

COUNTY GOVERNANCE DISCUSSION
7:00 p.m.
April 19, 2011
Room 152, Thurston County Courthouse

Meeting Notes

Participants

Clydia Cuykendall
Cherie Davidson
Mark Foutch
Steven Homan
Jeff Jaksich

Mary Moore
Tillie Naputi-Pullar
Rick Phillips
Genevieve Pisarski

Rita Robison
Kathy Ryan
Phil Schulte
Cynthia Stewart

Those present introduced themselves and explained what interests they brought to this issue. A number of others, including several elected officials who had conflicts with Council meetings, indicated an interest in participating but could not attend this meeting.

Purpose of Meeting

Cynthia Stewart explained that the purpose of this meeting was to explore the level of interest in commencing a county charter process, and if the interest was sufficient, to begin developing a network and coalition to spearhead a public education plan and possible campaign. It was noted that the freeholder process involves either a resolution by County Commissioners to place freeholders on the ballot, in which case only county governance could be considered by the freeholders if elected; or a petition process, after which elected freeholders could develop a county charter that might affect city governance as well. In either case, the charter would need a public vote before being adopted.

Background of the Issue

Jeff Jaksich presented the background of this issue, including describing a 2008 Thurston County citizens budget review committee, a 2009-2010 League of Women Voters county governance study group, and three prior charter efforts dating back to as early as 1978. It was noted that two of the participants were involved in one or more of those previous efforts. Jeff also described a handout (attached to these notes) that lays out some of the issues identified in these earlier activities and expressed his concerns about budget and financial issues of the county. He emphasized the two structural issues: one is organizational and the other is financial. A solution to either separately may not improve the other. Solutions to both issues are needed.

Cynthia supplemented this with specific notes about the level of Sheriff patrol services in Thurston County and the constraints on those services as a result of the problems with county government financing structure in the State of Washington. This funding structure limits the amount of revenue available to support county services. The handout is attached to these notes. A note about population was also made: Thurston County continues to have a majority of its residents in the unincorporated area, while most of the elected officials of the county live in the incorporated areas.

Jeff noted that the focus of this and subsequent discussions must be on structure, not on individuals.

Brainstorming

Each participant expressed his/her feelings about whether a county charter effort would be realistic. All but one said yes. Concerns were expressed about how to appeal to a busy public that normally doesn't focus on governance issues and who want lower taxes. Most indicated that the "yes" was conditioned upon a variety of issues. These were explored more fully in the second part of the brainstorming.

Each participant then described issues they felt should be analyzed, investigated or could be used as "hooks" for the public, strategies for public engagement and conditions that would have to be met for a charter effort to succeed. The points raised were as follows:

- The objectives of a charter effort would need to be articulated in clear, measurable terms.
- It would be important to coalesce around one option. Although freeholders can't be bound by a single option, it would be important for the public to understand what a charter would be like. An example of one or more charters to portray the outcome would be helpful.
- The business case for a charter would need to be made. Both the value and the cost of a proposal would need to be clear. Much more specific financial data will be essential.
- It will be important to explain to voters why a charter would assure them they will subsequently live in a county that is well governed and provides the services they need.
- It will be important to explain "what's in it for me" for voters. "Hooks" will include increased responsiveness, increased representation, lower taxes. Specifically, it was noted that areas such as Yelm, which are experiencing large rates of growth, would need to be addressed.
- There are a large number of constituencies in the community that would have an interest. Those would need to be approached and their interests addressed. Some examples include public employee unions, city elected officials, county elected officials, special district elected officials, political parties and others.
- Some way to resonate with the voters would need to be developed. People are busy, this isn't their primary interest, and some 30-second sound bites will be essential to portray the issue in terms that appeal to the average public.
- Voters would need to understand the charter process (election of freeholders and placement of a charter on the ballot; the right of freeholders to create any charter they feel is best).
- The League of Women Voters governance study should get a public "hearing" in some form.
- The previous history and background of, and reasons for, previous charter attempts, should be explained.
- Having an institution (e.g., the Olympian) to sponsor and highlight the effort would be very helpful.
- It will be important to assume that this effort will take something like three years. It was noted that new significant legislation often takes three Legislative sessions; other issues were highlighted as "3 years".
- A decision will need to be made early about whether to pursue the petition approach vs a County Commission approach to establishing a freeholder election.
- A strategy or method will be needed.

- Opinion leaders in the community will need to be approached and persuaded to support this.
- A “viral” approach would be helpful (e.g., spread through social networking; “we love this because...”).
- If a committee is formed, the group should assume it will be ongoing throughout the freeholders’ development of the charter, to continue to keep the public informed.
- It will be important to educate the public about the proposed charter after the freeholders have proposed it and before the election on it. More time than was available in 1990 will be essential.
- It will be important to be sure of the focus of the effort and avoid “hot buttons”.
- Discussion on TCTV in a variety of programs will be helpful.
- A strong leader will be necessary.
- It might be useful to use a focal committee of the League of Women Voters, Olympian, service club(s), elected official(s), political parties, neighborhood group(s) and Tribes to explore this issue with the County Commissioners and build support.
- Candidates running for office should be encouraged to include the potential for a county charter in their campaigning.
- Public commitments from elected officials would be helpful.

Next Steps

There was a consensus that there is enough interest to meet again. The focus of the next meeting should be 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.

Jeff and Cynthia will select a date for the next meeting in approximately one month, on either a Wednesday or Thursday. All participants and those who have expressed an interest will receive notes of this meeting and notification of the next meeting date as soon as possible.

Additional materials will also be provided. For example, Cynthia will put the 2007 report by the (former) Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development on the League of Women Voters web site and let people know how and when to find it there.

Cynthia and Jeff will begin 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.