

New direction for metro council?

Mpls. Star

Charles Weaver was recently appointed by Gov. Al Quie to be chairman of the Metropolitan Council. He was interviewed by Charles Whiting of The Star's Opinion Page staff.

Q: You've had about a month now to get settled into your new job as council chairman. Have you decided yet what changes, if any, you are going to make in the council's policies or the way it operates?

A: Oh, there are some changes internally. For example, I have elected to appoint an executive director as opposed to John Boland's (the previous council chairman) format of pretty much operating as his own executive director. Which, in turn, has meant some other internal changes.

Q: What then do you see as your responsibilities as chairman but not as staff director?

A: First of all, one of my strengths is not personnel management. I intend to work very closely with the staff but I feel very strongly that the council is working for local units of government and I think it's my responsibility to make sure that relationship is very, very close and that the needs of the local units of government are responded to by the chairman.

Q: You say working for the local units of government. Isn't there a conflict between that perception and the fact that council members are appointed on a one-man, one-vote basis, which implies that they represent the people of the area?

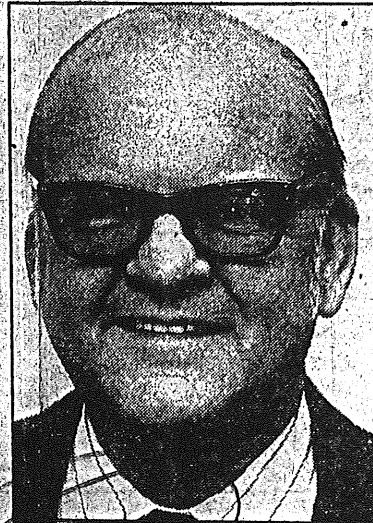
A: Well, certainly they represent the people of the area but those people elected their local officers to handle the affairs of that particular community and those are the people that the council members deal with most of the time and they're responsible to their constituents to make sure their local unit is running properly.

Q: I believe you have said in the past that you are opposed to an elected council. I would gather that's why you see the council representing the local units rather than the people directly.

A: Yeah, there are a couple of reasons. First of all, we don't have taxing power. If we did, I would be absolutely for an elected council because any body that has the power to tax must be elected by the people. There's one other consideration that isn't talked about very much and that's the ability, provided you have a good process for the appointments, to structure the Metropolitan Council to make sure that all segments of the population are, in fact, represented. And I think past governors have done that and certainly, Gov. Quie has done that. We have a very well-balanced council with all areas and parts of the population represented.



Charles Whiting



Charles Weaver

Q: To go back to my original question: Do you foresee with your rise to the chairmanship any changes in policies or operating directions from those followed under your predecessor?

A: I can't speak of any specific differences that are going to take place. I certainly have my own priorities. It's absolutely essential to develop a strong core city in order for the metropolitan area to be strong. That comes up in a number of ways, whether it's the stadium or the people mover or whatever it takes to maintain the vitality of Minneapolis-St. Paul. Then the other tremendous challenge that we've got is making our development guide work. My feeling—I can't speak for John Boland—but certainly my feeling is that we have to be flexible. That's critical and I think perhaps in the past sometimes we haven't been.

Q: You're talking about the council's power to review local comprehensive plans to ensure that they are in conformance with metropolitan plans?

A: That's right. In the next couple of years, those local plans will be coming in and we have to put those together in a manner to preserve the integrity of the development guide and yet in full cooperation of the local units of government.

Q: Are you having any difficulty with any community on the preparation of those local plans?

A: We have a lot of communities, in the rural areas particularly, that just do not have planning expertise and planning staff or the resources to go out and get them. Although we make grants to those communities, sometimes we're way short. And we've created some problems for them, too, because we haven't been, in some areas, definitive enough. Some of them are very concerned about spending a lot of money to develop a plan and then

having that plan come down here and be turned down.

Q: Have you encountered any reluctance on the part of local communities to make the plans conform to the development framework?

A: I guess that's where I'm saying the flexibility comes in. We can't just tell a local unit, "Look, you're deficient in A, B, C and D." We've got to look at A, B, C and D and say, "Well, maybe you should adjust that. Maybe you have got a good idea and we can have some conformance with what you're planning." Certainly, that won't work in every case but there are occasions when we have to look very carefully and make sure we're right.

Q: To the casual observer who used to see the Metropolitan Council embroiled in a number of major issues, particularly at the Legislature, the council has kind of dropped out of sight. It seems to be engaging now primarily in the review of localized issues. That's not true entirely but is that generally a correct perception or do you still see the council as having major regional issues to tackle and to put forward?

A: We really do have a lot of major regional issues. A lot of our stuff just isn't very much fun to read about. We've just completed our water-quality study and we're responsible for developing a plan for the metropolitan area under the 1977 Clean Air Act, which is going to be a major undertaking with very, very severe consequences if we don't do the job right. Those things are low-profile, I guess, but nevertheless extremely important. Housing is something that is vitally important.

Q: Housing is an area in which you seem to have spoken in favor of a change in policy. The council last year got into the operating side of publicly assisted housing. I believe you said that you were

opposed to that. Is that correct?

A: We are the regional HRA and we administer a subsidized housing program and are a pass-through for the funds. We have about 2,300 units now. I think that's terribly important and I very strongly support that. On the other hand, some time ago we applied for 50 units of large-family housing. And the proposal at one time was to build those houses and the council would operate them, rent them, maintain them. I don't think that's the council's function. I think there is a need for large-family housing in the region. I don't think we ought to be the ones to build, maintain and operate those units.

Q: But you think it should still be done by someone else?

A: Yes. One of the other problems with the housing is that there are a lot of folks out there who, from day one, have said the Metropolitan Council is pretty soon going to start operating and taking over the functions of the local units of government. I guess I see our getting into the operating area as a pretty good sign that maybe they were right. The feeling that the people in the metropolitan area have toward the Metropolitan Council is very, very important to the continued existence of the Metropolitan Council. We can do great things in the development of the region as long as we have the trust of the people.

Q: There's also a need to maintain the trust and confidence of and coordination with state government—the Legislature, the governor who appointed you to this job. In the recent past, it seems that the governors at least have not been terribly close to the operations of the council. What's your relationship with Gov. Quie going to be?

A: I think it's very exciting because there's no question that he's extremely interested in what's going on at the Metro Council and I think that's terribly important and that was obvious in the way he selected his council appointees. He was very concerned that people could make the time commitment to be on the council. He was concerned that they were aware of what the council was doing and had some knowledge of local affairs. He put great emphasis on the inputs of the local elected officials and the legislators and he has appointed a liaison person to work with the Metro Council.

Q: You just recently ordered the preparation of a legislative program for the council. What do you anticipate being in that program?

A: Not very much. Certainly we're talking about a bill that would help us to preserve agricultural land. We're involved now in an investment framework and I think that's another terribly important thing and very low key. But it will be a very important tool. The purpose is to find out just exactly what the financial status of the whole metropolitan area is.