

There are Laws and There are Laws

Brad Finstad & Marnie Werner

Dear Future Governor:

As you well know, Minnesota is a state of many different faces and regions. In the first issue of the *Rural Minnesota Journal*, state demographer Tom Gillaspay and state economist Tom Stinson introduced a geographic definition of Minnesota that divided the state into “plexes,” “ruralplexes” and a “metroplex.” Each of these areas carries a unique stamp formed by circumstances of the past and the present, and of the enduring landscape, making them all different. And of course, you, as governor, get to serve them all.

But there is — and has been for quite some time — a lingering fear among Minnesota’s residents living outside the Twin Cities that those in government, especially in St. Paul, aren’t quite aware that what they do can have a different impact on rural areas; as these policies are set, their effects on residents beyond the Twin Cities aren’t fully considered. Ever since redistricting in 2002, when for the first time Twin Cities legislators outnumbered legislators representing the rest of the state and rural Minnesota lost a Congressional seat to the Twin Cities suburbs, the concern about representation has been growing. So as long-time observers of and participants in state politics, we just wanted to point out a few things.

First do no harm

The law of unintended consequences

Pretty much everyone has heard of Newton’s Third Law of Motion: For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. It’s a law of physics that’s applied to many other

things, from cooking to child rearing, including politics. Every piece of policy that comes out of a decision-making body has some kind of effect on everyone in its jurisdiction. Generally it's the reaction expected, but sometimes it's a reaction not expected. It's that unexpected reaction that has led to the development of a lesser-known "law" that's more appropriate for Minnesota. It hasn't been as rigorously tested as Newton's, we would suspect, but it's no less true: the Law of Unintended Consequences.

Made popular by sociologist Robert K. Merton in the 1930s, the law goes something like this: Every action taken on a complex system will produce unforeseen and unintended consequences, both good or bad. In other words, mess around with something complicated, like people's lives or their businesses, the road system, or education funding, and you are bound to get some results you weren't expecting.

The Law of Unintended Consequences has been at work in politics since politics began, and it's no less true in Minnesota. Ever since redistricting in 2002, rural residents have been nervous, hoping that metro legislators will follow the byword of the medical profession when they create policy: First do no harm. This doesn't just apply to rural parts of the state. Our state population is becoming more diverse, not just in terms of ethnicity but also income, education and background. Every individual, neighborhood and community exists in different circumstances, creating different needs and interests. And although it may be easy to forget, rural Minnesota has some very different circumstances, leading to very different needs.

Let's take a quick spin through a list of socio-economic and demographic indicators to see why. *Overall*, rural Minnesota — everything outside the seven-county Twin Cities area — is older, poorer and less educated than the Twin Cities. What we find when we look at this county by county, however, is that these factors vary considerably by location. The population is youngest in a swath running from Stearns County down through the west metro to Blue Earth County, oldest around the periphery of the state. An older population means one that tends to be more dependent on Social Security, fixed incomes, and public services. The highest median household income

is clustered in and around the Twin Cities and Rochester and interestingly, Roseau County. From there, median incomes go down, until incomes in the far western and northern parts of the state sit at less than half that of the counties in the western Twin Cities suburbs. Since the cost of living in these regions is not half of what it is in the metro area, again, these regions are more dependent on public services. Free and reduced-price lunch for K-12 students is lowest in the Twin Cities suburbs (highest in Minneapolis and St. Paul proper) and increases as we move west and north. Draw a line from Big Stone County north of St. Cloud to Chisago City and you'll find north of that line the percentage of people on Minnesota Care is almost twice the rate found south of that line.

Why is all this? Well, that question has been poked and prodded fairly thoroughly, and the answers are multiple: young people leaving their rural homes for college in the city, leaving an older and rapidly aging population on fixed incomes; various crises and changes in modern agriculture, including today's consolidation of farms; the decline in manufacturing and its well-paying jobs, which, along with agriculture has been the backbone of the rural economy. There are many other reasons for these long-term trends, but these are the highlights.

So, when you as the new governor come aboard in January 2011, you will be facing not just a deficit, but the results of the 2010 Census. Those results will probably not be too surprising: a set of demographic trends continuing on in the same direction they have for the past few decades. After the results of this next Census come out, it's a fairly safe bet that rural Minnesota will lose a couple more legislators.

So what are we asking of metro legislators and yourself? Simply to be fair. And be aware, especially as they move into the ugly job this next session of tackling the mammoth budget deficit. The budget cuts have been tough, and many rural leaders believe they fell disproportionately on rural Minnesota already, especially in the areas of Local Government Aid and road and bridge maintenance funding. Let's try not to make rural regions an easy target.

Going on the offense

A role for rural lawmakers

At the same time, rural lawmakers are on the front line of this issue, of course, and they know better than just about anyone how policy set in St. Paul will affect their district. But as they lose overall critical mass in the legislature, their ability to do anything about it could be weakened. How can this be counteracted? A rural caucus has been tried before with limited success, but that doesn't mean it can't be tried again. The Iron Range legislators have led a highly successful caucus for years. Granted, they are all of the same party and face the same unique issues for their districts, which makes being effective infinitely easier. But most rural legislators deal with the same issues and needs for their districts regardless of party. The challenge is for lawmakers to throw off party strictures where they are not necessary, stop making politics personal, and work together to strengthen the rural voice. Perhaps there is a role here for the new governor to encourage a bi-partisan effort like this to strengthen the state.

Another thought is the "rural lens." The idea has been tossed about for a while of setting up something like they have in Canada: a rural agency in the Canadian federal government applies a "rural lens" to most policies under consideration to ensure that that policy's impact on rural regions of the country are understood and negative outcomes can be addressed before they create havoc. Can we do something like that in Minnesota? Setting up a new agency isn't a good idea right now, but our rural legislators can be acting in that capacity already. If they're not, they should be, which is another argument for a non-partisan rural caucus.

Remaining relevant in a swiftly tilting world

Rural residents handling and embracing change: poaching is out, collaboration is in

But lest we sound like we're putting all the responsibility on legislators to "please, just understand us," there is a lot we rural residents can do, too, (and already have) at the local level to immunize ourselves somewhat against unintended consequences.

That means keeping ourselves relevant and that's going to involve embracing change. A colleague of ours has traveled to communities of all shapes and sizes across Minnesota for years talking about effective economic development, and he tells this story: In many towns, he asks the local leaders to close their eyes and describe how they want their community to look in five or ten or twenty years. And what the audience almost unfailingly describes is how their community looked in the 1950s.

Now who doesn't want the town of their childhood back? The town where they began their lives, fell in love, raised their family? The fact is, though, that town isn't coming back. But it doesn't have to be a sad fact or a hard fact. Times have changed, yes, and we can mourn for what has been lost, but at some point that mourning period has to end and we have to get to work. Change is scary and hard, but it will happen with or without our participation. The results will be better when we participate.

Another colleague tells me about a certain Minnesota county where four communities and the county itself all have their own economic development authorities, and they all compete relentlessly against one another in a county with a population of around 14,000. The idea of these organizations merging and working together for the good of the larger region is unthinkable to these individuals, and so they continue duplicating services for very small areas in the quest to maintain a community identity.

This is the familiar economic development system that has been in practice for decades in rural and urban communities alike: competing against each other, trying to attract the big employer through tax breaks and promises. The result has been success for some places, but for the most part, poaching, disappointment and ill will. The fight is, of course, over limited resources: who gets the jobs and the benefits and the tax dollars.

What's the alternative? Start looking to the community next door. Extend our famous neighborliness beyond the city limits or county line. Many communities and counties are already figuring out ways they can work together to save

money and provide necessary services. We can also develop our communities economically from within. Encourage development of small businesses by people already living in the community, who already have a stake there, and encourage existing businesses to work together across community lines and even county lines to strengthen their positions and ensure they can remain in the community. The state can help with new policies that support collaboration among governments, businesses, schools and colleges, and other organizations, and examine existing policies to ensure that those on the books already aren't hampering this effort.

Who's going to do all this work at the community level? That's where leadership development comes in. The fact that people are still in your community, that they want to start businesses and create wealth is an excellent sign — it means they want to be there. Don't discourage it. Encourage it. Inspire those who want to be leaders, and also those who maybe don't want to be leaders but you think would make good leaders. You want your kids to stay in town? Give them a role to play so they have purpose there. Sure it's hard, but instead of picturing your town in the future looking like your town of the past, picture what you would want it to look like for your grandkids. Can you see that picture? Okay, go get it.

It's a two-way street

The need to stop scaring each other to death: sound bites are not our friends

So, dear Governor, there you have it. Both the metro and rural areas need to do their part. The legislators and constituents of the Twin Cities need to recognize that as long as they are the majority in the state, they control the fate and fortune of *all* residents of the state, especially those in rural areas. And rural residents, for their part, need to keep doing what they can to encourage the building of community and wealth in their own towns and counties.

So in the meantime, how do we learn to work with each other instead of against? First of all, we need to stop trying to scare each other to death. As always, it's a fight over finite resources, and in a fight, we like to pull out the big guns of

civic doom and economic despair: the world will end if this particular motion is passed, etc. The sound bite is particularly suited to this war of ideologies and is used effectively by all sides, interests and parties to get everyone whipped up and angry at each other. No one wants to look soft on anything, and everyone wants to be the hero.

Unfortunately, it also poisons the atmosphere, making it a great deal more difficult to create meaningful policy that produces solutions. Eventually sound bites just insult our intelligence and extreme partisanship hits a point of diminishing returns, where political sniping and an Eeyore attitude of budgetary fatalism doesn't work anymore. Here's a quote, attributed to Benjamin Franklin, although he may not have been the first to say it: "We must, indeed, all hang together, or we will assuredly all hang separately." That is as true today as it was 230 years ago, no matter what level of society it's applied to, from fractious partisanship at the federal level to communities within the same county not getting along. And now is the time, if there ever was one, to roll up our sleeves and get to work — together.

After all, all politics are local, but policy is set for everyone. Everyone has different needs and wants and there is only so much to go around. The governor's role this next session will be as referee to ensure that the finite resources are distributed as fairly and as equitably as possible. So to all of you willing to take on this job, we wish you well. You're in for an exciting four years.