



# Josh Pauly, PeopleSourced Policy founder & executive director

Combine meetings with technology to inform, engage citizens

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

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## Present

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## Summary

PeopleSourced Policy (PSP) Founder and Executive Director Josh Pauly created his organization to make it easier for people to have their voices heard in the local community. He describes PSP as a nonpartisan civic-engagement organization that is issue-driven and uses both technology and in-person meetings to make it easier for people to have their voices heard and to be part of the policy process. He sees it as an outlet for people to understand a little bit more about what's going on, to share their voices and to have their concerns heard.

Pauly says PSP is looking at aging in Minnesota as its first topic. The first step would be to have a panel discussion on the topic, including various experts on aging and related issues, like the workforce and housing. PSP would live-stream the panel discussion on Facebook and archive the meeting on YouTube. People could share their ideas on the topic on PSP's online platform. Policymakers could use the platform to find out what their constituents are thinking and to offer suggestions themselves. Pauly sees PSP as a platform for the whole community.

He says PSP also plans to "gamify" public policy by creating games that focus on different elements of public policy. The organization will sponsor its first game night this fall, since it has several games ready to go and plans to create two more in the coming year.

## Biography

Josh Pauly is founder and executive director of [PeopleSourced Policy](#), a project of the Minnesota-based Center for Policy Design. For the past three years, he has taught middle-school social studies and AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) at Sanford Middle School in Minneapolis. AVID is a nationally known program designed to close the achievement gap by preparing all students for college readiness and success in a global society. (Click [here](#) to learn more about the AVID program at Sanford.)

Pauly also spent the past year as a fellow of the Education Policy Fellowship Program, which is a partnership of the Washington, D.C.-based Institute for Educational Leadership and the Minnesota-based Center for Policy Design. He is currently a fellow at the Center for Policy Design.

He received his bachelor's degree in history in 2011 from the University of Minnesota. In 2014, he completed his master's degree in education, also at the University of Minnesota.

## Background

Since September 2015, the Civic Caucus has been undertaking a review of the quality of Minnesota's past, present and future public-policy process for anticipating, defining and resolving major community problems. On Nov. 27, 2016, the Caucus issued its report based on that review, [Thinking Ahead: Strengthening Minnesota's Public-Policy Process](#). The Civic Caucus interviewed Josh Pauly to learn how his organization, PeopleSourced Policy, will use its digital platform to engage community members directly in the political process.

## Discussion

**Josh Pauly founded [PeopleSourced Policy](#) to make it easier for people to have their voices heard in the local community.** PeopleSourced Policy Founder and Executive Director Josh Pauly explained that he created the organization after Donald Trump was elected president. As a teacher at Sanford Middle School in Minneapolis, he and his sixth-grade students looked at the data about who voted for Trump.

The students said they didn't agree with Trump and wondered what they could do. Pauly told them they needed to make their voices heard in local politics. Minneapolis City Council Member Andrew Johnson, who represents the area where Sanford is located, came in to speak to the students. The students brought up issues like potholes in the streets and problems with the sidewalks.

"The students felt like their voice was heard and like they did something," Pauly said. "I felt like I should live out the advice I gave my students. I should make my voice heard in my community."

Pauly went to his city council member's office hours, but he noted that some people don't have the opportunity to do that because of their work schedules. He attended a night meeting about a possible redevelopment project in his community and said the meeting was "chaotic, loud, unorganized. My voice was never heard." The meeting location wasn't on a bus route and there was no childcare offered, he said. He left the meeting thinking, "There's got to be a better way."

"I wanted to create something a lot more functional that works with different people's schedules," he said. So he created [PeopleSourced Policy](#) (PSP), a nonpartisan civic-engagement organization that is

issue-driven and uses both technology and in-person meetings to make it easier for people to have their voices heard and to be part of the process.

**The \$15 minimum-wage issue in Minneapolis, recently passed by the Minneapolis City Council, provides an example of how PSP could work.** For example, Pauly said, if the minimum-wage issue were still under consideration, PSP could first hold a live panel discussion in a place easily accessible by public transit, where childcare would be provided.

The panel would be made up of people with different perspectives on the issue. It would not include politicians, he said. The panel could discuss the tip credit, time for implementation, the small business exemption, etc.

Pauly said PSP would live-stream the meeting on Facebook, so people could access it from anywhere, if they couldn't actually attend the meeting. The meeting would be archived on PSP's YouTube channel. After the meeting, he said, PSP's online platform would go live and a user would sign in with her or his name, physical address and e-mail address.

(An online, or digital, platform is any web-based platform for presenting content, e.g., Facebook, Twitter or websites. This is in contrast to analog platforms like billboards, direct mail, telemarketing, events, word-of-mouth, etc.)

"With that information, we can geo-plot where you live and know who your city council member is," he said. "With that we can aggregate and disaggregate data." The platform would show the main topic and have a paragraph or two explaining it. There would be links to the panel discussion and to readings for further information. He said the platform could break the topic down into subcategories that people care about.

Then people can share their ideas. Other people can "like" or "love" an idea, meaning they *really* care about it. If people love certain ideas, PSP will reach out to them and try to activate them as citizens by suggesting further steps they could take on their own. People can comment on other people's ideas or flag them if they think they're inappropriate.

**PSP can aggregate and disaggregate data to show which participants are from which wards and which ideas people care about in which ward.** Pauly said the organization could disperse this information to city council members, other organizations and to the public. *MinnPost* has agreed to partner with PSP for the first year, he said, and will be sharing information the platform gathers.

The platform currently includes mapping only for Minneapolis, but he said it would eventually include the entire state. Pauly said people outside of Minneapolis can participate, though; the platform will designate them as living in "Ward 0."

City council members can look at the PSP data to see a snapshot of how their constituents think. The council members and other organizations can also share their ideas on the platform. "This is a platform for the whole community," Pauly said. "We think it's easier for people to participate in this." PSP wants to have meetings in each ward at the beginning of exploring a new topic, as well as at the end.

**PSP is looking at aging in Minnesota as its first topic.** Pauly said the first step will be to have a panel discussion with Susan Brower, state demographer; a representative from the Minnesota Board on Aging; Sean Kershaw, executive director of the Citizens League; Mark Brinda, who provides workforce and training assistance at the Minneapolis Department of Community Planning & Economic Development; Andrea Brennan, director of Housing Policy and Development for the City of Minneapolis; and Christina Kendrick, senior community specialist with the City of Minneapolis.

In addition to live-streaming the panel discussion on Facebook and putting the meeting on YouTube, PSP will provide links to resources for people who want more information.

**Many people have not had a platform to share their opinions on specific topics.** An interviewer commented that PSP is trying to gather information from a variety of people, many of whom have not had a platform to share their opinions. "You provide basic information on a topic, but you also get information back from people on how they feel about it and what they'd like to see," he said. The interviewer asked how Pauly proposes to drive people to the PSP site.

Pauly responded that PSP is partnering with *MinnPost* and he is planning to talk with the *Star Tribune*, the *Pioneer Press*, *City Pages* and neighborhood newspapers in Minneapolis. On July 14, 2017, Pauly was on Twin Cities Public Television's *Almanac* program discussing his plans to "gamify" public policy. "The national organization Strong Towns is going to write a piece about PSP this fall," Pauly said. "Our sister organization, Glasshouse Policy, in Austin, Texas, is sending out a newsletter e-mail to announce our presence. We have been and will continue to reach out to community-based organizations. We're looking at partnering with the Hennepin County Library System. And we're creating a promotional video—a visual pitch—to send out on the Internet."

The same interviewer noted that he's on the board of a nonprofit organization that has a computer lab where people can come in and search for a job or a variety of other things. "These are people whose opinions we never get," he said. "No one ever asks them. And they are some of the people most impacted by these issues." Perhaps, he said, Pauly could walk them through a brief introduction into what PSP is trying to do.

**PSP could have smaller panels in wards or neighborhoods.** In addition to having a large panel discussion, Pauly is looking at having smaller panels in wards or neighborhoods. Then people can share their voices in small community meetings, he said. PSP can distill down what the top three ideas and policy recommendations are for a community and then invite the community in and ask if the ideas are functional. City Council members and other policymakers can take the ideas and make them into functional public-policy ideas that can be put into an ordinance or policy.

**The PSP approach might work with local, retail policy questions, like fixing potholes, but it might not provide deep analysis of complicated topics.** An interviewer made that remark and said there is a difference between sharing views and getting deep into policy analysis. "Just sharing views on whether something is a good or bad idea doesn't really, on some complicated issues, help people truly understand the implications of things," he said. "It seems that the process you're proposing has some limits in terms of the challenges it can address."

Pauly responded that just because something is complicated doesn't mean people shouldn't get to share their ideas. "I think you have to give people a little more credit," he said. "It's on me to find people to serve on panels who really understand the topic. I'm not expecting people who participate on PSP's platform to create a fully functional policy."

**While Pauly decided on PSP's first topic, aging in Minnesota, in the future he'd like to crowd-source ideas for the topics.** He plans to ask people what they want to talk about and ask policymakers on what issues they'd like community input.

**Don't people who participate in PSP need a basic commitment to civil conversation and disagreements?** An interviewer asked that question and said we're assuming that everyone is acting in good faith. "But how do you police that?" he asked.

Pauly responded that PSP is not Facebook. "We'll have moderators who keep everything cordial and civil," he said. "There are different ways to police it. There will be a basic understanding that this is not a place for personal attacks; it's a place to share ideas."

Another interviewer suggested that Pauly's work with PSP bears some relationship to the work of Trygve Throntveit on the Minnesota Civic Studies Initiative at the University of Minnesota. The project is aimed at reclaiming democracy as the work of citizens. (See [March 24, 2017, Civic Caucus interview with Throntveit](#) for more information.)

**We as a public are very ignorant about the civic process.** An interviewer made that remark, adding, "We don't know how government works." He said we no longer focus on teaching it in our schools. "We used to have civics classes and kids understood how a bill becomes a law."

He commented that, in addition to gathering information from citizens, PSP could help people better understand how the system works, where it might be going off track and how they can participate as citizens in the process to get it back on track.

**The political parties are very interested in the PSP platform.** Pauly said he has met with members of both major political parties, as well as the Independents and Greens. One person wanted to buy the platform to use it to get ideas from constituents. He said the parties have offered ideas on topics they'd like PSP to explore. "If I were a politician, I would want something like this for people to go on and share their ideas with me," Pauly said. "But PSP is not about helping an individual politician. It's about giving people a platform where their voice can be heard."

He said the [Pirate Party in Iceland](#), which promotes direct democracy, is using a similar type of platform to get ideas from people. And [Glasshouse Policy in Austin, Texas](#), has been doing what PSP is trying to do since 2014 and is effective at it, Pauly said. PSP and Glasshouse Policy have formed a partnership to share ideas.

**Many years ago, in Minneapolis and Saint Paul, there was a feeling that citizens' voices were not being heard in local government, so the cities created neighborhood councils.** An interviewer made that remark and asked how PSP fits in with what neighborhood councils are trying to do. Pauly responded that he's met with neighborhood organizations, which like the idea of the PSP platform. He said their role with PSP would be to help organize community meetings.

Another interviewer said Pauly's approach has the potential to be very local in its impact. "This is a really good idea in a certain context," the interviewer said. "Maybe when people get truly engaged through this vehicle, they could elevate the conversation to something larger and broader. There are tiers of complexity and policy here that put limits on what might be accomplished. It's important to establish boundaries within which this can really help and engage people."

Pauly agreed there are things that are very complex. "Our goal is not to take someone and throw them into the stratosphere," he said. "But everyone can connect to the topic of aging in Minnesota." People have parents or children or they're getting older themselves and wonder what they're going to need from their community.

"I think that's the launching point," he said. "Hopefully, we can activate citizens, so they can go on and do bigger and better and greater things. But we need to somehow take a first step."

He said it took him talking to 39 friends before he found someone who had heard of the Citizens League. "And nobody knows what the Civic Caucus is," he said. "We hope to connect with people and tell them that these and other organizations are institutions they can go to and get information. I think that's a win."

**PSP would like to have game nights, focusing on different elements of public policy.** "We want people to get involved in policy in general," Pauly said. "Policy is a higher order, stressful thing. We're going to try to make it easier by 'gamifying' public policy. We want to create some games out of more traditional policy matters." He gave the example of having teams of people design their ideal streets for different kinds of transportation and then having judges pick the winning team. PSP has a low-tech, land-development game and a game around city planning ready to go.

The organization has a game night planned around transit policy at the University of Minnesota-Duluth this fall. Pauly said a goal this year is to create two new games:

- One of those is an open-sourced application that allows people to make a budget for the state, based on the real amount of money in the state's budget. They'd have to decide, for example, how much to allocate to schools or to health and human services. At a meeting, they'd then explain to other citizens and elected officials why they made those choices.
- The other game focuses on redistricting. State Demographer Susan Brower has already promised to give PSP data from the last round of redistricting, Pauly said. The goal is to give people the power to draw the lines and then compare them to how they have been drawn in the past.

Because of his teaching background, Pauly also plans to release these "game nights" as STEM curriculum for K-12 schools. An urban middle school and a suburban high school have already signed up to use them.

**It's important to teach people in the next generation how to run for public office.** Pauly made that remark and said it's important to get people to mentor millennials who might want to run for office. He mentioned the Millennial PAC, which is run by Jon Tollefson, a candidate for Minnesota State Auditor.

An interviewer said that, as he left public office, he had the idea of having "governmentors," who would mentor and establish those people who are running for office out of pragmatic thinking about how we can make government and policy work. "It seems that the farm team for elective office is almost exclusively coming from the base of each party," the interviewer said. "We don't have the kinds of people who are civic-minded and willing to look at all sides of issues."

"I think it's important that people do mentor younger people," Pauly responded. "I have a lot of ideas and a lot of energy, but I don't have any wisdom or experience."

Another interviewer commented, "We must raise up a group of people like Josh to understand what public policy is all about. This is a good beginning and we'd like to do whatever we can to help."

**PSP must make sure its network is broad and inclusive.** An interviewer made that remark and said it's important to include people who might have different viewpoints, so you can run your views against them and learn how to defend those views. "It needs to be a multi-racial, multi-ethnic network," the interviewer said. "I'm glad you're open to a broad network."

**There is a complex world of policy surrounding topics like aging in Minnesota.** An interviewer made that comment and said the problem of policy design is very different from asking people what they think about aging. "I can't see how a conversation among people who don't know about policy and policy design can be informed helpfully by what you're talking about doing," he said to Pauly. "What happens after you bring people together to talk about aging in Minnesota?"

The interviewer said in many areas, there are faulty systems that need to be modified by policy design. "What you're doing seems to address existing systems and tries to help people get engaged," he said. "I still don't see where the knowledge of the systems that need to be redesigned is going to come from." He said it's good Pauly's work is attempting to get people engaged and to teach them how the world works. "But," the interviewer asked, "how does your work connect with policy design?"

"Our goal is not to craft new systems and change all the infrastructure," Pauly responded. "Our goal is to get people involved and to understand the system. That's going to come from the experts who are on our panels to curate these subtopics. But I don't think there's anything wrong with community engagement. We're not trying to replace policymakers or people at the Humphrey School [of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota], who are doing great work. We're just trying to create an outlet for people to share their voices, have their concerns heard and try to understand a little bit more about what's going on."

Pauly said if there are 1,000 people on the PSP platform, maybe 100 people will take a next step and maybe 10 of them will try to be on the neighborhood association or apply for a fellowship. "Then we go to another issue and get another 100 people who care," he said. "I think that's how we chip away at it."

"I don't think this is the be-all and end-all," Pauly said. "I haven't solved anything. I'm just trying to do my part. I'm 30 and I need to be the person to solve problems. At some point you have to do something; hopefully it leads to something better."

**Exchanging ideas electronically appears to have enabled the most passionate political extremes to be heard.** An interviewer made that remark and said that has had an enormous impact on the political world at the national, state and local levels. "People who feel intensely on the right or intensely on the left are very engaged," he said. "How does this approach deal with that behavior and do anything to minimize the balkanization going on in the political world these days?"

Pauly responded that it's incumbent on him to reach out to people in all different walks of life and with different political views. He said polarization hasn't been an issue with a similar digital platform developed in Austin, Texas. Instead, people share about things that impact them individually.

Pauly said it's important also to get institutions to share on the PSP platform. "If we're doing something on aging, the State Board on Aging and other nonpartisan organizations should be sharing their data and things they're looking at," he said.

**If nonpartisanship is key to the long-term credibility of PSP, what safeguards are being built in at the beginning to assure nonpartisanship?** An interviewer asked that question and Pauly responded that PSP's advisory board will include people on the left, the right and the middle. He said PSP would pick topics that are not "owned" by the left or the right. "Picking the topic is important," he said. PSP will use the advisory board and neighborhood associations to provide input on the topic choices.