



Chair Scott Dibble
Senate Transportation Committee

March 6, 2023

Dear Chair Dibble and Members of the Senate Transportation Committee,

The Metropolitan Council was created 50 years ago to solve significant problems – the entire region faced sewage, development and transit crises and some communities were unable to provide essential services to their residents – challenges that local officials were unable to solve on their own. Legislators understood the need to create a regional governance structure to manage issues that transcended local boundaries. In establishing the new Metropolitan Council, the legislature provided for appointed citizen members who could focus on addressing regional concerns. The Council's governance was established specifically – and even brilliantly – to give it important limited authority but with statutory accountability to the Governor, Legislature, local officials and the region's citizens and businesses. The creation of the Metropolitan Council put Minnesota on the map for its innovative metropolitan problem-solving strategy and to this day it is the envy of metropolitan regions across the country. The Council continues to serve as a national model of regional governance and local coordination of services.

Today, the Council's responsibilities cover transit, waste and wastewater management systems, regional parks and park reserves, regional trail systems, assistance to local governments on development of comprehensive plans, regional water supply, and other functions. In 2015, the Council adopted a new housing plan, the first in 30 years, to assist local communities in creating housing options for people of all incomes and at all stages of life.

Our region's Metropolitan Council is again receiving attention at the Legislature, with legislation that would overthrow the current structure for a model that would require the Council to be elected.

Many of us involved in local government believe this legislation would threaten the effectiveness of our regional government and its mission to provide comprehensive regional planning, infrastructure, and services in a coordinated and efficient fashion. This is not to say there is not room to refine what works well. However, an elected Metropolitan Council would essentially "throw the baby out with the bathwater."

Here are several reasons I believe the proposed governance change in SF 1624-Dibble is problematic and ill-advised:

State law gives the Metropolitan Council responsibility to coordinate and provide regional planning and infrastructure, including wastewater, transit, and the allocation of federal highway funds for improvement of our regional transportation system. The need for coordination among the Council and other governmental units is essential and is generally effectively accomplished on a partnership basis. There are occasions where there may be tensions among regional and local officials when regional and local interests conflict, and in such cases, Council members need the space and governance structure that allow it act on behalf of the region. Under an elected Council, the Council's regional function and purpose would be sacrificed to parochial approaches and conflicts that are inherent in an elected model. The work of the Council does not lend itself to this model of governance.

In its regional transportation and transit function, the Metropolitan Council has been approved by the federal government as a Metropolitan Planning Organization ("MPO"). The Transportation Advisory Board (TAB), acting in its advisory capacity to the Council, serves this function as an approved MPO. Federal funding in excess of \$200 million bi-annually is presently effectively and fairly channeled through the TAB planning process and its 34 members, composed of elected

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officials, agency representatives, and citizens, who recommend the use of federal funds for the benefit of the entire region. A governance change of the magnitude proposed by this legislation would trigger the need for a re-designation of the MPO and by law would require the support of 75% of the cities in the MPO district and other significant approvals. This process would likely take several years, and in the process, could compromise federal funding for projects planned and approved across the region.

When regional governance changes are proposed, they are often done under the assertion that the Metropolitan Council lacks transparency and accountability. While I would dispute this assertion, there are, nonetheless, after 50 years, some changes that can be made to our regional governance model that would improve its channels of accountability while maintaining the integrity of our known and viable regional structure. Staggering the terms of Metropolitan Council members would be a significant improvement and often doesn't get its due consideration in terms of its importance to the improvement of our already well functioning regional governance model. Staggered terms allow for phasing the appointment of members and the expiration and promote regional stability and focus, minimizing the effect of politics on the body and allowing new members to learn the intricacies of regional governance before the eventual departure of the more experienced members. Staggered terms also allow for more diverse viewpoints and would help inoculate the Council from mission creep or the potential for sharp lurches in policy direction. Staggered terms are in place for many governmental bodies and they have broad support.

Improvements could also be made to add transparency to the process for nominating and appointing members and such changes should be made. Such refinements to the regional governance model would a good model even more effective and efficient, as opposed to a wholesale overhaul that creates an uncertain course and structure for the future.

Our regional government is a true and distinct regional governance model, free of the clashes of partisan loyalties, party politics, and parochialism. Let's support common sense improvements that would serve the Council and all its stakeholder communities, improvements that allow the Council to do what it is designed to do – coordinate and provide for regionwide public policy, planning and provide the services that benefit the economic prosperity of our region and our state. That pathway is not through an elected Metropolitan Council, but instead a refinement of what we have.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James B. Hovland", written over a horizontal line.

James B. Hovland
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Chair, Transportation Advisory Board
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