



# Tom Dennis of the Grand Forks Herald

Minnesota's status as a "state that works" is less secure than in 1970s, yet is still somewhat intact

A Civic Caucus Review of Minnesota's Public Policy Process Interview

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## Present

John Adams, Dave Broden (vice chair), Paul Gilje (executive director), Randy Johnson, Paul Ostrow, Dana Schroeder (associate director). By phone: Janis Clay, Tom Dennis, Sallie Kemper (associate director), Clarence Shallbetter

## Summary

Minnesota has undergone some discouraging trends since the 1973 cover story in *TIME* magazine declared Minnesota a "state that works," according to Tom Dennis of the *Grand Forks Herald*. He points to a 1996 *New York Times* story branding Minneapolis as "Murderapolis," to the budget turmoil and special partisanship in the 2000s and to a 2004 report by the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School that concluded Minnesotans believe government is wasteful and public programs are not well run.

But Dennis is cautiously optimistic. He believes discouraging trends are subject to change. He calls Minnesota "a resilient place," where partisanship is moderating and where reassuring signs show that "all is not lost." He asserts that while Minnesota's status as a "state that works" is strained and not as secure as it once was, it's still somewhat intact. He says one of the state's great assets is the range of civic institutions struggling to resolve its problems. Also, government in Minnesota and North Dakota remains unusually responsive to public interest and public pressure.

Dennis contends that his newspaper's editorial page and its news pages continue to play a role in promoting public awareness and debate of issues before final decisions are made. The special projects the paper does that include deep reporting on an issue bring public attention and get policymakers moving. But the newspaper industry worries about the lack of young readers and is struggling with how to make money in the digital arena.

## Biography

Tom Dennis is editorial page editor of the *Grand Forks Herald* in Grand Forks, N.D. He has held the position for 18 years. Before moving to Grand Forks, Dennis edited the editorial page of *The Times Leader* newspaper in Wilkes-Barre, Pa., and also was a reporter and columnist at the *Duluth News Tribune* in Duluth, Minn.

Dennis is a graduate of Williams College in Williamstown, Mass., and holds a master's degree from the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism in New York City. He is a veteran of active-duty and reserve service in the U.S. Coast Guard.

## Background

The Civic Caucus is undertaking a review of the quality of Minnesota's past, present and future public-policy process for anticipating, defining and resolving major public problems. The Caucus interviewed Tom Dennis, veteran editorial page editor of the *Grand Forks Herald*, to get his perspective on how Minnesota's process for developing sound policy proposals worked in the past, his assessment of how well that process is working today and his thoughts on the role the media have played in the past and play currently in that process.

### Discussion

**Outside of the city of Grand Forks, about half the readers of the *Grand Forks Herald* are from North Dakota and about half from Minnesota.** Tom Dennis of the *Grand Forks Herald* said the paper circulates to Bemidji in the east and to Devil's Lake in the west.

**Minnesota has something the east coast does not.** Dennis said he's in Grand Forks because of Minnesota's and North Dakota's quality of life. He grew up in Rhode Island, but his family would come to Minnesota often to visit relatives as he was growing up. "Minnesota seemed to have something that the east coast did not," he said. "I liked the sense of community, the lakes, the pace of life, and the idea that both in Minnesota and North Dakota, when you're raising kids, you escape the crushing pressure to get your kids into selective colleges."

He said if you live on either the east or west coast, that pressure can dominate parents' lives. Here you escape that, because there's faith in the quality of institutions such as the University of Minnesota and the University of North Dakota. "That makes for a much more relaxed atmosphere in which kids can grow up."

He said his thinking about Minnesota was reinforced by the [1973 \*Time\* magazine cover](#) featuring then-Governor Wendell Anderson and the headline, "The Good Life in Minnesota." The story inside proclaimed Minnesota "the state that works." Another influence, Dennis said, was Neal Peirce's assertion in his 1983 book, *The Book of America: Inside 50 States Today*, that no other state better captures the good life for more people than Minnesota.

**Minnesota's status as a "state that works" is strained now and not as secure as it was back then, but it's still basically intact, as it also is in North Dakota.** Dennis noted that in 2004, the then-Humphrey Institute at the University of Minnesota, under the leadership of Ted Mondale's Minnesota Community Project, issued a ["sobering report."](#) Dennis quoted from the report:

"Minnesota is changing. In a state where the storied consensus once meant a high degree of civic engagement and shared vision, we see divisions into increasingly irreconcilable camps, with a deep skepticism about public institutions and strong disagreement on their role and abiding concern about the rapid growth and change in the makeup of our communities. Clearly, the causes of these disruptions are multifold: a changing economy, racially diverse immigration into the state and the polarization of politics. Regardless, there is an increasing belief that community in Minnesota is on the decline, as fewer people know their neighbors, the quality of education seems to erode, transportation infrastructure fails to keep up with needs and taxes seem persistently high."

The report concluded, "Minnesotans are convinced that government is wasteful and inefficient, squandering hard-earned tax dollars on programs that are not well run or do not benefit all people equally."

Dennis said another bad omen for Minnesota occurred in 1996, when the *New York Times* ran a story calling Minneapolis "Murderapolis." At that time, the city's murder rate surpassed that of New York City by 70 percent. "The article showed how things had changed from 'the state that works' in the 1970s to 'Murderapolis' in the 1990s," Dennis said.

"There were clearly discouraging trends," he continued. "But Minnesota is a resilient place. The 2000s were the years of Governor Jesse Ventura, budget turmoil and a newly intense partisanship at the Legislature. Some of that seems to have moderated. There are enough reassuring signs to let me know that all is not lost."

Dennis pointed to a November 2015 story in the *Star Tribune* headlined, *It's official: Twin Cities the best place to live in U.S., says list of lists*. The paper reported that a website called Patch of Earth combined seven lists of best cities to come up with a definitive list. The Twin Cities appeared in five of the seven lists and thus topped the definitive list.

On another positive note, Dennis pointed to Minnesota retaining its high ranking for educational test scores and its high ranking on health and quality-of-life indicators. "It's a resilient place," he said. "There are still lots of great reasons to live in Minnesota."

**There are a number of civic institutions engaged in trying to fix the things that are threatening Minnesota's status as a good place to live .** "One of the great assets of the state is a whole range of civic institutions struggling mightily to try to correct things," Dennis said. He mentioned the *Coalition of Greater Minnesota Cities* , which has a membership of 85 cities about the size of East Grand Forks and Bemidji, with Duluth the largest city represented. The organization lobbies the Legislature on a variety of small-city issues, especially for local government aid from the state.

Dennis noted that the Coalition routinely sends out opinion pieces to newspapers, which he believes is very effective. He said "beleaguered editors" of small newspapers are looking for material of interest about public life in Minnesota. "The opinion pieces are ready to go, so we put them in the paper," he said. "They get out to audiences of tens of thousands of people. The Coalition is one institution that has real-world impact, in part because it's good at media relations."

He said the *Minnesota Chamber of Commerce* also generates opinion pieces fairly routinely on various issues. And he mentioned the Minneapolis Federal Reserve Bank's quarterly publication, *fed*

*gazette*, a regional business and economics journal that runs in-depth profiles of issues affecting the region.

Dennis noted the recent change in leadership at the conservative think tank **Center of the American Experiment** from founder Mitch Pearlstein to new president John Hinderaker. Dennis said Hinderaker wants to persuade Minnesotans that they don't have it so good and to explain why the high tax/high service model in the state isn't working. "It'll be interesting to see how that works out over the next few years," Dennis said.

"On balance," he said, "the public institutions work as effectively as they can in modern America, given our partisanship. I still find in Minnesota and North Dakota some semblance of that good life that Gov. Wendell Anderson was touting on the cover of *TIME* magazine. It's still a good place to raise kids. I like being part of the forces like the Civic Caucus trying to keep it that way. You get a sense of government as being willing to change over time, to make adjustments, so people have a sense that they can make a difference."

**Citizens are still fairly engaged on the issues that matter to them.** An interviewer asked about citizen participation and what observations Dennis has about the role citizens play today and have played over time. The interviewer asked about the impact of what is in the paper today.

Dennis observed that citizens are still engaged whenever a problem arises. They turn out to community meetings, he said. He gave several examples of active citizen engagement. In St. Cloud, there were full houses at meetings about Somali immigration and assimilation.

Another example is the concern people have actively expressed about the building of the proposed Sandpiper Pipeline, which would extend 616 miles from near Tioga, N.D., to near Superior, Wisc. The pipeline, Dennis said, has been brought to a standstill now by environmental groups, who are getting their views heard in the courts.

He also mentioned the example of school bond referenda. "I don't get a sense that those are diminishing in importance," he said. There is active citizen participation in meetings and debates about the referenda.

**The newspaper industry is fretting about how comparatively few young people read the newspaper and keep up with current events that way.** The issue is, Dennis said, as these young people get older, will they pick up the newspaper? "The jury is still out as far as millennials are concerned," he said. "The news-reading habits of people have dramatically changed, with so much of it done on people's phones. All newspapers are trying to crack the digital code, not how to create content, but how to make money."

He said most newspapers still get the bulk of their money from the print product, either advertising sales or circulation sales. That's typically about 80 percent of the company's revenue. But circulation has declined, sometimes by half, so there's less market penetration than there used to be.

There's more readership than ever before, because of online readers, Dennis said. "But the revenue that comes in from online doesn't compare to the print advertising. Some papers, like the *Star Tribune*, now are using pay walls, so you can only get a certain amount of content online without a

subscription. That's to prevent the erosion of readers of the print product. It's a whole new world for newspapers."

**There has been a demographic shift over the years with the decline in the population of rural Minnesota, which means less power at the Capitol.** An interviewer commented that the split between urban and rural keeps getting worse and worse. One of Minnesota's greatest strengths, the interviewer said, is that no matter what kind of place you want to live, there's a place for you, whether in the heart of the city or on a farm. Now some people make immediate judgments about city people or rural people. One legislator told the interviewer that the urban/rural split is bigger than the Republican/Democratic split. The interviewer asked how we could increase the understanding and respect urban and rural people have for each other.

Dennis agreed that the declining rural population translates to less power at the Capitol. "All the rural legislators and city council members are keenly aware of that and do what they can to try to maintain what clout they have," he said. He noted that the Iron Range, for example, used to be more of a force in the Legislature than it is today.

He asserted that Local Government Aid (LGA) was one of the key ways that made the vision of being able to live anywhere work. "If you moved to a small town like East Grand Forks," he said, "you could trust that you'd have an adequate library and police force. LGA was a big part of that."

**Things in North Dakota have changed enough recently to alter some perceptions about rural areas.** "Changes brought by oil development in North Dakota over the past 10 years have been so dramatic that I now realize all of these things are really transient, just waiting for the next trend," Dennis said. " All the stories in the 1980s and 1990s used to be about North Dakota emptying out, but now that's so far removed from reality. Apartment rents in Williston were rivaling those in Manhattan in the 2000s because of the gigantic influx of people and money. Now there's another reversal, because oil is a cyclical industry. But the change was so dramatic. You can see that the optimists were right and the pessimists were wrong."

"So in Minnesota, while these trends may seem permanent, they're more subject to change than you might think," he said. "Demographics can move in one way, but then it reverses."

**On balance, there are enough civic-minded institutions to keep Minnesotans thinking that progress is being made on the state's general problems.** An interviewer asked if Dennis was aware of any groups of citizens getting together today in a nonpartisan way. Dennis responded that there are a handful of nonpartisan groups that play a unifying role, including the Civic Caucus and the [Jefferson Center](#), which uses citizen juries to come to a consensus or conclusion on various issues. Minnesota Public Radio is another unique and unifying force.

He said the existence of groups like these sets Minnesota apart and that the state nurtures these groups.

"It's hard to say how effective these groups are," Dennis said, "but, on balance, their very presence in the state helps make Minnesota what it is and gives people trust in public institutions." He senses a recovery of trust since the 2004 Humphrey Institute report he quoted earlier. "I don't think there's as much cynicism as accompanied the Ventura era in the 2000s."

He said, though, that there are some nagging problems so resistant to solutions that he could imagine people getting cynical about them. He pointed to the stubbornness of the achievement gaps between blacks and whites and the immigration issue. But, he said, there are enough civic-minded institutions to keep Minnesotans thinking that progress is being made on the state's general problems.

**The *Grand Forks Herald* has editorialized that the Susquehanna River Basin Compact provides a useful model for how Minnesota and North Dakota could cooperate on the Red River Valley.** Several interviewers asked about the need for organizations that can deal with issues that cross state borders. Dennis responded that his newspaper has editorialized that the Susquehanna River Basin Compact, which includes the states of Pennsylvania, New York and Maryland, provides a useful model that could be applied to the Red River Valley. Such a compact between Minnesota and North Dakota would be a very formal, congressionally approved relationship between the two states, he said.

**The Humphrey School at the University of Minnesota could help enlighten people about how the larger region is working today and what we might do to make it better.** "If I were dean of the Humphrey School, that would be a focus," Dennis said. "That would be the logical place to find that type of research. It's probably a matter of leadership. If the University wants to bring up the profile of the Humphrey School, it would have to declare that goal and call on the school's leadership team to make it happen."

**Grand Forks has a new industry, unmanned aircraft testing and maintenance, that came about through civic cooperation.** An interviewer brought up this recent development and Dennis commented, "Things do sometimes change for the better." He said the joint efforts of the University of North Dakota, other area postsecondary institutions, the North Dakota Congressional delegation and the Air Force resulted in the FAA naming Grand Forks one of six sites in the country where unmanned aircraft would be focused.

"Grand Forks has an exciting new industry to look forward to," Dennis said. "Things like this are clearly still possible when the circumstances, the conditions and the leadership are right."

**The newspaper's editorial page and its news pages both have a role in promoting public awareness and debate of issues before final decisions are made.** In response to an interviewer's question, Dennis said editorials are creations of the editorial board, which comes to a consensus on an issue and then tries to present that consensus as a common-sense way forward. "So, the editorial often winds up approximating the compromises that take place in City Hall or the state Capitols," he said.

He said the role of the news pages in promoting discussion of issues is pretty much the same today as it was in earlier years. Reporters are looking for news and issues raised by city councils and other public bodies. Sometimes, Dennis said, the newspaper sponsors a political debate or a forum on a particular issue to further public understanding. In other cases, editors will spot a trend and then do a special project on that trend. "That brings things to the public's attention and gets policymakers moving," he said.

**There is no entity in North Dakota that produces consistently interesting studies to which the whole state pays much attention.** An interviewer asked whether the University of North Dakota

(UND) has something like the Humphrey School or an emphasis in its Ph.D. programs that focuses on looking at and helping the state to understand what its issues are and where it's going. Dennis replied that there is less of that kind of civic involvement at UND. There are individual economists and political scientists who study state issues and offer great insights. But there is no parallel to the Humphrey School and no entity producing consistently interesting studies on public policy issues.

**Some North Dakota foundations are addressing community problems.** In response to an interviewer's question, Dennis said Grand Forks was a Knight newspaper community, as were Duluth and St. Paul. The Knight Foundation is still active in those communities and sponsors periodic studies about what the biggest problems in Grand Forks are and how to go about addressing them. He said the community foundation in Grand Forks sponsors similar types of evaluations.

He noted that the local Chamber of Commerce also plays a role in figuring out the kinds of things the community needs.

**Government in North Dakota and Minnesota remains unusually responsive to public interest and public pressure.** Dennis said one great thing about America is that it has a "self-governing mechanism" for solving problems. He brought up again the dramatic reversal in North Dakota's fortunes between the 1980s and 1990s and the 2000s. "All of the forecasts were way off," he said. "Trend was not destiny in that case."

"None of the trends you see now do you need to be permanently discouraged about," he continued. "They're all subject to change. With the right leadership, you can retain a sense of optimism, especially in North Dakota and Minnesota, where government remains unusually responsive to public interest and public pressure."