



# R. T. Rybak, president and CEO of the Minneapolis Foundation

## Minneapolis Foundation to play stronger role in public policy

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

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### Present

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### Summary

According to R.T. Rybak, president and CEO of the Minneapolis Foundation, the 101-year-old foundation played a large role in helping develop Minnesota's civic infrastructure-perhaps the largest role as an institution. That civic infrastructure has gotten us a long way, he says, although it has never been driven or led by the state's political community. He contends that the civic infrastructure has been stronger than the political parties and an easier place to convene and solve problems.

But he believes our civic infrastructure is not well situated for the very complex issues of race and equity. He believes the infrastructure and the participants are nowhere near what they need to be. If we want the benefits of living in this community-among them, low unemployment and high educational attainment-to be available to everyone, we must have a dramatic rethinking of how engagement works, he says.

Rybak stresses that the Minneapolis Foundation intends to more dramatically assert its role as a community foundation by creating more convening opportunities and stepping into public policy. He says convening is an end in itself to a certain degree, since it's so important to keep the lines of communication open across wide areas. But convening, he admits, does not often lead to a certain proposal or solution.

To help stimulate quality proposals for change, Rybak says that as a community foundation, the Minneapolis Foundation would be open to helping bring back the type of nonpartisan, non-special-interest study process that, in the past, gave deep study and analysis to an issue and came up with

specific, actionable proposals for change. And he finds it an interesting idea for a foundation or a group of foundations to take a more aggressive approach to motivating organizations to use that type of approach in order to develop quality proposals for solving community problems.

## Biography

R.T. Rybak has served as president and CEO of The Minneapolis Foundation since July 2016. As leader of one of the oldest and largest community foundations in the country, Rybak oversees the management of nearly \$700 million in assets; the administration of more than 1,200 charitable funds created by individuals, families, and businesses; and the average annual distribution of more than \$50 million in grants.

A Minneapolis native, R.T. Rybak spent almost 30 years working in journalism, the commercial real estate business, publishing and the Internet before being elected mayor of Minneapolis (2002-2013) in his first run for public office. Most recently, he served as executive director of Generation Next, a coalition of civic, business and school leaders focused on closing the racial achievement gap in Minneapolis and Saint Paul.

He is the author of *Pothole Confidential*, a book about his 12 years as mayor of Minneapolis, serves as a senior advisor for municipal practice at Living Cities and is a vice chair of the Democratic National Committee. He is a graduate of Boston College.

## 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 R.T. Rybak of the Minneapolis Foundation to get his assessment of the kinds of proposals for solving public-policy problems the community needs and the role a community foundation can play in helping in the development of those proposals. .

## Discussion

**The political community has never been at the center of civic life in Minnesota.** R.T. Rybak of the Minneapolis Foundation said there have always been a lot of solid, middle-of-the-road, well performing political leaders in the state, but they've never driven Minnesota's civic life or led the state's civic infrastructure.

**The Minneapolis Foundation was one of the first community foundations in the world.** The Foundation was founded in 1915, when five individuals came together to create an organization to benefit the community for years to come. "That's how we got civic infrastructure," Rybak said. "When new executives came to town, Ken Dayton would tell them, 'In this town you don't just do business, you contribute.' This is a phenomenal legacy and the Minneapolis Foundation played a huge role in it-maybe even the biggest role as an institution." Over the last 100 years, the Foundation has invested over \$850 million locally, nationally and globally to address issues and fund solutions.

The Foundation, Rybak stated, now has three core areas, all about equity, that it funds with about \$6 million a year: education, employment and civic engagement. But there are 1,200 individual funds in the Foundation that together put \$60 million to \$80 million into the community each year. "Those are individuals making individual choices," he said. Rybak asserted that there is more capacity within those individual funds. He'd like to broaden that, if possible, by convening the funders and aligning their giving much more.

**In recent years, there has been more convening of people around tables, because we've figured out that there's not a single thing you can solve by yourself.** During his 12 years as mayor, as he helped formed bipartisan organizations like the Regional Council of Mayors, Generation Next, Itasca Project and GREATER MSP, Rybak said there was a real sense of coming together around these issues. With these bipartisan groups sitting together at the tables, the tables became safe zones, he said.

"I feel pretty good about the civic infrastructure continuing to evolve in some ways," Rybak said.

**But our civic infrastructure is not well situated for the very complex issues of race and equity.** Rybak said this is one of the challenges facing the region and the state. "The infrastructure and the participants are nowhere near what they need to be," he said.

He noted that there have been organizations formed like Neighborhoods Organizing for Change, which is a grassroots, member-led organization building power in under-resourced communities and communities of color across the Twin Cities. It focuses on the intersection of race, the economy and public policy. "It's important to put the community-based, neighborhood organizations into the mix," Rybak said.

"We have a phenomenal community with the lowest unemployment rate of any metro area in the country and with high educational levels. But I don't think we can get to the next step, which is to make sure that's true for everyone, without a pretty dramatic rethinking of how engagement works."

**Generation Next is really about taking the compassion we have in this community and doing more to drive alignment.** Rybak served as executive director of Generation Next prior to moving to the Minneapolis Foundation. He said his job there was to drive that alignment by having a table of all the foundations and superintendents in town focused on equity in education.

"We could really dive into the data and look into race and culture and understand that," he said. "We could say it was great that all of the funders were investing in literacy. But we have 17,000 kids in Minneapolis and Saint Paul not reading at grade level and you're funding interventions for 7,000 kids. We're not moving the dial on literacy."

And most of the interventions were for kids a couple of months below grade level, Rybak pointed out. "What about kids who are several years behind?" he asked. Most of the achievement gap was caused by kids being one or two grade levels behind.

He said data show that an African American boy has a deeper average commitment to learning than his white counterpart. But looking at personal identity shows a very different picture, he noted. The African American boy has a much lower positive identity than the average white kid.

Math or science, where you fail and fail until you get it right, Rybak said, is only going to reinforce a student's low personal identity. "So, we should stop spending so much time asking African American boys to work harder and instead focus on telling them they can do it," he stated. "That's a very different frame. That's smarter. It's disaggregating data and understanding culture."

Rybak said Somali kids are very high on personal identity, while Latino kids have a much lower personal identity. "The teachers better know that, so they don't make assumptions," he said.

**Our civic infrastructure needs to be culturally richer.** "We've gotten a long, long way with the civic infrastructure we have," Rybak declared. "But for us to really, fully have an asset-based way of looking at diverse cultures, we're going to have to pivot these institutions to be more culturally rich."

**There is a rapid deterioration of identity with political parties.** "That's changing very rapidly," Rybak said. He noted that different parties have different blind spots. In the Democratic Party, the blind spot is urban education. "We have to do really disruptive things to deal with urban education," he stated. "Look at school board nominations. The Democratic party is not qualified to be the sole arbiter of who sits on the Minneapolis school board."

An interviewer asked whether the strong civic infrastructure in Minnesota has kept the political parties from taking leadership on public-policy issues. Rybak said the political parties and the civic infrastructure are somewhat independent. "I don't think it's one or the other," he said. "It's that the civic infrastructure has been stronger and an easier place to convene and solve problems."

**Minneapolis and St. Paul must work together.** An interviewer asked whether having two central cities makes it harder for the metropolitan area to tackle the issues of the central city. "It's very different on either side of the river," Rybak responded. "I never got this Minneapolis vs. Saint Paul thing. It's not the way I was raised. But it is a very live issue, especially for people in Saint Paul, who have seen the evolution of businesses out of the downtown. I never fully appreciated that."

He said by construct in this region, the two cities have to work together. "You don't have an option," he asserted. "Arguably, a major city could go it alone, if it were the only major city around. But it's not about the geography of east and west. It's about the large talent shed this region has."

**How can we communicate to younger people the critical lessons from the past about how policy is made?** An interviewer commented that there are critical lessons for younger generations to learn from past policy changes like the Minnesota Miracle, 1971 legislation that brought a major shift in school finance in the state. He asked how we can update and communicate to younger people how policy is made and what the key lessons are that could be applied. "There's little or no focus on that in the schools," the interviewer said.

Rybak responded that the best thing in politics is to be totally yourself. "The most successful people are the ones who are laying out on social media what they are thinking," he said. He thinks social media is really helpful. "It has some challenges, but it's like the town square," he said. "I'm not down on these new tools. We just have to use them in a transparent way."

"If social media didn't exist, we'd not be as far along in the discussion of equity and equality," Rybak said. There are disruptive voices on social media, he noted. "But at least I hear them. It's different from someone else interpreting them."

He asserted that the dialogue has brought us to the following point. "Equality," he said, "is saying 'black lives matter, but so do white lives.' Equity is saying we must explicitly say 'black lives matter,' because we have all these videos of black people being killed and it's not the same for white people."

**Where is the concept of deep study of an issue by a nonpartisan, non-special-interest group happening today or how might it be possible?** An interviewer asked that question, saying the deep study should include redefining the issue, listening to people, taking some time and doing sober analysis, leading to the group coming up with a proposal that reflects the best interests of Minnesota.

Rybak responded that there are lots of places in the civic structure where that works, like the Itasca Project and the Regional Council of Mayors. "That kind of table exists in formal and informal places," he said. "Those sorts of things happen. It's OK to have it be informal and have a culture of engagement."

"I hear the word 'calm' in the description of the study and proposal process," Rybak said. "When we fully engage all the voices in the community, there will be lots of anger and rage. We're not going to have the privilege of calm discussions about really hot issues. We're going to have to develop the internal armor to handle all of that. We're going to hear the voices of people who haven't been at the table, who are angry-rightfully."

**The Minneapolis Foundation is a foundation, but it's really a community of 1,200 people at various levels of access and levels of wealth.** Rybak said the number one thing he's working on is communicating that the Minneapolis Foundation is a foundation, but it's imbedded within a philanthropic community. "We want our community to be integrating with other communities," he said. "Our community of 1,200 givers can do much more together and can be interacting much more with others for significant change."

He stated that the Minneapolis Foundation plans to create more convening opportunities. The Foundation used to run the Minnesota Meeting and it might bring that back.

"We're going to more dramatically assert our role as the community foundation, helping to convene people around issues," Rybak declared. "That also means we'll step into public policy. We're very resolved that we must support the Minneapolis Public Schools referendum. We're putting out a piece of literature on that, because community foundations can do independent expenditures."

**What role should higher education institutions play in engaging with the community?** An interviewer asked that question and Rybak responded by pointing to Augsburg College as an institution that has been deeply engaged with the community.

He commented that big research institutions like the University of Minnesota (U of M) are complicated. He noted that U of M President Eric Kaler, founding co-chair of Generation Next, convened the smartest people working on different aspects of math learning and math education. "But none of this work is being deployed together," Rybak said. "The University is not wired to bring this together."

He said Generation Next is taking all of those ideas to Anne Sullivan School in Minneapolis this year through a program called GopherMath. The program will also include the Northside Achievement Zone. The goal is that students will master math by eighth grade. "We've learned that the gateway is learning fractions by third grade," Rybak said. "The University doesn't package things like that."

Rybak noted that the U of M convened a conference on educational equity, bringing in a number of outside experts. "But the University should have been talking about its own work," he said.

**We can't put blindingly large issues on the table.** An interviewer asked how we can focus on small pieces of larger philosophical issues so we can begin addressing parts of the total. Rybak responded that we're human beings who only can digest so much. Looking at issues like the massive restructuring needed in the education system is blinding people. "We need to break these huge things apart into digestible chunks," he said.

He cited the example of Generation Next looking at the state's early childhood quality ratings and finding that the gap is not in school-based preschool, but in less formal child-care settings, such as friends and family care or licensed family care. So Generation Next started a small program where multicultural teams go to licensed family child-care homes located in neighborhoods that feed into schools with high achievement gaps. "It was more scalable and focused on the areas that mattered most," Rybak said.

**We must harness the knowledge of the huge surge of baby boomers coming out of their careers.** "These people are relevant," Rybak said. "There's massive knowledge that needs to be harnessed right now. This group has massive potential. We shouldn't forget the fact that they're an incredible asset with more time, more experience and more knowledge to share."

**It's hugely important now to keep lines of communication open across wide areas.** Because of that, Rybak said, convening is an end in itself to a certain degree. But the problem is that the convening is not leading to a certain proposal or solution.

**Bringing back the type of nonpartisan, non-special-interest study process that, in the past, came up with quality proposals for change is an interesting and logical place for a community foundation to go.** Rybak said he's open to helping bring back that type of study and recommendation process. "If you want to resurrect the past Citizens League type of convening and have the foundations be more involved, I'd be interested in that discussion," he said.

An interviewer asked if there would be interest from a foundation or a group of foundations to taking a more aggressive approach to stimulating organizations to develop proposals for change. The foundation or foundations would come up with a list of the 100 most urgent issues facing Minnesota and choose the top five, the interviewer suggested. Then the foundation or group could say it was open to proposals from organizations that would take on one of the top issues. Rybak called it a "really interesting idea."