



# Citizens League Report

## **The Metropolitan Council: Strengthening Its Leadership Role**

**March 23, 1989**

**Public affairs  
research and education  
in the Twin Cities  
metropolitan area**



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**THE METROPOLITAN COUNCIL:  
Strengthening Its Leadership Role**

Prepared by  
Committee on the Metropolitan Council  
John Boland, chair

Approved by  
Citizens League Board of Directors  
March 23, 1989

Citizens League  
708 South 3rd Street, Suite 500  
Minneapolis, MN 55415  
338-0791

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## INTRODUCTION

The Metropolitan Council is one of this region's most important institutions. But it is increasingly seen as irrelevant to those who are not insiders to its day-to-day work.

Despite growing criticism, the Council continues to produce some genuinely exemplary results. Its recent efforts to gather a longer range set of strategic planning assumptions for the region and its highly regarded work on the airport dilemma are two good examples.

But it is not at center stage on other vital regional issues. In fact it seems to have been too much on the sidelines in the light rail transit controversy, just as it has been consistently bypassed on a series of regional siting decisions. Sliding into irrelevance might be a fate worse than disappearance.

Much of the criticism of the Council seems aimed at what others have not permitted or encouraged it to do. We are convinced, however, that the Council's opportunity to play a stronger role lies mostly with its own members. Their will and vision matter more than any other factors. If the Council becomes stronger, its members will have made it happen.

Our current interest arises from more than 20 years of emphasis on the importance of metropolitan governance, combined now with concern over the Council's specific future. We have long maintained that the best means of strengthening the Council's role is electing its members, but until that happens the Council should concentrate on a strategy of restructuring its roles and relationships.

If these changes do not restore the Council to a prominent place in shaping the regional agenda and confronting its problems, then more radical measures should be considered.

## FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

1. The Need for Metropolitan Coordination and Policy Development--A metropolitan governance system is essential to the orderly growth and management of the Twin Cities region. Coordinating the planning and development of the metropolitan area is as great a need today as it has been in the past.

The Metropolitan Council is a unique and necessary agency for dealing with issues that transcend the boundaries of cities, counties and other units of local government. This region needs the Metropolitan Council to play the role of a leader that identifies, plans and coordinates metropolitan-wide issues.

2. Metropolitan Council Contributions--Many of the Metropolitan Council's contributions over the past 22 years have significantly changed the threads that make up the Twin Cities metropolitan fabric. Among the Metropolitan Council's recognized accomplishments are:

- Arranging the strategy for providing and financing regional sewer service.
- Implementing the Metropolitan Land Planning Act to manage growth in the metropolitan area and curb urban sprawl in areas with inadequate infrastructure to support that growth.
- Providing information and technical assistance leading to the designation of the Mississippi River in the metropolitan area as a National River and Recreation Area.
- Implementing guidelines to balance the percentage of federally subsidized housing in suburban and central city areas.
- Increasing the emphasis on transit and land use planning in highway planning, improving mobility through innovative management of the existing road infrastructure, and influencing the design of major controversial freeway designs for I-35E and I-394.
- Establishing and overseeing a network of regional parks.
- Managing the proliferation and location of highly specialized health care services and capital-intensive medical equipment.
- Coordinating the implementation of the 911 emergency telephone system.
- Maintaining and expanding a regional data base and providing information analyses.

3. The Metropolitan Council's Role--The Metropolitan Council role includes a critical function not performed by other agencies: developing political consensus that leads to action on metropolitan wide problems. The Twin Cities metropolitan area enjoys healthy

economic, educational, governmental and cultural sectors, in part because of the Metropolitan Council's contributions.

Not only the Twin Cities area, but the entire state has a stake in seeing this vitality continue.

The Metropolitan Council's role is broader than that of a regulatory or administrative body. The Council must assertively seek to:

- Identify emerging issues that will require discussion and response.
- Offer regional perspectives and solutions to these and other problems.
- Develop political consensus on perplexing issues that cannot be handled by units of government with conflicting interests or smaller jurisdictions.
- See that the adopted solutions are implemented by the appropriate agency.

Unlike agencies of the state, the Metropolitan Council finances its general operations with a property tax in the seven county metropolitan area.

To implement its policies, the Metropolitan Council draws its influence from good ideas, persuasion and negotiation, not direct control. The Council has little direct authority over the other units of government in the seven county area.

In identifying problems and proposing solutions the Metropolitan Council should be suggesting appropriate roles for the Council, cities, counties, school districts and other organizations to play in resolving problems.

4. Future Need for a Metropolitan Voice--Many public policy issues will continue to confront the metropolitan area and require a metropolitan perspective. Some of these issues will not respect the boundaries of other units of local government. Others will cross functional system lines as well as geographic ones.

Issues likely to affect the region will not fall exclusively into the category of land planning issues. Other issues with broader social implications will also require a metropolitan perspective.

It will be important for the Metropolitan Council to confront emerging issues that won't otherwise receive a metropolitan perspective, such as: decreases in housing demand resulting from expected demographic changes, or projected labor shortages.

5. Changed Perceptions About the Council--With some important exceptions, such as solid waste management, the Metropolitan Council has not actively sought responsibility from the Legislature in the last decade as it once did. Although the need for the Metropolitan Council remains strong, a perception exists that the Council is less relevant than it could be. As a result of its inaction in several areas:
  - a. The Metropolitan Council is not well understood by legislators, with a few exceptions. Minnesota legislators have mixed perceptions; some believe the Council has too much authority, and others believe the Council has not taken enough initiative or exercised enough leadership. During the 1988 session an amendment to abolish the Metropolitan Council was offered during a floor session. Although the amendment failed, the implication was that some legislators did not see the need for the Metropolitan Council.
  - b. The Metropolitan Council has not always been used for analyzing issues that are clearly metropolitan in nature. For instance, when the Legislature decided to locate a horse race track in the metropolitan area, it bypassed the Council and created the Minnesota Racing Commission both to site and to operate this track. The Metropolitan Council did not aggressively seek siting authority.
  - c. The Metropolitan Council's authority over light rail transit (LRT) in the metropolitan area is limited, although LRT planning and implementation have financial, social and transportation implications for the region as a whole. When the Legislature debated whether the counties should control LRT development, the Metropolitan Council did not lobby to retain this authority.
6. Importance of a Metropolitan Voice in Transportation--Workable transportation is vital to the effective functioning of a metropolitan area. Highway and transit planning have been fragmented among regional, state, and county authorities. Integrating transit and highway planning into a balanced transportation system is arguably more critical today than in the past, as the era of acquiring more right-of-way and constructing new roads comes to an end. The Metropolitan Council is the logical agency to set overall transportation policies and coordinate the planning of highways and transit in the region. The Council must reaffirm its role in defining the transportation system for the seven county metropolitan area.
7. Council Relationships with Regional Commissions--Cooperation and coordination between the Council and some of the metropolitan commissions remains inadequate. Although the various commissions have routinely made legislative proposals, the Metropolitan Council has generally remained outside the discussions leading up to the proposals and during the debate at the Capitol. For example, the Metropolitan Council has not been involved in legislative discussions of Metro Mobility, the program of subsidized transportation for disabled people.



8. Council Members--The citizen members of the Metropolitan Council are appointed to bring a broad-based vision to the Council. They should focus on anticipating and framing regional issues, and suggesting viable solutions to these issues. Council members should focus on setting policies; they should leave responsibilities for day to day operations to the staff.

To involve a broad perspective on the Council the time commitment must be conducive to schedules of community representatives who want to serve but are unable to make the Council a fulltime job. For people contemplating service on the Council, the amount of time involved may appear daunting. Many Council committees and subcommittees meet each week, and the number of meetings may rule out service on the Council for some community leaders.

9. Council Staff--The Council needs a baseline staff to perform the day-to-day operations involved with regional planning and coordination. However, beyond this the staffing should be flexible and able to respond in size and expertise to a changing set of issues. Flexible staffing means the Metropolitan Council would be able to study an issue, make recommendations and then move on to other issues, without necessarily having an ongoing presence in the field.

## RECOMMENDED CHANGES

1. Elect the Metropolitan Council--We reaffirm the need to elect the members of the Metropolitan Council. Since the Citizens League's first report recommending that the Legislature create a metropolitan council, the League has advocated election of Council members by popular vote of the people.\*

Election is needed to:

- a. Enhance the position and credibility of the Council with the added legitimacy provided by direct election by the people.
  - b. Stimulate Metropolitan Council members to move aggressively to solve problems. The knowledge that they must be reelected will help motivate Council members to take the initiative to resolve problems.
  - c. Motivate Council members to initiate contact with the public to educate the public about Council policies and to receive input about regional problems.
  - d. Ensure that important policy decisions with profound implications for the region are made by elected, not appointed, officials. Such decisions deserve the accountability provided through a popular vote of the citizens.
2. Change the appointment process--Until the Council is elected, the appointment process should be changed.
    - a. Appointment of the Council Chair to a Fixed Term--To strengthen the position of Metropolitan Council chair and enhance its independence, the appointment should be for a fixed, four-year term. Removing the chair should remain at the pleasure of the governor.
    - b. Nominating and Recruiting Qualified Candidates for the Council--To improve the identification and active recruitment of qualified candidates for the Metropolitan Council, the nominating commission that currently recommends candidates to the governor should develop a statement of the selection criteria and a description of the responsibilities and duties of a Council member. The statement should make it clear that Council members will be expected to identify regional problems, offer alternative solutions, and develop consensus that leads to action on the problems. It should be distributed to potential candidates, and should guide the nominating commission's selections.

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\*See A Metropolitan Council for the Twin Cities Area, Citizens League, March 1967, and The Metro Council: Narrowing the Agenda and Raising the Stakes, Citizens League, June 1984.

3. Council Should Appoint Commission Chairs--To clarify lines of accountability the Legislature should grant authority for appointing the chairs of the Metropolitan Waste Control Commission and the Regional Transit Board to the Metropolitan Council chair, subject to approval of the full Council. The chairs should serve at the pleasure of the Metropolitan Council chair, and other members should serve fixed terms. When problems arise, the Council needs a mechanism to replace leadership on a commission.

This recommendation recognizes that the Council's level of authority is not the same over all commissions, and consequently excludes the Metropolitan Airports Commission and the Metropolitan Sports Facilities Commission.

4. Prepare a Legislative Program--Each biennium the Metropolitan Council should prepare a legislative program and aggressively seek legislative support for its program.

In part to mark its autonomy and to reflect the difference between the Council and other agencies, the Council should prepare this legislative program independent of the Governor's agenda. The Council should transmit the program to the Governor to seek executive branch support for the initiatives. However, the Metropolitan Council and its staff should become involved with state issues only to the extent the issues coincide with those of metropolitan interests.

Insofar as possible, the Council should present a unified voice for metropolitan affairs to the Legislature. This means the Council's legislative program would include the legislative needs of all metropolitan agencies to the extent the Council approves those needs. This does not mean the commissions would forego their activities at the Capitol, or that the Council and commissions would always agree on their legislative positions. It does mean the commissions would not advance legislative proposals without Council commentary.

5. Focus on Policy--The Metropolitan Council members should confine themselves to policy making. They should resist involvement in the day-to-day operations of the Council's activities.

Council staff should be responsible for routine operations. This will allow the Metropolitan Council members to concentrate on an active role in the broader arena of making policy, identifying long range issues, proposing alternative solutions, and seeing the solutions through to implementation.

6. Fulfill Future Staff Needs--For those emerging issues the Council will be dealing with in the future, the Council should rely more on staff brought on line for their special expertise. Employing staff in this way will bring in fresh perspectives, encourage innovation, and help the Metropolitan Council respond in depth to particular issues. This could be accomplished through any number of arrangements, including greater use of consultants, or employment of graduate students or professionals on a project by project basis. Furthermore the Council staff should have opportunities for cultivating broader perspectives on metropolitan issues through arrangements such as staff exchanges between agencies.

## WORK OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE

The Community Information Committee (CIC) of the Citizens League is responsible for implementation of Citizens League reports. In the fall of 1988, the committee determined that the League should review the Metropolitan Council. It felt that since the League's last report on the Council in 1984, enough changes had occurred in the issues facing the Council and in the understanding of the Council by other policy makers, to warrant a follow-up study. Consequently, CIC chair Carl "Buzz" Cummins appointed a subcommittee to review the 1984 report, study the Metropolitan Council, and submit recommendations to the Board of Directors. Members of the Board of Directors were also invited to join the subcommittee.

Background information on the Metropolitan Council can be found in the Citizens League's 1984 report The Metro Council: Narrowing the Agenda and Raising the Stakes.

### Subcommittee Membership

Under the leadership of chair John Boland, 12 Citizens League members participated in the deliberations of the subcommittee. Citizens League President Peter Vanderpoel served as an ex-officio member.

John Costello  
Carl Cummins  
Ann Duff  
David Graven  
Virginia Greenman  
Ed Hunter

Jean King  
Ted Kolderie  
Susan McCloskey  
Dan Peterson  
James Terwedo  
Nancy Zingale

### Subcommittee Meetings/Resource Speakers

The subcommittee met for the first time on November 17, 1988 and concluded its work on February 17, 1989. It met for a total of nine meetings. The following resource persons spoke with the subcommittee:

Mary Anderson, mayor, Golden Valley  
Joan Campbell, member, Metropolitan Council  
Rep. Phil Carruthers (DFL-Brooklyn Center), former Metro Council member  
Sally Evert, commissioner, Washington County Board  
Sandra Gardebring, commissioner, Minnesota Department of Human Services, former chair of the Metropolitan Council  
Tom Harren, assistant commissioner, State Planning Agency  
Steve Keefe, chair, Metropolitan Council  
Josephine Nunn, member, Metropolitan Council  
Gary Peterson, mayor, Eden Prairie  
Jerry Splinter, city administrator, Brooklyn Center

### Staff Support

The subcommittee was assisted throughout its work by Citizens League staff members Jody Hauer, Donna Keller and Joann Latulippe.

## RECENT CITIZENS LEAGUE REPORTS

The Metropolitan Council: Strengthening Its Leadership Role	3-23-89
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Statement on Changing the Fiscal Disparities Law	1-15-88
Statement to the Governor & Legislature on Transportation Financing in 1988	1-04-88
Statement to Legislative Commission re: Road Financing	10-12-87
Statement to U of M Regents re: Commitment to Focus	7- 7-87
Statement to Governor and Legislature on Innovation and Cost Control (Governor's Budget)	4- 8-87
Selection of a New State Commissioner of Transportation	10-30-86
Letter to RTB re: Metro Mobility Price Competition Ideas	6-12-86
Testimony to Legislature on Bloomington Stadium Site Bill	2-20-86
Letter to RTB re: Policy Committee's Study of Metro Mobility from CIC	12-6-85
Statement to House Tax Subcommittee on Fiscal Disparities	10-31-85
Statement to Legislature on Preserving Metropolitan Tax-Base Sharing	9- 6-85
Statement to Legislature & Metro Council on Bloomington Development Proposal	8-15-85
Statement to Metropolitan Council on Organized Collection of Solid Waste	4-24-85
Statement to Metropolitan Council on Long-Term Care	3- 8-85
Statement on Transit Alternatives	1-23-85
Statement on Solid Waste Disposal	1-21-85
Statement to Tax Study Commission	8-22-84
Statement on Light Rail Transit	4- 6-84
Statement to Legislative Study Committee on Metropolitan Transit	12-15-83
Statement to Governor's Tax Study Commission	11-22-83
Statement to Minnesota's Highway Study Commission	9-29-83
Statement on the Metropolitan Council's Proposed Interim Economic Policies	8-29-83
Statement to Mpls. Charter Commission: Proposal to have Mayor as non-voting member of Council	8-11-83
Statement to Metropolitan Council & Richard P. Braun, Commission of Transportation on Preferential Treatment in I-35W Expansion	7-21-83
Statement to Members, Steering Committee on Southwest-University Avenue Corridor Study	7-19-83
Statement to Commission on the Future of Post-Secondary Education in Minnesota	6-22-83
Statement to the Metropolitan Health Board	6-20-83
Appeal to the Legislature and the Governor	4-26-83
Citizens League Opposes Unfunded Shifts to Balance Budget	12- 1-82
Longer-Term Spending Issues Which the Governor and Legislature Should Face in 1982	1-18-82
Statement Concerning Alternatives to Solid Waste Flow Control	1-12-82
Amicus Curiae Brief in Fiscal Disparities Case	filed 12-17-81
Statement to the Minnesota State Legislature Regarding the Reconstruction Project	12-14-81
Letter to the Joint Legislative Commission on Metropolitan Governance	11-13-81
Statement to Metropolitan Health Board on Phase IV Report	11- 4-81
Statement to Metropolitan Council on I-35E	9-24-81
Statement to Minneapolis Charter Commission	7- 6-81
Letter to Metropolitan Council re CL Recommendations on I-394	6-23-81
Statement to the Governor and Legislature as They Prepare for a Special Session	5-26-81
Statement to the Minnesota State Legislature Regarding the University of Minnesota Hospitals Reconstruction Bill, as amended	5- 8-81
Statement to the Governor and Legislature Concerning Expenditures- Taxation for 1981-83. Issues by Tax & Finance Task Force	4-28-81

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## WHAT THE CITIZENS LEAGUE IS

The Citizens League has been an active and effective public affairs research and education organization in the Twin Cities metropolitan area since 1952.

Volunteer research committees of League members study policy issues in depth and develop informational reports that propose specific workable solutions to public issues. Recommendations in these reports often become law.

Over the years, League reports have been a reliable source of information for governmental officials, community leaders, and citizens concerned with public policy issues of our area.

The League depends upon the support of individual memberships and contributions from businesses, foundations and other organizations throughout the metropolitan area.

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- *Public Affairs Directory* — a listing of agencies, organizations and officials involved in the making of public policy.

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