



Metro-size solutions to urban problems

By Larry Copeland, USA TODAY

ST. LOUIS PARK, Minn. — On a frigid afternoon, the Starbucks at the center of town lures people from nearby offices and homes like an open hearth — a common scene in downtown America.



Thanks in part to the "Met Council," suburbs in Minnesota have more than fun in the snow to offer its residents

By Hans Madsen, Daily News via AP

Until recently, though, this Minneapolis suburb of 44,000 *had* no downtown. That made it difficult to attract the prized young professionals and others who can reinvigorate a city's tax base — but who demand urban centers near public transportation where they can live, work and play.

So St. Louis Park decided to create a downtown. But the city needed money to buy land, demolish old bars and build streets and sewer lines. City officials turned to the powerful Metropolitan Council, a 17-member body that controls many aspects of daily life in the Twin Cities' seven core counties.

The council gave St. Louis Park \$3 million for the first phase of a new "downtown" along Excelsior Boulevard. The district now includes apartments, offices, an amphitheater and a park. Even with temperatures in the teens and a dusting of snow on the ground, it seems to pulse with vitality.

"I was just driving by and saw this and decided this was where I wanted to live," says Michelle Hecker, 27, sipping a steaming coffee. "It has everything I want right here."

Now the "Met Council" is being touted as a national model for a country whose local government structures have failed to keep pace with the demographic reality of how Americans live.

The Twin Cities Metropolitan Council

Membership and staff: 17 members 16 from districts and an at-large chairman appointed to four-year terms by the governor; 3,700 employees.

Annual budget: \$496 million,

About 80% of the U.S. population lives in the nation's 300-plus metropolitan areas. They face a common set of challenges that cross city boundaries: traffic congestion; shortages of affordable housing; water and air pollution; and outdated roads, bridges and sewer lines.

These problems require metropolitan or regional solutions. In Minneapolis, St. Paul and the rest of the Twin Cities area, the Met Council tries to provide them. It manages growth by deciding where new subdivisions and businesses can be built. It has saved taxpayers millions of dollars by

including \$72 million in federal funds.

What it does: Coordinates long-term regional planning; levies a property tax; issues bonds; operates airport, parks, transportation, sewage-treatment systems.

What it does not do: Police or fire operations.

Accomplishments:

Building the Hiawatha Light Rail Line, which will link Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport, Mall of America shopping center and downtown Minneapolis.

Started nationally praised Livable Communities program, which helped a dozen communities create town centers.

Pioneered affordable housing in suburbs and cleaned up abandoned industrial areas.

Built 43 regional parks and 18 trails used annually by 29 million visitors.

Plans: Develop high-speed bus systems; give cities more flexibility in deciding where development occurs; develop high-speed freeway lanes based on "congestion pricing," in which drivers pay a fee to use them.

Sources: Metropolitan Council, reporting by Larry Copeland

operating the bus and wastewater-treatment systems efficiently. It pays for parks and affordable housing, and it just built the region's first light-rail route.

Local government in most other metropolitan areas is scattered among hundreds of overlapping, often competing jurisdictions. The six counties of the Chicago metro area, for example, have 270 municipalities. Then there's the state government, whose spending priorities often are influenced by rural interests.

"All these issues play out at the metro scale," says Bruce Katz, director of the Brookings Institution's Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy. "The problem is that there's a disconnect between how we live and work and how we govern."

The questions for local and state governments are many: Who's responsible for easing the traffic jams that have become a shared American experience? Is it the county where commuters live? Or the city where they work? Who should fix metro America's crumbling streets, bridges and sewers? Control growth? Keep the air and water clean?

Many metro areas are moving from paralyzing factionalism toward regional approaches to solve problems that defy traditional government:

- Louisville last year merged with surrounding Jefferson County to create a more efficient government, Louisville Metro. It was the nation's first such consolidation in 25 years. It bumped Louisville from 67th to 16th on the list of the USA's largest cities, increasing its population from 256,000 to 694,000 and enlarging it from 60 to 386 square miles. Several other cities — including Fort Wayne, Ind., and Syracuse, N.Y. — are exploring this option.

- Maine Gov. John Baldacci is proposing "regional school districts" that would combine two or more districts into single units with at least 1,000 students. These districts could then form "regional cooperatives" that would provide services such as transportation and special education.

- The Compact for a Sustainable Bay Area in Northern California and the New Mayflower Compact in southeastern Massachusetts are addressing transportation, environmental and housing problems.

- Mayors and local officials from regions across the nation are meeting on issues such as transportation and homeland security. Ron Sims, county executive in King County, Wash., which includes Seattle, has helped bring together mayors from Los Angeles, Baltimore and Chicago to lobby Congress to give metro areas more control over federal aid.

- Usually fractious politicians in three Florida counties recently formed the South Florida Regional Transportation Authority.

- Business leaders in several metropolitan areas have taken the lead in planning for future development, mass transit and housing. They include Chicago's Metropolis 2020 and St. Louis' Metropolitan Forum.

The Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce recently formed a "Quality Growth Task Force" of elected officials, businesses, environmentalists and others for long-range planning on traffic, land use and water quality. Chamber President Sam Williams says the idea is to encourage development in areas that already have public transportation, rebuild underdeveloped areas of close-in suburbs and create housing for people of varying incomes.

Chasing federal dollars

Even with the growing shift to the regional approach, metropolitan areas still must decide how to pay for the things they want. The debate begins — and often ends — with how to carve up their share of federal highway money.

Many metro areas, facing increasing highway congestion and growing numbers of public transit users, are trying to limit sprawl by promoting development in areas that already have roads, sewers and access to public transportation.

Federal transportation money is one of the most effective tools for pursuing such strategies. Since 1991, the federal government has required that metro areas set up planning organizations to recommend how such money will be spent. But the metro groups can't withhold the federal money from anyone. And they are often under the influence of state transportation departments, says Robert Puentes, senior research manager at the Brookings urban policy center. "In most states, state DOTs tend to have a fairly anti-metro bent," he says.

Puentes and others say the formula for distributing federal money for roads and transit needs updating to reflect the rapid growth of metro areas in the past few decades. Metro areas, which account for 85% of U.S. economic output, have direct control over just 5%-6% of highway funds. This often means that money commuters pay in gasoline taxes is not returned to their communities for new lanes or transit lines but is spent in other parts of the state.

Sims, the Seattle-area county executive, says this strategy is costing the nation its competitive edge. He says U.S. metros compete not just with each other but also with metros internationally.

"Shanghai is spending \$12 billion U.S. in their metro in order to get moving," he says. "We can't afford to lose our ability to be agile, to effectively move people and goods easily."

The stakes are huge. Congress is now debating a transportation bill that would authorize \$247 billion to \$375 billion over the next six years.

A question of clout

Some scholars say that the metro planning organizations don't have enough clout — and aren't likely to get it.

"They've got no teeth," says William Hudnut, senior research fellow at the non-profit Urban Land Institute. "The government that we have is obsolete. We're stuck with 19th-century boundary lines."

Hudnut is a former mayor of Indianapolis who helped revitalize the city's downtown and lure the professional football Colts from Baltimore. He says metro officials across the country are more likely to form alliances on specific issues than to create new layers of government. "People tend to resent changes in governance," he says. "The prejudice against larger regional forms of government is that they will gobble us up and we'll lose our identity."

Experts say the Met Council in the Twin Cities and the Metro Council in the Portland, Ore., area are the nation's only true regional governments. Portland's seven-member body oversees land-use, transportation and conservation decisions. The council manages the Oregon Zoo, the Oregon Convention Center in Portland, the region's garbage collection and a network of parks and trails.

Minnesota's Met Council was created in 1967 by state legislators who worried that, without controls, growth in the Twin Cities would drive up the cost of sewers and roads. The goal, which most metro areas wouldn't grasp for a generation, was to direct growth where that infrastructure already existed.

The Met Council is responsible for approving the long-range development plans of about 200 local governments.

With that much control, the council is a perennial target. Opponents say it leaves too much power in the hands of people who aren't elected. (Members are appointed by the governor.) Critics say it has moved away from its planning mission and should be stripped of its sewer, housing and transportation duties.

"We need to get it away from the social engineering of the past 10 years," says Annette Meeks, a Met Council member.

Ted Mondale, a former council president, scoffs at such attacks. He notes that the *Chicago Tribune* lauded the Met Council's success in overcoming race and class divisions to create public housing in 15 suburbs. In November, the Environmental Protection Agency honored the council for revitalizing contaminated industrial sites and helping create a dozen town centers like the one in St. Louis Park.

"The Met Council has been a place where people can lay down their arms and cooperate," says Mondale, son of former vice president Walter Mondale.

He and other proponents argue that the Met Council's regional approach has generated tax savings of \$2 billion by planning growth and eliminating duplication in the construction of roads and sewers. Sewer bills are among the lowest in the nation for similar-size metropolitan areas.

"I think our great advantage compared to other regions," says Curtis Johnson, a former council president, "is we have a regional living room here, a place to talk officially about regional problems."

The problem for St. Louis Park was that it came of age during the 1950s as a bedroom community of Minneapolis. Like many other suburbs born in the culture of the automobile, it was a collection of strip malls, old bungalows and neighborhood bars. "We didn't want to be just a bedroom suburb; we wanted to be a city," says Thomas Harmening, the city's community development director.

City officials got a \$139,000 grant from the Met Council to plan their redevelopment project. They got additional grants of \$2.8 million for demolition, relocation of businesses and land acquisition. Last January, the new downtown debuted as St. Louis Park's community focal point.

That sense of a central gathering place was what drew Hecker, who moved into the district last year from another Minneapolis suburb.

"I just fell in love with this place," she says. "You have the sense that you're part of a community. If you drive around Minneapolis, there's no other area like this that's close to the freeway and close to the city, where you can walk to restaurants or the dry cleaner's or whatever."

Hecker takes a sip of coffee and opens a book. "I love living downtown," she says.

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