



A bold experiment: the Metropolitan Council at 40

Forty years ago, a rural-dominated Minnesota Legislature took a bold step – it voted to create a regional planning and coordinating body for the seven-county metropolitan area.

For much of their history, Minneapolis and St. Paul were intense rivals. However, by the mid-1960s, the two cities had joined together to secure major league baseball, football and hockey teams. They grew together more closely with the completion of the interstate freeway between the two cities. And they came to recognize that rapid growth presented region-wide opportunities and challenges requiring greater regional cooperation.

In 1967 – at the urging of many local government, business and civic leaders – the Metropolitan Council was created to:

- Plan for the orderly and economical development of the seven-county metro area, and
- Coordinate the delivery of certain services that could not be effectively provided by any one city or county.

The drive for the Council's creation was led by the Citizens League, the Metropolitan Section of the League of Minnesota Municipalities, the League of Women Voters and others. They saw the need for some kind of regional body to deal with issues that transcended the boundaries of nearly 300 separate local units of government – including seven counties, 188 cities and townships, and 22 special purpose districts.

In the 1967 session, the Legislature considered two competing proposals: a Council elected from geographic districts with broad operating powers, and a Council of at-large appointees with limited planning powers.

The final bill was a compromise – a Council appointed by the governor from geographic districts with planning and coordinating powers. Operating responsibilities for regional services were vested in separate boards – the existing Metropolitan Airports Commission, the Metropolitan Transit Commission (also created in 1967) and the Metropolitan Sewer Board (created in 1969). The Council was not given operating responsibility for transit and wastewater services until 1994.

The measure was given final approval by the Legislature on May 19, 1967, and signed by Governor Harold LeVander on May 25. In appointing the Council's first members, Governor LeVander said the Council "was conceived with the idea that we will be faced with more and more problems that will pay no heed to the boundary lines which mark the end of one community in this metropolitan area and the beginning of another."

"This Council was created to do a job which has proved too big for any single community," the Governor said.

Big problems for a new agency

At the time of the Council's creation, the region faced some major challenges:

- Backyard septic systems were failing in many suburban communities, and inadequately treated wastewater was being discharged into many of the region's lakes, rivers and streams.
- The Twin Cities' privately owned bus company was rapidly disintegrating, a victim of rising fares, declining ridership and an aging bus fleet.
- Rapid growth was threatening vital natural areas better suited for preservation as parks and open space.
- Growing fiscal disparities were making it difficult for communities with inadequate tax capacity to fund essential services and were providing unhealthy development incentives.

The fledgling agency did not have to start from scratch. It inherited a small staff and a decade of studies from the Metropolitan Planning Commission, an advisory body that had been created by state lawmakers in 1957.

The Council's creation was followed in succeeding years by the enactment of other legislation to strengthen the Council and address pressing regional issues. These Council-backed initiatives included the 1969 legislation that created the regional sewer system, the 1971 law that established the region's unique tax-base sharing system, and the 1974 laws creating the regional park system and the Metropolitan Housing and Development Authority (HRA).

The Met Council did not win immediate and broad public acceptance. Over the years, there were periodic calls for the Legislature to eliminate the Council. In the mid-1970s, a group of Dakota County communities threatened to boycott the Council and withhold its property tax dollars.

However, the Council persevered and did not shy away from controversial decisions. One of the Council's first major decisions came in 1970, when it vetoed the Metropolitan Airports Commission's selection of Ham Lake in Anoka County as a site for a second major airport. One fear: that it would cause environmental harm to the 23,000-acre Carlos Avery Wildlife Refuge, the state's largest wildlife refuge.

James Hetland, the Council's first chair, recalls that there were a number of powerful forces pushing the proposal, including business groups that wanted the region to have a "world class" airport. "The problem was that they wanted to build in a very ecologically sensitive area," he says.

Improving our transit service

During its early years, the Council supported the Metropolitan Transit Commission's move to take over and improve the region's privately-owned bus system. In 1970, at the time Twin City Lines was acquired, 480 of the company's 635 buses were 15 years of age or older. Eighty-six of the buses were so old that they were banned from the streets of Minneapolis.

After acquiring the company, the MTC embarked on an ambitious five-year, \$20 million transit improvement program that included the purchase of 465 air-conditioned buses, the installation of 135 bus shelters and new bus stop signs, and the establishment of a 24-hour bus information center.

At the same time, however, the Council blocked the MTC's early efforts to develop a 37-mile heavy rail transit system such as those serving San Francisco and Washington, D.C. Instead, the Council developed its own plan for enhanced bus service. The two agencies battled in the Legislature over the issue through much of the 1970s and neither plan was ever implemented.

John Boland, who served as Council chair during much of that period, says that – in hindsight – the MTC may have had “more vision of what was coming.” At the time, Boland says, studies indicated that too few metro area commuters would use rail transit to justify the enormous cost. “Our planners and our Council members and a lot of legislators said our only realistic option was the bus.”

In the early 1980s – at the direction of the Legislature – the Council studied the possible development of light rail transit in the metropolitan area and concluded that LRT could be feasible in several heavily traveled corridors. However, such proposals stalled until the late 1990s, when the Legislature approved funding to help build the 11-mile Hiawatha line linking downtown Minneapolis, International Airport and the Mall of America.

The Hiawatha line proved to be a stunning success. In its first full year of operation, the line provided 7.9 million rides, exceeding pre-construction estimates by 58 percent. The LRT line also has spurred redevelopment along the corridor, with 7,700 new housing units built since 2000 and another 8,000 on the drawing boards.

In 2006, the Met Council approved plans for a second LRT line in the Central Corridor between downtown St. Paul and downtown Minneapolis. The 11-mile line along University and Washington Avenues would provide improved access to employment, educational and economic opportunities all along the corridor, including the University of Minnesota, the Midway area and the state Capitol complex.

“This new line has the potential to be even more successful than our Hiawatha LRT line,” says Peter Bell, the current Council chair. “We project that the Central Corridor line will attract 38,000 riders per weekday by 2020 and more than 43,000 riders by 2030. It is part of our long-range plan to improve mobility, build transit ridership and slow the growth in traffic congestion.”

Modernizing our wastewater system

Starting in 1969, the Council and the old Metropolitan Sewer Board (later renamed the Metropolitan Waste Control Commission) moved forward with the development of a modern regional system for the collection and treatment of sewage. At the time, the municipal sewage treatment system operated jointly by Minneapolis and St. Paul was inadequate to meet the needs of developing suburbs.

Newer suburbs that could not gain access were struggling to build waste treatment plants of their own. Inadequately treated waste was being dumped into the Mississippi River, Lake Minnetonka and other regional waterways. And the region's groundwater was being contaminated by failing septic systems. In 1959, the state Health Department found that half of the private wells in 39 communities were contaminated with septic waste.

The new system inherited 33 municipal treatment plants, only four of which were capable of providing adequate treatment. Within a decade, 21 of these plants were closed and four new plants were built.

In the mid-1980s, the region embarked on a \$322-million, 10-year effort to separate combined storm and sanitary sewers in Minneapolis, St. Paul and South St. Paul. These combined sewers were resulting in the overflow of millions of gallons of untreated waste into the Mississippi River during major storms. Along with continual improvements in regional treatment plants, the sewer separation program has contributed to significant improvements in the river's water quality, aquatic life and bird habitat.

Today, the region is served by a system of eight regional treatment plants and 600 miles of regional interceptors serving more than 100 communities. It regularly wins national environmental awards while helping to maintain rates 25 percent below those of similarly sized systems.

"Our wastewater system is one of this region's great success stories," says Council member Russ Susag, who worked as an engineer for the system during its early years. "In my lifetime, we have gone from discharging raw sewage into the Mississippi River to the magnificent treatment system we have today."

Parks: A regional treasure

The Twin Cities' system of regional parks and trails is regarded by many residents as one of the treasures of our metropolitan area.

In 1974, the Legislature created the system, designating 31,000 acres of existing city and county parks as part of the regional system. It also authorized up to \$40 million in bonds for park land acquisition and development. The Council's first regional open space plan designated 12 "immediate action sites" for acquisition. Within a decade, all 12 sites were acquired.

Dave Durenberger, who chaired the advisory committee that developed the regional parks plan and later served in the U.S. Senate, says the legislation was designed to ensure that "invaluable natural resources" would be preserved and that metro area residents would be able "to enjoy the recreational opportunities that go with living in our community." In doing so, it built upon visionary efforts of those who created the Minneapolis and St. Paul park systems, he says.

At the time, some of the proposed park sites were being eyed for other purposes. For example, what is now the 2,200-acre Lake Elmo Regional Park was being considered as a possible location for a regional shopping center or a landfill.

Today, the system consists of 49 regional parks and park reserves, 28 regional trails and six special recreational features (such as the Como Park zoo and conservatory). They are operated and maintained in partnership with 10 city and county park agencies within the region.

This 53,000-acre system provides opportunities for active recreation – such as walking, biking, swimming and boating – for more than 33 million visitors a year. It also protects irreplaceable natural features such as lakes and wetlands, hardwood forests and native prairies.

"If you ask residents of the metropolitan area – and we do ask them every year – the thing they treasure most about our region is our parks and trails," says Peter Bell. "By any measure, we have a system of regional parks and trails that is second to none."

Planning still a core function

Although the Met Council has taken on major operating responsibilities, planning continues to be one of its core functions. During its early years, the Council derived considerable power from its role as the regional clearinghouse for federal grant applications, reviewing and commenting on local applications for more than 150 federal grant programs. (This review power diminished in importance as federal grant programs were cut and it was eliminated altogether in 1982.)

In 1976, the Legislature passed the Metropolitan Land Planning Act. It required all local governments in the seven-county area to adopt a comprehensive plan that is consistent with the Council's Regional Development Framework and regional system plans. The law also required communities to share their plans with neighboring jurisdictions, providing an avenue for greater intergovernmental coordination.

At the time, John Boland says, some local officials feared the legislation would enable the Council to tell them "how to zone within their city." However, he says, most of them ultimately recognized that this was not the case, and that the law was intended to ensure the efficient use of regional infrastructure, such as sewers, highways and transit.

Since the law's enactment, the Council has reviewed more than 3,200 local comprehensive plans and plan amendments. It has requested modifications in some 50 plans, or 1.6 percent.

In 1995, the Legislature approved a bill that created three new Met Council grant programs to assist communities in implementing their local plans. These grants provide communities with funding to help clean up contaminated lands for redevelopment; promote efficient, connected development, and expand the supply of affordable housing.

From 1996 through 2006, the Council awarded 470 grants totaling more than \$160 million, helping to leverage billions of dollars in private and other public investment. These grants have helped transform sites such as the vacant Sears store in south Minneapolis into Midtown Exchange, a vibrant urban hub with a mix of office, retail and housing uses.

Council grants also have helped create new town centers such as Excelsior and Grand in St. Louis Park, and Heart of the City in Burnsville. Both are mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly urban centers that include housing, jobs, shops, restaurants, parks and other amenities.

Louis Jambois, executive director of the Association of Metropolitan Municipalities, says local officials may not agree with every Council decision. But he says most of them acknowledge "the Met Council performs a valuable service in creating a forum for discussion and decision-making about how the Twin Cities metropolitan area should grow."

Council Chairs – 1967 to Present

James L. Hetland Jr., 1967-71

Albert J. Hofstede, 1971-73

John E. Boland, 1973-79

Charles R. Weaver, 1979-82

Gerald J. Isaacs, 1983-84

Sandra S. Gardebring, 1984-86

Steve Keefe, 1986-91

Mary E. Anderson, 1991-92

Dottie Rietow, 1992-95

Curtis W. Johnson, 1995-99

Ted Mondale, 1999-2003

Peter Bell, 2003-Present