




Snohomish County
Executive's Office

Aaron Reardon
County Executive

(425) 388-3460
FAX (425) 388-3434

M/S #407
3000 Rockefeller Avenue
Everett, WA 98201-4046

To: Charter Review Commission
Fr: Aaron Reardon, County Executive 
Re: Perspectives on Snohomish County Government
Date: March 8, 2006

Charter Framework

The role of the Charter Review Commission is a unique and exciting one. One of the dynamic provisions of the Snohomish County Charter is the provision that created this group. It allows a group of citizens to be elected every ten years to review the governmental structure of our County. As you know, any changes this Commission proposes will then be subject to a vote at the general election.

This structure is an ideal blend of the republican and democratic ideals central to American democracy. Elected officials review, update, and recommend, with the ultimate power to adopt resting with the citizens.

While you engage in this process, I hope you keep in mind that it is a constitution you are writing. As we all know, a constitution is a basic law, a framework for government. The most successful constitutions, like the U.S. constitution, adhere to the basic framework concept. General institutions are created, with power allocated among them. This creates a system of checks and balances, which serves our citizens by fixing accountability and protecting civil liberties.

When engaged in a process that you have undertaken, there is always a temptation to become ensnared by current issues of the day. Like all informed citizens, you discern a specific need, and are tempted to respond by creating a specific government entity to respond to the perceived need. Although clearly understandable, I urge the Commission to resist such a course of action. For instance, the charter should not spell out what executive departments the Commission believes are necessary. The needs of our citizens change over time. The way government should be organized to address specific needs also changes over time. Allowing elected officials through the legislative process to address the specifics, without requiring a "constitutional amendment" is the best way to insure a responsive government.

I believe events over the past few years illustrate this. Certainly the events of September 11 2001 brought home to all of us the need for government at all levels to be ready to respond to emergencies. Katrina and threats of world wide epidemics only underscore the need to be prepared.

In Snohomish County, we historically had a Department of Emergency Management to handle emergencies. Yet it was not a "Department" in any meaningful sense. It was a separate entity created through interlocal agreements between the County and several cities, supervised by a group of local officials with a host of other responsibilities. Recognizing the need to have an effective, accountable, entity charged with emergency management, I proposed in 2005 that we have a true "Department of Emergency Management," as part of County government. The County Council agreed. As of January of this year, we have a true County department in place and we are working hard to make it the first class emergency management organization Snohomish County deserves.

My point is that needs change over time and government can best respond by having the flexibility to restructure without being unduly constrained by a prescribed Charter or "Constitution" detailing all aspects of operations.

Separation of Powers

The genius of the American system of government is the separation of powers. A legislative branch to set policy with the power of the purse, an executive branch to administer the affairs of government, and an independent judiciary to interpret the law and provide access to individual citizens the bedrock of our liberty. This is true from the federal government to local government.

I have been privileged to serve in both the legislative and executive capacity. My years in both the Washington State House of Representatives and the Senate gave me a deep appreciation of the vital role of the legislative branch. My time as County Executive has given me an appreciation of the complexity of running a dynamic governmental organization. I hope this Commission will retain the basic structure the County currently has, but in allocating power among the branches, to underscore the role of the Council as a body that promotes and passes legislation which sets policy and that administrative responsibilities belong to the Executive.

Fiscal Responsibility

A balanced budget is a must. More importantly, as dollars are limited, County government must use those dollars ever more wisely to provide our citizens efficient, effective government. My goal as County Executive has been to make Snohomish County the most efficient provider of government services in this state.

To that end, we created priorities and outcomes based system of budgeting. It is a process of determining the priorities of the citizens we serve and evaluating the effectiveness of the outcomes of the programs government delivers. Through this process, county departments compete against one another and are allocated funding based upon their ability to meet citizens. Council then conducts its own public process leading to budget adoption.

The budget process, whether using this process or not, is long and complicated. The 2006 budget was adopted by the County Council in late November of 2005. It is now only March and the budget process has already begun. Preliminary planning and getting the departments to focus on budget development is underway. A good portion of the summer is consumed with budget preparation as the Executive office reviews budget requests and recommendations and prepares to transmit the budget to Council in September as required by the Charter. October and November has the Council dealing with the budget, along with all of its other duties.

Quite frankly this time consuming process is not a good utilization of resources every year. At best you only have a few months of results before moving into the next budget cycle. Budget staff spend most of their time every year in the budget preparation process, instead of doing the detailed analysis of the budget and analyzing results which could benefit the not only the budget process, but the County as a whole.

I am requesting that you change the Charter so that the County can move to a two year budget cycle. On a yearly basis, there will still be the opportunity to make any needed midcourse corrections. But a biennial budget will conserve resources and allow for a much better analysis of the tax dollars that are expended on behalf of our citizens.

In addition, I believe understanding the fiscal impact of legislation is vital for good public policy decision making. This is done when the Executive transmits proposals to Council through forms known as ECAFs. But this is not necessarily done for Council generated legislation, nor is the information as comprehensive as that which the state legislature receives on a daily basis while in session. Therefore, I hope this Commission will consider requiring fiscal notes for all legislation Council considers which covers both ordinances and motions.

Lastly, it is important to restrain from spending money as fast as it comes in. Moreover, it is just as important to have the necessary funds on hand to meet liquidity obligations or in business or household terms "Cash flow." In 2004 when I was sworn into office, we encountered a liquidity balance lower than what was required to meet expenditure obligations. This was because for four consecutive years, the county had spent more money than it was taking in. These over expenditures were driving this county deeply in the red. I am asking the Charter Review commission to recommend to voters a general Fund spending lid. This spending lid will be the result of mandatory liquidity and emergency reserve funds that may only be accessed by a super majority of the County Council. This "Constitutional" spending lid will make certain that our taxpayers investments are protected and allocated in a responsible manner.

Conclusion

There are a great number of particular issues and proposals that the Commission may wish to discuss. I am happy to discuss the specifics with you. In this presentation, I have tried to share with you my perspective of the broad issues which I see that confront the structure of County government and your task ahead. Thank you again for listening to me and for your willingness to serve the citizens of Snohomish County in this important work.