

BEAVERTON BUSINESS ADVOCATE
B'92 GA surveys
 March '92
show mixed viewpoints

The first two BACC Government Affairs Committee polls found responding Chamber members divided on the issues of education and the Metro charter revision.

In the November 1991 survey on the Metropolitan Service District charter revision, 40 percent of respondents said Metro should have added powers to force cities, counties and special districts to implement regional objectives in such areas as transportation, land use and solid waste. Forty percent of respondents disagreed with expanding Metro's powers, and 20 percent were undecided.

Half of the respondents stated that Metro should assume more direct responsibility for urban services such as transit, parks and housing. An equal number also suggested that Metro's role should be reserved to coordinating local government actions and providing a forum for elected officials to discuss issues.

Most respondents (70 percent) were opposed to the idea of replacing existing county governments with a single regional entity. On the issue of Metro leadership, 80 percent of respondents said the agency's executive officer should be elected.

In the December poll on educational issues, 75 percent of respondents said children spend too little time in school, while 25 percent said the current school year is long enough. Regarding school selection, approximately half of respondents said students should attend the school nearest their home, 25 percent opted for district selection of schools, and 31 percent said students should attend the school of their parents' choice.

On the president's proposal to establish 535 special magnet schools, 53 percent were in favor and 47 percent opposed. Regarding work force preparedness, 43 percent of respondents said many high school students are ill prepared for work because they have little "real-world" experience. Nearly 40 percent attribute the problem to students' unwillingness to work hard in school, while the remaining respondents (12 percent) said either poor teaching or inadequate public funding are to blame.

Half of the respondents would support a national standards system to determine what students should know, but 40 percent said such a system would be meaningless unless progress could be accurately measured. On a similar issue, nearly half of the respondents support national testing of students to help measure progress.

The controversial dual-tracking plan put forth by Vera Katz found favor with 75 percent of respondents, while 13 percent were opposed and 12 percent were undecided.

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Metro Spending Open to Question

First part of a series

Richard A. Dickey

The local media reports that the state's new \$9.7 million archives building includes expensive carpeting, stone floors and light fixtures that many find extravagant and wasteful in a time of severe budget and service cuts.

The result: vocal public anger and condemnation, forcing the state to review the project, as well as launch an inquiry into the department responsible for the project.

In mid-December, *Oregonian* reporter James Mayer reported that the Metropolitan Service District will launch a \$23 million remodeling project to turn the former Sears building near the Lloyd Center into its new headquarters. Two days later the paper's political columnist Steve Duin slammed the agency's action, labeling the project Metro's "new playground" and a "\$23.4 million monument to (Metro Executive Officer) Rena Cusma's ego."

A story seemingly tailor-made to raise the collective blood pressure of the citizenry is met with apparent indifference and dies on the vine. There are no angry calls for an inquiry.

Why the state building with its "extras" would create such a ruckus while Metro's remodeling job costing more than twice as much barely causes a raised eyebrow is not as puzzling as it first seems. In fact, it provides a good clue towards understanding Metro's unique relationship with the citizens it serves.

Because of the agency's distinctive history and development, the region's residents don't have a true concept of what Metro is all about. They have a mental image of state government, of the country and city, but when it comes to Metro, few have a clear idea of how it does, can, and will impact their lives.

But this is a good time, an important time to start learning. Metro is at a crossroads. It is currently wrestling with the task of finally defin-

ing its role in local government. And when the agency is done, the public will be asked to vote on a critical and complex issue: How must power and how many functions should be moved from city and county jurisdictions to Metro? What's the best way the agency can remain answerable to the public?

But to understand the Metro of tomorrow, it's important to understand its history.

Today's Metro is a union of two agencies: an earlier incarnation of the Metropolitan Service District, known as MSD, and the Columbia Region Association of Governments, or CRAG. They were both born during the 1960s, the off-



spring of a complex maelstrom of problems and forces.

These included federal demands that the region establish a metropolitan planning organization, increasing calls for planning and quality of life protection throughout the state, and ever-widening frictions between Portland and the outlying region.

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These frictions were sparked by Portland's aggressive efforts to annex outlying areas. Many who lived or owned businesses in these areas were not about to become absorbed into the "big city" and launched their own equally aggressive campaigns to incorporate into their own cities.

Those who wanted to retain a more local identity most often won over the hearts of the voters, and the result is the mixed bag of independent municipalities we know as the Portland metropolitan area.

There's no denying the fact that maintaining direct local control of our communities has been advantageous in many ways, and lends much to the charm and livability of the region. But there is also no denying that the resulting lack of cohesion among all these municipalities so dependent on each other has resulted in a great waste of financial resources. It has also contributed to many of the headaches we in the region have faced and continue to deal with today.

These problems led to calls for region-wide approaches to regional issues from several diverse interests within the area, including local business leaders, the Portland Chamber of Commerce, environmental activists, state legislators, local politicians and the League of Women Voters.

The league in particular was instrumental in sounding the bugle call for regionalization. A study entitled, "A Tale of Three Counties" issued in 1960, spoke of poor quality services in suburban communities, "wasteful, fragmented and uneven urban services," and placed the blame on "fragmented local government."

MSD and CRAG were the solution the region's political leaders chose to deal with these problems. MSD's task was to absorb and perform services that were common to the entire metropolitan area.

Authorized by the state legislature in the late 1960s, the region's voters approved establishing MSD in 1970. However, these same voters overwhelmingly rejected giving the new agency a tax base that very same year.

This combined action would define the agency for the next two decades, and is the greatest contributing factor towards why Metro is so difficult for voters to comprehend today.

The founding agency was caught in the middle of opposition that came from at least two fronts.

First, many legislators and other interests in other parts of the state feared the power that would result from a formation of a "supercity." They were apprehensive that such consolidated power would be too much to compete with for the state's allocation of resources.

The second front was the result of a conflict within the metropolitan region itself, a conflict

that exists not just between voters but often within individuals as well.

It stems from the recognition among many that some type of government body that deals with regional issues and functions is necessary. At the same time, this is offset by our natural wariness here of big government and our love of representation that is as local and direct as it possibly can get. Conflicting needs, conflicting yearnings.

The result of all this wariness, outright hostility and the refusal of the voters to grant MSD taxing authority meant that the agency had to take on regional functions at a snail's pace, and each time it had to come up with creative methods to fund its activities.

These methods include small taxes slipped in here and there, such as excise taxes for services they offer, fees they charge for these services, government dues assessed upon local jurisdictions that are a part of Metro, and various grants.

There is no better time for residents to become involved than now...weekly Thursday night meetings can be attended by anyone.

This slow pace of absorbing functions, coupled with the fact that they took tiny incremental bites out of the taxpayers' wallet, means MSD, or later Metro, was rarely front page news. Few understand the agency's role in the scheme of things and consequently it barely registers as a blip on voters' consciousness.

CRAG's fate was also compounded by this struggle, but to an even greater degree. CRAG's task was to deal with planning issues involving land use, an always controversial subject in this state.

Not surprisingly, CRAG was constantly under attack by other interests, and narrowly defeated death at the polls in 1976. So reviled was the agency that supporters of a ballot measure reorganizing MSD sold voters on the idea by highlighting the fact that the newly-formed Metro would absorb CRAG's functions and CRAG would be abolished. The measure passed in 1978.

Since then, voters have lived with the new Metro whether they are aware of it or not. In the time since, much of the original suspicion and animosity towards MSD and CRAG has dissolved.

This happened for two reasons. First, Metro continued to be an unfathomable entity to the region's citizens. Second, many of those leaders who were originally opposed to MSD and CRAG had begun to recognize the value of a regional approach to regional issues.

Instead of fighting Metro, they began to work within it, on committees and subcommittees, or through testimony at Metro hearings. The old fears were still there; that individual rights would be diminished, that one or more areas of the region might be able to impose their will on one another, that the connection between government and the governed might be smothered in additional layers of bureaucracy.

The difference is that instead of trying to destroy the beast, they decided to tame it and make sure it develops into a creature they can live with.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the makeup of the Metro Charter Committee. Charged with formally defining the agency's future functions, powers and methods of taxation, the committee is made up of 16 members from diverse, often competing interests.

For instance, three were chosen by the boards of commissioners of the three counties within Metro's borders. Three others were selected by the city governments within the region.

Here in this committee, the issues of accountability to elected local governments, accountability to voters, the desirability of such functions as land use planning are debated, always intensely, often hotly.

There's good reason for the intent deliberation. Metro, as it is conceived by this committee, will be quite different than the agency we know today. Voters will be asked to accept or reject the committee's vision of regional government, perhaps as soon as next November. It will be a critical turning point for how we choose to govern ourselves.

That's why there is no better time for residents to become involved than now. The charter committee's process allows many opportunities for public input between now and the elections, and the weekly Thursday night meetings can be attended by anyone. Yet, according to the committee staff, few members of the general public have participated in the process, at least up to now.

Next week, we will discuss in detail what conclusions the committee has already reached, and where things stand today. We will also list the dates remaining for the public to express its views on what Metro should and should not contribute to the region, and how these functions should be funded.