

**COUNTY GOVERNANCE DISCUSSION**  
**7:00 p.m.**  
**June 1, 2011**  
**Room 280, Thurston County Courthouse**

**Meeting Notes**

**Participants**

Ken Balsley	Gus Guethlein	Rick Phillips
Ken Bragg	Lou Guethlein	Genevieve Pisarski
Clydia Cuykendall	Jeff Jaksich	Lynn Scroggins
Cherie Davidson	Jim Longley	Cynthia Stewart
Mark Foutch	Mary Moore	

Those present introduced themselves and explained what interests they brought to this issue. A number of other people who participated last time and/or indicated an interest in participating were not able to attend this meeting.

**Purpose of Meeting**

Cynthia Stewart explained that the purpose of this meeting was to develop a strategy for whether to use the petition method for placing a freeholder election on the ballot and for developing public education, outreach and engagement strategies. The agenda was based on decisions made at the last meeting. Copies of the meeting notes and handouts used at the last meeting were distributed to those who had not been present at it.

**Strategy Brainstorming and Discussion**

**Issues discussed:**

- What happened in previous attempts that caused them to fail?
  - Were public employees involved previously?
  - Independently elected officials give the impression of accountability to the voters for those functions
  - Sorting out regional functions from local functions would be helpful in clarifying governmental roles
  - In the last effort(s), placating too many parties led to proposals that were too complex to be easily understood (hence they failed)
  - Business interests, particularly real estate developers, appeared to be met better by the standard county commissioner form of government
- Possible approaches for this time:
  - Note that commissioners work in silos; can't meet except in open public meetings
  - Can a specific charter be committed in advance? (recognizing that only the freeholders can actually propose a charter, and the freeholders cannot be bound in advance to specific terms, can a "possible" charter be developed and shown to portray intent?)
  - Note that taxpayers do not have direct connections to the governing bodies of organizations providing regional services through interlocal agreements (e.g., Intercity Transit, LOTT)

- Many parts of the county believe they are not represented among the current County Commissioners, since all the Commissioners live in cities
- The County will not be able to sustain current levels of service into the future, especially law, safety and justice services
- Jail costs cannot be met now, much less in the future
- The likely opposition will need to be identified and their concerns addressed
- What would happen if there were only one question on the ballot: Shall Thurston County have a home rule charter? (This was noted as potentially controversial as well)
- A stronger county government could help all jurisdictions
- Problems to anticipate:
  - There will be opposition
  - The problems at Thurston County are too complex to be able to explain well to the voters
  - Populism resonates with the public, but it no longer works. “Human scale” resonates. More government does not resonate with the public. Elected officials have a shared accountability; special districts have specific functions tied to their ability to use property tax; a charter would not likely be able to address special taxing districts.
- Other
  - The other charter counties follow similar structures, except San Juan County, which has an appointed county administrator
  - The financial structural problems with Thurston County are not specific to this county; King, Pierce and all other counties have the same structure. It is a legislative authority issue and isn’t affected by the Charter.
  - Intercity Transit and LOTT are separate governmental bodies. IT is a Public Transportation Benefit Authority (PTBA) approved by voters. LOTT is an interlocal agreement based organization.
  - Sprawl has exacerbated the county’s financial troubles by creating urban areas with expectations of urban levels of service, but the county only has financing for rural levels of service
  - Another complication is that the county provides regional services with no source of additional funding
  - The way decisions are made about locating new development is complex. It also exacerbates financial structure issues.
  - Certain parts of the county relate more to Lewis County and those legislative districts than to the northern part of Thurston County
  - The regional library system is a model of a larger scale system that works because it uses economies of scale
  - It may be important to assume that the Sheriff should remain an independent elected official in any option (more than other currently independently elected officials)

The strategy that was approved for further development, subject to later discussion, is as follows:

1. Over the next couple of years, conduct discussions about a variety of governance issues, such as those listed below. In each venue where discussion occurs, ask the participants what they think should be done (do not “tell”, just “ask”). Use a simple outline of issues.
2. Prepare a simple charter example to use if asked, explaining how county government might be changed. Include the following principles and develop the business case for these potential

changes (explain how they would save money, increase representation, why interlocal agreements are not a good solution, etc.):

- Increase in number of Commissioners; create a Legislative branch; assure that these elected officials represent various areas of the county to increase representation
  - Establish an Executive
  - Reduce the number of independently elected officials
  - Include a periodic charter review process
3. Plan a freeholders campaign after two or more years. Assume the home rule charter will only address changes to the county and will not include cities at that time (it is too complex for voters to address changes that affect cities and the county concurrently; consider changes to add cities at a later date).
  4. Support annexations of urban growth areas to the respective cities.

Venues to conduct conversations with the public:

- Conversation Cafes at libraries, etc., open to the public and advertised in advance
- Service club meetings (as a program item)
- Meetings with city councils
- Meet with key opinion leaders
- Neighborhood associations

Governance issues for discussion in multiple public venues:

- County finance (based on the presentation to the League of Women Voters in January 2011)
- The nature of the regressive tax structure (which a charter alone cannot solve)
- The regional nature of the environment, which transcends local jurisdictional boundaries and the elements of which do not change depending on jurisdiction
- Urban vs rural levels of service
- The purpose of annexing urban growth areas to cities
- The benefits of having more representative government; issues with representation in the current structure
- How the cost will change/be addressed
- What impact fees are, how they work, and why they are different than what is covered by property taxes

Key factors for success:

- It will be important for every representative of this group to be able to say the same things when defining the need and problem to be solved in public. Therefore, there will be an outline prepared for all to use.
- It will be important to expect and be able to address unintended consequences

## **Next Steps**

**The next meeting will be at 7:00 p.m. on Wednesday, July 20, 2011 (location to be announced).**

Prior to that meeting, a draft strategy plan based on these notes will be prepared and distributed to all participants for review. Additionally, Jeff and Cynthia will request specific individuals to assist with additional research, such as:

- Functions currently provided via Interlocal Agreements
- The previous Charter proposals

Cynthia and Jeff will continue building an email list for keeping everyone informed as this moves forward. Others will spread the word and provide additional names to Cynthia for this mailing list.