

CITIZENS  LEAGUE



It Takes a  
**REGION**  
To Build  
Livable  
**Neighborhoods**

An Urban Growth Strategy for  
the Twin Cities Metro Region

*An overview of a report prepared by the Citizens League*

**February 1997**

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*It Takes a Region to Build Livable Neighborhoods*

 Recycled paper

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# IT TAKES A REGION TO BUILD LIVABLE NEIGHBORHOODS

*This report is about livable communities, and how to make sure ours remains one. The goal of this report is to present a long-term vision of our community into the 21st century: a vision of its growth and our quality of life.*

*The focus of the study is the spatial structure of the Twin Cities region — land use patterns, infrastructure, and the built environment — and about how they come together to form livable communities in some places, while in other places they work against livability.*

*The report examines the causes and consequences of metropolitan sprawl in the Twin Cities region, recounts the costs of that sprawl, and suggests ways to stem those costs by shifting the path of future growth in a new direction.*

*The values that the Citizens League has long espoused underlie the recommendations of the report: equity and fairness, shared*

*responsibility and cooperation, and citizenship. The recommendations call on Twin Cities citizens to think regionally, and to think long-term, about what the next 50 years of growth should bring.*

*This report does not offer solutions to the social problems that we find in our community. It does, however, explore ways in which our patterns of community-building can create livable places where every citizen can thrive.*

*The report is the result of 15 months of work by the League's Building Livable Communities Committee, co-chaired by Don Fraser and Sally Evert. The committee was asked to identify the public policies behind current development patterns and to consider whether the region, which according to the Metropolitan Council will add 330,000 households by the year 2020, can continue to grow in its current form.*

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## PART I

### REGIONAL GROWTH ISSUES

*Today, our region enjoys a comparatively high quality of life. But things are not good for all people, and conditions are likely to worsen with our current form of growth.*

**New development is dispersed and predominantly low-density.** This trend separates job growth from labor pools; fails to provide adequate affordable housing; poses environmental threats; consumes large amounts of farmland; and undermines good community design.

**Poverty is increasingly concentrated in Minneapolis and St. Paul neighborhoods, and is spreading to inner-ring suburbs.**

**Municipalities are increasingly seeking and competing for high-tax developments.** Municipalities benefit from high-value housing, which encourages land-use regulations that increase the cost of housing while subtly screening out lower-value developments.

**The real region has expanded beyond the seven-county designation, undermining the Metropolitan Council's ability to manage regional systems properly.**

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## PART II

### LAND USE DRIVERS

*Regional growth patterns are a combination of market forces and a heavy dose of government intervention.*

#### Market forces:

**Consumer preferences.** People with financial means and mobility prefer low-density, developing municipalities, due largely to critical factors such as safety and education.

**Limited choice in the market.** Options in housing and neighborhood design appear limited, bound by not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY) attitudes, government regulation, and a reluctance to try untested housing developments and design techniques. This lack of choice might cloud "real" preference for housing and neighborhood design.

**Urban disincentives.** Market disincentives make urban investment difficult and risky, especially when compared with greenfield development.

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## PART II *continued*

**Changing demographics.** Average age and ethnic makeup will influence future housing preferences and growth patterns in the next 25 years.

### **Government intervention:**

**Federal involvement.** Federal housing and infrastructure programs, along with the home mortgage interest deduction, have created incentives for outward expansion and bigger houses.

**Infrastructure.** Infrastructure expansions — particularly roads and sewers — accommodate individual land-use decisions, but the resulting increase in convenience encourages additional development that might not otherwise occur.

**Public subsidies.** Public subsidies for land use hide or shift the real costs of individual land-use decisions. Despite preferences for suburban locations, numerous subsidies and tax expenditures provide still greater incentives to build in these areas.

**Municipal finance and the property tax classification system:** The tax system encourages municipalities to manipulate land uses to maximize property tax revenues. This leads to competition and overzoning for commercial/industrial and high-value residential development and, often, neglect of affordable housing.

**Municipal land-use regulations:** Many municipal regulations — e.g. zoning, minimum standards, building codes — have discernible outcomes on land use and are often used to exclude people and developments that some deem “undesirable.”

## PART III **Recommendations**

*Land-use policy should create a vision for how we want the region to look, to act, and to feel 25, even 50 years from now.*

**Principle #1: Build communities that reflect a vision for livability.**

- Create a meaningful community vision based on

the tastes and preferences of the people who live in the seven-county region.

- Build inclusive rather than exclusive communities. To do so, municipal zoning must be more accommodating. The Metropolitan Council also must commit resources to facilitate such development.
- Build compact, efficient, and connected communities. More attention must be paid to local and regional urban form, including minimum density requirements where urban services are provided.
- Build communities that value public green spaces and the protection of natural resources. Governments must re-evaluate various land-use policies — such as those for capital facilities — to ensure they do not conflict with preserving open space.

**Principle #2: People should pay for the public services they receive.** People must be held directly accountable for the costs they impose through individual land-use decisions.

The Metropolitan Council should be empowered to: 1) determine the “full cost” of development; 2) create the necessary tools or methods for charging costs back to consumers; and 3) collect the appropriate fees from new and existing development for costs imposed on various local and regional systems.

**Principle #3: Future metropolitan growth should be re-directed inward.** Developed areas should be made more attractive to new development by eliminating current obstacles and introducing new incentives.

- The state or Metropolitan Council should create a “Metropolitan Redevelopment Fund” for all regional cities to be used *specifically and only* for the renewal and redevelopment of “used” land.
- The state should strengthen tax increment financing (TIF) as a redevelopment tool.
- The central cities must fully capitalize on natural and other available amenities for new residential development. Riverfront redevelopment should be made a high priority.



**Principle #4: Empower effective regional governance.**  
The expansion of the "real" region beyond the original seven counties requires the state to empower regions as they are *organically* and *functionally* defined.

- The Legislature must recognize the state's interest in land use and establish guidelines to help local governments achieve specific land-use objectives. A state agency has to have the power to implement this framework for more efficient land use.
- The state must eventually match regional government authority with the region's organic and functional boundaries.
- The Council should replace the metropolitan urban service area strategy (the MUSA "line") with a set of incentives and disincentives to achieve the urban form desired for the region.

**Principle #5: Relieve municipal dependence on property taxes by aligning taxes with public services delivered.**

- The State Legislature should construct a tax system that establishes what level of government (municipal, county, regional or state) is responsible for specific public services.
- Municipalities should better align and connect taxing mechanisms with the public service being provided.
- The Legislature should investigate and authorize different taxing vehicles so each level of government (particularly municipal) has the capacity to pay for necessary services, while providing each with general revenue vehicles beyond the property tax levy.

**Principle #6: Enhance citizenship at the regional level.**  
To empower changes in land-use policy at the regional level, residents must identify with issues and act as regional *citizens*.

- Change the Metropolitan Council selection from gubernatorial appointments to popular election.
- Local government officials must recognize and appreciate the importance of regionalism, and assist in educating local residents about shared goals.

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**Mail this form to:** Citizens League  
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Copies of the report, *It Takes a Region To Build Livable Neighborhoods*, are available from the Citizens League office (first copy free to Citizens League members; \$10 per copy for non-members).

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