



# Pahoua Hoffman, Citizens League Executive Director

Mediator of policy disputes a key role for Citizens League, but not its only role

A Minnesota Policy Process Interview

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## Present

John Adams, Janis Clay (executive director), Paul Gilje, Pahoua Yang Hoffman, Randy Johnson, Ted Kolderie, Paul Ostrow (chair), Bill Rudelius, Dana Schroeder (associate director), Clarence Shallbetter, T. Williams.

## Summary

Citizens League Executive Director Pahoua Yang Hoffman says the role of mediator of policy disputes is a key role for the organization, but not its only role. She discusses the League's work as a mediator with a committee exploring a St. Paul minimum-wage ordinance and helping to facilitate a debate led by a resident task force on police-community relations in Edina. She said there could also be projects where the Citizens League actually originates a study, rather than serving as a type of mediator.

She talks about how the Citizens League's study committee process differs from that used in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. She believes the League must bring people with special interests and selfless citizens together to work for the common good.

Hoffman says the Citizens League's mission continues to be relevant today, as it was when the League was founded in 1952. A Civic Caucus interviewer had earlier described that mission as helping the community understand its problems and determine what to do about them. Hoffman adds to the mission the process of empowering the community to do just that.

She describes the Citizens League's three areas of focus over the last few years: (1) the workforce, including education; (2) aging; and (3) good governance, both local and regional. She is very concerned about the loss of regionalism and keeps that at the top of her mind when thinking about the Citizens League's work.

Hoffman discusses the *Citizens League Voice*, the League's new print magazine, launched in the fall of 2017. Also available [online at this link](#), the *Voice* explores a single policy question per issue through three to four essays presenting multiple perspectives on the topic.

## Biography

Pahoua Yang Hoffman is executive director of the Citizens League, a position she has held since December 2017. She is the seventh executive director in the organization's 66-year history. Prior to being appointed executive director, Hoffman served for three years as the Citizens League's policy director.


In her role as policy director, she led two high-profile Citizens League study committees on Metropolitan Council reform and transit financing. She and three other founding members conceived of the Capitol Pathways program, a paid internship program for college students of color that provides legislative training and access to the Minnesota State Capitol. Alumni of the program have moved on to secure policy-related positions or additional study.

Before joining the Citizens League in 2014, Hoffman served as the manager of government affairs and content administration at Twin Cities PBS, one of the top mid-market stations in the country. For seven years, she led the station's government relations, as well as worked with the station's production teams to plan and coordinate local media projects.

Her current board service includes: Catholic Charities of St. Paul and Minneapolis, where she serves as chair of the Advocacy Committee and a member of the Executive Committee; the Minneapolis Parks Foundation and Girl Friday Theatre Company.

Hoffman holds a bachelor's degree in history from the University of Minnesota and a master's degree in business administration from the University of St. Thomas. She was a 2013 to 2015 policy fellow at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School of Public Affairs.

## 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*.

The Civic Caucus interviewed new Citizens League Executive Director Pahoua Yang Hoffman to learn about the Citizens League's current public-policy work and its vision for the future.

**About the Citizens League.** The Citizens League was founded in 1952 as a nonprofit that would be "completely and absolutely nonpartisan, concerned only with presenting the public with facts upon which each citizen can reach an intelligent decision." The Citizens League has developed and implemented nonpartisan policies on education, effective governance, taxes, parks and open space, transportation and other issues. The League is best known for bringing together diverse perspectives

from experts and from the people affected by various issues. Notable achievements include the creation of the Metropolitan Council, the passage of the Fiscal Disparities Law, supporting the nation's first charter school law and launching Metropolitan State University.

In the fall of 2017, the Citizens League started a new print magazine, the *Citizens League Voice*, which is also available online at <https://citizensleague.org/voice/>.

## Discussion

**Many of us don't let the Civic Caucus know how valuable it is.** Citizens League Executive Director Pahoua Yang Hoffman made that remark and said she often looks up past Civic Caucus interviews of people before she meets with them. She said she had reviewed the notes of the **Civic Caucus Feb. 9, 2018, internal discussion**, which she referred to throughout this interview. She liked the way an interview group member described the Civic Caucus during that February discussion: "an advocate for a marketplace of ideas."

**The Civic Caucus's focus on Minnesota's competitiveness is good.** Hoffman said Minnesota's competitiveness is on all of our minds, mentioning Greater MSP and the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce. "I'm also thinking about that in the work of the Citizens League," she said. "The Citizens League wanted to make Minnesota a better place to work and live."

**Hoffman described the Citizens League's three areas of focus over the last few years:**

1. The workforce, including education. "Education is a means to an end," Hoffman said. "And that end is an engaged and active workforce."
2. Aging. Aging is an important issue as we think about Minnesota's competitiveness, Hoffman said. "We're going to be heading into a workforce shortage," she said. "We have always had a rich civic community here. Going around the state talking to people about the challenges of an aging population, I keep hearing from people aged 50-plus or 60-plus that they feel like second-class citizens. They can still give to their communities, but they're not seen as productive members anymore. That's a loss. If Minnesota can do better, there's a competitive edge there. How do we support and continue to engage older adults in our communities?" She also mentioned the importance of having intergenerational conversations about aging-that younger people do want to engage in learning more and being part of these conversations.
3. Good governance, both local and regional. Hoffman said she'd been at the Capitol during the 2018 legislative session supporting and opposing bills related to Metropolitan Council reform. "There are fewer and fewer regional advocates these days," she said. "We are forsaking the long term for short-term gains. I saw all session people fighting for their piece of pie-not thinking about the entire whole. I see cities fighting for what they want without thinking about the entire region. I see counties thinking only about their counties and not the counties they border. Regionalism is eroding."

"When I think about the Citizens League's work, I keep at the top of my mind what we're doing that will strengthen the region that will therefore strengthen the state. The metro/rural divide is really fueled by fights among the core cities, the suburbs and the exurbs." She said she doesn't feel that divide as much when she is in Greater Minnesota as she does in the metro area.

**The Citizens League is taking a look at what it has done and how it has contributed uniquely to the community.** "The Citizens League mission continues to be relevant," Hoffman said. She noted that the Civic Caucus talked about the mission of the Citizens League in its Feb. 9, 2018, internal discussion as the following: to help the community understand its problems and determine what to do about them. She said she'd add to that mission: How do we empower them to do that?

**Informed debate is almost nonexistent elsewhere.** Hoffman pointed to that remark made by a Civic Caucus interview group member in the [Civic Caucus Feb. 9, 2018, internal discussion](#). "We've lost the art of disagreement," she said. "We talk past each other. With increasing technology and social media, we're building more insulated echo chambers to find people who think like us."

**She liked the discussion that the Civic Caucus should address issues no one else wants to address or issues that aren't being adequately discussed.** She agrees with a Civic Caucus interview group member that the civic sector has deteriorated.

**For three years, the Citizens League has run a program called Capitol Pathways, aimed at providing a pathway to the Capitol for college students of color.** Hoffman noted that there are few legislators of color and few lobbyists of color. "Students of color do not know about these career opportunities," she said.

Lobbyists representing various interests have a large amount of influence, Hoffman said. Legislators have to know a lot in a short amount of time, so the lobbyists step in. "Who are these lobbyists and whose interests are they really representing?"

She said she's observed that the students know a lot about social justice, but they sometimes conflate this with civics. They may think that social justice is civics. So this year, Hoffman raised money to hold a four-day boot camp for the Capitol Pathways interns on the legislative process: how a bill becomes a law, what the legislative calendar is, what the Senate majority leader and speaker of the House do, etc. "We've developed an entire curriculum now for young people," Hoffman said.

"Civics education continues to be lacking in our schools," she continued. "One program like Capitol Pathways is not going to solve those challenges, but this program—along with others like Amherst H. Wilder Foundation's Community Equity Pipeline and Nexus Community Partner's Boards and Commissions Leadership Institute (BCLI) program—are creating access points and bridging some knowledge gaps."

**Membership organizations are seeing declines in membership.** Hoffman said that is true of the Citizens League, Minnesota Public Radio and Twin Cities PBS. "What do members get that no one else provides?" she asked.

**The Citizens League should be a place where different ideas and the best ideas come together.** Hoffman made that remark and said the Citizens League is not about changing people's minds so much as about educating people so they can make up their own minds.

**The Citizens League has launched a new magazine called the *Citizens League Voice*.** Hoffman felt the media landscape was lacking a publication that presented multiple perspectives through essays on one topic per issue. In the *Citizens League Voice*, each topic begins with presenting just

the facts in a neutral voice, followed by contributions from three to four essayists providing various perspectives on the topic. The *Voice*, which is still a pilot, is currently being funded by an unrestricted Bush Foundation Ecosystem Grant. The magazine is sent to every Citizens League member and to every legislator. Hoffman said the Citizens League still has to find an ongoing funding mechanism for the magazine.

Hoffman said the *Voice* begins a vision of the Citizens League that she's been thinking about. "We wanted to create a magazine that would create quality conversation and meaningful debate by engaging Minnesotans of all backgrounds and ideologies to explore the most effective policy solutions," she said. "Progress still happens at the speed of trust. For people to be engaged in the issues, they need to know enough about the issues. That was one of the goals of this magazine."

Hoffman said the *Voice* is using the Citizens League's strategy of "assembling people with a diversity of experiences and circumstances to discuss issues that matter most to Minnesota's future." She said this process has helped define problems more accurately and, more often than not, has resulted in innovative solutions.

Hoffman argued for a print magazine rather than a digital newsletter. She said while general circulation magazines are on the decline, niche magazines are on the rise. "Niche magazine readers are passionate about the content," she said. She noted that the *Voice* is also available online at <https://citizensleague.org/voice/>.

Citizens League members want unbiased journalism in a voice that's not sensational, but neutral, Hoffman said. "By serving our members, hopefully we're serving the interested public. Our vision for the *Voice* is to facilitate civil conversation that emphasizes empathy and understanding, without shying away from disagreement. We wanted to create a model for nonpartisan journalism that demands rigor and discourages rancor."

Each issue of the *Voice* takes on a big question, Hoffman explained. The first issue, Fall 2017, addressed disruptive protests; the Winter 2018 issue, transportation gridlock; and the Spring 2018 issue, public pensions. "The magazine slows us down," Hoffman said. "It gives us something to hold in our hands and then read the three or four different perspectives and sit with it for awhile. It allows some time to learn."

Hoffman said the magazine allows the Citizens League to talk about its own work and to celebrate the work of peer organizations. "It's critical in addition to doing our own work to also build the civic infrastructure," she said.

**An interviewer endorsed what the Citizens League is doing with the *Voice*.** "People who read print have an impact that is seriously undervalued," he said.

**The Citizens League brings together people with different interests.** Hoffman made that comment and said it's important to bring together the selfless servants in public life with those that have self-interests. Together, they can work for the greater good, she said.

She noted that the current Citizens League Saint Paul Minimum Wage Study Committee has both a low-wage worker and a business owner as members. "The tables the Citizens League is setting are

making sure we're getting different perspectives together," she said. "Curating that table is so important. Minimum wage affects so many different people in such profound ways."

**The four-day legislative process boot-camp curriculum for Capitol Pathways interns is very basic, but could be used by adults.** Hoffman made that statement and said she wants to look at the curriculum to see how it could expand to all of the Citizens League's members. She noted the Vital Aging Network (VAN) has a curriculum for civic engagement for people aged 50 and over. She'd like to find a way to marry the curriculum the Citizens League has developed for young people with the VAN curriculum. That could make good on the League's promise to create new civic leadership.

**An interviewer asked Hoffman to describe the current Citizens League in more detail.** Hoffman explained that the Citizens League has six staff members, including herself, and a library of consultants. "We have raised the bar on consultants," she said. "They bring a level of expertise and experience that we don't have in-house." The League has a library of about 20 consultants and draws on them for their particular expertise when it is appropriate. She said the League's budget includes about \$200,000 per year for consultants.

The 2018 budget for the Citizens League is \$1,102,079. Hoffman said 45 percent of the budget comes from unrestricted funds from individual and corporate members. The League currently has 1,500 active individual members and 100 corporate members. Individual members account for \$208,000 in revenue and corporate members account for \$283,000. Specific project grants total \$565,000, or 51 percent of the budget. Five percent comes from earned income from things like events.

**The Citizens League helped facilitate a debate over police-community relations in Edina.**

Hoffman said a Race and Equity Task Force, led by Edina residents, chose the Citizens League through a public RFP process to help the city conduct its community engagement. Over the course of a year, the Citizens League facilitated community conversations that helped inform the Edina resident-led task force to make recommendations to the city. One consultant the Citizens League used on the project was a trained race-based facilitator and another was especially good at doing individual interviews.

**Can people ever be totally neutral?** An interviewer said he doesn't believe we can, because we're going to be influenced by who we are and what we bring to the table. "But you can be fair and examine the issue," he said.

The interviewer said there is a role for demonstrations and protests, but oftentimes people don't understand it. Some people want protestors to solve the problem, he said, but that's not the role of protests. Their role is to point out the problem. "For the legislators to try to beat that back is bone-headed," he said.

Hoffman agreed with the interviewer's opinion on being neutral and said a better way to say what the Citizens League's new magazine is attempting to do is to strike a balance. She also said she sees protests as one tool for change, but not the only one.

**How is the Citizens League's study committee process different from that used in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s?** An interviewer asked that question and pointed out that in the League's former

committee process, an effort was made to have the committee members be generalists and to exclude people representing special interests. The interviewer said the committee heard from people with special interests as resource speakers, not as members.

Hoffman responded, "We must bring people with special interests and selfless citizens together." She spoke of the Citizens League's Metropolitan Council Study Committee several years ago, which included city and county officials among the members. She said legislators wanted to know who was on the committee and that it made them more willing to put something into a bill, knowing who had already vetted the recommendations.

"It is different from how it was done before," Hoffman said. "We are living in a different time. If we were to have just Citizens League generalists on a committee and then I had to sell it to the people whom I needed to buy into the recommendations, I just don't know if we would have done that in time for the 2016 legislative session."

"It is different, but not necessarily better," she said. "It's not that we couldn't go back to the old committee process. I don't want people to think we've jettisoned that. We simply have to consider what model works best for which issue."

### **What's the measure of success at the end of the year that the Citizens League has done well?**

An interviewer asked that question and Hoffman said the League can tell immediately what people value if there is an increase in the number of members and an increase in donations. "That's one major signal that says we're doing something right," she said.

She said some things are harder to measure. "I want people to experience the back and forth of the debate and the space we create where we can have these conversations in a productive fashion and to leave changed by that," Hoffman said. "I hope people can say, 'Because of the Citizens League process, I know somebody in a different way because of the exchange that happened here and the way we held the meetings.' I hope people walk away moved by what they learned or the way we had the meetings. It's harder to measure that kind of impact."

### **How do we change the culture of the Legislature so conversations we're trying to model**

**happen there?** An interviewer asked that question and said, "That's where this deliberation should happen and there's virtually none."

Hoffman responded, "This year was one of the worst years ever at the Legislature. This is not the way it should be done. We should have a study committee on the broken legislative system-the 2:00 in the morning, 989-page omnibus bill. It's harmful to democracy."

She said when legislators are brought together away from the Capitol, they say they get a lot of pressure from party leaders to behave in a certain way. "They're not always voting their consciences," she said.

The interviewer, Civic Caucus Chair Paul Ostrow, noted that the national organization of No Labels, a bipartisan group attempting to bring members of Congress together to solve problems on a bipartisan basis, is trying to change the rules of Congress. (Ostrow is also co-chair of No Labels Minnesota.)

"What would a political movement to try to change the rules of the Minnesota Legislature look like?"

Ostrow asked. Looking at the legislative process might be a good issue on which the Civic Caucus could partner with the Citizens League, he said.

Another interviewer said we should look at the history of the Legislature in terms of the evolution from when it was working better to where it is now. He said lessons can be discerned from how things were done before. "We didn't get to where we are now overnight," he said. "It will take some time to make this better."

**The Civic Caucus is sifting some of the most important issues that Minnesota needs to focus on.** Hoffman made that comment and said there could be a natural hand-off where the Civic Caucus tells the Citizens League about issues that could be topics for League study committees.

**Hoffman wants the Citizens League to be an intergenerational civics organization.** She said she'd like to get people involved no matter their age, so a college student sits next to someone with many years of experience in public affairs. "I don't know of another organization that does that," she said.

**It sounds like the Citizens League is genuinely interested in becoming the mediator of policy disputes.** An interviewer made that comment and Hoffman responded, "We've been called to that role. It's a key role for this organization, given the current political climate, but not the only role."

The interviewer said that in the past, the Citizens League never saw itself as a mediator. Hoffman responded, "We're not in the true sense a mediator, because we have a position in the end and a mediator wouldn't."

Hoffman gave the example of the St. Paul minimum wage debate. "The community members in St. Paul wanted more of a voice in shaping an ordinance for the city," she said, and the St. Paul Foundation asked the Citizens League to step in and help. "Our mediation role is going to start that way, but eventually the study committee is going to come up with recommendations."

Another interviewer said now the Citizens League ends up trying to find the idea with the maximum support among existing positions. "In contrast, in the past, what often was done was to come up with a new understanding of the problem or a new idea for solutions that had not been discussed among the stakeholders," the interviewer said.

Hoffman answered that there could be projects where it's that-where the Citizens League is not taking on a mediator role, but actually originates a study. She gave the example of a League proposal to the McKnight Foundation that does not include a mediator role. It has to do with the fact that there is no shared vision for the region. "No one really owns this," she said. "It should be the Met Council, but given the political fights, they often feel the need to fly under the radar. They are not exercising all the authority that's given to them in statute. It may be out of self-preservation, but they're just trying to get by and do their work."

She's asked the McKnight Foundation to fund a steering committee of younger leaders to come up a future vision for the region. "This is our future," she said. "I sincerely care about our region. I want our state to thrive. How do we think differently about this? How do we think bigger about this?" Hoffman doesn't know yet if the foundation will fund the project.



**Not everything has to happen at the Capitol.** Hoffman made that remark in response to an interviewer's comment. On the issue of aging, she said so much of what the state needs is for people to make informed decisions on their own that they're now leaving till late in life.

"How do we help change the narrative on how we talk about aging?" she asked. "It doesn't always have to be up at the Capitol. Not everything needs to be a mandate, especially in aging. Government can't solve this problem alone. It has to start with individuals and families. It starts with activating personal agency."