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Background Brief on...

Local and Regional Governments

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City Government

In the 240 cities throughout Oregon, the city councils serve as the highest authority within city governments in deciding issues of public policy. In open public forums, city councils pass laws (ordinances), adopt resolutions and generally direct discussions involving the governance of their communities and the welfare of their citizens.

Four forms of city government determine the administrative role of any city council. Most Oregon cities with populations over 2,500 have the council/manager or council/administrator form, in which the council hires a chief executive officer to be responsible for the daily supervision of city affairs. Portland is the only city in the state with the commission form of government, where the elected commissioners function collectively as the city council and serve as administrators of city departments. Smaller Oregon cities typically have the mayor/council form, in which the legislative and policy-making body is a popularly elected council. Currently, Beaverton is the only city with the strong mayor form, in which the mayor, serving as the chief executive officer, has the authority to appoint administrative personnel, is responsible for city administration, and serves as the presiding officer at council meetings.

City administrators and other city employees often participate in the policy development process but are primarily responsible for effective delivery of municipal services and programs. Many local government activities and programs are directly related to federal or state mandates.

City governments typically provide such services as: fire and police protection; streets and street maintenance; sewer and water treatment and collection systems; building permit activities; libraries, parks and recreation activities; other numerous social service responsibilities. Cities also have considerable responsibilities for land use planning within their city limits and urban growth boundaries.

County Government

Early county governments in Oregon were very limited in the services they provided. Their primary responsibilities were forest and farm-to-market roads, law enforcement, courts, care for the needy and tax collections. In response to demands of a growing population and a more complex society, today's counties provide a wide range of important public services including: public health, mental health, community corrections, juvenile services, criminal prosecution, hospitals, nursing homes, airports, parks, libraries, land use planning, building regulations, refuse disposal, elections, air-pollution control, veterans services, economic development, urban renewal, public housing, vector control, county fairs, museums, dog control, civil defense and senior services.

Until recently, counties functioned almost exclusively as agents of the state government. Their every activity had to be either authorized or mandated by state law. However, a 1958 constitutional amendment authorized counties to adopt "home rule" charters, and a 1973 state law granted all counties power to exercise broad "home rule" authority.

Nine counties have adopted "home rule" charters, wherein voters have the power to adopt and amend their own county government organization. Lane and Washington were the first to adopt "home rule" in 1962, followed by Hood River (1964), Multnomah (1967), Benton (1972), Jackson (1978), Josephine (1980), Clatsop (1988) and Umatilla (1993). Twenty-four of Oregon's 36 counties, including the nine with charters, operate under a "board of commissioners" with between three to five elected members. The remaining 12 less-populated counties are governed by a "county court" consisting of a county judge and two commissioners.

Regional Governments

Metro - Metro covers approximately 460 square miles of the urban portions of Clackamas, Multnomah and Washington counties in northwestern Oregon. There are 24 cities in the Metro service area, including Beaverton, Gresham, Hillsboro, Lake Oswego, Milwaukie, Oregon City and Portland. Metro is responsible for a broad range of services. According to its voter-approved 1992 charter, Metro has primary responsibility for regional land use and transportation planning, and is further empowered to address any other issue of "metropolitan concern." In 1997 the legislature approved House Bill 3638 that allows Metro electors to amend its charter without seeking corresponding changes in state statute.

Other regional governments – Besides Metro, there are seven other regional councils of governments in Oregon: Mid-Willamette Valley Council of Governments; Oregon Cascades West Council of Governments; Lane Council of Governments; Rogue Valley Council of Governments; Mid-Columbia Council of Governments; Central Oregon Intergovernmental Council; and Idaho-Oregon Planning & Development Association. These councils are multi-jurisdictional and multi-purpose organizations. They are voluntary associations of local governments cooperating and working together on issues and problems which cross city, county, and in some cases, state boundaries.

Special Districts

Throughout Oregon, approximately 1,000 special service districts provide a broad range of community services. State statutes (ORS 198.010 and 198.335) provide for the creation of the following 28 types of districts: water control; irrigation; ports; regional air quality control authorities; fire; hospital; mass transit; sanitary districts and authorities; people's utility; domestic water supply districts and authorities; cemetery; park and recreation; metropolitan service; special road; road assessment; highway lighting; health; vector control; water improvement; weather modification; geothermal heating; transportation; county service; chemical control; weed control; emergency communications; diking; and soil and water conservation districts.

Special Districts are financed through property taxes or fees for services, or some combination thereof. All districts are directed by a governing body elected by the voters.

Staff and Agency Contacts:

Oregon Blue Book – Local Government Page - <http://bluebook.state.or.us/local/cities/cities.htm>

League of Oregon Cities - 800-452-0338 or 503-588-6550 - <http://www.orcities.org/>

Association of Oregon Counties - 503-585-8351 <http://www.aocweb.org/>

Metro - 503-797-1700 - <http://www.metro-region.org>

Special Districts Association of Oregon
800-285-5461 or 503-371-8667 <http://www.sdao.com/>

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