



# Summary of Meeting with Tom Sorel, MnDOT Commissioner

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

*Friday, February 20, 2009*

**Guest speaker: Tom Sorel** , commissioner, Minnesota Department of Transportation

The meeting took place in a conference room at the MnDOT building, State Capitol.

**Present:** Verne Johnson, chair; David Broden, Marianne Curry, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland (by phone), Dan Loritz, and Clarence Shallbetter

**A. Context of the meeting** —The Civic Caucus invited the commissioner to meet with us today to discuss the status of comprehensive transportation planning and policy-making in Minnesota, the main subject of a Civic Caucus meeting last month.

**B. Welcome and introductions** — Verne and Paul welcomed and introduced **Tom Sorel**, commissioner, Minnesota Department of Transportation. Sorel began his position as the Minnesota commissioner of transportation in April 2008. He has 30 years' experience with the U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration, as division administrator with the Minnesota Division Office of the FHWA in St. Paul; stewardship/oversight group and major projects team leader in the Washington, D.C. FHWA Office of Infrastructure; U.S. DOT intermodal liaison for the 2002 Winter Olympic Games in Salt Lake City; and director of planning and program development in FHWA's regional office in Albany, New York. Sorel has a Master of Business Administration degree from Thomas College in Maine, a bachelor's degree in civil engineering from the State University of New York, Buffalo and experience in executive management, project management and conflict management.

**C. Comments and discussion** —During Sorel's comments and in discussion with the Civic Caucus the following points were raised:

**1. Significance of the 35W bridge collapse** —Collapse of the 35W bridge in Minneapolis on August 1, 2007, has had an enormous impact, particularly emotionally, on the public and on those directly involved in transportation, Sorel said. We shouldn't underestimate its impact. People are still hurting. MnDOT needs to regain public trust it formerly had. Regaining public trust means emphasizing integrity, intent, competency and follow-through, he said.

**2. Statewide transportation plan highlighted** —Sorel highlighted the strategic vision for MnDOT that includes five strategic directions: Safety, Mobility, Innovation, Leadership and Transparency. He then highlighted the activities related to the development of the 2009-2028 State Transportation Plan.

See:  <http://www.dot.state.mn.us/planning/stateplan/pdfs/1%20ExecutiveSummary.pdf> .

Identified as key components of the plan are:

- Superior highway connections to adjacent states and Canada
- Active ports in Duluth and along the Mississippi River
- Strong connections to a national high-speed passenger rail network
- Cost-competitive national freight rail connections, supported by regional freight rail corridors and intermodal terminals.
- Vibrant Twin Cities International Airport hub and secondary supporting airports throughout the state
- Upgraded highways and expanded transit service connecting regional trade centers throughout the state
- Reliable mobility in the Twin Cities through innovative highway capacity improvements and expanded transitways.
- Reliable mobility in greater Minnesota metropolitan areas through expansion of the highway network and transit systems.
- Greater transit options throughout the state with improved connectivity between services and modes
- Safe travel throughout the state, with a goal toward zero fatalities
- Expanded networks for safe biking and walking

He hopes the vision for this plan can be shared by all transportation stakeholders in the state.

A Civic Caucus member observed that the transportation plan ought to be consciously integrated with other objectives such as economic development plans for the state, so that it can be linked to creating jobs, for example.

**3. A MnDOT plan, prepared collaboratively** —Asked about the plan's official status when adopted, Sorel said that ultimately MnDOT approves the plan, but it is based on collaboration with stakeholders.

**4. Whether the plan identifies what won't be done** —A Civic Caucus member observed that to be credible a plan must indicate what won't be done as well as what will be done, to demonstrate that priorities are serious.

**5. A rail plan is included** —A statewide rail plan will be included, Sorel said, which can be transformational for MnDOT.

**6. Significance of proposed Pine Island development** —A Civic Caucus member commented about some publicity today about a possible \$50 million highway improvement in the vicinity of Pine Island, MN, to support a major new industrial development. Sorel replied that the project is something MnDOT is exploring but MnDOT has not determined an appropriate investment level.

**7. Major shift in management style for MnDOT** —Sorel said that MnDOT's approach of involving all stakeholders—e.g. cities, counties, rail advocates, trucking interests, contractors, consultants, etc.—in preparation of its transportation plans represents the current emphasis on collaborative approaches for MnDOT.

**8. Minnesota's structure not more fragmented than other states** —Responding to a question, about involvement of so many different levels of government and agencies in Minnesota transportation, Sorel said he doesn't think Minnesota's situation is all that different from that of other states. Asked about possible structural changes, he replied that he doesn't believe the structure is fatally flawed.

**9. How to set priorities in a collaborative process** —Civic Caucus members said they can understand how because of collaboration various interests each would be able to get their plans incorporated in MnDOT plans. But it isn't clear, they said, how priorities would be set. For example, if both more rail and highways are contemplated in the same corridor, serving the same locations, it is difficult to see how the collaborative process would be able to produce a decision on relative priorities for the rail and highway improvements. Sorel said he doesn't envision so-called "winners" or "losers" in the MnDOT plan as it will be finally adopted.

**10. Significant emphasis on freight movement** —Responding to a question about the economic development importance of paying more attention to moving freight, not just people, Sorel replied that MnDOT's plans indicate major support for freight.

**11. Paying attention to the interests of cities, suburbs, and smaller towns** -A Civic Caucus member noted that there's great interest on the part of individual cities about maintaining and improving their local street system, along with local buses, as well as being connected to larger projects, such as inter-city rail. Sorel replied that the MnDOT plans will take these interests into consideration as well.

**12. Timetable for MnDOT approval** —After sufficient input from all interests MnDOT will be adopting its 20-year plan, Sorel said. Currently, its draft documents are being reviewed by others. See the complete draft at: <http://www.dot.state.mn.us/planning/stateplan/download.html>. He repeated his earlier point that the plan, while ultimately approved by MnDOT, won't be just a MnDOT plan, because it is a collaborative document.

**13. Value of a state planning agency** —A Civic Caucus member observed that it might be easier to integrate MnDOT plans with other concepts for the development of the state (such as where various types of economic activity could be encouraged) if there were a state planning agency.

**14. Leveraging private investment** —Continuing the discussion of the importance of highway interchanges to various private development projects, Sorel noted that the University of Minnesota currently is studying the potential of obtaining financial support for highway projects from the property owners who benefit from those projects. Sorel said MnDOT knows there are critical interchanges for economic development and he believes MnDOT can play a leadership role in their timing and financing.

**15. "Needs" always seem far in excess of any reasonable expectation of fulfillment** — Responding to a question, Sorel said MnDOT plans outline some \$65 billion in highway needs over the next 20 years, during which time about \$15 billion is expected to be available for construction. A Civic Caucus member observed that growth in the "needs" for highways always seem to grow much faster than the growth in the level of the economy, and, consequently, faster than ever can be expected to be satisfied.

**16. Importance of looking to innovation** —Many new areas need to be explored, Sorel said. That is why he's stressing a multi-modal approach for MnDOT. We also need to look at better revenue sources than the gasoline tax and to ways to bring the private sector into the picture.

**17. Question of how a plan is enforceable** —Acknowledging the collaborative approach, a Civic Caucus member inquired how the plan's recommendations would be enforceable. Sorel replied that he is hoping for a common vision to emerge among the participants. He doesn't want to be in an enforcement mode.

**18. Support from the Governor** —Sorel said that he, as a transportation professional, has received good support from the Governor.

**19. Addressing the importance of setting priorities within limited financial means** —Civic Caucus members wondered how the MnDOT plan can be workable if it doesn't face the hard decisions of which projects ought to receive higher priority over others, given financial limitations. They wondered how listing all desired projects will provide adequate direction.

**20. Thanks** —On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne thanked Sorel for meeting with the Civic Caucus today.