



# Dave Durenberger & Ben Schierer

Minnesota's future is at the local level

A Minnesota Public-Policy Process Interview

*March 27, 2020*

**Click [HERE](#) to see and hear the complete Zoom recording of the March 27, 2020, Civic Caucus interview with former U.S. Senator Dave Durenberger and Fergus Falls (Minn.) Mayor Ben Schierer.**

## Present

(All online by Zoom.) Tom Abeles, Helen Baer, John Cairns (vice chair), Janis Clay (chair), Pat Davies, Dave Durenberger, Paul Gilje, Randy Johnson, Lee Munnich, Paul Ostrow, Bill Rudelius, Ben Schierer, Dana Schroeder (associate director), Clarence Shallbetter, T Williams.

## Biographies

**Dave Durenberger**, former Republican U.S. Senator from Minnesota, retired in 2014 as Senior Health Policy Fellow at the University of St. Thomas and as chair of the National Institute of Health Policy, which he founded there in 1998. Durenberger served in the Senate from November 1978 to January 1995.

Prior to his election to the Senate, he practiced law in South St. Paul with Harold LeVander and served as his chief of staff when LeVander was governor from 1967 to 1971. From 1971 to 1978, Durenberger was counsel for Legal and Community Affairs at the H.B. Fuller Company in St. Paul.

After his election to the Senate, Durenberger became a member of the Senate Finance Committee and also secured a seat on the Intergovernmental Relations Subcommittee of the Government Affairs Committee, later becoming its chair. He became a member of the Advisory Committee on Intergovernmental Relations in 1981.

He also served as chairman of the following Senate committees and subcommittees: the Select Committee on Intelligence, the Health Subcommittee of the Senate Finance Committee, the Oversight Subcommittee of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, and the Rights of Individuals Subcommittee of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee.

Durenberger has a B.A. in political science, history and English from St. John's University in Collegeville, Minn., and a J.D. from the University of Minnesota School of Law.

**Ben Schierer** is mayor of Fergus Falls, a city of 13,845 (2018 data) in west-central Minnesota. Schierer was elected mayor in 2016 and previously served for eight years on the Fergus Falls City Council, to which he was first elected in 2004. In 2018, he served as co-chair of gubernatorial candidate Tim Walz's Community Prosperity Council and served on Governor-elect Walz's and Lt. Governor-elect Peggy Flanagan's transition advisory committee.

Schierer (pronounced "shire") and his family own and operate Union Pizza & Brewing Company in downtown Fergus Falls. Ben Schierer is a 1992 graduate of Fergus Falls High School and completed his bachelor's degree in May 2020. He is a 2020-2021 Bush Foundation Fellow.

## Background

The Civic Caucus interviewed former U.S. Senator Dave Durenberger and Fergus Falls Mayor Ben Schierer to learn about efforts by Minnesota mayors to resolve public problems. Durenberger met Schierer during a trip to Fergus Falls several years ago. During his time in the Senate, Durenberger was deeply involved in issues of intergovernmental relations and calls local government the place "where the rubber meets the road" and "where the leadership in the future is going to come from."

## Summary

**Following is a summary of Dave Durenberger's and Ben Schierer's major points in discussing the power of local government to resolve public issues.**

**The future is in the local level of government in Minnesota.** Former U.S. Senator Dave Durenberger (R-Minn.) made that statement in introducing Fergus Falls (Minn.) Mayor Ben

Schierer. "Try being the mayor of Fergus Falls," Durenberger says. "It's a lot harder than in Anoka, Minneapolis or Saint Paul. This is the place where the rubber meets the road," he says. "That's where the leadership in the future is going to come from."

**Minnesota Mayors Together.** Schierer said mayors have an opportunity and a responsibility to deal with the issue of how divided our communities, the state and the nation are. He said in 2017, the Regional Council of Mayors launched the Minnesota Mayors Together initiative, through which a number of mayors met six times in cities across the state between October 2017 and October 2019: in Bemidji, Duluth, Willmar, Owatonna, Edina and Fergus Falls.

He defines Minnesota Mayors Together as a "coalition of the willing." The mayors actually want to come together and solve these issues, he says, and the group is smaller and more focused than larger groups of mayors. "It's a place for hard questions," he says. The organization has the support of the League of Minnesota Cities.

Schierer says the purpose of the initiative is to break down the rural/urban divide and to get to the heart of some of the difficult conversations and difficult issues. "Dave Durenberger has great confidence in local leaders," Schierer says. "At the local level, we still have the ability to build trust. Trust is what's going to be necessary to have these difficult conversations about what is dividing us as communities, as a state and as a nation."

Schierer says the initiative has begun that work. "Minnesota Mayors Together is relationship-driven," he says. "We have something powerful, but undefined. We're in the process of defining what we take forward. How do we take these relationships we've built and turn them into action?"

"Mayors get things done," he continued. "When it comes to fixing the potholes in the streets, people don't care if you're a Democrat or a Republican, as long as you get them fixed."

Schierer says he has realized that the power is at the local community level, given the dysfunction at the national level and, increasingly, at the state level. He says Minnesota has a rich tradition of leading by example, whether in local government, health care, or education and local funding through the Minnesota Miracle. "It took the metro area and the rural area and Republicans and Democrats working together to get those things done," he says. "We can use that rich tradition of leadership from Minnesota and translate that into action at the local level."

**Identifying issues.** Schierer says things like housing and transportation are "easy issues" about which the group of mayors could make policy proposals. But the "deeper issues," like equity and Islamophobia-particularly in rural communities-require relationships and conversations among the mayors, he says.

**One Minnesota.** Schierer says local units of government can take the divide out of important issues. "By building relationships, we can get back to the 'One Minnesota' Governor Walz talks about," Schierer says. He says we need to work across the partisan lines in the way that led to the Minnesota Miracle. Local government cooperation and agreements across county and township lines can be beneficial.

**Meet in the middle.** Durenberger says people with different ideas on solving a problem used to meet in the middle. "Now's the time to get back there," he says. "Every big-ticket issue gets politicized."

**Past leaders.** Schierer says he's conducting interviews with past leaders statewide to see what worked and how we can use that today. He says those leaders recognize the importance of cooperation and have an underlying belief in the ability of government to better people's lives. "Relationships are the basis of that," he says, noting that when Durenberger was in office, he had relationships and the trust of people on both sides of the aisle.

**Involving youth.** Schierer says if we reach out to youth on a local level, kids step up. He notes that Fergus Falls will become the first Prairie City USA, due to the work of local youth to make the city Monarch friendly and pollinator friendly. And the student climate lobby wants to do a solar-energy project at the high school. Schierer wants the city to be involved, but says the project should be led by these students.

**Minnesota media.** Durenberger is concerned about changes in the media, including public radio and public television. "We're lagging in Minnesota as far as the media bringing understanding to the kinds of questions that should be addressed," he says. "Can't they educate and inform us?"

**Disinformation and misinformation lead to fear.** Schierer says that's particularly true on the issue of immigrants and refugees, especially in his part of the state. He said rumors build up people's fears.

**Redistricting.** Schierer says there should be an independent group of people handling redistricting.

**Partisan affiliation.** Schierer says it's a positive thing that we don't have partisan affiliation at the local level, except in places like Minneapolis or Saint Paul. At the local level, he says, it's hard when partisan politics gets involved. "By removing partisan labels, we can get to know our colleagues and can get to the heart of an issue," he says. The Legislature became partisan in 1973, he notes, asking what we've been able to do or not been able to do since then.

**Conclusion.** "What's most important is making sure our democracy works," Schierer concludes.

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