

STATEMENT BY THE CITIZENS LEAGUE  
ON THE JUNE 12 REFERENDUM ON  
CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS IN MINNEAPOLIS

1. We recommend the voters of Minneapolis vote "No" June 12 on the proposed amendment to the charter, which would provide for referendum on city capital projects costing \$15 million or more.

Our recommendation is not intended as, and must not be taken as, a criticism of the right of citizens to petition for changes in organization or procedures in city government.

However, we have serious reservations about this amendment, for two reasons:

The proposed amendment is unclear what is to be the definition of a 'project.' Judgments differ. The truth is that nobody knows for certain. This is true even with respect to presently proposed (or ongoing) capital improvements. Its effect is bound to be less clear, still, with respect to improvements that may be proposed five, ten or more years from now.

Second, we believe the referendum is an undesirable and ineffective approach to the problem of increased responsiveness by government. It does not really provide a change in the way the city government is organized, or operated. It merely provides -- after the fact -- a project-by-project review of the major capital budget. As such, it is not a sound way to increase the responsiveness of city officials to the residents. The referendum provides for a wholly inadequate form of citizen participation in major city decisions. Participation is needed before decisions are made, as we noted in a 1970 Citizens League report. Other changes which would focus responsibility for the initiation of proposals in the executive side, and free up the legislative side to react in response to the voters' wishes, are also needed. The proposed amendment fails to address these deeper issues. If passed, it would, as we noted with the similar proposal in 1970 "provide for review, but make informed judgment more difficult. It would not involve people in decisions before they are made, but largely permit them to act only after the fact."

2. We recommend further that the City Council clarify the issue being voted on June 12 by clearly eliminating additional consideration of the proposed downtown stadium.

The continuing confusion about whether the June 12 vote is, or is not, on the stadium must be dispelled by eliminating it from the discussion.

3. Some positive steps must be taken to dispel the distrust and lack of public confidence in city government.

The petition for a vote June 12 is the second such petition in three years. They are the most formal manifestations of an underlying distrust which reflects itself also in public hearings, in public opinion surveys, and in various forms of organized and partly organized protest.

We believe that, if Minneapolis is going to be able to do successfully the difficult things that must be done in administering and rebuilding an older, developed central city, it is critically important to take positive steps to strengthen the mechanism by which the City secures the consent of the governed.

These steps require a more substantial response to a much deeper problem than provided in the proposed referendum.

4. We recommend that the Minneapolis Charter Commission move immediately to consider positive solutions to the problems of city decision-making.

The Commission should move quickly to consider limited changes, aimed at strengthening the representative institutions in city government and mechanisms for participation by citizens in major decisions that could be voted on in the general election November 1973. The Citizens League is prepared to assist the Commission in every way in its review of the sources of citizen dissatisfaction with Minneapolis government, and in its search for constructive changes.

## BACKGROUND

1. On more than 11 occasions since 1954 the Citizens League has dealt with the issue of taxation and borrowing policy for Minneapolis government. Without exception, its studies have affirmed the long-standing policy of the City Council -- as an elected unit of general government -- issuing bonds without a referendum. This function, not unlike approval of the operating budget and levying of taxes, should remain the responsibility of elected representatives of general government. On those occasions in 1960 and 1963 when the Citizens League itself developed comprehensive proposals for the revision of Minneapolis city government (the CIVIC charter) it proposed the issuance of bonds by the City Council, by the customary two-thirds vote.
2. The underlying problem -- of which the proposal for referenda is a symptom -- is the structure which prevents the City Council from performing the normal function of a representative government.

- \* The Council, as we noted in our 1969 report "Who Will Help Us Get Action?", is trying to be both the executive and the legislative body at the same time. The City Coordinator, who functions as the Chief Administrative Officer, with responsibility for obtaining the necessary information and for proposing major programs, is appointed by and responsible to the City Council. The Council, therefore -- none of whose members is elected citywide -- inevitably becomes the body required to take the initiative politically. The Mayor, on the other hand, who is elected citywide, has limited ability to propose programs, and tends therefore to react to proposals developed by the Council.

The consequence of this arrangement is that the City lacks any clear center for policy initiative and political leadership which can be held responsible to the people. And the City Council is -- because it must play, de facto, the leadership role -- inhibited in the performance of its legislative, policy-making function as representative of the people.

We have concluded on many occasions that someone other than the City Council must be made responsible for proposing budgets, capital improvements and other city programs. The City Council could, then, act as the representative legislative body.

- \* A second fundamental change needed to insure responsiveness and communication between citizens and their elected local representatives was recommended in our report "Sub-Urbs in the City."

This report recognized in 1970 the increasing trouble the City was experiencing in obtaining the "consent of the governed" for the difficult things that must be done in the city. In it we called for the establishment of community councils, made up of representatives elected from small districts in the neighborhoods, who could function to review, comment on and advise the City Council about proposals affecting them. Such a formal mechanism, we suggested, would permit and encourage involvement of people in the city in an early and meaningful way in decisions about the programs and changes that must take place.

3. We present no specific proposals for structural change at this time. If the Charter Commission will begin looking at the deeper sources of citizen dissatisfaction, we are prepared to assist them in every possible way, so that a positive solution can be presented to the voters in the November 1973 general election.

In moving to complete its work, we suggest the committee give additional thought to four issues and possibly reconsider recommendations on them. These include:

1. The process of selecting representatives to the community councils.
2. The process for electing members.
3. The legal framework for the community councils.
4. The recognition of community councils by other units of local government.

1. Process for selecting members -- We believe the structure of community councils should make city government better and easier. . . not worse and harder. In this respect we have some questions about the opening up of an enormous amount of participation without settling the question of how we are going to get local decisions and local direction. The election of members of a community council from small districts within the boundaries of a community would be a preferable way of achieving this objective. It would result in a more effective representation, be more workable, better enable decisions to be made, and provide a more visible forum of local resident members who gain legitimacy in speaking for the community through the elective process.

The concern by the committee for involving organizations who have long had an interest in the improvement of their community is a reasonable one. It undoubtedly partly explains the attractiveness of the committee's recommendation that community councils be made up of representatives from organizations. This approach, however, has a number of shortcomings. These include:

-- Members of the community council will be required to wear two hats - as a representative of an organization and as a member of the community council. This will likely present some problems for the community council, as the loyalty and the primary responsibility of its members are likely to rest more with the organization from which they come than with the new council. Many individuals are likely to find they do not have sufficient time to devote to both jobs. With their first priority largely to their original organization, participation in the activities of the council may well be damaged.

The problem of dual membership and loyalties and the limited time members can spend in any given activity has been recognized in recent changes in the composition of other governmental bodies. The members of the Metropolitan Council are now appointed directly by the Governor instead of as representatives from local units of government, as was its predecessor--the Metropolitan Planning Commission. Similarly, the Higher Education Coordinating Committee now consists of lay citizen members appointed by the Governor, instead of representatives from institutions of higher education.

-- The federation approach to membership diffuses responsibility for decisions about important local community issues and the ability of individual citizens to be heard. Too frequently, members of federations are likely to either postpone deliberation on issues until they can go back and forth from their organizations, or, in an effort to make decisions, will infrequently communicate with the executive committee of their organization. . . and even less with their general membership. This dilemma will be difficult to resolve with the likelihood that, as issues become more important and decisions are imminent, the second alternative will be more frequently followed. This can only result in serious doubt about whom the individual members are in fact speaking for or representing.

-- The open-ended federation approach. . .and its resulting large membership. . . will either result in long delays in getting decisions, or result in a further diffusion of responsibility. The federation approach suggested in the report appears to call for a large number of organizations to send representatives who will be voting members of the community council. As the number of these members increases, however, it will be difficult to simply conduct routine business and to get decisions made or to provide timely direction to the city or to developers. This condition will either result in postponement and delays with their accompanying frustrations to all involved in this process, or lead to the creation of an executive committee. Such a committee, however, will only further diffuse responsibility which is already at least two-three steps removed from the average resident.

--- Difficulties will be experienced in constituting a federation and maintaining it. A considerable amount of time must be spent on organizational matters such as the definition of who is eligible for membership, the weighting of votes, the filling of vacancies, and the continual maintenance of membership in a federation. This not only would require a number of meetings in the early formation of councils, but also is likely to be an issue at many of the subsequent meetings when the federation, however constituted, begins to function. In addition, a considerable amount of energy will be devoted to keeping the federation together. . .energy which will be drained off of attention to more substantive issues of concern to the community.

We suggest the committee seriously consider a possible change to its present recommendation on membership of the community councils as follows:

- (1) Provide that at least one representative on the community council be elected from each of the identified neighborhoods within a community council's boundary in addition to the three officers elected at large.

Concern for involving organizations within the community in a council whose basic membership is elected could be accommodated in either or both of the following ways:

- (a) Direct solicitation of nominees for positions on the community councils from existing neighborhood and community organizations such as member organizations in the Association of St. Paul Communities, the PTAs, the Project Area Committees, and the Target Advisory Councils.
- (b) Expansion of the membership of the community councils from the basic elective number by including additional members who represent organizations or interests selected at an organizational meeting. The total number of these organizational members, however, should not exceed the total number of elective members.

A community council composed of an increased number of elected members coming from neighborhoods and from within the entire community, plus organizational representatives not to exceed the number of elected members, would have the following benefits:

- \* Insure that local neighborhood concerns would be present in the larger community discussions and decisions.
- \* Insure the size of a community council would be manageable. . .thereby improving the possibility of getting community decisions and direction when there is an enormous amount of participation. It would also greatly reduce the necessity for creating an executive board which would further diffuse representation of local residents. Finally, a manageable-sized council would increase the visibility of its actions and decisions.

Under the 11 community council alternative, if organizational representatives were added to a community council in numbers not to exceed the elective representatives the largest community council would consist of 22-25 members and the smallest 12-15.

- \* Substantial additional opportunities for participation by people and organizations interested in particular programs or issues would be broadened well beyond those now available. This could be accomplished by means of task forces or standing committees of the community council. Such target or subject committees might well be established to deal with specific programs such as urban renewal or school and park programs which affect only a portion of the community. Committees could also be organized around functional areas such as housing, community business and shopping activities, education, recreation, health, transportation, safety, etc.

2. Process for electing members -- We believe it is preferable in the long run for elections of members to the community councils to be held simultaneously with the local municipal election. However, this may not be the best approach in the first years of a council's formation, when considerable effort must be made to acquaint residents with the existence of this new structure, its importance, and the opportunities it affords to local residents.

We suggest the committee explore other elective processes in the early formation of community councils. Instead of holding elections in the usual format, with voting booths located in polling places, for example, it might be possible to hold the elections for a number of days at many locations frequented by local residents, such as outside of shopping centers on Fridays and Saturdays, or outside churches and synagogues on Saturdays and Sundays. The availability of voter registration lists should assist in identifying possible voters. The use of a simplified form of the absentee ballot would provide a means for identifying who had voted, without disclosing their selection.

3. Legal framework for community councils -- We believe additional thought should be given by the committee to its recommendations on the way in which community councils are legally established. The exclusive use of a contract issued by the mayor raises serious question about the continuity of the community councils as mayors change and their existence in the event there are conflicts between the community councils and the administrative staff which, under the proposal, are both in the executive office of the mayor.

We suggest an enabling ordinance be adopted by the city council setting forth the general structure of the community councils -- their powers, duties, and administrative changes such as "notice of intent". The particular year-to-year functions, funding, and staffing could then be set out in a contract as suggested in the committee's report.

4. Recognition of community councils by the county board and the St. Paul school board -- We recommend the committee additionally consider openly inviting the county board and the school board to recognize the community councils and to develop a relationship with them comparable to the city.

For the county board. . . this would insure input into policies by the 8-11 communities of St. Paul comparable to what is already possible for the 12 suburban villages or communities in northern Ramsey County. Participation by community councils in St. Paul particularly in numerous social services largely provided by the county is

especially important. A large proportion of the recipients and users of these services live in St. Paul. Similarly, many of the county roads are important traffic arteries in all of St. Paul.

For the school board. . .the recognition of community councils as a collateral vehicle to the PTAs for citizen input would be helpful in planning for school construction, the coordination of new schools with public facilities such as parks, and their use by the community for after-school community functions. Space might well be available in a few schools that could even be appropriate locations to house the community council staff and for meeting sites.

### Summary

Overall, we are impressed with the concept outlined by the committee and commend it for its significant work and contribution. We agree that citizen involvement is a way of restoring trust in government. It can be productive. However, it must challenge people to propose changes for their communities. We believe that residents will accept this challenge and help the process to become a positive one.

The structure proposed by the committee provides a recognized forum for the community -- a focal point for discussion about their ideas of what the community should become and which proposals or projects are acceptable. Changes in the composition of the membership of the community council, as we suggest, will further strengthen the ability of the community to provide timely direction on numerous issues. Finally, the overall arrangement will provide citizens with the training and experience necessary to be effective in the decision-making process of local government. It will provide them with access to information and a formal role in the process leading to decisions. . .two elements which are critical to any kind of effective citizen participation.