

#263

STATEMENT OF WAYNE H. OLSON  
FOR THE CITIZENS LEAGUE  
TO THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON METROPOLITAN AFFAIRS  
FEBRUARY 8, 1973

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. My name is Wayne Olson, I am a past president of the Citizens League and was chairman of its committee which studied the metropolitan transportation problem and published its report in February 1971.

The League has long been concerned about problems in our transportation system and about the area's increasing dependence on the private automobile. The first major report was published in 1965. In 1966 a League report was instrumental in the creation of the first Metropolitan Transit Commission. A further report on the planning and management of the transportation program was published in 1968. And my committee's report, which dealt also with transportation finance, appeared in 1971.

The Citizens League's strong conclusion has consistently been that the Twin Cities area must diversify its transportation system, with meaningful alternatives to the private automobile; and that it must move rapidly to do this. Our conclusion has been underscored recently by the growing volumes of travel; by the area's diminishing ability to increase the supply of road space; by the imminence of restrictions on vehicle emissions, out of a concern for air quality; and by the emerging evidence of a need, now, to be concerned with our basic supplies of fuel.

The question facing this 1973 Legislature is to get this new transportation program really moving. We believe this separates into two parts.

\* \* \* \* \*

1. The first is quite immediate, less complex and essentially non-controversial. It is to keep the present transit improvement program moving, and to continue to build ridership with the technology we have at the moment.

This may require additional financing to the MTC for the 1973-75 biennium. The Citizens League has not restudied recently the financial situation of the MTC. We are, therefore, unable to say with assurance whether or not this financial need exists, or what is its magnitude. But it may exist.

If additional financing is needed, the question of financial sources will again arise. In our view, the dominant fact about this area's policy toward transportation finance remains the extent of the property tax subsidy to the road system. This remains inconsistent with the general policy of withdrawing property tax subsidy when no longer required, and shifting the operating and capital costs of such major systems onto users as they demonstrate a capacity to assume them.

We suggest the Legislature continue the steps it began in 1971 to withdraw the property tax from the road system, and use all or part of these general revenues thus freed-up for the continued development of transit -- a system now not able to pay its own way.

2. The second is to move promptly on a decision about the system that is to be in operation after 1980. In large part, this requires an answer this year to the organizational question, "Who decides?"

We believe most persons would reject the idea that final authority on a decision of this magnitude, in this or any other program area, should rest with a single-purpose authority.

Decisions have, at times, been made this way in the past. But too often this has meant that questions of major importance were raised and discussed only as construction became imminent -- with the result that the area then either had to proceed with a project that would later be regretted, or reverse course after very large amounts of time and effort had been committed in planning. Examples such as the interstate highway program, the MAC proposal for a new airport at Ham Lake, or the proposed upstream sewer plants, come to mind. The lesson has been that the broad, general discussion ought to be held, and the basic policy questions broadly discussed in the community, early; and the detailed technical planning ought to follow from that.

This is basically the situation we have now, with transit and transportation. The single-purpose agency has proceeded some distance with its planning, the really hard thinking by the general-purpose agency -- the Metropolitan Council -- began later than would theoretically be desirable. So there is some disagreement. Yet the principle still holds: the single-purpose agency cannot be the final authority. The MTC has a limited responsibility, for transit. The Council has the broader responsibility -- to think about what travel is to be served not only by transit but also by highways, to relate transportation facilities to the land-use pattern, and to make a judgment about transportation in relations to other development and its costs.

We believe, therefore, that decisions of this sort must rest with a policy body having broad general governmental responsibility.

The Legislature has the final authority. But -- as we explained in earlier statements here -- we believe the Legislature will be strongest when it is delegating responsibilities to general-purpose governments of limited territorial jurisdiction, under effective state supervision and control. Put another way: the job of the Legislature is to create the system that makes the decisions. On precisely this theory it has delegated to the Metropolitan Council, as the body with the broadest functional and territorial responsibility in the Twin Cities area, the responsibility for putting together the programs of all the special purpose agencies -- balancing all the considerations, physical and financial. This intent was expressed in the 1971 amendment setting out the relationship between the Metropolitan Council and the MTC. It is in this role, as established, that the Metropolitan Council has been making its decisions on basic policy questions respecting the levels of service, the cost and the timing of the transportation -- transit and highway -- system.

We would urge the Legislature to focus its review of this transit and transportation problem specifically on the decision-making process: how it is organized, and how it has operated on this issue. How are the issues raised? How are they resolved? Once made, how will they effectively be carried out?

\* \* \* \* \*

As you start into this review you may find, as we did in our study, that this is indeed a complex and difficult problem. Let me -- in conclusion -- offer just three basic things I think we learned.

- \* The emphasis should be kept on the objectives and the results being sought. That is, on increasing mobility; on really effective alternatives to the automobile, and on getting them used; on improved accessibility; on a reduction of congestion and therefore a reduction in the need for new road construction; on improved air quality; and on service to persons not now well served.

These are the 'ends.' A transit system is only a means to these ends. It is not an end in itself. Whatever achieves these ends best is what the area should have.

- \* A substantial improvement of the physical facilities is, certainly, a major part of the solution.

The critical change that will be made in moving to a substantially upgraded transit system has to do not so much with the vehicle as with the roadway. On this, both of the plans now before you agree. Their common effort is to get the multi-passenger vehicles out of the stream of automobile traffic, and into a separate and reserved right-of-way, in the congested central portion of the Twin Cities region. By and large, they agree on the location of the corridors that need to be served. Both propose to run, through this new reserved right-of-way, a vehicle carrying about 45 passengers.

It is only from this point that the plans diverge; the MTC prefers a vehicle fixed to the guideway, so it can be automated; the Metropolitan Council prefers a vehicle not fixed to the guideway, so it can run from a residential subdivision to a work-place without a transfer of vehicle.

- \* An effective transit system will, however, require more than simply the construction of facilities.

A transit system is not successful if it works, technically. It is successful if it is used. And this will mean, very largely, used in preference to the automobile. This is why we came down so hard, in our report, that the test for transit -- as we said, 'the key thing to build' -- is patronage, and ridership.

This means there is a major need -- probably not yet fully appreciated -- to think about measures that will help ensure the usage of whatever capital system may be constructed. Our report concluded that this area will have to think much more about all those things -- including prices and promotion -- that influence the traveler's choice of mode. Beyond this, there are other questions (also not yet fully explored) about the extent to which these measures might actually substitute for some capital construction. A Citizens League committee is presently, as you know, working on these issues, and will be reporting shortly. We will be happy to share this report with you as soon as it is completed and released.