



Former U.S. Senator David Durenberger

Restore value that an effective civic infrastructure once offered Minnesota

A Review of Minnesota's Civic Process Interview

October 9, 2015

Present

Steve Anderson, Dave Durenberger, Paul Gilje (executive director), Randy Johnson, Sallie Kemper (associate director), Ted Kolderie, Dan Loritz (chair), Paul Ostrow, Amita Ramachandran, Bill Ridelius, Dana Schroeder (associate director), Clarence Shallbetter, Mike Temali. By phone: Janis Clay.

Summary

According to former U.S. Senator Dave Durenberger, the most important strength of the Twin Cities metropolitan area and of Minnesota as a whole has been the community's ability to take collective action to resolve major problems. He says that during his time in the Senate (1978 to 1995), he took many Minnesota public-policy ideas-such as chartered schools-to Washington. There they became critical to bipartisan policy reform in the areas of health, education, welfare, environment, transportation and federalism.

Comparing the community today to that of the 1970s, Durenberger says there have been changes in corporate leadership and huge growth in the number of nonprofit organizations competing for money. He notes changes in the foundation community and in the media and said many people are getting their news from seven-second sound bites. He laments that the University of Minnesota is no longer the important community resource it once was.

In the past, he says, elected leaders and leaders of the corporate civic culture left a significant mark on our civic infrastructure and our national reputation for good governance. But the interests of the forces that shape public policy in Minnesota and shape our current contribution, or lack thereof, to national policy have changed, he says. Durenberger sees little evidence now of a market in Minnesota for rebuilding civic infrastructure and the development of creative policy ideas. But he suggests there is a legacy in the community that we can draw on and shares ideas on what the community could reflect on and do to restore a broad-based civic infrastructure.

Biography

Dave Durenberger, former U.S. Senator from Minnesota, recently retired 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. He was first elected in a special election in November 1978 to complete the unexpired term of the late Sen. Hubert Humphrey, whose position had temporarily been filled by Humphrey's wife, Muriel Humphrey. Durenberger was reelected in 1982 and 1988.

Prior to his election to the Senate, he served in the U.S. Army as an officer in Military Intelligence and as a reserve Civil Affairs and Military Government officer. 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. While there, he also served as chair of the Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission and the Hennepin County Park Reserve District and as executive director of the Minnesota Commission on the Future of the Arts, the Minnesota Supreme Court Code of Judicial Conduct Advisory Committee, and the Minnesota Constitutional Study Commission.

After his election to the Senate, Durenberger, who had campaigned on "changing the role of government," 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. Working with the National Governors Association, he drafted President Ronald Reagan's "New Federalism" proposal in 1982.

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.

He is author of *Prescription for Change* and *Neither Madmen Nor Messiahs* and teaches and speaks nationally on the future of health-care delivery and policy. He 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.

Background

This interview with Dave Durenberger launches a new focus for the Civic Caucus: reviewing the quality of Minnesota's past, present and future civic process for developing good public-policy proposals and action to anticipate, define and resolve major problems. The Caucus developed this new focus during three internal discussion sessions, held on [Sept. 11](#), [Sept. 18](#) and [Oct. 2, 2015](#). While it undertakes this review of the civic process, the Caucus will also continue its interviews exploring the topic of human capital in Minnesota.

Note: The interview with Dave Durenberger was held by special arrangement in a conference room at the Neighborhood Development Center (NDC), located in Western Bank in St. Paul. NDC President

Mike Temali welcomed the Civic Caucus and gave a short update on his nonprofit organization. The NDC, Temali said, trains and supports low-income entrepreneurs of color to start and run businesses, most of which are located in low-income neighborhoods. He said the organization has been replicated in Detroit and Syracuse and it looks like it's about to be replicated in Philadelphia and New York.

"There's a national interest in this model that is very place-focused," Temali said. For a more complete discussion about the NDC, see the [March 6, 2015, Civic Caucus interview with Temali and former Western Bank President Bill Sands.](#)

Discussion

The most important strength of the Twin Cities metropolitan area and of Minnesota as a whole has been the community's ability to take collective action to resolve major problems. Dave Durenberger referred to and supported this idea that Ted Kolderie, former executive director of the Citizens League, posited in a 2005 speech.

Durenberger mentioned the importance of the Citizens League in the community's civic process, calling it, in its "heyday" in the late 1960s and the 1970s, "the mother of civic infrastructure and policy proposals." He said he took many of the League's ideas on governance reform and public service delivery options from that era to his service in the U.S. Senate. There they became critical, he said, to bipartisan policy reform in the areas of health, education, welfare, environment, transportation and federalism.

The history of Minnesota evolved from the frugal Yankee entrepreneurs of New England, their Calvinist conscience, and their civic virtue, which met up here with northern and eastern European immigrants. Durenberger referred to his 2014 speech to the Parks and Trails Council of Minnesota, in which he said that these immigrants were frugal of necessity, but possessed a social conscience and religious values that more than anything shaped the state's progressive cultural and political traditions.

When the commons is threatened, we're ready to act. As an example, Durenberger noted that in 2008, in the middle of partisan political battles and the collapse of an old economy, 62 percent of Minnesotans voted for the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment to the state constitution, that is, to tax themselves to provide for future generations.

What's different about this community now, compared to where we were back in the 1970s? Durenberger said there have been changes in corporate leadership and huge growth in the number of nonprofit organizations, which are competing with each other for money. Those and other factors make it more difficult to change things today.

"But we haven't changed," he said. "This is still the same state it always was. It isn't because we don't have enough civic education or that our kids are all too busy raising kids." Those aren't the barriers, he said.

He noted changes in the foundation community in Minnesota and questioned some of their recent grants. He said the media have changed and pointed out that 64 percent of people in the U.S. never watch public television or listen to public radio. "Everybody's getting their news from seven-second sound bites," he said.

There is little evidence that we have a market in Minnesota for rebuilding civic infrastructure.

Durenberger said in the past, elected leaders and leaders of the corporate civic culture left "an enormously significant mark on our civic infrastructure" and on our national reputation for good governance. "Much of that, and the interests of those forces that shape public policy in this state and shape our current contribution, or lack thereof, to national policy, has changed," he said.

He sees little evidence of a market in Minnesota "for rebuilding civic infrastructure, creative policy ideas, civic education or for leadership from a new generation of citizen leaders." Nor does he see a market for "problem identification, issues discussion, problem analysis, issue clarification, policy development, public debate and policy action."

"I say that with deep regret and a great deal of personal frustration," Durenberger said.

How are we to restore the value that a broad-based civic infrastructure once had to the community of Minnesota? Durenberger suggested calling out all the Minnesota resources responsible for our being a 1970s destination for good-government types:

1. Leadership. Who are the leaders who, if they were approached with a plan for recreating a civic infrastructure for the 21st century, would volunteer their time and their best resources?
2. A goal that describes and unites us. He suggested that goal as "Minnesota: A Renewable Resource."
3. A clear purpose that will distinguish us in 21st century terms. What can civic and collective action accomplish in a state like Minnesota today that it, and only here, can accomplish?
4. Resources. Subject expertise, research capacity, capacity to involve people in leadership positions in 87 counties.
5. The University of Minnesota. This institution's resources helped make Minnesota what it has become. Today the capacity of this huge national and international resource needs both leadership and financial followership.
6. Private business corporations. He is impressed by the business and moral sagacity of many of the women and men who rise to the executive suites in our state. But he said he's under-impressed by their personal commitment to things other than public entertainment arenas in our state.
7. Not-for-profit corporations. There must be 10 times as many today as yesterday, which is a tribute to our failure to deal with our community's problems and to the skill of the institutional advancement profession's philanthropic skill. Define the benefit they might render to collective civic action.
8. Foundations. What impact do they have on our community or its civic action?
9. Republicans and Democrats. We should find a way to shame both into disengaging themselves from national agendas and national funding and supporting our promise to create a real citizen legislature once again.
10. Someplace to start. Durenberger suggested starting by studying the impact of post-World War II public policy on the 21st-century core cities and older suburbs. He pointed out that economic disparities more clear today than ever, in both communities of color and of immigrants, impact public health, public safety and public investments.

There's a legacy we can draw on. An interviewer commented that some people look at Minnesota today and don't see as many top-flight, creative public-policy proposals coming forth. Some blame polarization of government for the difficulty of making change. Others say we should look to see if we're getting the proposals we should.

Durenberger responded that the good ideas are at the community level, in places like the Neighborhood Development Center. "The spirit of what we're talking about lives on," he said. "We have left a lot of legacy in this community that in one way or another can be drawn on."

The media have changed, leading to less transparency around public decisions. An interviewer lamented that transparency around public decisions seems to be getting worse. "Officials are under pressure not to speak publicly about anything till some kind of an agreement is reached," he said. "It seems as if there isn't the same public wrestling with ideas. All that happens behind closed doors." He asked Durenberger whether that was different in his era.

"Part of it is the media," Durenberger responded. "The media always broke this stuff loose, but the media have changed. I'd suggest that in my 50 years in the public spotlight, the quality, skill and experience of journalists on specific subjects relating to public affairs and public policy have diminished. This has happened as the financial rewards for solid, proven, investigative journalism have decreased and the financial rewards to media from advertising have increased."

The interviewer then recounted his conversation with a *Star Tribune* reporter before the city of Minneapolis made its decision on how it would help fund the Vikings stadium. The interviewer said city leaders successfully convinced people that city sales tax revenue was not available for the city to spend in other ways. In reality, he said, the sales tax revenue would have been freed up starting in 2018 to be used for community development, housing and other needs. The money would have started out at about \$30 million per year, growing eventually to \$50 million or \$60 million a year.

The reporter responded to the interviewer's comments by saying, "Why would I cover that? Nobody's debating that."

The interviewer also said there was no public debate about an unusual financing method Minneapolis is using to fund streetcars, because the method was never talked about publicly.

"The Fourth Estate is supposed to be looking after government," the interviewer said. "Now they just referee the political fights. That's not what it's supposed to be about."

People in the middle don't have anybody to vote for. Durenberger is concerned about what he calls the "Minnesota Moderate Middle." "A huge percentage of people in the middle aren't voting anymore, because they don't have anybody to vote for," he said. "We must bring them back in by finding leadership inside the extremes who will build bridges to each other."

An interviewer asked how we can address some of the lack of involvement of young people in the civic process. Durenberger noted that several of his children are living in Minnesota and they're not finding people to vote for. He said we must deal with this at the local level. "We must grow it from the bottom up," he said. "That's the only way you'll bring my sons and their children back into the process."

We have over-nationalized many things. An interviewer commented that there is a growing federalization of funding for a large number of public services, along with a huge increase in the number of special interest groups in Washington pleading for federal funds. Durenberger responded that we have over-nationalized many things, but haven't done much to address the lot of poor people in Minnesota.

Washington, D.C., is not innovative; it must have examples for change. When he was in the Senate, Durenberger said, he and Sen. Joe Lieberman took the new idea of chartered schools, which had just been created in Minnesota, and pushed for federal incentives to encourage other states to embrace the concept. That was an example, he said, of taking a good policy idea from a state and promoting it nationally. Washington itself is not innovative, he said.

"The incentives to bring innovative state solutions to Washington have decreased," Durenberger said, "even as the public and private costs of implementing federal spending and regulatory policies have increased. This is due to the shift in partisan power at both the national and state levels toward single issues, special interests and sound-bite solutions."

Having a group of the community's nonprofit organization leaders sit together at a table once in awhile could have positive results, but we don't have a place to do that. Durenberger mentioned the Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota (U of M). "We have institutions in place, but they're not where people go," he said.

Durenberger said for 100 years, the U of M "was a fantastic place for growth in this community." But now it's involved in things like building a new \$168 million athletic village. "Of all the institutions in the state, the U has had the most traditional promise, the most to contribute," he said. "It has great potential to support and encourage action by the larger Minnesota community.

"But it's been diluted by leadership and by governance. It and some other traditional institutions in this state have been absorbed by today rather than tomorrow. It's full of people who are into tomorrow, because they're teaching students. But their value is being diluted by all these other forces, the main one being leadership. There is also a lack of understanding by the state legislature of the unique character of its responsibility to invest predictably in its one state university/land grant college."

The question for this community, Durenberger said, is not only where are the leaders, but also, what are the satisfaction rewards of being a leader.

Some civic organizations, like the Civic Caucus and the old Citizens League, have attempted to deal with problems upstream, while lots of nonprofits are downstream dealing with problems. Durenberger said lots of nonprofits are operating downstream, just trying to keep ahead of today's problems for the people who are suffering from them. "But, for example, why are we not dealing with the disadvantaged child born today and what responsibility the mother has and feels for that child?" he asked. "We know that the first three years of brain development are key to everything else."

In the past, the Minneapolis newspapers aimed to act as an educational institution, with reporters the equivalent of college professors. Civic Caucus interviewer Ted Kolderie recounted

that when he came to work at the Minneapolis newspapers, one of the things he learned about from other reporters was a 1951 talk by John Cowles, Sr., publisher of the *Minneapolis Star* and the *Minneapolis Tribune*. Cowles talked about the newspaper as an educational institution. In 1950, Kolderie said, most adults in Minnesota had not been to high school. The median education level for adults over age 25 was about 8.5 years. "I'm not talking about graduation from high school, but just *going* to high school," he said.

Cowles laid out the concept of reporters being the equivalent of college professors, Kolderie said. "They behaved like that," he said. "They wrote serious books. *Minneapolis Tribune* science and health reporter Victor Cohn made the community aware of the development of the Kaiser program in California. The *Tribune's* Sam Romer was among the leading labor reporters in the country. I always felt that contribution in a major way."

In the 1930s, Kolderie said, a famous story ran in *The Nation Magazine* about Minneapolis being the most anti-Semitic city in America. "The paper institutionally went after that problem," he said, "which later became the foundation for Hubert Humphrey's work on civil rights."

"That's totally gone," Kolderie continued. "In 1951, when Cowles made that talk, the newspaper had the resources and the motivation to do this kind of thing and had essentially no competition. This has all so dramatically changed. It's the loss of that independent function that seems to be one of the major contributing causes to the present situation. Is there anything like that coming out of traditional print, public radio, public television or out of new technologies, such as *MinnPost*?"

Durenberger said the *Star Tribune* now has close to a monopoly over the news in print or online. "They seem to have a veritable monopoly on journalistic resources." Kolderie commented that Glen Taylor coming into ownership of the newspaper is potentially very significant.

A well-functioning civic process would be looking out ahead at challenges facing the community as a kind of radar system. Kolderie said the civic process should be anticipating challenges facing the Twin Cities area rather than waiting till problems happen and then asking how we're going to fix them. "The rate of change and the potential for massive, disruptive change-including the appearance and spread of the digital world-is raising all kinds of questions," he said.

As one example of major change, he noted that the William Mitchell College of Law in St. Paul is now offering an online program that filled its quota the first year with students from around the country, even though law school admissions in general have gone down by around 40 percent. But, he alleged, St. Paul city officials are not thinking about the implications of online learning on the many higher education institutions located there.

"You wish somebody were thinking about these things," he said.

In the old days, the U of M was an important community resource. Another interviewer asked whether agenda setting, as Kolderie suggested, is more important than putting forward policy proposals. Durenberger said back in the days when people at the University were receiving Nobel prizes, there were people who were committed to seeing and predicting the future through solid

research. "We, including our state legislature and our political parties, need to fortify the importance of that, as well as identify the importance of a news source that does that well," he said. He said that should be one of the next steps in the Civic Caucus's review of the civic process.

Minnesota is a renewable resource. "Somewhere outside of the single issues lies the future of Minnesota," Durenberger said. "What can bring people together is the common goal of Minnesota being a renewable resource. That's what's unique about this state-whether it's land, water, human capital or whatever. That's one of the possible ways to start thinking about what kind of future Minnesota can have."

He concluded by saying of the Civic Caucus: "I'm grateful you're doing what you've been doing for 10 years."