



Civic Caucus Interview Group - Internal Discussion

A Progress Report: Minnesota's public policy process reflects changes in state's culture

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, present and future public-policy process for anticipating, defining and resolving major community problems. The Caucus interview group held another internal discussion to review a draft of preliminary findings it's learned from interviews on the topic held so far.

Leading up to today's internal discussion meeting, a very preliminary *draft* of findings- *not* previously reviewed or approved by the Civic Caucus-was distributed to the interview group as background for discussion. The draft highlights a number of points that have been raised over the last several months of interviews and formed the basis for today's internal discussion. But the draft is just that and has *not* been approved as any formal position of the Civic Caucus.

See this draft of the preliminary findings [here](#) .

Summary

Civic organizations in Minnesota today are functioning in a more individualistic, less community-oriented environment today than in the past. Members of the Civic Caucus interview group make that assertion in an internal discussion reviewing a *very preliminary draft* of findings from the Caucus's exploration so far of the public-policy process in the state.

Members of the group observe that people sitting around the table dealing with issues as generalist citizens, not special interest groups, came from a culture that said you need to be worried about making things better in the community. Certain civic organizations empowered citizens to make a difference in that way. As businesses in the community became more nationally owned than locally owned, the interest of those businesses in the local community seemed to diminish. That weakened the earlier culture and the civic organizations that helped put the culture into practice. It's important to worry about it if that culture is no longer here, members of the Civic Caucus group say.

Participants in the discussion note that all of the great public-policy ideas in the world won't succeed unless we change the underlying environment. They question what role the Civic Caucus or other organizations could take in moving the needle culturally and socially. The group says we must remember that there are pluses, as well as negatives, in some changes in the environment, such as the ability to communicate readily and easily.

The group wonders whether legislators are unduly influenced today by special-interest groups and whether there generally is less attention now to larger, underlying issues than to immediate concerns. They discuss the importance of determining what would motivate more people, especially the younger generation, to get involved and pay attention to significant policy issues.

During the discussion, the interview group agrees that the Civic Caucus's challenge over the next few months is, after completing the findings, to develop conclusions and recommendations (that is, specific, actionable proposals) on strengthening Minnesota's institutions of public policy.

Discussion

The Civic Caucus is treating this topic of the state's public-policy process differently from some past topics by focusing on coming up with findings before moving on to conclusions and recommendations. The interview group agreed that the Caucus's challenge over the next few months is, after completing the findings, to develop conclusions and recommendations (that is, specific, actionable proposals) on strengthening Minnesota's institutions of public policy.

An interviewer said we should concentrate on better validating some of the proposed findings. Another suggested that we have categories of findings, such as major issues, society, the environment and the public-policy organizations. That would lead to categories of conclusions and then categories of recommendations.

Civic organizations today are functioning in a different environment today from that in the past. Today's discussion included the following points from interview group members:

- **More individualistic approach?** People must understand the environment better. So much has changed over the last 40 years that isn't understood. We've moved from taking our institutions for granted and letting them do whatever they do-whether the government, the church, business or political parties-to an individualistic way of looking at things. With this new viewpoint, people join together with others of like mind as special interests and push for what they want. Much of what they want is materialistic vs. communitarian in nature.

- **Changes in education?** Is there too much emphasis on economic motivations for education at the expense of larger concerns of how what you contribute should add to the public good? Something has deterred people from thinking about these larger questions about where we are going and what we are going to do about it.
- **Role of civic organizations.** What is the role for the Civic Caucus or other organizations in moving the needle culturally and socially? We need to change the underlying environment. If not, all the great public-policy ideas in the world won't succeed. Is there a moral bankruptcy of bad public policy for which both liberals and conservatives are guilty?
- **Yearning for the "good old days"?** In looking at the way the environment has changed, we've made some strong value judgments about whether the past or current environment is better. We've implied that the environment used to be more community-oriented than it is today.
- But that's true. People sitting around the table dealing with issues as citizens came from a culture that said you need to be worried about making things better in the community. Community and business leaders encouraged young people to be involved; some even gave their employees time to be involved. It's important to worry about it if that culture is no longer here. In the past, people used their citizenship to make things better.
- **Diversity.** Another change has been the increased ethnic and cultural diversity in the population.
- **Don't over-emphasize the negative.** We should look at positive changes in the environment, as well as negative ones. What might be positively operating today as opposed to in the past? There are some pluses in being able to communicate readily and easily. We must make observations about the pluses.

Citizen participation in the public-policy process has changed. Comments by the interview group included the following:

- **Are there changes in citizen participation that impact public policy?** Participation in traditional organizations has declined, but people remain interested and participate in different ways. We need to understand how that impacts public policy.
- People participate actively in neighborhood organizations.
- Different age groups participate in different ways.
- It's not just the way organizations use new forms of communications, but it's also how the public and other groups assimilate it.
- People still participate in getting together to influence and advocate through government organizations and committees. But some of the civic organizations we knew and loved in the past are not operative any more.
- **Are legislators unduly influenced by groups with lobbyists?** Legislators always ask now which groups are supportive of an idea. That's what they want to know. They're so influenced by

groups who hire lobbyists. It's such a different milieu than just looking at whether something's a good idea.

- **Need to look to larger questions** . Is there less attention to larger, underlying questions than to immediate concerns? We had studies of larger questions in the past, such as a study by the Citizens League years ago about how many hospitals the Twin Cities area needed. Perhaps it's more difficult to think of larger questions now. In past years, it was possible to know by reading the newspaper or having conversations at various meeting places. Today there's more to understand.
- **Self-interest versus community interest.** We're wondering if it is true that typical citizens today are more concerned with their self-interest rather than the community interest.
- In earlier times, when communities were small, the leadership in the community knew a lot about what was going on. Now the knowledge being transferred is too small. The combination of not knowing what's going on and the self-serving approach taken by some people makes consensus on community betterment more difficult.
- **Next generation.** We never talk about what is it that motivates the next generation to be interested. They don't have all the same issues priorities that the older generation might have. We must ask people how they are motivated to become involved and how they connect with other people to get action to happen. We must ask what would motivate people to be involved.
- What would motivate people to pay attention to significant policy issues? What are the obstacles that prevent people from participating? To us it seems obvious that they ought to pay attention.
- There are young people who want to make a difference and are intensely interested in big ideas. Is education doing an adequate job of helping them learn the concrete steps to take that would make a difference?

One interviewer put forth a proposal to simplify the Civic Caucus mission to making Minnesota better. He suggested a role for the Civic Caucus in moving the needle on making Minnesota better.

- **Evaluation and feedback are critical parts of the classic business P-I-E model** : Planning leads to Implementation, which leads to Evaluation, which leads to feedback for improvement back to the planning step. That should result in doing more of what works and correcting what doesn't.
- **Importance of planning.** Planning is fun and glamorous. Where it breaks down is finding people to slug out the nitty-gritty of implementing the plans. And the planners don't want to discover through evaluation that their plans were too complex or were a complete failure.
- The Civic Caucus should consider shifting its main focus from the planning stage to the implementation and evaluation stages by (1) identifying and publicizing key state issues and (2) publicizing how current state actions are really doing, using actual, timely data.

- The underlying assumption is that making Minnesotans (and, hence, key government decision makers) keenly aware of these two things will stimulate constructive action.
- Seek sidebars twice a month in Twin Cities and Greater Minnesota newspapers describing one key Minnesota issue, as space permits. Also, invite Minnesota Public Radio to cover this. Describe what's happening in the issue, what's working, what's not and why not. Identify groups to put heat on to get corrective action.
- Try to recruit a group from the University of Minnesota to collect data and feed data to the Civic Caucus, which would highlight the issues.
- Get citizen readers involved in evaluation by letting them respond online either "act" or "don't bother."

Don't act as if we seem to have all the answers. An interviewer responded to the proposal by saying it sounds as if we have all the answers, that we know the issues and how to get things done.

How do we inform the next generation? Comments included the following:

- An interviewer described his experience in being invited to talk to high school juniors and seniors about his experience in ministry to kids at the Hennepin County Juvenile Detention Center and to adults in prison. He said the high school class was attentive, but there was no plan for further reflection or follow-through on the topic.
- What are kids learning in social studies classes today? Where is civic education today? Kids can get engaged in public-policy issues. But at the college level, they come in with no knowledge of these issues and how to go about solving them. How do we do a better job of civics education?

What has caused a decline in seeming relevance of certain civic organizations in Minnesota? Interviewers made the following comments:

- This discussion proves what a loss effective civic organizations are to this community.
- A proliferation of other organizations, some of them special-interest organizations, has developed, causing some formerly effective civic organizations to be less effective or listened to.
- Finances have played a role.
- As businesses in the community became more nationally owned than locally owned, the interest of businesses in the local community seemed to diminish.
- Leadership of some civic organizations changed the focus of the organizations.

The media have made some efforts to investigate and shape various issues. The interviewers made the following comments:

- The *Star Tribune* has done some strong investigative series on child protection, special education and other issues.
- Many people watch public television and listen to public radio and there are examples of programs put together on local issues and challenges.

There are far too few African American teachers in Minnesota, but little thinking about what to do about it. An interviewer pointed out that only 500 of the state's 65,000 teachers are African American. The Legislature is desperate for proposals about what to do about this, he said, but there is no hard thinking about it going on at the state Department of Education.

Prior to this meeting, the Civic Caucus received a number of comments from readers reacting to the notes of its Feb. 26, 2016, internal discussion on the public-policy process.

- "Special interest groups have bullied and forced their agendas for the last 30 years to the point that people who care about our society have just given up hope for the future."
- "Focus on issues that can be substantially resolved by the state (or smaller jurisdiction). Prison populations and mental health treatment probably fit this category." Also, many community problems are aspects of poverty and inequitable distribution of income.
- Migration of Minnesota residents to lower tax states is picking up steam. "Minnesota has a lot of major government problems and doesn't have leaders to legislate and manage for the overall good of the state."
- It's a serious issue that public forums on policy issues are being populated more and more with various interested parties and not generalist citizens or the informed lay public.
- The sharing and movement of money among different levels of government, with its resulting effects and limitations, should be studied.
- The Minnesota Association of Counties has made some recommendations that have fallen on deaf ears. "I'm not sure if it's because the two political parties can't (or won't) get along or if the issue is that the bureaucracy at the state's different departments is afraid of change."

In addition, some members of the Civic Caucus interview group commented in writing prior to this meeting on the draft of preliminary findings. Among those comments:

- We should not ignore the cultural foundations after World War II that made it possible for civic institutions to form and flourish in the Twin Cities: (1) the relatively homogeneous cultural environment and (2) the relative absence of troubled/challenged populations. This was a different environment from that of the large Northeastern industrial metropolises, with their cultural heterogeneity, that led to more present-oriented rancor and stalemate, rather than future-oriented cooperative activity.
- The problem is the tendency today to discuss issues in terms of (a) problems we deplore and (b) goals we seek to achieve: that is, resources we put in and results we want out. There's a failure to understand the system that turns resources into results. That leads to failures to think

through to the heart of the problem, which is essential to develop proposals truly able to resolve problems. We could assert that after 100 years of centralization, things are likely to decentralize. States are bound to become more important, so it's time to re-equip states to perform this responsibility well.

- One institution of public policy not mentioned is the role of media, both written and broadcast, and the changes contributing to what is covered and the amount of space given to specific topics.
- Our recent experience in Minnesota has been that presidential-election voter participation has been rising for the past 20 years. But voter participation in nonpresidential elections has been "falling like a rock." Campaign finance is not really an issue. We might want to drop it from the list.
- Decrease in citizen input may be somehow linked to the growth of the role of staff.
- Minnesota's strength in public policy has in the past been linked to the active role citizens played in participating in various groups. Citizen participation has changed, with fewer actively involved in regular public-policy discussion and organizations.
- Changes in the media are significant. In the past, media provided a focus and often depth of reporting on issues and topics that citizens grabbed onto and a public debate resulted. Today, people can select the source of information with which each citizen is most comfortable.
- The Civic Caucus needs more focus on how public-policy infrastructure and process should evolve in the future.