



Sean Kershaw, Executive Director of the Citizens League

Today's political dynamic demands that more diverse interests be represented on public policy study groups

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

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Present

John Adams, Steve Alderson, Steve Anderson, Heather Bandeen, Janis Clay, Paul Gilje (executive director), Randy Johnson, Sean Kershaw, Ted Kolderie, Dan Loritz (chair), Dana Schroeder (associate director), Clarence Shallbetter, T. Williams. By phone: Dave Broden (vice chair) and Paul Ostrow.

Summary

Sean Kershaw, executive director of the Citizens League, explains the study of the Metropolitan Council undertaken by a Citizens League task force from September 2015 through March 2016. He describes the three recommendations made in the task force report: (1) adopt fixed, four-year, staggered terms for Metropolitan Council members, who would still be appointed by the governor; (2) strengthen the Metro Council selection process to include more input by citizens and local officials; and (3) fully deploy the Metro Council's current authority to reduce concentrations of poverty in the region.

Kershaw asserts that differences in the political environment today compared with the past require a different makeup of Citizens League study committees or task forces than in the past. A diverse group of interests by geography, ideology, sector, race/ethnicity and experience with the Met Council were represented on the 19 person committee, which was a critical part of coming up with recommendations that had credibility and would work for the long term. A group of generalist citizens alone, without any formal role for key stakeholders, may not be as effective as it was in the past.

Challenges like the aging of the Baby Boomers, and their impact on every institution in Minnesota, demand a rethinking of how we approach public policy development and implementation. The previous model that worked so well for the Citizens League in the past, will not be sufficient for these

challenges. On an issue like aging, every institution becomes an 'institution of public policy', not just the legislature and executive bodies - or formal policy organizations like the Citizens League.

Sean also expressed concerns about metropolitan school districts, especially St. Paul, and the role of foundations in public policy.

Biography

Sean Kershaw is executive director of the Citizens League, a Minnesota nonprofit public affairs organization with a 60-plus-year history of framing problems and then recommending and advancing creative solutions to these policy problems.

When he became the Citizens League's sixth executive director in 2003, Kershaw had been a member of the organization's board since 1996 and had co-chaired the League's 50th-anniversary report, *Doing the Common Good Better*. Prior to becoming executive director, Kershaw had been deputy director of the Saint Paul Department of Planning and Economic Development, where he worked for 11 years. Before coming to Minnesota, he was planning coordinator for the Public Housing Authority in his hometown of Omaha, Nebraska.

Kershaw has a B.A. in sociology from Haverford College in Pennsylvania. He lives in Saint Paul's West Seventh neighborhood with his husband, Tim, and their children, Aidan and Grace.

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 Sean Kershaw of the Citizens League to get his assessment of the state of that public-policy process and to learn more about the League's role in the process.

Discussion

The Citizens League undertook a study of the Metropolitan Council from September 2015 through March 2016. Sean Kershaw, executive director of the Citizens League, said it was strategically smart to set the schedule so the study task force would have a report ready for the Legislature during its 2016 session. The Citizens League report,  *The Metropolitan Council: Recalibrating for the Future*, was approved by the Citizens League Board of Directors on April 4, 2016.

From the beginning of the task force's work, Kershaw said, the Citizens League Board required that any potential recommendations had to meet three broad criteria:

- **They had to preserve the ability of the Metropolitan Council to be an effective regional authority.**
- **They had to acknowledge current criticisms of the Council.**
- **They had to be politically plausible.**

While there were no preconceived outcomes, the final report is mainly focused on governance, Kershaw said. Its recommendations include:

- Adopt fixed, four-year, staggered terms for Metropolitan Council members, who would still be appointed by the Governor. With fixed terms, the members would no longer serve at the pleasure of the Governor. The Council chair would continue to be appointed by the Governor and continue to serve at the pleasure of the Governor.
- Strengthen the Metro Council member selection process to include more input by citizens and local officials and to further encourage the appointment of well-qualified members.
- Expand the current Metro Council nominations committee from seven to 13 members. Seven citizens-at-large should be appointed to the committee by the Governor. Six local-government elected officials should also serve on the committee, with three appointed by counties and three appointed by cities.
- Require that the nominations committee recommend three finalists for each Metro Council seat and that the finalists' names be made public at least 14 days prior to the final selection by the Governor.
- Add to the current Metro Council member qualifications: experience in local government and/or experience in areas such as transportation, housing, environment and regional development; ability to represent both the demographic diversity of each district and the region as a whole; and ability to meet the time commitment required.
- Fully deploy the Metro Council's current authority to reduce concentrations of poverty in the region and to foster increased connections to social and economic opportunities.

The Citizens League recommendations were included in a bill that passed the Minnesota Senate. Half of the recommendations were in the House bill, Kershaw said, which did not go beyond committee. He said it was understood that nothing would likely happen legislatively on the Metro Council issue unless the metropolitan region's transportation issue were settled, which it wasn't before the legislative session ended in May.

The Citizens League intends to stick with the Metro Council issue. In response to an interviewer's question, Kershaw said the League will continue to advocate for its Metro Council recommendations. He noted that the report raised two issues for further study by the Citizens League: water supply and transportation governance. (He noted that housing was also discussed.) He said the League is considering a study on the transportation governance issue before the next legislative session begins in January, if funding can be raised. The lack of resolution on transportation means this issue will be important again in the coming years.

Did the Metro Council task force address long-range planning issues? An interviewer who was also a member of the task force commented that he had two concerns at every meeting:

- **People on the task force who were most active and vocal were primarily representing very short-term issues. That pushed into the background the longer-term, long-range planning issues that, traditionally, the Metro Council was supposed to be concerned about.**
- **Some issues being talked about were expressions of fiscal concerns by counties and some suburban municipalities.**

"We never got into the governance problem," the interviewer said. What showed up in the final report, which he said was very good, represented what the task force talked about, but long-range planning and governance were never really addressed. "Those are two issues that should be at the top of the list," he said.

Kershaw responded that the recommendation to move to fixed, four-year terms for Metro Council members was to build the governance capacity of the Council to be a long-range planning agency. "As long as members are worried about their terms on the Council, it's hard to do effective long-term planning," he said.

The Citizens League needs to better inform the public about the issues surrounding the Metro Council report. An interviewer suggested that the Citizens League create a series of study forums around the report. "By and large, the public is not aware of these issues," the interviewer said. "We need to better inform the public, so they can participate in this process and put pressure on elected officials."

The difference in the political environment now compared to the past requires a different makeup of Citizens League study committees or task forces than in the past. An interviewer asked Kershaw to discuss the makeup of the task force and how that affected what issues it was able to address. Ten of the 19 task force members were current or former local, state or regional public officials, elected and nonelected. (A list of task force members and their biographies are included in the appendix of  [the report](#), starting on page 61.)

Kershaw responded that there's an enormous difference between the past and current makeup of Citizens League study committees or task forces. "In the past, we could get a group of generalist citizens with no connections to special interests who could come in with an implausible idea that would get implemented," he said. "That is not the case now. Period. We could have come up with the best academic ideas and they would sit there and go nowhere."

He said when the Citizens League brought the Metro Council report to the Legislature, the fact that the task force had some members with a deep knowledge of the Metro Council and some with almost no experience reflected reality and this added credibility. And the members represented a variety of sectors, geographies and ideologies.

"By the time we met with legislators, we had already argued through all of those points of view," Kershaw said. "We came up with something that had a great deal of legitimacy when we got to the Capitol, because we had a diverse set of people who could argue things out around the table. This is an example of a completely different political dynamic now compared with the past. Even if we could have gone bolder and further with our report, I believe even less would have happened."

The task force process involved negotiating between competing interests before the recommendations were released. An interviewer asked whether the task force process Kershaw described involved making compromises internally among generalist task force members and those members representing various special interests before any ideas or recommendations were released publicly. She asserted that's different from the approach the Citizens League used in the past, which involved putting out potentially bolder, less restrictive ideas and leaving room for compromise during the legislative process.

"We deliberately had people representing 'different interests' on the task force because there are more special interests lobbying at the Legislature today," Kershaw said. "Without including those interests on the task force, the recommendations wouldn't have had any credibility. They wouldn't have gone anywhere."

"The Legislature is so different now compared to the 1970s, when solid ideas could be more easily agreed to and be considered," he continued. "Now there are so many special interests around the Legislature trying to keep things from being done. We need to work those things through in a study committee or task force." Perhaps ironically, including the special interests in the policy development process increases the chance that a common-interest recommendation will be accepted and implemented.

Some questions were beyond the scope of the task force study. An interviewer raised questions he had hoped the task force would touch on: the role of the Metro Council in transportation finance issues, expansion of the Council's territory beyond the current seven counties, and education issues, which the Council has done nothing about.

Kershaw responded that it would have been hard to get to those questions in the six-month time frame of the study. "That doesn't mean those aren't great questions. We just didn't have time to dive into them," he said. Also, issues like schools and expansion of the Metro Council's territory would not have gone very far. "They're not going to be relevant in the short term."

As long as the Metro Council is made up the way it is now, it's harder to address the long-term issues. An interviewer who served on the task force brought up the importance of long-range planning on issues like transportation and schools. Kershaw agreed that long-range planning is important. But he said changing the way Council members are nominated and changing to fixed, four-year terms, both of which the task force recommended, are the best ways to enable the Council to get to long-range issues, such as water, housing, transportation and the state's changing demographics and aging population.

"Unless we change the Council's governance, it won't be able to get to these issues," he said.

Could the Citizens League do more to inform the broader public about the Metro Council issues? An interviewer repeated his comments about the Citizens League needing to get the Metropolitan Council issues out to more people than the typical ones. "This concerns many people," he said. "It's too important to be left to politicians to decide."

Kershaw responded that the Citizens League has a chance to keep talking about the report over the next year. The public tends to be either uninterested in or completely opposed to the Metro Council. It seems the people who are most motivated are mostly opposed to it.

The Metro Council is not using its convening authority to address equity issues. Kershaw commented that the Metro Council has additional opportunities to address equity issues with counties, school districts, cities or state agencies. "The Council is reluctant to use its existing convening authority to address those issues," he said, "because of what might happen to them politically if they do that."

The task force decided that keeping the current system of the governor appointing the Metro Council chair was the only option. An interviewer asked whether the task force looked at other options for selection of the chair. Kershaw said the idea of having the Council members select the chair came up for some discussion, but the task force didn't support that option.

"The Governor is a key player in any Met Council reform. For the recommendations to be politically plausible, it meant we had to take measured steps not to pull away too much from the governor or risk him not accepting any recommended changes," Kershaw said.

One path for the Citizens League is to continue to work on metropolitan governance. An interviewer commented that we know how the Citizens League raised, shaped and helped resolve issues in the past. He asked how the League is doing that today and how it will do it into the future.

Kershaw responded that the Metro Council project is in some ways traditional for the Citizens League in that the target is legislative and administrative. "We did it somewhat untraditionally in terms of the makeup of the task force, but the primary audience for the recommendations is the governor and other elected officials," he said.

He said the League will continue to advocate for the task force recommendations. If the organization does some work on transportation governance, any committee or task force would have a similar makeup to include counties and cities. "We were deliberate about doing this. The Metro Council project is key to the future of the region and of Minnesota. It ties to our past work. And it's something we can take on and have outcomes over a fixed time."

"Assuming we have the resources," he continued, "one path for the League is to continue to work on metropolitan governance in similar ways."

In the future, the Citizens League and every other system will have to address the impact of the aging of the baby boomers. Kershaw said aging baby boomers are already having a major impact as they leave the workforce. They will become very expensive when they're in their 80s and 90s. "Everything falls apart. The costs of long-term care will overwhelm everything," he said. "There's no way we can cut or spend our way out of this."

Unlike the Metro Council issues, Kershaw continued, the solutions to aging are not just administrative, executive or legislative. The solutions are the last result of other things not happening in every type of institution: families, schools, congregations, neighborhoods, workplaces, healthcare organizations, etc. The future for the Citizens League and everyone else doesn't look like the Metro Council project.

The future looks like the Citizens League's aging project, "Calling Home." If you ask people in the 50-to-90 age range what home and community look like, transportation questions and city government issues look totally different. "This is the challenge of the future," he said.

The League's Calling Home project is focused on engaging the public on aging issues. This initiative will look at "home" as a starting place for intergenerational conversations about aging and planning for the life changes that are inevitable. A key aim is to spur conversations that will bring to light the challenges and opportunities at the crossroads of family and community, which will inspire more proactive planning and more responsive policymaking.

The project will include a partnership with Twin Cities Public Television to do a series of conversations in different communities. The project will lead to determining the key policy threads that come from these conversations and who the stakeholders are who need to work on them. Kershaw said the Citizens League is still raising money for the project from foundations and individuals. It has raised \$160,000 so far.

Foundations are less interested in funding policy work. An interviewer commented that the people who used to be interested in funding things like this aren't interested anymore. How does investment get made in what's needed? Otherwise, we just have nice ideas, he said.

Kershaw responded that if we don't do good work, we don't necessarily deserve support. "Ultimately, it's a resource question," he said. "Most foundations don't support policy work because they fear the partisanship that emerges in policy work now, or they simply prefer service delivery over long-term systems work. They're interested in more direct services with immediate outcomes. It's frustrating how shortsighted that is."

On the other hand, he said, business donations to the Citizens League have increased in recent years, because it does on-site policy presentations for companies' employees. He noted that those inside-the-company conversations are much more diverse than any other presentations or programs the League does. "I'm hopeful about the business involvement," he said.

It's hard to plan for a dynamic future. What's different about the future, Kershaw asserted, is that it's hard to have 30- or 40-year plans when the world is so much more dynamic today compared to the past. For example, we're fighting about a transportation system that driverless cars will change quickly. And housing must be completely rethought, he said.

Someone needs to call out the failure of the district school systems. An interviewer said despite the fact that the customer base for higher education is in the K-12 public schools, the University of Minnesota and the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system (MnSCU) don't see themselves as in partnership with the K-12 schools. "Higher education gets a complete pass on what's going on in public schools, as if they exist in separate silos," he said.

"Someone needs to call out the failure of the schools," Kershaw responded. He said his daughter will be leaving the St. Paul district school system for a chartered school when she reaches sixth grade. "The system is such a disaster at every level. The school district has had a willful collapse because

they can't govern themselves. We're going to look back on this time period and really regret it. I'm very hopeful about the new superintendent in Minneapolis. I'm less hopeful about St. Paul. They're just driving that car right off the cliff. It's just awful."

"Try to step into that and see what happens," he continued. "The special interests are so strong and they're playing chicken with everybody else."

The Civic Caucus, the Citizens League and other organizations must focus on institution building and leadership building. Kershaw said the Civic Caucus should redefine what an institution of public policy is. The Caucus needs to talk about institutions for implementing policies, which encompass everyone, not just the Legislature. Organizations like the Civic Caucus and the Citizens League must focus on institution-building and leadership-building everywhere.