



Minnesota State Representative Paul Thissen

Fix disparities, practice "radical localism", repair legislative process

(Thissen withdrew from the gubernatorial race on Feb. 7, 2018)

A Civic Caucus Gubernatorial Candidate Interview

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Present

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Summary

DFL Gubernatorial candidate and State Rep. Paul Thissen says if he were elected governor, he'd most like to move Minnesota from being the second most unequal state in disparities—especially racial disparities—to having policies in place where equity is a reality. He believes we need a new set of agreements about what it means to have economic security in Minnesota: affordable health care; available and affordable child care, especially in Greater Minnesota; affordable housing; access to higher education; and retirement security.

Thissen says we need "radical localism" at the state level. State government should set goals and standards, provide support and accountability and then let local communities figure out how to achieve those goals. Currently, the state often tries to dictate what local communities should do down to minute details. He says we should free up local communities and governments to do a lot more.

Thissen says transparency is the biggest thing we need to fix at the Legislature to take some of the poison out of our politics. Too much happens at the last minute and behind closed doors. He says we need to get back to an empowered committee process, where legislators can dive into issues and the committee process is respected. He says conference committee meetings should be public and end-of-session negotiations between the governor and the Legislature should either be held publicly or made available to the public.

Thissen has a bill that would require the Legislature to abide by Minnesota's Data Practices and Open Meeting laws. The bill also attempts to better define the single-subject rule, a state Constitutional requirement that all legislative bills be restricted to one subject. He says the governor could decide not to sign a bill if the Legislature has not followed transparent policies.

Biography

Rep. Paul Thissen (DFL-Minneapolis) represents District 61B in the Minnesota House and is a candidate for governor of Minnesota. He was first elected to the House in 2002 and has been re-elected ever since. He has said he will be retiring from the House in January 2019, at the end of his current term.

Thissen served as Speaker of the House from 2013 to 2015 and as House Minority Leader from 2011 to 2013 and from 2015 to 2017. He served as chair of the Health and Human Services Committee from 2007 to 2010. He currently serves on the following House committees: Education Finance; Job Growth and Energy Affordability Policy and Finance; and Legacy Funding Finance.


While Thissen was Speaker, the Legislature passed the first significant investment in early childhood education in Minnesota history; all-day, every-day kindergarten for every five-year-old in the state; a two-year tuition freeze for public college and university students; and the Women's Economic Security Act. The Legislature also raised the minimum wage, legalized same-sex marriage, created the broadband investment program and enacted a first-in-the-nation solar energy standard.

Thissen is a graduate of Academy of the Holy Angels High School in Richfield, Minn., and earned a bachelor's degree from Harvard University in 1989 and a law degree from the University of Chicago Law School in 1992. He served as editor of the *University of Chicago Law Review*.

After law school, Thissen clerked for the Honorable James B. Loken of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit and then worked for the Minnesota State Public Defenders Office. He also worked as a partner at two major Minnesota law firms.

In 2006, Thissen was named one of "Forty Under 40" top business professionals in the Twin Cities by *Twin Cities Business Journal*. In 2008 and 2013, he was recognized as one of "100 Influential Minnesotans in Health Care" by *Physician Magazine* and named one of the Twin Cities' "Best Brains" in *Minneapolis/St. Paul Magazine*.

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](#).

As part of that look at Minnesota's public-policy process, the Civic Caucus began a series of interviews in October 2017 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 Paul Thissen is the sixth in that series.

Discussion

Opening Remarks.

Gubernatorial candidate and State Rep. Paul Thissen said there are three major things Minnesota needs to tackle:

1. We need a new set of agreements about what it means to have economic security for families and individuals in Minnesota. Thissen said that's especially important because the economy is changing rapidly. He listed several important issues related to economic security:

- Access to reliable, affordable health care;
- Availability and cost of child care, especially in Greater Minnesota;
- Availability of affordable housing;
- Access to higher education; and
- Retirement security.

2. We need to close the disparities in Minnesota, particularly the racial disparities. Thissen said we must meet that challenge head on and do it in an intentional way or we won't make the progress we need to make. He said the thing he'd most like to do over the next eight years is to move Minnesota from being the second most unequal state to having policies in place where equity is a reality. "That would be a tremendous legacy for us if we actually lift everybody up," he said.

3. On the political side, people still feel very disconnected, like they don't have a voice. Thissen said people feel very disconnected and like they don't have any control over their destiny both politically and economically. "Figuring out how to reengage them is an important job of the governor," he said.

Some of that, he said, is rethinking state government to make it more localized. "State government should take the role of setting an agenda, expectations and providing resources," he said. "It should let local communities have much more control of the details of how they get there, instead of the state dictating the details down to the very minute level. How do we empower people again to feel like they have control of their own political and economic destiny?"

Early childhood and K-12 education.

We must invest more resources in early childhood education to make it more affordable and to give childcare centers more resources. In response to an interviewer's question about the challenge of people getting their children to quality childcare, Thissen suggested that perhaps childcare centers could provide transportation.

He said we should rethink transportation as part of what we offer people for their economic security. We could offer access to transportation subsidies, in the same way we offer subsidies for health care and childcare, he said. It would be part of a holistic approach.

In 2003, the Legislature was facing a deficit and it cut child-care subsidies and aid to local governments to balance the budget, he said. "We've never recovered from that."

How do we get the best and brightest back into the education field? An interviewer asked that question and said people with college degrees who are in the education field have the lowest salaries relative to other people with college degrees. Thissen responded that lower salaries are a problem in many areas of public employment, such as IT. "A piece of raising those salaries is preserving the benefits, like pensions, that have offset the lower salaries," Thissen said.

How do we get more teachers of color in our classrooms? Thissen asked that question and said teachers of color come in and then leave the field of teaching much more rapidly than white teachers do. Part of it is money, he said. But also, they don't feel they have a say in what they do and are able to exercise their professional judgment. Some research, he said, shows that many teachers of color come to teaching even more mission-driven and when they don't see the ability to have a voice in what that profession looks like, they leave. "We're too top down about how teachers have to operate," he said.

There is an economic standpoint, Thissen said, but if we can free up the teachers to have more say in the curriculum, we'd attract more of the best and brightest to teaching.

Transportation.

The biggest challenge to transit is that there is no dedicated funding scheme for it. Thissen pointed out that according to the Minnesota Constitution, gas tax revenues can only go to roads and bridges. An interviewer noted that fare-box revenues only fund 30 percent of the operating cost of transit. The interviewer said downtown Minneapolis is changing from an employment center to a place to live and there is a disconnect between how the region is developing and how we're thinking about financing transit. "The Metropolitan Council is not speaking to the region's realities," the interviewer said.

Thissen responded that the networks we develop are hub and spoke, but how can we finance transit so that it's not hub and spoke? "How do we get people from North Minneapolis to Shakopee for Amazon jobs?" he asked. Perhaps the employers should pay a share of transit costs.

The same interviewer said the cost of Metro Mobility, transit for elderly and disabled people, is exploding. Thissen agreed that it is a big pull in the budget. He asked whether transportation in some senses should be treated more as a social service rather than as part of the transportation budget. "There's a huge missing need," he said.

State Planning Agency.

We have to have something in place like the State Planning Agency, which was formed in 1965 and abolished in 2003. Thissen said he voted against getting rid of the State Planning Agency in

2003, but it was eliminated. He said the Planning Agency doesn't necessarily have to be the same as it was and could tap into the work of the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School of Public Affairs and a number of foundations doing this kind of work. But having at least a core of people in a planning agency looking across the other state agencies would make a big difference, he said.

He would focus the Planning Agency's work on workforce development and closing the racial opportunity gaps. He said the governor should have the power to direct which issues the Planning Agency works on.

The obstacles to reinstating the State Planning Agency are fiscal and ideological. "Is this the best use of resources?" Thissen asked. "We'll have to make that case."

Gaps and Disparities.

Places that are growing steadily, like the Twin Cities, are magnets for people to come from other places to improve their lives. An interviewer made that statement, following up on Thissen's earlier statement that what he would most like to do as governor is close the racial disparities and gaps in Minnesota. The interviewer pointed out that many of the people who are arriving are at the lower end of the social-economic ladder. Places that are stagnant have fewer gaps than places that are growing, the interviewer said. That magnifies the gaps in places like the Twin Cities. The interviewer then asked what policy options can tackle the fact that there are so many people who are poor, by getting at the root problems in a realistic way,

The most hopeful things are the Northside Achievement Zone in North Minneapolis, the Promise Neighborhood in St. Paul, and similar programs in Northfield, Austin, Red Wing and St. Cloud. Thissen said he likes the hub idea these programs use. "They're not necessarily spending more money, but they're harnessing resources in a different way," he said. "It's also the idea that every child in that neighborhood is going to college and you figure out how to get them there. You set expectations early. You make it a family-driven process. It's driven by the community and it's flexible, depending on where it is."

Higher Education.

There's a gap between what's offered on the supply side by higher education institutions and what's needed on the demand side. An interviewer made that observation and said many students coming from K-12 schools are not ready for higher education. He asked whether higher education institutions should change what they're doing in order to meet people who show up on our campuses unable to do regular college work. Or, the interviewer asked, should we go back and ask what we're getting for spending \$21,000 per student, per year in the Minneapolis Public Schools?

One of the huge drivers of college debt is people having to pay for remedial education at the college level that they should have gotten for free when they were in public K-12 schools.

Thissen made that remark and asked whether we should charge back some of those costs to the K-12 schools, so the students are not picking up the whole cost. Students having to pay for their own remedial education is one of the most unfair parts of the education system, he said.

Thissen said there are some successful programs, like the **federal TRiO programs**, which are federal outreach and student services programs designed to identify and provide services for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. TRiO includes eight programs targeted to serve and assist low-income individuals, first-generation college students and individuals with disabilities to progress through the academic pipeline from middle school to post-baccalaureate programs.

TRiO helps students in their first year of college by focusing on academic achievement and the challenges of transitioning to college, Thissen said. Students who've participated in TRiO during their first year in college go on to provide mentoring to succeeding first-year students.

The cost of higher education will come down as technology changes. Thissen gave that response to an interviewer's question about why higher education is so expensive. Thissen said new technology should allow one professor to teach more students. He cautioned, however, that in making higher education affordable for people, we have to be careful to retain a strong research university, as successful places like San Francisco, Boston and North Carolina have. "That takes a different kind of investment that I think we ignore in Minnesota," he said.

Characteristics and Role of the Governor.

What are the characteristics that people should look for as they select a candidate for governor? An interviewer asked that question and Thissen responded with several recommendations:

1. Get beyond particular issues and look at the candidate's underlying understanding of what's going on in our economy and our politics. We need a shared understanding of what the larger picture is.
2. Look at the candidate's record of going into the arena and not just fighting about things, but actually delivering by getting things done. Thissen said that's what sets him apart in this race.
3. Look for a history of the candidates standing up for their values and doing what they have to do. But they should also know when to walk away with enough, instead of fighting for the very last little bit of what they can gain in a political fight.

Thissen said getting Minnesota from the second most unequal state to no disparities is the one big thing he'd like to do as governor. We need to look at our shared idea of what's going on in Minnesota, Thissen said, and what is really driving our economy and politics. There is a growing concentration of economic and political power in the country and the state and that drives racial, gender, geographic and economic divides. "It doesn't allow people to see each other and stratifies society," he said. "We don't see the same reality. The governor must describe the larger reality of what's going on."

We'd be better off if the federal government would cut a lot of strings in programs like health care and would fund block grants to the states at the level we need. Thissen gave that response to an interviewer's question about whether Democrats should continue to pursue the new nationalism that President Teddy Roosevelt supported. Under that concept, policies run up to the federal executive branch and come back down in the form of regulations and grants, the interviewer said.

Thissen said when the Republicans tried to move health care to block grants, they would have cut a lot of strings, but they also would have made a large cutback in the funding. He stressed that funding has to be adequate for states if health care were to move to a block grant program.

Thissen also mentioned that in the administration's move to get rid of net neutrality regulations, states are preempted from taking any action on their own. He said he and Rep. Ron Latz (DFL-St. Louis Park) will try to bring some action on net neutrality to the state level during the upcoming legislative session.

We need radical localism at the state level. Often, Thissen said, the state tries to dictate what local communities should do, down to minute details. "It creates political controversy that we don't need and it creates bad public-policy outcomes," he said. "What works in Minneapolis doesn't necessarily work in Elbow Lake."

"If we could rethink our state government so that it's about setting standards, providing support, and providing accountability and let local communities figure out how to achieve those goals, we'd be a lot better off," Thissen continued. He said the state's broadband program was designed that way. And he has a proposal to create regions in the state that would decide what's best to do in early childhood in their own region, with the state providing the resources to do those things.

Thissen said there should be national enforcement of things like human rights. But for more mechanical policies, we could free up local communities and governments to do a lot more. When asked what the local community would be in the Twin Cities, Thissen said it would probably be the regional community.

Legislative Process.

How can we get things done in today's poisonous political climate? An interviewer asked that question and Thissen responded with two recommendations:

1. We need to empower outside groups to do more policy work, including citizen boards.
2. The biggest thing we need is transparency. Thissen said so much happens at the Legislature at the last minute and behind closed doors. He said we need to get back to an empowered committee process, where legislators can dive into issues and where the committee process is respected. Conference committee meetings should be public. End-of-session negotiations between the governor and the Legislature should either be held publicly or made available to the public. "What you say in public is going to be much more reasonable than what you say behind closed doors," Thissen said.

"If we could get back to a strong committee process and back to a transparent process, we could take some of the poison out of our politics," he said. "The other thing we need to do is to get big money out of our politics."

Thissen has a bill in the Legislature now that would require that the Legislature abide by Minnesota's Data Practices and Open Meeting laws. Currently, Thissen said, the Legislature can ignore those laws, which apply to other levels of government. He said the bill also includes a provision to try to better define the single-subject rule, a state Constitutional requirement that all legislative bills be restricted to one subject.

(**The Civic Caucus is one of the *amici*** on the section of *Rebecca Otto v. Wright County* that deals with the single-subject rule. The case is now before the State Supreme Court.)

The governor can decide not to sign a bill if the Legislature has not followed transparent policies. Thissen said that might be one way to force the Legislature and the governor to step up and do what's right. He noted that earlier in his legislative career, he voted on a lot more bills each session than are coming up for votes currently, because there was better adherence to the single-subject rule.

Who should take the leadership in improving the legislative process? An interviewer asked that question and Thissen said it has to be the rank-and-file legislators, the governor, and citizens who care about the issue. He said more and more people do care about it. "I think there is hope," he said. "It will have to be forced on the legislative leadership, because the current system is where their power comes from."

Health Care.

Ultimately, a single-payer health care payment system makes a lot more sense than what we have today. Thissen said one of the big challenges in health care is that we've broken into pools that are too small. While a single-payer system makes more sense, whether we can achieve that on the state level or whether it has to be national is open to question, he said. "But who pays for it is really only the beginning of the question," he said.

The health care delivery system is really what we have to get after. "How do we provide a delivery system that's not just individual actors acting in a marketplace to serve people?" Thissen asked. "We need to figure out incentives so they can cooperate, so the social services, mental health, as well as the direct care services, are all working together. There is a lot of great work going on at the community level. Communities are figuring it out. But we need to continue to push hard on that piece."

It's a fabulous idea to deliver health and other social services to children and families through the community school. Thissen said it's a matter of redirecting resources and working with the private sector. Minnesota's health care systems have a sense of commitment to the community that's sometimes lacking in other places, he said. There are lots of partnerships we could build.

He said we need a change in mental health services and mental health screening for children. If a school district diagnoses a problem, the district is on the hook to pay for special education services for that child, he said. Last year there was a bill to try to get Medicaid to pay for some of those services. "That's helped a bit," Thissen said. "But it's a really serious public-policy obstacle we have to figure out."

Thissen is worried that Minnesota is going to back down on its commitment to public health, which has been a huge benefit. He said the **Statewide Health Improvement Partnership (SHIP)**, run through the Minnesota Department of Health, has had a big impact on reducing smoking and obesity and providing a lot of community-based public-health initiatives. "We need to expand that, instead of contract that, because it has had an effect on driving down the cost growth," he said.

We have a huge opportunity in Minnesota for research and development on solving some big chronic diseases, like diabetes and Alzheimer's disease. "We have the constellation of resources right here in Minnesota to do some incredible work on that," Thissen said. "It would save us money. It would expand our economy in a big way. I think we should have a governor who makes kind of a moon mission out of solving diabetes or solving Alzheimer's—picking one and harnessing the resources for the state to do that. Most importantly, it would improve people's quality of life."

The governor's role in solving the opioid crisis is to convene all the experts to move in the same direction. That includes the enforcement piece, the alternative treatments piece, the education piece and the regulation piece, Thissen said. There's an enforcement piece not only against the people who provide the drugs, but also against the drug companies.

Minnesota's Workforce.

There's a much heavier lift in terms of workforce development than we recognize. Thissen said he met recently with members of CTUL ([Centro de Trabajadores Unidos en Lucha](#)), an organization led by low-wage workers and dedicated to building the power and leadership of low-wage workers. He was able to talk to individual members about their challenges with finding affordable childcare and getting to work.

The next day, Thissen met with a group of business leaders to hear what their challenges were. Their major challenge, he said, is the workforce and the fact that we're not taking our workforce development ideas to scale in any meaningful way.

We must make workforce development central to what we do. Thissen said there are obstacles that exist in many people's lives that we must help them overcome. And we must bring in more immigrants.

Hennepin County's [Hennepin Pathways](#) program takes people who've been receiving services from the county and thinks of them as the future workforce. Thissen praised the program, which is aimed at adults and also works with other employers. He explained that the county has looked at its standards for hiring and how it could use its resources to help these people get ahead. "It's really changed the county's focus," Thissen said.

Thissen disagrees with the University of Minnesota's decision to charge much more for out-of-state tuition than for in-state tuition. That's moving the wrong way, Thissen said. He noted that the University of Alabama provides free tuition to any student, whether in state or out of state, who has a grade point average of 3.5 or higher.

We can't see artificial intelligence (AI) as a threat to the workforce. We must look at the jobs that come up behind it, Thissen said. For every robot, there are three jobs created: someone to make it, someone to run it and someone to repair it. We have to train people to do that. He said AI has the potential to lead to gains in employment. "If we could create research hubs on robotics and AI, Minnesota could be on the cutting edge," he said. "And we could use it to make our government work much better."

Sex Offenders.

We must have a discussion on a thinking-forward basis about how to deal with sex offenders.

Thissen said we need to look at how we sentence sex offenders to begin with and how we do assessments of them as they go through the system. And we need to create incentives for the treatment to work.

Some people can't be incorporated safely into our communities, he said. That runs counter to things we'd like to believe, like mercy and rehabilitation. "The challenge is to figure out who's who," he said. "I don't think our system does a good enough job of that in terms of what's going to keep our communities safe vs. taking a retribution approach."