Lindquist takes the wheel in MTC labor negotiations

By Dan Wascoe Jr.
Staff Writer

Six months ago a labor contract expired between most Twin Cities bus drivers and the Metropolitan Transit Commission (MTC).

Even though the negotiating and arbitration process has dragged through the summer and into the fall, no pickets have ringed MTC garages and no strike has been threatened by the agency's 1,700 employees. Instead, arbitration proceeded as required by state law.
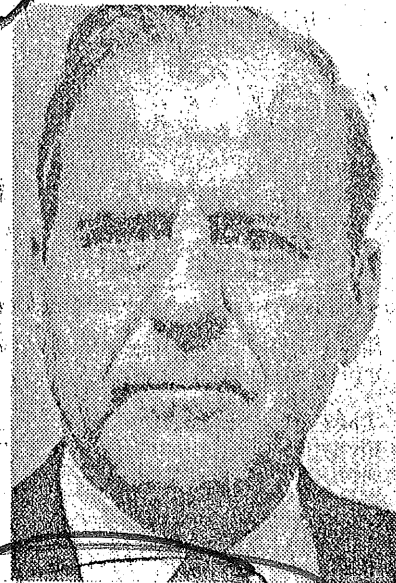
This week, finally, the pace may quicken. Three arbitration experts are scheduled to "hole up in a hotel room" to wrestle over a settlement, according to Cam Andre, the MTC's chief administrator. But in the end, the deciding vote, worth millions of taxpayers' dollars, will be cast by Leonard Lindquist, a veteran Minneapolis lawyer and arbitrator.

Lindquist, 66, is not an elected official. He once served in the Minnesota House and on the old Minnesota Railroad and Warehouse Commission. But in 1958, he lost a race for

Congress against Third District Rep. Roy Wier. (Two years later he lost the Republican endorsement to Clark MacGregor, who did defeat DFLer Wier.

The other two arbitrators in the MTC matter picked Lindquist last summer to act as chairman of the arbitration panel. They are Isadore Gromfine, from Washington, who is arguing the case of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1005, and John Dash, from Philadelphia, who represents the

Leonard Lindquist

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MTC.

Arbitration is not cheap. Andre said the MTC will pay Dash $75 an hour and will share with the union the cost of hiring Lindquist — $400 a day. Andre said the MTC's share of the bill could be at least $50,000 to $60,000.

As for the settlement itself, higher wages and fringe benefits could increase the MTC's annual spending by $2 million to $4 million. It will cost more than $51 million this year to run the bus system. Issues range from more pay (the drivers' top hourly wage now is $7.67) to payments for tools to the number of paid holidays.

Earlier this fall, Lindquist acknowledged that "I'm in the situation of a judge" in the arbitration proceedings. He must review about 300 exhibits and 1,500 pages of transcripts, he said.

At that point the two sides were "very far apart." He suggested that the negotiators probably can be brought together more readily on the wage issue than on some others. That's because a cost-of-living clause in the current contract has kept drivers' and mechanics' wages moving up with inflation.

This is the third time arbitration has been necessary in the four contracts agreed to by the MTC and the transit union since 1970.

Lindquist is hardly new to this kind of thing. He was an attorney with the National Labor Relations Board in 1939 and 1940. Later he pursued his interest as partner in a law firm that also included DFLers Earl Larson, Orville Freeman, Don Fraser and Lee Loevinger. (Larson is a senior federal judge. Freeman went on to become governor and U.S. agriculture secretary. Fraser was elected to Congress and Loevinger became a member of the Federal Communications Commission.) Now he is a partner in the Lindquist and Vennum law firm.

He has lectured on labor arbitration at the University of Minnesota and was a counsel in negotiations involving the National Football League. Lindquist was on the players' side.

He was appointed by former Minneapolis Mayor Charles Stenvig to head a committee studying commercial development. And a year later, he worked for Stenvig when the mayor was looking for another job.

Lindquist would not predict just when a decision might come in the MTC arbitration matter, but the process will take at least until late November. If that is true, then MTC employees may get some hefty back-pay checks around Christmastime.

But the subsequent need for higher subsidies of the Twin Cities bus system will put pressure on the MTC to raise fares, lobby next year's Legislature for more money or continue to cut service.