



**LEAGUE OF
WOMEN VOTERS®
OF ST. PAUL**

REPORT ON THE DISTRICT COUNCILS IN ST. PAUL

AUGUST 2007

Prepared by the League of Women Voters of St. Paul

Committee members:

Bobbi Megard and Ruby Hunt, Co-chairs

Ruth Armstrong

Joan Newmark

Sally Patterson

Marion Watson

LWV, a nonpartisan political organization, encourages informed and active participation in government and influences public policy through education and advocacy.

League of Women Voters of St. Paul

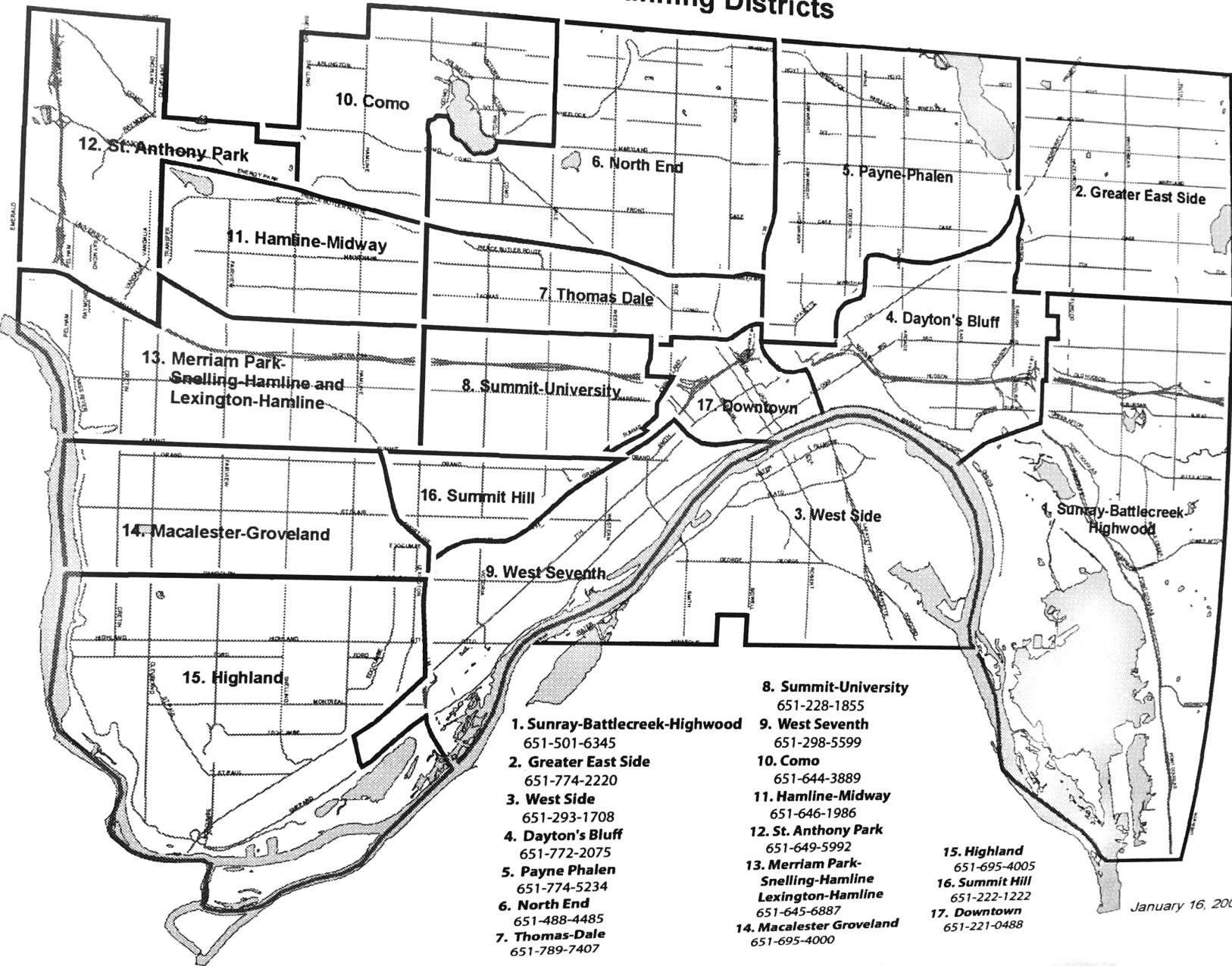
550 Rice Street

St. Paul, MN 55103

Telephone: 651 789-0118

www.lwvsp.org

City of Saint Paul Planning Districts



- 1. Sunray-Battlecreek-Highwood**
651-501-6345
- 2. Greater East Side**
651-774-2220
- 3. West Side**
651-293-1708
- 4. Dayton's Bluff**
651-772-2075
- 5. Payne Phalen**
651-774-5234
- 6. North End**
651-488-4485
- 7. Thomas-Dale**
651-789-7407
- 8. Summit-University**
651-228-1855
- 9. West Seventh**
651-298-5599
- 10. Como**
651-644-3889
- 11. Hamline-Midway**
651-646-1986
- 12. St. Anthony Park**
651-649-5992
- 13. Merriam Park-Snelling-Hamline Lexington-Hamline**
651-645-6887
- 14. Macalester Groveland**
651-695-4000

- 15. Highland**
651-695-4005
- 16. Summit Hill**
651-222-1222
- 17. Downtown**
651-221-0488

Table of Contents

	Page
Background.....	3
Recommendations	5
District Council Activities and Services.....	9
What Others Say	12
Sources	17

Background

The League of Women Voters of St. Paul has long supported the District Council system of St. Paul. We supported its original creation and have followed its activities for thirty years. It is not always possible to be aware of all the ways in which the city benefits from the District Councils, but what would we do without them? As a task force convened by the St. Paul Foundation stated in 1989, "To understand St. Paul is to understand its neighborhoods."

Here is a partial list of the District Councils' current contributions:

They provided forums for major development projects within their districts and for those projects that extend beyond district boundaries. They developed block nurse programs that offered assistance to senior citizens in maintaining their health regimens. They promoted *Neighborhood Night Out* as a means of enhancing the safety and well-being of the neighborhood. They expanded recycling and reuse projects to include used appliances, junk cars and toxic wastes. They established neighborhood beautification projects by providing flowers, banners and trees in both residential and business areas. They facilitated the integration of new immigrants into the community by providing information in languages other than English. (More information can be found in the *Activities and Services* section, page 9.)

An advisory District Council system in St. Paul was created by City Council Resolution in 1975. Neighborhood planning was a requirement to qualify for federal *Community Development Revenue Sharing Year II* programs. Seventeen districts were created. Each District Council was to represent the residents of its area. At least 51% of the board of each district was to be selected by an election process. Anyone voting on issues at district meetings was required to be a resident of the area. Members of the administrative boards were required to have been residents of the district for at least six months. Business representatives could be eligible for election if they had owned real property or conducted business in the area for a minimum of six months. These requirements were to ensure that information and advice from the neighborhoods actually came from people who lived or did business there. Toward that end also, discrimination was forbidden on the basis of race, creed, color, sex, religion, national origin or ancestry, sexual or affectional preference, criminal record, or disability. Further, by the use of affirmative action, each District Council board should have as a voting council member a resident of the protected classes residing in that district including low income, public assistance, woman, racial minorities, senior citizens and disabled (handicapped). Each council was to be structured as a non-profit organization with the proper governing documents.

For its part, the city was to establish budgeting and auditing procedures for the councils. It was to actively seek advice on neighborhood planning, including housing, recreation, transportation, health, safety and shopping centers. It was to provide funding and contract with the councils for certain services such as crime prevention, clean-up, recycling, special programs for youth or the elderly, or urban revitalization. The position of Citizen Participation Coordinator was created to advise and oversee the establishment and operations of the councils.

The League of Women Voters believes that efficient and economical government requires competent personnel, the clear assignment of responsibility, adequate financing, and coordination among the different agencies and levels of government. In 1996, the League of Women Voters of St. Paul published *A Study of the District Councils in St. Paul*. The motivation for that study had been cuts in financial support by the city including elimination of the position of Citizen Position Coordinator. The League was concerned that the close cooperation between the city and the councils would decline. Over the next ten years, that seems to have been the case. This year the councils have come to public attention in a number of ways. Boards of Directors are supposed to represent the residents of the neighborhoods. In the case of District 3, the West Side Citizens Organization, the annual meeting was attended by non-residents who elected a new slate and reversed existing policy decisions. District 13 was required to combine three councils into one with an overly short timeline to establish a new nonprofit organization. The energy supply for Rock Tenn and possible noxious emissions from the plant attracted the interest of Districts 11, 12, 13, and 14. District 15, Highland Park, found itself in severe financial straits. Some councils have not filed all required documents to the state and IRS in a timely manner. These problems have led some critics to question the validity of the District Council system.

While we acknowledge that these problems do exist, we believe the solutions lie in correcting the faults in the system and ensuring a strong relationship between the councils and the City of St. Paul. To that end we have drawn up the following recommendations.

Recommendations

Finances

Recommendation: Boards of Directors should assume their fiscal responsibilities.

Financial reports have not necessarily been made in a timely manner. In fact, at least one council found itself to be in dire financial straits. Most Boards of Directors of nonprofit organizations are not well informed of the fiduciary responsibilities of boards. It is often the belief that the staff bears responsibility for financial operations. In fact, the fiduciary responsibility rests entirely on the Boards of Directors. They may delegate to their community organizer/executive director, but it is then their duty to have a full accounting. If legal action were brought against a council, the Board, not the staff, would be held legally at fault. The Minnesota Attorney General's office spells this out in a publication, *Fiduciary Duties of Directors of Charitable Organizations*. Every council board member should be given a copy of this document and its contents should be reviewed annually.

Recommendation: Every District Council must have an annual independent financial review.

An annual audit was required in the original City Council resolution creating the District Councils. A real audit by an auditor can be an expensive procedure, and councils have difficulty finding the money. An annual financial review is essential, but this can often be accomplished without a full-scale audit. In fact, it is possible that some councils have already interpreted the word "audit" in an informal sense. The budgets and operations of most councils are fairly uncomplicated. We recommend that bylaws be changed to read, "An independent financial review of the Treasurer's books will be done at the close of the fiscal year." The fact is that most councils may now use this method rather than an official audit report. We believe the bylaws to be in need of this clarification. We also believe the city itself should participate in funding this review.

Oversight and coordination

Recommendation: The city should perform its proper oversight functions.

Every year the city enters into a contract with each of the District Councils regarding citizen participation and crime prevention. When the District Council system came into being in 1975, the requirements of the councils and the obligations of the city were clearly spelled out. The avenue for accountability to the city by the councils was through the Citizen Participation Coordinator. The Coordinator advised on the organizational structures needed by nonprofit institutions. Copies of all reports to the city and other layers of government were provided to the coordinator. The councils became separate nonprofit organizations, but in order to receive city funds, they were held accountable to the city.

When the Citizen Participation Coordinator position was eliminated, oversight was delegated to the Department of Planning and Economic Development (PED), and the Director of Administrative Services was given this responsibility among many others assigned to that position description. Monitoring of councils decreased. Now there are serious lapses

in financial accountability, citizen participation, and submission of required forms to the state and federal governments. Proper training of boards and staffs no longer exists.

Recommendation: District Councils should separate the administrative operations from the program operations.

District Councils should separate the administrative operations from the program operations so that the management of the organization is a priority. District Council staffs strongly believe in their independence from the city and from one another. This makes cooperation among them or standardization of procedures difficult even if that standardization would save funds and provide checks and balances within the system. If independence is needed it is in the programs initiated. These programs should grow out of the will of the residents in each district.

Given the budget constraints on the City of St. Paul this year, what might be a feasible solution? Council organization is not dissimilar to one organization having "chapters" around the country. Each is independent, but there are universally accepted norms for all of them in terms of operation and there is accountability to a central body (in this case the city) on many levels (financial, taxes, etc.). An organization capable of developing a template might be the Wilder Center for Community. We believe such an organization could accomplish important financial benefits across the councils. It should be considered. We also believe that the city itself should participate in providing this annual financial review and oversight through the Budget Office.

Recommendation: Communication to residents should be improved.

Some council Board members believe they cannot adequately communicate with the residents of their districts. It is true that at least one council makes a determined effort to stay in touch with its constituents by publishing its newsletters in as many as three languages. But this is not the case across the board, and coordination among the districts could help to improve this communication. The organization's positive accomplishments and successful program outcomes must be communicated systematically to its stakeholders. This report lists many of the programs which have been initiated by District Councils such as the Block Nurse Program, community gardens and housing inspection. The city should examine ways to publicize the work of the councils and recapture the enthusiasm and esteem once enjoyed by St. Paul's citizen participation efforts.

Recommendation: Boards should reflect the residential and business composition of the neighborhoods.

This was a requirement of the original city resolution creating the councils. Each organization's staff and board must be cognizant of and respond to the changing economic, social, and physical needs of the neighborhood. Of course, the board needs to be representative of the community it serves. Neighborhood residents are the eyes and ears of the community. They need to know how to bring community issues forward and work with government to solve problems. Fundamentally, the District Councils offer a "school for democracy" and promote civic engagement.

Recommendation: Council Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws should be reviewed.

This would permit consistency in the bylaws as recommended in the original City Resolution. There are now nonresidents (other than legitimate business owners and representatives of community organizations) serving on boards. A number of Boards of Directors do not reflect the population diversity of the districts.

Training

Recommendation: The city should establish an ongoing program for training boards, staff and volunteers to strengthen the District Council system.

The recommendations listed so far point to the need for training of boards, staffs and volunteers.

St. Paul's Administrative Code-Chapter 10 created the Department of Planning and Economic Development (PED) assigning specific requirements for ongoing training opportunities in Section 10.05 as follows: (edited)

- 1. Provide funds, as budgeted, for neighborhood leadership activities and training programs.*
- 2. Provide information and training to city staff and District Council staffs on citizen participation, city processes and neighborhood needs, provide training as requested to citizen volunteers to maintain organizational structure and monitoring ability.*
- 9. Provide technical assistance in the areas of grant writing, contracting, program, financial and contract management as requested or appropriate to PED, other city departments and other organizations.*

Since the position of Citizen Participation Coordinator was eliminated in 1994, the City has done little in the way of training to assure the integrity and effectiveness of the District Councils. City contracts are prepared and monitored by PED on an annual basis. The contract lays out the responsibilities of the District Council for compliance with federal, state and local regulations. District Council staffs have access to all regulations through PED or online postings. Responsibility for following these requirements fall to the staff of each council with the presumption that they will be followed. Staff turnover and insufficient training opportunities often result in a lack of oversight by the City and problems for the District Council.

Aside from the contracts, our interviews with Community Organizers/Executive Directors revealed that the organizations are unclear as to what the city expects of them or what they expect from the city. There is a strong feeling of independence on the part of the District Councils and yet the councils are clearly beholden to the city for funding, information, and legitimacy.

The Hubert H. Humphrey Institute District Council Study (summer 2006) highlighted several weaknesses of the District Councils; ongoing training opportunities should address these weaknesses.

- Staff turnover and board retention

- Diversity among stakeholders (renters, homeowners, and businesses)
- Strategic planning and future vision
- Compliance with federal, state, and local regulations
- Dispute resolution
- Civic engagement – community involvement and outreach
- Nonprofit fiscal management (staff and board)
- Grant writing and fundraising
- Program evaluation (crime prevention, block clubs, chore service, etc.)

These training recommendations should be written into the city contracts as expectations for the District Councils and provided by the PED staff through budgeting or outside resources. Training should be required of all Community Organizers/Executive Directors regardless of longevity. PED should develop and implement an orientation program for new staff and boards. Periodic training will upgrade management skills, provide opportunities for sharing ideas, and promote cooperation among the councils.

Training might be obtainable from a number of outside sources such as:

- Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA), University of Minnesota
- Center for Democracy and Citizenship, HHH Institute, University of Minnesota
- Wilder Center for Community–Neighborhood Leadership Program and James Shannon Leadership Institute
- Harry Boyte, Community Organizing Skills for Public Action-Public Policy Class, University of MN
- Jim Capraro, Capraro Consulting Services, 728 West Jackson Blvd., #101, Chicago, Ill.
- The Management Assistance Program for Nonprofits (MAPA)
- Minnesota Council of Nonprofits

As Carol Osip, a member of the LWV Study Committee, observed in 1996, “With all these differences among the councils, what are the threads that tie them all together? On paper it is many common goals and objectives, similar neighborhood activities, and participation on city committees. In person, there is obvious energy and spirit, a desire of citizens to become better informed, a great pride in their neighborhoods and concern about the quality of life. These are all people who are giving up time at home or work because they share a vision of the city they want Saint Paul to become. They ultimately believe that the people who come to the meetings and dare to sit in the front of the room are the people who make the city move.” We find that to be just as true in 2007. In our review we have failed to mention the important role of volunteers. All projects developed and accomplished by the boards of directors and committees of the District Councils reflect hundreds of thousands of hours of volunteer time.

District Council Services and Activities

The list of activities and services provided by the District Councils is impressive indeed. Continually adapting to the changing needs of each community, each District Council reflects the unique make-up of the neighborhood. Recently many of the District Councils have intensified their efforts to include all members of their communities from the youngest to the oldest, from homeowners to business owners to renters. And, reflecting the changing demographics of the city, the effort includes the immigrant community, helping them to understand and participate in the democratic process at its grass roots level.

Other recent changes include more widespread cooperation between adjacent districts on various projects and problems that go beyond the geographic limits of the district. Joining the age of technology, many districts have developed web sites and electronic newsletters to better facilitate communication both within the district and with the city itself.

The following compilation was drawn from reports submitted by executive director/community organizers at the request of the League of Women Voters. At least one council listed each activity cited.

City Issues

- Establish web sites to keep residents up to date on District Council issues.
- Publish and distribute on a regular basis newsletters throughout the neighborhood.
- Develop small area plans.
- Review updates and zoning changes.
- Review site plans and licensing changes.
- Explore best land uses for local areas.
- Remove neighborhood nuisances for land reclamation projects.
- Establish programs for the proper and free removal of "junk" cars.
- Respond to city-initiated proposals, such as the Capitol Improvement Budget process.
- Provide volunteers for citywide task forces and local projects.
- Write articles for local newspapers concerning city policies and initiatives.
- Work with citizens in the districts to provide feedback to the city.

Neighborhood Issues and Livability

- Develop or expand on-line capability to communicate with the community.
- Coordinate a long-range planning process with residents churches business and schools.
- Provide public forums for neighbors to address problems.
- Work with local organizations to enhance quality of life for residents and businesses.
- Distribute surveys asking residents about activities needed for community.
- Promote district activities in local newspaper and newsletters.
- Conduct House Tours of homes in the area.
- Encourage renter participation; establish tenant councils at high rises.
- Create and distribute packets to new neighbors.

- Originate and promote local festivals, community holiday tree, ice cream social, neighborhood garage sale, bike rodeo, progressive dinner, pride day and food drives.
- Facilitate housing rehab and loan programs.

Environment

- Supply information and coordinate recycling.
- Distribution of recycling bins and signs.
- Organize community clean up, including disposal of toxic wastes.
- Organize Christmas tree pick up and chipping.
- Form committees to help with wetland identification and restoration, safety around ponds, and lake management.
- Organize community-wide garage sales to promote re-use.
- Organize garden tours.
- Provide forums for the community to discuss possible industrial pollution.

Beautification

- Cooperate with the business community in beautifying shopping areas with trees, flowers and banners.
- Conduct an alley beautification contest.
- Organize land and gardeners for community garden plots.
- Urge the City to purchase such environmental assets as a virgin prairie grassland area.
- Promote community activities such as plant sharing.
- Promote greening projects.
- Help to beautify vacant lots and small parks; planting flower gardens on vacant property.
- Work with organizations such as Graffiti, Inc.
- Form a group to help design expansion of a city facility such as a local library.
- Organize a home improvement fair.

Promote Safety and Crime Prevention

- Administer Crime Prevention grants.
- Establish Block Clubs, train Block Club leaders, and communicate regularly with them.
- Work with local police teams to solve problems of homelessness.
- Work with the city to monitor traffic flow and unusual congestion.
- Organize National Night Out events within the district.
- Provide workshops on home security and personal protection.
- Improve awareness of crime prevention strategies.
- Sponsor crime prevention strategies.

Housing and Economic Development

- Develop housing co-ops in scattered sites.
- Maintain and improve housing stock.

- Work to expand free housing inspection program.
- Work in partnership with banks, local institutions, and grantors to address housing issues and economic development.
- Work with local community development corporations and local developers.
- Work with businesses and business associations.
- Originate applications for grants to alleviate local problems.
- Manage approved grants to alleviate local problems.
- Manage approved grants to rehab residents' homes and vacant houses.
- Provide home improvement fairs.
- Work to obtain exterior lighting grants.
- Provide a neutral space for resolution of potential conflicts between expanding, businesses, institutions and area residents.

Services for Youth

- Conduct a reading-readiness program for pre-schoolers.
- Conduct a latchkey child care program.
- Raise money for tot-lots and playground equipment.
- Organize summer jobs youth programs.
- Organize leadership development for teens.
- Support the development and growth of a youth council.
- Coordinate rent-a-kid, job connection and chore service programs to help senior citizens.
- Develop a program for at-risk youth.
- Recruit, sponsor and coach public achievement teams.
- Work with businesses to match mentors with youth.
- Sponsor a yearly education symposium.

Family Services

- Develop a family resource center.
- Introduce and promote a farmers' market in the community.
- Help single-parent family households.
- Provide outreach to the members of the immigrant community, especially those who need help understanding and participating in all levels of city government.
- Help low-income families and individuals.
- Develop family centers.

Senior Services

- Develop and continue to support block nurse programs and living-at-home programs.
- Conduct chore service programs.
- Provide income tax form preparation.
- Provide help with housing inspections.
- Hold activities in District Council offices for seniors.
- Provide a senior citizen drop-in center.

What Others Say

“Shortly after I was elected Mayor of St. Paul in 1972 I appointed a committee on Citizen Participation. There was no doubt that the citizens who would be affected by the actions of the city were in an excellent position to advise the mayor, the city council and others about the impact of their actions. Countless meetings were held throughout the community. Out of this came a committee report with great emphasis placed on early and meaningful access of citizens to the City planning process. Citizens complained that by the time they learned about something affecting their neighborhoods it was a too late to have any meaningful input.

“In 1975 the City Council adopted a resolution establishing a District Council system across the whole city made up of residents and business owners in each area. Each council would plan for their specific area for housing, recreation, health, safety and environmental protection. Quite an undertaking for a volunteer group of citizens.

“To assist with the rules, regulations and complexities of government and as an overall helper, a Citizen Participation Coordinator position was created within the Planning Department. This position was eliminated which I believe was a gigantic mistake.

“The links between the city and the councils have weakened and that is unfortunate. The need for healthy District Councils is as important now as it was in 1972, perhaps even more so. I believe that it is important that the city should reaffirm its support in the District Council system and provide the training and oversight required to function in the best interests of the citizens of St. Paul.”

*Larry Cohen Mayor, 1972-1976
Retired Chief Judge, Ramsey County District Court*

“All problems are solvable with a sense of community, a sense of interdependence-a sense of all being in one boat together. If we ever lose that sense of connected-ness, then I think this city would indeed be a sterile and barren place to live.

“How to define community? Well, one friend put it well when he said the sense of community is based on an awareness of connected-ness. It is a set of connections: the connections by choice, connections by chance, and the way those connections govern, bless, and sometimes cripple our lives. That historic sense of community is not created by government, but I do believe there are all kinds of ways, both institutional and informal, to support, celebrate and nourish that sense of community.

“From an institutional standpoint, the extraordinarily refined citizen participation framework in Saint Paul has shaped the city. This citizen participation program was made part of the institution of the city during the administration of Larry Cohen. It was created through the hard work of council members like Ruby Hunt, Dave Hozza, Bob Sylvester and Pat Roedler. The network of 17 District Councils convenes as a task force to review the city's capital improvement budgeting and expenditures, including Community Development Block Grant funding. All together, citizen participation has shaped the physical environment of this city to the tune of more than one billion dollars. Ninety percent of those choices and those dollars have been expended in the way and in the priority rec-

commended by those citizens. That sense of empowerment is much more than rhetoric. It is real and it is understood by people who are active in their neighborhoods. I think it is important support to that sense of community, or sense of empowerment that is essential to a great city. We should support the process which reflects this sense of community."

*George Latimer, Mayor, 1976-1990
Urban Studies Professor, Macalester College*

"Neighborhood organizations, like WSCO, began as a place where citizens could practice democracy in their community. Through involvement in these organizations people acquired the skills needed to engage in public life. They learned to identify issues to research, to analyze and understand decision making and authority. Most importantly they learned to reach out and engage the broader community in the work of community building. All were welcome in these efforts: residents, business owners, activists, and people who worked in the neighborhood. Originally these organizations were also multi-issue focused. Organizations worked on initiatives involving the city but issues involving the schools, local business development, and recreation opportunities were also important focuses. With the advent of the formal citizen participation process, support came from the city, and the community's voice became more recognized and powerful. Unfortunately over the years leadership moved from active citizen volunteers to executive directors. Today we need organizers who can focus on developing leadership and building organizations. We need to reengage our citizens in the work of community building.

"St. Paul was once a national leader in neighborhood and community development. We were among the best. We can be that again."

*Jim Scheibel, Mayor 1990-1994
Member City Council, Ward 2, 1982-1990
First Community Organizer, District 13 (West Side Citizens Organization)*

"When a recent transplant to Saint Paul asked me who I would consider as the best leader in the city, I deferred to the District Councils as a whole rather than any individual leader. The District Councils have provided a great training ground for the future leaders of our city. Small group politics do not get any more personal, and in many cases more emotional, than in the board and committee meetings of our lowest levels of citizen government. While the councils can be parochial at times and their influence on policy matters may be limited, they provide an ideal classroom to learn and apply the skills of diplomacy, compromise and consensus building, not to mention the principles of legislative procedure, that are essentials for any public leader to master."

Bob Butterbrodt, former board member, District Council 13 (Merriam Park)

"The District Council system allows average citizens to participate in city government. Since participation is voluntary and mostly non-partisan, the focus tends toward practical solutions to neighborhood problems rather than elections and other party politics. Time volunteered is very precious so it is not wasted. District Councils also provide a much-

needed link between people in neighborhoods and their elected, appointed and civil service officials. Many issues such as re-zoning requests, traffic problems and environmental concerns can be handled in the neighborhoods enabling higher city officials to concentrate on larger city-wide issues. Lastly, District Councils provide a valuable communications link between the city and it's people. Council meetings, special functions and forums allow citizens to air neighborhood concerns and frequently allow city officials to explain policies, challenges and proposals in an atmosphere that is less formal than City Hall.”

*Layne Carver, resident of District 15 (Highland)
Retired Lieutenant Colonel, Minnesota National Guard*

“District 8 (Summit-University) may be the most diverse, ethnically and socio-economically in the city, Black, Caucasian and Asian. The challenge is to provide services that will meet the needs of this varied constituency given our limited resources. It is incumbent upon us to do more to recruit more participation from throughout the district. More assistance from the City would be helpful.”

*Stanley A. Gardner, board member
District Council 8 (Summit-University)*

“I have been on the District 2 (Greater East Side) since 2001. I found that the District Council role has been effective in bridging between the neighborhood and the City in housing, crime and public safety issues. It helps to get the attention of local officials to get them to address these issues. I believe the District Councils have served the community well, and I hope we can maintain that spirit of collaborative relationships between the City and community.”

Chao Lee, Board member, District Council 2 (Greater East Side)

“I believe our District Council was invaluable in mediating issues between developers and nearby residents, which included new housing in Highwood and on Upper Afton Road. The council successfully fought for a needed sidewalk along McKnight Road. It provided an excellent educational opportunity for citizen participation in government, including finding people to serve on city boards.”

*Richard Newmark, former president and treasurer
District Council 1 (Sunray-Battle Creek-Highwood), retired 3M Corporate Scientist*

“Democracy depends on checks and balances and an informed public who can give advice and their thoughts without fear and intimidation. The concept of citizen participation provides for the most basic form of democracy, with Councils and residents sitting down with each other in their immediate area, listening and learning about land-use, zoning, licensing, and government and then giving their advice to government agencies and

elected leaders. Citizen participation via the District Councils provides for the essential opportunity for citizens to share about their street, their tree, their block, their neighborhood. It must be fostered and enhanced--not diminished and compromised.”

*Janice Rettman, St. Paul City Council Member, Ward 5 (1986-1997)
Ramsey County Commissioner, District 3*

“As a City Council member I voted to establish the District Councils based on the fact that there would be oversight on the part of the City. There would be more benefit to the City if District Councils paid more attention to the overall economic well-being of the City. Why not work with the developer to find common ground relating to a project which would generate jobs and tax base for the City?”

*Patrick Roedler, St. Paul City Council Member (1974 1980)
Former holder of Master Steam Fitters License State of Minnesota
Member Pipe Fitters Steam Fitters Local 45 St. Paul*

“As citizens we face so many issues - neighborhood, city, state, federal and global. It is difficult to sort it all out. As for the District Councils, perhaps it's time to take another comprehensive look at the system. We should examine their purpose/mission to see if they are still needed. What are the costs and benefits? Weigh the pros and cons. It reminds me of the saying that 'if you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you always got.' It may be a time for a change!”

*Bill Sands - Chairman, Western Bancshares, Inc.
1989 Chair of the St. Paul Foundation's Task Force on Neighborhood/Community Action*

“Over the last two decades, our neighborhood (Macalester Groveland) has benefited immeasurably from the existence of the District Council. I will use two examples to demonstrate the power of the Council's decentralized reach to allow for neighborhood improvement and grassroots development of positions on issues of citywide importance. The first is the longstanding neighborhood/ University of Saint Thomas dispute (1999-2005) over campus expansion, prompting the creation of a Macalester Groveland Council ad hoc committee that made a series of recommendations, resulting in the hiring of a campus planner by University of St. Thomas who reported they did not need many of the buildings proposed, leading to a scaling back of the project and an eventual compromise agreement. The other example is the promotion of Alley Gardens which led to more safety in the alleys, house numbers prominently displayed on garages and gates and a clean-up and sprucing up of many of the alleys, now prominent with outstanding gardens.”

*Jim Toscano, president, Minneapolis Heart Institute Foundation
Active in District Council 14 (Macalaster Groveland)*

"Some 30 years after its inception, the District Council System is still working and providing the City's best bang for the buck. As city dollars shrink and the city continues to look at more efficient ways of providing services without negatively impacting the citizens, I cannot emphasize enough how important it is that we continue to support the invaluable contributions that occur on a daily basis within every one of these neighborhood councils.

"In my life now as a licensed realtor in MN, I cannot tell you how often I utilize the expertise of the community organizers in finding out answers to a laundry list of questions my clients may have posed - be it street paving, crime, traffic, etc. And, I encourage them after the closing to use the organizers as a resource or better yet get involved in the District Council."

*Sue Vanelli, former Community Organizer, Dist. Council 5 (PaynePhalen)
Realtor, Dave Ross Real Estate*

"I have observed and participated in District Councils for nearly 20 years, beginning with serving on my own District Council 12 (St. Anthony Park) in 1992. Since then I have had frequent interactions with them through my work running the Midway Chamber of Commerce and as head of economic development for the Saint Paul Area Chamber of Commerce. In early 2007, I launched a new consulting firm dedicated to enhancing civic leadership and have studied models from around the country. Based on that, I see several areas where Saint Paul's District Council system could be improved, especially as it relates to the role of city government in supporting the Councils. To remain timely and relevant, I believe that the City of Saint Paul must invest in District Councils rather than disinvest in them as has been the pattern in the past dozen or so years."

*Ellen Watters, former President, Midway Chamber of Commerce
Former Senior Vice President, St. Paul Area Chamber of Commerce
Former member of District Council 12 (St. Anthony Park), Partner, Civic Source*

Sources

Publications

Hubert H. Humphrey Institute, University of Minnesota, *District Council Study Report*, Summer 2006

District Councils in Saint Paul, St. Paul League of Women Voters, 1996

City of St. Paul Administrative Code – Chapter 10, Sec. 10.05

The Task Force on Neighborhood/Community Action, The St. Paul Foundation, 1989

Articles of Incorporation for each of the District Councils

Bylaws for six of the councils

District Council Activities and Services Reports

Fiduciary Responsibilities of Directors of Charitable Organizations, Attorney General of Minnesota

City of St. Paul City Council Resolutions 1975

Personal Contacts

To gather information and suggestions for this report the committee met with a number of individuals involved in District Councils at this time, those involved in the past, and city officials responsible for oversight. These were:

Community Organizer/Executive Directors from four District Councils

The July monthly meeting of Community Organizer/Executive Directors

Interviews with four former Community Organizer/Executive Directors

Cecile Bedor, Director, Department of Planning and Economic Development (PED)

Bob Hammer, Director of Administrative Services, PED

League of Women Voters members who served on Council boards, as community organizers, or contributed to the 1996 LWV Study of District Councils in St. Paul