



Minnesota State Representative Paul Thissen

Legislature needs high quality proposals from outside general-interest groups

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

July 22, 2016

Present

Steve Anderson, Dave Broden (vice chair), Paul Gilje (executive director), Randy Johnson, Dan Loritz (chair), Paul Ostrow, Bill Rudelius, Dana Schroeder (associate director), Clarence Shallbetter, Paul Thissen, Fred Zimmerman. By phone: Steve Alderson, Tim McDonald.

Summary

General interest groups outside the Legislature have played a critical role in developing a number of important public-policy innovations in Minnesota, according to Minnesota Rep. Paul Thissen. For example, he notes the Citizens League's important part in creating the Minnesota Miracle, groundbreaking 1971 legislation that increased state funding for local school districts.

He believes that some groups that used to play a role in making public-policy proposals have become more partisan. There is a middle-ground space, he says, to be occupied by groups not pursuing ideological agendas. He laments the move to bringing to the table all the special interests, which tend to take over the conversation, leading groups to come up with already-compromised proposals. Better, he says, is to allow general-interest groups to bring good ideas forward and let the Legislature make the compromises.

Thissen advocates for having general-interest, third-party groups work on governance issues in the Legislature, helping to put new governance structures in place, including, perhaps, changes to the legislative committee structure.

He says what makes proposals from outside groups to the Legislature of high quality is that they be unique and say something new, that they include a commitment to do the follow-through to get the proposals enacted, that they be in areas where other people are not working and that they be fully formed-on a "silver platter"-so the Legislature can consider them right away.

Biography

State Rep. Paul Thissen (DFL-Minneapolis) is the Minnesota House Minority Leader. He was first elected to the House in 2002 and has been re-elected every two years since then. From 2007 to 2010, he chaired the House Health and Human Services Committee.

Thissen was born in Bloomington, Minn. After graduating from the Academy of Holy Angels in Richfield, he attended Harvard University and graduated with high honors in 1989. He earned his law degree from the University of Chicago Law School in 1992.

Thissen clerked for the Honorable James B. Loken of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit and then joined the Minneapolis law firm of Briggs & Morgan. He specialized in general litigation and appellate work. He also worked for the Minnesota State Public Defender's Office.

In 2006, Thissen was named one of "Forty Under 40" top business professionals in the Twin Cities by the *Twin Cities Business Journal*. Thissen continues to work at Briggs & Morgan when the Legislature is not in session.

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 Minnesota State Representative Paul Thissen to get his assessment of how urgent it is for the State Legislature to get good proposals for resolving public-policy problems, the character of a good proposal and what the Legislature is looking for in those proposals.

Discussion

Groups outside the Legislature, such as the Citizens League, were responsible for a large part of the Minnesota Miracle. According to Minnesota Rep. Paul Thissen, Minnesota made a lot of progress during the days of former DFL Minnesota House speaker and Minnesota Member of Congress Martin Sabo and former Minnesota Governor Wendell Anderson. Thissen said groups outside of the Legislature, such as the Citizens League, were responsible for a large part of the Minnesota Miracle, groundbreaking legislation passed in 1971 that increased state funding for local school districts by reducing dependence on local property taxes and increasing dependence on state income and sales taxes.

The Legislature can't agree on what the long-term problems are that are facing Minnesota.

Thissen said one of the challenges the state faces in the process of issues raising, issues shaping and issues resolving is that the Legislature can't even agree on what the problems are. He believes

the process of issue raising is significant. "In 2003, the Legislature was moving from crisis to crisis," he said. "There was no long-term thinking. We were lurching from solving crisis to crisis. We've moved out of that lately and we must retrain ourselves to think long term. But what are those long-term problems?"

It's harder and harder to have real, direct conversations with constituents. Thissen said more and more often now those conversations are mediated by professional advocates. "Often times an advocate-sometimes a lobbyist-intervenes in the conversation and guides it," he said. "The way we attempt to solve problems now is to bring all the special interests to the table. But that results in a move toward the middle ground, rather than the common ground, which should be the goal."

Moving to bringing everybody, including special interests, to the table results in groups coming up with already-compromised proposals, rather than allowing general-interest groups to bring good ideas forward and letting the Legislature make the compromises.

The federal government has strings of money, which makes it harder for states to be laboratories of innovation. "How do we fit the state's ideas and actions into the boxes the federal government has created?" Thissen asked.

Some groups that used to play a role in making public-policy proposals have become more partisan. "There's space out there to be occupied by groups not pursuing ideological agendas," he said. "Such groups could be occupying that trusted middle ground we're lacking right now."

Political follow-through and taking political risks with good ideas don't seem to be part of the process, Thissen said. "At some point we must say, 'Engage in the legislative process, not the partisan process.'"

Professionalization of the staff at the Legislature may have led to too little thinking among actual legislators. "The staff does tremendous work," Thissen said. "But having third parties come in and fill that space for legislators might be important. Outside groups could help on governance issues in the Legislature, helping to put new governance structures in place."

"It's largely an issue of governance, a values thing," he said. "How should we set up the structure through which we make decisions? That's a space for outside proposals. We haven't revisited that in a long time."

Are there ways we can rebuild our institutions to rebuild trust? An interviewer commented that we're suffering from a lack of leaders and a lack of followers. He noted that in the past we had leaders like Presidents Dwight Eisenhower and John Kennedy and civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "I don't see any leaders today," the interviewer said. "And even if there were good leaders, nobody would follow them."

"There is some truth to that," Thissen responded. "Part of it is lack of trust in institutions." He said we must rebuild that trust by finding ways to rebuild our institutions.

Baby boomers and millennials have distinct ways of viewing the world and the future. An interviewer commented on a survey reported in *Minnesota Monthly* that compared the way millennials and baby boomers look at various topics. There were lots of differences, but more in common than we

might have thought, the interviewer said. There is a question about how to communicate with different age groups and social groups.

Thissen responded that there are generational issues at his law firm and distinct ways people view the world and the future. "Millennials are more likely to carve their own path," he said. "They are less willing to subordinate their personalities to larger institutions. Communication with millennials is very different."

He stated that the difference has partly to do with governance. "Kids in their early 20s don't want to get involved in politics," he said. "They think they can solve problems more effectively out of government than within government. But there is a central question about who brings ideas forward."

It's challenging to get citizens involved, but also to direct them into discussions with government. An interviewer asked how we can start the conversation about how individual citizens can make change, rather than how elected people can make change. Thissen responded that it's challenging to get citizens involved. He pointed to the discussion about racial disparities. "People are getting involved, but they don't know what to do." They must also get involved in discussions with government, he said.

The state Department of Health and Human Services is too big and can't focus on our biggest challenges. "We have huge problems," Thissen said. "The aging of society is driving most of the costs. We haven't figured out mental health. We broke up all the state hospitals and never came through with community programs. We haven't figured out the sex offender programs and how to get health-care providers to Greater Minnesota. Our discussion about health care has been about insurance rather than about how we deliver quality health care."

What are the characteristics of high-quality proposals from outside groups to the Legislature?

Thissen responded:

- Groups should be saying something unique and new in their proposals;
- Groups should make a commitment to do the follow-through to get the proposals enacted.
- Groups should try to find areas where other people are not working. For example, so many advocacy groups are coming forward on transportation. There are longer-term issues that haven't seen as much focus, such as governance.
- It's much better to bring fully formed proposals to the Legislature that can be talked about right away; bringing them in on a "silver platter" makes very good sense.

Some good things have been happening, driven largely by outside groups, in the health area.

Thissen noted three areas: (1) the state has made some significant progress on mental-health issues. (2) Driven largely by the federal government, the area of disabilities is moving more to a community basis and to individual decision-making. (3) A lot of good work on cost-containment reform was done at the end of former Governor Tim Pawlenty's term. Then Congress passed the Affordable Care Act, which focused on insurance reform rather than delivery reform, which is an area ripe for reform.

The University of Minnesota and other postsecondary institutions are under-tapped resources.

"We don't use them enough in government to develop good data," Thissen said. "We could do better on that."

In the upcoming Civic Caucus report addressing the public-policy process for anticipating, defining and resolving major public problems, what should we say about the value of educating the community ? An interviewer asked that question and Thissen responded that it would be helpful to provide a historical perspective on how things used to be and how those processes were set up. He also suggested looking at what other states are doing.

The interviewer discussed the important role of the Citizens League in the 1970s, when the organization produced nearly 100 reports. "When the League put out a report," the interviewer said, "it almost guaranteed a legislative hearing and newspaper editorials on whatever the report was proposing." He suggested that the Civic Caucus focus its report on a goal once put forward for the Citizens League by its then-executive director, Ted Kolderie: "Looking ahead at opportunities before they are lost and problems before they become crises."

Thissen asserted that it would be very helpful if the Civic Caucus report were a guiding document on what the mission of our community and its leaders should be and what challenges and opportunities are facing the state.

An entity that has a public-policy proposal should seek support from other groups. "That's part of follow-through," Thissen said. Supporters of successful legislative efforts in recent years, such as the minimum-wage law and the Women's Economic Security Act, worked to broaden the base of supporters of the proposals. Then the supporters sat down together and talked about what roles they would take to drive the proposals through the Legislature.

He said a lot of groups will agree to support proposals not in their spheres, just so other groups will support their proposals. He warned that people must be very clear about their role so they don't get into a situation like that. "That has become more of a problem," he said.

We should be delivering more human services, such as health care, through the schools.

Thissen questioned how to set up the legislative committee structure and state agencies to enable that kind of collaboration. He's been thinking about how to structure the committee system differently. "Instead of having an education committee, maybe a committee could focus on 25 interrelated problems," he suggested.

The Legislature operates way too much behind closed doors. "That's one of the reasons the Legislature is not functioning," Thissen said. "We have to figure out how to educate the public about what's going on." He said he's very committed to shaping up the Legislature to operate more openly.