

To the General Reader

The heart of this study is Chapter VII, beginning at page 57. It constitutes a detailed analysis of the issues confronting Kittitas county government as seen through the eyes of those who responded to the questionnaires. The preceding chapters are basically descriptive in character.

Every effort has been made to conform to the national guidelines of the League of Women Voters regarding the maintenance of objectivity and the avoidance of irrelevant biases. The committee preparing this First Draft Report believes it has succeeded in this regard and in the event of any errors, welcomes suggestions for improvement so that the final report is in the best League tradition.

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FIRST DRAFT REPORT

Study of Kittitas County Government

by

League of Women Voters, Kittitas County

(June 1993)

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League of Women Voters, Kittitas County
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First Draft Report
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League of Women Voters, Kittitas County
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I. Introduction

At its May 1992 Annual Meeting, the Kittitas County League of Women Voters voted to conduct a study of Kittitas County Government, focusing on the following issues:

- Strengths and weaknesses of the current county system
- Problems of cooperation between the county and cities
- Long-range planning processes in effect between County Commissioners and departments
- Development of specific recommendations for improving governance within the county

Reasons for the study included the following:

- Increasing responsibilities made particularly apparent with the state adoption of the Growth Management Act;
- Increasing budgetary concerns;
- Absence of a visible long-range planning process;
- Increasing concern regarding public participation in county issues; and,
- Absence of a visible intra and inter-governmental cooperative process.

In conducting this study, the League of Women Voters of Kittitas county have been encouraged by the support and cooperation of the county commissioners. Their cooperation was critical to the success of this study and underscores the county commissioners good faith efforts to work with the public and others in understanding county government.

After (a) reviewing the historical background of county government in Washington state, (b) the Revised Code of Washington affecting counties the size of Kittitas, and the 1993 Kittitas County budget, questionnaires were developed and sent to four distinct and separate groups in order to provide a framework for looking at how

people perceive the functioning of county government from the standpoint of their real life experiences. The four groups receiving questionnaires were:

a. members of the general public

Questionnaires were sent to persons who had frequently attended County Commission meetings, had testified at public hearings, or had otherwise visibly participated in county government affairs. Thus, this was not a sample chosen at random and therefore may not reflect public opinion in general. Instead, this sample was selected to solicit viewpoints of those participants who had substantial real-life experiences with county governmental processes. Additionally, questionnaires were also sent to those who responded to a notice appearing in the Ellensburg Daily Record which encouraged participation in the League's survey.

Number = 30

b. all current and former county commissioners, since 1980

Number = 9

c. all current city and county planning commission members and those city officials whose jobs require cooperation with county officials

Number = 39

d. all current county department heads, including elected officials (as listed in Section III)

Number = 20

Of the 98 questionnaires sent out, 62 completed questionnaires were returned. Of the questionnaires returned:

The general public rate of return was 80%,

The current and former county commissioners rate of return was 56%,

The county department heads, including elected officials, rate of return was 80%; and,

The planning commission members and other city officials rate of return was 44%.

To insure objectivity and validity of the research, each step of the process was supervised by a professional in this field: Dr. Laura Appleton, Sociology Professor, Central Washington University. She assisted with the designing of the questionnaires, the gathering of data, the coding of responses, the tabulating and analysis of the data, and the final written summary of the results.

All returned questionnaires were tabulated by Todd Rawls, Research Assistant, Sociology Department, Central Washington University. The League of Women Voters, Kittitas County, paid the customary charges for this service.

Verbatim responses to open-ended questions have been transcribed with reference to specific persons deleted to protect anonymity. These edited responses have been included in this First Draft Report.

Through the questionnaires, we identified specific issues affecting the quality of the current operations of county government. It is our hope that this knowledge will increase the public's understanding and lead to a cooperative effort wherein four different groups of citizens sharing mutual concerns and having common goals and philosophies, will work together to bring about a more effective county governmental system.

With the completion of this first stage of the study and the issuance of this First Draft Report, the League will now turn to the study of questions that have arisen thus far regarding Kittitas County governance. After this second year of study, a final report will be made available to the general public.

While this First Draft Report has been prepared primarily for the use of League members in their study of Kittitas County governance, the general public is encouraged to read this Report, carefully consider the implications therein, and join the League in its efforts to develop an accurate and responsible assessment of Kittitas County governance. To this end, a copy of this First Draft Report has been made available in all city and county libraries. Interested citizens are encouraged to meet with League members or offer their written comments.

II. Historical background

In 1843, prior to statehood, the Provisional Government of the Oregon Territory created four "districts," part of which was to become the state of Washington. Two years later, as a result of legislative action, the name "county" was substituted for "district". With the adoption of the state constitution in 1889, the several existing counties were recognized as "legal subdivisions" of the state, receiving all of their legal authority from the state constitution and state legislature. These counties have retained their original status. Subsequent counties were established by the state legislature. As legal entities, all counties may:

- as municipal corporations own and manage property, take part in legal transactions, and exercise certain powers in the courts,
- as a unit of government directly govern all the people living within its boundaries, and
- in accordance with legal authority, finance its activities by taxing property.

With the exception of King, Clallam, Whatcom, Snohomish and Pierce, all counties are currently organized by the governmental form originally used in organizing county government in the state.

Traditionally, in each Washington county the legislative and administrative authority had been vested in a three member governing body known as the "Board of Commissioners." Thus, when the territorial counties became legal state subdivisions, they brought with them the concept of the three-member board of county commissioners as the county's legislative and chief administrative authority for several county operations. These county boards also had quasi-judicial duties.

Currently, counties in Washington are classified by law according to population. With the largest population, King county is classified as AA, followed by Spokane and Pierce classified as A. The remaining counties are classified as First, Second, Third, etc., in descending population categories. Each county category is differentiated by the number of officials required to carry out duties defined by law, by provisions for terms of office and election, and in the determination of their compensation. (abridged from "Government in Spokane County", League of Women Voters of Spokane Area, 1985)

Kittitas county, the seventh largest in Washington state, is located in the geographic center of the state with the Cascade mountains at its western border and the Columbia river forming its eastern border. Most of its northern border is national forest land

and its southern border abuts a U.S. military reservation (Firing Center). The 1990 census puts the population at twenty-seven thousand (27,000) inhabitants.

The county's major industries include agriculture (livestock, hay, cereal grain, and corn), higher education (Central Washington University), recreation, and logging. Forty-four percent (44%) of the county (669,000 acres) is commercial forest land, currently held under private and public ownership. Slightly less than half of the land in the county (46%) is publicly owned and exempt from county taxation.

Within Kittitas county are cities defined by boundaries and within each boundary each city has a separate form of government, administered by a group of elected officials, which controls public safety, provides utilities, zoning, and deals with issues concerning health, safety and welfare within the city. Upper county cities include Cle Elum, Easton, Ronald, Roslyn and South Cle Elum. Lower county cities include Ellensburg, Kittitas, and Thorp.

Incorporated cities

Cle Elum, population of 1,778

With a council form of government; a mayor is elected at large; five council members are elected from separate districts and one member is elected at large. The city has its own water/sewer systems, a police department and a volunteer fire department. The council handles zoning issues within its jurisdiction.

Ellensburg, population of 12,500

With a council/manager form of government; seven council members are elected at large; a mayor is elected by the council from its own membership; a city manager employed by the council and is directly responsible to the council. The city has its own water/sewer systems; street, fire, and police departments; and handles zoning issues within its jurisdiction. A number of boards and commissions (members are appointed by the city council) serve in an advisory capacity on a variety of matters concerning parks, recreation, planning, library, and city beautification.

Kittitas, population of 700

With a council form of government; five council members and the mayor are elected at large. The city has its own water/sewer systems, one police officer, and a volunteer fire department. The council handles zoning issues within its jurisdiction.

Roslyn, population of 843

With a council form of government; six council members and the mayor are elected at large. Water is provided by a privately owned water district and utilizes septic tanks in lieu of a comprehensive sewer system. The city has a police department and a volunteer fire

department. The council handles zoning issues within its jurisdiction.

South Cle Elum, population of 950

With a council form of government; five council members and the mayor are elected at large. The city has its own water/sewer systems and a volunteer fire district. Police services are contracted out with the city of Cle Elum. The council handles zoning issues within its jurisdiction.

Unincorporated cities

In these cities, the Kittitas County Board of Commissioners is responsible for all decisions relating to roads, street care and maintenance, police services, and land use planning.

Thorp, estimated population of 160

The city has 121 registered voters in its water district; its water source is a privately held artesian well; septic tanks are utilized in lieu of a comprehensive sewer system; and a volunteer fire district serves the community. Leadership roles have been assumed recently by two local committees: The Thorp Mill Historical committee and the Land Use Committee formed under the Growth Management Act.

Easton, estimated population of 150

The city has 119 registered voters in its water district; septic tanks are utilized in lieu of a comprehensive sewer system; and a volunteer fire district serves the community. A local government committee has been formed under the Growth Management Act.

Ronald, estimated population of 200

The city has 81 registered voters in the water district; its water source is privately owned; septic tanks are utilized in lieu of a comprehensive sewer system; and a volunteer fire district serves the community.

Vantage, estimated population of 100 with an additional 100 during the summers

The city has 42 registered voters in the water district; the water source is a privately owned well; the sewer system has volunteer commissioners; and a volunteer fire district serves the community. A private community club with elected officers serves in a quasi-city council capacity.

III. Kittitas County Government as it Now Exists

Elected Officials

Board of Kittitas County Commissioners. The Board is composed of three commissioners elected to four-year terms, annually selecting one of their own to serve as Chair. The county is divided into three districts on the basis of population and, at the time of election, each candidate must live in his/her district. The candidates are partisan and are nominated in a primary election encompassing only their district. In the general election, all county voters are given the opportunity to select the commissioners who ultimately serve. The Board serves as the county's legislative body, chief administrator for several county operations, and has some quasi-judicial duties.

Their legislative responsibilities require the Commissioners to adopt, amend or repeal all county ordinances, the local laws of the county. The ordinances include traffic, zoning, planning and public safety ordinances, and any other ordinances designed to protect the health, safety and welfare of the general public.

As administrators, the Commissioners are responsible for public roads and public works programs, human resource services, planning and zoning for unincorporated areas of the county, county parks and recreation systems, capital improvements, and other services and programs which are not clearly the responsibility of other elected county officials.

The Board's primary duties are to levy the taxes necessary to operate and to adopt a balanced budget for each calendar year. The Commissioners have ultimate responsibility for the entire county budget, including those of the elected officials and appointed department heads.

In their quasi-judicial capacity, the Commissioners hear appeals from decisions made by other county boards or commissions and determine approval for a variety of development proposals, such as subdivisions, and timber land and open space current use requests.

The Commissioners serve on a variety of community-wide boards and commissions, along with other public officials to help direct public policy. Commissioners are responsible for appointing members to serve on numerous boards and commissions such as the Planning Commission, Board of Adjustment, Mental Health Board and others.

The Board's meetings are public and records of the meetings can be viewed by contacting the Clerk of the Board.

County Assessor. Elected at large for a four year term, the County

Assessor is responsible for determining the value of all taxable real and personal property within the county for ad valorem tax purposes.

County Auditor. Elected at large for a four year term, the County Auditor is responsible for the recording of documents, titles, and deeds; the issuance of marriage licenses; the issuance of motor vehicles licenses, DOT permits, vessel registration; and conducts all elections within the county. In addition, the Auditor oversees county accounting, auditing and budgeting activities.

County Clerk. Elected at large for a four year term, the County Clerk maintains the permanent records of the Superior Court and receipts all monies received by the Court.

County Prosecuting Attorney/Coroner. Elected at large for a four year term, the County Prosecutor/Coroner is responsible for the prosecution of all crimes and violations of county ordinances. The Prosecutor also acts as the county's legal counsel and defends the county in all civil suits. In addition, victim and witness assistance services and child support enforcement are overseen by the Prosecutor. The Coroner is responsible for the investigation of deaths within the county.

County Sheriff/Director of Emergency Management. Elected at large for a four year term, the County Sheriff administers the County Jail and is also responsible for the provision of police services in the unincorporated area of the county, including patrol, criminal investigation, and emergency response.

County Treasurer. Elected at large for a four year term, the County Treasurer is responsible for receipting and disbursing all funds of the county, collecting property taxes, and investing the county's cash. In addition, the County Treasurer provides similar banking services to to the local governmental entities within the county, including schools, fire and water districts.

Superior Court Judge. Elected at large to a four year term, the Superior Court Judge presides over the Superior Court, which is the trial court having: exclusive original jurisdiction over all civil matters involving dollar amounts over \$10,000; title or possession of real property; cases involving legality of any tax, impost, assessment or toll; probate and domestic matters; Original jurisdiction over all criminal cases amounting to felony; Original jurisdiction over all criminal cases not otherwise provided by law; Exclusive original jurisdiction over juvenile matters; Appellate jurisdiction over Courts of Limited Jurisdiction to hear *de novo* or appeal on the record of error of law.

District Court Judges. Two part time judges are elected from separate districts (Lower County and Upper County) to four year terms. District Court Judges have concurrent jurisdiction with the

Superior Court for crimes classified as misdemeanors and gross misdemeanors. In addition, the District Court Judges hear the following kinds of cases: (1) mitigation and contested traffic infraction hearings; (2) civil lawsuits when the amount in controversy is not more than \$25,000; (3) small claims; (4) domestic violence protection petitions; (5) anti-harassment petitions; (6) drug property forfeiture hearings; (7) vehicle impoundment hearings; (8) name change petitions.

Appointed Officials

Agricultural Agent. Chairing the Kittitas County Cooperative Extension office, the Agricultural Agent is responsible for providing leadership and support to the development and coordination of Cooperative Extension programs including agriculture and natural resources, family living, 4-H/youth and community resource development. Educational programs include the following: Livestock production, management and marketing, farm business management on livestock and crop enterprises; irrigated pasture production and management; 4-H animal science projects. Duties also include advising on general agricultural policy and agricultural development, range management, and general community resource development and public affairs.

Director of Department of Building and Fire Safety (Inspector/Fire Marshall). Responsible for Building Permit and Fire/Life Safety processes in the county and contracted cities; budgeting of the department; advising on new ordinance adoption and enforcement relating to the department; and oversees activities and responsibilities of the County Fire Marshall and performs field inspection of adopted County, State and Uniform Codes.

Business Manager, Kittitas County Fair Department. Employed by the Kittitas County Fair Board, the Business Manager, in accordance with policies established by the Board, administers the Kittitas County Fair and Fairgrounds; including promotion, planning, budgeting, contractual agreements, maintenance and management of all aspects of the Fair and the interim season events and rentals. The Board sets overall policy for the Fair and interim season, reviews and approves budgets, and establishes long range plans.

Manager of Data Processing. Employed by the Board of County Commissioners, the manager advises the Board on issues involving data processing, is responsible for the operation of the county's primary computers, and maintains normal office administrative procedures within the Data Processing Department.

Juvenile Court Administrator. Appointed by the Superior Court Judge, the Administrator is responsible for the day to day administration of juvenile court, probation counselor, and detention services and may also serve in the capacity of a

probation counselor. The Administrator also currently serves as the Administrator of Probation Services, performing probation functions, as ordered by the Judges (of the Courts of Limited Jurisdiction and the Superior Court Judge) for adult misdemeanor offenders.

Program Director, Kittitas County Mental Health, Substance Abuse, Developmental Disabilities Program. Appointed by the Board of County Commissioners, the Program Director is responsible for the management of the community services related to mental health, substance abuse, and developmental disabilities in the county. The duties include determining the community need for services, writing grants, negotiating contracts with federal and state officials, and distributing funds to community organizations; and also providing staff support to citizen advisory groups appointed by the Board of County Commissioners. The current advisory groups include the Kittitas County Substance Abuse Board and the Kittitas County Mental Health/Developmental Disabilities Board.

Planning Director. Appointed by the Board of County Commissioners, the Planning Director is head of the land use planning agency which prepares a long-term comprehensive plan for the physical development of the unincorporated areas of the county; oversees the preparation and regulation of zoning, subdivision, shoreline management and other codes used to administer the goals of the comprehensive plan; makes recommendations to the Planning Commission, Board of Adjustment, and other planning committees of the county; administers environmental requirements of the state; and serves as Secretary to the Conference of Governments.

Public Works Director. The Public Works Director oversees the Department of Public Works which is responsible for the funding, maintenance and construction of the on-system roads and rights-of-way adopted by the county. The Director is responsible for funding, maintenance and planning for the Kittitas County Airport (Bowers Field); operation of the Equipment Rental and Revolving Fund; Flood Control operations; and the Parks Fund.

County Maintenance Supervisor. The Maintenance Supervisor is responsible for the maintenance of the courthouse, jail, and the Morris Sorenson building.

Director of Public Health. A licensed physician, appointed by the Board of County Commissioners as the Director of Public Health, directs the county environmental health programs to assure protection of the community from health hazards.

Solid Waste Administrator. Directs the county environmental health programs to assure the provision of a cost-effective and environmentally sound solid waste system.

Areas of Joint Local Government Cooperation

Pursuant to the Interlocal Cooperation Act, RCW Chapter 39.34, local governmental units may cooperate with other localities on a basis of mutual advantage. Examples of current cooperative efforts between the county commissioners and local governments include:

Health Services

The Board of Health (which in fact is the Kittitas Board of County Commissioners) determines, with input from the county Health department staff, a formula contract to provide services to incorporated cities. These contracts are negotiated yearly.

Jail Facilities

All incorporated cities contract with the sheriff's department for jail services. Contracts are negotiated yearly.

Law Enforcement

There is on-going cooperation among all law-enforcement agencies within the county, and Ellensburg negotiates with the county regarding computer use time. A special drug task force operates in cooperation with Ellensburg and the county.

Library Services

Ellensburg, Cle Elum and Kittitas have their own city libraries. Easton and Thorp encourage the use of the school libraries. Vantage, Ronald and South Cle Elum use the nearest city library. The county government contributes money (determined by formula) to each city library so that unserved Kittitas county residents may use the city libraries at a reduced cost from what they normally would pay as a non-city resident.

Kittitas County Communication Emergency System

Each city contracts with the county for a negotiated set fee for the services of the system, which is housed in Ellensburg's Safety Center. Each city and fire district is represented on a board which makes all decisions. At present, each emergency call averages \$7.00 per call.

Animal Shelter

Ellensburg owns the only animal shelter in the county. Other cities and the county contribute funds to be able to place animals in the shelter.

Growth Management Act

By state law, the county receives state funds to develop long-range growth plans. Ellensburg receives a proportionate share of the state grant (other cities receive direct services from the county planning department) to coordinate comprehensive planning in such areas as population growth pressures, protection of property rights, agricultural and forest land use, public housing, and public transportation needs. Incorporated and unincorporated

cities, and populated areas of the county are now participating in decisions regarding their areas of concern by attending meetings, studying issues, speaking with elected representatives, forming committees, and proposing solutions.

Fire Prevention

The county's firefighting personnel are housed in the Ellensburg firehouse (for a negotiated fee and in kind services) and all fire departments and districts in the county support one another during emergencies.

The Fire Prevention Co-op is an educational organization composed of participants representing Ellensburg Fire District No. 2, The Department of Natural Resource, The U.S. Forest Service, The County Fire Marshal's Office, and other volunteers. They meet regularly for educational purposes, write grants, provide linkages and public relations opportunities among governmental firefighting groups. In county areas not covered by a fire district, the U.S. Forest Service will respond when human life is threatened or trees are burning. They are not authorized to respond to structural fires.

Garbage Service

All areas are served by the Waste Management Company under contract with the county. The county owns and collects fees for the use of the collection center, the compressor, and the land fill.

IV. KITTITAS COUNTY BUDGET OVERVIEW

The total budget for Kittitas County is projected at \$22,028,605 for 1993. Revenues and expenditures for 41 county departments/funds are included with individual departmental budgets ranging in size from \$9,062,797 (County Road Dept.) to \$1,635 (Board of Equalization.) The five largest departmental budgets are:

1. County Roads	\$9,062,797
2. Equipment Rental & Revolving	2,534,861
3. Sheriff	2,347,261
4. Mental Health, Substance Abuse, Devel. Disabilities	1,036,611
5. Solid Waste	793,351

The five departments which employ the most people are:

1. Sheriff	42+ employees
2. Assessor	14 employees
3 & 4. Prosecuting Attorney & Auditor	12+ employees each
5. Lower County District Court	8+ employees

The budget document does not give the number of employees for the County Road Dept; it may be among the top five but we do not have that figure. The highest paid county employee is the Superior Court Judge at \$96,600. (The state pays 1/2 of the Superior Court Judge's salary.)

^{107%} During the last five years—between 1989 and 1993—the total county budget increased by ~~200%~~, from \$10,641,802 in 1989 to \$22,028,605 in 1993. During this same period, the number of county employees increased by just 20%, from 172.85 FTE's (full time equivalents) in 1989 to 207.28 FTE's in 1993. Sixty seven percent (67%) of the county budget funds employee salaries.

Revenues supporting county services come from a variety of sources. Following is a breakdown of major revenue sources for 1993.

- 39% from state or federal shared taxes or grants designated for specific purposes; i.e., Law and Justice, Drug Enforcement, roads & arterials, mental health, developmental disabilities, substance abuse, Growth Management Act, Forest & BLM taxes and grants, P.U.D privilege tax, state game in-lieu tax, state liquor taxes, federal highway taxes, federal bridge replacement, motor vehicle tax, WIC, Medicaid, D.O.E. grant, etc.
- 19% from local taxes; i.e. real and personal property taxes, diversion road tax, timber harvest tax, 911 system excise tax, admissions tax, etc.
- 17% from fund balance; unexpended funds carried over from previous years; usually from unexpended designated tax dollars, reserve funds, or unexpended state/federal grant funds.

- 16.5% charges for services including sales, rentals, fines, fees, permits, interest, etc.
- 8.5% miscellaneous; other revenues including "transfers-in" which are monies transferred between funds for management or for services rendered; i.e., T.B. hospital funds transferred to Health Department; monies transferred between the Road Dept. and Equipment Rental & Revolving, etc.

Almost all of the departments show quite detailed expenditure budgets, including such expenditure line items as salaries, employee benefits, supplies, professional services, communication, travel, repair & maintenance, rent, and capital outlay. There are, however, a few glaring exceptions to this detailed reporting. The largest department budget, County Roads, (at \$9,062,797 representing 39% of the total county budget) has an expenditure budget of only seven line items, none of which would really indicate to a private citizen what budgeted monies will be specifically used for. No personnel are listed, no salaries, and none of the other above referenced detail is included. This is also true for Equipment Rental & Revolving—a \$2,534,861 budget with just two expenditure line items; Solid Waste—a \$793,351 budget with just 6 expenditure line items; and the Airport—a \$151,900 budget with just six expenditure line items.

In reviewing the 1993 Kittitas County Budget, several questions were raised.

1. Are there countywide guidelines for each department to use in preparing its budget? How much detail is required? What kind of expenditure justification is required?
2. About half of the county's departments are budgeted under "Current Expense" and the other half are not. What differentiates these departments and why are they shown separately?
3. Why do some departmental budgets (i.e., County Road, Equipment Rental & Revolving, Solid Waste, Airport) show so little expenditure detail. Why don't they list personnel and salaries? Who is responsible for administration of these budgets? How/when/by whom are they audited?
4. There is a \$535,827 budget called "Miscellaneous". Who is in charge of these funds and how is this budget developed?

COUNTY OVERVIEW

KITTITAS COUNTY VOTERS

BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS X

ELECTED OFFICIALS

- X* Assessor
- X* Auditor
- X* Clerk
- X* Prosecutor/Coroner
- X* Sheriff
- X* Treasurer
- X* Superior Court Judge
- X* District Court Judges

Public Service Department

X Department of Public Works

Parks

X Planning

X Building Inspector/Fire Marshall

X Solid Waste

Airport

Flood Control

Support Services

Communications

X Data Processing

X Facilities Maintenance

Civil Service

Community Services

X Mental Health

X Public Health

X Co-op. Extension

X County Fair

V. Alternative Forms of County Government

Although the framers of the state Constitution wanted uniformity in county governmental structure, they also included the phrase "except as hereafter provided," a state constitutional provision which made future changes in county governmental structure possible through legislative action or amendments to the state Constitution.

However, it was more than fifty years after statehood before the first alternative to the three-member board of commissioners, the "Home Rule" charter system of government, was made available by constitutional amendment on Nov. 2, 1948. In the same year, Article XI was amended to provide for the formation of combined city and county municipal corporations, and for the manner of determining the territorial limits thereof, each of which shall be known as a "city and county" and, when organized, shall contain a population of at least three hundred thousand (300,000) inhabitants.

In 1990, one hundred years after statehood, the state legislature enacted another alternative to the three-member board of commissioners. This new law provides that (1) the board of commissioners of any non-charter county with a population of three hundred thousand or more may submit a ballot proposition at a general election to the voters of the county, authorizing the board of commissioners to be increased to five members, upon petition of the county voters equal to at least ten percent of the voters voting at the last county general election. At least twenty percent of the signatures on the petition must come from each of the existing commissioner districts. There is some question as to whether this alternative is available in Kittitas county since the county is not a "non-charter county with a population of three hundred thousand or more".

Another possible route to changing the structure of county government is by way of a "Home Rule" charter county amendment.

The first step toward becoming a "Home Rule" charter county is the election by the voters of "not less than 15 nor more than twenty five freeholders" at an election called for by the board of commissioners or by a petition signed by ten percent of the registered voters at the last preceding election. The elected freeholders are to convene within thirty days after their election to prepare and propose a charter for the county. If a proposed charter receives the affirmative vote of a majority of the voters, the board of commissioners would call for a special election and the new "Home Rule" county government would be established as provided for in the charter.

In legalese, after the adoption of the charter, "such county shall continue to have all the rights, powers, privileges and benefits then possessed or thereafter conferred by general law. All the powers, authority and duties granted to and imposed on county officers by general law, except the prosecuting attorney, the county superintendent of schools, the judges of the superior court and the justices of the peace, shall be vested in the legislative authority of the county unless expressly vested in specific officers by the charter. The legislative authority may by resolution delegate any of its executive or administrative powers, authority or duties not expressly vested in specific officers by the charter, to any county officer, or officers or county employee or employees."

General reasons for choosing the "Home Rule" charter system include the following beliefs:

- citizens would receive wider representation in county matters
- there would be increased public input in the deliberations of the legislative body
- there would be more local control of county government

To date, only five of the state's 39 counties have opted to become "Home Rule" charter counties: King, Pierce, Whatcom, Snohomish and Clallam. All but Clallam county created county councils (nine members for King, seven members for Whatcom and Pierce, and five for Snohomish) whose primary duty is to adopt a budget for the county and to establish county policy. These counties also have elected county executives who are responsible for proposing budgets and also hold veto power over council actions. Clallam county retained its three-member board of commissioners but provided for an administrator, appointed by the commissioners, to assist the board.