

# **King County Charter Review Commission Rural/Local Issues Subcommittee**

## **Summary of Issues and Amendment Proposals**

September 12, 2007

The commission received nearly 60 comments on rural governance and local services in King County. The primary issue raised was the need for better representation in the rural and unincorporated areas of the county.

Following is a summary of comments received on rural/local issues, including brief context and background on the issues.

### **King County Council & Representation**

A number of people recommended changes to the structure of the council, to provide better representation for rural and unincorporated areas. Examples of structural changes raised are: redrawing council districts so that more districts include a significant rural/unincorporated area, and creating a bicameral council with one house based on population apportionment and another on land apportionment. The Four Creeks and Greater Maple Valley Unincorporated Area Councils (UACs) favor these options.

Councilmember Lambert recommended a number of amendments to increase rural / unincorporated area representation and services. First, councilmembers representing unincorporated areas should have direct authority over departments such as DDES that provide local government services. Secondly, the approval of at least 60% of councilmembers with unincorporated areas in their districts should be required for council actions affecting the unincorporated areas. Thirdly, the Executive should be required to consult on rural issues with all councilmembers in districts with 25% or more rural land.

### **Unincorporated Area Councils**

In 1995, Executive Gary Locke approved the creation of a new type of advisory body for the unincorporated areas of the county: Unincorporated Area Councils. The UACs are recognized community groups that self-organize and operate according to the county's guidelines. Members of UACs are elected in county elections. The UACs' mission is "to provide effective and continuing opportunities for citizens to participate in county government processes and decisions that affect their communities" on policies, county programs, citizen appointments to advisory committees, community plans, and subarea plans. There are six UACs currently operating.

The comments received about the UACs indicated that these bodies are not fully meeting the expectations of citizens and lawmakers. A number of citizens stressed that better methods for more direct representation were needed, noting that UACs do not represent everyone in the county, and that they lack decision-making power. Some people argued that the UACs should not be treated as governmental entities, given the small numbers of people voting in often-uncontested UAC elections, and the UACs' lack of representation of the citizens in their areas.

Councilmember Lambert noted that UACs do not represent all rural residents, and have no decision-making authority. She believes there is widespread "dissatisfaction with the lack of a dedicated local services provider ... for government services and policies that affect only rural area residents."

## **New Governance Structures**

As in 1996-97, there is a desire for a new rural/unincorporated governance structure. Most of the comments on governance structures recommended a new county department or deputy focused on rural and/or unincorporated affairs. The Four Creeks UAC, for example, supports the creation of a Department of Unincorporated and Rural Affairs "with the mission of maximizing the value of unincorporated resources while maintaining the well being of a vibrant rural economy and lifestyle."

Some people recommended the creation of a township model. However, townships are currently not permitted at the state level, and the Attorney General would have to reverse that decision.

The 1996-7 CRC concluded that there needed to be a separation between the County's regional and local decision-making, and recommended the creation of a new legislative body (the Unincorporated King County Council) to represent residents of unincorporated areas. The council did not act upon this recommendation.

## **Policy Development and Planning**

A number of people noted that there is a "fragmented" or "inadequate" policy development process for the rural areas. The Four Creeks UAC recommended a charter requirement for the creation and management of comprehensive subarea plans for unincorporated King County, "scoped and modeled similar to those produced by municipalities."

Some commenters suggested additional or different rural policy planning staff, who have more extensive "hands on" rural area experience, or moving the rural area policy staff back to the Executive's office from DDES.

The 1996-7 CRC recommended the creation, by ordinance, of subarea planning commissions for unincorporated areas. (UACs could choose to fill this role if they existed in a particular subarea.) This recommendation was not acted upon.

## **Land Use**

Since the passage of the Growth Management Act in 1990, there has been divisiveness over land use issues between the county, which implements the GMA, and the rural residents of the county. Many rural residents argued in favor of protecting the rural way of life, and expressed that too much development is occurring in rural areas. Some, such as the City of Maple Valley, believe that there is not enough cooperation between cities and county on changes to the urban growth boundary. Councilmember Lambert also argued that the GMA Boundary Review Board should allow the leaders of the cities who will absorb the potential annexation areas to govern the land use policies in those areas.

While many land use issues are pre-empted by state law, the rural subcommittee should still investigate issues with land use in rural areas due to the issue causing such conflict between the county and residents.

## **Local Services**

The county is the local service provider for residents of unincorporated areas. The level and quality of these services has often been called into question. A number of citizens and lawmakers wanted the county to commit to making local government services its primary role and top priority. One recommendation was to require the county to provide local services at a level that is at least equivalent to the median for surrounding cities, and to give those local government services priority for funding before considering other services.