



Dane Smith, president of the public policy organization Growth and Justice

Assign high priority to inclusiveness in public policy groups

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

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Present

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Summary

The president of another public-policy organization, Growth & Justice, shares his agreement with many parts—along with some suggested improvements—in a Civic Caucus draft on the public-policy process in Minnesota. Dane Smith said he likes the emphasis on the importance of independent, non-partisan, citizen-based groups. He agrees that the environment for change is different today from the past. He urges the Civic Caucus to give greater attention to the problems of racial disparities. He suggests including additional names of effective groups. It is critical, he said, for study groups to include much broader representation from people of different races, ethnic and cultural groups, ages and genders. More people need a sense of "equity" in the community, not just in a fairness sense, but in ownership, he urges. He supports a preliminary direction to turn to foundations for needed leadership on the public-policy proposal process.

Biography

Dane Smith was named president of Growth & Justice in April 2007 after concluding a 30-year career as a journalist for the Star Tribune and the Pioneer Press, where he developed a solid reputation reporting and writing about state, local and federal government and politics. He succeeded founding executive director Joel Kramer, who is currently a member of the board of directors.

Dane is co-author of the book, "Professor Wellstone Goes to Washington: The Inside Story of a Grassroots U.S. Senate Campaign." In 1989-90, Dane was the recipient of the John S. Knight

Fellowship for Professional Journalists, providing a mid-career sabbatical and a year of study at Stanford University. Dane holds a B.A. in journalism from the University of St. Thomas and an A.A. degree from Inver Hills Community College, where he also has served as an adjunct faculty member.

Background

Growth & Justice is a research and advocacy organization that develops innovative public policy proposals based on independent research and civic engagement. We believe when Minnesota makes *smart investments in practical solutions* it leads to *broader prosperity* for all.

For more than a decade we have been setting Minnesota's progressive agenda by uniting people around one simple philosophy: a robust state economy with widespread economic opportunity leads to a higher quality of life and greater economic justice.

The Growth & Justice vision for Minnesota:

- Business and job growth is strong and steady
- Economic justice is improving
- All our children are getting a stronger start in life
- We are better connected to jobs and other destinations
- Our economy and environment are clean
- We lead healthier lives in sustainable communities

Smith was invited today to offer his thoughts on a Civic Caucus preliminary draft of a report on strengthening the public policy proposal process in Minnesota

Discussion

Good emphasis on the "Minnesota Process"— It is good that the background of the report stresses principles on the public-policy process that were outlined by the Citizens League in 1976, Smith said. The draft identifies these principles as the "Minnesota Process". He suggested that the identification could be repeated other places in the report and could be used in the name of the report. The report could well be branded as Strengthening the Minnesota Process, he said.

He singled out the following paragraph for emphasis:

*** Non-governmental, independent, non-partisan, citizen based** —An independent group, not part of government or other group or organization locally or nationally, has an advantage. It is strictly non-partisan in its leadership, membership and activities. Welcoming people of all political persuasions and interests. Urging individuals to participate as generalists representing themselves, as distinct from a political party, profession or interest group. While not ignoring the exceptional contribution that people with professional or occupational credentials can offer, especially in the internal exploration of an issue, the credentials and perspective of ordinary citizens are equal or greater.

He also likes the Minnesota Process' emphasis on the importance of learning from individuals on all sides of an issue.

Good to avoid yearning for "the good old days"— The report speaks positively about both the public-policy process today and in the past, which Smith said he likes, because there are so many positive aspects of the process today. Moreover, we need to be wary of nostalgic affection for the past process when Minnesota was overwhelmingly white and homogenous, and less partisan..

An abundance of diagnosis of problems and prescription for solutions —Smith said Minnesota continues to be a leader in public policy nationally. As an example he cited progress on early childhood education with extensive leadership by Arthur Rolnick and the business community. Now there's no debate here about "whether" early childhood education is important, he said. Much progress has been made, and additional discussion now is positively focused on "how" to proceed further.

Give specific attention to racial disparities —While agreeing with the paragraph that highlights changes in the environment for public policy discussion, Smith urged that the report be specific about racial disparities, which he contends is the overarching No. 1 problem facing the state today.

Funding sources have shifted dramatically —He strongly agrees that sources of funding the public-policy process have shifted dramatically. Grants are usually available to fund specific projects for a limited time, not for general support of organizations focused on broad public policy research and advocacy..

Greater reliance today on federal solutions? —Smith said we need to be careful with facts here. The percentage of gross domestic product devoted to the federal government and to state and local government has remained relatively constant over the last half-century, he said. Also he noted that such notable efforts as the Northside Achievement Zone in Minneapolis would not likely have gotten off the ground without federal leadership. An interviewer replied that irrespective of the relative size of federal versus state-local, there seems to be a greater tendency today to expect that expenses of a state-local project will be partially covered by the federal government even when it is hard to discern a federal interest in a project.

Good to draw attention to low priority to civics education in schools— Smith said he recalls a time when all high school seniors were required to take civics

Mention additional organizations —In the listing of organizations leading in public policy, Smith said that MSP Win, Wilder Research and Compass, The Minnesota Center for Fiscal Excellence, and Voices for Racial Justice should be included.

Study groups needing to be more representative of the population— Smith agreed strongly that study groups are out of balance with the populations, particularly with the absence in many groups—including the Civic Caucus—of different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, as well as different ages and genders.

Advocacy groups more energized— He agreed with the report's observation that advocacy groups are more motivated to getting things done than just saying what should be done. In contrast to "think tanks", they are "think and do tanks".

Good idea to emphasize the role of foundations in public policy— He noted the leadership of foundations in 2009 and 2011 on two foundation-supported reports dealing with state government priorities, *The Bottom Line* and *Beyond the Bottom Line*. Some critics have questioned whether those reports generated action, but Smith said that emerging consensus on reducing mass incarceration can be traced back to those reports.

Urgent topics for study —It is vital, Smith said, to include the question of race equity and discrimination in the list of topics for study. He recalled the [report](#) of the Civic Caucus in early 2015 on strengthening the state's high quality work force. An outstanding example today of addressing racial disparities and the shortage of skilled labor in the state is the [Career Pathways](#) program of MSPWin, a project supported by several foundations and businesses, Smith said.

Difficulty communicating good ideas with a broader audience —An interviewer suggested that it is immensely difficult today to get good ideas—including ideas on improving the public-policy process that might be in a forthcoming Civic Caucus report—widely circulated throughout the state. Smith agreed that it is difficult for well-meaning groups to get media attention. But based on his reading of the draft, and his own 30-years experience in journalism, he thinks the major media outlets and editorial pages would be likely to cover the report.

Rushing to judgment without understanding how things work— An interviewer noted that many public-policy questions can't be addressed appropriately unless first there's an understanding how systems work, but interviewer said, too many persons seem to lack what might be thought as essential background. To illustrate the problem, the interviewer found virtual silence when inquiring of a group of graduate students in public affairs what the students thought were the main sources of revenue for local governments. The interviewer is concerned that too many proposals for change—including proposals supported by reputable funding organizations—seem to be generated by individuals and groups who haven't bothered to take the effort to gain an understanding of the larger systems within which given problems are addressed.

The difficulty in gaining broad representation on study groups —Responding to a question Smith agreed that organizations will likely encounter difficulty in achieving good representation from racial, ethnic and cultural groups. So many organizations seem to be trying to encourage the same people to participate. But he said that this issue is so vital to the future of the state that it must remain front and center. In his experience Smith said there's an absolute wealth of talent that is not being tapped because of inadequate efforts to broaden representation. He mentioned specifically younger people and people of color.

Social media is somewhat of a two-edged sword, Smith said. It offers incredible opportunity for people to share views with others on all sorts of topics, but the views aren't able to be offered in a context where they can be heard, evaluated and contributed toward some broader consensus.

Without diminishing the importance of well-balanced study groups, an interviewer said that study groups—regardless of their membership—should make sure that they consult with, and understand the concerns of, broad segments of the population before coming up with their conclusions and recommendations.

Exploring foundations' interest in strengthening the public-policy process— An interviewer noted that Minnesota has a variety of types of foundations, with involvement of founding families, boards of directors, and staffs. Where does one turn, the interviewer asked? Smith said that his organization has received funding from many foundations in the state and that he is very confident of their interest in the kind of public-policy leadership the Civic Caucus is envisioning in its draft report.

Recognize that long-term economic growth is central —One must acknowledge, Smith said, that foundations invariably are created and sustained by generous gifts from people whose wealth came about because of economic growth. Thus, one can logically expect that the ongoing work of foundations established with that wealth will involve ways to continue long-term economic growth. An interviewer replied that it seems very likely that foundations will continue to grow in importance in the state as much wealth from the baby boomer generation is passed on to foundations. Smith praised the [Minnesota Council on Foundations](#), Trista Harris, president, and Bob Tracy, director of public policy and communications, for its leadership in public policy.

A vision for a better engaged citizenry — An interviewer contended that large numbers of people in Minnesota genuinely love their state, listen to one another, and are interested in what is best for the entire population, not just for themselves personally. The interviewer wishes that more such people were involved in discussion of public-policy issues because most of them, as he said, have "no skin in the game."

Does control reduce efficiency?— Systems left to themselves usually operate efficiently, an interviewer said. But when outside influences are brought to bear, some of which sound very appealing, you lose efficiency. Thus, the interviewer contended, we need to be cautious about expecting great things from new efforts that might, on the outside, seem compelling, but which don't fit reality. For example, the interviewer said, placing a factory in an area of high unemployment won't automatically reduce unemployment in the area. Maybe, the interviewer suggested, more emphasis ought to be devoted to streamlining services, to make the more effective. Smith replied that one sees successful efforts in some states to ease governmental regulations on business.

Too many people living in "silos"— One really needs ongoing interaction with people of different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds to gain an appreciation of the humanness in everyone, an interviewer said. Unfortunately, according to the interviewer, too many of us live in "silos" without learning to know people of other backgrounds. Take drug addiction as an example, the interviewer said. Too many white people ignored drug addiction as being a problem, wrongly thinking that it was mainly a problem for blacks. But as soon as the addiction problem in the white community was acknowledged, then the whites started being concerned. The interviewer wondered whether more Minnesotans are living in silos today than in years past and, if so, why.

Giving people a sense of "equity" in community—"Equity", as Smith uses the word in this case, refers to having a piece of ownership in the community, just as homeowners have equity, or

ownership, in their homes. One can thereby distinguish equity from equality, which implies equalness in outcome.. People who are given a sense of ownership and equity in their community will care about and solve the problems of, their community, just as homeowners care about and solve the problems of their homes. We need to help our fellow citizens come to fully appreciate the equity they have in their communities, Smith said. Government in the USA has done much—for example the Homestead Act of 1862—to give its citizens equity, he noted.

Possible approach to foundation leadership —As the Civic Caucus moves toward a recommendation on turning to foundations for needed leadership on the public-policy proposal process, Smith suggested that leaders of foundations be invited to come together to learn about the Civic Caucus report, the "Minnesota Process" highlighted by the report, and its recommendations. One must be very encouraged already, he said, by the cooperation demonstrated by foundations in such efforts as MSPWin, the Bottom Line reports, the Northside Funders Group, and the Minnesota Council on Foundations. In response to a question about whether members of individual families that lead certain foundations should be looked to, Smith replied that all connections should be explored.