

Home Rule Charter: It Would Modernize County Government

By Margaret Fellows Portman, LWVSA, as printed in Spokesman Review (August 18, 1985)

Our county government is outdated; it was designed for a rural county in 1889.

Many principles of good government are not possible under the current structure.

Checks and balances are limited because administrative and legislative functions are combined. The management structure lacks clear lines of authority. The citizens are being shortchanged because they have no process of initiative or referendum or boards of appeals. And the system lacks local self-determination because it constantly must seek enabling legislation from the state Legislature.

Three county commissioners have combined powers to legislate, administer and adjudicate through appeals.

Two of them form a quorum and may make some big decisions.

The shape of the three commissioner districts makes it possible for all to be elected from central Spokane. The commissioners' increasing workload has caused them to appoint administrative assistants, but they retain administrative authority.

Six county officials (assessor, auditor, clerk, coroner, sheriff and treasurer) are elected by the voters and have great autonomy in their own departments under a charter however, these officials could be appointed on the basis of their job qualifications.

The commissioners must approve departmental budgets, but they cannot streamline or consolidate the departments headed by elected officials.

Clear lines of administrative authority are not present.

Originally, the state constitution outlined county government as an arm of the state to assess property, collect taxes, operate elections, provide

police protection and a court system and develop far-to-market roads.

But now, the counties are involved in many services needed by rural, urban and suburban populations; each additional service has been authorized under state legislation.

The current political atmosphere in Spokane County features a complex array of proposals for the local governmental structure.

What is the voter to do or even think about it all?

The choices tend to polarize and fragmentize the ardent supporters.

Incorporation of the Spokane Valley runs directly into opposition from annexation proponents.

While city-county consolidation sometimes is cited as an ultimate goal, it is far from a realistic possibility in the near future.

It creates many foes, especially among the small municipalities; it also needs some sound enabling legislation to remove threats of double taxation and other fiscal uncertainties.

No city-county consolidation has occurred under current Washington state law.

It is no surprise that large numbers of voters have become disenchanted.

Where is a unifying thread to bring together our thinking about local government? Where are the people who would like to concern themselves with local issues on a non-crisis basis?

There is no Spokane County charter, so that is a good logical place to begin.

Please note that you who reside in the city of Spokane or any of the other municipalities are taxpayers to Spokane County just as those who live in unincorporated or rural areas are; all residents

