

## **Peter Bell**

### **Chair, Metropolitan Council**

Peter Bell is the Chair of the Metropolitan Council, a regional agency that runs the regional bus system, collects and treats wastewater, plans regional parks and administers funds that provide affordable housing opportunities.

In partnership with local governments in the seven-county area, the Council also conducts long-range planning to ensure that growth is orderly, environmentally sound and cost-effective to preserve and enhance the region's cherished quality of life and ability to complete. The Council is appointed by and serves at the pleasure of the governor.

"I've often said that 90 percent of the people of the Twin Cities metro area don't know what the Council does, and the other 10 percent go to bed at night worrying about our every move," said Bell. "So we have a dual challenge. To inform the first group about the value of regional solutions to regional problems. And to reassure the other group that the Council can be trusted to focus on our core mission, work collaboratively and be accountable."

From 2001 to 2002, Bell was executive vice president for publishing and educational services at Hazelden, in Center City, Minn. Hazelden is an internationally renowned nonprofit providing a wide range of alcohol and drug-abuse services including treatment, prevention, research and publishing. He was executive vice president for new ventures development at Hazelden from 1999 to 2001.

Bell served as executive vice president for corporate community relations for TCF Bank, Minneapolis, from 1994 to 1999. Under his leadership, the bank earned an "outstanding" rating for its community reinvestment activities by federal regulators.

From 1990 to 1994, Bell was a human services consultant in the field of alcohol/drug abuse. He was the keynote speaker at the White House Conference on a Drug-Free America in 1990. He was the co-founding and executive director of the Institute on Black Chemical Abuse from 1975 to 1990. In addition, he has written numerous books on chemical dependence.

Bell was a member of the University of Minnesota Board of Regents from 2002 to 2007 and has served on the board of directors for many local and national social and civic organizations, including the Citizens League, Center of the American Experiment, the Center for New Black Leadership, the Greater Minnesota Housing Fund and the Family Housing Fund. He also has served on the transition teams for both Gov. Jesse Ventura and Gov. Tim Pawlenty.

Bell has a B.A. degree in social service administration from Metropolitan State University. He lives in Minneapolis with his wife Sharon and has two children.

To contact Peter, you may call 651-602-1453, or e-mail: [peter.bell@metc.state.mn.us](mailto:peter.bell@metc.state.mn.us)

## **National Surface Transportation Policy & Revenue Commission: Minnesota Field Hearing**

**Testimony of Peter Bell  
Chair, Metropolitan Council of the Twin Cities  
April 18, 2007**

Secretary Peters and distinguished Commissioners -- I am Peter Bell, chair of the Metropolitan Council, with jurisdiction in the seven-county metro area.

I, too, want to welcome you to the Minneapolis-St. Paul area -- and thank you for the opportunity to provide input into your deliberations on the future of the national transportation system.

The Metropolitan Council is a unique regional government—created by the state Legislature to function as both the MPO and as the largest provider of transit service in the seven-county “Twin Cities” area.

Metro Transit, which the Council owns and operates, runs the 12-mile Hiawatha light rail line between downtown Minneapolis, the airport and Mall of America in Bloomington.

Hiawatha is the region’s first light rail line, and since its opening in 2004 has shattered all ridership projections and expectations. The average weekday ridership last year was 28,150 -- 148 percent higher than pre-construction estimates.

The backbone of our transit system, however, is, and will continue to be, the bus system -- and we’re pleased to report that bus and train operations last year achieved the highest annual transit ridership since 1984. Again, we take great pride in our successes, as well as survey findings that satisfaction among our customers ranks very high at over 90 percent.

As a regional agency, the Council also operates the wastewater collection and treatment system....plans regional parks...and administers funds that provide affordable housing opportunities.

We're also the regional planning agency for the seven-county area, with some authority over land use.

189 cities, counties and towns in the seven-county area are required to submit local comprehensive plans that must conform to, and comply with, regional plans and policies. It's a way to help the region plan future infrastructure, promote efficient growth and ensure quality services.

### **(Recommendations)**

For the past 30 years, and especially since the passage of ISTEA, federal transportation policy has supported MPOs and metropolitan regions. As federal policy is retooled, this support must continue.

I urge you to continue support for regional planning by MPOs, both financially and through federal policy. It is essential that the DOT support funding of projects based on the fiscally constrained plans developed by MPOs. Earmarks too often circumvent planned priorities identified by local elected officials through the federally-mandated process.

You have heard testimony from the Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations and other MPOs that are interested in having federal policy promote regional authorities that would act both as the MPO and a transportation operator.

Also with respect to transit, I urge you to continue generous support for urban transit systems. Transit plays a critical role as congestion grows, the costs of energy sources go up and the public increasingly looks for transportation choices.

Toward that end, the New Starts program is essential for improving transportation and mobility in metropolitan regions.

However, the New Starts program to construct fixed guideway transit in urban areas must be fully funded. Additional investment in transit is critical to keeping metro regions and the nation competitive in a global, mobile economy.

The New Starts program must also be streamlined...and we strongly support efforts that Secretary Peters and Administrator Simpson have initiated toward that end.

The inflationary impact on project capital costs is significant. And the public does not receive the benefits of improved transportation choice and mobility that are needed now.

In addition, I concur that the program promotes micromanagement at the federal level, which in turn suppresses efficiency and innovation at the local level. I am certain there is a less intrusive way to protect the federal taxpayer and provide quality projects.

As a step in that direction, the FTA recently proposed to eliminate re-submission of New Starts documentation when projects are in Preliminary Engineering and Final Design--and not yet seeking federal funding.

Last year, the concept of a "Project Development Agreement" between FTA and project sponsors was proposed. This agreement would lay out a rather specific roadmap of deliverables with expected timelines for both the project sponsor and the FTA.

We support this concept as an effective tool for the FTA regional offices and project sponsors to commit to a project timeline.

I strongly encourage you to promote other efforts to streamline the New Starts process--to reduce the administrative and capital costs and help us deliver these very important transit projects in a timely and cost-effective manner.

Our entrée into rail transit has taught us other important lessons as well. Land use matters. Design matters.

A commitment by local communities on land use is necessary to justify the significant capital and operating investments that come with a New Starts project. I encourage you to continue the emphasis on land use as it relates to transportation investments.

The Twin Cities may have been somewhat of a late-comer to rail transit, but Minnesota has always been a leader in transportation innovations.

For 15 years the Council and Mn/DOT have partnered to operate an express bus system that uses the freeway shoulders to bypass congestion, carrying tens of thousands of commuters from the suburbs to jobs in downtown areas. Our customers have told us that the transit advantage offered by operating on these shoulders is a benefit they value greatly.

This is an innovative, low-cost solution to congestion that could benefit other urban regions. It is the type of solution I hope you would encourage.

However, FTA has recently indicated that they will no longer support new segments of these cost-effective transit guideways in

the future if minimum speeds cannot be achieved. This is based on an interpretation of SAFETEA-LU provisions.

Today I am urging you to reconsider this position to promote successful and efficient transportation solutions.

We also operate hundreds of freeway ramp meters in the region, as a way of squeezing the maximum capacity out of area roads. We also have one of the few HOT lanes in the country on I-394. Continued development of other innovative ITS solutions is also dependent on federal support, as addressed by others at this hearing.

In fact, I support setting aside a portion of federal transportation dollars to fully fund a variety of innovative demonstration projects at the local level. This kind of “risk” can only be assumed at the federal level.

While on the topic of innovation, I want to call attention to the region’s transit benchmarks. The Council’s adopted transportation policy calls for doubling transit ridership by 2030.

It’s no small goal, and it keeps us on our toes. I would suggest that similar goals and benchmarks be established at the national level to prompt all transit systems to strive a little harder for growth in ridership.

I also want to acknowledge the US-DOT’s leadership in developing the “Urban Partnership Agreement” program.

The UPA encourages all of us to continually re-think the spectrum of possible solutions to the congestion challenges our country faces today.

In summary, I urge you to support continued funding for regional planning by MPOs. Support funding of projects based on the priorities identified in plans developed by those MPOs. Streamline the New Starts program and encourage the federal government to focus on the big picture and allow local units of government to have a larger say in the management of their local projects.

That concludes my statement. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you.