

James Schoettler



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Members of the Metropolitan Governance Task Force  
600 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.  
State Office Building, Room 72  
St. Paul, MN 55155

Sent by email

Dear Task Force Members:

I am a member of Citizen Advocates for Regional Transit, which will have additional comments later. But I am writing today largely from my personal experience and to say why I believe it is time for an elected Metropolitan Council.

From 1971-1987 I was a member of the staff of the Metropolitan Council and have remained keenly interested in the Council ever since. I mention these dates, not to emphasize how old I am, but to emphasize that we have a half-century of experience with metropolitan governance that has been overwhelmingly successful.

The defining character of this success has not been a take-over of local governance, but a strengthening of local governance, by (i) identifying and delivering regional services in an efficient way that individual units of government could not do well on their own; and (ii) doing it in a way that involves the local governments in ways that best utilize their local capabilities.

Sewers are a good example; we have a local community collection system, managed by the local government, and a regional interceptor system that conveys the wastewater, often many miles, to a regional treatment facility. This arrangement has given us one of the best and most efficient metropolitan wastewater systems in the country.

Another example is the Regional Parks System. Counties and county parks go together like bacon and eggs, but only one of the seven counties had both the wealth and land areas to identify, acquire and develop the regional parks on their own when the land was available. At the same time, there were cities that supported - on their own - beautiful parks like Como and Minnehaha that drew people from all over the metropolitan area. The key was to create an organization that could work with the counties and local governments to identify future park sites throughout the region as well as existing regional parks and develop a funding process that enabled the counties and local governments to acquire, develop and operate these beautiful

regional parks. Today we have 56 regional parks, 400 miles of trails and over 63 million visits per year, all managed by the counties or local governments.

There are numerous other services that can be mentioned, including the 911 system, the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area under the National Park Service which originated through the Met Council as a Critical Area designation, and the Agricultural Preserves Act. All are accomplishments of this organization.

Back in '71, when I started to work for the Council, it was just four years old; but the issue of an *elected* council was still in the air and has remained in the air to the present time.

In my view, an *appointed* Council was the right way to go - at the start. It gave the Governor and the Legislature the opportunity to set the example by appointing people with the intellectual capacity to take a metropolitan perspective on the many issues put before them, like whether to build a new airport; and especially, the big one at the time, sewers.

With over a half century of experiment and experience, I think the evidence is overwhelming that our type of metropolitan governance works. It has assumed greater responsibilities and a greater role in the lives of the residents of this metropolitan area. It was an experiment in 1967; it is an essential instrument of government today.

At the core are two things: (i) a metropolitan perspective and (ii) a willingness to work together with all the counties and municipalities.

The Met Council has not supplanted local government, it has strengthened and enhanced local government. In my opinion, there otherwise would have been widespread consolidation and annexation. And you would still not have accomplished anywhere near what you have accomplished so far with the Met Council.

But it has long since been time for the Council to be elected.

An elected Council will increase awareness in the public of these many services that make life better for us. It will shed more light on the complex and long-lived issues that face us today and need their participation to be adequately addressed. It will draw from the public the validity of the folks in charge and will assure that the Council is responsive directly to the public it serves.

The Council will function better with a clean one person – one vote approach to drawing Council districts and overlapping terms will assure at least half of the Council understands what is happening, which greatly reduces staff domination.

There are many fundamental issues that still need to be addressed by the Council. This Task Force has already named transit, water supply and climate change; that's a mouthful there, and there's lots more to be done. And it is important that the Task Force identify weaknesses in the

current processes of the organization and recommend changes that will enhance governance and accountability going forward.

The key is that you already have this extraordinary organization. It is time now to put its leadership into the hands of the people.

Thank you, Members of the Task Force on Metropolitan Governance.

James Schoettler