

September 18, 2023

To the members of the Legislative Commission on Metropolitan Government:

You have been given the important task of refashioning the Metropolitan Council. As people who attended almost all the public meetings planning the Southwest light-rail line, We offer some observations we hope will be helpful.

The prevailing narrative, in the wake of SWLRT mistakes, is “the appointed Met Council doesn’t listen to the public and should be replaced by an elected Council whose members would be more accountable.” But the facts are more complicated, and it’s not clear how an elected council would avoid the mistakes that were made.

First, we don’t think the diagnosis that the Council was unresponsive to public opinion is correct. Second, the proposed solution might handicap its function as a planning agency able to focus on the entire area rather than local politics. Third, since the Council has had considerable success in other areas and did a good job building two earlier light rail lines, an incremental approach to change might be wise.

1. The current narrative about SWLRT is alluringly simple: the Council didn’t listen to warnings from neighbors living near the Kenilworth tunnel, and problems ensued. In fact, the Met Council listened very carefully, but didn’t agree, because the Council judged that alternative routes wouldn’t meet cost and ridership criteria needed to qualify for federal funding. These neighbors (who advocated for an Uptown route instead) then sued the Met Council for not following federal rules about route selection. They lost in court but this caused a long delay in the project at a time of rapidly rising labor and material costs.

Mistakes that the Council did make included failure to negotiate a plan acceptable to these neighbors (for instance, acquiring more real estate in the tunnel area) and to point out from the start that the Minneapolis city council could pass a municipal consent vote anyway. Also the Council accepted reassurance from both internal and external engineering consultants that the sandy soil in the area would make tunnel construction easier than it proved to be. As laypersons, council members were dependent on technical experts to understand these details.

2. An all-elected council would have more credibility but it’s hard to see how it would avoid such problems. The risk is that elections would favor candidates focused on voters’ short-term concerns. Democracy in real life doesn’t always work as hoped, and in particular doesn’t tend to reward long-term thinking. The Founding Fathers foresaw this, and created two legislative branches, one accountable to voters for re-election every two years, and another with six years to do what they thought was right even if unpopular.

Problems a reformulated Council will need to consider:

People don't like to pay taxes

People don't want to be inconvenienced now for the benefit of future generations

People who own cars don't want to pay for transit

People who don't encounter poverty in their daily lives have difficulty imagining what life is like for poor people and transit-dependent people

Low-income people have less political power and don't vote as often

Children, the people most in need of long range planning, don't vote at all

People don't pay much attention to down-ballot races

Wealthy people will influence elections in their self-interest

Young people who are scared to death of global warming have little political power

People have scant knowledge about research into what has been proven to work

People don't understand what civil engineering can and can't do

Some possible solutions:

Make voting districts large enough to make it hard for special interests to "buy" an election, e.g. ten districts of 330,000 apiece for our seven county area

Include some appointed members to ensure representation of groups lacking political power (children, young adults, low-income people) and to help Council members understand technical aspects of their decisions

Include some former mayors, to lend valuable experience, just as corporate and non-profit boards routinely include immediate past presidents

Include some urban planning academics with deep knowledge of what has been shown to work elsewhere, to help guide discussion. For example, a key factor predicting which children will escape poverty as adults is having parents with a short trip to work (<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/07/upshot/transportation-emerges-as-crucial-to-escaping-poverty.html>); a short commute means more time for parenting

Include someone with a civil engineering background

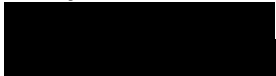
Create a committee consisting of all living former governors, rather than just the current one, to make these appointments in a less partisan way

3. A part-elected and part-appointed Council could improve both planning and execution. Ten elected plus seven appointed members from the groups mentioned above would equal the current size of the council.

Richard Adair

 Minneapolis

Barry Schade

 Minneapolis