

# Metro: A Giant About to be Born?

By Tony Whyte

"Metro has jurisdiction over matters of metropolitan concern."

That line is the first in a chapter outlining functions and powers of Metro, the regional planning and administrative superagency now courting public approval for the Nov. 3 election.

Not only would Metro--if approved by voters--have jurisdiction, it would have the power to enforce its decisions, plans and policies. It would have the power to give itself more power and remain financially aloof from the people and communities in its realm.

Supporters say that could bring more and quicker attention to north and northeast Portland communities, partly because the Albina Plan is nearing completion. But Metro critics are not so sure the Albina Plan will be a top priority if a regional approach to planning is a reality.

If voters fail to ratify Metro's proposed charter in November there will still be a Metro. It won't go away. It will continue to do the things it already does--operate the convention center and coliseum, take care of solid and liquid waste and operate a recycling program.

Even if it doesn't get voter approval for new powers it

will probably take over Tri-Met, since transportation--and the planning that goes with it--is a regional matter.

Metro had a predecessor, Columbia Region Association of Governments, that tried more than a decade ago to address such regional issues as 911 emergency dialing service. Over time, local governments in Washington, Multnomah, Clackamas and Columbia counties found the service too expensive and too inflexible to meet the needs of all involved.

CRAG also found itself without the political strength to enforce its regional

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strategies. The seven members of the Metro council would have that power and could exercise it by ordinance.

Metro need only reach a finding that a local government function is of metropolitan concern in order to pass an ordinance taking that function to itself.

Metro already gets property tax. Under its new charter it could levy "specialty taxes" without a vote of the people. Hotel-motel, theater and restaurant taxes fall in this category, according to Janet Whitfield, administrator of the committee that drafted the proposed charter.

Its operating expense would come from a set-aside from tax revenues of \$12.5 million the first year, with that amount increased each subsequent year by a percentage equal to the cost of living index. This spending cap, however, does not apply to any other taxes approved by voters, payroll taxes and tax-increment financing charges on property.

Both Whitfield and committee member Charlie Hales were quick to point out that a single project might drain the operating fund and require bond issues or new taxes. The proposed Green Spaces project was universally cited as an example.

Hales, a candidate for city commissioner, was enthusiastic about the new charter. He said he believes that planning already in progress such as the Albina Plan stand an excellent chance of priority rating by regional strategists.

"Actually," he said, "the Albina Plan could drive a regional strategy although Metro, as envisioned, won't be making any site-specific decisions."

Not everyone is as happy with the proposed charter as Hales and Whitfield.

Matt Hennesey was one of five committee members voting against the proposed charter. The only Black on the 16-member panel that drafted the charter, Hennesey wanted more than seven members on the Metro governing council.

Hennesey is concerned that minorities and the communities in which they live won't be well represented on Metro's decision-making council.

"We need to look ahead 20 or 30 years," he said, "when each of the seven part-time councilors will represent 150,000 people. The council should be larger, and if there are to be only seven members, they should be full-time."

"But it is my strong belief that a smaller council is a barrier to minority participation."

The ability of Metro to levy its own taxes doesn't bother Hennesey. "The right of referendum is always there," he said, indicating that the public can override any levy it feels is unfair.

Now that the Albina Plan is near completion, would it fare better under city administration or under the proposed Metro?

"It would probably fare better under the city," Hennesey said. "Although I think Metro can and

will reach out to all parts of its jurisdiction."

Ultimately, Hennesey said, Metro would have to address issues of ethnicity and social problems.

"I think the feeling up to now has been that social concerns are someone else's territory. But as the region grows and the metro area becomes much larger, we will have to deal with social issues. Land use issues raise social issues," Hennesey said.

With 12 years as a city manager in Ohio and Michigan, Hennesey has frequently found himself defending the spreading of costs for services among those who may not use them. Metro has already announced it would distribute the financial burden of such facilities as the convention center across the entire Metro service area.

"In the American system," said Hennesey, "there is an allegiance to the common good. It's why parents pay taxes for education even after their children are out of school. Over all, we're better off."