

Quality of life goal of panel

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Of the Argus

Devising a governance system that will enable the region to preserve its quality of life is the primary goal of the committee writing a charter for the Metropolitan Service District, its chairman says.

"We as a region still have a quality of life that's very, very good," Hardy Meyers told the Washington County Public Affairs Forum Monday.

"We're probably one of the few metropolitan areas anywhere that can say that, including Seattle, where there's an increasing sense that they've lost the opportunity to shape and control growth."

Coping with growth in a metropolitan area with numerous jurisdictions, most experts agree, requires extraordinary cooperation among local governments. Such coordination is difficult without some sort of regional governance structure.

And brainstorming a structure is the responsibility of a 16-member committee, which includes four Washington County representatives, which has been holding weekly discussions for several months now. It plans to submit a proposed charter to voters next November.

A charter is similar to a constitution in that it specifies what responsibilities and what authority a local government should have. It can be changed only by a vote of the people.

Meyers said he is unable to assess

the odds of whether voters will approve a charter. He said one potential stumbling block is that the document will have so many provisions that almost everyone could find something to object to.

If voters reject the proposal, current state laws pertaining to Metro will remain in effect. Those laws can be changed by majority vote in the Legislature.

Metro provides no direct services to residents of the tri-county area. However, it coordinates—and oversees compliance with—regional plans for transportation and solid waste disposal.

Meyers said the question of whether there are other functions which should be handled regionally is one of the threshold issues facing the charter committee.

For example, he said, it's been suggested that Metro should be responsible for ensuring that the region has sufficient water for the 400,000 new residents expected over the next 15 to 20 years.

And that it coordinate efforts to preserve natural areas for parks, recreation, wildlife habitat, water quality and so forth.

However, he said, the charter committee has tentatively discarded the idea of having Metro coordinate a regional library system, even though Metro already has some authority to do so under existing laws which it hasn't exercised.

In January, the committee plans public hearings in each of the three counties of the region so it can get a better idea from citizens whether it's headed in the right direction.