

RMJ

Rural Minnesota Journal

Institutional Change: Possibilities for the Future

Fall 2007



CENTER *for*
RURAL POLICY
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Seeking solutions for Greater Minnesota's future

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Any opinions voiced in the Journal are those solely of the authors and not necessarily of the Center.

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Editor's note

Marnie Werner

"Everybody talks about the weather, but nobody does anything about it."

Just like this old axiom, it seems like when we talk about the public institutions in our lives, we treat them the same way: we love to complain about government, our school systems, health care, etc. But the truth is, although quite a bit is said about them, there's also quite a bit done about them — and to them — too.

We're very good at trying new methods, initiating new programs. Hospitals try new ways of tracking patient care and financial reimbursements. A government, state or local, puts in place a new program to process paperwork or tax statements or health care benefits that will hopefully save money. Every school year brings a new curriculum or a new testing method. These are areas we often talk about and tinker with endlessly, in the hope that if we can just find the right combination of action and money, we'll reach a steady state where all the basic issues and problems are solved.

But in this issue of the *Rural Minnesota Journal*, we wanted to look beyond new programs that simply rearrange resources. Instead, we asked a handful of bright people, experts in their fields, to look at fundamentally new ways of doing things. The question we asked them was: "Do we need to substantially change our institutions and/or change the way we do things to succeed in the 21st century?" This is not just change, but institutional change, which is more than just coming up with a new way to do something. Institutional change refers to large-scale change, big sweeping ideas that require big, sweeping changes, and vitally different ways of *thinking* about things.

The articles in this issue cover four different areas: local government and whether it needs a new direction, rethinking how our schools are teaching our children, keeping rural hospitals financially viable, and which direction to head in the ongoing

development of a broadband infrastructure. Do these areas need comprehensive, fundamental change? And if they do, how much? How far do we go?

We all naturally resist change. It's hard work, tiring, kind of scary, and in terms of the type of reforms discussed in this issue, can potentially require a massive reassignment of financial and human capital, especially in the public sector, where systems are built over decades and it's difficult to diverge from a particular way of looking at and assessing things.

Is institutional change necessary? We'll leave that up to you, the reader. We hope that you will find many things to think about as you read this issue and consider change in our systems, whether you are one who makes policy, one who tries to influence it, or one who simply lives within it. But one thing is certain: change is just another word for opportunity. We may never reach that stable state, that political and programmatic nirvana where everything clicks and works from here on in, but that's no reason to stop asking, "What if?"

Chairman's note

**Daniel C. Reardon
Board of Directors
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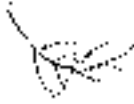
Four public institutions seem to stand out as significantly important, if not critical to our way of life. As Greater Minnesota communities think and plan about local issues, future opportunities, and the quality of their lives, it becomes absolutely necessary to scrutinize how we govern and are governed, receive medical care, educate our children, and communicate electronically.

There are innumerable procedures and policies that steer these four institutions. Our access to health care, its quality and cost is a prime example of how the market place, political policy and local practice impact our lives. Often we do not pay attention to the underlying policies and practices that affect us directly. As communities we want a better education for our children. We typically ask for better-prepared teachers or more money for innovative programs. How often do we probe how the institutions that are central to our lives are run? How often do we focus on who is making the decisions, what processes they are using, and why it is being done that way? We tend to concentrate on the concrete reality before us rather than look under the surface.

My son has a book titled, *How Things Work*. As the Center's editorial committee and board of directors considered this issue of the *Minnesota Rural Journal*, we wanted to challenge you to think about how things work. Empowered with the knowledge of what drives systems, we believe you will be better able to identify new approaches and realign or change the institutions that are there to serve you. We hope we have succeeded.

Acknowledgements

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