

# Metropolitan Governance

**M**y name is Mathews Hollinshead, and I serve as one of two Transit Modal Representatives on the Metropolitan Council's Transportation Advisory Board — the TAB. I am also Conservation Chair of the North Star Chapter of the Sierra Club and a convener of Citizen Advocates for Regional Transit (CART). Today I am speaking as a TAB member, but I also want to express my agreement with separate testimony submitted by Jay Severance and Jim Schoettler, who are fellow members of CART. I am not speaking today officially for the Sierra Club.

As you know, the TAB enables the Metropolitan Council to act as our region's Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), under a waiver from the Federal Government, because the TAB includes elected officials.

I urge this task force to recommend direct election of the Metropolitan Council members, not a Council of Governments (COG), which is closer to TAB's structure. Met Council members should also be full-time, given the complexity and range of the Council's responsibilities. What the Council does now, with almost 50 years of experience, is so vital, so essential, that it cannot be left to part-time, indirect accountability.

For proof, consider transportation, about which everyone has strong opinions, given how we have reconstructed metro regions since the advent of mass-produced automobiles.

The Twin Cities has relatively low congestion and high accessibility — if you happen to own a personal motor vehicle. It is the opposite if you do not. This access is unacceptably expensive — \$12,000+ per personal vehicle according to the AAA, with millions of motor vehicles on our roads and streets, requiring unsustainable percentages of space and pavement just to park and store, which is most of the time. The Met Council tries to mitigate this, but lacks direct accountability to the public and — amazingly — does not plan our biggest transit investments.

It is very strange — almost incomprehensible, in fact — that transitways — rail or concrete guideways such as the Blue, Green and Gold lines — which are our most expensive and should be our most regional transit component — are not planned or designed by the region. Instead county “regional rail authorities” plan this most expensive and regional component — the component that is supposed to be, according to funding criteria, “of regional significance.” Although the Met Council is at the table, it rarely intervenes decisively and early, when decisions carry the most weight. Cities, on the other hand, participate vigorously from the start.

Rather than creating one ubiquitous, regional network as they should, transitways thus take so long to develop individually that everyone suffers project fatigue. This, in turn, reinforces our strongest cultural and economic bias: the personal motor vehicle. That's bad news on many levels: climate, safety, health, sprawl and, most obviously, public and private expense.

Issues ignored or unseen by counties during the part of the process they control only surface later and are then blamed on the Met Council. Southwest LRT and Bottineau Blue Line Extension never secured explicit, binding legal agreements from freight railroads with controlling interests affecting their options. The Green Line decisively exceeded expectations until Covid hit — but could have included signal priority and cut-and-cover or tunnel grade-separation, combining all the benefits of both density and speed. The Riverview Corridor, which should be a regional line connecting the entire East Metro to the airport at an average speed faster than the 54 bus, is designed instead to run on the surface in mixed traffic coming out of downtown St. Paul — a ridership killer. Cut-and-cover or tunnel grade-separation here is an example of what we don't consider under the current governance structure.

It is clear that this arrangement serves the status quo at the expense of the future. Transitways can be both fast and also serve density. Post-Covid, they should shift the planning of new lines from hub-and-spoke — the old commuting paradigm, based on our two downtowns — to a regional system with many hubs connected by crosstown lines, giving everyone what our CART group calls universal transit mobility (UTM). Travel by car already works this way. Drivers live, work, go to school, shop, attend religious services, go to parks, attend entertainment and sports events and/or socialize across every municipal and county border in the region. There are many crosstown belt lines for motor vehicles — Highways 62, 36, 100, 169, 494, and 694. Transit, to compete, should have the same.

But it won't happen under current Met Council governance structure, or under a COG. By definition, counties and cities govern only to their borders. It's naive to expect them to plan or operate regionally on their own. The Met Council has proven its competence in its rapid roll-out of Arterial Rapid Bus (ABRT) lines. If it becomes a council of governments, the region risks losing its ability to advance equity, address climate change, or provide affordable mobility for all. Direct elections, by contrast, will give these goals legitimacy and accountability nothing else can.

Direct, proportional election of Met Council citizen members is not big government. It is better government — government that is truly reflective of the full region. (Some version of the TAB and/or its committees might stay as purely advisory bodies, but the Met Council and its committees should plan, initiate and design all regional transportation, including transitways.)

To avoid political polarization, provide continuity and avoid staff domination, it is essential that terms be staggered. This, along with direct elections, will produce stronger, more accountable outcomes.

Thank you for the very important work you are doing, and for this opportunity to testify.

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