

Metro's marching orders

*Charter committee outlines a formula
for strong, effective regional government*

Open space or sprawl. Abundant water or shortages. Efficient freeways or gridlock.

The metropolitan area needs a strong and responsive regional government to make sure that the rapid growth expected in the coming decades makes the region better and not just bigger.

That's why residents have a big stake in the Metro home-rule charter being drafted by a citizens committee. Voter passage of a charter would allow Metro to become more responsive to regional needs and less beholden to the state Legislature.

The committee, meeting under the leadership of Hardy Myers, has proposed a preliminary charter outline that does a good job of enumerating the tasks Metro should tackle.

They include:

- Land use — Metro would provide needed policing of the urban-growth boundary. It would also designate and watch over land outside the growth boundary that likely will be needed for urban development.

Metro also would oversee the siting of major commercial and industrial development and make sure that cities reach housing-density goals.

Those are important land-use powers for Metro to hold because they go hand-in-hand with planning and operating efficient regional transit and transportation systems.

Metro also would oversee a process to come up with a 50-year plan for the region. That would help give the region a set of shared goals.

- Greenspaces — Metro would lead efforts to preserve significant open spaces and wildlife corridors, thus protecting the natural beauty that makes this region attractive.

- Water — Metro would coordinate efforts to make sure the region has an adequate water supply and storage facilities.

Metro would continue to handle waste disposal and recycling efforts and to build and operate regional recreation, cultural and convention facilities. It would coordinate regional disaster and energy planning.

In many cases, the charter committee has merely delineated work that Metro already does. The agency, for example, already handles regional transportation planning and garbage disposal. It built the Oregon Convention Center and runs the Washington Park Zoo.

Critics of the charter process worry that if Metro has the ability to enact its own ordinances, it will become too powerful and will run roughshod over local governments.

But in the context of such regional issues as water, transportation and open space, Metro provides the best way for the region's voters to be heard directly. It enhances rather than diminishes the region's residents' control over their shared futures.

The charter committee has plenty more work to do as it readies a proposed charter for the November election. It still must address Metro's finances and how to identify future regional issues.

As the committee listens to the region's mayors, county commissioners and special-district officials, it should be sensitive to their concerns without backing off on its resolve to define a strong regional government.

Metro is the nation's only directly elected regional government. A well-crafted charter will allow this region's residents to use it well.

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