

Prospects slim that Metro charter will make the ballot

■ Panelists have crafted a home rule plan they don't like, and they await the public's response

By JAMES MAYER 6-25-92
of The Oregonian staff

With the deadline only a few weeks away, the chances that a home rule charter for the Metropolitan Service District will be on the November ballot are fading fast.

After more than a year of weekly meetings, a 16-member committee has cobbled together a document that virtually nobody likes.

"We don't know if we have built a car or a truck or horse or a dog," commented plumber Jon Egge, a committee member from Clackamas County.



CUSMA

Shaky compromises over major issues such as structure and taxing powers could fly apart at the slightest touch. And the committee remains bitterly divided on the basic reasons for having a regional government at all.

"I wouldn't bet my firstborn on it," Mike McKeever, a consultant working with a group of local governments, said in assessing the committee's chances of avoiding a deadlock.

Hardy Myers, committee chairman, acknowledged that a stalemate was a "very real possibility," but he has delayed a final vote on the charter until after a round of public hearing scheduled to begin Thursday.

The first hearing is set for 6 p.m. at the Northwest Natural Gas Co.'s fourth floor conference room, 220 N.W. Second Ave. The other hearings are set for 6 p.m. Monday in the Washington County Public Services Building, 155 N. First Ave., Hillsboro, and 6 p.m. Tuesday in Lake Oswego City Hall.

If no charter makes it on the ballot, or the voters reject it, Metro continues in its current form.

The job of creating a new government has proved extremely complex, but the basic disagreement is easy to state:

Metro wants legitimacy. The 13-year-old experiment in elected regional government wants the same broad powers to act and impose taxes as any other local government, subject to the will of the voters. The agency now is a creature of the Legislature.

Other local government officials, long wary of Metro's reach into their turf and tax bases, want a handle on Metro's growth. They see themselves, not the voters, as Metro's true constituency.

"Metro hangs like a sword of Damocles that could on any Thursday night fall on some local government," said Frank Josselson, committee member from Lake Oswego.

Metro Executive Officer Rena Cusma, who pushed hard for the consti-

tutional amendment allowing a home rule charter, has seen her brainchild come back to haunt her.

"The charter has very little in it I would support," Cusma said. "It's a very bad piece of work."

She doesn't like the charter's elimination of the current separation of powers structure in favor of a council with a regionally elected president and a hired manager. She doesn't like creation of a committee of local elected officials with a veto over new Metro programs. And she doesn't like a lid on how much money Metro can raise from taxes not approved by voters.

"Maybe discretion is the better part of valor, and we should go back to the drawing board," Cusma said.

She already has formed a political action committee to fight the proposal if it ends up on the ballot in its current form.

Local governments don't like the tax limit either — they want it even tighter. And they don't like the structure. They want a more pure council-manager form of government.

Any Metro charter will have a hard time getting attention on the crowded November ballot. And voters may be in a mood to vote no on anything that resembles more government and taxes in general. Add organized opposition to this mix, and the charter's chances at the polls become even slimmer.

And then there's the wild card of Neil Goldschmidt's new task force on local government.

Given these realities, former Sherwood Mayor Mary Tobias, a committee member, is promoting a strategic retreat.

"I think the document we have now is a long way from complete," Tobias said. "We've raised a lot of important issues and the right people are in the room to get them resolved."

But she doesn't believe the issues can be resolved by Aug. 6, the absolute "drop dead" date for placing the charter on the ballot.

Tobias wants the committee to keep working toward the May 1994 primary election, or a special election if the Legislature can be persuaded to change state law.

"I see no urgency," she said. But others on the committee, some clearly weary after months of long, often unproductive, meetings, doubt that more time will do much good.

"We either do it this month or forget it," Egge said.

The committee can stay in existence until next May or until it puts a charter on the ballot, whichever comes first. With Metro Council approval, the committee's lifespan could be extended for two years.

Other possibilities exist, though. The Metro Council, unlikely to keep the current committee alive, could write its own charter and refer it to the voters. Or citizens could gather signatures on an initiative petition.

Egge said that he and others on the committee may do just that.

"I guarantee you it will have the kinds of political hooks that will ensure its passage," he said, referring to provisions aimed at reining in Metro.