

## REGIONAL GOVERNANCE

October 11, 2010

### Summary

#### **INFORMATION AND DISCUSSION—Metropolitan Governance**

Bringing together Peter Bell, the current Metropolitan Council Chair, and two former chairs, Curt Johnson and Ted Mondale, ULI Minnesota Advisory Committee member Jay Lindgren moderated a fascinating discussion on the role, future, and structure of the region's planning body.

#### **Governance structure: shift or status quo?**

When the Metropolitan Council was formed in 1967, there was little recognition that metropolitan regions would become global economic engines. Given the changing nature of the economy and the relationship and evolving policies of the federal government, Mr. Lindgren asked if the current structure of having all 17 members appointed by the Governor is the best model and if there are activities that the Council should be more heavily engaged in.

Chair Bell, who has served as chair for the past eight years, asked the audience to consider what the Council isn't currently doing and what it could do in a better fashion? He noted that public knowledge and understanding of the comprehensive planning process is better than it has been in the past, the region has some of the lowest waste water treatment rates, and the regional transit network is being built out under extremely challenging financial circumstances.

Pointing out that the Council has a budget of \$768 million, nearly \$1 billion in outstanding bonds, and a staff of hundreds, Chair Bell suggested that a governance structure should have staggered terms that go beyond the term of any one Governor. This notion was echoed by Curt Johnson. Chair Bell also considered the possibilities of having the 17 member body comprised of nine appointed officials and eight county commissioners/elected officials or having the county boards serve on the nominating committee.

Chair Bell, along with former Chairs Johnson and Mondale reject the notion of an elected council which would become another legislative body with extreme candidates on both sides running for seats. Chair Bell also said that he would reject a Council of Governments approach (e.g. the group comprised of local elected leaders) for fear that it would denigrate into parochial interests and horse-trading. Mondale suggested that it is important to keep Council appointments with the Governor, as the Council's performance and relationships with local governments, become something upon which the Governor is judged.

#### **Decentralization and the Metropolitan Council's powers**

Referencing [an article written by Steve Berg in MinnPost](#), Mr. Lindgren asked the panelists to respond to former legislator and director of the [Institute of Race and Poverty at the University of Minnesota Law School](#) Myron Orfield's charge that Met Council hasn't used its powers to slow decentralization and its deleterious impacts such as the concentration of poverty and segregation of schools.

Chair Bell suggested that factors beyond those pertaining to the Council contribute much more to multi-generation poverty, including family constellation, culture, and marriage rates. Bell said that he wasn't convinced that de-concentration efforts led by Council planning activities would overcome these challenges. He also pointed out the "calibrating role" the Council plays as it

exists at the intersection of efficient infrastructure, social equity, and the rights of communities to do shape their own development. Mr. Mondale who was chair from 1999 until 2003, talked about the community planning exercises led by Peter Calthorpe that were focused on concentrating development in existing areas as well as creating the Metro Mayors group – focused on dealing with issues at a regional scale. According to Mr. Johnson, jobs and housing were already decentralizing in the 1990s and that the Metropolitan Council’s role in this was not a primary factor.

### **The importance of economic development**

Mr. Lindgren asked the panelists to talk about the need for the region to have a greater focus on economic development. According to Curt Johnson, the recent work of the Itasca Project, led by the business community, was a clear acknowledgement that “we need a strategy for our economic future and we need someone to lead this.” Ted Mondale agreed that it makes sense for the business community to lead the effort and for the Council chair and staff to assist and create a framework that allows the vision to be sustained and implemented over time.

Chair Bell noted that there is no statutory role for the Council with regard to economic development; however the efficient delivery of infrastructure services and the provision of high quality parks has a direct result on economic development.

### **Mayors and the Council**

Mayor Kautz emphasized the importance of close relationships with cities. Curt Johnson and Chair Bell suggested that if the region’s mayors have a collective vision it would be very powerful.

Mayor Hovland asked about the creation of the Counties Transit Improvement Board—wondering why it came into existence when the Metropolitan Council already plays a role in transit funding.

Hennepin County Commissioner and CTIB Chair Peter McLaughlin responded that it was a pragmatic way to get more resources given that there were a lot of projects on the 2030 Transit Plan that wouldn’t get built without new resources. CTIB believes that the Council and Governor should be more aggressive on transit funding as the sales tax only passed with a gubernatorial override. CTIB sees itself as a source of investment capital – whose investments must be consistent with the Council Transportation Plan.

Ramsey County Commissioner and CTIB representative Jim McDonough pointed out that it isn’t ideal to have both CTIB and the Metropolitan Council, but it highlights in his mind the problem of concentrating so much power in the Governor’s hand around this issue.

### **Concluding remarks**

Curt Johnson challenged the room to recognize that the state and nation’s “era of exceptionalism is gone” and that we must forge a new way forward that is not locked in bitter partisan politics. Chair Bell pointed out that we are living in a time of resource constraints which always leads to tension. Cynicism is bred by over-promising and under-delivering. Yet Chair Bell urged the audience to consider that in the past eight years public support for transit, funding for parks, and the comprehensive planning process has grown.