

Transcript for The City Speak Podcast Season 3, Episode 12, “2021 Legislative Series: Addressing Racial Inequities”

[Podcast theme music begins]

Luke Fischer:

From the League of Minnesota Cities, this is The City Speak. I'm your special host for our legislative preview, Luke Fischer. Through this series of three podcasts, we'll cover topics on the economy, pandemic, and race equity. We hope to introduce you to our team of lobbyists at the Capitol and to help you be best prepared for the upcoming legislative session. We're recording today's podcast on Friday, January 8th, 2021. I think that that's an important thing to note recognizing that there's a lot in flux in the world right now. But today's recording will give you some good insight into the upcoming Minnesota legislative session.

Luke Fischer:

I'm joined today by two of our intergovernmental relations lobbyists, Irene Kao and Craig Johnson, [podcast theme music fades out] to have a conversation about the League's race equity work and how that'll play out at the Capitol. I want to give you an introduction quick of two of our important team members that are joining us today. The first is Irene Kao. She's been with the League since 2012, and she's been on our intergovernmental relations team since 2016. Her issue areas at the Capitol include data practices, open meeting law, land use, civil liability, and procurement, and she also serves as a legal counsel for the League's lobbying department. In other words, you're an attorney, right Irene?

Irene Kao:

[Laughs] Yep.

Luke Fischer:

She's also served on the League's race equity team, that started in 2017. Irene was born and raised in Fergus Falls and brings a unique perspective as an Asian-American growing up in greater Minnesota. Irene, thanks for being here today.

Irene Kao:

Happy to be here.

Luke Fischer:

Wonderful. And Craig Johnson is also joining us. Craig has been a member of the League's IGR team since 2003. He covers environmental, energy, and land use issues that affect all Minnesota cities. He has served on the League's internal race equity team and works with the state ethnic councils on behalf of the League and brings an important perspective to this conversation as well. Craig, thanks for being here.

Craig Johnson:

Great to be here.

Luke Fischer:

All right. So, I want to kick this conversation off, uh, but to do it, uh, understanding that we're going to talk a little bit today about race equity and what that means at the Capitol. I think it's important for us to

frame up, why it's a topic, generally, for us as an organization and what it means for us. And Irene, I was wondering if you could maybe give us a little bit of background about the League's race equity work and, and where it's at and how long we've been, we've been dealing with this topic.

Irene Kao:

I would say the first foray that the League's work started actually in 2016 when we were starting to coordinate with GARE, the Government Alliance on Race and Equity. We were helping coordinate a cohort that was happening in Minnesota. Then 2017 was actually when the League itself had a team that participated through that cohort.

Luke Fischer:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Irene Kao:

And so, we started to do more intentional work, not just internally, but externally, too. How could we help cities engage around race equity and racial disparities that might be affecting their communities that are unique, no matter what city you are throughout the state? There are some cities who are able to participate through GARE, but then we tried to scale it for smaller cities as well. And, actually, most recently we had a cohort, that was in southwest Minnesota that was more tailored to smaller cities.

Luke Fischer:

We've heard about this from city officials across the state. I've heard it firsthand and it's something that city leaders really seem to be taking seriously and are leaning into right now, uh, which is a good thing to see. So, Craig, understanding that race equity is an important topic for cities right now, how has the League developed its policies that it's taking to the Capitol that relate to race equity?

Craig Johnson:

It's actually been a rather interesting and pretty involved process. As Irene mentioned before, we've had discussions in the individual cities that have been working on this for quite a while. But what really started to develop, especially after the incidence with the killing of George Floyd over the last summer and the resulting worldwide reaction to that, was our cities realizing we kind of needed to have a little more formal involvement by the League.

Luke Fischer:

Yeah.

Craig Johnson:

And, so we have our policy development process that happens every summer; it was happening exactly at the same time that all of this was going on.

Luke Fischer:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Craig Johnson:

And our members actually asked that we form a group to look at drafting a racial equity policy on behalf of the League. So, cities and staff from cities, and elected officials from cities all over the state, a group of 20, got together, put together a draft policy that was brought back to the committee, got amended a little bit there, sent to our board. And, now that's part of the League's legislative platform. So, that really gives us a new focus ability to do what was in that policy, which is to ask the state to play a much stronger role in helping cities to be able to address these equity issues and, and identify where they are.

Luke Fischer:

I think it's worth putting a point of emphasis on — you said that the committee that worked on this was a group of 20 city officials from across the state. But when any legislative policy is adopted by the League, it sort of starts in that policy development process. And then, I was wondering if you could maybe just touch on the next steps that, that doesn't just maybe happen in isolation, but that there are other places for input along the way as well.

Craig Johnson:

That's exactly right.

Luke Fischer:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Craig Johnson:

We formed that group of 20 that spent several hours in meetings working out the language. Many, many emails back and forth with language suggestions and, and lots of deep thought and, and very heartfelt discussion. That then came back to the larger group, which is the policy committee, which added their input. That then was presented to the League's board of directors and put on public notice for all of our cities on the League's website. We did get feedback from a number of cities with comments on that policy. And then after all of that has been coalesced, the League's board had a discussion in November where they adopted our new policies, and among those policies was this new racial equity policy.

Luke Fischer:

From a member perspective, it's probably reassuring to hear all of the intention and thoughtfulness that went behind the policy development process as it relates to this topic. So, one of the questions I have then, is how does this play out at the Capitol? We've got a race equity policy that has been carefully developed, it's been carefully crafted, but what does that actually mean when we go across the street to the Capitol at St. Paul or when we tune into a Zoom meeting, at least in these times?

Craig Johnson:

A good example is a meeting that Irene and I were both in yesterday with a chair of a house committee who said, "You know, one of the things I'm expecting is we're going to have a lot of discussion on race equity this year. Do you guys have suggestions on that? What does the League think about this?" Previously, we would have really only been able to say, "We think it's a really important issue." [Laughs]

Irene Kao:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Luke Fischer:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Craig Johnson:

Now, we have a policy that says, "Actually here's our policy language," Which we sent them and said, "We actually are asking the state to look at these following areas as places where we need to see better assistance from the state to help cities deal with this." And, so we now have that tool. I think the other thing that has already happened in meetings with state agencies with me, as they are looking at what they're working on, a number of the administrative agencies have racial equity as one of the priorities for what they're trying to address on behalf of the governor in their, in their legislative agendas. And we are now able to say, "Tell us what you're planning there. We can let you know how that works for cities. And we want to be a partner with you on this, not just reacting to your proposal."

Irene Kao:

Yeah.

Craig Johnson:

So, I think that's a pretty substantial difference.

Irene Kao:

One of the things that specifically gets called out in our policy is not only to collect that type of data, but to disaggregate that data, right? So, how can you have data that will be meaningful so that you know what it means for your Black residents or Asian residents or, you know, anything else so that you can know the impact of either employment, or housing, or all of those things that are collected at the state level. And in order for a city to make meaning of that, to not have these numbers that you can't really apply to your own community, those are some of the asks that we're making at the Legislature.

Luke Fischer:

Yeah. More information is always a good thing and information that's more specific and is certainly informative, I know, to the decisions that city officials are often asked to make. So, I'm wondering maybe if each of you could give us an insight into a policy area, a little bit more specifically, coming into the session where you think that you'll see some interplay with our race equity policy and, and a real question that the Legislature is going to wrestle with in the session.

Irene Kao:

We know it's, it's going to show up in issues of policing, of employment, of housing, and so those are areas that naturally will be part of the conversation. And honestly, in the conversations we've had with legislators now it's come up.

Luke Fischer:

So, those areas make a lot of sense to me, employment, policing, and housing. But there are probably some more less obvious areas where that may come up and Craig, I'm wondering if you can give us a sampling of other areas in which these questions are sort of part of the legislative process and places where we'll be asked to weigh on.

Craig Johnson:

So, one quick one is about renewable energy and energy efficiency and has been heavily focused on how do we get solar panels on houses, electric car infrastructure. But when you actually start looking at who benefits from all of those programs, it's people who own their own houses, own electric cars, and have a place in their own home where they can park them to charge them.

Craig Johnson:

And that completely misses people who maybe live in apartments, or people who live four units in a house and do not have off-street parking. And so, as we're looking at all of these kinds of issues in cities, if we want to help all our residents we need to be looking at a way that affects a greater part of the public and gets to those people who aren't at that same level of the economy. And very often, that is heavily slanted toward our non-white residents who are less likely to own houses, less likely to own cars, more likely to be reliant on other types of transportation.

Craig Johnson:

Um, another quick example is when we look at where projects are sited, there are requirements when we do our permitting and when proposers decide what they're going to do, to look at the impacts of that for environmental impacts in particular.

Luke Fischer:

Sure.

Craig Johnson:

Federally, there are requirements called environmental justice that you're supposed to look and make sure you are not unfairly impacting people who do not have the same means to represent themselves in something. So racially is the biggest, but also economically.

Craig Johnson:

The state is looking at having a much more involved role in having that be part of decision-making, and our cities frequently play a role in reviewing those environmental assessment worksheets for projects. So, it is something where we're going to be involved in a way we probably haven't been involved before. And we're going to be asked to give our input on how to make that work best for cities.

Luke Fischer:

That's really interesting to hear some of the less obvious ways that we'll encounter this issue at the Capitol this year. And I think that, that probably just underscores the importance of the League having a clear position that Irene and Craig, you guys have both described well through our conversation today. So, if members have questions throughout the legislative session, if they have ideas, if they have input, what's a good way for them to connect with the League, with our legislative policies, who do they reach out to and what should they know?

Irene Kao:

So, they could reach out to any of us. I think that we try to make ourselves as accessible as possible. Definitely go to our website, if you look under the advocacy tab you're going to see any of us. You could reach out to Craig, to myself or actually anyone on our team and we'll be able to get you connected with the person who is working on the issue that you're interested in.

Craig Johnson:

And I think also we, we have regular communication that comes out related to our issues. So, the Cities Bulletin is free. During the session it's a weekly thing and all you have to do is go to the League's website, give an email address, and you're going to start getting it.

Irene Kao:

And you can always follow us on Twitter, where, if you want up-to-the-moment updates, feel free to do that. And I would encourage you actually to follow our entire team, because you're going to see what's happening at the Capitol.

Luke Fischer:

Members, it's important to know that our team is available and ready for you at any time and they are a very accessible group of people to work with. So, with that, Craig Johnson and Irene Kao, thank you very much for making time to talk a little bit about our race equity work, both at the League and at the Capitol, coming into this legislative session. And thanks for the work that you're going to do at the Capitol this year on this topic, and for your advocacy on behalf of all of our members.

Irene Kao:

Happy to do it.

Craig Johnson:

Yep.

[Podcast theme music begins]

Luke Fischer:

At The City Speak, we always like to conclude each episode [podcast theme music fades out] with a few key takeaways for members to pay attention to. And I think our conversation with both Craig and Irene highlighted a couple of important things that I would note. First of all, is that race equity is an incredibly important topic for our cities and it's an important topic for the League of Minnesota Cities, and it's something that we'll continue to prioritize as we come into the upcoming legislative session.

Luke Fischer:

I think point number two is that questions around race equity are obvious at the state Capitol when you think about housing, policing, or the economy, but they also come up in less obvious ways as Craig discussed — through environmental policies and other areas.

Luke Fischer:

[Podcast theme music begins] I think the third point I would make coming out of this conversation is that our IGR staff are ready to answer questions and help you navigate the state Capitol this year and all you have to do is reach to ask a question. So, with that listeners, I'd like to thank you so much for making time to tune in. Don't hesitate to reach out if you've got a question and be well.

[Podcast theme music ends]