



Tom Triplett, nonprofit consultant

Increase visibility and impact by partnering on public-policy studies

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

February 10, 2017

Present

John Adams, Janis Clay (executive director), Paul Gilje, Randy Johnson, Dana Schroeder (associate director), Clarence Shallbetter, Tom Triplett. By phone: Dan Loritz, Paul Ostrow (chair).

Summary

Nonprofit consultant Tom Triplett discusses how the Civic Caucus can get people to take note of and listen to its work. He bases his remarks on a review of the Nov. 27, 2016, Civic Caucus report,  *Looking Back, Thinking Ahead: Strengthening Minnesota's Public-Policy Process*. The report made recommendations on how to improve the public-policy study process in order to come up with creative solutions to Minnesota's problems.

To increase the impact of its work, Triplett suggests two main techniques for the Civic Caucus: (1) that it undertake public-policy studies at the invitation of a policymaker or someone in a leadership role, whether at the state or local level; and/or (2) that it partner with another entity that already has high visibility on the topic being studied. He proposes several categories of potential partners.

The Civic Caucus recommended working with the Minnesota foundation community to improve the public-policy study process. Triplett advises the Civic Caucus to identify an issue and try to tie it to the interest of a particular foundation. He says that could increase the visibility of the Caucus and generate some funding for the project.

He encourages the Civic Caucus to have a list of critical issues facing Minnesota when deciding which issue to take on next. He advises choosing a focused issue that no other organization is looking at and then finding a partner who will either fund a study of the issue or actually undertake the study itself. The study would be done using the "Minnesota Process" recommended in the Caucus report: using nonpartisan, non-special-interest generalists; looking at the fundamentals on a focused specific concern; being open to learning first; sharing knowledge with others; and issuing specific, informative, readable, defendable final reports.

Biography

Tom Triplett is principal of Triplett Consulting LLC, a Minnesota-based enterprise that helps nonprofits nationwide become more financially sustainable. He is also a Minnesota-licensed attorney with substantial experience with nonprofit and government finance and structure issues.

Prior to his role at Triplett Consulting LLC, he was a principal consultant at Fieldstone Alliance, a 501 (c)3 nonprofit based in St. Paul. His prior nonprofit work experience includes serving as CEO or interim CEO of five Minnesota nonprofits: the James J. Hill Reference Library, the College of Visual Arts, the Minnesota Business Partnership (comprised of the CEOs of the state's largest corporations), the Minnesota Project (a community-development nonprofit), and the St. Paul Convention and Visitors Bureau. He also was an attorney with two of the state's largest law firms.

Triplett has extensive experience in the public sector. He is a former commissioner of the Minnesota state departments of Finance, Planning and Revenue. He was also policy director for a mayor of St. Paul, interim vice-chancellor for finance of Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, and deputy counsel to the Minnesota Attorney General.

He is a current or former board member of more than a dozen nonprofits, including a variety of education, environmental, community development and arts organizations. After completing two terms on the Washington County Housing and Redevelopment Authority, he was named the state's outstanding local HRA commissioner in 2016.

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,  *Looking Back, Thinking Ahead: Strengthening Minnesota's Public-Policy Process*. The Civic Caucus interviewed nonprofit consultant Tom Triplett to hear his reaction to the report and to get his ideas on how to implement its recommendations.

The Civic Caucus has interviewed Triplett twice before: once on Dec. 18, 2009, about the budget forecast and once in a group interview on May 6, 2011, about legislative interims and where the Legislature gets its ideas.

Discussion

How do we get people to listen? In his review of the  Nov. 27, 2016, Civic Caucus report on  *Improving the public-policy process* consultant Tom Triplett said his main concern is not the "Minnesota Process" per se—or how we go about producing studies—but more how we get people to listen.

(The Minnesota Process is described on pp. 8-12 of the report, which spells out the characteristics of that process, which has served the state well in the past in

developing creative solutions to community problems: using nonpartisan, non-special-interest generalists; looking at the fundamentals on a focused, specific concern; being open to learning first; resisting shortcuts; thinking ahead; listening to all sides; sharing knowledge with others; and issuing specific, informative, readable, defendable final reports.)

Hopefully, Triplett said, the Civic Caucus could develop ways to communicate so that people will pay attention and listen to its work. He suggested two main techniques:

1. Do studies at the invitation of a policymaker or someone in a leadership role-not just at the state level, but also for city councils and county boards.
2. Partner with another entity that already has high visibility on the topic.

What is the policy context in which the Civic Caucus is operating today? Triplett listed five important points:

1. Everybody is issuing reports and studies, and they're usually biased. There's no shortage of information out there.
2. We've all seen examples of hateful, biased social media "discussions" of public policy, especially at the local level.
3. Policymakers have so little time to dig deep into important policy questions.
4. The increasing role of money in politics. There are now million-dollar races for the Minnesota House. That's just going to grow.
5. The most effective influencers of public policy in the state right now, in Triplett's judgment, are the Minnesota Legislative Auditor and the *Star Tribune*. When Legislative Auditor Jim Nobles and his staff say something, it's almost a guarantee that there will be legislative or rulemaking action. The *Star Tribune* is also influential, particularly with its multi-part series, reporting on topics such as the Mississippi River, child welfare, prisons and sheltered workshops for people with disabilities.

Who are the potential "inviters" for a Civic Caucus study? Triplett mentioned several:

1. The governor. Triplett said perhaps the Civic Caucus could suggest to the governor that it do a study on issues that state government has had trouble resolving over the years. Examples might be special education or arts education in the public schools.
2. A legislative committee chair. "That's proven effective," Triplett said. Suggest to the chair that the Civic Caucus use the Minnesota Process and come back next year with new ideas on an important state issue.
3. A mayor or city council or county board.

4. There are some Minnesota foundations with the money to do the work. "The major foundations in the state are becoming ever more focused in their topic areas," Triplett said. The Civic Caucus should identify an issue and try to tie it to the interest of a particular foundation. "That might serve both to highlight the visibility of the Civic Caucus and to generate some funding for a project," he said.

Triplett feels strongly that the Civic Caucus must avoid doing a study where the inviter has already determined his or her position. "Stay away from that kind of research for hire," he advised.

With the likely de-funding of many federal programs with the new administration, Triplett suggested there might be value in the Civic Caucus examining alternative funding strategies in fields like environmental protection, public housing and renewable energy. Again, however, seek out invitations and/or partners to do the study.

Educate the people who have to make a decision. An interviewer made that statement and said there is an annual meeting at the University of Minnesota (U of M) with all the legislative Transportation Committee members and all the transportation people at the University. In the past, the interviewer said, those meetings helped the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) decide to fund transportation research at the U of M.

Try to get foundation people to understand that they don't know everything . The interviewer continued with that statement. "Frequently, foundations think they know the answer and they want to fund things that support that," he said. "That's not like a Citizens League committee from the past that would back up and ask what the cause is."

"There's such an unfortunate power dynamic that goes on with foundation staff," Triplett responded. "Once you're in charge of handing out money, your ego tends to get inflated. But fortunately, that's not true for everybody in the field."

There's great potential in the Civic Caucus partnering with others on a study. Triplett said that's one way of ensuring that people will pay attention to what comes out of the Civic Caucus. He noted six categories of potential partners:

1. A group that's already working in a topic area, such as an immigrant-support nonprofit.
2. Another high-profile media outlet, such as the *Pioneer Press*, MPR or *MinnPost*.
3. The biggest opportunity for partnering is with higher ed institutions. That might include the Humphrey School of Public Affairs or the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA) at the U of M or private colleges, perhaps by working with the Minnesota Private College Council. "These institutions have their own way of elevating issues that the Civic Caucus might not have," Triplett said. "The research capabilities and student interest make all colleges worth serious consideration as partners."
4. Other research entities, like the [Wilder Foundation](#) .
5. Policy process entities, such as the [Jefferson Center](#) .

6. Millennial groups, such as [Fourth Generation](#). Triplett described Fourth Generation as a group of millennials who've come together to develop a new, nontraditional process for philanthropy. They're interested in social enterprise. He suggested that the Civic Caucus invite someone from the organization for an interview.

There are hurdles for the Civic Caucus to overcome. Triplett listed three:

- The Civic Caucus could possibly be seen as a new/old Citizens League.
- The lack of age and race diversity in the Civic Caucus interview group.
- The era of Trump: Why bother with studies? We've already got the answers!

How do we get attention after issuing a report and have an impact? An interviewer asked that question and noted that CURA has put out numerous reports that seemed to have had no effect.

Triplett responded that maybe the gatherings mentioned earlier of legislators and researchers on transportation issues is a model that would be replicable on other issues. "It's when you get the policymakers invested in the idea that 'We have to find a solution to a certain problem and we can't do it by ourselves,'" he said. "Can you help out?"

"There's a lot to that," the interviewer remarked, "because policymakers are just besieged by special interests, like the Transportation Alliance, the trucking associations, road builders, transit advocates and bond sellers."

Another interviewer remarked that MnDOT does think long term and has plans for what needs to happen to various segments of roads over the next 15 years. "But then they have to think about the short term, because legislators are badgered by special interests," he said.

"In the old days, when the Citizens League used to tackle something, its Program Committee would think about what was going to be hitting the headlines in two years," the interviewer continued. "It wasn't solution-oriented, as much as it was trying to understand the system that was creating the problem and how to get leverage on the system to solve the problem. That's the kind of thinking that doesn't occur very much anymore."

He said the Civic Caucus spent over a year looking at workforce issues. We identified all the obstacles and the issues and then we issued a report. (See Jan. 25, 2015, Civic Caucus report, [A Statewide Crusade to Secure Minnesota's High Quality Workforce](#).) "I'm afraid we didn't take the next step and say, 'Given the way the system works, here are the workable step-by-step things that could be done to give us a different outcome two, three or four years down the road,'" he said.

Why isn't the higher ed system delivering what the state needs? The interviewer continued. "I know there's a lot of hand-wringing and frustration about why the higher ed system isn't delivering what the state feels it needs—whether it's in citizenship issues or workforce development issues or a lot of other related issues. Yet, we expect the higher ed system to deliver. There's a logjam there of some sort. We keep looking for the next leader to pull us out of the mess."

"It may well be that the Civic Caucus shouldn't jump into a world-class issue to start with," Triplett responded. "Looking at Minnesota State as it searches for a new leader, the Caucus should take on this function of selection of a leader. How do you find people who have the vision to be a leader? Instead, these institutions always go straight to the consulting headhunters, who come up with the same names over and over again."

What about a planning grant for the Civic Caucus? An interviewer asked Triplett for his thoughts on that question. Triplett responded that he doesn't think the Civic Caucus can go to the McKnight Foundation or whomever and simply ask for money to create a process or hire staff. He said, though, that that there is potential for arraying the individual interests of the various foundations in Minnesota against the question, "Can a policy study help you in achieving your mission?"

Triplett reiterated his earlier point that the Civic Caucus should not become another research-for-hire organization. However, if a foundation has a need for unbiased research on an issue that is both important to it and to the state as a whole, then the Civic Caucus should pursue that opportunity.

The interviewer said it would be helpful for us to start thinking about that and get a group to work on it. Triplett said he would be willing to help.

Does the public-policy process need to be better defined or do we need a different process for different issues? An interviewer asked that question and wondered whether the process you use should grow out of the issue you're trying to tackle.

Triplett believes the process should grow out of the issue you're trying to tackle. For example, he said the Civic Caucus could be helpful in looking at the issue of whether we should continue to require that that health-care providers in Minnesota be nonprofit. "That's an issue unique to Minnesota," he said. "Maybe that would require a special process to get at."

How do we encourage the Legislature to look at the big picture or long-term trends? An interviewer recalled that in the 1970s, the State Planning Agency put on an annual "Minnesota Futures Conference" before the legislative session began, which all legislators were required to attend. The conferences were intended to inform legislators of long-term trends in the state and encourage legislators to do long-term, big-picture thinking. The responsibility for the conferences later moved to the Humphrey School at the University of Minnesota.

Triplett said it would be worth trying to re-establish something like the Futures Conferences before legislative sessions. The Civic Caucus would need a partner to take that up. He said it wouldn't be working on the resolution of a particular issue, but might encourage more long-term thinking. He wondered if the Humphrey School could be a partner.

An interviewer responded that the people at the U of M and Minnesota State behave in a way not aimed at solving contemporary problems. "The incentives for professors are not aligned with that mission," he said. "For the most part, professors are not teaching public policy."

He suggested looking to the private colleges for people willing to engage in public policy and possibly join the Civic Caucus interview group. Triplett agreed that it would be helpful for the Caucus to meet with Paul Cerkvenik, president of the Minnesota Private College Council, rather than trying to meet with each college individually.

What group might be the most likely to conduct its work following details of the Minnesota Process? An interviewer asked that question and explained that the Nov. 27, 2016, Civic Caucus report recommended ways of ensuring a good process in Minnesota for coming up with creative ideas for doing something about issues in the future. It settled on what it calls the Minnesota Process, which has served the state well in the past in developing those creative solutions. (Characteristics of the Minnesota Process are listed in these notes at the beginning of the discussion section.)

Triplett responded that he's not sure what group that would be. The interviewer asked whether some entity, perhaps the Humphrey School, would undertake a study using the Minnesota Process if a foundation offered to fund it. Triplett suggested that the Civic Caucus meet with Bill King, former president for 12 years of the Minnesota Council on Foundations. He might have some perspective on the question, Triplett said.

Pick focused issues that nobody else is looking at. The interviewer said it's important to have a list of critical issues facing Minnesota when deciding which issue to take on next. The interviewer named several Minnesota-specific issues, but Triplett responded that he was nervous about the Civic Caucus taking on such big issues, even if they are Minnesota-specific. He advised choosing instead focused issues that no other organization is looking at.

How do we brand the Civic Caucus? An interviewer talked about the organization [No Labels](#), a national organization with a Minnesota chapter. The mission of the national organization—comprised of Democrats, Republicans and independents—is to create within Congress a bloc of elected officials who combine ideological independence and common sense with a willingness to reach across the aisle to get things done.

The interviewer said the slogan of the day should be "Make *Democracy* Great Again." Those are the principles of the Civic Caucus, he said. "Democracy is the best form of government because it's the battle of ideas and compromise and coming up with the best solutions to problems. The best way to do that is through a democratic process. I don't think most people think that anymore. If Washington can't figure it out, maybe Minnesota can figure it out here."

He asked what the unique role of Civic Caucus is. "How can we brand this in a way that sustains the Civic Caucus financially and in terms of its influence?"

Triplett responded that the Civic Caucus should find one or two small, manageable, important issues and find a partner who will fund a study of the issues and find the right people, the generalists, to come to the table and use our process. The Civic Caucus needs to try a couple of these things, he said.

"In other words," the interviewer remarked, "we make ourselves relevant by having some successes, big or small." Triplett agreed.

Another interviewer commented that the Civic Caucus report didn't envision the Caucus itself necessarily doing the studies. Instead, the report asked the foundation community to revive the Minnesota Process by seeking proposals from groups willing to use that process to study an important issue.

Triplett responded by saying if the Civic Caucus can find a foundation with a focus area that has a major unanswered question, the Caucus could tell the foundation it'd be willing to lead the process, but maybe not do the study itself.

The legislative process is getting broken down. Triplett said years ago in the legislative process, there was a long-term, objectively defined list of road projects. "Now what we're seeing is individual pieces of legislation dealing with one stretch of road," he said. "The same thing is happening in public utilities regulation. The legislative process is getting broken down. If that continues in other areas, it's going to be a huge, unfortunate shift."

He said another area that is suffering now is the management of public facilities, such as the new Vikings stadium. "The Legislature is not thinking conceptually about how the facilities should be managed," Triplett said. "Instead, they're thinking about how the members of the Stadium Authority should be appointed. But there are much more fundamental questions there."

He said perhaps the Civic Caucus should put together a list of areas where there's friction about policy and process and structure. The list might help identify questions the Caucus wants to move on.

Should there be disruptive activity today through something that's brand new? An interviewer asked that question after pointing out that Triplett himself has

been involved in several successful disruptive activities, such as chartered schools and the Minnesota Project, a study group the interviewer said was somewhat in competition with the Citizens League.

Triplett responded that he likes the concept of being disruptive, but not being so far off the mainstream that people won't pay attention. That's why he thinks it's important for the Civic Caucus to begin to develop a list of current issues, then winnow those down and figure out who'd be interested in funding a study.

Triplett said there is a role for the Civic Caucus to come up with manageable issues where change can be made. But the Caucus needs to work with a partner to have a visibility level it normally wouldn't have on its own. It also needs a funding stream. He also repeated his earlier point that to be credible, the Civic Caucus must broaden its base of participants to include more people of color and more young people. "With a few exceptions, we're too old and too white."