

IS THE
METROPOLITAN
COUNCIL
EQUIPPED TO
GUIDE THE NEXT
50
YEARS?

ONE SIDE SAYS the Twin Cities metro area continues to “rapidly decentralize” at a time conditions demand the opposite. Profound global changes prompt more efficient patterns of development, smaller carbon footprints and a wedding of transportation and land-use policies, but the Met Council appears unwilling or unable to encourage a growth shift back toward the center. Instead, at the expense of central cities and developed suburbs, the council continues to emphasize development at the metro edge, albeit in slightly more compact forms. This decentralized growth—in both housing and commercial development—hollows the core and damages the metro region’s competitive edge.

THE OTHER SIDE SAYS the Met Council lacks the authority to influence development patterns. Indeed, refusing to approve development at the metro edge would only encourage more sprawl in counties just outside the seven-county metro. Growth patterns are influenced by land prices, market forces and demographic patterns that are beyond the Met Council’s authority. The best that can be done is to encourage more compact nodes on the metro edge. As for the central cities and inner suburbs, they’re doing just fine.

ON THE
ISSUE



Where do you land?

Read this Point and Counter Point article then **tell us what you think.**

DIRECTIONS: Email a 200- to 400-word response to editor@landof.org. All responses will be posted to the LandOf.org blog and in a final white paper that will be distributed back to you. Thanks in advance for your participation in this critical civic issue.

Questions? Email editor@landof.org.

POINT

From the *Star Tribune* on February 8, 2010

EDITORIAL: Decentralization Dulls Metro's Edge

Despite investments, Met Council fails the central cities.

If Metropolitan Council Chairman Peter Bell's final State of the Region speech last week contained a subliminal message, it was probably this: Seven years of conservative leadership has not destroyed the Twin Cities' four-decade experiment in metro governance. The sky has not fallen. The clock has not been turned back. Even the most exalted liberal element of metro planning -- rail transit -- has pushed ahead to the point that the Twin Cities is no longer decades behind its competitors.

Indeed Bell, who expects to leave his post when Gov. Tim Pawlenty steps aside next year, has done a stellar job on many fronts. Under his guidance, Republican catcalls of "train to nowhere" have given way to an acceptance of transit as a worthy partner and an expectation (thanks to a veto override) of more train lines in the years ahead.

But nowhere in Bell's thoughtful recounting of accomplishments and challenges was there a mention of the Met Council's fundamental flaw, one that predates the Pawlenty years: The council has been powerless to stop the steady and destructive decentralization of the metro region. Despite its national reputation for planning and its mission of "orderly and economical development," the council continues to encourage growth at the suburban edge at the expense of redirecting development and vitality back toward the center.

That kind of planning is neither orderly nor economical. And it moves the Twin Cities metro "in the wrong direction," according to Bruce Katz, the metropolitan policy director at the Brookings Institution. Brookings follows closely the comparative strengths and weaknesses of the nation's largest metro areas. It classifies the Twin Cities as "rapidly decentralizing" at a time when conditions demand just the opposite.

Katz and other analysts worry, and rightly so, that this metro area is out of step with profound global changes that demand more efficient development patterns,

smaller carbon footprints and a wedding of transportation and land-use policies. The future, they believe, demands more Pilates (a strengthening of core muscles) and less expansion of the metro waistline.

Yet the Met Council continues to encourage 70 percent of new growth on fresh ground at the suburban edge and only 30 percent in developed areas with infrastructure already in place. Those numbers should be reversed. Our growth pattern is more akin to the failed cities of the Rust Belt than the attractive places that the Twin Cities likes to consider its peers. The central districts of Denver, Seattle and Portland, for example, have been attracting a metrowide share of redevelopment well above the share of Minneapolis and St. Paul. (See chart).

The dispersal of jobs away from downtowns is especially worrisome because it forces auto dependence and longer commutes. When jobs were still expanding and transit emerging (2002-2008), the western suburbs added 24 times more office space than transit-friendly downtown Minneapolis. The Hiawatha line may have attracted housing (7,700 units by Bell's count), but not jobs. The acres of empty land abutting the rail line in downtown Minneapolis are symbolic of the council's failure to generate efficient land use.

Bell resists any plea that the council -- like some transit agencies elsewhere -- get into the land development business, or even that it strengthen incentives to locate jobs near transit. It's not that he disputes Brookings' "decentralizing" assessment. He doesn't. But he says that political reality prevents the council from emphasizing infill. The expanding suburbs at the metro edge want to continue expanding, and they are the tail that wags the dog. Metro governance is a delicate thing, as Bell pointed out on Monday. It teeters between what's best for the metro as a whole and the perceived self-interest of individual suburbs -- and self-interest has been on a roll. Decentralization, unfortunately, has become who we are.

Our best hope, perhaps, is that the market is shifting toward a more benign growth on the metro's outer limits. Large households, large lots and lengthy commutes are on the decline; compact communities, transit ridership and walkable neighborhoods are on the rise, even on the suburban edge. A tight state budget will limit the expansive road projects that encourage sprawl. And development, when it resumes, may be rated -- at least nominally -- on carbon impact.

One way or another, the Twin Cities metro needs to strengthen its core if it wants to regain its competitive edge. It needs more Pilates and less middle-age spread.

THINGS TO CONSIDER

CENTRAL CITY LIVING

Share of metro residential development in central cities 2007

New York	55 percent
Chicago	40 percent
Portland	33 percent
Seattle	26 percent
Denver	25 percent
Atlanta	21 percent
Minneapolis/St. Paul	16 percent
Detroit	7 percent
St. Louis	5 percent
Pittsburgh	3 percent

(Source: John V. Thomas, EPA, Residential Construction Trends in America's Metropolitan Regions (January 2009))

COUNTER POINT

Response published in the *Star Tribune* on February 10, 2010

Met Council Does The Work It Is Meant To Do

By Peter Bell chairman, Metropolitan Council

In a recent news story ("Despite growth, highway expansion called unlikely," Jan. 29), the *Star Tribune* reported complaints from officials in Scott and Carver counties that the Metropolitan Council is not doing enough to expand highways to serve future growth in their areas.

Just a few days later, a *Star Tribune* editorial ("Decentralization dulls metro's edge," Feb. 8) suggested just the opposite -- that we're not doing enough to strengthen the region's urban core and prevent "decentralization" of our population.

In my seven years as Met Council chairman, I have learned that our agency is a convenient target for criticism from many quarters. One thing our critics have in common: They generally ascribe more powers to the council than it really has.

We do not have the power or the resources to build all of the roads (or all of the transit lines, for that matter) that many folks would like to see.

That's why we are partnering this year with the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) to develop a new highway investment strategy aimed at wringing the most capacity possible out of our existing highway system.

Nor does the council have the power to dictate development patterns, as the *Star Tribune* editorial suggested. Instead, we work collaboratively with local governments -- within the framework established by state law -- to promote orderly, economical development and ensure the efficient use of highways, sewers and other regional investments.

It is breathtakingly naïve to suggest -- as the editorial did -- that the council could require that 70 percent of all new growth take place in the developed portion of the region. Let me be clear: The Met Council can guide, encourage and monitor development, but we cannot tell people where they can and cannot live.

If we refused to extend regional sewers to the outlying suburbs, this would encourage greater sprawl. It would result in more development relying on backyard septic systems in the fast-growing communities outside the seven-county area, where land is cheaper and land-use policies often are less restrictive. From

2000 to 2008, the counties adjacent to the metro area grew by 19.9 percent, more than twice the rate of the seven metro counties.

Moreover, our development patterns are strongly influenced by land prices, market forces and demographic patterns. People choose a place to live based on many factors, including crime, quality of schools, housing costs and job location.

And our state has been appropriately deferential to local elected officials and their right to make land-use decisions. Some argue that the result is "sprawl." Others say our residents are blessed with an abundance of options from which to choose a place to live -- part of our rich quality of life.

Redeveloping land in the urban core often is very expensive, and there are not nearly enough public or private resources to help. The council has done its part, providing nearly \$95 million in grants to Minneapolis and St. Paul since 1996 to help clean up contaminated land, leverage new development and expand the supply of affordable housing.

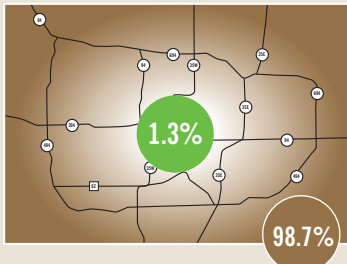
We also have strengthened the urban core by committing \$2 billion in federal, state and local resources for rail transit lines that primarily benefit Minneapolis and St. Paul.

For those concerned about development patterns, there are a number of encouraging signs:

- Minneapolis and St. Paul are among the few Frost Belt cities that have actually gained population in the last two decades. We are seeing impressive residential growth in the two downtowns as more empty-nesters seek to live near entertainment, restaurants, retail and other urban amenities.
- The rate of land consumption appears to be slowing in our region. Our most recent land-use survey shows that development occurred at an average rate of 7,500 acres per year from 2000 to 2005, compared with an average of 9,200 acres per year during the 1990s. We will be conducting another aerial survey this spring.
- The updated comprehensive plans we have received from local governments indicate that communities are guiding more land for development at higher densities, often along major transportation corridors that are more readily served by transit.

As council chairman, I have worked hard to adhere to our statutory mission and to strike a careful balance between two important civic values -- the right of each community to develop based on local values and the cost-effective use of expensive regional infrastructure. This requires looking out for the best interests of both the central cities and the suburbs.

JOBS



From 1998 to 2006, there were 139,798 jobs added in the 13-county metropolitan statistical area. Of those, 98.7 percent were added at least 10 miles outside of downtown Minneapolis.

(Source: Brookings Institution, *Job Sprawl Revisited: The Changing Geography of Metropolitan Employment* (April 2009))

DENSITY

Population density has steadily dropped in the seven-county metro. If we had grown at the same rate but maintained the densities in 1980, we would have saved 52,807 acres of land from development.

(Source: MCEA Analysis of Metropolitan Council Information on Twin Cities Region Land Use and 2005 Population.)

52,807 ACRES
is more than Edina, Eden Prairie, Richfield,
Golden Valley and St. Louis Park combined.



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