

Valley group works for regional cooperation ^{8/10/91}

111

The Mid Willamette Valley Council of Government is one of 13 such councils in Oregon.

The valley group was created in 1959 in part to meet federal mandates for regional planning but also because of a desire to improve cooperation among elected officials.

The council originally had five members — Marion and Polk counties, the city of Salem, the Salem School District and the state of Oregon. It now has grown to include 37 jurisdictions.

Despite that, it has shrunk during the past 15 years as independent agencies were created to oversee several federally-financed programs, such as senior services. Some employees also were lost as cities and counties assumed more of the land-use and traffic planning tasks that formerly were left to the council.

Although membership fees are at the heart of the problems facing the council, they comprise only 8 percent of the group's \$2.5 million budget. Many of the council's operations are financed by state and federal grants.

However, membership fees pay for 64 percent of director Alan Hershey's \$48,720 salary.

Here are some of the issues in

which the council played a significant role:

■ **Sewage treatment plant** — All jurisdictions in the Salem urban area agreed in 1962 to a single treatment plant operated by the city of Salem, a first in the state.

■ **911 emergency communications center** — After years of discussions overseen by the council, Salem, Marion and Polk counties and several small cities agreed to create a central emergency dispatch center operated by Salem. The move is expected to mean substantial savings for Salem as well as improve the quality of the area's 911 system.

■ **Regional library** — The regional library service, which links libraries in Salem, Dallas, Silverton and other cities, was developed through council discussions.

■ **Prison and mental health institution study** — Council staff completed three studies showing the detrimental effects of state prison and mental health institutions on the Salem area. The studies helped prompt the legislature to require that future institutions be built in other parts of Oregon.

Mid-Valley government council will review role, fees for members

By Alan Gustafson ^{8/14/91}
The Statesman Journal

Membership fees assessed to 37 area governments will be revised by December as part of an overall review of the role of the Mid Willamette Valley Council of Governments, the agency's board agreed Tuesday.

"It's been about 10 years since we've gone through major changes," council director Alan Hershey said. "It's about due again."

The council is a voluntary association of area governments that was formed in 1959.

Through the years, the council has funneled grant money to local jurisdictions, commissioned numerous reports, and provided assistance on issues ranging from urban growth boundaries to sewage treatment plants and regional libraries.

The council's financial support and staffing have declined in recent years as independent agencies were created to over-

□ Lane group charges more

Page 2C

see federally financed programs, such as senior services.

Critics have contended, especially during tight budget times, that the council was an unnecessary layer of government.

This spring, the Salem City Council considered dropping out of the agency. Instead, it opted to reduce its contribution and remain a member.

Hershey said the plan to develop a new fee schedule was in response to discontent expressed by Salem and Marion County representatives.

City and county officials had contended that the two jurisdictions were subsidizing smaller area governments through excessive membership fees.

Cost to local governments ^{8/10/91}

Costs include fees for membership, economic development and special projects

AGENCY	TOTAL FUNDS
Marion County	\$29,619
Polk County	15,091
Yamhill County	15,757
Amity	342
Aumsville	435
Carlton	408
Dallas	2,963
Donald	320
Dundee	470
Falls City	325
Gates	320
Gervais	325
Hubbard	582
Idanha	320
Independence	1,334
Jefferson	578
Keizer	6,617
McMinnville	5,240
Monmouth	1,913
Mount Angel	1,013
Newberg	3,823
Salem	22,586
Sheridan	799
Silverton	1,758
Stayton	1,588
Sublimity	535
Turner	380
Willamina	591
Woodburn	6,816
Salem Area Transit District	50,090
Chemeketa Comm. College	6,578

Salem/Keizer School District 21,256

Jefferson School District 280

Marion Co. Fire District 1,530

Marion County ESD 280

Yamhill County ESD 280

Soil & Water Conservation of Marion & Yamhill Counties 280

Source: Mid Willamette Valley Council of Governments

Barry Nichols/Statesman Journal

Salem officials wary of unequal fees

Role studied: Page 1D

By Scott McFetridge

The Statesman Journal

It's a tiny percentage of Marion County's budget, but don't tell Commissioner Mary Pearmine that a few thousand dollars is nothing to worry about.

When Pearmine looks at the \$29,619 the county is paying this year to the Mid Willamette Valley Council of Governments, she thinks of the 37 job cuts that she agreed to in the struggle to cope with property tax-limiting Measure 5.

"Yes, this is worth getting worked up over," Pearmine, a former chairwoman of the council, said. "We're talking about real human beings here that could have stayed if we had spent the money differently."

Pearmine said she valued the council but didn't think the county was getting its money's worth. She has suggested a \$20,000 cap on payments, a move that would force the council to cut expenses or raise fees to smaller communities.

Council Director Alan Hershey said such a move would more than

double the costs to small jurisdictions, something he doesn't think is acceptable.

Although he was confident a compromise could be worked out at a daylong meeting Tuesday, Hershey acknowledged that a substantial cut in the fees charged to the region's largest governments threatened the council's existence.

"It would be nice if we could do it for free, but it's not realistic," Hershey said.

Pearmine isn't alone in her belief that large governments are paying too much for council membership. Other commissioners and Salem officials also support her plan.

At the core of the discontent is a belief among officials of larger governments that they are subsidizing smaller jurisdictions. Pearmine and others contend that although small governments pay as little as \$280 a year, council staff spends an inordinate amount of time on their projects.

Unlike Salem and Marion County, small governments usually don't have their own planning departments or employees skilled at submitting federal grant applications. Because of this, they depend on the council.

The small jurisdictions often pay extra fees for the council's time, but don't have to pay the ongoing overhead costs that larger governments are saddled with.

With this in mind, the Salem City Council considered dropping out of the organization this spring.

The council eventually agreed to remain, but only after cutting its membership fee by \$7,961 — to \$15,000. The city gave the group additional money for economic development and special programs.

The membership fee is less than half the \$31,955 Salem paid last year, Bob Wells, a city budget officer, said.

"There was a feeling in our Budget Committee toward the general membership fee that the city probably put in more than it got out," City Manager Gary Eide said.

Some Salem officials, such as city council member Harry Thorp, were more blunt.

"They really don't do us much good, but we're the ones who put up the most bucks," Thorp said.

To Hershey, those arguments are nonsense.

To the contrary, he said that no

jurisdiction in the council had benefitted more than the city of Salem. Just one recent project, consolidating the 911 emergency dispatch system, saved the city \$200,000 in its first year, he said.

Salem officials said that the city might have been able to create the new dispatch system on its own, but Hershey disagreed.

He said he organized 111 meetings concerning the project, many of which were held to convince officials from smaller jurisdictions to overcome their mistrust of Salem and participate in the system.

"There were a lot of places the city of Salem was not welcome," Hershey said.

Sublimity Mayor Sam Brentano, the chairman of the council, also said that the group benefitted Salem and other large governments just as much as the small districts.

Brentano added that he was growing tired of justifying the council's value, something that has eaten up a significant chunk of the staff's time and has hindered efforts to tackle new issues.

Like Hershey, Brentano was hopeful that the matter could be resolved at Tuesday's meeting.

But a solution could be hard to come by.

Salem and Marion County officials said it would be difficult for them to remain in the council unless their membership fees were reduced.

Randy Franke, a Marion County commissioner, said most area officials think the council could grow increasingly valuable as governments try to consolidate programs in post-Measure 5 budget years. But as the Measure 5 budget clamp tightens, Franke said it also would become more and more difficult to justify large membership fees.

"If there are no effective changes, then I think it would be real hard to continue," he said.

Even if Marion County and Salem dropped out of the council, the group probably would continue in some form, Dennis Goecks, a Yamhill County commissioner, said.

The council would lose some of its effectiveness, but member governments still would be better off than if they were on their own, he said.

"Maybe it'll be a smaller version," he said. "But we're a whole lot better if we stay together."