

Charter panel close to first decisions

One of group's big moves so far: backing regional OK of big projects

By JAMES MAYER
of The Oregonian staff

Inventing a government isn't easy — particularly when the public attitude toward the government in question ranges between apathy and paranoia.

After six months of work, the 16-member Metro charter committee is closing in on its first series of decisions on a new charter for the nation's only elected regional government. But there's a long way to go.

"It's like trying to pick mercury up off the floor," said Ray Phelps, committee member.

The committee's mission is to write a home-rule charter describing the powers, financing and organization of the regional government, formally known as the Metropolitan Service District. The Legislature currently controls Metro's structure and functions. The goal is to have a charter proposal ready for the ballot in November 1992.

The panel started with the hardest issue first — regional planning.

Planning is the local politician's most potent power — the ability to decide who gets to build what,

where. They do not want to give it up.

One committee member, former Sherwood Mayor Mary Tobias, described regional planning as "Big Brother" and joked that her city may be forced to secede if the charter is approved.

Tobias was only half-joking. Giving Metro the power to reach down into local plans is sure to run into heavy resistance from local governments.

However, most members of the charter committee believe that at least some planning has to be done on a regional level to deal with the half-million new residents expected over the next 20 years.

"This is one single organism, this region, in terms of planning responsibilities," said committee member Frank Josselson.

But defining just how far the planning powers should go has proven extremely difficult.

"This is where the political rubber hits the road," said Hardy Meyers, chairman of the committee.

In perhaps the most significant decision so far, the committee last week agreed that a new regional government should have power over

where major developments like shopping centers or factories get built.

"A good example is the new Nike factory in Beaverton," Josselson said. The development, actually the \$147 million, 72-acre Nike World Campus on Southwest Murray Road, was built in the "middle of nowhere" without concern for where workers were going to live or how they were going to get there, he said.

The panel is not trying to work out final charter language at this time. Instead, the idea is get public reaction once all the potential charter provisions dealing with functions, including planning, have been hammered out.

Regional planning as envisioned by a majority of the committee would involve a method for dealing with urban growth, including management of the urban growth boundary and planning for certain areas outside the boundary.

Metro would also have planning responsibilities for the regional aspects of transportation, mass transit, water supply, housing densities, open space, garbage, disaster planning, and convention facilities.

Metro already has much of this power under state law, but the agency has lacked the political will to exercise it in many cases. Obtaining voter approval through a char-

ter, however, may give Metro the political backing to do more.

The committee has also proposed that the charter call for appointment of a commission to create a "non-binding future vision" looking at least 50 years ahead. The commission would establish population levels and settlement patterns that the Portland metropolitan area could accommodate — and still achieve a desired quality of life.

However, major planning issues remain unresolved, including the relationship of local plans to the regional plan. Some committee members, such as Charlie Hales of the Home Builders Association of Metropolitan Portland, want to see the comprehensive plans of local cities and counties subject to approval by Metro, with Metro's plan then subject to review by the state Land Conservation and Development Commission.

Other unresolved issues include a process for adopting the regional plan. Options here include giving local governments some kind of veto power, or making the plan subject to approval by the voters.

But in the end, Metro and the local governments can't escape each other. "They are like a couple having difficulties," said state Sen. Ron Cease, D-Portland, a committee member. "They know they can't live without each other, so they have to get along. But there will be fights."