

Metro, county locked in power struggle

Area officials afraid charter will give Metro local control

By REID IFORD

OREGON CITY — Clackamas County leaders and Metropolitan Service District officials are locked in a power struggle as a recently formed committee develops a charter for Metro.

The charter could create a major shift in Metro's authority, functions and even its boundaries.

Several Clackamas County officials see possibilities for curbing what they see as excessive power by Metro and making it more accountable, and visible, to the public. However, Metro officials defend the agency and view the county complaints as exaggerated and add that some elected officials are trying to take over aspects of Metro.

"Metro has extensive statutory authority, more than they exercise," said Clackamas County Commissioner Judie Hammerstad. "They could require local government — city and county — to adopt ordinances or changes to their comprehensive plans in the areas of land use, water, transportation and law enforcement.

"They have the authority to take over Tri-Met. They have the power to impose a 1 percent income tax on residents in the region. It would require an affirmative vote of the people to go into effect, however," said Hammerstad.

"By and large, they haven't done these things. They have not exercised their full authority," she said. However, Hammerstad believes Metro is a step toward a "super

county," where the urban portions of Clackamas, Multnomah and Washington counties are combined into one governmental entity.

Metro operates the Washington Park zoo, and such major attractions as the Coliseum and the new convention center. It also has authority over garbage disposal within its boundaries. Metro serves an area that includes portions of Clackamas, Washington counties, and all of Multnomah County, although its boundaries do not follow the urban growth boundary.

Hammerstad is not alone in her concern about the scope of Metro's power. In a presentation before the Metro Charter Committee, the group preparing the draft charter, Clackamas County Commissioner Darlene Hooley said that local governments "...feel that the Metro requirements through the adoption of functional plans gives that level of government (Metro) an unseen, unaccountable, unresponsive power that undermines the abilities of local government to provide service that is responsive to the

needs of our local citizens."

The county commissioners have asked that the proposed Metro charter contain language that respects the integrity of local government. They say they fear Metro is overstepping its bounds, and may be hurrying to develop functional plans that it may not have the authority to develop after the charter is in place.

Metro receives its authority from the state Legislature. One reason for developing the charter is to define Metro's power, and relieve it of its direct ties to the Legislature, said Hammerstad. "Currently, all of their power comes from the Legislature, and they have to go before the Legislature each session," she said.

An agency that deals strictly with tri-county issues being orchestrated by the Legislature causes serious problems, said Hammerstad. Since most legislators don't live within Metro's boundaries, she feels they have little interest in day-to-day issues

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Metro's charter worries leaders

OREGON CITY — Oregon City Commissioners asked by the *Enterprise Courier* last week said they were uneasy about the Metropolitan Service District's charter process.

Commissioners Carol Powell, Jim Ebert and Bob Light all said they are concerned about the new charter and what affect it may have on local governments trying to provide local services.

Ebert said the idea that Metro should provide services where there is an efficiency of scale for offering the service region-wide misses some of the point of local

government.

"It worries me that you could make a case for efficiency of scale for all services provided by local government," Ebert said. "They could look at the library system and decide that, in the bigger scheme of things, we don't need one."

"My only concern is about how big Metro will be," Light said.

"Local control is always a concern," he said. "I'm not trying to protect my own turf, but does Metro know what's best for Oregon City, ultimately?"

Power

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affecting this region.

The new charter cannot give Metro more power than it already has, but it can limit that power. The charter can redefine Metro's authority, and limit that authority. The committee has the power to redraw Metro's boundaries (subject to Boundary Commission approval), and can determine how Metro will be funded in the future, said Hammerstad.

Metro currently gets most of its revenue through interfund transfers, from diverse charges such as garbage tipping fees and excise taxes charged on rental and ticket sales at attractions Metro administers. That's another concern of Hammerstad's. She feels administrative fees may be excessively high.

The charter committee will have three functions, according to Hammerstad. It will decide governance issues, such as whether the executive officer be elected or appointed; how many members should be on the council; how many districts; and if local government officials should serve on committees.

It will determine functions of Metro. For example, what should Metro do? Should it have planning and coordination authority? Should it be a service provider, and if so, for what services?

The third area Hammerstad said the committee will address is taxation authority. In essence, how Metro should pay for itself.

Hammerstad hopes to see some changes in Metro as a result of the new charter, but she said Metro

may have an unfair advantage on the committee. Metro appointed eight of 16 members, and Metro Executive Director Rena Cusma appointed the committee chair.

Hammerstad said she doesn't question the need for Metro, she only wants its powers defined, and hopefully limited.

"From the county's standpoint, there are a number of functions Metro needs to perform, especially in the area of planning and coordination," said Hammerstad. "They do very good work on population projections and planning, (particularly) transportation planning.

"But, we feel that the service providers should be the local governments that are accessible, accountable and responsive to the citizens. So, we would like to see a charter developed that provides for cooperative coordination with service responsibilities left at the local level.

"Metro right now is an invisible government, with extraordinary powers. I want to see it accountable. I want to see it responsive to both the citizens and local governments," said Hammerstad.

Tom DeJardin disagreed with many of Hammerstad's conclusions about Metro. DeJardin is Metro councilor for District 5, which incorporates much of Clackamas County that is within Metro's boundaries. The seven-year Metro veteran refers to his district as: "The heart of Clackamas County."

DeJardin, whose position is elected, said Metro is accountable to the citizens. "People have direct

access to me," he said. In fact, his phone number is available and he answers his own phone. He said he fields about a dozen Metro-related calls a week.

"To whom do they want us accountable?" he asks. "One of their solutions is to have people from county (government) on the council. That (becomes) an appointed board, which people in this district do not like."

DeJardin thinks calls for more county control on local issues really mean more county control over Metro. "If they want accountability and coordination, well, what's good for the goose is good for the gander," he said. "Maybe they would like to have members (of community groups) appointed to (the county commission)."

Metro has garnered national and international attention, and is envied as a regional entity with a reputation for accomplishing tasks other entities just talk about, according to DeJardin. He credits Metro's success to its having an elected board, which he said provides community support for its activities.

"Why revert to mediocrity?" he asks. "For all its personal faults, Metro has been able to get things done. We're not a bunch of fancy politicians. We're just people wanting to roll up our shirt sleeves and get things done.

"(County opponents) seem to feel that if Metro can become all that it can be, it will be to their detriment, and I don't see that," he said. "That's a very narrow concept. The strength of one (government body) is not predicated on the other being weak."

DeJardin does not see a danger of Metro becoming the nucleus of a super county. "Metro is not meant to be that," he said. "Metro

originally began as a council of government. Metro covers all of Multnomah County, but it doesn't cover all of Washington or Clackamas counties. It's a thing to be considered, but maybe it's not the time for that."

He also resents the charge that Metro packed the committee. "We wanted top-flight people, people who were thinkers, who had the capacity to have a vision — to see 20 to 50 years in advance," said DeJardin. "They are good thinkers."

John Egge of Clackamas serves on the charter committee. He was appointed by the Clackamas County commissioners, but he said he does not view himself as a county representative. "I feel that I represent the citizens," he said.

Egge does believe there was an attempt to pack the committee with Metro supporters, but he questions if it was successful. He said not everyone is shaping up the way those who appointed them may have had in mind, although some are clearly trying to enhance Metro's power.

"There are some people on the committee whose goal it is to have the super county," said Egge.

"They (Metro) already have almost total powers. Their grant of powers (from the Legislature) now is so broad as to almost be considered total. It's my sense we will limit that to some extent," he said.

"I think we have a shot at making some significant improvements," said Egge.

"I'm pretty optimistic."