

THE METROPOLITAN COUNCIL
APPOINTED OR ELECTED?

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Background:

According to Minnesota Statutes, the Metropolitan Council was created "In order to coordinate the planning and development of the metropolitan area comprising the counties of Anoka, Carver, Dakota, Hennepin, Ramsey, Scott and Washington." Its present composition is made up of 15 voting members, 14 of which are appointed by the Governor, one from each of 14 Council districts in the metropolitan area. Council districts are presently comprised of combinations of Senate and House districts which were set up before the 1972 reapportionment. The Chairman of the Council is also appointed by the Governor and becomes the 15th voting member. All appointments are made with the advice and consent of the Senate.

Appointed or Elected?

Perhaps no other question concerning the future of the Metropolitan Council has been so frequently debated in recent years as the question of whether the Council should remain appointed or become elected. In addressing this problem it is imperative that we both ask ourselves what the Council now is and what we wish it to become.

While there are sharp differences of opinion as to whether the present direction of the Council is the right role for it to assume or pursue, most people will agree with

the statement that the Metropolitan Council has become or is emerging as a major policy decision-making body for metropolitan areawide problems.

Those who favor retaining the appointment process rather than making Council positions elected make their case by advancing two main schools of thought.

The first is that they believe appointees are better able to make objective, long-range decisions concerning the planning and development of the entire metropolitan area than can elected officials. Both the St. Paul Chamber of Commerce and the St. Paul Dispatch and Pioneer Press believe Council planning will be more objective if it is not subjected to the forces of parochialism which they feel almost certainly will emerge if the Council becomes elected. They contend that the planning aspect of the Council's responsibility is best served when they are free of local, geographical and political interests. Elected representatives, as one St. Paul attorney put it, will naturally consider the interest of their district first rather than the long-range, best interest of the entire metropolitan area.

A second school of thought favoring the appointment process is advanced by the aforementioned groups, plus former State Senator Gordon Rosenmeier, who helped enact legislation creating the Council. They contend that the Metropolitan Council has become a much more powerful body than the Legislature ever originally intended it to be. According to this line of thinking, if the present direction of the

Council goes unabated and the legislature does not move to strictly limit the powers and responsibilities of the Council, it will become a new level of local bureaucracy, a regional supergovernment whose power and authority will diminish and erode that of locally elected units of government. Electing Council representatives, they contend, would only further increase the authority of this already too powerful agency and would cast the die for a regional supergovernment. In relation to this, some believe, as does W. C. Anderson, a Dakota County administrator, that the centralization of authority in ever-increasingly small groups of men is a very bad idea.

This school of thought strongly believes the role of the Metropolitan Council's "coordination" in metropolitan affairs should be in seeking cooperation between municipalities and other governmental units. When irresolvable conflict arises between the Council and a metropolitan unit of government, they maintain that a holding action should be the limit of the Council's authority, and the conflict should be settled by the state legislature rather than having the Metropolitan Council make policy decisions.

In contrast are those who believe that the Council should be elected. They include, among others, the mayors of St. Paul and Minneapolis, the Governor, the Citizens League and the Metropolitan Council itself. Those favoring the election of Council members do so for a large variety of reasons, perhaps as many as the individuals and organizations supporting it.

Perhaps the central theme and most significant reasoning forwarded by proponents favoring election is that the Council is a major policy decision-making body for the metropolitan area. They point out as did a recent Citizens League report that the Council will be responsible for making policy decisions on 3.7 billion dollars of capital improvements over the next 20 years. Congressman Bill Frenzel, who helped in the creation of the Council, believes that the policy decisions it makes for the metropolitan area are too important to be made by non-elected officials. Governor Anderson feels that in a general way the reason the Metropolitan Council was set up was so that they could resolve problems that crossed municipal, township and local governmental lines. They are the metro unit that should have the most power and influence and ultimately be making the final decisions, said Anderson.

Groups who favor election contend, as does the Minneapolis Star and Tribune, that it is in the best traditions of representative democracy and the basic right of the people in a democratic society to elect representatives to important public policy decision-making bodies. This, they contend, has become increasingly important as the powers of the Council have grown and are increased. Through election, they believe, metropolitan affairs would be put back into the hands of metropolitan citizens and make Council members more responsive to popular will. Mayor Al Hilde of Plymouth has been critical of the lack of accountability on the part of Council members and suggested some elective process be used in the future.

Mayor James King of Bloomington sees the election of Council members as necessary to reduce the Council's "isolation and insulation" from the public.

Related to this, the Executive Director of the Minnesota League of Municipalities believes that local officials do not accept the Metropolitan Council as the legitimate representative of the area because it is appointed and not elected. Mayor Cohen of St. Paul feels that the Metropolitan Council is in a position of substantial power which is not presently balanced by the ability to act derived from election. In much the same way, a Metropolitan Council member believes election is necessary to "legitimatize" the Council in a society that believes in democracy.

Albert Hofstede, Chairman of the Metropolitan Council, has said that "coordination is easy to say and hard to do." The legislature, which originally mandated the Metropolitan Council the responsibility to "coordinate" the planning and development of the metropolitan area, must decide what it meant by the word "coordinate." The legislature must decide if the Council is to be an administrative arm of the legislature or a policy-making body for the metropolitan area. Once the role of the Council is defined, perhaps the question of election or appointment is made slightly easier.

More Pros and Cons

Pro

Those who argue for the election process of Metropolitan Council members believe that it will offer greater opportunity

for citizen input. They also believe election will result in higher visibility for the Council and, subsequently, greater awareness on the part of citizens for Metropolitan Council affairs.

In addition, they argue that the present appointment process removes selection of metropolitan policy makers away from the metropolitan area to the state level.

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In contrast, advocates of the appointive process believe it provides a healthy link between the Governor, the legislature and the metropolitan area.

In addition, they argue that the last thing we need is another name being added to the ballot. Citizens Leaguers counter this point by arguing that the Metropolitan Council is a policy-making body and should be added to the ballot and that county administrative offices, such as county auditor and county treasurer, should be appointed, thus removing them from the ballot.

Finally, proponents of the appointive process believe that it allows for the selection of highly competent specialists, minorities and women who might not otherwise be able to be elected.

Public Opinion

The Minneapolis Star (who happens to favor election of Council members) in late November, 1972, took a poll of 600 voting age respondents from the metropolitan area to determine how people felt regarding the election or appointment of

Metropolitan Council members. Of all the respondents to the Star's poll, 66% believed Metropolitan Council members should be elected; 22% believed they should not and 12% had no opinion.

Interestingly enough, 28% of the respondents considered themselves "moderately" or "well informed" on the Council as opposed to 72% who considered themselves "not too well informed."

In June, 1971, a similar poll was taken by the Minneapolis Star which indicated that at that time 59% of the respondents favored election of Metropolitan Council members.

Reapportionment and the Elective or Appointive Process

Whether appointed or elected, almost all individuals agree that Council districts should be based and drawn on equal population districts. Congressman Bill Frenzel has pointed out that for the Council to qualify as an A-95 review agency for federal grants, it is essential that it be organized on a one-man, one-vote basis.

Present Council districts which were drawn up before the 1972 reapportionment are no longer equally populated and should be brought into balance. The most frequently suggested corrective measure would divide the metropolitan area's 34 new Senate districts into combinations of two, thus creating 17 Council districts with one representative elected or appointed from each. Another possibility which has been mentioned is creating a 11-member Council which could be based on combining roughly every 3 Senatorial districts in the metropolitan area into one Council district.

In either case, the Chairman could then be appointed as he now is by the Governor, elected from among the Council membership, or elected at large from the metropolitan area.

If Elected, How?

If an elected Council should be decided upon, there are three main suggestions for both the length of terms and the method of election.

One election method suggested by the Metropolitan Council includes a six-year, single term limitation. One-third of the Councilmen under this recommendation would be elected every 2 years rather than all at one time. Staggered terms, its proponents argue, will aid the continuity of the Council. Opponents of the six-year, single term idea argue that it is too long and still allows Council members to remain isolated from their constituencies. In addition, they believe staggered terms which allow for only one-third of the Council members to be elected at any one time, reduces the opportunity for a comprehensive, periodic public review. All Council seats in their opinion, should come up for election at the same time. A four-year term is much more to their liking.

Perhaps a compromise of sorts between the above-mentioned plans, which also tries to meet the need of continuity, accountability and periodic public review, is found in a third suggestion. This plan would create 4-year staggered terms in which incumbents could run for re-election. Under this recommendation, every two years one-half of the Council would be up for election.

The terms of the Chairman could be 2, 4, or 6 years, depending on the nature of the selection process and the preference of the legislature.

If an election process is decided upon, most opinion is in consensus that it should not begin until 1974 to provide adequate time for preparation, planning, filing and campaigning.

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