Technology as a tool for better public service

by David Fisher

Colleges, law schools and state governments have at least one thing in common. As much as they claim not to pay attention to annual rankings or report cards of their performance, they actually do.

Minnesota state government received a report card recently. The Government Performance Project, a biannual collaboration between Governing magazine and the Maxwell School of Syracuse University, graded the fifty states on financial management, capital management, human resources, managing for results, and information technology.

Minnesota received a solid “B” in information technology, as well as a solid “B” overall. Now, our commitment is to do better next time by surpassing the leaders in the use of technology in government — Kansas, Michigan, Missouri, Utah, Virginia and Washington.

There is an interesting pattern to the rankings. Almost without exception, states that show strength in information technology score at or near the top in overall performance. This is an indication that technology makes positive things happen in all areas of government.

In Minnesota, as elsewhere, electronic government has existed largely in the fulfillment of public expectation. But it must be more than that. Public policy requires that we bring information technology to a far higher level of public relevance — meaningful in the daily lives of citizens, in business to government relationships, and in meeting the functional responsibilities of government. It really is about the accountability of government to its citizens.

Is this the coming of age for e-government? Can technology now play a more significant role in building a digital democracy? As the state’s chief information officer and advisor to the governor on technology issues, I can offer a qualified “yes.” E-government is of age, but progress in real terms is not nearly as fast as we would like.

In Minnesota, we have an abundance of technological strengths. In fact, we have information technology systems to deliver at least some essential services inside government. Entity-wide systems, say Governing’s editors, are in “good shape.”

But Governing also found that “while the state [of Minnesota] provides much information online, it’s not a national leader in electronic transactions.” The magazine also quotes one of the state’s technology managers saying, “Mostly, we don’t have the support from the legislature we need. The legislature has not made that move to understand that technology is expensive and a new way of doing business.”

Not all legislators in Minnesota fail to understand the potential of technology. Some have shown increasing sophistication and support. Still, the fact remains that too few are knowledgeable about what these tools can do, and fewer still understand the need for technology to deliver on important policy initiatives. The discomfort of lawmakers can translate into missed opportunities.

By now probably everyone in Minnesota has heard questions raised about the fitness of our state to compete in the 21st century. However, there has been little discourse on the true role of technology as a tool to achieve better governance, an objective that is tied to how each of us as citizens learns, works, and plays.

As a result of the dense, insider language used to describe technology, and because there is always greater interest in appropriating dollars for “tangible” programs, technology in Minnesota has become the stepchild of other, policy-based, initiatives. One of my key objec-
Losing energy on conservation

by Lyle Wray

Several years back, during one of our seemingly six-month winters, my furnace went out. I called my regular furnace repair company and was told that I could get a replacement right away. When I asked about an energy-efficient furnace, I was told that I could get one but I would have to wait until summer. Well, as we all know, waiting for a furnace in January is not a particularly appealing option when you live in Minnesota.

The recent headlines about rolling blackouts in California have cast a renewed light on energy issues in this country. And while California often can seem worlds away, energy issues are no small matter for Minnesotans, either. (See article on page 2.) For starters, more than 10% of our energy supply is scheduled to go offline permanently in 2007, with the phase-out planned to get underway in 2005. Yet economist Alfred Kahn, architect of the Carter administration's deregulation of the airlines and other industries, recently suggested that electric energy might be one legitimate exception to the deregulation trend. As Kahn said, "We've got a wasteful and crudely regulated system -- from electric to natural gas -- routinely raises significant financial, environmental and political issues. But it is unlikely that boosting supply alone will be enough. The emerging agenda in California, and elsewhere, extends beyond building additional capacity from cleaner sources, to include renewed conservation efforts. In fact, California is already ahead of most states in the area of conservation, and Minnesota needs to step up efforts on conservation, and we need to do it now."

Many of us remember the energy conservation campaigns of the 1970s and 80s. Unfortunately, as my efforts to obtain an energy-efficient furnace demonstrate, many of the praktische moves of the past appear to have been cast and dropped to a beleaguered people in need of new life. New technologies have a rapidly moving field. For Minnesota to be in a position to take full advantage of these advances, we must eliminate regulatory barriers and provide appropriate incentives for their adoption.

Business as usual or a 21 century energy future?

We are at a crossroads in determining the direction of our energy future. We must move toward a new system of generation technologies, more reliable, more affordable and more environmentally responsible. We can or can not move toward a reliance on the sorting of large generating facilities, using fossil fuels that continue to create environmental and public health damage and economic uncertainties. According to Michael Noble of Minnesotans for an Energy-Efficient Economy, "There is only one crisis if we do nothing." The choice is ours.

Lyle Wray is executive director of the Citizens League, a nonprofit, nonpartisan, Twin Cities public affairs organization, 708 S. Third St., Suite 500, Minneapolis, MN 55401. Phone: (612) 336-1791. Fax: (612) 337-1919. E-mail: info@citizensleague.org. Web site: www.citizensleague.net. Matthew L. Hammond, president. Articles and commentary are drawn from a broad range of perspectives and do not necessarily reflect League positions on policy questions.

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Lyle Wray is executive director of the Citizens League.

"Average Americans are driving escalating energy consumption with little apparent appetite for new sources, additional transmission capacity or conservation."

Conservation, renewable energy sources key to Minnesota's energy supply

by Dee Long

Rolling blackouts, smart two alerts, price spikes and triple digit percentage increases in retail costs of electricity. Are these West Coast phenomena, like orange groves and six-month winters, evidence of comparatively low electricity rates, our power outages are generally the result of inclement weather, and we have yet to deregulate our electric industry. So can we afford to be complacent about our power needs? Analysts are warning that the state may need an additional 3,000 megawatts of electric supply, the equivalent of three new coal-fired or nuclear plants, before the end of the decade. The figure is one-fifth of Minnesota's current usage.

One megawatt provides enough power to serve about 1,000 homes. If we are to avoid a capacity shortfall, it is critical to adopt an aggressive plan of action now. We can ensure a reliable, affordable and environmentally sustainable future for Minnesota if we take immediate action to meet our future power needs.

Efficiency investments are the cheapest and quickest new source of energy. Efficiency investments are the cheapest and quickest new source of energy. If we adopt an aggressive plan of action now.

In Minnesota alone, energy efficiency programs have saved over 2000 megawatts of electric supply, the equivalent of three new coal-fired or nuclear plants, before the end of the decade. The figure is one-fifth of Minnesota's current usage.

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There is another force hindering this effort, and that is the bureaucratic and hierarchical structure of government that at its core promotes inefficiency and the demands of its constituents call for greater reliance on these tools to get things done - anytime, anywhere. There is another force hindering this effort, and that is the bureaucratic and hierarchical structure of government that at its core promotes inefficiency and the demands of its constituents call for greater reliance on these tools to get things done - anytime, anywhere.

"I know you're on line! ... And I'm not taking a number for heaven's sake, Agnes... I'm here to take you to lunch!"

The Minnesota Office of Technology (OT), a unit of the Department of Administration, now has a one-stop licensing initiative to provide each agency with a core enterprise-wide communications infrastructure. A winning example of its application is the recently introduced passenger vehicle license tab renewal process. Using a credit or debit card, citizens can now renew their vehicle license from the comfort of their home, business or school, anytime of the day or night; any day of the week. Partnersing with the departments of Finance and Natural Resources; Revenue; Trade and Economic Development, and Transportation.

Funding would be derived from various revenue sources, including the creation of multiple funding streams from new dollars, initiatives such as sales revenue from state information technology resources, as well as from general funds appropriated by the Legislature. The TEF would be administered with the assistance of a board comprised of members from both the public sector, including Gov. Ventura and the private sector. Once implemented, TEF would help accelerate our development of electronic government services, thereby promoting citizen access and satisfaction.

Already 72 percent of Minnesotans say they would be likely or very likely to use government services online. Currently 15 percent of Minnesotans say they take advantage of on-line government services. These numbers will continue to rise. A fully realized e-government is not a case of "if," but of "when."

The State of Minnesota is prepared to offer citizens what they want and deserve. The expertise and the technology are there, and we are gaining on our objective. That's the good news on Minnesota's government front. Now we must intensify the effort.

David Fishe is Commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Administration.

The Star Tribune (March 2) sees reason for caution in the latest economic forecast. "Lawmakers should not put off problems this session under the assumption that they can be addressed with next year's surpluses. That neither tax cuts and spending increases can proceed under this forecast. But the governor and legislators will be wise to opt for one-time rather than permanent actions where that is possible and reasonable."

The Benndji Pioneer (March 2) also urges caution in future budget commitments. "Lawmakers should exhibit caution in tax cuts and spending. There is room to do both, but there is a great opportunity to make investments in infrastructure that may not be possible in future budgets. Especially important are one-time funding opportunities in education and transportation. "Minnesotans have welcomed checks for returned tax dollars, but many fear if it isn't the time to make key investments before the pot runs dry."

However, the St. Cloud Times (Feb. 28) argues, "A shrinking surplus is no excuse to give up on a potentially historic legislative session. "Lawmakers and Ventura should stand strong in the face of this economic news and remain committed to addressing the many fiscal challenges unveiled since early January."

The Rochester Post Bulletin (March 5) says "compelling reasons for fully funding the CriMNet system. The criminal justice system costs $2 billion a year in Minnesota and $50 million per year is spent on dealing with revenue losses. CriMNet is needed for a more efficient, as well as a faire, system. "It is absolutely essential to make criminal records available where they can be used. If we want to fight crime, we cannot do so with faulty, fragmented records. Full funding is a small price to pay for public safety and the fair administration of justice."

The St. Cloud Times (March 5) also supports a $41.5 million appropriation for Phase II of CriMNet, but is urging legislators to "proceed cautiously." Acknowledging that CriMNet has potential, the Times believes lawmakers will eventually "have to decide if it's worth the $41.5 million price tag. For now, though, there isn't enough evidence to make that long-term decision. The short-term answer, although pricey, is to spend another $41.5 million and closely evaluate results before appropriating money for CriMNet's remaining phases."

The Duluth News Tribune (Feb. 24) has no such reservations. "As in other parts of his budget, Gov. Jesse Ventura has under-funded this effort. It will be up to the Minnesota Legislature to give it the priority it deserves. "Appropriate the $41.5 million for Phase Two of the CriMNet project and get on with it."

"Criminals will continue to be one step ahead of law enforcement until authorities achieve easy access to a shared data base. The proposed CriMNet is an important first step," according to the Red Wing Republican Eagle (Feb. 26). "Lawmakers will be fielding many requests this session for individuals and groups who believe their case is worthy of getting a slice of the state's projected surplus. This one, however, should be near the top of the list. "Public safety is one of the basic responsibilities of government."

The Duluth News Tribune (Feb. 20) sees an interesting red flag in the 2000 Census results and subsequent redistricting. "While Minnesota will hold onto its eight congressional seats, every other state in the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River basin will lose seats in Congress beginning in 2002. "Noting Americans' penchant for bigger and better, perhaps one reason that the water-importing states of the Southwest will gain seven Congressional seats, the paper predicted, "this loss of nine congressional seats could have a huge impact on those who depend on the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River system for our drinking water, industrial uses and shipping."

The Red Wing Republican Eagle (Feb. 22) is urging Minnesota to "get nuclear energy on the table. "Minnesota faces a shortage of electricity even with continued operation of Prairie Island. Close that plant, and the state will face a crisis," the paper predicts. "Instead of ignoring nuclear power, everyone should be finding new sources of nuclear generation. Nuclear power ... is reliable, affordable and clean."

The Pioneer Press (Feb. 16) supports the recent report issued by Achieve, a national education group hired last year at the request of the Legislature to give an independent analysis of the Profile of Learning Program. "Perhaps the most powerful recommendation from the academic panel is to establish a statewide deadline for adoption of all 24 standards. Permitting districts "to set their own number of standards, led to inequities in graduation requirements."

The Mankato Free Press (Feb. 12) says "lawmakers and schools need to continue looking for better ways to grade schools ... individually and statewide ... on how well they are doing at educating children." That's why the Free Press urges legislators to seriously consider a bill authored by Tim Pawlenty, R-Eagan, under which "the state would hire Standard and Poors to track where exactly public education dollars go and the corresponding return in student achievement."
Loose connections to services and commerce exist today and are growing in the city. Government is in the customer service business and it is a technology-driven service business. Government is in the business of giving the public access to information, services, and the latest technology to enhance the access to and delivery of government services to benefit the population. This is a good thing. I suggest that, and I am very sensitive to the whole city council minutes, and the library newsletter."

"Citizens don't care that it's county courts—not the city—that handle parking tickets."

I think there are ways you can do things around elections and other special events, but we really need to use the Internet in everyday public policy development, amongst those that show up. There's nothing wrong with that. We want it to be open, we want to deal with the digital divide, but we want to build the infrastructure now. If we wait until everyone gets online by then the Internet will just be the path to a better future. And one of the wonderful opportunities we have today, is to give people a sense that their voice is heard, that they really should be. One of the wonderful opportunities we have today, is to make decisions. And in order to make decisions, citizens really should be informed. That may be a little idealistic, but they really should be. One of the wonderful opportunities we have today, is to give people additional information, to give them the opportunity to connect with each other. We can use our website as a way to facilitate that, maybe by setting up community chat groups, or putting together groups, or giving citizens the opportunity to talk to the mayor.

So you'll see us doing more ultimately to change the relationship between government and citizens.

"Access continued from page 6"

"Connecting citizens to solve problems"

The following is an excerpt of remarks by online strategy consultant Steven Clift at the March 1 Citizens League Mind-Opener. The full transcript of Mr. Clift's remarks is available online at www.citizensleague.net.

"Citizens don't care that it's county courts—not the city—that handle parking tickets."

"Access continued from page 7"
The US could eliminate 40 percent of projected energy demand over the next decade by installing more energy efficient lighting in commercial buildings, adopting more efficient home air conditioners, using improved lighting designs in new and renovated buildings, tuning up and repairing existing home air conditioners, upgrading commercial heating equipment and air conditioners and optimizing existing commercial building management (Business Week, March 5, 2001, p. 46). – Lyle Wray

Government-to-business services on the web grew rapidly in the last year, according to a survey of government web sites by Forrester Research. But the survey also showed there is a long way to go. Only 11 percent of the surveyed sites allowed businesses to pay fines or sales taxes online, but that’s up from 9 and 2 percent, respectively, last year. At the other end of the spectrum, the percentage of sites offering license applications increased from 36 percent to 56 percent and the percent offering building-permit applications increased from 13 percent to 38 percent. – Phil Jeni

The Citizens League is often (o.k., constantly) talking about property taxes. And while much of the nonprofit community is up in arms about Governor Ventura’s proposal to allow cities to collect a payment-in-lieu of property taxes, we at the Citizens League recognize that we already pay property taxes – via our office rent.

For those of you who have never been to the League’s office, we are located in a small suite on the 5th floor of the Thresher Square building. This seven-story building, located at the corner of Chicago Ave. and 3rd St. near the Metrodome, has an estimated market value of $2.3 million. Taxes payable for the year 2000 totaled $149,871. How much of that went to pay for the city services, such as police and fire protection and snow plowing, which make this a safe and accessible place to work? Not one dollar. How much went to pay for our share of the services provided by Hennepin County? Not one dollar. Of this building’s $144,000 property tax bill, roughly $106,000 went to the tax increment financing district, $33,000 went to the fiscal disparities pool and a mere $4,000 went to the voter approved levy for the Minneapolis Public Schools. – Kris Lydon Wilson

In a recent American Enterprise Institute forum on “The Permanent Campaign,” Norman Ornstein reported on his own back-of-the-envelope research on the influence of opinion polling in presidential campaigns. He did a Nexus search of all newspapers and magazines, using the joint search terms “polls” and “American elections,” and taking the first three days in August in the election years 1980, 1984, 1988, 1992, 1996 and 2000. In 1980 there were 28 joint mentions of those terms. By 1992 there were about 100 mentions.

The 2000 search caused Ornstein’s computer to freeze because it couldn’t count high enough. He had to search each day separately and found more than 1,600 joint mentions of “polls” and “American elections” for the three-day period. “It had become clear that polls are the driving focus of analysis of discourse in the print press,” Ornstein said. – Janet Dudrow

Speaking of political campaigns, during the 2000 election season, broadcast TV aired a record number of ads, but provided viewers with an average of just 45 seconds a night of candidates discussing issues. According to a survey of the Annenberg School of Communications at USC, about a third of the 74 TV stations in the country’s top markets made voluntary commitments to air five minutes of candidate-centered discussions each night. Just one station met that standard. WCCO was one of 23 stations that made the commitment, but its average of 1:36 minutes per night ranked 18th out of the 23 and 20th out of the entire group of 74. – P.J.

East coast cities are often hailed for their public transportation systems. But while these systems might be admirable to middle class travelers they don’t seem to do much for poor people in inner-city neighborhoods. In Boston only 32 percent of employers with a high number of entry-level jobs are located within a quarter of a mile of public transit. And it takes a Boston welfare recipient at least an hour to reach only 14 percent of the employers in high-growth areas. To reach just half of the employers takes more than 2 hours, according to a 1998 study by the U.S. Department of Transportation. Many cities have addressed this so-called reverse commute problem by extending transit lines to neighborhoods and/or job clusters that were previously unserved. But these efforts have had mixed results at best.

Some officials across the country now believe that fixed-route systems will not help a large proportion of the welfare population. Commute times for car and van pools on the other hand compare favorably to the car. A Chicago study found that a one-hour car commute translated to a 70 minute van pool ride compared to a two or three hour transit ride. Established in 1991, the Chicago Pace van pool service now operates 325 vans and recovers 100 percent of its operating cost, while offering faster, more reliable and more flexible service than the fixed-route system. Perhaps there is a larger lesson here for the public transportation system. – P.J.

Take Note contributors include Minnesota Journal and Citizens League staff members and Janet Dudrow, policy analyst at Dorsey & Whitney.
Welcome

New and returning members

Charles Ballentine
Jill Barclift
Reggie Birts
Louise Brown
Thomas Clarke
Karen Cole
Carolyn Curti
Steve Foldes
Bob Hawbaker
Linda Hopkins
Claudia Johnston-Madison
and John Madison
Matt Kane
Joanna Lees
Shawn E. Lewis
Ernest Lloyd
Kate Magrew
Tracey Mulich
Anne Olson
Cherie Perlmutter
Jeff Pope
Helen Roberts
Jeff Sigurson
V. J. Smith
Zach Stabenow
Jacquelyn C. Stewart
Lynda Thorfinnson
John Turnipseed
Laurel Waldoch
Katie Walker
Julia Wallace
Samuel White
Joseph Wood

Mental health committees complete their task

The Children's Mental Health Committee concluded its contract study for the Department of Human Services (DHS) and the Department of Health (MDH) in late January. The committee report, entitled Meeting Every Child's Mental Health Needs: A Public Priority, calls for a public health approach to children's mental health, with a focus on prevention and early intervention efforts.

The committee, co-chaired by Marcia Avner and Keith Halleland, met 13 times between October and January. A total of 22 individuals took an active part in the work of the committee. In addition to the chairs, they were:

Brad Brown
Lou Burdick
John Colonna
Bright Dornblasr
Susan Fisher
Emma Foss
BraVada Garrett-Akinsanya
Virginia Greenman
Kay Guimestad
Roger Israel
Judy McDonald
Todd Otis
Beverly Propes
Dennis Schapiro
Ann Cullen Smith
Joy Sorenson Navarre
Robert Stepaniak
Mary Tambornino
Parker Trostel
Jack Wallinga

The Adult Mental Health and Employment Committee, which was also commissioned by DHS and MDH, concluded its work in late December. The committee's report, entitled Mental Health and Employment: An Issue for One in Five Employees, identifies successful strategies for addressing the mental health challenges of those working and for accommodating those with serious mental health problems who want to work.

The committee was co-chaired by Mike Christenson and Jan Smaby. A total of 19 individuals took an active part in the work of the committee. In addition to the chairs, they were:

Doug Berg
Linda Ewen
Karen Ferrara
Sharon Foss
Mary Ruth Harsha
Carolyn Jones
Fred Knox
Kelly Matter
Mary McLeod
Hillary Mercer
Steve Miles
Allan "Pat" Mulligan
Nancy Schouweiler
David Sommer
Terry VanderEyk
Shane Weinand
Jonette Zuercher

Citizens League committees rely on testimony from the people who are experts in the field of study. Thank you to the following people who provided information to the mental health studies:

Children's mental health resource speakers:
Don Allen, DHS, Children's Mental Health Division
Jannina Aristy, DHS, Children's Mental Health Division
Boyd Brown, Office of the Ombudsman for Mental Health & Mental Retardation
Dr. William Dikel, Consultant
Dr. Noirena Hale, Office of Special Ed, MN Dept of Children, Families & Learning
Lois Harrison, DHS, Children's Mental Health Division
Joel Hetler, Ramsey County, Children's Mental Health Department
Kathy Kosnoff, Disability Law Center
Vicki Kunether, DHS
Dr. James Moore, Southdale Pediatrics
Judy Parr, Wilder Foundation
Toni Rollson, DHS, Children's Mental Health Division
Jose Santos, Director, La Familia Guidance Center
Rob Sawyer, Olmsted County, Division of Children and Family Services
Mary Jo Verschay, Ramsey County, Children's Mental Health Collaborative
Jill Weise, DHS, Children's Mental Health Division

Mental health and employment resource speakers:
Chris Bell, Attorney, Jackson Lewis Schnitzler & Krupman
Sandi Brown, DHS
Julie Brunner, MDH
Clair Courtney, MN Department of Economic Security
Sheila Hanschen, Mental health services consumer
John Le Breche, Mental health services consumer
Jan Malcolm, Commissioner, MDH
Sandra Meicher, Executive Director, Mental Health Association of MN
Jim Ramaraine, Mmepin County Human Resources Department
Susan Segal, Attorney, Jackson Lewis Schnitzler & Krupman

Thank you resource speakers and committee members!
K-12 Education Reform in Minnesota

Are good intentions and more money enough?

The next Citizens League Mind-Opener series will focus on K-12 education issues, with special attention to accountability, system reform, and the future of charter schools.

As committee deadlines approach, Representative Alice Seagren (R-Bloomington), chair of the House K-12 Education Finance Committee, and Senator Sandra Pappas (DFL-St. Paul), chair of the Senate Education Committee, will provide legislative updates from their respective chambers. Joe Graba will also speak about a new endeavor called the "New Schools Project."

Tentatively scheduled for April 10, 17 and 24, each meeting will run from noon to 1:30 p.m. at the University Club, 420 Summit Avenue, St. Paul. The cost is $15 for League members and $20 for nonmembers and includes a buffet lunch.

Watch your mail or the League website (www.citizensleague.net) for additional information.

Citizens League in the news

Signs of spring remain elusive and the weather continues to be unseasonably cold, but one of the surest indicators of the change in seasons is the heating up of Minnesota’s policy discussions. So it’s no surprise that the Citizens League has been in the news quite a bit in the last month.

In February Minnesota Public Radio sponsored an on-line forum on the University of Minnesota. League Executive Director Lyle Wray contributed one of six opinion pieces that set the tone for the subsequent discussion, which was expertly moderated by active League member Griff Wigley. The League’s recent report on graduate and professional programs at the University, produced by a committee co-chaired by Jane Vanderpoel and Buzz Cummins, played a prominent role in the discussion. In addition, earlier League work on the state budget project led by Chuck Neerland and Becky Malkerson, stimulated a broader discussion of funding for all of higher education. You can find the forum on MPR’s website at www.mpr.org; click on the link toward the bottom of the home page called “A Universal Vision.”

On Sunday, February 25, the Pioneer Press devoted its editorial page coverage to controversy surrounding higher education funding. A guest editorial by Lyle Wray was the featured opinion piece.

Ted Kolderie also contributed to the Pioneer Press editorial page on Thursday, March 8. The article was adapted from a piece that first appeared in the Minnesota Journal in August, 2000. Both articles can be found in the archives section of the Pioneer Press’ website at www.pioneerplanet.com.

Gary Cunningham, co-chair of the current study on school completion, represented the League at a March 2 press conference announcing a legislative bill to create a new state board to oversee charter schools. Sen. Sandy Pappas and Rep. Alice Seagren introduced the proposal. The press conference was covered by major print and electronic media outlets.

Members: Do you know where your Public Affairs Directory is?

The Citizens League Public Affairs Directory (PAD) is a must for anyone interested in the who and where of public policy in the metropolitan region. The PAD contains the names, addresses, telephone and fax numbers and email addresses of public officials in government, education, communications and public affairs. All for the low price of $15 (plus $1.50 for postage and handling). Order your copy today at www.citizensleague.net or call 612-338-0791.

www.citizensleague.net