

Advantages, Disadvantages of County Home Rule Are Discussed

Stronger County Government Seen In Many Sources

Editor's Note: This is the second of two articles about county home rule. The first, published Sunday, Oct. 18, discussed the Jackson county court's current attitude toward home rule, and the steps provided toward attaining a home rule charter for Jackson county.

What is county "home rule" all about?

Basically, it means a stronger county government. This strength can have several sources. It can come from assuming new responsibilities toward people and progress in the county. It can also come from taking over responsibilities currently vested in smaller taxing units within the county, on the one hand, or in the state government, on the other.

It can come as well from streamlining operations within the county courthouse itself.

Three Goals
Advocates of home rule advance many arguments in its favor, but three basic goals emerge: simplicity, efficiency and economy.

Another important point is flexibility, meaning the development of a county charter best suited to the needs of the individual county. Furthermore, this charter once adopted by the voters could be amended or revised or even tossed out entirely.

In fact, of course, no Oregon county need adopt a home rule charter at all.

But those who support home rule, in principle at least, are numerous—including the three present members of the Jackson county court.

Present Set-Up Criticized
Among the strongest arguments supporting home rule are those which criticize existing county government.

These generally paint the picture of a sprawling farm house, its oldest part dating back to pioneer days, with rooms added on all sides, its floors and roofing at different levels, flanked by lean-to sheds—backward in plumbing, impossible to heat and in constant and ever-increasing need of repairs.

Moreover, the families living in this archaic structure are simply tenant farmers, hobbled by an unhurrying landlord (the state) to whom they must turn far too often for permission to repaint ceilings, reshingle roofs and hammer a few pothooks into the kitchen wall.

This picture, in some cases more than others, may be exaggerated. But the concept that county government is "behind the times" gains supporters daily.

Long History
The story of Oregon's counties dates back before 1857, when Oregon citizens ratified their state constitution. Practically from the beginning, home rule was provided for cities.

But counties, for the most part, have had to rely on the state's Legislature for specific authority for their operations. In 1929, the Oregon Senate turned down a proposal that would have provided statutory authority for county home rule.

A constitutional amendment was passed in 1944 permitting counties to adopt the county manager form of government. Two counties each made two unsuccessful attempts to gain voter approval for it.

Then in 1956, the Legislative Interim Committee on Local Government proposed the "county home rule" amendment to the state constitution.

Shortcomings Cited
"Specifically," the committee reported, "the major shortcomings of local government organization have been the breakdown of city growth through lack of annexation, the failure or inability of counties to take initiative in the solution of suburban problems and the consequent creation of an unwieldy structure of special district governments in the suburban areas. As a result suburban areas can turn to no single overall unit of local government with general responsibility for the public health, safety and welfare."

The "home rule" amendment was approved by the voters last November. This amendment enabled the state lawmakers to provide authorizing legislation, and last spring they did so.

While Oregon's counties have always differed in size

and topography and resources the crucial changes affecting government have proved to be population growth and the consequent use, largely uncontrolled, of county land.

Counties Varied
Recent population figures, for example, show that while Harney county has 10,132 square miles and a population of only 6,260, Multnomah county (including Portland) has only 424 square miles but a population of 542,030. Jackson county has 2,817 square miles and a population estimated at more than 70,000.

In counties where population is growing rapidly, there are increasingly extensive suburban developments—areas outside city boundaries where people are building homes singly or in subdivisions. And inevitably, there are a host of other land uses—ranging from parks and schools to shopping centers and manufacturing plants to junk yards and garbage dumps.

While suburban development in Jackson county does not compare to that in the Willamette basin counties—Multnomah, Marion and Lane for example—it is still becoming a serious problem.

Talking with local real estate developers, or with the county's planning technician, Jack Eaton, one can gain an appreciation of where this county stands now and what its development will be in the coming years.

Other Services
While farmers and ranchers naturally require irrigation and fire protection at least, the needs of suburb-dwellers extend to drinking water, sanitary sewers and other services.

As suburban areas continue to develop, the quantity of individual tax-levying districts established to provide these services multiplies, for the county has no statutory control over the various taxing units.

Many of these districts, home rule proponents assert, could be consolidated for more effective and economic administration under county government.

Another argument for home rule is that only through adoption of a county charter tailored to meet the needs of the individual county—with its peculiar problems of population growth and land use—can solutions to present needs and orderly future development be assured.

State Approval Needed
Another existing problem is that of securing state approval on various matters of local concern. Many interests, often conflicting, are represented at the state capital.

But under a home rule charter, the county's citizens through a government they have molded for themselves could "rule their own roost" to a much greater degree.

In this connection, of course, the citizens could reorganize county officialdom, deciding what elective officials were required and how much each should be paid. This would not however include judges and the district attorney—considered state officials.

A major advance in effective county government would be the authority for long-range financial planning. Here, the county despite a home rule charter would remain handicapped by the inability to issue general obligation bonds or to use the installment-plan "Bancroft" method in levying assessments.

A measure to appear on the 1960 general election ballot would, if approved, remove this serious roadblock.

Arguments Against
There are, to be sure, a number of arguments against home rule.

One of these is that the new legislation permits "sweeping changes" and grants powers to the counties which are beyond their proper scope and contrary to Oregon's long-existing concept of the function of counties.

Another set of objections anticipates the development of what would amount to chaos. If each county can draw up and adopt the charter it happens to think best, these objections hold, then there could be as many different ordinances, laws and procedures as there are counties. Along this same line, county gov-

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ernments would have the power to pass laws and adopt taxation methods radically different from those embodied in present state statutes.

Difficulties Seen
These developments, the arguments run, would make it difficult for counties to deal with each other. They would also lead to constant and prolonged battles before the state supreme court, both to decide the limits to laws of these types and to determine within what limits the state Legislature itself could pass general laws applying to all counties.

Another argument points to past experience, and notes a tendency for county court members to be representatives of certain areas in the county rather than of the county as a whole. If the county government's power is increased, it is said, these sectional interests could lead to a more serious split.

These general arguments favoring or opposing county home rule should be carefully balanced. Then, one must go a step further and apply them to Jackson county.

As of last year, only six states across the nation had

authorized home rule charters. Connecticut, on the other hand, abolished counties entirely this year.

The six states—California, Maryland, Ohio, Missouri, Texas and Washington—generally permitted home rule on a basis more limited than what is possible under Oregon's new law.

Furthermore, as of a year ago September, at least, only 14 counties in these states—out of 200—had actually adopted home rule charters. Eleven of them were in California.

For the most part, it has been those counties with the

greatest population density which have taken the step. In such counties, the need for stronger and more comprehensive county government is the most compelling.

The pros and cons in this article have been general. The question of Jackson county's own future—whether it should adopt a home rule charter and if so, what kind—must depend on whether this county's conditions and developments warrant it.

The decision is one which those in authority—and that means every voter—must decide.

West Coast Airlines Gets Cut-Rate Permit

Washington—UPI—The Civil Aeronautics Board has ruled that West Coast Airlines may put into effect immedi-

ately cut-rate roundtrip excursion fares between Spokane and Seattle, Wash., and between Burns and Portland, Ore.
Albany, N.Y. — (UPI) — Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller has expanded his forthcoming Western tour to include Washington and Idaho.

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