



# Civic Caucus Interview Group - Internal Discussion

A progress report: What have we learned and where do we go from here?

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

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## Present

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## Background

The Civic Caucus is undertaking a review of the quality of Minnesota's past and present public-policy process for anticipating, defining and resolving major community problems. The Caucus interview group held an internal discussion to suggest findings it's learned from interviews on the topic held so far.

## Summary

There have been dramatic changes in civic life in Minnesota over the last 50 years, the Civic Caucus interview group has found in its review so far of the state's public-policy process. In an internal discussion of preliminary findings of that review, the group observed that these changes have led to a loss of the generalist citizen point of view and a failure to look at the deeper causes of community problems. Findings suggest that there were more actionable, coherent public-policy proposals being developed and implemented during the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s.

The group questioned whether there is a way today for citizens to gain the knowledge and skills to counter the ever-growing multitude of special interest organizations, with their well-financed staffs and lobbyists. Participants noted that some public-policy institutions used to empower citizens to gain the deep knowledge needed for such direct policy involvement through participation in study committees. Fortified with that knowledge, citizens were able to present public-policy reports and

recommendations and testify at the Legislature. The Civic Caucus group questioned whether any community organization is engaged today in the kind of citizen-empowerment needed to effectively respond to special interest groups.

The Caucus group noted that historically there have been a wide array of institutions of public policy: general-interest civic organizations, state agencies and local governments, political parties, academic institutions and the media. It questioned whether these institutions are fulfilling their responsibility today for researching and defining issues and offering recommendations for resolving community problems. It said institutions receiving large amounts of public funds ought to be able to do more to attack state problems, with better ideas and proposals coming forth than there are now.

The Civic Caucus group believes there is receptivity at the Legislature and in the state's executive branch to improving Minnesota, but these institutions are not getting the kind of help they need. They need good proposals with definable things to do, but the state no longer has a system producing such proposals.

The group will continue to explore the public-policy process with further interviews and plans to produce a final list of findings, conclusions and recommendations over the next six to 12 months.

## Discussion

**Looking ahead to the Civic Caucus in 2017** . Civic Caucus Chair Dan Loritz suggested that before we get into the subject of institutions of public policy today, the interview group members spend a few minutes discussing their hopes for the Civic Caucus in 2017. Among the comments:

- Since 2009, our interviews have covered four topical areas: redesign, competitiveness, the work force, and, now, institutions of public policy. It will be interesting to see what's next.
- Perhaps we should explore the potential for closer contact with other organizations, such as *MinnPost* or the Institute for Freedom and Community at St. Olaf College, which is studying the history of civil discourse.
- Maybe more emphasis is appropriate on how different age groups and other demographic characteristics relate to public policy.
- The state could benefit greatly if someone, perhaps the Civic Caucus, could assemble, and keep current, a list of key opportunities and problems facing the state and share that broadly with organizations, the media, colleges and universities, foundations, and the public.
- There seems to be potential in linking college students with ongoing studies in the community.
- The blurring of responsibilities among local, state and federal entities needs to be explored.
- An inquiry into the structures of elections and government at all levels is needed.
- With so many changes in the nature of "family", how does one build effective groups with a sense of values? Is there too much focus on what "I" want versus what the "community" needs?

- It might be worth exploring good models of civic involvement in other states.
- We might look at emerging areas where public policy is being generated. Three examples:
  1. The task forces the Legislature is establishing, which are new. The study groups are made up of members of both legislative houses and take testimony during legislative interims. One task force is looking at prison population reform. Use of task forces like these might become permanent.
  2. The summits the governor is starting in areas like agriculture and water.
  3. The role of individual leaders, such as Marla Spivak, who has shifted the entire conversation on bee pollination. How do those people emerge? Many come from the University of Minnesota's agricultural campus, rather than from the University's Humphrey School.

**What have we learned so far in our exploration of how well Minnesota's process for developing actionable public-policy proposals is working?** The group suggested findings we've learned from interviews we've held so far on the topic. Among them:

- There are things that could be done to encourage kids to be more involved in public affairs in high school.
- There have been dramatic changes in civic life over the last 50 years.
- There is little evidence of a market in Minnesota today for redeveloping our civic infrastructure. Is a part of our role to create that market? It may involve reaching out to high schools and colleges.
- The marketplace is abuzz with ideas, but they're mostly self-interested, narrow ideas. Perhaps the market isn't looking for those comprehensive recommendations.
- There is no countervailing force against special interest groups.
- There are thousands of organizations that can raise issues and help shape them. Many are able to receive tax-deductible donations. It's a free-for-all. We've created a situation through tax policy that gives everybody an opportunity to communicate directly. All of this pours into the Legislature, the issue-resolving body. And the Legislature can raise issues on its own, shape those issues and resolve issues itself.
- The number of children born out of wedlock is very concerning. We need families in order to implement public policy.
- Looking back to Jefferson's idea, if the Republic doesn't have educated people, it won't last.
- A big subject relates to understanding the family and how it's affected institutionally in the state.

- If we're looking at how to close the achievement gap, it comes down to housing, poverty and the movement of kids around the whole metro area. We can't even find them sometimes as they move from place to place. That leads to a decrease in their ability to learn. There are underlying social problems here that schools alone can't resolve.
- There are hard realities that Minnesota's institutions of public policy must face now and in the future: the increase in immigration, changes in demographics and changes in the family.
- There are unintended consequences of well-intentioned actions taken in the past. For example, the Legislature closed the big state mental centers and everybody was supposed to get treated in their communities. But there was no money for treatment. Now mentally ill people are out on the streets. Half the prison population is mentally ill. The prisons aren't tuned in to providing mental health care. That's not what their role is.
- The classic business model is planning, implementation and evaluation. Respected public policy institutions are known for presenting plans, but we aren't sure if the plans are implemented or whether or not they're working. Is it possible to hook the media into reporting numbers on programs run locally or by the state to tell the public how they're doing?
- Communication is a big way of turning public policy back into some action. How do we communicate public-policy topics so people can see how they affect them?
- There's no leadership in dealing with the issue of mental illness in the schools.
- The role of the citizen versus that of special interests is critical. Is there a way for citizens to get the knowledge and skills to counter the special interests, which have staff and lobbyists? Is there a role for the citizen in putting forth the general interest?

Some public policy institutions used to empower citizens to do that through the deep knowledge citizens gained through study committees. Citizens, not staff, were the ones who talked publicly about reports or testified at the Legislature. It was the citizens who had been empowered by what they had learned and deliberated over. In some organizations, the boards were always very strong and made the decisions on what to study or whether to adopt a particular report. Now that seems to have turned the other way, with the staff in control of many organizations.

- A number of foundations today are staff-directed, rather than board-directed.
- We're looking for something that's been lost: the generalist point of view, the citizen point of view and an effort to look at the deeper causes of community problems. There isn't an organization in the community that's engaged in that kind of activity today.
- Historically, institutions of public policy have been in place. We created public entities, such as state agencies and local governments, that all exist to deal with public policies. They could be sources of ideas and thinking about what should be done.
- Political parties have been seen in the past as vehicles for advancing proposals for changing the way systems operated.

- We've heard conflicting statements that maybe foundations are not a primary source of ideas.
- The media could do some exploration of public policy issues and come up with ideas and recommendations.
- We have a lot of institutions of public policy, some of which are publicly chartered to do things.
- Higher education could perhaps be a place where some ideas should come from.
- We knew what once was and we'd like to get something in place that would do that again.
- There is no shortage of ideas, but we're not focusing on the root causes of problems.
- We can try to improve the system that we have by bringing pressure from the outside or we can create incentives where systems improve on their own. You have to do both of them.
- Leadership doesn't always begin at the front end of a problem. We must get the topic raised so people will say they can do something about it. Rather than waiting for leadership to emerge, it's more important to get the topic out there at a level of intensity that says somebody has to take charge.
- Some institutions of public policy decide which parts of a system are amenable to change and focus on those. The challenge is how to take ahold of a piece of the total issue.
- There is receptivity at the Legislature and in the state's executive branch to improve Minnesota, but they're not getting the kind of help they need. They need to get good proposals with definable things to do. We don't have a system that's doing that anymore.
- We don't get public policy discussions in the media. The only coverage the issues get is when there's any kind of partisan disagreement.
- We need to get our message out about the idea of generalist citizens. It seems that now when a committee is set up to address a problem, we make sure every special interest is on the committee. Then the solution ends up being one that all those with special advocacy positions agree on. That's not necessarily the best result.
- Some people are concerned that the role of the University of Minnesota in helping resolve the state's problems may have changed. The group wondered if there are hard data available to illustrate the proportion of U of M research relating directly to Minnesota problems that was conducted in the past compared to today.
- When a problem becomes local, then you do something about it. We need to look at how to get data down to the citizen.
- Institutions receiving large amounts of public funds ought to be able to do more to attack state problems, with better ideas and proposals coming out than there are now.
- Perhaps there are elements in the old public-policy process that could be applied today. For example, the Humphrey School puts on a program and, unless you were there, you'll never

know what went on. We should put forward the concept of minutes or notes being helpful to the people who weren't there. The Citizens League's minutes of meetings of its current committee on the Metropolitan Council are written for the people who were there, not for the people who weren't.

- There seem to have been more actionable, thought-out public-policy proposals being developed and implemented during the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s.
- A well thought-out, actionable idea will trump the influence of the moneyed special interests.
- We agree that problems like mental health and the achievement gap should be priorities. But we never get to them, because money rules the game.
- We should look into what other states are doing.

**What's next?** The group discussed coming up with a draft of findings and then moving on to drawing conclusions and coming up with recommendations. Chair Dan Loritz suggested that we complete that process within six to 12 months.

An interviewer proposed that we take more time for internal discussion, like today's meeting. He said in addition to holding more interviews, we should devote every second or third meeting to internal discussion.