



Policy pride and prejudice in Minnesota

New transportation solutions from a new (civic) policy model

by Sean Kershaw

Our current transportation dilemma, the result of the 35W bridge collapse in August, is testing Minnesota's policy pride. But with adversity comes opportunity—and right now Minnesotans have an excellent opportunity to prove we still have our innovative edge when it comes to public policy. But first we'll have to dispel some of our long-standing prejudices about the way we make policy, and create some new models that can help us make better policy now and in the future.

This is an opportunity for Citizens League: by creating a "civic policy agenda" on a critical issue like transportation we can define what we mean when we say "policy happens here" and implement better and more sustainable policy strategies on the issues we care about most.

Pride

Part of our fundamental story as Minnesotans is a strong desire to be the best. We don't brag about it, but we want to be the most innovative and the most entrepreneurial state in the country when it comes to public policy. That's why the bridge collapse and its aftermath of finger pointing and bad politics struck a blow to our collective policy pride.

But wanting to be the best doesn't mean we know *how* to be the best. As our Minnesota Anniversary Project (MAP 150) has demonstrated, our old ways of solving policy problems and engaging citizens in better solutions are no longer always sufficient. Our current transportation dilemma is just one example.

Prejudice

Part of the problem stems from some long-standing policy prejudices that are hard to shake. For example, we are taught to see transportation and other policy issues as problems to be fixed with big, one-time solutions by the Legislature and governor. Our role as citizens in this model is essentially to complain and then wait for someone else to solve the problem. And although the government deserves blame for questionable

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management practices now, and insufficient funding strategies for more than a decade, we can't get to where we need to be in the future using our current policy model. Citizens want and deserve a better solution—and a bigger role in the policy process.

Civic policy making

An essential part of any new model requires that we all share responsibility for solving our transportation problems, that includes *all* of our institutions, government, employers, families, and the roles that all citizens play in these institutions.

Being a policy-maker involves wrestling with the costs and benefits of our decisions—finding the best common good solution that improves Minnesota's economic success and quality of life.

One of the problems plaguing our state's transportation policy is that we have kept the costs and benefits of our transportation decisions—our impact on the common good—largely hidden. We often base our transportation decisions on whether it's "free" to drive or park, without factoring in all of the hidden costs: lost time and productivity due to traffic congestion, increased health costs from air pollution, and additional vehicle crashes. And we hide the sources of revenue that pay for our "free" transportation system as well. For example, most people don't realize that property taxes pay for nearly one-third of our state's road spending (about \$1 billion per year for local roads).

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In order to create a system that can serve a million more residents in the next 15 years we've got to become more efficient in our use of resources. And we need to give citizens the opportunity to become better policy-makers. If we attach more of the costs of transportation directly to our choices we're likely to come up with better, more efficient choices and use the resources we have more wisely.

A new civic agenda

Perhaps what's most important is that by creating a civic policy agenda we can flip our current policy model on its head and move away from big hierarchical one-time policy solutions that don't really work well any anymore, and toward a model based on the decisions we as citizens make everyday. Do I take I-94 from my house to Target, or do I take Hamline? Do I make three round-trips to Minneapolis in a work day, or change my schedule so I only make one or two. As an employer, do I pay for parking and bus passes—and do I allow employees to have flexible schedules?

If we want citizens and institutions to participate in making transportation policy we need to make the true costs of our driving decisions clearer. The decisions citizens make about where and how to drive or ride and where to live and work, and the decisions big companies make about flexible work schedules and telecommuting, matter as much as many of the decisions made by the Legislature.

This civic approach to policy-making is practical. We believe it is the only way to efficiently and sustainably address our transportation dilemmas. It is also good for our Minnesota democracy. Every time we exercise this civic decision-making authority we become better citizens. ●

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