

A Short History of MCRGO

by David K. Felbeck

Synopsis of a presentation at the Scholars' Summit of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy
November 10, 2001

Abstract

The ten-year struggle for concealed firearms reform in Michigan represents a classic example of non-partisan grass-roots activism. The practices of unsuccessful groups are analyzed and contrasted with the evolution of the Michigan Coalition for Responsible Gun Owners (MCRGO) and its winning strategy.

Early history

In 1925 a white mob in Detroit attacked the home of Dr. Ossian Sweet, a black physician who had just moved into an all-white neighborhood. (Tim O'Brien, *Detroit News*, Mar. 4, 1999) The situation got out of hand, even though a dozen police officers were present who cordoned off the area. Shots were fired, both from the mob and from the house, and one member of the mob was killed. Subsequently, everyone except Dr. Sweet's wife was tried for murder, but after a seven-week trial, the judge ruled that a verdict could not be reached and declared a mistrial. The prosecutor decided to re-try only Henry Sweet, Ossian's brother, who had freely admitted that he had fired a gun. Clarence Darrow, who came to Detroit to take this case, took the view that this was justifiable self defense, and the second all-white jury, after only three hours of deliberation, declared Henry Sweet not guilty.

The Ku Klux Klan subsequently lobbied the Legislature and in 1927 won the passage of PA 372, which gave local county gun boards

discretionary authority to grant concealed carry licenses only to those who in their opinion had a need to defend themselves. This "may issue" law gave wide latitude to the gun boards, and resulted in practices varying from issuance only to police officers and friends and political supporters of the board to a few counties where every honest person could obtain a concealed carry license. Thus the origin of the 1927 "carry concealed weapons (CCW)" law was pure racism.

Preliminary efforts at reform

In 1993 State Representative (and former Senator) Alan Cropsey submitted a bill designed to reform the inconsistent and unfair practices of the local county gun boards. The essential feature of this bill required that each gun board "shall issue" a concealed carry license to every qualified applicant, thus removing the onerous discretionary feature from the law. Although hearings were held, these bills languished under the control of the Democratic leadership in the House.

Again, in 1995 Representative Cropsey submitted a package of "shall issue" bills, of which HB 4720 was the centerpiece. Hearings were held before the House Judiciary Committee in December of that year, and many people testified in its favor. Susanna Gratia-Hupp, who saw her parents murdered in the Luby's Café massacre in Killeen, Texas, while she had a 9-mm pistol in her vehicle outside, gave moving testimony to the value of self-defense. Even though the Democratic leadership promised to bring the bill to a vote, it never happened.

At that time Michigan had several disparate state-level pro-firearm groups. One of these organizations took the view that all firearms laws violate Michigan's Constitution of 1963, Article 1 Section 6: "Every person has a right to keep and bear arms for the defense of himself and the state."

They actively opposed HB 4720 because it infringed on the Constitution, and they supported camo-clad people with sandwich boards parading in the halls and hearing rooms of the House

Several factors began to influence this situation in 1996. One was the stunning success of a Spokane, Washington group called "Noban" in unseating the then-Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives because of his anti-firearms views. This group was one of the first in the country to make effective use of the Internet for communicating with members and in generating grass-roots activism. Several pro-firearms Internet groups in Michigan existed for a time, but none of these became important forces in the movement in Michigan. Most of these groups suffered the same credibility problem: instead of working with the Legislature, they opposed virtually everything that was proposed, taking an "all or nothing" stance. The result was almost always nothing.

Founding of MCRGO

It was against this background that eight concerned firearms activists gathered together at 8:00 p.m. on Nov. 25, 1996 at Finley's restaurant in Lansing. The Agenda for this formative meeting, prepared in advance by Ross Dykman, included the formula which the organization has followed rather closely ever since: "Support pro-gun legislation.; support pro-gun legislators; force change in local gun boards; network with other pro-gun organizations, clubs, etc.; events; media; expansion."

At a second meeting on Jan. 31, 1997, the organization's name, Michigan Coalition for Responsible Gun Owners, was decided upon, along with the mission statement: "To promote the responsible, legal ownership and usage of firearms through education and legislative action." Emphasis on "responsible" has been a key to the

Coalition's bipartisan success, with particular focus on working with the Legislature to craft laws that represent improvement over current law, even if short of perfection. Later in 1997, Carol Bambery, an attorney, helped in writing Bylaws and in getting the organization incorporated. Everyone agreed that membership growth was critical, so they began to man tables at gun shows and any event where they believed they could persuade people to join. It was this small group and their dedication of time and energy that carried the organization in its early stages.

Growth of political activism

The founders saw clearly, after the difficulties with the Cropsey bills under antagonistic House leadership, that the only reliable way to assure meaningful firearms reform, including subjects beyond CCW reform, was to elect legislators sympathetic to the rights of firearms owners. MCRGO therefore created three entities: MCRGO, a Michigan non-profit; MCRGO Political Action Committee (PAC), a registered lobbying group; and the MCRGO Foundation, a 501(c)(3) organization for educational purposes.

MCRGO from its earliest days created local chapters of single or multiple-county size whenever membership warranted. The key in every case was to find a person willing to assume the responsibility who would vigorously pursue the aims of the Coalition. The Bylaws created an elected nine-member Board of Directors which set state-wide policy, but the key to success was and is the activism of the local chapters.

Communication was vital to spreading the word that an organization existed that would work with the Legislature for the good of Michigan's firearms owners. In about 1998, MCRGO started an Internet talk list, to which anyone (member or not) could contribute anything regarding Michigan

firearms rights. In 1999 MCRGO created its first website, www.mcrgo.org, which to date has experienced almost a half million hits.

The existence of some 500 gun and shooting clubs in Michigan represented a potent source of support. MCRGO, still in its infancy, has already brought over 60 of these clubs into its fold as MCRGO affiliated clubs, providing them with access to the MCRGO website for posting events and maintaining rapid communication regarding sometimes fast-moving events in Lansing.

The election of 1998

In early 1998, the membership of MCRGO had reached about 3500. Before the election the House was split, 58 Democrats to 52 Republicans. Three districts held by Democrats looked like close races: 85th District in Shiawassee County, 94th District in Saginaw County, and 107th District in Eastern Upper Peninsula. In each case, MCRGO contributed funds to the Republican candidates, sent in full-time volunteers when possible, organized town-hall meetings for the candidates, and worked to get out the vote. Each of these three districts was won by the Republican candidate by a margin of less than 400 votes. These three victories were crucial in turning the House around to 58 Republicans and 52 Democrats, and Representative Chuck Perricone was elected Speaker. He never forgot what MCRGO had helped achieve.

Success of CCW reform

Alan Cropsey was term-limited out of the House in 1998, so Representative Mike Green submitted a CCW-reform bill, HB 4530, in early 1999. The publication of John Lott's book, *More Guns Less Crime*, and his scholarly testimony before the House in 1998 surely were instrumental in

educating the Legislature on the relevant facts regarding the benefits of concealed carry to every honest citizen.

With the invaluable assistance of NRA and MUCC representatives working with MCRGO, in mid-1999 both the Senate and House CCW-reform bills were passed by substantial majorities in their respective houses. These bills were passed the same week as the multiple shootings in Columbine, Colorado. While concealed carry reform was and is completely unrelated to these shootings, the public and media hysteria scared the Legislature away from taking further action. So there the matter rested, largely because of pressure from Governor Engler.

MCRGO continued its successful efforts at growth, and by the spring of 2000 had grown to some 4000 members and maintained almost constant pressure on Speaker Perricone to appoint a House-Senate conference committee to complete passage of this legislation.

Finally, following the 2000 election, Speaker Perricone and House Majority Leader Dan DeGrow appointed a joint conference committee to put together a single CCW-reform bill acceptable to both houses. Speaker Perricone asked representatives of NRA, MUCC, and MCRGO to sit on a preliminary drafting committee to work out acceptable compromises to this legislation. This committee worked informally with the Conference Committee during the final drafting of the bill. On December 12 and 13, 2000, again working closely with NRA and MUCC, some twenty volunteers from MCRGO worked the lobbies of both houses in support of the final version of the legislation, which passed both houses by substantial margins on December 13, 2000. Many legislators reported that they had never before experienced such a large number of volunteers working actively for a bill. The

Governor signed the bill into law on Jan. 2, 2001 as 2000 PA 381.

The referendum against PA 381

Attorney General Jennifer Granholm and Wayne County Prosecutor Michael Duggan were subsequently instrumental in promoting a referendum intended to negate the CCW-reform bill through a vote in the general election of 2002. Using substantial funds from out of state, this anti-CCW group obtained the required number of signatures and submitted the referendum to the Secretary of State. Because PA 381 contained two different appropriations for state agencies and was thus not susceptible to a referendum according to the Michigan Constitution, MUCC and MCRGO filed a lawsuit to stop the Secretary of State from proceeding with the referendum. Following negative rulings at the lower courts, the issue was appealed by the plaintiffs to the Michigan Supreme Court, which on Friday, June 29 found for the plaintiffs in a 4-3 decision. Thus PA 381 took effect the following Monday, July 2.

The anti-self-protection (ASP) forces then threatened to file an initiative to negate PA 381, because an initiative is the constitutionally proper instrument for this purpose. The reason that a referendum was initially attempted was because acceptance of the referendum by the Secretary of State would have put the legislation on hold until the November 2002 election. Had this group attempted an initiative instead, which would not have halted the legislation, they would have faced the possible difficulty of explaining to the voters why their dire predictions of general disaster from this legislation had not occurred during the sixteen months between the onset of CCW reform and the November 2002 election. After observing the first three months of shall-issue CCW experience without any firearms disasters, in the fall of 2001 the ASPs stated publicly that they will not attempt

this initiative to negate PA 381, citing loss of their out-of-state funding sources. Only time will tell whether these are their real intentions.

Summary

The existence of a widespread and well organized grass-roots movement such as MCRGO exerts a strong influence on elected officials to an extent that is disproportionate to the organization's numbers. It is clear that CCW reform occurred because NRA, MUCC, and MCRGO worked very closely together throughout this period. But without MCRGO it probably would not have happened. This experience demonstrates the high level of effectiveness wrought by a relatively small group of volunteers dedicated to a cause. Their success is all the more remarkable when examined in light of the almost universal opposition to CCW reform by the media of Michigan, in newspapers as well as in television coverage. The top leadership of most police organizations, including the Michigan State Police, the Michigan Sheriffs' Association, and the Michigan Prosecutors' Association also vigorously opposed this legislation.

Following passage of PA 381, MCRGO experienced phenomenal growth, and by the fall of 2001 had over 23,000 members. The future presents large demands on any group that is so successful. Michigan has many archaic and unnecessary firearms-control laws which demand change. The continued efforts of many committed and hard-working volunteers hold the promise that the organization can continue to serve Michigan's firearms owners as well as all of its citizens.

MCRGO Telephone: 517-484-2746
Website: www.mcrgo.org