Metro is risking trouble with its expansion plans

By STEPHEN H. GENTNER

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What is with Metro?

County and local governments are cutting costs, reallocating funds and tightening belts along with everyone else in the United States.

The Metropolitan Service District, on the other hand, has laid out, in a final report from its advisory committee on convention facilities, an ambitious plan of huge expenditures and expansion in a recessionary economy.

The plans don't match up with reality. The $2 million loss the Oregon Convention Center experienced in its first year of operation was subsidized by 3 percent of the hotel/motel tax. All the other Metropolitan Exposition-Recreation Commission expenses are coming out of the coliseum reserve fund, which by the commission's projections should be exhausted in three years. These are its only two sources of revenue.

Capital improvements, facility upgrades and major repairs to the Memorial Coliseum have been neglected to the gain of loss-generating facilities such as the Portland Center for the Performing Arts and the Civic Stadium.

The publicized consolidation of facilities under the commission in order to save money has resulted in increased costs in overhead, which remains high in relationship to total operating expenses.

Metro's December advisory committee report also states that the relationship between Metro and the commission has devolved into a turf battle, which has created an attitude among commission staff members "that there is little need to be responsive to the requests of Metro because Metro is perceived to have no direct authority over MERC."

Visionaries at Metro are now looking at expanding the new Oregon Convention Cen-

Stephen H. Gentner is manager of the Imperial Hotel in downtown Portland.

IN MY OPINION

ter. The plans call for adding 90,000 square feet, with studies to begin in 1993. This would be a horrendously expensive proposition, to say nothing of the loss of 875 parking spaces and the convenience and revenue they represent.

Metro must put its house in order and end the dissension and conflict within its organization. The consolidation of facilities is costing money, not saving it. Except for the aging Memorial Coliseum, all Metro's facilities with MERC are in the red and eating into the reserve quickly.

Metro's response to these problems is to throw more gasoline on the fire with expansion dreams for the Convention Center and the absorption of the Portland Expo Center to complete Metro's monopoly on trade-show venues. Expo absorption by Metro also represents a big loss of revenue to Multnomah County. How will the county replace that loss?

In light of these internal problems and what I see as a frightening lack of responsiveness to the recession and taxpayers' ability to pay, the home-rule charter drafted for Metro — by a Metro charter committee established by the Legislature — likely will result in an attempt by Metro to exercise its taxing authority.

Where do our county and local governments fit into this scenario? Services we pay for now cost enough as it is, yet we may be confronted with adding still another layer of bureaucracy, duplication of effort and taxes.

Everyone else in the United States is pulling in their horns, but Metro says full speed ahead and give us taxing authority, please. Metro must be kept accountable to the voters before any new taxes are enacted.

As citizens, our ability to protect our financial security from overtaxation, especially in the wake of Measure 5 property-tax-assessment increases, is imperative.

Metro charter on agenda

An update on drafting a charter for the Metropolitan Service District will be the main agenda item for the monthly meeting of the Washington County Visitors Association.

The meeting will begin at 11:30 a.m. Wednesday at the Valley Conference Center, 9368 SW Beaverton-Hillsdale Highway, Beaverton.

Lunch costs $10. Call 684-5555 by Monday to reserve a place.

Members of the Metro Charter Commission including John Meek of Hillsboro will serve as a discussion panel for the meeting.