

Thurston County
League Of Women Voters

Options for Local Government
June 2010

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INTRODUCTION

As a result of discussion at the League of Women Voters Chapter planning retreat in early September 2009, a study group on local government was formed. Members Loredana Biro, Bill Funk, Marilyn Funk, Jeff Jaksich, Rob Kirkwood, Mary Moore and Cynthia Stewart worked together between September 2009 and June 2010 to prepare the following report.

For a number of reasons, a study of local government, particularly county government, appeared timely in September 2009. Among those reasons were the following media headline issues, which raised questions about whether local government could be more efficient and less expensive if reorganized.

- All jurisdictions – especially Thurston County - were suffering greatly from the tax shortfall caused by the economic downturn and were significantly reducing services as a result;
- The Thurston County Sheriff and County Commission had filed opposing lawsuits over the role of the County Commission vis-à-vis other county elected officials in budget and policy decisions affecting those offices;
- The City of Lacey and Fire District 3 were engaged in extensive public conflict over resources and services;
- A ballot proposal to establish a Southeast Regional Fire Service District to coordinate some of the smaller fire districts in the County did not pass, even though the voters most affected financially supported it; and
- There was an apparent lack of interjurisdictional coordination on issues affecting the region, such as the long term future of Capitol Lake and potential development on the isthmus between Capitol Lake and Budd Bay.

The study group was asked in particular to review and recommend changes, if needed, to the Thurston County League of Women Voters position on county governance.

The group reviewed a variety of issues and background materials as well as the League of Women Voters position statement on county government. Members wondered whether their collective vision for Thurston County could be achieved with the current governance structure. Could it...

- Assure a clean, healthy environment in which the water and air are pure;
- Develop in ways that house people closer together and jobs closer to housing, with pedestrian amenities, so that people do not have to use cars as much; and forests, farmlands and shorelines are preserved;
- Sustain a healthy economy employing the region's physical assets, historic features and green buildings;
- Support a vibrant and diverse arts community;
- Serve as an appealing gateway to the Olympics and Pacific Ocean; and

- Create a sense of belonging, in which citizens come together around projects and are fully aware of what they need to contribute to the community?

Study members concluded that the current structure of local government will not support this vision. They agreed that continuation of the current structure will lead to severe public safety concerns because of the declining ability to pay for services in light of a structural deficit that causes an ever-widening gap between revenues available and the cost of services. They also found that the current structure does not support sufficient coordination in economic development and land use planning or in community engagement.

Thus, they recommended that a new structure for Thurston County government be developed, using a home rule charter, consistent with the previously adopted League position. In combination with this, the group recommends that the State League of Women Voters work aggressively to lobby the State Legislature to adopt the 2007 recommendations of the State Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development¹ that would aid in financing for counties. A home rule charter, particularly one that consolidates city services with the county, could address the severe limitations on county financing, the inefficient structure of the commissioner form of government, and the duplication of costs from redundant executive branches among multiple local governments. While home rule charter attempts have not been successful in the past, the group believes that a public education effort in advance of a freeholders election could be persuasive to voters.

The report that follows provides background regarding Thurston County, a range of options for reorganization and how these options compare to each other relative to criteria established by the group, details of the proposal, and a history of previously proposed measures.

For more information, contact the League of Women Voters, Marilyn Funk, 360-357-7967.

¹ Now named the State Department of Commerce.

SUMMARY

After reviewing the current League of Women Voters position on county government, the history of Thurston County, issues presented by the county's current structure, previous efforts to reorganize the county and a variety of other background material, the study group has concluded by consensus that change in the County's governance structure is needed and that legislative support to achieve that would be beneficial. The group agreed by consensus that:

- Revenues available to all jurisdictions are insufficient, but particularly for counties.
- County services will need to be reduced over time if there is no change in structure because of the annually widening gap between revenues available and the cost of services. Because services are already at rock-bottom levels, it will not be long before there are serious public safety concerns and few services other than law, safety and justice will be possible.
- Significant savings to the public could be available by reducing the number of jurisdictions performing the same functions. Consolidation of services would lead to reduction in management staff and more efficiency in service delivery.
- A serious lack of role clarity about the executive functions of the current county structure exists both among elected officials and with regard to the role of the County Administrator vis a vis the County Commissioners for those departments reporting to the Commissioners.
- Representation of unincorporated area residents is diminishing in the current structure.
- The large number and complex system of interlocal agreements and joint boards and commissions established to administer intergovernmental services is complex and is not transparent to the public.
- A home rule charter would be consistent with current adopted League of Women Voters position on county government.
- A home rule charter that consolidates city and county services could be consistent with the principles contained in the current adopted League of Women Voters position on City of Olympia government.

Among the various options for changing the county structure, a variety of approaches offer financial and service delivery advantages. However, because of the process for establishing Home Rule, any specific option would be left to the freeholders to recommend, based upon their own assessment of what is most beneficial and politically feasible. Options with the most structural advantages may also be the least politically feasible, and those with more current political support could perpetuate the problems without offering any advantages (e.g., Option 1).