



Civic Caucus

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Metropolitan Council Position Report

Statement by the Civic Caucus To the Governor, Legislature and General Public Concerning the Future of the Metropolitan Council

The question of the future of the Metropolitan Council is being brought into focus by two recent events—a bus drivers strike and publication of a report from the Center for the American Experiment (CAE). These events should produce a needed review of the Metropolitan Council and stimulate a look back to why the Council was created in the first place. They also help spotlight a 2003 report of the Civic Caucus concerning the Council's role and the state's role in transportation.

We concur with Peter Bell, chair of the Metropolitan Council and James L. Hetland, Jr., first chair of the Metropolitan Council and one of the original proponents of an effective regional agency, that now is an appropriate time to reconfirm the need for a regional body representing the citizens of our metropolitan area.

The Civic Caucus believes the need for the Council in 2004 is essentially the same as it was in 1967 when the Council was established: certain crucial problems of the Twin Cities metropolitan area are beyond responsibility, capability, and authority of existing units of government in the area.

Three principles that were central to early success of the Metropolitan Council remain valid today.

First, the Council was given limited authority[^] not home rule. The Council is always subject to control by the Legislature. Its powers only extend to what the Legislature allows.

Second, the Council was given the authority to make decisions by its representation. The Legislature sensed the Council must have an effective voting system. Its members are appointed by the Governor from districts of approximately the same population; they do not represent specific cities, counties or other units of government. Its chair is appointed at-large by the Governor.

Thus Minnesota made a choice that has escaped most other metro areas, the distinction between a mechanism for reaching consensus *among units of government* of the metropolitan area and a mechanism for consensus *among citizens of the area*. We have both. The interests of local governments are represented through metropolitan associations of municipal[^] school and county officials. The Metropolitan Council represents the interests of citizens on issues of metro concern. Both are essential. But they are different.

Third, the Council was created to concentrate on policy issues. The Council wasn't created because local units of government and separate regional agencies couldn't do the building and managing job. They could. But policy decisions were lacking. Making policy for the seven-county metropolitan area was, and has remained, the Metro Council's primary job. Events of the last few months illustrate the need for Metropolitan Council leadership. At the very moment that the CAE was recommending that the Metropolitan Council be abolished.

26 proposals for solving the stadium question-were advanced. Interestingly, not one proposal came from the Metropolitan Council. Surely, the Legislature would have a better basis for action on the stadium question in 2004 if it had instructed the Council to present a formal, representative, responsible consensus on behalf of the seven-county area- At a minimum the infrastructure costs related to location could be considered as a part of the public dollar support.

That the urbanized portion of the Twin Cities area extends far beyond seven counties doesn't diminish the importance of the Legislature obtaining policy proposals from the Council. The vast majority of the region's population continues to be confined to the seven-county area. In 2002, the seven-county area represented 84 percent of total population of a 17-county metropolitan area that included two Wisconsin counties. A great amount of land within the seven counties still is undeveloped.

The Legislature ought to undertake a major review of the future of the Council, beginning with an interim commission between the 2004 and 2005 sessions.

The Legislature will need^ responsible^ informed analysis and proposals. Civic, business, labor, and other community organizations, including the Citizens League, chambers of commerce^ the Minnesota Business Partnership^ the Minnesota AFL-CIO^ Growth and Justice, and the Itasca Project, ought to look at the Council's future. Leadership from non-governmental groups is critical. Organizations representing local units and agencies of government can be expected to weigh in, but the Metropolitan Council's main constituency i&the people of the region^ not other governments.

The Civic Caucus believes one aspect of the Council ought to be changed and a second ought to be preserved.

First, the Legislature should change the Council by removing its direct operating authority and making it exclusively a policy body.

Second, the Legislature ought to preserve the current method of choosing Council members from districts of equal population. That principle has enabled the Council to retain its independence and to maintain its credibility with the Legislature and the public. The Legislature should reject proposals for the Council to represent county and city governments.

The Metropolitan Council can function effectively and not be a threat to existing governmental service units if it is truly a generalist policy body and not a competing operating agency. The Council must be the advocate for citizens of the region with the Chair the spokesperson for their interests.

In 1967 the Legislature was very specific in keeping the Council out of day-to-day operations. The Legislature assigned operations to subordinate regional agencies, such as the Metropolitan Sewer Board and the Metropolitan Transit Commission, and gave the Council budget and planning control over them. However, in later years the Legislature transferred operational authority from the

subordinate agencies to the Council, which-as founders of the Council had warned-significantly diminished-the Council's leadership on area-wide policy questions. The Council now is mired in the day-to-day business of overseeing the operations of its sewer system, its transit system, and housing concerns. Making policy proposals to the Legislature no longer is its main job. A legislative interim commission can devise a workable plan to disengage the Council from operations.

We have a separate recommendation for metropolitan transportation.

Last year the Civic Caucus in a 19-page report concluded that many problems of the Twin Cities area can be resolved within the seven counties^ hut not transportation The territory from which a growing number of people commute to jobs in the seven-county area extends far beyond the borders of those seven counties. Clearly,- a rearrangement of transportation policy and operations among the various parties, including MnDOT and the Metropolitan Council, is needed. We recommend that a Governor-appointed- Transportation Commission be created to handle major policy and operational aspects of transit and other ride sharing^ highways and parking facilities over the entire 17-county Twin Cities area.

The Civic Caucus is a long-standing group whose members have followed public policy issues in the Twin Cities metropolitan area in various capacities for more than 50 years. Its membership includes a former chair of the Metropolitan Council, a former Metropolitan Council staff member, the chair of a Citizens League committee that originally recommended establishment of the Metropolitan Council in 1967, and two persons who were on the staff of the Citizens League committee in 1967.

The Civic Caucus gathers weekly to discuss issues of general interest and periodically shares its conclusions and recommendations with a wider audience. Recently the Civic Caucus re focused its attention on the Metropolitan Council, one of the great innovations in local government structure in America. The Caucus has issued five reports in the past two years: (1) US government response to the 9/11 terrorist attack, (2) recommended US government policy for handling the Middle East crisis^ (3) revitalization of the Citizens League, (4) Twin Cities traffic congestion^ and (5), this report concerning the Metropolitan Council. Members of the Caucus are Verne C. Johnson, chair; Charles ff, Clay, Paul Gilje, James L. Holland, Jr., Gene Preiss, John Sampson, and Clarence Shallbetter.