



Charlie Weaver, executive director, Minnesota Business Partnership

Legislative polarization stalls action on good public policy proposals

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

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Present

John Adams, Steve Alderson, Steve Anderson, Dave Broden (vice chair), Janis Clay, Paul Gilje (executive director), Randy Johnson, Ted Kolderie, Dan Loritz (chair), Dana Schroeder (associate director), Clarence Shallbetter, Charlie Weaver. By phone: Audrey Clay, Paul Ostrow.

Summary

Civic organizations that exist to change public policy and their future are relevant, says Charlie Weaver of the Minnesota Business Partnership. But if they want legislators to embrace public-policy change, he says the organizations must deal with politics, have some involvement with advocacy and form coalitions with like-minded groups. And they must pay attention to two things that affect legislators: how their constituents feel about an issue and whether taking a position on an issue will affect their re-election chances.

Weaver discusses the importance of marketing to get the public to support policy change, giving examples of how groups marketed the Fiscal Disparities concept and the Minnesota Legacy Amendment and how they worked to defeat the 2012 Minnesota Marriage Amendment. He says, though, that even if individuals or groups do everything right in dealing with a topic, coming up with a proposal, and getting public support, they still might fail because of a strong lobbying presence at the Legislature. He gives examples of issue positions most people support, saying that lobbyists for various interests are able to keep those proposals from making it through the Legislature.

Weaver asserts that polarization at the Legislature is the main reason good proposals are not being enacted today. He says today's Legislature offers a very different environment from that of the 1970s and 1980s, when legislators could think about things and discuss compromise positions without immediate retribution. Now the environment is such that ideas can't form, percolate and be discussed without people pounding on legislators.

And lastly, Weaver sharply criticizes the Minneapolis School District for its lack of progress in improving outcomes for students.

Biography

Charlie Weaver, Jr. is the executive director of the Minnesota Business Partnership, a nonpartisan organization founded in 1977 that comprises 115 CEOs of Minnesota's largest employers. He has served in that position since 2003.

Weaver served five terms as Minnesota state representative (R-Anoka), first elected to the Minnesota House in 1988. In 1998, he ran unsuccessfully for attorney general. Governor Jesse Ventura appointed him Commissioner of Public Safety in 1999, a position he held through 2002. In 2003, Governor Tim Pawlenty appointed Weaver chief of staff, a position he held for 11 months before leaving to head the Minnesota Business Partnership. He served as a criminal prosecutor for Anoka County from 1991 to 1998 and was a lawyer with Lindquist & Vennum from 1984 to 1988.

Weaver is the son of former Minnesota State Representative Charles Weaver, Sr., (1931-1992) and nephew of former State Representative John L. Weaver. He received his bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Oregon and his law degree from the University of Minnesota Law School.

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 Charlie Weaver of the Minnesota Business Partnership to get his assessment of the state of that public-policy process and to learn more about the Partnership's role in the process.

About the Minnesota Business Partnership . Founded in 1977, the mission of the nonpartisan Minnesota Business Partnership is to maintain a high quality of life for all Minnesotans by ensuring that the state's economy remains strong and globally competitive and its prospects for growth bright. This mission, it says, is based on the firm belief that the quality of life for all Minnesotans is directly linked to our state's economic health.

The Partnership works with elected officials, state agency staff and others on a range of public-policy issues relevant to all Minnesotans: education, jobs and the economy, and health care. It stresses that it offers specific recommendations intended to help government deliver services and benefits more efficiently and effectively. It emphasizes that its focus is on progress, not partisan politics.

Discussion

There are several assumptions we can make about civic groups and the Legislature. Charlie Weaver, Jr., of the Minnesota Business Partnership laid out several assumptions:

1. Civic groups exist to change public policy. Most of these groups have a goal of thinking about issues that matter to Minnesota and coming up with ways we can make them better.
2. In order to change public policy, you need to move legislators. It takes three things to get legislators to embrace public-policy change:

Their constituents demand it.

Does it affect their re-election chances? They'll think twice about taking a position that's going to negatively affect their re-election chances.

Assume certain legislators are personally committed to something that's core to their being, such as a pro-life stance. Lobbyists' views or constituents' views aren't going to change their views on the issue if it is core to their values.

Are civic organizations and their future relevant? Weaver answered his own question. Yes, he said, but they must pay attention to the first two things that affect legislators: constituents and re-election.

How do civic organizations get the public to support policy change? he asked. How do they create a groundswell? How do they get people behind them?

There are basic questions that must be answered, "yes" before an organization can do that, Weaver said:

Do people care about the issue?

Is it an issue people are passionate about?

Is there a path to making a change? If not, people won't get engaged.

Can the policy change be part of a cause or a movement? Young people today like being part of a movement and being part of an organization that's making a difference, whether it's Cargill feeding the world or Ecolab cleaning water in Africa.

Figuring out how to market whatever issue a civic organization decides to raise is important, Weaver asserted. He gave several examples:

When the Citizens League developed the concept that became the Fiscal Disparities law in 1971, the League and others advocating for the idea didn't talk about the minutiae of how the program would work, Weaver said. The hook in gaining public support was that the law would encourage cities throughout the region to have parks and open space, rather than competing for the next big power plant to enrich their tax base.

Weaver said advocates for the Minnesota Legacy Amendment, which was approved by voters in 2008, ran a very effective campaign. The constitutional amendment raised the state sales tax to put money into a fund for arts and culture, wildlife, clean water and more. "They didn't market that around the arts," he said. "No one mentioned the Guthrie Theater. Broadly, it was about clean water. That's what sold that amendment. That was a very effective marketing tool."

Weaver said people working against the 2012 Minnesota Marriage Amendment, which would have banned gay marriage, talked about the importance of the institution of marriage, rather than focusing on gay marriage alone. He said that's what defeated the amendment.

Sophisticated marketing is different today, Weaver remarked. Groups need to deal with social media, which he called a big change and a challenge for civic organizations. And in the old days, an organization might have been the only one with a certain idea. "Now there are a million people with opinions on both sides of an issue," he said. A proposal must be presented in simple terms and it must be unique. "It better have some angle or avenue that others don't jump into," Weaver declared.

Even if individuals or groups do everything right in dealing with a topic, coming up with a proposal and getting public support, they still might fail because of strong lobbying presence at the Legislature. Weaver offered several examples:

He said 70 percent of people in the state are in favor of graduation standards. But the Legislature removed them because of the power of the teachers' unions.

Seventy-five percent of people support being able to buy alcohol on Sunday. "But the municipal liquor lobby is really strong," he said, so the measure keeps getting voted down.

The NRA is powerful enough to defeat even the most minor proposed gun limitations, such as gun-show background checks, even though most people are in favor of them.

The union-backed requirement that school districts follow the "last-in, first-out" policy, that is, to fire the youngest teachers first in times of teacher cutbacks, is opposed by 80 percent of the public, who say teachers should be employed on the basis of performance, not seniority.

Civic organizations must deal with politics and have some components getting involved in advocacy. The Business Partnership, Weaver said, began by doing research on education issues, but then decided it needed to get involved in the political process and advocacy. It now advocates for its own ideas and those of groups like Greater MSP and the Itasca Project.

"It's a double-edged sword," he said. "The Civic Caucus has credibility because it's not political. If you get into advocacy, people label you. That's the risk. If you want to be effective, you must be engaged in advocacy to a certain extent, but you have to be careful about being on one political side or another."

Polarization at the Legislature is the main reason good proposals are not being enacted.

Weaver said the problem is not a lack of business involvement, because CEOs like as Richard Davis of U.S. Bancorp are very engaged in public policy. Nor does he think the problem is lack of ideas or interest in civic engagement.

"The Legislature is very different today," Weaver said. "Ideas can't form and percolate and be discussed in an environment where people don't pound on you. Legislators are different. There are very few citizen legislators today. Legislators are on television all the time, so they're posturing."

An interviewer commented that in the past, there was a heavy focus from both parties that good government came first and politics second. He asked how we could get back to solving long-term

problems rather than just trying to solve today's symptoms. "No one's taking a risk to do something smart on an issue," the interviewer said.

Weaver cited the issue of transportation. "It's very hard for legislators to take the long view," he said. "The environment is so different." The Legislature had an opportunity to do a 10-year plan on transportation, he said. But some people won't even talk about transit and some insist on using the gas tax rather than the general fund. There isn't much incentive to find common ground.

He noted that Speaker of the House Kurt Daudt suggested increasing license tab fees, which would have raised \$100 million, as a compromise to achieve long-term funding for roads and bridges. Almost immediately, at the state Republican convention, party members criticized Daudt for bringing up the tab fees idea. "That paralyzed the Republican caucus," Weaver said. "In the 1970s and 1980s, you could think about things and discuss various compromise positions and there would be no immediate retribution."

An interviewer commented, "We're in a period of very rapid change. The change is affecting the issues. I'm struck that our way of shaping the issues is not keeping up very well. Politics have always been there. It used to be offset by other elements in the process. But we're still shaping issues in old ways." He asked whether it makes sense to try to bring radical issues into the next legislative session.

Weaver replied that in order to be effective, organizations should consider forming coalitions with other like-minded groups. He cited MinneMinds, which is a coalition of 100 different groups working on early learning access for children in need. "You have to be far more strategic than in the past," he said.

The interviewer asked whether people must work on proposals over a period of sessions. "Exactly," Weaver replied and offered the example of Sunday liquor sales, which has come up in a number of sessions. Every year, it's gotten more votes, he said.

We need to hold people accountable who are not behaving in a way that creates a healthy civic environment. In response to a question, Weaver cited recent remarks by U.S. Bancorp CEO Richard Davis about the value of civic engagement, decency, respect, tolerance and the ability to raise new ideas and challenge old notions without being personally attacked. "Having leaders in this community act in a way we want to see our legislators act is a start," Weaver said. "We're so blessed to have great business leaders in the community who model this approach to civic engagement that we want everyone to emulate. We need to continue to drive those values and hold people accountable who don't behave that way."

Transportation and transit are not top-three issues for most people, so it's harder to pass legislation on these issues. "The struggle we're having with achieving a long-term transportation solution is that transit is not a top priority for most Minnesotans," Weaver said. "Transportation and transit are just not top-three issues in people's minds, even though they're a priority for the business community. Getting elected officials to take the long view on controversial issues is a challenge."

He agreed with an interviewer that technology like Uber and driverless cars is going to change the world. "There are going to be driverless cars and it's not too far away," he said.

The role of the state departments in legislative discussions is significant. Weaver said legislators are so inundated now and so swamped with data and facts that they really have to narrow their focus. "If you're on the Transportation Committee, you rely heavily on MnDOT," he said. "If you're on the Natural Resources Committee, you rely heavily on the Department of Natural Resources (DNR). There's also a skepticism, though. Legislators are less likely to take the agencies' word for it today than they used to be."

People must be rewarded for taking risks and not lose their jobs. In order to get people to be leaders and take risks, Weaver said, people need to be comfortable doing it and must know that someone effectively has their back. And legislators must know that they have some political leverage. "That'll help with risk taking, which is rarer and rarer in politics," he said.

Foundations are pretty ineffective politically, but they can have big impact by where they spend their money. In Minnesota, Weaver said, the business community makes about 48 percent of all nonprofit contributions. The foundations in Minnesota spent over \$200 million on education in the last year.

"The challenge, though, is to get them organized and focused," Weaver said. "We're working to try to get them to hold the recipients of their grant dollars accountable." The foundations are doing good work, he said, but often they don't know if their investment works, even though it feels good.

Workforce is the critical issue going forward. It'd be great to have the Civic Caucus's leadership around that issue, Weaver said.

The business community wants to improve outcomes for students in Minneapolis schools, but is frustrated with the lack of progress. "As a business/political person in the community, the thing I'm most embarrassed about is the failure of the Minneapolis School District," he said. "Someone should go to jail over what's happening there. The business community is very energized around finding strategies that would improve outcomes for students in Minneapolis, but incredibly frustrated over the lack of progress in the district. We cannot afford to lose another generation of young people who are the victims of this dysfunctional system."

The Civic Caucus should continue to be fearless, to be active, to be courageous and to drive change. "You've got nothing to lose," Weaver said. "There is a role for this organization and the issues you think about. You should think about how you can combine with other organizations when you pick a topic. And you should think about the advocacy side. They're both really important in achieving change."