

MINNESOTA Journal

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Citizens forum will tackle rising health care costs

by Sen. Dave Durenberger

We all know that our health care system is problematic. Hardly a day goes by that we don't see or hear another news report about rising health care costs, which pose a serious threat to Minnesota's business climate and the state budget, as well as to our citizens' well-being and standard of living. Health care costs are escalating at a much faster pace than economic growth, personal income, and general inflation. Unless Minnesotans take action to avert a crisis, the state will continue to see an increase in the number of uninsured residents and failing businesses and exacerbated state budget woes.

We can't solve complex problems like health care through government commissions, in an ivory tower, or from the top down. So what should we do? We need to solve this problem in a way that contributes to the solution: we need to engage people in defining the problem and in offering answers. I am pleased that Gov. Tim Pawlenty has formed a Minnesota Citizens Forum on Health Care Costs, with an emphasis on citizen engagement, to address health care in Minnesota. I am honored that the Governor asked me to lead this effort.

This effort is called a citizens forum, not a governor's commission, because it will be led by citizen leaders. Many of us have experiences at commission efforts that haven't worked. The successful citizen's forum model used to be the way we solved most of our problems before we became enamored with big government, big interest groups, big experts, and big media. None of the groups in charge of the current health care system are going to change it. So who's left? We are! We, the people of Minnesota are going to take charge of our health care system.

The problem of rising health care costs is like high blood pressure. It has a variety of underlying causes and range of dangerous effects. With citizens' help, we are going to figure out those interrelated underlying causes. We're going to re-envision what we want health care to look like in Minnesota. And then we're going to devise strategies for the Governor, the Legislature, and the many other stakeholder leaders to consider.

Citizen leaders

Respected community leaders, most of whom do not have a direct financial stake in the health care system, will guide the Forum's work. These panel members, who were appointed by the Governor, will lead all Minnesotans in this effort to define what our health care system could do for us. They are citizens, but they don't speak for all citizens. We want citizens to do that for themselves.

Public input

The starting point for this effort will be determining Minnesotans' views. As consumers of health care services—and the people who pay health insurance premiums—our citizens have a huge stake in the solutions we'll explore. Many, many people will be asked to contribute. Everyone's ideas and opinions will be critical as we move forward.

Much work has already been done to determine what Minnesotans think about health care issues. We will start from what we already know, and will then reach out to the public to test our assumptions. We also will ask all health care stakeholders to be involved in this process. Some of the best ideas about reform come from

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Revitalizing the Citizens League: Building on a rich tradition

by Gary L. Cunningham

Deeply woven into the social fabric of Minnesota's soul is an innate passion and desire to make a contribution, to invest time and energy to make things better. Regardless of partisan disputes and agendas, that sense of idealism has been a powerful driving force for change and improvement.

This sense of idealism and cooperation in forging innovative approaches to public and civic issues finds root in the Citizens League. Such concepts as civic virtue, integrity, and the common good underlie our mission and purpose. The League has long stood for the belief that government belongs to the people. As such, timely and appropriate research and engagement, the warp and woof of the fabric of the League, has always reflected these twin undertakings.

The state of the League

I am pleased to report that the Citizens League continues to be a formidable voice, as well as an objective driving force of public policy in Minnesota. Evidence of this can be seen on many fronts, from energy policy, to mental health policy, to the debate over transportation and sprawl, to the growth and stability of the League itself.

Last December, the League issued the report, "Powering Up Minnesota's Energy Future," the result of a study committee chaired by Andy Brown and Ken Keller, which outlined various recommendations, some of which were approved by the legislature in the last biennium. Given the problems with the current energy system in Minnesota and across the country, this research provides a timely resource to assist policy makers to effectively address this policy issue.

Department of Human Services Commissioner Kevin Goodno recently approached the League to co-chair the Mental Health Action Group, a public-private venture created to identify and implement changes in Minnesota's mental health system for both children and adults.

The League's vitality is further evident in the expansion of the membership, the reach of the League and its financial standing. Recently, the League has wel-

comed many distinguished new members with extensive and accomplished policy backgrounds.

In addition, President Sean Kershaw announced recently, the League is financially solvent and meeting its fundraising goals for corporate and individual donors. The success of the League is a testament to the hard work, leadership, vision and the unique perspective each of you brings to the League.

As inequalities worsen, more middle-class and affluent residents relocate to more distant cities. The result is a widening of these disparities, as many residents take with them much-needed resources.

As we look to the future, we must guard against becoming complacent or reticent by focusing on present and past success without planning for future enhancements. Toward this end, with the help of John Adams, chair of the Strategic Program Committee, the League has undertaken a rigorous self-assessment to better position, examine and address today's public policy issues.

As part of the self-assessment process, a preliminary report, titled the "preamble" takes a fresh examination of the public policy landscape and outlines strategic approaches for the League to continue providing a non-partisan voice in an increasingly partisan climate. The document's recommendations call for engaging members more quickly on policy-related events; creating more access points and opportunities for member participation; focusing concerted attention on building civic leadership; improving and reforming the study committee process; and improving implementation of recommendations. (See our website for the document: www.citizensleague.net)

A survey of the political, economic and social landscapes around us clearly indicates that the public policy challenges have changed, requiring the League to adapt also.

Public policy challenges

Foremost among the challenges is an apparent shift in the values and priorities in the state as a result of the severe and unprecedented budget crises. This change is manifest in a zero sum game that appears to pit the interests of the urban core against those of the suburbs. If the budget cuts go as proposed, we could potentially be witnessing an increasing divide in the quality of life between the urban and suburban communities.

Alluding to the potential for disparity in the quality of life based on growth trends, the League's 1997 report, "It Takes a Region to Build a Neighborhood," states that, "...the seven-county Twin Cities region enjoys a comparatively high quality of life. But not everyone shares in that quality of life and conditions are likely to worsen if the region does not change the way it manages growth."

Indeed, this prediction is quickly emerging as a reality. Increasingly, second ring suburbs are experiencing rapid growth, economic prosperity, higher median incomes, higher graduation rates, lower rates of crime and fare significantly better in many key health measures. These indicators point to a high quality of life relative to those living in the rural and urban communities.

On the other hand, the quality of life in the inner cities continues to lag behind. Despite continuing investment of substantial resources, efforts to revitalize the inner cities have, for the most part, failed to achieve their desired goals. Past efforts have been guided by a social model predicated on meeting the needs of individuals. Programs aimed more directly at economic development have been fragmented and ineffective. These ad hoc strategies have come in the form of subsidies, preference programs or costly unsustainable initiatives. The result is a social model which has inadvertently undermined the creation of an economically viable system.

As inequalities worsen, more middle-class and affluent residents relocate to more distant cities. The result is a widening of these disparities, as many residents take with them much-needed resources. The Brookings Institute recently under-

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Viewpoint

When “great” isn’t good enough: New superintendency solutions for Minneapolis schools

by Sean Kershaw



Theory of Science Pop Quiz! What do you do when your experiment goes exactly as planned, but the outcome fails to prove your hypothesis? Answer: You begin to question the validity of the hypothesis. Maybe it’s wrong—and almost certainly is if you keep repeating the process with the same results.

Public Education Pop Quiz! What do you do when a superintendent does “a great job,” but still fails to achieve any real progress in improving student achievement? What happens when several superintendents in Minneapolis have the same result? Answer: Reexamine the hypothesis that a superintendent can solve the achievement problems in the Minneapolis School District’s current structure. Maybe the model is broken.

By most measures of process, Minneapolis Superintendent Carol Johnson’s term has been a huge success. She’s hired smart and talented people (e.g. David Jennings), significantly improved community relationships and trust (the

recent Sanford incident notwithstanding), brought additional resources to the District, and negotiated difficult political circumstances. The goodwill surrounding her term seems genuine.

But by almost every standard of achievement and student performance—what really matters—the progress has been miserable. For example, at the current rate of improvement, the overall achievement gap between white and black students won’t close for another generation! Is this really our standard for achievement?

This isn’t just inadequate, at a certain point it becomes insane! Where else would we tolerate such minimal progress? And this is the single most important social justice issue of our day!?

We complain about the ethical and economic impact of Enron and other corporate scandals. Aren’t the economic and ethical consequences here more troubling?

This is not a sideswipe at Superintendent Johnson, administrators, or teachers. Far from it—it is actually an acknowledgement of their talent and hard work as individuals. But it is also an acknowledgement that we have to stop looking for individuals (teachers, parents, and especially superintendents) to save a bad system.

If the key outcomes that matter didn’t improve under Johnson’s high-caliber leadership, what makes us think that a) we can find another person as talented as she has been; or b) If we do, that progress won’t continue to be as inadequate? The job may simply be undoable!

The last thing the students in Minneapolis need right now is a long search for a highly compensated and then short-termed leader who won’t improve student achievement and learning. We’ve seen it happen in dozens of other cities—including Minneapolis. Now is not the time to settle for the status quo, either. Don’t “find better people for a bad job.” Find a better job for the right person. Don’t expect an individual to save a system that is broken. Let’s fix the system

before we waste more time, more money, and more lives.

So what am I proposing?

Slow down, before we make a mistake. The District is in good hands with David Jennings. What would be lost by taking time out to consider the fundamental role and responsibility of the superintendent?

Consider potentially dramatic changes to the fundamental governing structures in the District. We need a new organizational relationship between the chief executive and the school system. The Sept. 3, 2003, issue of *Education Week* includes an excellent article by William G. Ouchi, author of *Making Schools Work*, that links “deep and revolutionary” decentralization to improved student achievement. Give parents, teachers, principals and individual schools much greater authority—and accountability.

Within the Minneapolis schools, there seems to be no consequences for poor performance, and no adequate incentives for improvement. In fact, Superintendent Johnson leaves with a generous financial package, despite the poor performance of her students. We must restore both accountability and incentives to the system.

We must thoughtfully examine other models and systems for governance, accountability and performance—and be prepared to demand and support their implementation in Minneapolis.

(Before people ask: I’d argue that Peter Hutchinson’s term was an alternative entity essentially trying to do the same job. It wasn’t a fundamental change in the structure of the position, or the District.)

Keep in mind several key principles: improving student outcomes should matter more than preserving the existing system; choice and flexibility must be preserved; teachers, parents and the community must be expected to, and allowed to, play a greater role; incentives and accountability must be built into the system; and, the

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OnBalance

Views From Around the State

Judicial selection, regional treatment facilities and politicians behaving badly have set tongues wagging across the state

In light of the Supreme Court's ruling that Minnesota's strict limits on speech amount to an unconstitutional silencing of candidates, the **Free Press (8/6)** advocates changing the way judges are selected. "It's time for Minnesota to adopt an appointment process, whereby judges are appointed by the governor and confirmed by legislators for six- or eight-year terms. They should then be required to go through a review process to be re-appointed."

The **Rochester Post-Bulletin (8/6)** agrees and has some suggestions of its own. "If the U.S. Supreme Court rules that a significant change must be made, the state should move to an appointive system, which would require an amendment to the state constitution," the Post-Bulletin writes. "Minnesotans are fortunate to have exceptionally well-qualified judges, without partisanship, without wasteful campaign spending and without emotional electioneering that has little to do with meaningful decision-making based on the law."

The community of Fergus Falls will be left with fewer jobs and a largely vacant building when developmentally disabled and mentally ill patients housed at the Regional Treatment Facility are moved to community-based facilities. The **Daily Journal of Fergus Falls (8/19)** views the decision to move patients as both logical and unfortunate. "The RTC was based on the model for mental illness treatment during the turn of the 20th century—house everyone who suffers from mental illness in one building for their entire lives, keeping them away from society. Today, mental illness is treated as it should be—an illness that can be treated with medication. Patients are much better off nearer their families and their communities, where they have a better chance of becoming a member of society more quickly. Such a model means the demand for a large building is no longer needed. It's just unfortunate Fergus Falls has to be the community to suffer from the change."

The **West Central Tribune (8/15)** calls the state's goal for completing the process by Jan. 1, 2005 unrealistic and shortsighted. "For that objective to be achieved, a complete new system has to be created for delivering mental health services in communities in every county throughout the state...This short timeline just is not realistic. It took seven years for the state to introduce a new care system for the developmentally disabled... The tight implementation timeframe likely has no time for community reaction or acceptance, zoning and other issues that may develop."

In Rochester, the achievement gap in reading and math between white and black students was greater than the state average. The **Post-Bulletin (8/26)** calls for a concerted community effort to close the gap. "However, there are no easy solutions and it will take hard work on the part of students, teachers and parents and everyone concerned to close the gap the tests reveal. It is not a matter of interest only to teacher, parents and students. It is important to society because it will affect the future of America. For that reason, it is worth the very best efforts of all concerned."

The **St. Cloud Times (8/16)** was also concerned with the news that Minnesota has the largest achievement gap of the 19 states that require high school exit exams. What the Times found more troubling is that "Minnesota has no specific plan to address these gaps. Granted, the state is in the middle of huge changes in its graduation standards. But these gaps are large enough to warrant close attention now."

State DFL and GOP should be ashamed of themselves according to Willmar's **West Central Tribune (8/23)**. The Tribune called the behavior of both parties at the state fair "ridiculous, absurd and sad. Most of all, it is un-Minnesotan." The DFL pushed for hearings investigating Pawlenty and his tax records and the GOP distributed "DFL lies on a stick" paper fans to fair-goers. "Both

party chairs and their party leaders to work to bring civility back to Minnesota politics," the Tribune admonishes. "If they do not, the rest of this year and next may find Minnesota politics sinking to gutter depths our state has never seen. And our state will be worse off because of it."

"It's understandable that politicians get wrapped up in the endless campaign attacks," **Red Wing Republican Eagle (9/2)** admits. "But they ought to examine the message being sent to constituents. More often than not such sharp exchanges only turn off the majority of voters, and that is not healthy for the democratic process...It's time for Democrats and Republicans alike to accept some responsibility and bury the hatchet. We expect a level of political bashing once the legislative session convenes, but constituents deserve at least a summer reprieve."

Sen. Norm Coleman does a good job of outlining what rural America need in his Rural Renaissance Initiative, opines the **Bemidji Pioneer (8/10)**, but the paper questions whether it will work. "The Rural Renaissance Initiative recognizes a key factor in stimulating rural economic development—a need to improve the so-called quality of place for rural communities in which to attract new businesses and manufacturers... But Coleman, a New York native, notes that he comes from the background of people who need to be convinced. 'There is no more zealous believer than a convert,' he said."

The **Worthington Daily Globe** is skeptical of the plan's success. "At first glance, we wonder whether we should be pleased or insulted," the paper writes (8/12). "Sen. Coleman must have been winking when he said, 'People need to understand the valuable resource America's small town represents.' Apparently they need a little help (a bribe, perhaps) to understand. Well, this plan probably won't even get off the ground. Too much of a strain on the budget. Too quirky, besides. And, no, we don't feel insulted."

Action group seeks common ground and common sense solutions to improve Minnesota's mental health system

The Citizens League is pleased to announce that it will be convening and helping staff a new Mental Health Action Group. Gary Cunningham, chairman of the Citizens League Board of Directors, and Minnesota Commissioner of Human Services Kevin Goodno will co-chair the steering committee for the group. The Citizens League and Halleland Health Consulting will provide support staff.

by Sean Kershaw

There is a growing feeling among people who work in the mental health system, and the individuals and families that interact with it, that the current service delivery system in Minnesota is seriously flawed, if not broken. No one is to blame. The system is the product of years of well-intentioned efforts to add programs, increase public and private coverage and services, and adapt to the ever-expanding knowledge base of effective treatment practices. But after years of layering on programs and funding streams, and adapting to new practices, the system has become complex, fragmented, and fraught with perverse incentives and outmoded programs. The service delivery system has itself become an impediment to providing the desired outcomes in mental health care within the constraints of limited financial resources.

The preliminary report from President Bush's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health (Oct. 29, 2002) paints a similar picture of the nation.

"The Commission is united in the belief that the mental health service delivery system needs dramatic reform. It is becoming clear that the mental health services system does not adequately serve millions of people who need care. While many consumers do receive effective treatments and services, many others do not. The system is fragmented and in disarray—not from lack of commitment and skill of those who deliver care, but from underlying structural, financing, and organizational problems. Many of the problems are due to the "layering on" of multiple, well-intentioned programs without overall direction, coordination, or consistency. The system's failings lead to unnecessary and costly disability, homelessness, school failure, and incarceration."

In its final report (July 2003), the Commission states: "To improve access to quality care and services, the Commission recommends fundamentally transforming how mental health care is delivered in America."

The work of the Minnesota Mental Health Action Group begins with this premise.

Minnesota: it's time to act

More than \$1.2 billion in total public and private funds are spent each year on mental health services in Minnesota and there are hundreds of public and private mental health programs, activities and agencies. Despite this, the system is not working the way it should. Patients and their families are dissatisfied because their needs are not being met. The system is inefficient and often ineffective. There is little coordination between public and private services and between the health care and the social services systems. This is all occurring during a time of (and contributing to) significant budget constraints at the state level.

Patients and their families charge the system is not meeting their needs and that better services and more financial support for those services are necessary. At the same time, government and private sector employers are struggling to find ways to control rapidly rising health care costs in a time of budget constraints.

We must find better ways to help families using the existing resources, and quickly, or face the risk that patients will lose access to even currently available mental health services due to lost health coverage or cutbacks in government programs.

Health insurers, hospitals, advocates for people with mental health and chemical dependency issues, community-based service providers, and others have generated an abundance of task forces, work groups, and reports in the past several years. All of the groups that have examined Minnesota's mental health system agree that the current system is flawed and needs reform. Most also agree on what needs to be done, and have identified opportunities to improve outcomes and improve efficiency.

While there are pockets of activity, there is no organized effort to coordinate those activities to achieve broad-based system-wide reform, or to fill gaps where no progress is being made. The Minnesota Mental Health Action Group will fulfill this purpose.

The Minnesota Mental Health Action Group will spearhead change

The Minnesota Mental Health Action

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health care professionals, system executives, and special interest and advocacy groups. We also will involve our health care partners in eastern South Dakota, North Dakota, and western Wisconsin who serve Minnesotans.

As the forum does its work, we will put some possibilities on the table and have people react to them. These solutions may be short-term or long-term; they may be big-picture, systemic changes or small fixes. Once we understand what Minnesotans collectively think about health and health care costs, we will work quickly to develop a vision and strategy for health care and policy change.

Re-envisioning health care

In the first phase of its work, the Citizens Forum will ask, “What do we expect from our health care system? What do we want it to be?” We need to reach a consensus on where we are going before we can devise strategies for reform that will get us there. For years, both at a national and state level, we had competing solutions and little agreement on the goals. From the standpoint of cost, quality, and access, we’re no closer than when we started.

As we consider our future health care system, we will keep in mind that we are not going to solve our cost problems simply by changing how we pay for things or by reducing the number of people who receive services. Both the World Health Organization and the U.S. Institute of Medicine have told us that the problems in our health care system are systemic. It is critical that any reform effort reflect the

multifaceted pressure that we confront—the costs, volume, and quality of goods and services. Focusing on any one of these factors without acknowledging the impact on the others cannot lead to consensus.

The Forum’s work will include short-term recommendations and “A Vision 2010” strategy for sustained change that will keep health care affordable into the next decade. By January 2004, we will release our recommendations to the Governor.

Transforming the system

There is an urgent need to move swiftly. If costs continue to rise unchecked, the state budget crisis will surely lead to further cutbacks in health care programs and more employers will be forced to drop coverage or increase employees’ contributions.

In phase two, the Citizens Forum will create the road map that will help make our health care system a better value in terms of quality, safety, and effectiveness. We will challenge all of the stakeholders in health care to work with us to design and implement major health care changes that will be necessary to ensure affordability and achieve our vision for the year 2010.

Throughout our work, we will remember that the professional-patient relationship must be at the heart of any health care reform effort. If we lose our focus on that, we lose our handle on what makes Minnesota medicine work.

Timing is everything

For this kind of systemic change to happen, the timing must be right. The

Governor and I and many others believe the timing is right. A tenet of Eastern philosophy is “When the pupil is ready, the teacher will appear.” My sense is that we are ready. The frustration level of all health care stakeholders is at a record high; everyone is calling for change. We now need the teachers—those in our community who have ideas about what our health care system should be—to step forward. The panel members are the leaders of this effort; the people of Minnesota are the teachers and they must feel ownership of our health care system.

Our health care system is extremely complex and political and change is difficult. We can’t expect it to change quickly or easily. Every stakeholder has a strong incentive to keep things the way they are. But coupled with optimism, hope, and hard work, Minnesotans have the talent, expertise, and community spirit to show the nation how to reign in out-of-control health care costs.

Winston Churchill said we always do what’s right, after we try everything else. It’s time to do what’s right. I have always believed that Minnesota has the best minds in health care and the best spirit of cooperation. This is why I founded the National Institute of Health Policy right here in Minnesota at the University of St. Thomas. And that is why I agreed to lead this effort.

I’m eager to get to the challenge. **MJ**

For more information, see the Minnesota Citizens Forum on Health Care Costs web site: www.mncitizensforum.org.

Viewpoint *continued from page 3*

focus must be long-term sustainability and success.

Don’t wait for the District to make this decision for itself. One potential next step is to establish a state-sponsored commission to review existing data on new models for school district governance, leadership and organization, and make recommendations on restructuring to the state. Ideally, they could make recommendations that allow a superintendent to do a better job—at a better job.

Why should the District support this pro-

posal? With the legislative session coming soon, appeals for more funds from the District are almost certain. However, given the poor performance of the District, and the genuine concerns about the cost of this performance, if the District does not demonstrate a real effort to change—not just 10-point plans—why would this Legislature and the Governor help them out with additional funds? Why should they?

Of course we should be careful with these efforts—“faddish” attempts at

reform can be very dangerous. But we are losing a great deal now—thousands of lives a year. Too much is being lost by our inability to see what’s obvious. It is time to say, “The superintendency has no clothes!” **MJ**

Sean Kershaw is President of the Citizens League. He can be reached at skershaw@citizensleague.net or 612-338-0791. For more information, or to comment go to www.citizensleague.net.

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Group is a coalition of people and groups who are working on mental health reform, led by a core group of influential public and private sector leaders from each of the major mental health constituencies: consumers, providers, hospitals, health insurers and various levels of government.

Having identified six key priority areas (“action teams”), the Minnesota Mental Health Action Group is now focused on involving a broad coalition of stakeholders in recommending clear outcomes in each of these areas. These action team topics are: developing a high-level public/private partnership model for service delivery; establishing a sound fiscal framework; improving the coordination of care and services; standardizing assessment, performance measurements and outcomes; earlier intervention and secondary prevention; and addressing workforce supply issues.

The activities of these teams will include:

- ▲ Comparing the existing reports, recommendations and proposals and identifying and prioritizing goals and strategies that have broad support.
- ▲ Identifying and establishing links with existing leaders and groups working on those priority areas, and establishing new

task forces where no organized effort is underway.

- ▲ Forming a larger coalition to work collaboratively on system reform.
- ▲ Developing a plan and timeline for reforms in each priority area and following up to ensure progress is made.
- ▲ Serving as change agents to bring about the desired reforms by organizing and leading work groups to mobilize action around the specific priorities.

We must find better ways to help families using the existing resources, and quickly, or face the risk that patients will lose access to even currently available mental health services.

The Minnesota Action Group’s work will end in December unless the group decides it needs to meet occasionally in 2004 to ensure that progress continues.

Engaging the community

The Minnesota Mental Health Action Group will benefit from the inclusion of the institutional and organizational parties

within the existing mental health and chemical dependency system. However, no change to this system will be complete, or successful, without the participation of the patients, families and communities impacted by the issue. Also, given the disparities in outcomes among certain underserved communities, it is essential that these communities have direct input into the assessment, evaluation and implementation process.

The Citizens League will lead a process that will enhance, support and complement the work of the Minnesota Mental Health Action Group. Using focus groups and community meetings, the League will provide additional information, input and support from key consumers and communities who will benefit from an improved system of coverage and treatment. This includes existing consumer organizations, consumers and clients in the mental health and chemical dependency system, and individuals/representatives from underserved communities. **MJ**

For more information on this project, details on how to participate in the action teams or consumer engagement efforts, visit the Citizens League web site, www.citizensleague.net/mentalhealth/. You can sign up to receive automatic e-mail updates on the effort.

Revitalizing the League *continued from page 2*

scored this point by finding that between 1990-2000, Ramsey and Hennepin counties had steadily declining shares of the metro’s total employment while the fastest job growth is on the fringe of the urban counties. This has led to low-income central city residents being geographically isolated from job growth areas by increasingly limited transportation options.

The emerging setting is a geographic and economic compartmentalization. This trend allows developing suburbs to amass resources and tax base, segregates elementary and secondary central city schools and reduces the resources available to the greater social need in the central city and inner-ring suburbs.

What is of noteworthy concern is that

policy solutions aimed at ameliorating this condition have been mired and entangled in partisan disputes. A pervasive milieu of either/or has seeped into policy debates. What is missing from current discourses is that we can achieve our goals without resorting to choose between being personally right and having common goals. Greater emphasis needs to be placed on developing a regional perspective. Policy approaches must recognize the interdependence of the communities and devise appropriate solutions to these regional issues.

Such perspectives and demographic changes have profound implications on policy. As members of the Citizens League, we share a commitment of working for the common good. The better part of

Minnesota has long believed that there is more to life than just looking out for our self-interest while remaining numb to those around us. Minnesotans are continually moved by the desire to do that which is right. Our duty is to lead where others are hesitant, to act when others are complacent, and to engage when others recede.

We are working to build upon a dynamic, innovative and outward-looking League. In the words of President Kennedy, “Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future.” **MJ**

Gary Cunningham is chairman of the Citizens League Board of Directors.

TakeNote

Policy Tidbits

Rising prices and falling revenues challenge our spirit as days darken

Rental housing became more affordable during the 1990s, a recent report by the state demographer shows. According to the report, the percentage of Minnesota renters paying more than 30 percent of their income for rent fell from 42 percent in the early 1990s to 35 percent in 2000.

Affordable housing advocates dispute the report's findings, arguing that it is based upon 2000 census data and that conditions in Minnesota have since deteriorated. View the report at www.demography.state.mn.us/index.html. — *Sean Kershaw*.

The City of Seattle recently published the findings of a survey of 50 e-government websites hosted by cities and counties around the country, including Hennepin County. Some of the survey's findings include:

- 62 % of cities and counties offer electronic payments
- 50 % use content management software
- No city or county allows advertising on their site
- 60 % of cities and counties are marketing their sites

Read the full survey online at www.cityofseattle.net/html/50citysurvey.htm

— *Rebecca Stenberg*.

Minnesotans can expect a 30 percent jump in natural gas prices in September, the state's largest utility company warned. Center Point Energy Minnegasco, which serves more than 730,000 customers in the state, said it is paying more for gas than a year ago, and that the increase will be passed to customers. Assuming a normal winter, the company said the average customer would see their gas bill increase by \$100 over last year's average of \$880. — *S.K.*

Drafts of the new Minnesota Social Studies and Science Standards are available at the state Department of Education webpage, education.state.mn.us. Fourteen public meetings will be held between now and Oct. 22 to discuss the standards. You can also view and comment on the standards on the Citizens League website. — *S.K.*

"Mostly it's been a matter of deciding what not to do," Wisconsin state Rep. Mike Powers said when asked about how he

manages his daily routine in the face of state budget cuts. In response to budget pressures, Powers let his two full-time staff go and is managing his office alone, reports *Governing* magazine. The change has meant forgoing constituent outreach efforts and self-promotion activities. Despite this, he said he has received overwhelming support from his constituents. His colleagues have not been so supportive and many consider his move a stunt. — *Laura Hammond*.

The Minneapolis Center for Neighborhoods is asking what can be done to strengthen citizen participation in our cities. Over the next few months, the Center will host a series of workshops designed to create citizen participation compacts for each city that brings governmental representatives, neighborhood and community leaders and interested citizens together. The city groups will work to develop an understanding of each group's role in supporting citizen participation, to find ways to broaden involvement by diverse community interests, and to improve efforts to increase public engagement. For more information, contact the Center at 612-339-3480 or visit their web site at www.center4neighborhoods.org. — *S.K.*

Story after story reports natural-gas prices are rising because demand is rising, and that demand is rising partly because big industrial users—including power plants—have switched to gas for fuel. Not too long ago the notion was that natural gas, as a premium fuel, should be reserved for residential use; that big plants should run on oil or coal or (in the case of generating plants) nuclear fuel. How and when did the big plants get switched to natural gas, anyway? — *Ted Kolderie*.

How can Minnesota best increase the number of working people who can support their families? What should the mix of state and local taxes and fees be and why? These are the two of main questions being examined by Growth & Justice, a new state-level economic policy organization. Growth & Justice is committed to the proposition that we can simultaneously achieve economic growth, economic justice and environmental sustainability. If you'd like to participate in an upcoming Growth & Justice roundtable discussion on wages, or a discussion of government revenues early next year, or to learn more about the organization's work, call 612-872-1460, or go to www.growthandjustice.org. — *Lori Schaefer*.

Usually, school districts propose closing schools to save money. But after recently spending about \$6 million to repair the Sanford Middle School building, the Minneapolis Public Schools are discussing closing the school and building a \$25-35 million school further south. Cargill and the Humphrey Institute's Center for School Change have worked to help improve Sanford student performance and family involvement and those efforts have paid off. Over the last four years, according to the district, the percentage of Sanford's "continuously enrolled students" who made at least a year's worth of progress in reading and math increased, while the overall percentage of Minneapolis Public School students who made at least a year's worth of progress declined slightly. What message does the proposed closing send to the Sanford faculty, parents, and students? — *Joe Nathan*.

Take Note contributors include Citizens League members and staff.