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Free Metro for future

County, city, special-district parochialism would hamper needed regional decision-making

Few public officials in the Portland metropolitan area believe MAX, the regional light-rail service, would be operating today if its startup had depended on first getting approval of two-thirds of the county, city and special-district commissions of the tri-county area.

Still fewer of these locally elected officials would agree that their own decisions should be subject to approval first by neighborhood votes.

Yet those are exactly the shackles they want applied to the region's directly elected council, Metro.

The response of the 16-member citizens panel charged with drawing up for the November ballot a home-rule charter for regional governance should be a flat, "No thanks."

Voters rejected local-government control of regional decision-making in 1978 when they abolished a largely ineffective Columbia Region Association of Governments, CRAG. In its place they substituted a directly elected regional executive and council, Metro.

They clearly were fed up with the parochialism and turf protection that strangled cost-effective regional-service solutions in a burgeoning metropolitan area. The ballot decision last November reaffirmed that position. It created the Home Rule Charter Com-

mittee to offer voters an opportunity to substitute a regional constitution for the legislative statutory authority under which Metro has operated since its inception.

Yet city, county and special-district officials at a recent conference argued for continued control of regional decision-making. They didn't ask just for an advisory process, as would be entirely proper. They proposed that Metro's planning and new-service decisions be subject to their approval, by two-thirds of a newly created panel of local elected officials.

That would be a virtual return to the CRAG paralysis of yesteryear. Metro was created to end the local-government myopia, the duplication and political invisibility of the myriad little governments that proliferated throughout the metropolitan area. It was created to provide those services that would be more cost-effectively provided regionwide. Voters' concerns about responsiveness and accountability were addressed by making the regional council and executive directly elected.

Instead of returning to the turf-protectionist strictures of the 1970s, the charter committee should shape an elected regional government that can face up to the challenges of the 1990s and the new century.