

# Where Is SEMCOG?

## It Might Never Be A Regional Government But It Can Lead In Cooperation And Research

By TIM RICHARD

The sweet young thing behind the convention registration desk was filling out name tags for the incoming governmental officials.

"Name?"

"E. Robert Turner," replied Turner's assistant.

"Representing?"

"SEMCOG," the Turner aide said.

The sweet young thing behind the registration desk looked up quizzically. "Where," she asked, "is Semcog?"

A fair question. SEMCOG isn't a town like Saginaw or Newberry, as the young lady thought. It's shorthand for the Southeastern Michigan Council of Governments—born officially the first of 1968 better months of committee meetings, selling jobs and legislative controversy.

A few months later, some committee appointments were announced. Otherwise, silence. So where is SEMCOG?

TO THE POLITICAL RIGHT, the Council of Governments is the first step toward "metro" government—a term that is used with a distasteful snarl and is attacked along with fluoride, riots and socialism.

To the Black Power crowd, the Council of Governments is the newest tool of the suburban, white, affluent Establishment to keep political control of the sprawling Metropolitan Detroit, especially since the City of Detroit proper has a Negro population gradually approaching the 50 per cent mark, and one day soon is certain to have a black mayor.

To the advocates of political centralism—a doctrine that has lost much strength in recent years—the Council of Governments could some day be the agency to perform regional services directly to the public in some future year.

To E. Robert Turner, executive director of the Council of Governments since April, it's none of those things. It was never meant to be. It shouldn't be.

### Stop Metro Government

BOB TURNER'S background is as a city manager—in Massachusetts; in Boulder, Colorado; most recently, in Burbank, California. Therefore, he believes in home rule in making existing local governments function more effectively. The Council of Governments can help by (1) helping to set up cooperative arrangements between those local units and (2) providing research.

"If this Council were to be a regional government, I would not have left Burbank. I personally would not wish to be associated with a government that is area-wide."

"Senator Huber (State Sen. Robert Huber, arch-conservative Republican from Troy) and people who attack the Council of Governments have warned this will evolve into a regional government. I say that's the very thing we're organized to stop!"

"I've seen big government. For example, Los Angeles County, which has 4,000 square miles, the same area as the six counties in the Council of Governments here. Los Angeles County has 58,000 employees and contracts with local units for some services. Well, I'm not sure it provides the public any better services than local governments—with one reservation:

"That these local units here will cooperate and coordinate."

Metro or regional government will come, says Turner, only if local units fail to operate. Turner himself has no doctrinal opposition to metro government: "I don't believe metro government is socialism. That argument is phony. I just don't think it's any better than good local government."

Local government—cities and K-12 school districts in particular—are facing all sorts of crises, social and financial, these days. The New Left would like to scrap most existing institutions as failures. Turner sees it the other way around: "We've never used our cities, our school districts, our counties to their fullest potential."

### Money For Research??

THE COUNCIL of Governments—Turner hates the tag "SEMCOG," says it smells of demagogic sloganism—is a service organization for the 400 or so cities, townships, villages, counties, school districts, intermediate school districts and community college districts that chop up the economic unit of southeastern Michigan.

It's voluntary. A governmental agency joins, pays its dues, and sends a delegate to the general assembly, which elects a board, officers and committees.

At the moment, the Council of Governments has committees working in four problem areas—solid waste (trash) disposal, law enforcement coordination, joint purchasing and educational needs. Also, it acts as a parent sponsor for the now 20-year-old Detroit Metropolitan Regional Planning Commission and its Transportation and Land Use Study.

Turner visualizes other jobs for the Council in the future—drainage, uniformity of building codes, state and federal liaison services, and research. Especially research.

"It is literally incredible," says Turner, "that we orbit the earth and moon but still sweep our streets essentially the same way we did in the early part of the century. We treat our water the same way. We remove our snow the same way—fancier equipment, but the same way."

"I see the need for tremendous expenditures for research. Look: No corporation today could survive without putting 15 per cent of its expenditures into research. A smart investor, when he buys a stock, looks at how much it's putting into research."

So how much does local government put into research? Maybe two or three per cent?

"A fraction of one per cent!" Turner shoots back. "And that's one of the root causes of the failure of local government to cope with the problems of the times."

"Local government is always keeping up with physical things. You don't put a millage question before the voters unless they get a direct benefit—streets, sewers, classrooms. But if you ask anyone to spend money on research—"

For the research function, Turner has his eyes on the community colleges. They could provide some of it and also become a training ground for local government officials. And the federal government, now increasingly interested in aiding local units, could provide big chunks of money for research—the same

as it did, with such excellent results, in the space program and for agriculture.

That's in the future. Where is the Council of Governments right now?

### The Neglected Computer

"THINGS ARE GOING well, but there's not enough visible yet to document," Turner replies. "We're moving as fast as can be expected. Many were intent on action programs. What we're doing doesn't sound exotic, but it is meaningful—it will contribute to better services and/or lower costs."

Joint purchasing is one key area. Turner's staff is preparing recommendations for the policy committee to show how local governments can form combinations to purchase the supplies they need in greater quantities and thus at lower unit cost.

One method could be by geographical location, with one large government putting out bids for the others. Another method is by function—several school districts getting together, for example.

Data processing is another area where Turner feels local governments have failed sadly to get moving. He'd like to see the Council encourage combinations of local governments pool the use of computer equipment, making it available to each member of the combo without the need for each unit to buy its own.

"Cities, counties and schools have not yet begun to use the computer to the degree you find in the private sector of the economy," he says. "Data processing is one of the most basic tools of organizations today. Many of our problems are due to lack of information—or lack of the availability of information—or lack of analysis of the information. But the level of utilization of these fantastic new tools, computers, is very low in government in this area."

So much for the nuts and bolts of the Council of Governments' operation, and for its near-future plans. What about the place of the Council in the array of regional agencies?

### 5 Other Agencies

THERE ARE A half-dozen such agencies in this section of the state today.

Turner's Council—with the planning agency—counts as one. There's the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority, a five-county agency that runs a greenbelt of parks around this metropolis. The Detroit Water Board, with representation from the suburbs, acts as something of a regional utility.

Detroit and Wayne County are working on a joint air pollution plan. There's an authority working on solid waste problems. Finally, there's the newly-organized Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority (SEMTA) which is starting on a regional bus plan.

SEMTA can be viewed as an adjunct of the Council. The state law setting up SEMTA gives the Council power to nominate eventually a majority of the SEMTA board members.

Turner expects that the Detroit-Wayne County air pollution effort may evolve into a regional authority. Beyond that he's wary



E. ROBERT TURNER is executive director (chief hired operating officer) of the Southeastern Michigan Council of Governments.

about "a host of special-purpose regional authorities. Then a citizen of town X will have to go before eight or 10 or 12 different boards to make his needs felt."

IN THE SUBURBS, people take pride in their small towns. Yet it's a political fact of life that those small towns are growing less important. This writer analyzed the agenda of one Observerland township and found, for example, that three-fourths of the items had to do with other agencies of government—public works contracts, uniform plumbing codes, joint efforts to obtain favorable state laws, and so on. Thus, a good argument can be made that local powers are gradually slipping upward, and the only thing left is a fierce sense of community pride.

Turner doesn't buy the argument. In the first place, he says, "A sense of pride in the community is very important, even if it brings on a sense of parochialism."

And as for local units' losing their powers, Turner says, "What we're trying to do is make those units more effective. A lot of people say some school districts are too small, some cities are too small—that may be."

"Yet I don't know who really has the wisdom to say what is the optimum size city or school district. I believe the answer is what we're doing. You get help—state and federal aid—sure. There's nothing wrong with state or federal aid; it's absolutely essential."

"But we can eliminate this horrible tendency for state and federal aid to make everyone look alike. This cooperative approach—it's never really been tried."

And so Bob Turner sees the Council of Governments not so much as a new institution or new layer of government, but as a way to change people's attitudes from parochialism to cooperation.

"Let's not scrap our institutions," Let's make them work."

**Oct.**

<b>MONDAY</b> 7	DEUCE WILLIAMS - SQUARE DANCING. Community Room, 7 p.m. <b>FIND OUT ABOUT YOUR PERSONALITY</b> by Computer. see Astro Analysis in Mall.
<b>TUESDAY</b> 8	LADIES' DAY. Cinema I; free coffee, 9:30; free movie, 10:00. Plus: prizes, including a mink stole by Sears. WEIGHT WATCHERS, Community Room, 12:15 p.m.
<b>WEDNESDAY</b> 9	COLONIAL SENIOR CITIZENS - Community Room, 12 noon.
<b>THURSDAY</b> 10	GERMAN SHEPHERD CLUB - Community Room, 8 p.m.
<b>FRIDAY</b> 11	Session in Entertaining - CHARM COURSE for mamas, 10 a.m., 1:30 p.m., 7:30 p.m., Community Room.
<b>SATURDAY</b> 12	COIN SHOW in Community Room, 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. AUCTION at 4 p.m. ASTRO ANALYSIS will read your personality by Computer.

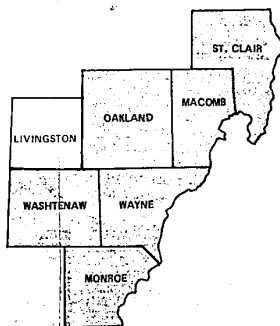
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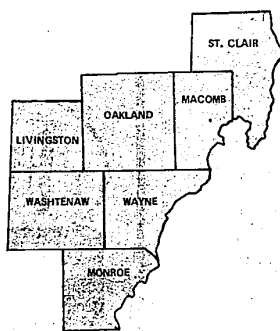
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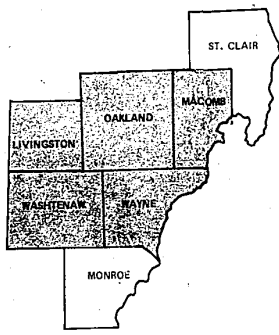
### SEMCOG



### TALUS



### HCMA



Southeastern Michigan Council of Governments is a six-county service agency joined voluntarily by counties, cities, townships, villages, school districts, intermediate districts and college districts.

Transportation and Land Use Study is a special project of the Detroit Metropolitan Regional Planning Commission, which in turn is a subordinate agency of SEMCOG. It covers seven counties.

Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority is a single-purpose agency that develops and operates parks in a greenbelt around metropolitan Detroit. It cooperates, but has no connection, with SEMCOG and TALUS.