

A HISTORY OF WASHINGTON'S LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

*A Summary of Volume I of the 1988 Final Report by the
Washington State Local Governance Study Commission*

Joint Select Committee on Junior
Taxing Districts, Municipal Corporations,
and Local Government Finance

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Introduction

- Legislation enacted in 1985 established the 24-member Local Governance Study Commission
- The Commission produced a lengthy two-volume report:
 - Volume I - a history of Washington's local governments
 - Volume II - an analysis of local government problems and recommended solutions

Tradition!

- Washington's local governance tradition:
 - Insistence on local option and control, including the way in which state policy is implemented
 - An evolving relationship between counties and cities and numerous special purpose districts

Tradition – Counties and Cities

- Cities and counties originally had distinctive roles and responsibilities
 - Counties, the administrative arm of the state:
 - Maintained vital records, provided courts and law enforcement, built roads, collected taxes, conducted elections
 - Cities and towns:
 - Provided safe community, economic identity, and higher levels of services for more concentrated populations

Tradition - Special Purpose Districts

- History in Washington pre-dates statehood
- Generally created for limited and specific purposes
- Common examples:
 - Fire districts
 - Water-sewer districts
 - Library districts

Early Days: 1845-1944

- High population growth, political volatility, and distrust of distant decision-makers
- Desire for governance structures with local options and control
- Popular reforms, including establishment of special purpose districts and publically-owned ports and utilities

Middle Days: 1945-1960

- Significant growth in suburban areas surrounding major cities
 - Economic and population growth
 - Rise of the automobile and new highway system
- New needs and desires for public services typically provided by cities
- Changes in county authorities - increased flexibility and more comprehensive planning

Latter Days: 1961-2007

- Population trends begun in the first half of the 20th century continued
- By 1983 the number of Washington residents living in unincorporated areas exceeded those living in incorporated areas
- Greater federal involvement in local gov't affairs
- Increased regional planning and cooperation between existing governments

Latter Days (continued)

- 1990-91 adoption of the Growth Management Act
 - Focused growth into designated “urban growth areas”
 - Declared cities to be the most appropriate provider of urban governmental services
 - Resulted in the incorporation or annexation of large portions of previously unincorporated suburban development

Latter Days (continued)

- Adoption of several citizen-initiated tax reforms affecting local governments
- Cities were granted broad powers of self-governance
- Special purpose districts
 - Continued to provide publically-desired services
 - Numerous new types of districts were created, including districts focusing on economic development and transportation issues

Questions/Comments?

Thank you!

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