

# The Oregonian

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## Metro: a familiar look

*Charter committee should stick close to the status quo when designing a new structure for Metro*

**W**hy worry about the structure Metro will have under the charter that voters will face in November? Because in the effort to invigorate regional government, form may determine function.

In drawing up that structure, however, the charter committee should keep a basic principle in mind: If it isn't broken, don't fix it.

That's why the committee shouldn't tinker with the post of regional executive. Clearly, Metro needs a focal point, a single person who can articulate the region's goals. The governor sets direction for the state, the president for the country. In the same way, the regional executive sets the agenda for the region.

Any plan that eliminates that post, even if it creates a regionally elected council president, as has been suggested, dilutes accountability. The region's voters have endorsed the regional executive post, and the new charter should reflect those wishes.

But the region also needs a policy-making body. What kind of beast should the council be?

The Metro Council has 12 members — soon to become 13 to avoid tie votes. The positions are part-time, with council members taking on Metro work in addition to their regular occupations. The demands are heavy: Council members estimate they put in 35 hours a week during busy periods. And the districts they represent are large, encompassing about 80,000 people, about the same size as a state Senate district.

A smaller, full-time council, of five or seven people, would have some advantages. Council members would be more visible to the public and take on more work. There would be no need

for the current council's cumbersome committee process.

But the disadvantages are big. Election campaigns would be expensive and responsiveness to constituents would be difficult because each district would include more than 240,000 people. And during this time of voter unhappiness with the size of government, little would be served by creating more job opportunities for full-time politicians.

A very large council — say 21 or more people — would keep individual districts smaller. But the result would be a regional version of the Oregon Legislature. Thanks, but no thanks.

The sensible alternative, again, is to leave well enough alone. A council of 11, 13 or even 15 members strikes a good balance between representation and cohesion. Serving on the council would remain a public-service commitment rather than a way to pay the rent. And the heavy workloads would create a safety valve, as charter-committee member Ron Cease wryly observed recently: If council members are pressed for time, they'll only tackle the most important projects.

While recognizing the value of the status quo, the charter committee should break new ground in one area. It should create a new post: an elected performance-auditor to act as the public's financial and service-delivery watchdog. Charter-committee member Ray Phelps and others have expressed interest in establishing such a post. The idea should be pursued.

In the end, successful regional government will hinge on getting the right people for the right jobs. But creating the right jobs is an important first step.