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Purpose & Role of the Metropolitan Council: Focused for the Future



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Purpose & Role of the Metropolitan Council: Focused for the Future




Metropolitan Council

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Contents

	page
Introduction.....	1
Need to Focus	1
Focusing the Council.....	2
Legislative Charge	2
Purpose	2
Council Role	4
"Core" Areas of Influence.....	6
Criteria for Selecting Core Influences.....	6
Process for Identifying and Managing Emerging Issues.....	7
Other Role Options	7
Implications of Focusing.....	8
Region as a Whole.....	8
Council and Staff Structure.....	8
List of Figures	
Figure 1. New Metropolitan Council Role.....	3
Figure 2. More Emphasis on Critical Emerging Issues	4
Figure 3. Relationship Between "Trouble at the Core" and Council Core Areas of Influence	6
Figure 4. Regional Issue Leadership Process.....	11
Appendices	9
General Principles and Criteria to Assess Current Council Programs	10
General Principles and Criteria to Evaluate Emerging Issues.....	10
Criteria	12

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Introduction

This paper presents a role and purpose for the Metropolitan Council. Consistent with this purpose, it spells out a way to identify and address emerging issues in the region and identifies the Council's "core" strengths toward this end. Doing so will enable the Council and others to engage emerging regional issues in the Twin Cities area. The stake in the effort is high. The region's quality of life and economic health ultimately depend on how well this large, increasingly heterogeneous community can solve today's problems and head off those that would otherwise make tomorrow's dramatic headlines.

This effort grew out of an evaluation of the Council made at its request by the Management Analysis Division of the Minnesota Department of Administration. Their recent report encouraged the Council to redefine its purpose and role. Similar calls have been made by Gov. Arne Carlson, state legislators, and the media, among others. Further, the Council's role and purpose grew out of the Council's effort last year to create a vision and goals for the region in the future. The goals are spelled out in *Metro 2015: Vision and Goals*.

An internal Transition Team of Council members and staff developed this focus. The Team reviewed legislative reports and major academic, magazine and newspaper articles as part of the process. Council advisory committees also participated.

The focus will bring about real, fundamental change. By intention, its most significant impact will be on the region and its problems. But what the Council does and how it does it also will change.

Need to Focus

The Council has been successful in solving a number of regional problems. It has brought about improvements in water quality, developed a regional park system, slowed sprawl, improved transit, changed the solid waste system, among others, and initiated the emergency 9-1-1 system.

The laurel wreaths the Council earned for these successes did not come without costs. Getting the job done meant acquiring a mind set largely focusing on the four metropolitan systems—sewers, transportation, parks and airports. It meant a preoccupation with meeting a long list of legislative mandates. Council work on other issues in the region was choked off or slow in getting under way. Few Council resources were devoted to them.

But this explains only part of why the Council needs to focus. For a decade, Minnesota's governors told the Council not to stir up the pot, so the Council kept an extremely low profile. The governors set up special commissions, such as the racing commission and the sports facilities commission, to site regional facilities instead of the Council. Governors and many legislators assessed the Council's performance based on how well it carried out existing mandates. State leaders saw the Council as an organization for the 1970s and 1980s, not one for the 1990s and beyond.

The Council also is responsible for its current state of affairs. Over the last decade, it hasn't been proactive and taken risks, choosing instead to keep a distance from controversial issues. If the Council took on an issue, it entered the arena only after a course of action was established elsewhere and it was politically acceptable to get involved. In recent years, the Council tied its own hands by

choosing to operate from a community wide consensus model of decision making, even though it often had authority to decide. If there was no consensus, the Council didn't go forward. When consensus wasn't reached, plans and ideas were shelved.

The federal government provided funding for regional planning in health, criminal justice, aging and the arts. As a result, the Council conducted planning in these areas, but has been slow to disengage from them as federal funding stopped. Continuing these activities with reduced local resources together with other essential Council responsibilities spread the organization out too thinly.

In short, the Council, by and large, has not instituted fundamental internal change, even though some critics have called for it and many other organizations in and out of government have been doing so.

Until now. This report lays out a purpose and focus for the Council. It clarifies how the Council will engage emerging critical regional issues and what the agency's core strengths and competencies are. It also establishes a way the larger region can partner in the resolution of regional issues. The last 25 years of Metropolitan development amply demonstrate that a regional approach makes a difference. The Council's focus will enable its to carry on its strong, overall tradition. These changes can be carried out within the Council's current statutory authority.

Focusing the Council

Legislative Charge

*T*he preamble in the legislation creating the Metropolitan Council instructs the Council "to promote the orderly and

economic development of the metropolitan area, public and private, recognizing physical, social and economic needs" the charge is broad, but the general intent suggests the Council's fundamental purpose.

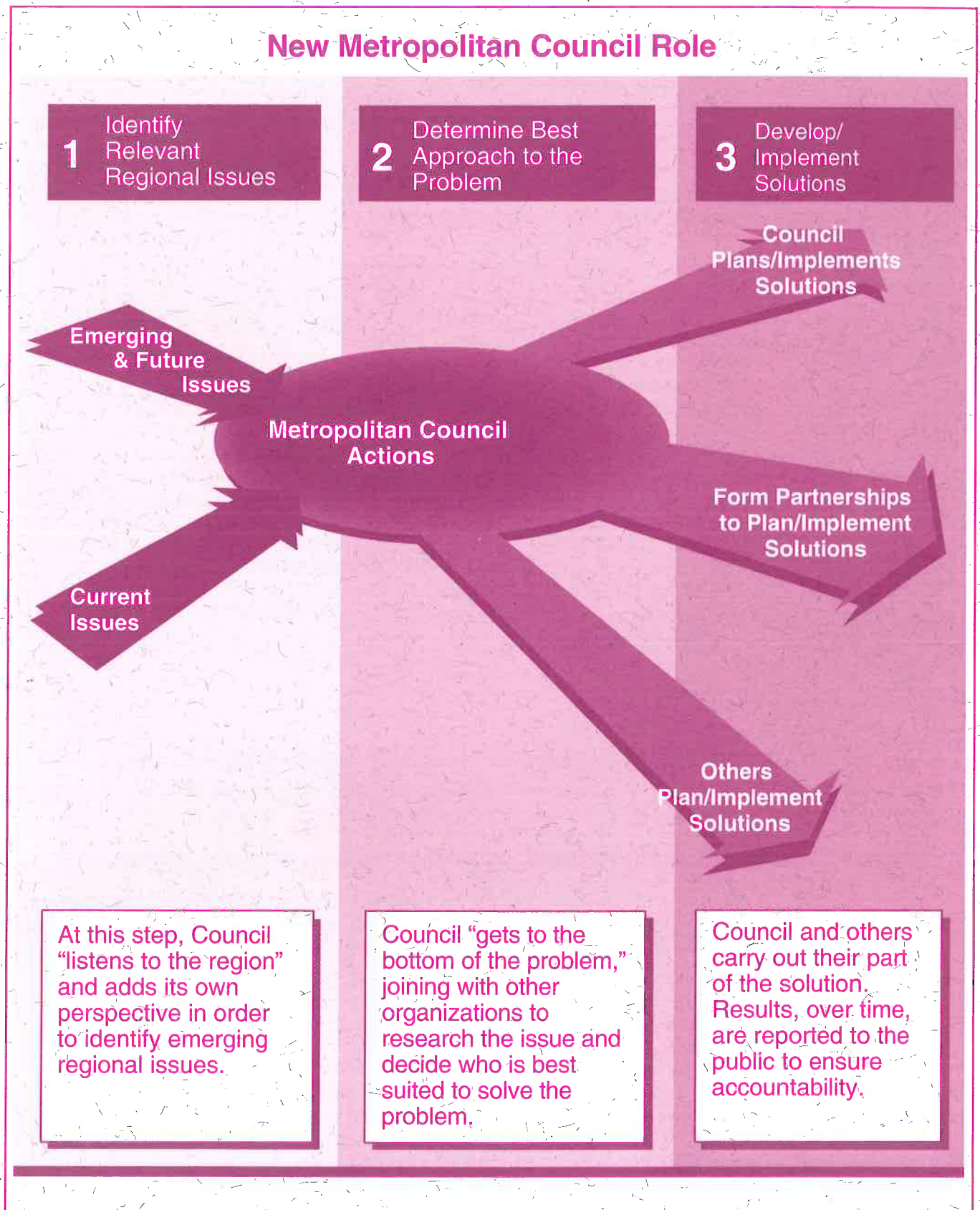
Purpose

To improve the region by strengthening the economic, societal and environmental health and vitality of the metropolitan area.

*A*rticles evaluating the Council unanimously assert there is an ongoing need for the Council. They do not question its general purpose. The Council is needed because it can take an objective view of issues facing the region and how to solve them, i.e., it is not wedded to a city or sub-regional perspective, nor to a single-function answer, e.g., sewers or transit. The Council brings a comprehensive, long-range planning perspective to today's issues. It advocates for a regional perspective and for the good of the region as a whole in the clash of local and metropolitan interests. The odds of this occurring are high. The region has 273 units of government. Today's issues go beyond infrastructure and cut across many traditional program approaches. And there is a great need for cost effective government.

The purpose statement is broad enough to include Council involvement in a wide range of new issues, authority or inter-governmental relations.

Figure 1





Council Role

To provide leadership on critical current and emerging regional issues leading to action and assuring accountability.

To carry out its purpose in today's environment, the Council will shift its focus from an emphasis on long-range planning to incubating solutions to the region's emerging issues. The Council is the appropriate organization to do so. It has a regional focus and long-range planning capability. Moreover, the Council will carry forward its proven strengths—long-range planning and traditional activities related to land use, metro systems and issues crossing governmental boundaries.

Doing so means the Council must redeploy its resources and energy to provide regional leadership on emerging critical

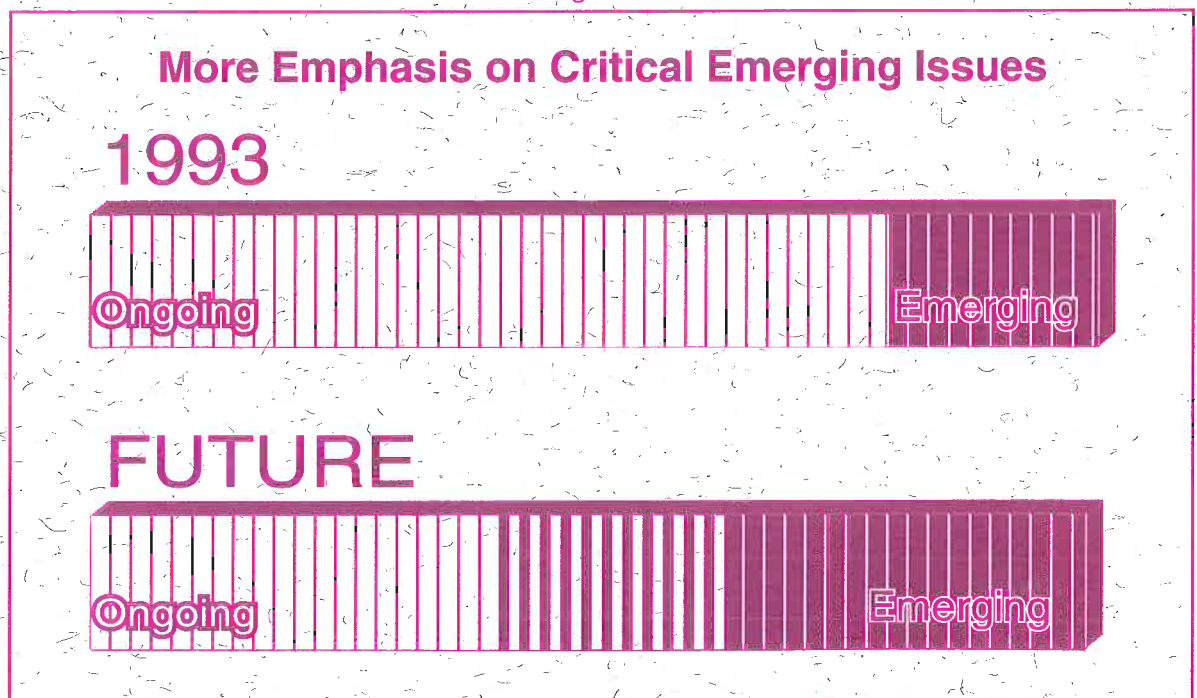
issues and correspondingly reduce its energy and resource commitment to activities that are no longer a priority.

The Council will take advantage of its planning and research strengths to identify current or emerging issues, evaluate them to determine their impact and importance to the region, then seek out an entity that can, and will, take action. The Council will also decide that it is the most appropriate body to take on a few of the issues, and ensure implementation of solutions. (Figure 1 summarizes the process. Figure 4 on p. 10 breaks the process down into five steps.)

The approach will bring about a new Council, with the following characteristics.

- **A focus on results, actions and monitoring.** Getting results and action on emerging issues is not at the center of the current Council approach. The Council presently confines its monitoring to well established regional programs.

Figure 2



- **More focus on critical emerging issues and their timely resolution.**
- **Issues that change.** Today, much of what the Council does involves a metro system mind set where issues are much more static. The focus involves bringing work on emerging issues into more of a balance over time (See Figure 2)
- **Preservation of its proven strengths and core capabilities.** The Council will continue to play a role in the oversight of metro systems and the commissions that operate them. In addition, the Council will continue to influence the land-use patterns and development of the region and be a party to issues that spill over governmental boundaries. To continue these key functions and to carry out its new role, the Council needs to have capability to do the following: conduct research (data collection and analysis); conduct long-range planning; communicate with the region; work with the legislature and conduct other intergovernmental relations; and convene, facilitate and mediate issues or disputes. If necessary, the Council will improve capabilities in these areas.
- **Partnership with others.** To play a leadership role in emerging issues, the Council will assemble its resources so it can triage critical emerging regional issues, then partner with others in the public and private sector to address the issues and get action, thereby assuring accountability to the public. Partnerships with groups is not the Council norm today.
- **A comprehensive viewpoint.** The Council will focus on a comprehensive viewpoint on issues more than on having a comprehensive set of programs. More planning would occur across systems and planning disciplines (housing, transportation, etc.).
- **Use of a decision making model that resolves issues.** Consensus would continue to be the preferred decision making approach. Every effort needs to be made to bring people to the table to see if there is agreement. But when action is needed (i.e., there is a threat to public health), and there is no consensus, the Council should use a voting model. A majority vote of the Council will decide the matter.
- **Cost-effective delivery of regional services.**
- **Communications with broader purpose.** There will be more communications among the accountable organizations about critical emerging issues and what to do about them and more communications about issues with the larger public. Today, Council communications focus on what the Council is doing, not on critical emerging issues.

The Council is "jump starting" the transition immediately, and it will restructure its internal makeup by the end of 1993. Next year, the Council will begin to carry out the lengthier process described below (Also see Appendix). It will begin to implement its focus with its current set of authority and intergovernmental relationships.

Making these new Council attributes characteristic of the organization is critical at this point in time, and perhaps, more critical than resolving issues of Council structure, power, representation, and the like. Whatever future form the Council takes, the three attributes (leadership, action and accountability) need to be present.

“Core” Areas of Influence

The Council's role and purpose is incomplete without identifying the planning activities that make up the core of its capabilities. Its capabilities, in turn, need to be strong in issue areas requiring continued attention and, at the same time, broad enough to be relevant to critical emerging issues as well. The core areas the Council selected are transportation, land use, water management, housing and regional investment. Many of the region's emerging issues will have, for example, a transportation or land use element in them, so the Council will be in a position to respond to such issues. For example, Figure 3 illustrates how the Council's core strengths relate to poverty conditions in the core of the region. Solutions are likely to include transportation, housing and land-use strategies.

These core activities are areas where the Council will provide regional leadership. They support the Council's purpose and role. They require strong staff expertise.

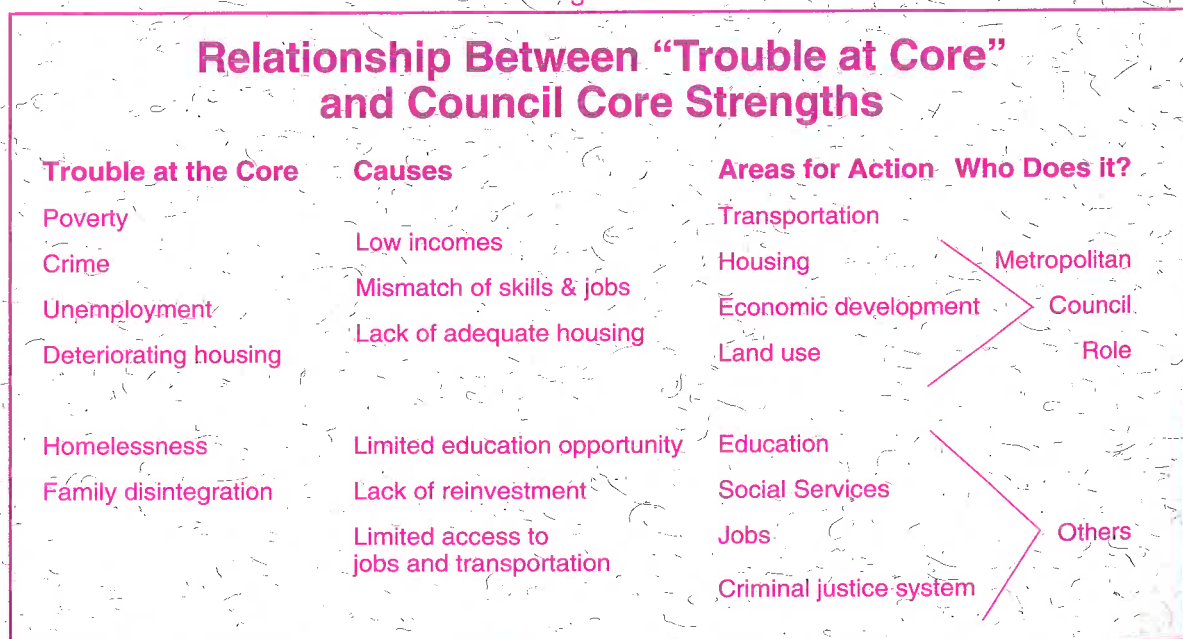
Criteria for Selecting Core Areas of Influence

The Council used the following criteria to select its five core strengths.

- Activity or issue is important to the region and critical to carrying out the *Regional Blueprint*. (The next version of the *Metropolitan Development and Investment Framework* will be called the *Regional Blueprint*.)
- Issue is critical to Council remaining relevant to the changing needs of the region.
- Issue relates to the problems identified in the Council's *Trouble at the Core* report.

Figure 3

Relationship Between “Trouble at Core” and Council Core Strengths



- Issue encompasses the three elements—strengthening the economic, societal and economic health and vitality of the metropolitan area—in the Council's purpose statement.
- Issue is evolving and requires the Council's unique and continued involvement to represent the regional and general purpose planning perspectives.

Process for Identifying and Managing Emerging Regional Issues

*T*he Council will serve as a regional problem solver. Changes in the region signal issues or problems that must be addressed for the overall good of the entire area. The Council will be in a position to identify critical issues and assess them so it can seek out entities, public or private, to take action. The vast majority of issues would be handled by the Council this way. A few might become the Council's responsibility for action.

An emerging issue team made up of members and staff, plus loaned executives, staff from other governmental units, and/or consultants, etc. will be created. The team will identify and assess the issue, recommend a proposal to deal with the issue, and identify the most appropriate entities to take up the problem and act to get solutions in place. Other Council interdisciplinary teams will deal with fewer, but more complex issues at greater length. The Council would communicate the results of this activity to the larger community. (See Appendices and Figure 4 for a description of the process and criteria Council will use to determine emerging issues). The process is akin to a needs assessment process for regional issues, but goes beyond assessment to incubating solutions.

In addition, the Council will use the process and criteria to determine if it should spin off more of its ongoing programs. It spun off its arts program recently and will soon spin off its Area Agency on Aging responsibilities.

The process gives the Council a way to identify, sort, evaluate, and move issues for study and action. Issues, of course, change over time. Quickly, an "old" issue thought to be "under control" can become an emerging issue. An example might be the question of whether the region should continue to have a centralized sewage treatment system, or whether more, smaller plants would be a more effective future strategy. The process also provides a way to deal with such issues.

Accountability is a cornerstone for focusing. The question is how to encourage other, independent groups to work on emerging issues and make them accountable without resorting to regulation or control over them.

The Council will monitor emerging issues taken up by other organizations or activities spun off from the Council to assess progress toward solutions. If the selection of the organization was well thought out and if the key groups participated in it, then accountability should be the norm. If not, then the Council will exert public pressure or its own persuasive powers to bring about change. It might suggest mediation. Unsuccessful in all of this, the Council will ask the Minnesota Legislature to intervene. The Council will propose and advocate for new legislation.

Other Role Options

*T*he Council evaluated three other possible roles for the Council. The roles do not meet the region's needs, so they have been dropped from further consid-

eration. Generally, these structures do not lead to accountability.

The options the Council looked at are as follows:

- Leave Council as is, with long-range planning and systems as its focus. This model is slow to respond to emerging issues, and is difficult to use to exercise leadership.
- Respond to "hot button" issues. This approach would downplay the Council's long-range planning function to focus on emerging issues and problem solving. The approach doesn't recognize that most problems are complex and their solutions need to be part of an integrated, long-range planning perspective.
- Restructure the Council as metropolitan government, directly operating regional services. In this structure the focus would be on operating systems in a narrow range of regional services, not on broader, emerging issues or long-range, integrated planning. Experiment here with transit, where operations and planning were under the Metropolitan Transit Commission, did not work. Planning was second priority to day-to-day operating concerns and on meeting service goals. Also, operators tend to become vested in a certain technology and find it difficult to evaluate other ones.

Implications of Focusing Region as a Whole

The Twin Cities region needs a strong, effective advocate for the good of the region as a whole. Doing so effectively is part of the Council's history. This focus is a step toward reinvigorating effective regional leadership. It is a way to

engage today's issues. Moreover, doing so will help prevent those that would likely occur in the future.

Council and Staff Structure

This focus puts the Council in a leadership position. It is to identify current and emerging issues and ensure action is taken and organizations are accountable. The focus means more collaboration in problem solving and multi-disciplinary answers. Finally, it suggests the need for flexibility - - to change as needs change and to shed unnecessary activities.

This approach focuses on what the Council will do, and does not establish an internal structure. That is the next step, to be completed by the end of 1993. The approach suggests, however, the need for a more flexible organization that can adapt quickly to changing needs. The challenges facing the Twin Cities area in the 21st century will be multifaceted and require multijurisdictional and multidisciplinary responses. This suggests a less compartmentalized structure.

In addition to traditional planning skills, the Council will need staff trained in communications, mediation and intergovernmental relations, plus support staff.

The focus suggests the need for staff to conduct planning for critical, emerging issues, whatever those issues might be. It will be necessary to partner more and more with others from the community to research, propose and plan actions to deal with new issues. It suggests the need for a "just in time" planning capability.

Moreover, focusing will create a work place more oriented to solving the relevant issues of the day. It will be an exciting place to be. Change is inevitable. Staff will find a focused Council is an opportunity for personal and professional growth.

Appendices

Appendices

General Principles and Criteria to Assess Current Council Programs

Principles

The Council would:

- Balance leadership/problem solving with ensuring implementation of regional policy/directions.
- Bring issue to closure by creating solutions and identifying appropriate structure for implementation.
- Reassess role and operation at least once every three years of all Council activities and functions — overall programs (transportation, sewers, parks, solid waste, housing, human services, etc.) and individual activities within the programs.
- Spin-off activities and functions not at the core of the Council mission and role.

General Principles and Criteria to Evaluate Emerging issues

Principles

The Council would:

- Advocate the regional interest.
- Focus on actions to get critical, emerging problems identified and solved. The objective would be to have the Council be an incubator where issues are defined, debated, solutions are created and closure is achieved when other responsible parties implement the solutions.
- Seek to determine who is responsible for developing and carrying out solutions.
- Ensure accountability from the parties responsible for getting results.
- Promote integration of infrastructure services and land use to promote regional vitality.
- Ensure efficient and effective solutions and best use of resources.
- Mediate differences among interests — public, private and non-profit.

Regional Issue Leadership Process

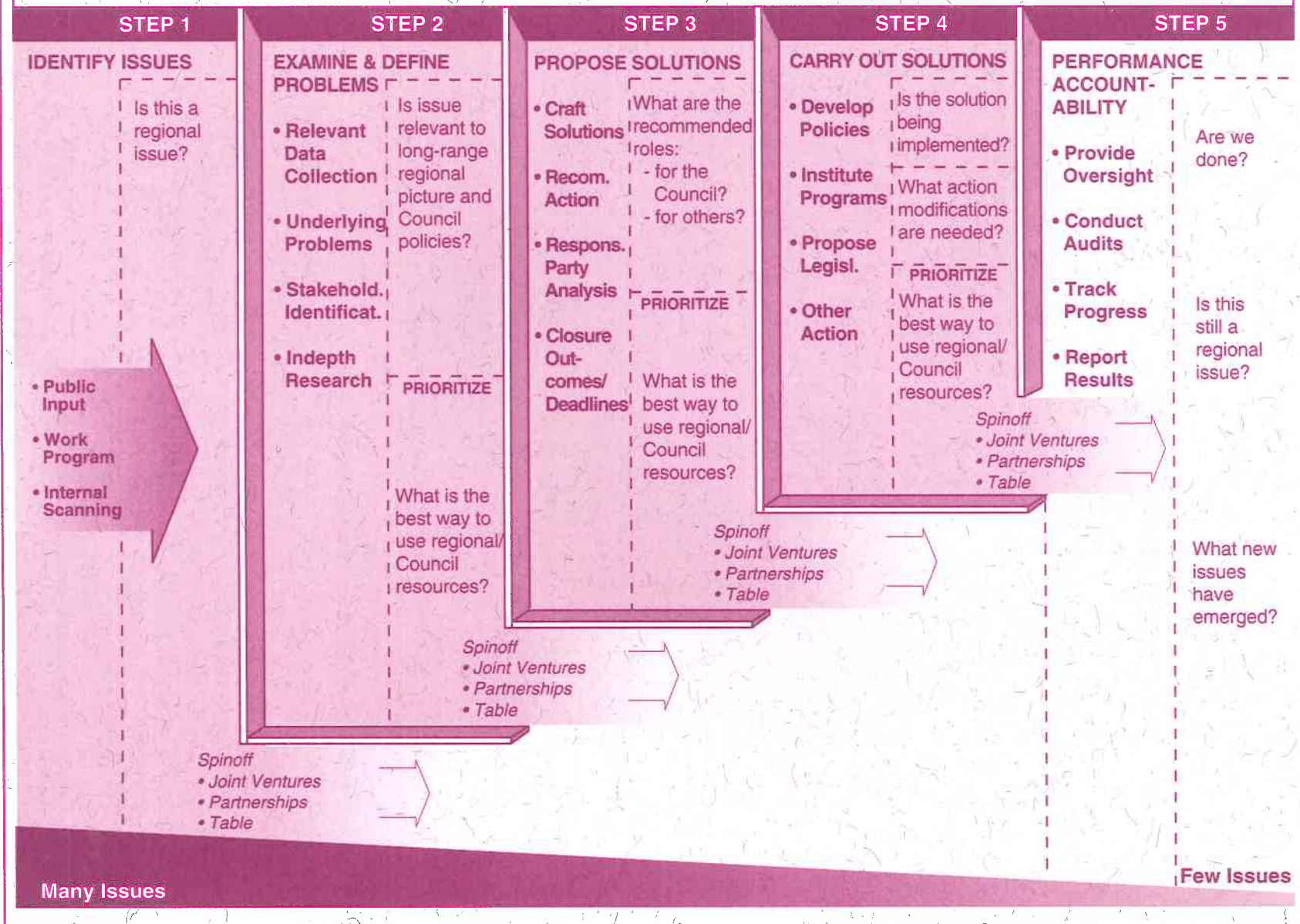


Figure 4

Criteria

Step One: Identify Issues

1. Is this a regional issue?

Ongoing Council Program

1. Is the issue still an issue?
 - Is it an area that needs to be revisited?
 - Has the nature of the issue changed?

2. Is the issue of regional importance?

- Why was Council originally involved?
- Have we done as much as we could?
- Has the nature or definition of the issue changed?
- Is there a role for regional advocacy? By whom?
- Is it being dealt with by someone?
- Is it being done in a cost-effective/efficient manner?
- Are economies of scale involved? Is the question of economies of scale of concern to a number of jurisdictions?

3. Does issue cross local government/district lines?

Emerging Issues

1. Is the issue of regional importance?

- What aspect of the issue needs a regional perspective?
- Is there a role for regional advocacy? By whom?
- Is it being dealt with by someone?
- Has Council looked at issue previously? What action did they take?

2. What are the potential overall regional impacts with or without action?

3. Does the issue cross local government/district lines?

4. Does this issue affect/concern equity within the region?

- Does it involve a redistribution of resources?
- Does it involve access to resources?

5. Does the issue involve cost-effective/efficient delivery of services?

6. Does this issue affect/concern equity within the region?

- Does it involve a redistribution of resources?

- Does it involve access to resources?

7. Is regional financing/oversight required to ensure cost-effective/efficient operations or service delivery.

- Are economies of scale involved?
- Is the region the appropriate level?
- Are there implications for overall capital costs or for total costs of consolidated regional operating budget?

Step Two: Examine and Define Problems

1. Is issue relevant to long-range regional picture and Council policies?

Ongoing Council Program

1. Does issue need to be addressed at regional level to assure implementation of the *Regional Blueprint*, other *Metropolitan Development Guide* policies and the following:

- Effective implementation of other policies?
- Ongoing, long-range policy direction?
- Ongoing, long-range oversight?
- Performance monitoring for adherence to policy?

2. Is the issue a matter of regional public good?

- Is it a public responsibility/public good not provided by private sector?
- Does the issue cross public/private domains?
- Is there a federal or state legislative mandate requiring regional action with Council held accountable for outcomes or action?

3. What are the potential regional impacts with or without action?

- What are the impacts across governmental/district lines?
- What are the impacts on metro systems?
- What are the region wide (state, nation, world) impacts?

4. What is the potential impact on infrastructure, regional land use and development?

5. What is the potential impact on the following:

- Efficient and effective services?
- Regional economic vitality?
- Environmental quality?
- Healthy communities?

6. Is the issue necessary for Council to maintain a comprehensive, long-range perspective and direction?

II. What is the best way to use regional and Council resources?

Ongoing and Emerging

1. What level and type of action is needed? What of the following is needed:
 - Issue solution?
 - Implementation of a solution?
 - Performance accountability?
2. What unique contribution can the Council make?
 - Will the key organizations collaborate in addressing the problem?
 - Can the Council's interdisciplinary and or regional perspective make a difference?
 - Can the issue be handled better elsewhere?
3. Does the Council have the resources to take on the issue?
 - How important is the issue compared with other Council priorities?
 - Who can work with us on it?
 - What is the appropriate level and type of Council involvement?
 - Is the issue time limited?
4. What are the implementation/fiscal impacts?
 - What are costs of activity if performed by Council?
 - What are the regional costs of activity if handled elsewhere verses if handled internally?
 - What income is associated with performing activity?
5. Do the Council's decisions on individual ongoing or emerging issues, when taken as a whole, result in a Metropolitan Council that can execute its role and purpose?

Step Three: Propose Solutions

I. What are the recommended roles: for the Council? for others?

1. What are the consequences if the Council doesn't accept the recommendations? Would doing so hamper the ability of others to carry out their roles?
2. Will other key organizations carry out their recommended role? Will doing so help the region?

II. What is the best way to use regional/Council resources?

1. Is there a direct service role?
2. What impact would it have on the Council workforce?

Step Four: Carry Out Solutions

I. Is solution being implemented?

II. What modifications are needed?

Step Five: Performance Accountability

I. Are we done?

II. Is this still a regional issue?

III. What new issues have emerged?



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