

Metropolitan Council plans go wrong, but not as the right imagines

By Conrad deFiebre

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"Forcing more people to live in multifamily housing ... Subsidizing expensive alternatives to driving ... Diverting gas taxes and other highway funds ... Converting general-purpose lanes to dedicated bike lanes ... Undemocratic, grandiose and ultimately destructive ... Play[ing] 'Sim City' with the lives of Twin Cities residents."

This overheated prose is just a taste of the holy war being waged these days by Minnesota's conservative Center of the American Experiment against the Metropolitan Council's draft comprehensive plan for development of the seven-county Twin Cities area over the next three decades.

In a marked departure from the 24-year-old think tank's often moderate right-leaning stances under its founder and president, Mitch Pearlstein, the CAE assembled an all-star team of anarcho-libertarian sprawl apologists for this jihad. It brought in Heritage Foundation senior fellow Wendell Cox [for a luncheon forum](#), got the Cato Institute's Randal (Anti-planner) O'Toole to write a [12-page polemic](#) denouncing the plan's "fallacies" and unleashed its own Katherine Kersten for a Star Tribune opinion column attacking the plan's "[unprecedented, top-down controls](#)."

Interestingly, though, these alarms haven't drawn much attention outside the right-wing echo chamber, probably because almost none of them are based in reality. Like 1950s John Birchers who spotted communists under every bed, the CAE's ideologues smell oppressive growth policies where there aren't any. "While the draft plan uses vague terms and generalities," O'Toole notes, "it is clear that upcoming housing, transportation and other sub-plans will seek to dramatically alter Minnesota lifestyles."

Clear to whom? O'Toole again: "The draft plan does not spell out all of these features. Instead, it relies on euphemisms that are used throughout the planning profession to mean these things." Even Kersten was forced to admit that "details are not yet clear." So what's a true believer to resort to? Perhaps some radical post-modern textual analysis or just a plain old preemptive strike.

About now, it's time to inject a stubborn fact or two into the discussion. Under the Met Council's plan, called [Thrive MSP 2040](#), the share of the region's growth in the core cities and inner-ring suburbs will be dwarfed by that of the more dispersed suburbs and exurbs, accounting for only 28 percent of the total. That's 1 percentage point more than the last Met Council long-range goal, and 3 points less than the actual average from 2001 to 2009, mostly under a council controlled by conservative appointees of Gov. Tim Pawlenty.

During that period, the spread of metro development slowed by 1,700 acres a year from the 1990s rate, a key measure of sprawl. As noted by Steve Dornfeld, the council's public affairs director at the time, that meant some of the growth shifted toward the center, "where costly infrastructure is already in place."

Does the new plan take much advantage of that sunk investment? Hardly. Among the [five distinct areas](#) of the region delineated by the council, the "emerging suburban edge" -- the most distant, comprising places such as Chanhassen, Hastings, Rosemount and Waconia -- is slated for the most new residents (228,000) and the fewest new jobs (59,000). That's a near-fourfold difference. Rough residential-employment growth balance is projected for all the other areas, with the older and mid-ring suburbs expected to add 42,000 more jobs than people.

This could look like herding people into teeming tenements and forcing them to give up their cars in favor of transit only to those so blind they will not see. How except by private motoring will all those new residents of the exurbs get to jobs that aren't in their neighborhood?

In truth, if anyone should be protesting the Met Council's latest plan, it wouldn't be sprawl-loving conservatives but rather smart growth urbanists. "It's a big lost opportunity," Myron Orfield of the University of Minnesota's Institute on Metropolitan Opportunity told me. "The council has lots of power to shape development in the metro but hasn't used it for a long time."

Most of those powers were established by a conservative Legislature and governor at the founding of the council in 1967. Back then, folks on the right understood the fiscal and environmental wastefulness of *laissez-faire* growth in 200 separate government jurisdictions cheek-by-jowl in the metro area.

Among the first issues the new council addressed was the contamination of groundwater by private septic tanks beyond urban sewer lines. It required septic systems to be sited on at least 5-acre lots. Since the late 1990s, however, under tripartisan administrations, the council has allowed septic on lots as small as 1 acre, a policy unchanged in the Thrive draft, Orfield said.

"Their policy outside the MUSA [sewer] boundaries is do whatever you want," Orfield said. "It's the worst of both worlds -- too spread out to provide urban services but too dense to allow for later in-fill."

So, he said, unsustainable development on the edge rolls on as 50 years' worth of sewer capacity within the MUSA line remains unused. And the willy-nilly growth so prized by today's conservatives as emblematic of American rugged individualism is actually propped up with huge hidden subsidies extracted from those in traditional communities.

For more on this "suburban welfare," check [my recent article](#). And here is [Orfield's full formal comment](#) on the Thrive MSP 2040 draft.

Orfield blames right-wing agonizing over the draft on a propensity "to rail against the idea of metropolitan government." But, as usual when the dragons being slain are imaginary, straw men must be posited. Among the many offered by the CAE's thinkers are "greenback urbanists," a term tossed off by Kim Crockett and David Strom in a [February Strib op-ed](#) that presaged the center's recent exertions.

"'Greenback urbanism' is hoovering up federal, state and local tax dollars to support a downtown-centric economic model for our state," contend these two veterans of the Taxpayers League of Minnesota, a radical anti-government group that has gone largely dormant of late. "There has been a big shift in spending on trains and 'amenities' like commuter bike lanes. The goal is to create density along train lines to bring growth and jobs to the cities."

Even if the so-called money grab were true -- note Minnesota's current [\\$1.1 billion in road projects](#) -- what's wrong with the goal? "We just don't have the density to support these trains," Crockett and Strom maintain, in what may be the mother of all circular arguments.

Just sayin'. In reality, greenback exurbanists are a greater scourge. Their urban conveniences of sanitation, mobility and other public services, enjoyed in splendid isolation, heavily burden everyone else. The Met Council could right this injustice, but it apparently has given up on even trying.