

# Monday, November 17, 2008

## [Paul Thissen: The MinnesotaBrown interview](#)

Last week I had a conversation with State Rep. Paul Thissen (DFL-Minneapolis) shortly after he announced his candidacy for governor. Rep. Thissen has been a friend to this blog, occasionally offering [insightful comments](#) on health care reform (his specialty area). I first talked to Thissen when he brought his health and human services committee to the Iron Range for hearings. Our conversation then was part of a well-received series of columns I wrote for the *Hibbing Daily Tribune*. ([Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#)). Like my earlier interview with State Sen. [Tom Bakk](#) (DFL-Cook), another likely candidate for governor, I will share my conversation in two parts: the first an objective review of the candidate's message, the second my analysis of the candidate and his or her chances.



### **THE PAUL THISSEN INTERVIEW:**

Paul Thissen is the chair of the House Health and Human Services committee, assuming that title with the DFL takeover in 2007 after just four years in the legislature. His time in office has been marked by work on a wide range of issues, but his specialty is clearly in health care reform. He was chief author of the Children's Health Security Act, insuring 40,000 additional Minnesota children, and championed the passage of the 2008 Health Reform Act.

Thissen is a Minneapolis lawyer, married with three kids, and he's running on the idea that you can organize a campaign that isn't all about financial capital or inside games at the capitol. But he also knows political reality, which is why he's announcing so early and planning a statewide push to build a adequately funded campaign.

And the success of Barack Obama's successful vast grassroots campaign seems to be part of Thissen's inspiration.

"The world is changing and institutions are changing," said Thissen. "The successful campaign in this race will be the one that empowers people."

Thissen plans to spend the next year touring the state, talking to people and learning what they want from the next governor. He has set up an "Idea Board" on his website to allow people to share their proposals to solve problems they see in their communities.

When asked how he'd explain his candidacy to blue collar Iron Range DFLers at a bar or union hall, Thissen offered his family's history as a metaphor. His family has been in Minnesota for five generations, with roots in farming, railroading, and teaching (both Thissen's parents were school teachers).

"What my family has shared over the generations is the importance of affordable health care, secure retirement and a good education," said Thissen.

He told me about a workbench his grandfather made that he used recently.

"My grandfather could have built a workbench that would have lasted 10 years; instead, he made it to last generations," Thissen said. "That spirit, that thinking for the future is what's driving me in this campaign."

The state budget, facing big deficits, will be a top issue during the 2009 session.

"If things are as bad as they are sounding, the depth of cuts needed will be things that Minnesotans wouldn't stand for," said Thissen. Once we go through that debate I think we'll find that all options on the table. It's a bad time to raise revenues but there are some things to talk about that could close the gaps."

Specifically, Thissen suggests repackaging health services -- an enormous part of the state budget -- to be more efficient and locally controlled without cutting services themselves. This way of approaching the problem is indicative of Thissen's governing style.

"We lose the long term thinking when we go budget cycle to budget cycle," said Thissen.

Another large part of the budget, education, is also on Thissen's mind. Again, he suggests finding ways to tie funding to results without sacrificing the quality of education from region to region, or from educational level to level.

"We see an achievement gap between regions of this state and we need to make sure we have a seamless system from early childhood all the way up to college," said Thissen.

The combination of massive education, health and human services budget needs and a likely budget deficit creates a "frightening" set of circumstances for the state, one that lawmakers often put in terms of numbers, rather than people. He used the example of the closure of Hibbing's Golden Crest nursing home, where some families of high-needs residents have yet to resolve their loved ones' next move.

"At the state level we often think about problems from a 30,000-foot perspective, but we need to see what's happening on the ground," said Thissen. "That's true in health care and it's true in economic development."

On the jobs front, Thissen takes a localized view.

My economic plan is about empowering communities more," said Thissen. "There are differences among our regions that must be respected. The answer for Hibbing might be different than the answer for somewhere else."

Thissen talked about Iron Range Resources, the unique state agency that manages the Iron Range's production tax revenue collected from mining companies in lieu of local property taxes. The agency is also charged with leading economic development efforts on the Iron Range. Thissen explained his strategy for job growth on the Range and around the state.

"I don't believe in selling out a community just for economic development," said Thissen. He said job growth must be balanced with human impact, the environment and long term planning to find the best way to keep communities vital.

"We have to connect with the global economy ... [self-generating] job growth and innovation are key to this," said Thissen. In this regard, he said, the Iron Range is well positioned for the future.

Ultimately, Thissen is realistic about the challenges before him. While he'll be fundraising like any other candidate, his real focus will be in getting out to every corner of Minnesota to try to inspire the support of the future delegates and voters that will decide if his campaign is viable or an asterisk.

"I know there's going to be a lot of people in this race," said Thissen. "I won't be handed anything. This will be about me going out to build trust with people."

#### ANALYSIS:

I'm so strung out from the election that it's hard for me to think about 2010 yet. For some reason when I talked to Tom Bakk last spring the ongoing campaign masked the sad fact that we were two years away from the election we're talking about. I know the reality that successful campaigns need to start their fundraising and organizational work this year, but what's often lost as a result is the message and the mettle of the person running. In this regard, I am impressed with Thissen's approach to an early start. He is going to go on tour and listen, learning the on-the-ground problems of Minnesotans in a very geographically diverse state.

As a non-metro resident, I am always concerned when the words "Minneapolis" or "St. Paul" or "Name o' Suburb" appear after a legislator's name. My main worry is that the Iron Range and other rural parts of northern Minnesota will be treated like an eccentric relative at the reunion rather than what we really are: a really important eccentric relative who controls most of the state's minerals, water and wood products. More than once during the interview, Thissen spoke of a state government that recognized the geographic diversity of the state and the need for each area to have some way of influencing how state resources for its residents are used.

If Thissen really does get into the guts of every corner of the state and really does listen, he might have an outside chance. I described my talk with Thissen to a friend this way, and I'll stick with it now: He's so damn reasonable. As a health care expert, he strives and generally succeeds to avoid "wonkishness," showing a clear speaking style that makes sense -- especially to independent-minded anti-ideologues. The risk with being reasonable is that voters might lose him in the shuffle of loud, emotional, and better known candidates who might join this race. But the fact is that reasonable people make good governors. Thissen is experienced but not yet a career politician. He has shown something that I have found lacking at every level of government, from dog catcher up to President: curiosity. He wants to learn more about a problem before he decides what the best solution is. And he's also willing to talk about specific problems. We spent a good portion of our talk last week talking about the woes facing one Iron Range nursing home that is closing later this month, greatly affecting several dozen Iron Range families. Most candidates avoid specifics, but not Thissen.



As I've said, I'm staying neutral in this one for the time being. I'd like to know who's running and what they have to say before I make that decision. That said, there's a lot in Paul Thissen for people to like:

- He quoted my book ("[Overburden: Modern Life on the Iron Range](#)"). (OK, that one was just for me).
- He showed the skill to move up to become health committee chair quickly, but hasn't been around long enough to become stagnant.

- As someone I know at the capitol says, "He looks like a governor, talks like a governor and walks like a governor." His name ID may be low, but these qualities can't be replicated.
- He reaches out when he sees people affected by policy to find out what they think.
- He's shown a 21st century ability to use the internet functionally while balancing work in government.
- He passed on the chance to jump on buzz words like "green economy" and "jobs" and acknowledged that economic growth of any kind must be built the hard way, with innovation and investment.

But there is at the same time no avoiding the obvious: Thissen's challenge in this endeavor is great and he is not yet positioned for top tier status against heavyweights that might include Tim Walz, Margaret Anderson Kelliher or RT Rybak. That said, Thissen could get there. At the least, he is worth a good listen for any DFL delegate, voter or opinion leader. He would match up well (as would others) against Tim Pawlenty or another top GOP prospect.

For more information, see [Paul Thissen for Governor](#).

By Aaron J. Brown at 12:00 AM  

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