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Background Brief on ...

Local and Regional Governments

City Government

In the 242 incorporated cities throughout Oregon, 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.

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, and other numerous social service responsibilities. Cities also have considerable responsibilities for land use planning within their city limits and urban growth boundaries.

Oregon's cities are governed by one of four forms that vary in the administrative role of its city council: council/manager or administrator, commission, mayor/council, and strong mayor. 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 Oregon city with the commission form of government, where the elected commissioners function collectively as the city council and 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. Beaverton operates under the strong mayor form of government, in which the mayor also serves 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.

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. 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 counties 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 eight counties, including all nine home rule counties, operate under a board of commissioners with a chair and between two to

four additional members. The remaining eight counties are governed by a "county court" consisting of a county judge and two commissioners.

Regional Governments

Metro – Metro, formed in 1979, covers approximately 460 square miles of the urban portions of Clackamas, Multnomah, and Washington counties. There are 25 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 such as managing the region's recycling and garbage services and long-term planning. 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, which 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 (COG) in Oregon: Mid-Willamette Valley COG, Oregon Cascades West COG, Lane COG, Rogue Valley COG, Mid-Columbia COG, Central Oregon Intergovernmental Council, and Northwest Senior and Disability Services. These councils are multi-jurisdictional and multi-purpose organizations; voluntary associations of local governments cooperating and working together on issues and problems that cross city, county, and in some cases, state boundaries.

Special Districts

Throughout Oregon, approximately 900 special service districts provide a broad range of community services. ORS chapter 198 provides for the creation of various types of districts such as water control, irrigation, ports, regional air quality control, rural fire, hospital, mass transit, sanitary districts and authorities, people's utility, domestic water supply, cemetery maintenance, park and recreation, metropolitan service,

special road, road assessment, highway lighting, health, vector control, water improvement, drainage, weather modification, geothermal heating, transportation, county service, chemical control, weed control, emergency communications; diking; libraries, 9-1-1 communications, radio and data, and soil and water conservation.

Special districts are financed through property taxes or fees for services, or a combination. All districts are directed by an elected governing body.

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