



# Minnesota State Representative Tina Liebling

Provide two free years of public higher education, move to single-payer health care system, increase funding for transit

*Tina Liebling withdrew from the race for governor on March 12, 2018*

A Civic Caucus Gubernatorial Candidate Interview

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## Present

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## Summary

Minnesota gubernatorial candidate and State Rep. Tina Liebling (DFL-Rochester) makes the following proposals to keep Minnesota competitive as a state:

- In higher education, provide students with two tuition-free years of postsecondary education, whether in college or technical school.
- In transportation, raise the gas tax and increase funding for transit.
- In E-12 education, provide more support to families and to the youngest children, perhaps by using home-visiting programs.
- On the state's public policymaking process, start a Minnesota Institute of Policy Development, tasked with thinking ahead for the state. And hold legislative leaders responsible for enforcing the state Constitutional requirement that legislative bills be restricted to a single subject.
- In health and human services, move to a single-payer health care system.
- On the workforce, work harder to help people who might need more support—such as new immigrants or people with felonies on their records—become productive members of the

workforce. And offer incentives to people to go to places they might not ordinarily go, such as a rural area that has a hard time attracting workers, or to try out types of work they wouldn't ordinarily try.

## Biography

Tina Liebling (DFL-Rochester) is a seven-term Minnesota state representative, first elected in 2004. She is the first DFL legislator to be elected from Olmsted County.

Many of Liebling's House committee assignments have been in the health and human services area, but she has also served on the following committees: Taxes, Civil Law, Public Safety, and Ways and Means. She chaired the House Health and Human Services (HHS) Policy Committee from 2013 to 2014 and served as the DFL health care lead on the HHS Finance Committee from 2015 to 2016. She is currently the DFL lead on the HHS Reform Committee.

Liebling earned a B.A. degree in Spanish from the University of Minnesota, an M.S. degree in public health from the University of Massachusetts-Amherst and a J.D. degree from Boston University School of Law.

## Background

Continuing its focus on Minnesota's competitiveness, since September 2015, the Civic Caucus has been undertaking a review of the quality of Minnesota's public-policy process for anticipating, defining and resolving major community problems. On November 27, 2016, the Caucus issued a report based on that review,  [Looking Back, Thinking Ahead: Strengthening Minnesota's Public-Policy Process](#). In October 2017, the Civic Caucus began a series of interviews with major, announced candidates for the office of governor of Minnesota. The interviews are centered on what can be done to keep Minnesota and its people competitive in a number of realms. This interview with State Representative Tina Liebling is the third in that series.

## Discussion

### 1. Opening Remarks.

**State Rep. Tina Liebling first ran for office in 2002, the year then-U.S. Sen. Paul Wellstone was killed in a plane crash.** Liebling said she was able to observe Wellstone's campaign and took to heart that he was always about ordinary people and that he had extraordinary political courage. "I really took that as a model," she said. She lost to Carla Nelson in 2002 in a three-way race for an open seat, but defeated Nelson in 2004 and has served in the Legislature ever since.

**Liebling describes herself as a "bold progressive."** Her legislative district is approximately 40 percent Republican, so she said she deals with a lot of people who disagree with her. She's been working hard at the Legislature over the years, but after the 2016 election, she felt she had to do something more. "For me, something more was to run for governor," she said.

Her reasons for running are that (1) in 2016, Democrats failed to really address the central issue of what's going on in the economy and we need someone to speak clearly about making the economy work again for ordinary people, not just the wealthy and the insiders; and (2) she's a person who stands up for what she believes in.

**Liebling supported Bernie Sanders for president in 2016.** She said she's the only DFL candidate for governor who was a Bernie Sanders supporter. She supported him because she felt he was speaking to the real issues that people are facing. Even though our economy has gotten better since 2008, she said lots of people never felt that improvement. "Too much of our nation's wealth is going to the super-rich," she said. "We can't afford to leave anybody behind."

## **2. Health Care**

**What is the future of MinnesotaCare?** An interviewer asked that question and Liebling explained the history of the program. MinnesotaCare is 25 years old and originally was a state-funded program for people who didn't qualify for Medicaid (called Medical Assistance in Minnesota). It was aimed at low-income people—mainly working people, small business people and farmers—who couldn't afford insurance. The program originally required no premiums, no out-of-pocket payments and no copays. Gradually, a small premium and some out-of-pocket payments were added.

Prior to the Affordable Care Act (ACA), MinnesotaCare was funded by a health care provider tax, which, Liebling called "a wonderful source of funding" because, as health care spending grew, the tax revenues grew and kept up with the costs of funding the program. Under the ACA, MinnesotaCare was converted to a Basic Health Plan (BHP) and the federal government took over much of the funding for the program.

Recently, the federal government took away a lot of the funding for MinnesotaCare, Liebling said, and the provider tax is set to sunset at the end of 2019. "I'm very much afraid that Gov. [Mark] Dayton may be presiding over the end of the program," she said.

**Liebling has supported a single-payer health care system for years.** "A system of insurance-run health care has such flaws," she said. "We're seeing it collapse." She said one of the problems with the insurance system is that it breaks everyone into different risk pools, which raises costs. "We should start by putting everybody in one pool," she said.

Deciding that everyone should have health care, Liebling said, is a productivity issue, an economic issue and a pocketbook issue. "It's also an issue for the industry of our state, because we have a very health-care-heavy state economy," she said. "The ACA did wonders for our state. When people have coverage of some kind, hospitals get paid. Doctors get paid. And we have a lot of them." And she pointed to the large long-term care system and supports for people with disabilities in the state, which employ a lot of people.

"We can't afford to leave anyone behind," Liebling said. "We need everyone—people of every race, color, national origin, sexual orientation and ability status—to be at their highest productivity, because more of us are aging. We need everybody in. It's not charity to worry about bringing everybody in, it's self-interest."

### **3. Transportation.**

#### **Raise the gas tax, but in the context of making the overall tax system more progressive.**

Liebling made that statement in response to an interviewer's question about transportation and transit funding. Liebling said she struggles with gas-tax funding, because of the regressive nature of the tax. "I'm a proponent of progressive taxation," she said. "That doesn't mean every single piece of taxation has to be progressive. But overall, it has to be progressive. People who are comfortable should be paying much more than people who are struggling to get by every day. I don't want to raise the taxes of people who are of lower and modest income. They can't afford it."

Liebling said there are things about the gas tax that are attractive: it's a user fee and it's dedicated funding.

**We should raise the fees on trucks because trucks drive up the costs of road and highway maintenance and construction.** Liebling made that statement and said trucks can pass on the higher fees and spread them through the cost of goods they carry. "Trucks are a tremendous wear and tear on the road system," she said.

**The Legislature should fund more of the cost of transit.** Liebling made that remark after saying that the Legislature, under the Republicans, doesn't want to fund transit. She said the Legislature sets up "a very artificial fight between the metro area and Greater Minnesota. It tries to pit people against each other. I think we're all connected."

"We've got to have good transit in the metro area," she continued. "It's absolutely critical for economic competitiveness. A lot of money in the state is generated in the metro area, which goes to the rest of state and helps support Greater Minnesota. Minnesotans understand that we all do better when we all do better. That's true geographically. If metro people can't afford to get to their jobs, that's a problem for all of us."

### **4. Education.**

**Provide students two tuition-free years of public postsecondary education, whether in college or technical school.** Liebling made that proposal, saying it would create a K-14 system of education. "I'd love to see four years free," she said. "Higher education is a public good that benefits all of us and should be for everybody. But first I'm proposing only two years, because I think that's actually doable right now in Minnesota. It's a competitiveness issue for Minnesota. It would help keep students here and would boost our economy tremendously."

She said the state's Postsecondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) program tries to do a lot of different things: help students earn free college credits, provide enriched courses for students whose schools don't offer them and provide an option for students who want to leave high school. She said the state is offering free college credits through PSEO, "but we're not doing it for everybody."

Liebling said the public high schools don't want to promote PSEO, because they lose funding when students participate in the program. "Like health care, it's too much about where the money flow is," she said. "We're shuffling money around, when we should be focusing on students and their education."

**We're seeing the results of class differences early in the education system.** Liebling made that statement in response to an interviewer saying that income disparity is a huge problem. The interviewer pointed out that students enrolled in IB (International Baccalaureate) and AP (Advanced Placement) classes are good students, who will be the leaders in society. Meanwhile, he said, students in regular classes or alternative programs are not engaged and "can't get their eyes out of their cell phones. The best teachers want to teach in IB and AP classes. The other kids get what's left over."

"There's a problem with not having enough teachers," Liebling responded. "And there's a movement now to de-professionalize teachers, when we should be going the other way. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we said we need teachers and we value teachers? Let's give them a free education in exchange for a certain number of years of service."

**We must support families and focus on the youngest children.** Liebling made that remark and said we must do more for early childhood education. She said home-visiting programs have been shown to be effective. "If I could wave a wand, I would do that for every family," she said.

"It's hard being a parent," she continued. "So few people have a grandparent available or a supportive community that can help. We need to recognize this as a society and give people more support, right from the beginning. Help them learn parenting. In some countries, when people have a child, it's a grand occasion for the whole society and you get resources wrapped around you. In our society, when you have a child, you're on your own. That's wrong and it hurts all of us."

We need to focus more resources on the youngest children, including parent education and support, Liebling said.

**The University of Minnesota's Rochester campus is working really well.** Liebling made that remark in response to an interviewer's question. The campus is growing, she said, and attracting a lot of students. "Students are very happy and there are a lot of connections with the community and with the Mayo Clinic," she said. It's relatively low cost, because the campus doesn't have any buildings yet.

**Are we getting what we pay for in higher education?** An interviewer asked that question and said the accountability is not there, either in higher education or health care. Someone dictates the price and the government feels it needs to pay that, he said. That doesn't happen in places like France, Germany or Great Britain.

Liebling responded by saying that the University of Minnesota (U of M) is a land-grant institution, so the Legislature can't dictate what the University can spend money on. The share being paid by the public is going down, she said, and the U of M says that's why tuition is going up. "This is not just a Minnesota issue," she said. "The cost of higher education has outpaced other things."

The interviewer said there should be pushback if the U of M and Minnesota State keep raising their prices, i.e., tuition. "No one's saying 'Why does it cost so much?'" he said.

Liebling responded that some people *are* asking that, but there are no studies of why tuition keeps rising. She said Minnesota's private colleges definitely have a role to play in the state, but said their high tuition means that their students get a lot of state grant money, at the expense of the public system. "How much of private education does the public need to be responsible for?" she asked.

**As more people leave the workforce through retirement and fewer young people are coming in, how can Minnesota maintain an outstanding workforce?** An interviewer asked that question and Liebling replied that people are working longer. "Sixty is the new 40," she said. "But we have to make sure that everybody in the younger workforce is able to work at the top of their game." She said we don't work hard enough to get to people who are not traditional members of the workforce, like those with felonies on their records.

"We can't afford that anymore," she said. "Don't tell me you can't find employees when so many people need work," she said. "Maybe they need a little more support. We must help people pull themselves up." Immigration is very important for Minnesota, she said. "We won't have a large enough workforce without it," she said. "We must be sure immigrants get integrated quickly, so they can get into the workforce."

**Perhaps there could be a program in Minnesota where we encourage people to go to places they wouldn't ordinarily go or try out types of work they wouldn't ordinarily try.** Liebling offered that response to an interviewer's comment that employers are saying they can't find *qualified* employees. Liebling said there could be some sort of matching program and perhaps the state could forgive some student loans if, for example, someone took a job in a rural area that has a hard time attracting workers.

**Can we validate what people can learn on their own or does everything require a formal education?** An interviewer asked that question, offering the example of his son, a filmmaker, who didn't go to college, but learned much of his craft from YouTube.

Liebling noted that there are many online courses now in the public college system. She believes there is still value in a traditional college education, though not necessarily as much as there used to be, since the economy is not what it used to be. "A lot depends on employers," she said. "They have to be willing to say, 'Well, you don't have a degree, but show me what you have.'"

She expressed concern that "you don't know what you don't know if you're only learning from YouTube. And people need emotional intelligence. They need to learn to interact and to work with people. A lot of people are growing up with technology and they may miss the personal interaction pieces if we don't have some structure to get them out of their homes."

## **5. Public-Policy Process.**

**Unfortunately, the Legislature doesn't necessarily use the good ideas that are proposed by outside people and organizations.** Liebling gave that response to an interviewer's question about whether Minnesota's public-policy process is working to develop good ideas for policymakers.

"Minnesota is lucky to have so many people engaged in trying to develop solutions to public problems. But a lot of times, it's not about good ideas. It's about politics," Liebling said.

The governor does have a role to play in the public-policy process. The governor puts forward proposals and can bring together people to form those proposals. "There's more of an opportunity to draw on that," she said.

**Starting a Minnesota Institute of Policy Development, similar to what Washington State has, is an intriguing idea.** Liebling made that proposal, saying if we had such an organization, it would be somebody's job to think ahead, so we're not only looking at a two-year or four-year cycle.

She said she was talking about something like the old State Planning Agency, which was established by the Legislature in 1965 and abolished in 2003 by executive order of then-Gov. Tim Pawlenty. It would do planning and policy development, she said. "We used to have that and it's a problem that we don't."

**It's a huge problem that the Legislature does not adhere to the state Constitutional requirement that legislative bills be restricted to a single subject.** Liebling made that remark in response to an interviewer's question about what the governor could do to encourage the Legislature to abide by the single-subject requirement.

"Omnibus bills are overused," Liebling said. "They're used to bury things. That's a game that has been played for many, many years. It has really gotten out of hand." We need legislative leaders who have a commitment to abide by the single-subject requirement. "It's their decision," she said. "We should hold them responsible for it."

The governor has a few levers—the veto power and moral persuasion—that can put pressure on the Legislature, she said, but this is mainly a legislative issue. The governor must be very clear at the beginning of a legislative session which things will draw the veto. Then he or she must follow through. "I think that's been a problem," she said. "You have to let people know early and often and stick to it," she said.

Over the years, Liebling said, the courts have given conflicting rulings on the single-subject requirement, so the boundaries are not clear. There are egregious examples of it, she said, but most of the time it is a matter of degree. So it's hard for a governor to draw a bright line and threaten a veto over the single-subject requirement.

Note: The [Civic Caucus](#) has joined an *amicus* brief on the single-subject requirement in a case now before the Minnesota Supreme Court.

**The governor must be there at the beginning, as policy is being developed, not just at the end of the legislative session.** Liebling made that statement and said, "The Legislature is a team of 201 people. It only works if you engage everyone on that team. Everyone has a constituency and a reach into their community. Not everyone agrees, but you must bring in as many voices as you can, so you make fewer mistakes."

**A governor should be deeply familiar with the Legislature and the governor's office and must be able to stand up to pressure.** Liebling made that remark and said, "This is not a job for a beginner. There is not a lot of time to learn on the job. You must put in the first budget right away. You must understand how the state works and what our finances are and also the politics and the people."

She said the governor can bring people together to solve problems, but will never make everyone happy. "It is critical not to give in to a few loud voices, but to keep the interests of ordinary Minnesotans at the center of every decision," she said. "The governor is under tremendous pressure and she must be able to stand up to it."

Liebling said she would return for a Civic Caucus interview if she is elected governor.