

What are cities for?(Editorials)(General-purpose governments vs. special districts)(Editorial)

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The Lane County Local Government Boundary Commission did everyone a favor when it turned down a plan to annex Springfield's fire department to the Willakenzie Rural Fire Protection District. It may make sense for Springfield to spin off its emergency-services responsibilities, but the annexation raises questions about the structure, purpose, governance and financing of local government. Springfield should not proceed until those questions have been examined.

The boundary commission unanimously rejected the annexation earlier this month on grounds that it conflicts with the Eugene-Springfield Metropolitan Area General Plan, the basic land-use document for areas within the cities' urban growth boundaries. Among the Metro Plan's central principles is that cities shall be the primary providers of urban services. Springfield would violate that principle by turning its fire department over to a rural district, the commission decided, so the city can't move ahead without first persuading its partners, Eugene and Lane County, to amend the plan.

The principle is sound. If urban services are provided by special districts outside cities, local governments lose a powerful means of encouraging compact growth and orderly development. Those are central goals of land-use planning, which is meant to have the dual benefits of preserving farm and forest lands and making efficient use of public investments in urban services.

The Metro Plan was drawn up before voter-approved property tax limitations restricted local governments' ability to finance services. Cities and counties are unable to maintain the services they provided in the past, much less accommodate increased demands. One of the few options remaining is for local governments to divest themselves of some responsibilities, and use their existing resources to better support those that remain.

That was one rationale for Springfield's annexation proposal: If the city could free itself of the obligation to pay for fire protection, it would increase its financial capacity to support other operations.

A property tax system that pushes local governments in this direction is manifestly irrational. Springfield residents would pay for fire and ambulance services, whether provided by the city or by the Willakenzie district. If the best argument for annexation is that Springfield would gain room under the property tax limitations for increased taxes to support as-yet-unspecified services, it's easy to predict what the voters' reaction would be: No sale.

Another argument for annexation, however, is more persuasive. If annexation results in a larger district that can provide more efficient fire protection at the same or lower cost, the idea would be worth pursuing. Indeed, Springfield's annexation might be thought of as the first step toward a unified fire department covering the entire Eugene-Springfield area.

Springfield officials haven't decided how to respond to the boundary commission's rejection, but they don't believe the Metro Plan rules out an annexation. It's possible that the spirit and the letter of the Metro Plan differ. Fire protection isn't exclusively a municipal service - rural and urban areas alike have fire departments. And nothing in the annexation proposal would limit Springfield's ability to manage and direct its growth, which is the chief purpose of the Metro Plan.

But why stop with fire protection? Other services provided by cities - police, parks, libraries - could also be turned over to service districts that might benefit from economies of scale.

A proliferation of single-purpose districts, however, could have several unwanted consequences. The districts would be governed by low-profile boards, with a corresponding loss of accountability. City councils currently allocate limited public resources among essential services; that balancing function would be lost. The cities themselves would lose important parts of their reasons for existing. The task of keeping the aggregate local government property tax rates

below the maximum allowed by law would become more complicated than it already is, and disputes among districts over their proper share of property tax resources could be expected.

These and other possibilities will need to be considered if Springfield seeks a Metro Plan amendment that would allow its annexation proposal to move forward. Annexation might make sense for the fire department - provided the justification is improved services, not an evasion of property tax limits. But the city and county governments would have to be sure of what they were doing before amending the Metro Plan to allow districts of all kinds. That door, once opened, could not be easily closed.

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