

Metropolitan Council Task Force Testimony 1/9/2024

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I have orally testified twice:

#1: 12/8/23- Testimony of traumatic transit police incident

#2: 1/5/23- Testimony of renaming the MET Council to MET Governor's council and recommendation to split areas of focus (more in written testimony)

I have prepared a written testimony: One expressing a recommendation and another expressing a concern.

A- Task-Force Recommendation

First, I would like to thank the task force for holding these sessions, as I have learned a lot about the MET council through the hearings. I have a MS in Agricultural and Resource Economics from UC Berkeley. Also I ran for St. Paul city council for Ward 1, and for St. Paul mayor in 2021. I'm genuinely interested in government structures, and take a systems approach. My recommendation is heavily influenced by prior testimony. I'll do my best to provide an outline on how the task force should approach getting to a common solution.

Reality: From citizen input, it is clear that the MET council does way too much, and are unclear on who the responsible parties are. Broadly speaking, citizens always favor more representation and voice, but administratively it can lead to partisanship in elections, and increase time & money for completion of projects. You can look at the city of San Francisco to see how layers of consensus models lead to stagnation and increased costs for development. Here are the three priority questions and considerations that I have for the taskforce.

1) What are the distinct areas of focus that the MET Council cover AND for each focus area, does it make sense to have elected representation, administration-based, appointee (current), or hybrid councils (appointee & elected)?

- a) For Example: I think Metro Transit should have elected members because citizens are impacted on a daily basis, and public safety is a high-priority. The Metro transit covers multiple cities, and counties. In addition, citizens have considerable concerns (provided testimony) on policing.
- b) I think a hybrid model can make sense for environmental projects.

- c) Housing is very complicated. From my understanding, Metro HRA is both a public housing authority and engaged with capital housing investments. Those are distinct roles.

2) Who chooses the appointees?

- a) Currently, it is partisan because the governor have exclusive right to appoint
- b) My recommendation would be to
 - i) Follow the appointee process for federal judges initiated by the US president, and then approved by US Congress. The governor's appointees would need to be approved by the legislature. This process is not partisan-based, in principle, and allows legislators and the public to learn who the appointee is
 - ii) Have the appointee process be at the midpoint of the governor's four year term. This has two significant impacts: 1) it's less partisan because dramatic shifts on leadership cannot occur all at once. 2) the appointee and recently elected- governor is encouraged to work across bi-partisan lines. 3) The "tradeoff" of my proposal is that it creates resistance to rapid change, though creates long-term stability. Stability can be very valuable for long-term environmental goals [hence breaking MET council by areas of focus]

3) What is the role and payment of the appointees?

- a) IMO The primary role of the Met Council is to provide oversight of the MET council administrative staff, and can make some recommendations
 - i) I do not know the agency and decision-making process between the staff and council members. Ideally it should be fair, for all parties involved. Though the decision-making structure should be clear and accessible to the public.
- b) It is clear to me that current appointees do not have the time or compensated fairly for the duties present. It should be a full-time role. If the council is broken down to areas of focus, then the appointees, elected or not, can be specialists in the field. The council can now adequately assess and audit the department

So in summary, the MET council should be broken down to areas of focus, and then the task force decides on how these focus areas should be governed. Ultimately, the governor will need to approve the legislation, and the proposal may not align with the governor's interest. I'm not a state legislator. As a citizen organizer, I would repeatedly name the MET Council as the "MET Governor's council" to indicate to citizens clearly that the current dysfunctionality and responsibility of the MET council is on the governor. Unfortunately, any criticism or highlight of the governorship may be viewed from a partisan lens. For proper governance, elected officials need to put their ego and political affiliations aside. Thank you for reading.

Express Concern: Public Health Emergency on the Light Rail

[Note: My second testimony was suppose to be about my experience on the light rail transit; I'm using 'users' to describe drug-users and addicts]

The current conditions on the light rail transit is unacceptable, and it's a public emergency. Last Christmas day, I was riding the Green Line eastward toward St. Paul around 2:20 pm. Once I got in the passenger car at US Bank Stadium, there were two separate groups of active drug-users on each tail of the car. They were actively smoking hard drugs such as meth, fentanyl, and etc. The ratio of drug-users to non-users was around 5 to 1.

The air was suffocating, and I started to get dizzy. However, I needed to stay alert as one passenger looked like they overdosed, as their body was completely limp in a nearly impossible sleeping position. After one minute, I asked his buddy to determine if he was fine. If he wasn't okay, I would have called 911. At the Snelling stop, a group of passengers came on the train, and immediately started using it with no regard.

Afterwards, I shared my experience with the community boards. This experience is COMMON to regular users, and many citizens no longer use the light rail because of the danger AND health risk to passengers. One of my friends adequately described it; "the light rail is not just an open drug market, it's a "moving drug den". From now on, I'll be carrying a naloxone kit when taking the light rail because the conditions are that bad.

I'm really frustrated by the lack of response of the MET council and legislative leadership in addressing this public health emergency. These conditions are permissible because the harm does NOT impact privileged persons that can take alternative transportation. The state was shut down during COVID precautions, but MET council has the luxury to wait months on end as most under-privileged and vulnerable populations are exposed to harmful air quality.

My recommendations are the following:

- 1) Consider what tourists would think about the Twin Cities if seeing the present conditions
- 2) Members of the Transportation Committee or any elected state representative should commute to the capitol using the light rail for one month. There is ample free parking on the empty parking lots of the Midway. Until elected officials see and experience the conditions of the light rail, there will be no political urgency to address this health crisis.
- 3) I'm not an elected official. My solution would be to close the light rail transit for six months, with additional buses covering the routes. The goal is to remove the normalization of users that the train is a suitable space to deal and use drugs. Users will find alternative gathering spaces to pursue drug activity. Ideally, local cities can have alternatives to users. When the light rail re-opens the MET council can create a reset on enforcement, and presence. This will slowly increase citizen confidence in the light rail and increasing ridership.

Thank you for reading.

