After the Governor's Line Item Veto

by Thomas M. Scott

Because CURA is facing a serious threat to its future, I am taking the extraordinary step of preempting this space to tell our readers what has happened and to remind us all of what CURA is here to do.

CURA, the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, is one of the University of Minnesota units scheduled for elimination as a result of Governor Arne Carlson's vetoes of legislative action. Unless the legislature can override the governor's veto or pass a supplemental appropriation, CURA will be among those to close its doors in July 1992.

Statements from the Governor's office indicate that there was no wish to eliminate CURA. Nonetheless, intentions aside, CURA has been caught in the cross-fire between the governor and the legislature on the issue of higher education funding and will be eliminated if nothing is done to reverse the governor's veto.

CURA began more than twenty-three years ago when Minnesota, like most other states across the nation, recognized that whether we like it or not we are an urbanizing nation, and we are an urbanizing state—we have tension among the races,
we have poverty, we don’t always understand how our economies grow and decline, we have families in disarray, we don’t seem to know how to educate many of our young people, we have a significant number of citizens who are ill-housed, we have confusion in governmental structures, we have crime, we have gridlock on the highways, and we have drug abuse.

The state turned to the land grant university, whose mission over the years in agriculture, in health care, in education, and in engineering (to mention a few), had been to serve the people of the state by conducting, testing, and applying systematic and objective research to issues of public concern.

In an action consistent with that land grant tradition, the state and the University of Minnesota’s Board of Regents created the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA). They said, in effect, “Give CURA the resources to encourage faculty and graduate students from across the entire University to use their talents and time to help us understand how the urbanizing process works in big cities and small towns. Have CURA reach out to the neighborhoods, the cities and counties, the nonprofits, the state agencies, to the people and organizations for whom urban problems are a day-to-day reality. Have CURA bring the expertise of the faculty and students of the land grant university together with those in the trenches and see if we can understand a little better how to cope with what urbanization means.” What they asked was that CURA do for urban problems what other units of the land grant university had done so successfully in the past for agriculture, health care, and engineering.

This is what CURA has been doing for more than twenty-three years. Some of our work is reported regularly on the pages of the CURA Reporter, but most of our work has emerged through other outlets. In a typical year our projects bring together 170 faculty (from eighty-five University units) and 125 graduate students (from forty-three University units) with 22 state agencies, 32 local governments, and 125 nonprofit community and neighborhood organizations. CURA does this on a budget that is a little more than one percent of all the appropriations for “legislative specials” at the University. In a typical year CURA doubles its budget from outside sources, so that the state gets two dollars of return for each one that it invests in CURA.

Throwing dollars at urban problems in the 1960s and 1970s did not make them go away, nor did ignoring them in the 1980s. A recent article in Governing magazine notes that “the phrase ‘urban crisis’ has returned to the American vocabulary.” Furthermore, we are now aware that so-called urban problems cannot be bottled-up in the older core central cities as some once thought they could. They spill out into the Richfields and the Anokas that surround these core cities, even to the Moorheads and Rochester, to the Mahnomenes and the Blue Earths.

Obviously, CURA cannot solve all these problems. Mobilizing the considerable intellectual resources of the entire University would barely scratch the surface. But CURA projects and programs over the past twenty-three years have made a difference. CURA has always operated in an experimental and developmental mode. Less successful projects have been dropped and highly successful programs have moved on to have a life of their own, like the Minnesota Land Management Information System (MLMIS), which went through seven years of research and development at CURA before it became the Land Management Information Center under the State Planning Agency, and more recently in the state’s Department of Administration.

CURA has consistently been the one program at the University where issues of poverty, disadvantage, and minority status have been addressed. In the 1970s we created the store-front university and the Martin Luther King program. More recently, we have provided thirty graduate assistantships each year in minority-based community organizations and have funded research projects involving discrimination in housing, Southeast Asian refugees, long-term nursing care at home for the elderly, Head Start, and maternity issues among low-income families. The problems of the poor and disadvantaged have been a consistent priority at CURA for the past twenty-three years.

Other recent projects at CURA have been as diverse as the urban issues facing Minnesota today. A professor in the College of Education demonstrated how effective a low-cost program could be in teaching first graders who were having trouble with reading how to read. A major study of trade centers in the Upper Midwest shows how business and industry in our region have responded over thirty years to long-term economic trends. A graduate student in mechanical engineering did a cost-effective analysis of the potential of wind power as an alternative energy source for Minnesota. A faculty member on the University’s Duluth campus is working with the St. Louis River Watershed Remedial Action Plan to analyze the consequences of accumulated toxins in Duluth’s harbor. A professor in the School of Public Health worked with the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency to assess the health risks of incinerating garbage. A team of faculty and graduate students worked with the Rochester/Olmsted Community Housing Partnership to prepare a comprehensive study of affordable housing in Olmsted County. And a graduate student worked with a committee of the Minnesota State Bar Association in analyzing and reporting on a survey that documented, for the first time in any state, the extent of the unmet need for legal assistance among poor families in Minnesota.

In my view, it is unthinkable that this land grant university, especially since it is located in the heart of the state’s major urban center, would not have a CURA, a center of research and outreach activity dedicated to urban issues. What a violation of the land grant tradition that would be. Yet, that is exactly what will occur on July 1, 1992 unless something happens to reverse the actions that have been taken.

For twenty-three years CURA has been dedicated to making this University work better for the people of Minnesota. At this point we can only hope that our work will not be undone, and that what needs to be accomplished in the future, will be allowed to take place.

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CORRECTION...One of our avid readers discovered a mistake in Esther Wattenberg’s article (“Children Having Children”) in the August 1991 CURA Reporter. On page 2, column 2, second paragraph: “Of these, 4,856 or 13 percent,” should be changed to “Of these, 4,856 or 7.5 percent.”