

MEMORANDUM

To: Michael May, City Attorney
From: Samuel Hutchison, Clerk
Date: September 25, 2018
Re: District Council System in St. Paul, MN

Overview

The city of St. Paul, MN (“The City”) is divided into seventeen districts, with each district being represented by a district council (“council”). Each council is an autonomous 501(c) non-profit corporation which contracts with the City for the purpose of community development and offering representation to residents. However, the district boundaries, as well as the essential duties and basic structure of a Council, are delineated in a series of resolutions that the City passed in 1975.

The basic structure of a council includes an elected board and a professional staff, augmented by volunteer work. Funding is supplied through both the City and through private partnerships, often initiated independently by the Councils themselves. Primary areas of focus include community building, land-use concerns, transportation, and equity.

History

St. Paul has had a history of relatively active “Neighborhood Associations” dating back to the turn of the 20th century. In 1975, as part of a nation-wide trend focused on urban renewal, St. Paul decided to bind these associations closer to the city in a way that enabled the residents of neighborhoods to have more direct influence on policy (or at least, the perception), and to provide the associations with more resources and structure in order to make them more effective in community development efforts.

The City did so through a series of resolutions passed in the summer and fall of 1975 (Council Resolution No. 265779), with the component pertaining to district boundaries codified in Chapter 95 of the St. Paul Code of Ordinances. The new district councils were composed primarily from elements of preexisting associations. Over time, the primary structural changes to the district council system have been the occasional redrawing of district boundaries.

Starting several years ago, the district councils and St. Paul have focused on exploring ways in which the Councils can enhance equity among their residents along racial and economic lines.

Structure

Currently, all of the district councils are 501(c) non-profit corporations. Incorporation is voluntary, but the 1975 resolution contains a clause stating that “The district council administrative board may become legally incorporated.” Through the resolution, the following characteristics are mandatory if a council wishes to contract with and be recognized by the City:

- At least 51% of the administrative board must be elected in an election process *determined by the district.*
- Members of the administrative board must be residents of the district area for six months or have owned real property in the area for six months or have been engaged in business in the area for a minimum of six months.
- Affirmative action requirements, including the requirement that at least one board member represent a member of a protected class if members of that protected class are found in the district (For the most part, these requirements have been voluntarily enhanced by the District Councils).

Furthermore, the resolution allows the district councils to create their own by-laws, determine the size of their administrative boards, and determine other necessary structure.

Generally, the boards set strategic direction, allocate resources, and approve projects, while the professional staff (supported by volunteers) perform much of the managerial and ground work. The size of boards vary from 11 to 30 members, and the average size of a board is 20 members.

Finances

If these requirements are met, the councils and the City enter into an annual contract which outlines the activities to be undertaken. The City then allocates funding from its Community Engagement Program and Innovation Fund for those activities. Currently, there is a minimum of \$30 - \$35,000 that any given district is entitled to. The rest is allocated across district lines by a formula which takes into account population size, poverty, non-English speaking, and employment.

In FY2017, the City distributed a total of \$1,191,211. The smallest amount received by a council was \$51,873, and the largest amount was \$109,475.

Councils also procure funds through private partnerships and grants. For example, the Macalester – Groveland Community Council received \$57,425 from the City in FY2017, but raised an additional \$160,000 during the same period. However, it should be noted that Macalester – Groveland has a particularly robust business development program.

Activities

The primary areas of concern for the councils are community building, land-use, transportation, and equity. However, issues such as crime and safety, community health, and education are also considered. Community building takes up around 25% of a council's resources, and includes hosting community events, communicating city issues to residents, and starting neighborhood initiatives. Many programs are initiated with the help of partners, such as the food science initiative *Growing West Side*, a collaboration between the West Side Community Organization, the West Side Farmers' Market, and others.

Achieving greater equity across racial and economic lines has been gaining increasing importance in these community building efforts. Many councils have "equity committees" which focus on these issues entirely. The demographic makeup of the districts often determine how much attention is made to these matters. Projects which to attempt to empower specific groups are becoming more common, such as providing funding for a Somali refugee group and supporting the creation of a Hmong community garden.

One of the ways in which councils have the most direct impact on their neighborhoods and on city policy is through the creation of a "district plan," generally every ten years, which is given to the St. Paul Planning Commission and City Council, reviewed, and then incorporated into the city-wide Comprehensive Plan (at least partially), referred to as the "formal vision of the development of the built environment of the city." Beautification efforts and ideas for improving transportation, mobility, and access to resources generally makeup a large portion of the district plans.

In addition, councils, usually through city employee liaisons, receive early warning notices of development proposals and permitting plans that affect their districts. They are encouraged to offer their input on these proposals, and often do so through formal recommendations. It should be noted that the liaisons, in addition to informing the Councils of decisions coming from city hall, also inform city hall of events happening at the neighborhood level through the help of the Councils.

Insights from the Ground

Two primary sources well familiar with the district council system were able to offer insight on, in their view, some of the strengths and weaknesses of the system. These were Liz Boyer, Executive Director of the Macalester – Groveland Community Council, and Joe Mendyka, Community Engagement Director with the city of St. Paul.

Ms. Boyer noted problems with the district councils that are often associated with small non-profits. Namely, financial stress, large staff turnover, and susceptibility to “mission creep.” Specifically, she noted that her organization has seen a 70% staff turnover rate in the past two years alone, which lessens the amount of institutional memory/continuity in a way which can slow operations and make employee transition more difficult. She also noted the difficulty at times in engaging the community. Keeping residents aware of the councils, their work, and their ability to participate is a persistent challenge. Passing out flyers for events and utilizing creative methods such as placing “alley garden awards” on the gardens of residents (complete with info on the Councils) are the primary ways in which awareness of the system is raised. Voting is generally done in person, and Ms. Boyer guessed that average turnout for a board election is around forty residents.

In addition, Ms. Boyer noted that while there has been a recent focus on racial equity, there has been a persistent attitude amongst many people of color that the district council system generally works better for white, wealthier residents. This perception may have to do with the system’s history in homeowner’s associations, or with other attributes unique to St. Paul, but is almost certainly affected by nation-wide, historical realities concerning race relations. Both Ms. Boyer and Mr. Mendyka noted the potential efficacy of performing community outreach on the basis of a mixture of geography, race, and cultural attributes, as opposed to on a more purely geographic basis.

A main point of concern for Mr. Mendyka is the relative lack of uniform standards among councils, and the way in which that makes it difficult for city employees to work with a coalition of different organizations, many with very different rules and deadlines. Although he said at this point in time the political will is non-existent, Mr. Mendyka appears to believe that greater clarification and simplicity in stating the standards (through ordinance/resolution) would be a good thing.

While noting that the age of the system makes it difficult to assess the councils, both Mr. Mendyka and Ms. Boyer expressed their belief that the platform the system offers to neighborhood residents is crucial. Mr. Mendyka noted the councils often act as a “steam valve” for residents, allowing their concerns to be voiced in a more appropriate, convenient setting

where they are less likely to be overlooked. He thinks this helps make the City more efficient in responding to resident concerns as well.

Finally, both Mr. Mendyka and Ms. Boyer strongly expressed their belief in the value of the councils as laboratories for policy innovation. Over the years the City has adopted and enlarged many beneficial programs that were created at the district level. According to Mr. Mendyka, one notable example is a successful community nursing program, originally developed by one of the councils, which St. Paul has had in place many years before a number of other cities created similarly successful programs.