Governor's plan fits several League positions

by Kris Lyndon Wilson

Several months ago, Gov. Jesse Ventura announced his desire for the state to take over more of the costs of K-12 funding, saying he wants the state to pay for 100 percent of the state-determined property tax levy that provides general funding for schools. At the time, it was unclear how Ventura intended to come up with the estimated $900 million needed to pay for his plan. However, in recent weeks, Gov. Ventura and his commissioner of revenue, Matt Smith, have started to reveal more.

At a recent Jefferson Center meeting, Commissioner Smith said the administration was considering three methods of raising the money: (1) broadening the sales tax base (and possibly lowering the rate), (2) instituting a state-wide business property tax, and (3) reducing state aid to cities and towns.

A review of the Citizens League's volumes of work on tax and budget reform uncovers longstanding League positions related to both the Governor's goal and the means he is considering for achieving that goal.

The League's portfolio of tax positions and recommendations, reflecting the input of hundreds of engaged citizens, has developed under a variety of fiscal circumstances. Even those developed during the significant budget shortfalls of the 1980s and early '90s still have a great deal to offer in today's more optimistic budget context.

In August 1995, the League outlined a division of state and local funding called the "ABC" plan in its report Choose Reform, Not Declining Quality. The plan called for the state to pay 100 percent of the cost of core services, plus compensatory aid for those communities with unique local circumstances. In turn, local governments would fund 100 percent of the cost of those services that are purely local, based on the demands of local residents and taxpayers.

Ventura's goal of 100 percent state funding of the state-determined school property tax levy seems to follow this principle.

Currently, about 25 percent of K-12 school funding, or about $1.8 million, comes from local property taxes. The Governor's plan would not remove this entire amount from the property tax. Approximately half of the $1.8 million levied on property owners is the result of state-mandated levies on local school districts. This is the portion Ventura wants to remove from the local property tax and fund with state dollars. The remaining half is the result of the decisions and priorities of local school districts, some through locally approved referenda. Under Ventura's plan, local school districts would continue to collect local property taxes to pay for these locally determined purposes.

Expanding the sales tax

One way the Ventura administration is considering raising the money to pay more costs of K-12 education is by expanding the sales tax. Currently, Minnesota's sales tax has a relatively high rate, compared to other states, but yields only a modest amount of revenue, due to the large number of exemptions. In addition to exemptions for food and clothing, Minnesota's sales tax also exempts a majority of services, including accounting, advertising and legal services, and sales by nonprofit entities. The Department of Revenue is seriously considering expanding the sales tax to more services and to sales made by nonprofits. Although the League has no position on expanding the sales tax to services provided by for-profit companies, in a 1988 report the League supported expansion of the sales tax to sales by nonprofits. (See accom-
Rebooting Minnesota policies for the knowledge economy

by Lyle Wray

It is widely agreed that we are entering a time in which developing and applying new knowledge quickly and well will be a major contributor to economic vitality and influence the world position of the United States. This is particularly true for countries with high concentrations of knowledge workers, such as Minnesota. The state has long been known for its high concentration of knowledge workers, and the importance of this sector to the state's economy cannot be understated.

In many ways, Minnesota is sitting pret-

us the knowledge economy broader

and deeper in the world. We have a
diverse economic base, with a wide range of products and services. The state has strong infrastructure, including education and research institutions, as well as a strong base of companies that generate new knowledge and technology. This mix of factors makes Minnesota well-positioned to compete in the global economy.

Telecommunications can afford many opportunities in Greater Minnesota and beyond, and the communication sector is a key driver in this way, under administration initiatives. We need to rethink and retell economic development and rural development.

Minnesota is a major push in developed countries to move many government services to the Web to save money and provide better service to citizens. This “e-Government” was the subject of a conference three weeks ago in Hong Kong, which showcased very strong communications and Singapore to dramatically improve govern-

ment services through advanced informa-
tion and technology use. The Web is the key to unlocking a firewall of opposition. The Minnesota Council of Nonprofits has already girded for battle, send-
ing alerts to its members to beat back “this attack on nonprofits.”

To compensate for any negative financial impact of these recom-

mendations, the committee also recommended that the Legislature provide some limited tax relief to those who are in need. And finally, the committee recommended that the Legislature consider limiting the amount of tax-exempt property in the state, so that local governments can more easily fund school operations.

There are some very promising developments on the horizon for Minnesota. The state has a strong foundation in education and research, and there is significant investment in technology and innovation. With the right policies in place, Minnesota has the potential to be a leader in the global economy.
Citizens League budget principles relevant for shortfalls and surpluses

Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, Minnesotans faced persistent shortfalls in the state budget, resulting in repeated and often messy struggles to find enough spending cuts and tax hikes to keep the numbers within a balanced budget. In nature, most of the steps taken to balance the state’s budget during this time did little more than give opposing sides a chance to nurse their wounds until the next crisis erupted. Even when the economy began to turn up at the start of the 1990s, the state continued to see revenues fall well below the levels needed to meet state spending needs.

In 1992, the Citizens League decided the time had come to develop a new way of thinking about state budgeting that went beyond short-term solutions. The Board of Directors charged a committee with the task of examining the state’s budget and identifying long-term, structural reforms to stabilize the state’s budget process and focus on the traditional choices of “cost, shift or tax.” The committee was chaired by Ed Dirkswager and Jean King and met from July 1992 through April 1993.

In the report based on the committee’s work, Minnesota’s Budget Problem: A Crisis of Quality, Cost, and Fairness, the League concluded the fundamental flaw in the existing state budget process was the lack of any relationship between spending and results. The League called for a new design for state budgets based on five major principles:

- Use competition to align institutional self-interest with the public’s interest in the quality and cost of services.
- Eliminate or reduce all non-conformity costs, including the social cost of individual decisions.
- Meet more public responsibilities through nongovernmental arrangements in which people already have responsibilities of mutual obligation.
- Consider long-term economic growth to be one of the objectives of state spending.
- Realigning state budget policy along these principles, the League argued, could save money in the long run. More important, it would help ensure the government met its primary goal of providing for the means of living for the money spent.

Two years later, facing another record gap in the state budget, the Citizens League convened a second committee of volunteers to reassess the earlier recommendations, identify reform proposals based on those recommendations and suggest further steps for their implementation. Chaired by Becky Mallanson and Chuck Peterson, this committee focused its attention on applying the League’s 1993 design principles to the state’s main program responsibilities: K-12 education, postsecondary education, state governments and long-term care for the elderly.

Aiming to create a more efficient system of public services in each of these areas, the League in the report Choose Reform, implement a new design for state governmental and postsecondary education, for the elderly.

Realizing the most joy in this project was the opportunity to create new ideas, to find different approaches to problems to try to solve them. That’s why the Citizens League has been such an ally, because that’s what they do, too.

I realized very early on that I was a policy-cum-inspired person and a strategy person. How do I take a problem, identify the steps to solve that problem and think out of the box? My stuff was good: “She got one of those ideas again.” A lot of them never went anywhere but a few of them did.

I love every minute of it, so I’m still going to be involved. Education reforms need to happen, as well as family violence and crime prevention, are my key passions right now.

What do you have in mind for writing and policy work?

ERJ: I’d like to do some editorial writing, that type of thing. I just like to find a place to do that and still support myself by practicing law and in a new business I’m starting. I have lots of things I’m interested in doing.

MJ: What’s your new business?

ERJ: The new business is called Video on the Web.

MJ: We’re providing new, low-cost video to Web services—much less expensive and easier than any video streaming service that’s on the market today. A political commercial would be $65 to put up to five minutes of video streaming on the Web, and it would come up right away. You don’t have to wait for it to do download.

I think there’s a great opportunity here for people to use this service to get their ideas out.

MJ: What lessons have you learned?

ERJ: In November I was invited as one of the innovations winners to speak at the Kennedy School Public Service Celebration. I told them I’d learned three lessons about the gift of public service: First, there is more than one right answer. It’s not about my right answer and your wrong answer. It’s about bringing people together to find the next right answer.

Second, let citizens take the lead. There are many ways to use this service to get their ideas out.

Remove the barriers. Encourage risks. Reward new ideas. Yes, learn from the inevitable mistakes.

Let’s celebrate the small victories. Change in the public forum can be frustratingly slow. But that’s how mountains are built.

First, talk about with them how about the vast majority of public servants are hardworking people of integrity. This audience was a very distinguished group of public servants and we’re all struggling with how to make government relevant to the public. How do we connect better with the public?

I said to them, please consider Joe Ventresca. One of the concerns I have is when people run into the institution to which they want to be elected. That’s, in some ways, what has been the key to success. I am writing a book to record the first two years of Minnesota’s tripartite government. I call it, “Two Parties and a Jesse.”

How do we involve younger people in public service, when they just hear these negative things about government? On the other hand, young people are very service-oriented. They’ll serve soup at a soup kitchen, but it doesn’t connect to us to get involved directly to determine what government policies are resulting in such need for soup kitchens.

MJ: As a state senator for 18 years, is harder today to do the kinds of things you’ve been talking about?

ERJ: The change is there more to be done, but there’s a lot less time to sit back and be thankful.

MJ: Why is there less time?

ERJ: Because there are more issues, more problems. I think that the various issue groups and organizations are more responsive to many different areas, rather than just a few. In the past, we’re more responsive as a body now.

We’re more reactive than proactive.

It’s more strategy. How do we strategize to get through best for Congress/for committees? You don’t realize it at the time, you really think you’re thinking it through, but it’s just that things does happen very quick.

Another concern I have is the media don’t give you a lot of breathing room to think about it, even when there’s not a lot to report on.

Is it more political?

ERJ: Yes, it’s more political. And this year—to work in the Senate—very political, because you have a two-year term for everyone and you have redistricting. You’ve got a three-party government. It’s going to be difficult to achieve a lot of new and different change under those circumstances, unless there’s something that brings it up from the outside that they have to react to.

We’ve been through two years of the triparty approach. Have you come to the conclusion that what difference has been made in terms of achieving positive things within the legislature?

ERJ: That triparty government can work. I think we’ve got to make it happen. One it can’t be about your right answer and your wrong answer. It has to be about everyone looking for the next right answer. Particularly the Governor has used that approach. It’s us against them. I think that’s the thing. What the Governor needs to do is to give real choices, not just bomb bridges. To the extent he can do that, we could do a lot of things.

MJ: As you look back over 18 years, is there anything different in the Governor’s Big Plan. But he’s got to work.
Erichott Junge, continued from page 5

Reichgott Junge, continued on page 6

with people, because change is not easy. I think the second thing we need to do is to reconcile with the people. The Government and the people effectively don't think the Legislature's doing a good job of that. We need to reconcile with them and put a human face on the issues we deal with at the Capitol.

MJ: How do you better connect with people?

RJ: I don't know. The Governor connects through celebrity, but that's a problem. We have to work how we connect when you're not a celebrity.

MJ: We really need to think about our relationship with the people, because the trust in government is still low. That's not changed over the last decade. What do we do? It's not enough to vote for generous billions of dollars on negative campaign advertising every two years. That only adds to the cynicism.

I'm working with the Minnesota Women's Political Caucus, which is a multi-partisan organization, to promote issues affecting women. The Caucus has been a great ally in promoting women leaders in our state. That helps to put a human face on the Capitol—just that alone.

Dealing with the things we're doing to connect with young people, particularly young women, is to have a new e-mail network. We're saying, Let us send you issue updates with people, because change is not easy.

MJ: put a human face on the issues we deal with...

RJ: That is...I think the launching of our e-mail network, which has about 20,000 people on it, had a great effect.

MJ: put a human face on the issues we deal with, because change is not easy.

RJ: We're saying, Let us send you issue updates with people, because change is not easy.

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RJ: We're saying, Let us send you issue updates with people, because change is not easy.
What constitutes a public good? Art Rolnick, Senior Vice President and Director of Research at the Ninth Federal Reserve District, defined it at George Latimer's Urban Issues class at Macalester College: Once a public good is produced, no one can be excluded from its consumption and one person's consumption doesn't diminish another's. Examples included national defense, police protection, education and public parks.

Rolnick said cities and regions that prosper do a better job of delivering public goods and should compete on the value and price of public goods. He was very critical of smokestack, or even microchip, chasing by governments. The market will determine the right mix of low-tech and high-tech.

Government's job is not to recruit industries, but to worry about the quality of the workforce and the quality and price of other public goods. —Phil Jenni.

Our own Ted Kolderie, former Citizens League executive director and current contributing editor to the Minnesota Journal—among a host of things he does—was honored recently by the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute Dean John Brandl. Writing in a special Summer 2000 issue of the academic journal Daedalus devoted to Minnesota, Brandl named Kolderie "the most influential Minnesotan of recent decades." Calling Kolderie "an independent policy entrepreneur," Brandl said, "It is hard to find a major policy reform in the last third of a century in which Kolderie did not have a hand. He was one of the inventors of the Minnesota Miracle, and for two decades he has been working on the fiscal and education policies that are replacing it."

In the Nov. 26 St. Paul Pioneer Press, editorial page editor Ronald D. Clark picked up on Brandl's praise. "Were it not for Kolderie and others like him, who are challenged every day to find ways to improve the quality and value of public services, Minnesota would not enjoy the reputation it does nationally for public policy innovation."

Beyond the accolades for Kolderie, Brandl's chapter, "Policy and Politics in Minnesota," is well worth reading. He paints an engaging history of the state's parties, leaders, innovators and policies of the 20th century, as he develops four themes: (1) the two major political parties are no longer innovators or com-

much the same way, the Intercampus Busway lets the University of Minnesota operate its Saint Paul and Minneapolis campuses to a significant degree as one.

High-capacity transit—rubber-tire or steel-wheel—is emerging in the region partly as an internal circulator (new "horizontal elevators" are under construction at Wold-Chamberlain to link the terminal with parking ramps, etc.), but largely as a connector. The light-rail line between the airport/Mall of America and downtown Minneapolis will serve as a connector for those two retail-convention-entertainment-hotel complexes. A transit "line" between eastern Bloomington and central Saint Paul would be a connector, too—potentially for the two airports. —Ted Kolderie.

Three states—Maine, Vermont and Arizona—just completed the first campaign cycle in which candidates had the option of full public financing. After collecting a qualifying number of small campaign contributions to demonstrate reasonable voter support, candidates can elect to receive enough public money to conduct a modest campaign. In return, they pledge to forego additional fund-raising for the duration of the campaign.

The results? According to the New York Times, 116 of the 352 candidates who ran for the Maine Legislature chose to accept full public financing and 54 percent of them won. Additionally, more women ran for office and the number of contested primaries increased 40 percent over previous elections.—Kris Lyndon Wilson.

"Take Note" contributors include Minnesota Journal and Citizens League staff members.
Welcome
New and returning members
Judy Barilla
Emily Kissane
John Kostouros
Charles LaVine
Robert Minton
Mary Vik
Susan Von Mosch
Ryan Winkler
Donald P. Yaeger

Thanks to recruiter:
John Hagman

This is an excellent time to donate
gifts of appreciated assets, like
stocks. Or to consider a gift mem-
bership to the League. Or to think
about making a permanent gift to
the League endowment fund. You
can also transfer funds electroni-
cally at Dain Rauscher, #I101-
5317-1984, DTC#235. For
more information on gift options
please call the League office.

League’s budget balanced, but remains flat

For the fourth year in a row the
Citizens League has stayed within its means. Un-
fortunately, those means are not growing very much. In
fact, the League budget has remained about the same for
more than a decade.

The League ended fiscal year
2000 with an operating sur-
plus of $8,993. Operating
revenue for the year was
$487,003, which was $31,265
less than FY1999, but about
$1,000 over budget. Operat-
ing expenses for the year
were $478,011, a decrease of
$23,700 (5%) over last year.

The League’s historical
sources of core support—
individual dues and contribu-
tions and corporate grants—
decreased slightly this year.
General operating support
from corporations was about
the same as FY1999. On the
other hand revenue from spe-
cial projects and contract
studies easily exceeded the
budget.

Sponsorship revenue for
League events, endowment
income, honoraria and earned
income all contributed to the
surplus. It’s also worth noting
that the League’s endowment
fund has more than doubled
in the last two years and now
stands at about $266,000.

Overall, total net assets de-
creased, as expected, by
$24,447. The Operating Fund
surplus increased unrestricted
net assets, but restricted as-
sets declined by $33,439.
The decrease was a result of
spending down the funds
from the Sloan Foundation
which were dedicated to the
League’s performance meas-
urement project (see the
League’s web site for more
information on this project).
While the grant was received
in FY1999, resulting in a
growth of restricted assets,
the expenses associated with
the grant were recorded in
FY2000.

The League’s Board of Di-
rectors recently adopted a
$487,500 budget for
FY2001. As in past years,
this is a very conservative
budget, based on the as-
sumption that current reve-
nue and spending patterns
will continue. League Presi-
dent Matthew Ramadan says
that while the League Board
is not willing to commit to
spending beyond last year’s
revenues, that does not
mean that the League should
be content with the current
revenue levels. Ramadan
believes the League should
exceed those levels.

Use your head: Make a year-end gift to the Citizens League

This is the time of the year that
many nonprofits solicit contri-
butions, and the Citizens
League is no different. Copies
of the League’s annual report,
along with contribution cards,
are currently on their way to
all League members.

This is also the time of year
that the attorney general and
other charitable watchdog or-
ganizations warn people to use
their heads not just their hearts
when making donations.

The Minnesota Charities Re-
view Council suggests that
charities spend no more than
30 percent of their budgets on
administration and fundraising,
leaving at least 70 percent for
programs.

The Citizens League easily sur-
passes this threshold, spending
only 8.8 percent on administra-
tion and fundraising. This
means 91.2 cents of every dol-
lar you donate to the League
go directly to programs.

At the League, we tradition-
ally haven’t spent a lot of
money just to raise money.
That’s because League mem-
ers have consistently dem-
onstrated their support for
the League’s mission and pro-
grams by making an extra
contribution at this time of
year. With your ongoing
support, we will continue to
see that your contributions
go directly to the programs
that make this a better, more
prosperous place to live.
Three committees at full throttle

The Citizens League currently has three citizen-based study committees underway.

After nine meetings, numerous resource speakers and good discussion, the committee examining mental health and employment issues, co-chaired by Mike Christenson and Jan Smaby, is expected to conclude its work with approval of a final report on December 20.

Meanwhile, the children’s mental health committee, co-chaired by Marcia Avner and Keith Halleland, has received an extension to continue its work into January. The committee will conclude the information gathering and resource testimony phase at its December 18 meeting, take a short break over the holidays and then return in January to prepare its report.

The reports of both committees will go to the Department of Human Services (DHS) and the Department of Health (MDH), for inclusion in their “Toward Better Mental Health” strategic planning initiative.

A special breakfast meeting on January 17, featuring Dr. Mary Jane England, president of the Washington Business Group on Health, will conclude the League’s work for DHS and MDH (see below).

Finally, the study committee on school completion rates, chaired by George Latimer and Gary Cunningham, continues to hear resource testimony. Recent meetings have addressed alternative schools, technical and career education, and other issues related to student engagement and motivation. The committee is scheduled to continue hearing resource testimony through December and January.

Individuals interested in following the progress of all three studies can find minutes of committee meetings and other informational links on the web at www.citizensleague.net/studies.

High speed internet arrives at the League

As mentioned in last month’s issue, a $10,000 grant from the Best Buy Foundation and a new laptop donated by IBM have resulted in a major increase in the League’s productivity. This month, we’re happy to report that the League now has a dedicated high speed (128k) internet line. No more busy fax line, painfully slow dial up or inability to access data or graphic rich websites.

As a result of the new technology, we are now able to update our web page constantly and access more policy research and reports. League study committee members should notice the improvement immediately. For instance, committee minutes are available right away and we even have links to maps of meeting locations. Plus we’ve dramatically decreased our postage costs.

League President Matthew Ramadan has asked League Board members to make a special contribution to a “technology fund” for further enhancements, ongoing maintenance and training. So far, nearly $2,000 has been added to the nice start provided by Best Buy.

We hope you’ll do your part by contributing to the League year-end fund appeal.

Notes from the League archives

This month’s issue of the Minnesota Journal, contains an article about the League’s 1988 report, “Cut Tax Exemptions, Boost Equity and Accountability” which dealt with tax exemptions for governments and non-profits. At the time the League Board authorized the study, it seemed to be the least controversial of the topics approved. The program slate adopted that fall included: 1) eligibility for tax exempt status; 2) early childhood development for at risk children; 3) school districts and changing demographics; and a controversial fourth study.

The discussions of both the Program Committee and the Board were dominated by a possible fourth study on the legal issues surrounding AIDSD and the conflict between individual rights and public health interests. Some Board members objected to the topic because it seemed to wander away from the League’s core emphasis areas. But the Board decided that the study would make the League more relevant by addressing what seemed to be a pressing issue of the day. In addition, the public was becoming alarmed by the problem, and it was thought that the League could add an important mainstream voice to the debate.

Today the tax exempt issue is back as part of the “Big Plan,” the charter school legislation that came out of the school district study has spread throughout the country, and early childhood education has emerged as a key issue in later school performance. But interestingly, the topic that fueled the most discussion in 1987 is the one that remains a major health issue in many parts of the world, but has virtually dropped off the policy radar screen in Minnesota.

Mark your calendars for a special event

Mary Jane England, M.D.
President, Washington Business Group on Health

Wednesday, January 17, 2001
7:30—9:30 a.m.
University Club of St. Paul
420 Summit Avenue, St. Paul

Details will be mailed right after the first of the year.

League of Women Voters to sponsor annual Citizens In Action Conference

Citizens League members are invited to attend the 2001 Citizens In Action Conference, sponsored by the League of Women Voters of Minnesota Education Fund, on Saturday, February 3 from 9:00 am to 1:00 pm. The conference is designed to help average citizens learn strategies and techniques for influencing the legislative process. Participants can attend either a two-hour beginner’s workshop or any two individual sessions on grassroots organizing, working with legislators and staff, and the rules and regulations of lobbying. For more information, contact the League of Women Voters at 651-224-5445.