

How can we change the Metropolitan Council? by Victoria Reinhardt

January 20 was the first day of the 1998 Legislative session. Among the many issues facing our legislators this year is the question, "What should be done about the Metropolitan Council?" Debate has focused on three proposals: 1) Direct election of Metropolitan Council members, 2) Eliminate the Metropolitan Council, or 3) Do nothing. I brought forward a fourth proposal last fall that the Ramsey County Board of Commissioners and the Association of Minnesota Counties endorsed for this legislative session. The proposal calls for a Council of Governments made up of local elected officials to replace the current appointed Metropolitan Council. I believe this proposal finds the middle ground to needed break the deadlock and arrive at a positive solution.

The Metropolitan Council finds its origin in the understanding that a metropolitan region is an interrelated system of local governments that cannot solve social and environmental problems in isolation. It was formed in the early 1970s as a planning agency for the seven county metropolitan area. The members were appointed by the governor in an attempt to de-politicize its decisions. The problem with this structure is two-fold: Firstly, the decisions of the Metropolitan Council are inherently political. These decisions, such as where roads will be located or where the MUSA line will extend are based, in part, on the prevailing political philosophy. Appointments to this Council by the governor actually works to heighten the political nature of the Council. Secondly, the Metropolitan Council has expanded beyond planning. It is now an operating agency with a budget in excess of \$625,000,000.00.

There are many reasons to move away from the status quo. According to a Sierra Club report, the Twin Cities metro area is one of the fastest growing metropolitan areas in the nation with 300,000 new homes expected by 2020. We are the largest metropolitan area without rail transit as an option. We need a Metropolitan Council that is capable of addressing the planning and implementation needs of our region while being accountable to the citizenry.

There has been much talk of a direct election of Metropolitan Council members. Representative Myron Orfield of Minneapolis will likely propose a directly elected Metropolitan Council during the 1998 Legislative session. Rather than creating this new layer of government, I believe that the Metropolitan Council should be made up of elected officials

A Council of Governments, or COG, would be made up of elected officials from the local governments of the seven metropolitan counties. This would provide for direct accountability to the voters without creating new elected positions. It would also more

closely tie local governments together in solving problems. All local governments are represented on the COG and, therefore, have a vested interest in seeing it succeed. On the other hand, a directly elected Metropolitan Council would still be separated from local governments and would provide very little incentive for cooperation or sharing of ideas. We don't need another bureaucratic entity, we need accountable leadership. A COG provides a better forum for leadership and accountability.

There are many issues such as land use, open space, transit and water quality, that by their nature, are more easily handled on a regional level. Given the growing importance of these issues to our region, a functioning, accountable Metropolitan Council to provide us with metropolitan solutions is a necessity. I believe that a Metropolitan Council made up of elected local officials will give our region the quality leadership, accountability and progressive action it needs and deserves.