Access to Government Information and Informed Citizen Participation Study Proposal 08.01

1. Describe your project idea, including clearly defining the problems and specific policy questions to be addressed.

Access to government information, transparency in government, informed citizen participation -- emphasis on state and local information

2. Why is this problem important?

We are at a critical juncture in the information environment - diminution of investigative journalism in the print press, questions re. the authority of blogs, lack of "information literacy" among the general public, in the curriculum

3. How could the Citizens League make a unique contribution?

Raise the issue to a level of public awareness. Information is implicit, not perceived as a "tangible" topic. Still, it undergirds every public policy discussion.

4. What are prospects that project would yield recommendations that could be implemented and have a major impact on the problem?

This issue is probably still at the level of awareness raising -- sub-sets of the issue call for action -- data practices legislation, access to public records in digital format, seeing the policy implications of capital expenditures, i.e. on technology, understanding of the link between telecommunications and information access

5. Explain how this problem can be addressed by data, research, and reason? Identify probable sources for data and research.

There is considerable data and research. We would likely go to the federal level where numerous groups are working on related issues (OMBWatch,Open the Government and others) At the state/local level we are fortunate to have the Humphrey Institute (Steve Kelley in particular). The Minnesota Coalition on Government Information focuses its work on state and local information where there is less research, many opportunities for collecting, organizing and making accessible data and research. The application of REASON is undoubtedly the most important factor - again the problem is that information is implicit and an informed citizenry is given more lip service than action and fiscal support.

6. Explain how this proposal can be framed without partisan bias.

There is nothing partisan about the issue of information access/transparency in government. An informed citizenry is the bulwark of every political party - it should be the goal of advocacy groups. This is precisely the point, i.e. that good information, well understood, is at very core of a democratic society. And Minnesotans are losing group....

7. Why would this project be attractive to members?

The challenge is to articulate the issue in terms that coincide with the specific interests of the individual or group -- i.e. no one has an "information" issue - their issue is health care of transportation or....It's the information thread that needs to be made explicit. From there CL could move on to the strategies, agencies, funding, etc. issues..

8. How would this project reach out to under-represented segments of the community?

A key question -- Obviously language issues come first. But there are cultural issues as well. The Alive Broadway project is a good example of a mix of technology and footwork at work in an under-represented community. The work on the Digital Divide addresses some of the issues surrounding access to technology - the next step to move on to how underrepresented groups acquire information -- next is the most important, how to underrepresented groups PRESENT information. MTN was a step in the right direction, of course (not cut), and the Mpls Public Library took steps (not subsumed by HCL, of course). So there are people in the community who understand. They are just not supported to do what needs to be done.

9. What is the potential for making this issue visible to a broader public? Why?

Information access/transparency in gov't are not an easy sell. This requires serious time and commitment on the part of individuals, neighborhoods, advocacy groups. Still, if there is a general understanding that access to and application of good information is a PUBLIC GOOD the end result should and will be better decisions. So the challenge is to link info access/transparency to that end result.

10. What resources—funding, experts, etc. might be available to support this project?

HHH-Steve Kelley, Minnesota Coalition on Government Information, College of St. Catherine Library Science students, probably more esoteric groups such as archivists who work behind the scenes but who understand the processes of assuring that information actually reaches end users -- and others like MTN folks who understand how to provide the tools and training for people to share the information they have. There are countless elists and blogs that could be mined for people who understand both the issues and the technology.