



# HISTORY OF THE COUNCIL



**“THIS COUNCIL WAS  
CREATED TO DO A JOB  
WHICH HAS PROVED  
TOO BIG FOR ANY  
SINGLE COMMUNITY.”**

**Gov. Harold LeVander**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Minneapolis-Saint Paul region is a great place to live, work and do business. Our region enjoys bountiful natural resources, a diverse economy, an educated workforce, and engaged communities. We also have a tradition of shared action and coordinated regional planning which has enabled the region to achieve a high quality of life.

**The Metropolitan Council plays a key role in developing and maintaining that quality of life through a collaborative regional approach to planning and development, paired with strategic investments that utilize good stewardship of our resources.**

As the future brings challenges of limited resources, an aging population, and changing demographics, the region will need innovative strategies, greater collaboration, and integrative approaches to planning for our shared prosperity. By partnering with communities to plan for the future, the Council will continue to guide the region to maintain our high quality of life, achieve economies of scale, deliver high-quality regional services, and enhance a competitive edge envied by other metropolitan areas.

**The Council’s development framework for the region, Thrive MSP 2040, focuses on Stewardship, Prosperity, Equity, Livability, and Sustainability as its guideposts for maintaining and enhancing our region’s quality of life for everyone.**

## A REGIONAL SOLUTION FOR REGIONAL PROBLEMS

In 1967, the Minnesota Legislature took a bold step – it voted to create a regional planning and coordinating body for the seven-county metropolitan area.

Despite being historic rivals, by the mid-1960s Minneapolis and Saint Paul had joined together to secure major league baseball, football and hockey teams. And they came to recognize that rapid growth presented region-wide opportunities and challenges requiring greater regional cooperation.

**The drive for the Council’s creation was led by citizens and legislators. They saw the need for a regional body to deal with issues that transcended the boundaries of nearly 300 separate local units of government (7 counties, 188 cities and townships, and 22 special-purpose districts).**

In the 1967 session, the Legislature considered two competing proposals: a Council elected from geographic districts with broad operating powers, and a Council of at-large appointees with limited planning powers.

The final bill was a compromise – creating a Council appointed by the governor from geographic districts with planning and coordinating powers. Responsibilities for providing regional services were vested in separate boards – the existing Metropolitan Airports Commission, the Metropolitan Transit Commission (also created in 1967) and the Metropolitan Sewer Board (created in 1969).

**In appointing the Council’s first members in 1967, then-Governor LeVander said the Council “was conceived with the idea that we will be faced with more and more problems that will pay no heed to the boundary lines which mark the end of one community in this metropolitan area and the beginning of another.”**



### AT THE URGING OF MANY LOCAL GOVERNMENT, BUSINESS AND CIVIC LEADERS, THE METROPOLITAN COUNCIL WAS CREATED TO:

- Plan for the orderly and economical development of the seven county metro area, and
- Coordinate the delivery of certain services that could not be effectively provided by any one city or county.

## BIG PROBLEMS FOR A NEW AGENCY

When the Council was created, the region faced major challenges:

- Backyard septic systems were failing in many suburban communities, and inadequately treated wastewater was being discharged into lakes, rivers and streams.

- The Twin Cities' privately owned bus company was rapidly disintegrating, a victim of rising fares, declining ridership and an aging bus fleet.
- Rapid growth was threatening vital natural areas better suited for preservation as parks and open space.
- Growing fiscal disparities were making it difficult for communities with inadequate tax capacity to fund essential services and were intensifying competition for development.

The fledgling agency inherited a small staff and a decade of studies from the Metropolitan Planning Commission, an advisory body created by state lawmakers in 1957.

**Additional legislation over the years was designed to address these pressing regional issues and strengthen the Council:**

- 1967 legislation created the Metropolitan Transit Commission.
- 1969 legislation created the regional sewer system.
- 1971 law established the region's unique tax-base sharing system.
- 1974 laws created the regional park system and the Metropolitan Housing and Development Authority (HRA).

## IMPROVING OUR TRANSIT SERVICE

In 1967, the Minnesota Legislature created the Metropolitan Transit Commission (MTC) to restore an out-of-date bus system. During its early years, the Council supported the MTC's move to acquire and improve the region's privately owned bus system, Twin City Lines. In 1970, when the MTC acquired the system, two-thirds of the company's buses were 15 or more years old. Eighty-six of the buses were so old that they were banned from the streets of Minneapolis.



The MTC then embarked on an ambitious five-year, \$20 million transit improvement program that included purchasing 465 air-conditioned buses, installing 135 bus shelters and new bus stop signs, and establishing a 24-hour bus information center.

In the early 1980s the Legislature directed the Council to study the possible development of light rail transit in the metropolitan area and concluded that LRT could be feasible in several heavily traveled corridors. In the late 1990s, the Legislature approved funding to help build the region's first light

rail line, the 11-mile Hiawatha line linking downtown Minneapolis, International Airport and the Mall of America.

### People love light rail

The Hiawatha Line, now known as the METRO Blue Line, was a stunning success. Between its opening in 2004 and the end of 2014, customers boarded the METRO Blue Line more than 94 million times. In 2014, customers boarded Blue Line trains 9.5 million times. This represents 11.2% of Metro Transit's total ridership.

The 11-mile METRO Green Line launched in June 2014 along University and Washington Avenues and now provides improved access to employment, educational and economic opportunities all along the corridor between downtown Saint Paul and downtown Minneapolis, including the University of Minnesota, the Midway area and the State Capitol complex. In its first year, the Green Line provided more than 34,500 rides on the average weekday.

### Transit ridership continues to climb

In 2014 Metro Transit's ridership was the highest it has been in more than three decades, providing more than 67.8 million rides throughout the Twin Cities. Ridership also benefited from several large events, including the 2014 All-Star Game at Target Field, which is served by two light rail lines, commuter rail and several bus routes. About 25% of fans took transit to Minnesota Vikings games in 2014 – twice the number from previous years.

### GOING FORWARD >>>

**The vibrant housing and business development occurring along the Green Line illustrates how thoughtful policy decisions and strategic transportation investments can stimulate economic development along transit corridors.** This kind of Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) -- that includes housing, retail, employment, and recreation, all supported by good transit -- enables people to live and work with less dependence on a personal car to meet the needs of daily living.

The Council will continue its use of policies and programs that support TOD initiatives, which have proven to bolster the impact of transit investments, increasing regional competitiveness and advancing equity.

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## MODERNIZING OUR WASTEWATER SYSTEM

In 1969, the Minnesota Legislature established the Metropolitan Sewer Board (later renamed the Metropolitan Waste Control Commission) to develop a modern regional wastewater collection and treatment system. At the time, wastewater systems operated by the Minneapolis-Saint Paul Sanitary District and various suburban communities were inadequate to meet the needs of developing suburbs.



**Newer suburbs were struggling to build and operate wastewater treatment plants of their own. Inadequately treated wastewater was being discharged into the Mississippi River, Lake Minnetonka and other regional waterways. Groundwater was being contaminated by failing septic systems. In 1959, the state Health Department found that half of the private wells in 39 communities were contaminated with septic waste.**

The new regional system inherited 33 municipal treatment plants, but only a handful adequately treated wastewater. Within a decade, about 20 of the old plants were closed, 4 new plants were built, and others were upgraded.

Today, 2.7 million residents in the seven-county Twin Cities region are served

by eight regional treatment plants operated by Metropolitan Council Environmental Services (MCES): network of approximately 600 miles of regional interceptor sewers collects wastewater from approximately 5,000 miles of local sanitary sewers and delivers that wastewater to the Council's 8 treatment plants. The plants treat approximately 250 million gallons of wastewater a day from 108 communities. The wastewater collection and treatment system operates 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

**MCES wastewater treatment plants regularly win awards for achieving near-perfect compliance with federal and state discharge standards. The Hastings and St. Croix Valley Plants are two of the top 10 plants in the country for 20-plus consecutive years of full compliance with clean water discharge permits. In addition, MCES keeps wastewater service fees competitive and affordable. A 2014 survey based on 2013 rates by the National Association of Clean Water Agencies (NACWA) confirms that charges to municipal customers in the Twin Cities metro are 40% lower than the national average among similar-sized systems.**

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ENVIRONMENTAL  
SERVICES.**

MCES also has significantly reduced energy consumption at its facilities. Working with Xcel Energy, MCES completed more than three dozen energy-savings projects between 2006 and 2013, with estimated current savings of nearly \$4.5 million per year. In 2011, MCES set new goals to reduce purchased energy 25% by 2015 and 50% by 2020, and is on track to meet those goals.

“Our wastewater system is one of this region’s great success stories,” said former Council member Russ Susag, who worked as Chief of Quality Control for the system in the 1970s. “In my lifetime, we have gone from discharging raw sewage into the Mississippi River to the magnificent treatment system we have today.”

## GOING FORWARD >>>

**At the request of the legislature, the Council is playing a lead role in ensuring the sustainability of our regional water supply, in conjunction with a community advisory committee.**

The Council has developed a regional Water Supply Plan that provides communities guidance in taking a proactive, cost-effective approach to long-term planning and permitting. This approach helps ensure plentiful, safe, and affordable water that supports the prosperity and livability of the region for future generations. The plan provides communities with technical assistance, guidance, and tools to encourage wise use and conservation of groundwater.

MCES is moving further toward integrating planning for wastewater, water supply, and surface water management. **The challenges of water supply, water quality issues, and environmental stewardship need strategies that look at the whole water picture and consider how efforts in one area could benefit the others.** For example, an integrated approach would move beyond treating wastewater only to meet regulatory compliance, to viewing wastewater as a resource available for reuse as a non-potable water supply, thus reducing demand on current potable water sources.



**MCES WASTEWATER TREATMENT PLANTS REGULARLY WIN AWARDS FOR ACHIEVING NEAR-PERFECT COMPLIANCE WITH FEDERAL AND STATE DISCHARGE STANDARDS.**

**“OUR WASTEWATER SYSTEM IS ONE OF THIS REGION’S GREAT SUCCESS STORIES.”**

Former Council  
Member Russ Susag

## PARKS: A REGIONAL TREASURE

The Twin Cities' regional system of parks and trails is regarded by many residents as one of the treasures of our metropolitan area.

The Legislature created the system in 1974, designating 31,000 acres of existing city and county parks as part of the regional system. It also authorized up to \$40 million in bonds for park land acquisition and development. The Council's first regional open space plan designated 12 "immediate action sites" for acquisition. Within a decade, all 12 sites were acquired.



Dave Durenberger, who chaired the advisory committee that developed the regional parks plan and later served in the U.S. Senate, said the legislation was designed to ensure that "invaluable natural resources" would be preserved and that metro area residents would be able "to enjoy the recreational opportunities that go with living in our community." In doing so, it built upon visionary efforts of those who created the Minneapolis and Saint Paul park systems, he says.

At the time, some of the proposed park sites were being eyed for other purposes. For example, what is now the 2,200-acre Lake Elmo Regional Park was being considered as a possible location for a regional shopping center or a landfill.

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**Today, the system consists of 53 regional parks and park reserves, 40 regional trails totaling more than 340 miles, and 8 special recreational features (such as the Como Park zoo and conservatory).** They are operated and maintained by 10 partnering cities, counties and special districts within the region.

This 54,000-acre system also protects irreplaceable natural features such as lakes and wetlands, hardwood forests and native prairies.

In annual surveys, residents of the region say our parks and trails system is one of the things they treasure most about our region.

**The Council's stewardship and work in identifying and purchasing natural areas enables residents and visitors to enjoy one of the largest and most vibrant regional park systems in the country. Our parks and trails contribute significantly to our region's livability and quality of life.**

Residents love the region's parks and natural areas and use them extensively; there were more than 48.7 million visits to regional parks and trails in 2014.

## GOING FORWARD >>>

The Council's 2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan identifies goals and strategies to expand the system, promote expanded, multimodal access to parks, and strengthen equitable use of parks by all residents.

## AFFORDABLE HOUSING

The federal Housing and Redevelopment Authority (HRA) began its Section 8 voucher program in 1974, and the Minnesota Legislature directed the Council to administer the rent subsidy program for smaller suburban communities throughout the region. Some larger cities and counties manage their own HRA programs.

In its first year, Metro HRA provided 550 vouchers in 13 communities. **Today it administers 6,335 vouchers in 96 communities. In 2014, Metro HRA earned the highest ranking possible for program operation from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for the 10th straight year.**

In 2015 the Council adopted a new regional Housing Policy Plan, its first in nearly 30 years. The plan establishes the Council's broad housing policy direction for the coming decades. It will assist local communities throughout the region to plan for and create housing options that give all people, no matter their life stages or economic means, viable choices for safe, stable, and affordable homes.

**Affordable, safe housing is essential for the success and livability of our region. Despite the expansion and successful use of Section 8 housing vouchers, there is still a great need for more affordable housing options for people at all life stages.**

**Affordable housing is critical to strengthen and stabilize families and communities. It's also important to businesses and the regional economy, because a range of housing options in communities helps attract and retain workers.**

## GOING FORWARD >>>

The Council's 2040 Housing Policy Plan is the region's first in nearly 30 years. It addresses housing challenges greater than

**HRA ADMINISTERS  
6,335 VOUCHERS IN  
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## AFFORDABLE, SAFE HOUSING IS ESSENTIAL FOR THE SUCCESS AND LIVABILITY OF OUR REGION.

**any one city, or county can tackle alone.** It recognizes that the future's increasingly complex housing issues demand more innovative strategies and greater collaboration. It also provides guidance to local officials as they address housing and housing affordability in their local comprehensive plans, and outlines strategies for:

- creating or preserving affordable housing, esp. near transit,
- expanding options for all incomes, life stages, and changing demographics,
- promoting environmentally sustainable and healthy buildings,
- and investing in and encouraging new additional affordable housing in higher-income areas of the region, particularly in areas that are well connected to jobs and opportunity.

## PLANNING STILL A CORE FUNCTION

While the Metro Council provides essential regional services, planning continues to be one of its core functions.

### Coordinating regional and local plans

In 1976, the Legislature passed the Metropolitan Land Planning Act, directing the Council to prepare a **long-range development plan for the Twin cities region at least every 10 years, and regional "system plans" for transportation, wastewater and water, parks, and housing. The law also requires all local governments in the seven-county area to adopt a comprehensive plan that is consistent with the Council's plans,** and to share their plans with neighboring jurisdictions, providing an avenue for greater intergovernmental coordination.



At the time, some local officials feared the legislation would enable the Council to tell them “how to zone within their city.” Eventually, most realized this wasn’t the case, and that the law was intended to ensure the efficient use of regional infrastructure, such as sewers, highways and transit.

Since the law’s enactment, the Council has reviewed more than 2,200 local comprehensive plans and plan amendments. It has requested modifications in only 24 plans, because the Council and local communities resolved most issues beforehand.

In addition to reviewing local comprehensive plans for consistency, the Council provides communities with guidance and technical assistance for developing their plans, through community profiles, maps, data, research and analysis, and the Local Planning Handbook.

### Investing in community vitality

In 1995, the Legislature created three new Metro Council grant programs to assist communities in implementing their local plans. These Livable Communities Act (LCA) grants provide communities with funding to help clean up contaminated lands for redevelopment; promote efficient, connected development; and expand the supply of affordable housing.

LCA funds help communities throughout the region to restore natural resources, improve transportation options, and develop new community amenities and thriving neighborhoods.

From 1996 through January 2015, the Council awarded 874 grants totaling more than \$307 million in LCA funds, helping to leverage billions of dollars in private and other public investment. These grants have helped transform sites such as the vacant Sears store in south Minneapolis into Midtown Exchange, a vibrant urban hub with a mix of office, retails and housing uses.

Council grants also have helped create new town centers such as Excelsior and Grand in St. Louis Park and Heart of the City in Burnsville. Both are mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly urban centers that include housing, jobs, shops, restaurants, parks and other amenities.

Since 1996, LCA grants have helped to create or rehabilitate 16,700 housing units affordable to families earning 80% of area median income or less.

### GOING FORWARD >>>

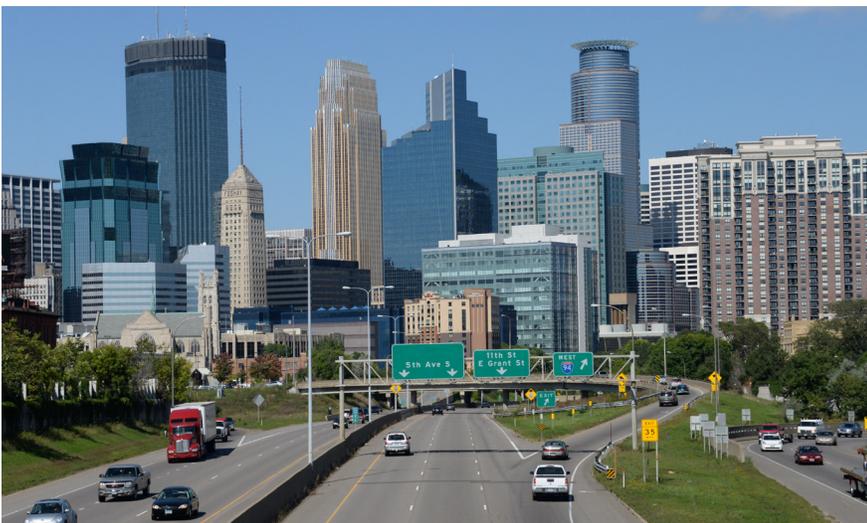
The Council's development framework for the region, Thrive MSP 2040, is grounded in the principles that led to the creation of the Council nearly 50 years ago: integration, collaboration and accountability. Municipalities can provide abundant choices, accommodate residents in different life stages, and meet local needs as they evolve. Thrive identifies five



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key outcomes for the Twin Cities metro area to strive for over the next decades:

- **Stewardship:** Managing the region's natural assets and financial resources.
- **Prosperity:** Investing in infrastructure and amenities that enhance the region's ability to compete.
- **Equity:** Connecting all residents to opportunity so they can share in the benefits, as well as the challenges.
- **Livability:** Focusing on creating quality of life and experiences.
- **Sustainability:** Protecting our regional vitality for generations to come.



## SUMMARY

The history of the Council reflects the changing needs and challenges of the Twin Cities region over time. **Our regional approach to meeting those challenges illustrates how cooperation, shared decision-making, and shared resources contribute to creating and maintaining a stable, successful, and livable region.** Future regional challenges such as limited resources, an aging population, and climate change will continue to be best met with a regional approach as well.

## COUNCIL CHAIRS - 1967 TO PRESENT

JAMES L. HETLAND JR., 1967-71

ALBERT J. HOFSTEDE, 1971-73

JOHN E. BOLAND, 1973-79

CHARLES R. WEAVER, 1979-82

GERALD J. ISAACS, 1983-84

SANDRA S. GARDEBRING, 1984-86

STEVE KEEFE, 1986-91

MARY E. ANDERSON, 1991-92

DOTTIE RIETOW, 1992-95

CURTIS W. JOHNSON, 1995-99

TED MONDALE, 1999-2003

PETER BELL, 2003-2010

SUSAN HAIGH, 2011-2015

ADAM DUININCK, 2015 - PRESENT

### More Information

See the Council's Fact Sheets for details on the Council's services and programs.

See Thrive MSP 2040 to learn more about how the Council will focus on stewardship, prosperity, equity, livability and sustainability for the Twin Cities Region.