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Regional consolidation proposed

□ Earl Blumenauer advances the idea of merging governmental functions of the three counties and their cities

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Like David slinging a stone at Goliath, Portland City Commissioner Earl Blumenauer took aim recently at the monster called local government.

Blumenauer's plan is simple: merge Multnomah, Clackamas and Washington into one county, replacing the Metropolitan Service District. This new

SECOND OF TWO PARTS

government would perform such county duties as elections, corrections and taxation as well as many services now provided by special districts.

But this monster may not fall as easily as the biblical giant. And many area residents will continue to root for Goliath. After all, better the devil you know than the devil you don't.

Here's a look at the current family of government monsters:

In addition to the three counties, the Portland area contains 220 local governments,

including 57 school districts, 32 cities, 41 water districts, 27 fire districts, two sanitary districts, 12 county service districts, four park districts, 17 road districts, two vector control districts, one highway lighting district, six water control districts, 10 drainage districts, two irrigation districts, four soil and water conservation districts, one cemetery district, one port district and Metro.

The 49 governments in Multnomah County alone will spend more than \$3 billion this fiscal year, and a typical suburban resident may be governed by as many as a dozen local governments with more than 50 elected and 15 appointed officials.

Combining many of these governments could lighten the taxpayer's load and bring

more fairness and common sense to the way services are provided. Supporters say the tax limitations imposed by Measure 5 and the demands on government posed by rapid growth will create the climate for change.

But some experts doubt a bigger government would cost less, and many fear the loss of smaller, personal-sized governments and local control.

Blumenauer recently unveiled his plan to merge the three counties at the City Club, which called for creation of "Willamette County" in 1984. The city commissioner wants to phase the changes in over several

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County: Some experts doubt the promised savings

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years to ease the political trauma, starting with what he thinks are obvious steps: combining taxation and assessment, elections, corrections.

"I think we can manage the change in a way that won't freak people out through a combination of votes, contracts and intergovernment agreements," Blumenauer said.

But some people are not convinced.

"If you start out trying to save money on police and fire, forget it, it's just not there," said Gil Gutjahr. Gutjahr is administrator of the Multnomah County Tax Supervising and Conservation Commission, which holds public hearings and offers advice on government budgets in Multnomah County.

"I like a decentralized local government. It may cost more, but I think there's some reason for it."

The mayor of Happy Valley, a small North Clackamas County town of about 1,500, illustrates what the reformers are up against.

"The county commissioners like to get re-elected," said Mayor James Robnett. "If you call them, they're willing at least give lip service to what you have to say. But if you have a super county, one set of commissioners, the voice from the hinterland is gone. We just wouldn't have any say whatsoever."

Happy Valley is awash in governments. A homeowner there pays property taxes to the city of Happy Valley, Clackamas County, Clackamas County Vector Control District, the Port of Portland, Mount Scott Water District, Clackamas County Service District No. 1 (sewers), Clackamas County Fire District No. 71, Clackamas County elementary and high school education service districts, North Clackamas School District, Clackamas Water District No. 2 and Clackamas Community College.

"Both people running for the water board are friends of mine," Robnett said. "The water district does its job very economically. People who work for them do their jobs, the foreman digs ditches, and so on."

Gresham Mayor Gussie McRobert, Clackamas County Commissioner Judie Hammerstaad and even strong Metro critic Bonnie Hays, Washington County board chair-

woman, said they would support a study of a three-county merger.

"Washington County wants to seriously have a third-party analysis of some of the possibilities and potentials," Hays said. "But a merger for merger's sake we can't accept."

Hays said the counties evolved different philosophies on taxes and other government basics. A study might lead to regional government, or it might lead to regionalization of some services, or it might lead nowhere, she said.

"We may put Willamette County to bed forever," Hays said. "That would be an accomplishment in itself."

A forum for the discussion of government reform is a commission that soon will be formed to write a new charter for the Metropolitan Service District.

The regional government agency directs such services as garbage, the zoo and the convention center. Under the new charter, anything could happen to its power. It could assume the role that the three counties now have or expand into other regional services such as operating jails and parks.

Rena Cusma, Metro executive officer, sees a future similar to Blumenauer's plan of merging the three counties.

"But that's down the road a ways," she said. The region should start looking at government services in a different way. Instead of splitting services by program, the regional government could do the planning and raise money, while cities actually run the programs, she said.

But building a better government is not like building a better mouse trap. People will not exactly beat a path to your door.

Ask Wes Myllenbeck.

Myllenbeck's consulting firm worked on about a dozen consolidation efforts around the country in the 1970s. His one success was the city of Butte and Silver Bow County, Mont.

And as chairman of the Washington County Board of Commissioners in the early 1980s, he supported regional government and tried to bring order out of the chaos of the county government at the time. Voters rewarded him by booting him out of his seat after one term.

"It's human nature to resist change," Myllenbeck said. "You may not like what you have, but you know how to work with it."

BUILDING A BETTER GOVERNMENT

Here are three proposals for streamlining government in the Portland metropolitan area:

CITY/COUNTY CONSOLIDATION

How it would work: Could be initiated by the Portland City Council, Multnomah County Board of Commissioners or citizen petition. An appointed commission would then write a charter subject to approval by voters in Portland and the county. Voters in smaller cities could opt out. The new city-county would absorb most special districts in the county. A charter rejected by voters in 1974 proposed an eight-member council, elected from districts, with a strong mayor.

PROS Provides one government responsible for services, promotes efficiency and tax fairness, eliminates outmoded and inadequate structures.

CONS Won't solve regional problems, imposes urban solutions — and tax rates — on rural and suburban residents, reduces local control.

WILLAMETTE COUNTY

How it would work: Washington, Multnomah and Clackamas counties would merge into one county, assuming the powers, responsibilities and revenue sources of the three existing counties, and replacing Metro as the regional government. Cities would continue providing services such as a fire and police.

The Legislature can change county boundaries, but voters in the home rule counties of Multnomah and Washington would have to approve repealing their charters.

PROS No new taxes would be needed; would remove Metro as extra layer of government; citizens already accept and identify with county government;

many regional services such as taxation, corrections, roads, water, sewer, and growth planning could be more efficiently provided.

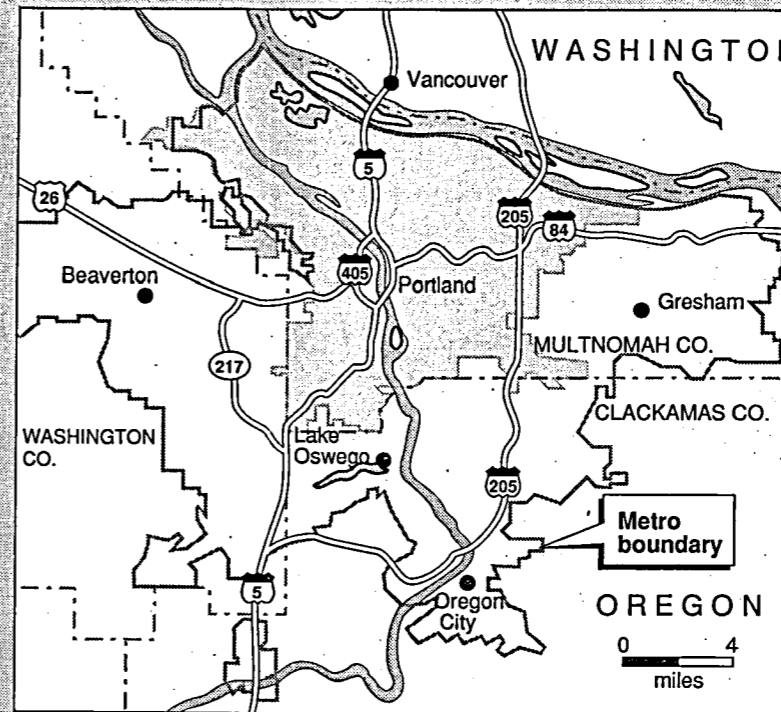
CONS Loss of local control; fierce political turf battles are not worth the benefits; big government is too impersonal.

STATUS QUO — PLUS

How it would work: Metro would continue gradual expansion of responsibilities to include Tri-Met, growth management, regional parks and open space preservation, low-income housing; mergers of special service districts for water, fire and sewer continue; cities would continue to provide urban services to more territory through annexation.

PROS Politically feasible; not disruptive; change comes from the ground up instead of imposed from above; allows Metro to gain public confidence slowly, building on success.

CONS Continues current wasteful, fragmented government structure; increases chance that crisis will force changes.



Metro and the three counties in the Portland area figure prominently in reorganization discussions.

Emotions rule the politics of change, but identity also is important.

Unincorporated areas resist joining cities. Little cities resist joining bigger cities. And everybody resists Metro.

"What influence would anyone around here have on Metro?" Happy Valley's Robnett asked.

Meanwhile, suburbanites who moved out of the city to escape inner-city problems do not want their taxes going to help solve those prob-

lems. But Cusma does not believe the suburbs can maintain that attitude indefinitely. "I don't think the suburbs can stay healthy in the long run without a healthy central city. We have to find a way for everyone to stay healthy."

Change, when it comes, tends to flow from scandal or other crisis.

For example, the Unified Sewerage Agency, a consolidation of numerous small sewer districts in Washington County, came about

only after raw sewage running in the streets brought the federal government down on the county.

An axiom says that Americans really don't care that much about government as long as the water flows when they turn on the tap.

In the Portland area, it may well be water that brings the crisis home. Demand is expected to exceed supply within the next 20 years, and local governments will have to consolidate to find new water sources.

Crises come and go, however, and

it's not yet clear whether Measure 5 will truly be the catalyst for change that Blumenauer and others hope, or just another exercise in creative budgeting.

And growth projections have sparked government reform plans since the turn of the century.

"We kind of get up to the brink of drawing some conclusions," said Ethan Seltzer, a growth planner for Metro. "Then we say, well, maybe not this time, and everyone turns around and goes home."