
Local Government Committee

HJR 4215

Brief Description: Authorizing consolidation or merging of statutory and constitutional county functions and structures.

Sponsors: Representatives Sommers, Romero, Jarrett, Clibborn, Moeller, Bush, Edwards, Morrell and Kagi.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Creates a ballot initiative for consideration at the next general election proposing the amendment of the state constitution so as to allow counties to consolidate or merge any statutory or constitutional function or structure.
- Authorizes the legislature to pass laws necessary to implement the proposed constitutional amendment and to impose additional requirements or conditions required for such implementation.

Hearing Date: 1/26/04

Staff: Thamas Osborn (786-7129).

Background:

In Article XI, sections 1 through 5, the state constitution provides that counties shall be the primary legal subdivision of the state and outlines the general requirements for county governance. Under these constitutional provisions, the legislature is required to establish a uniform system of county government and to provide for the election and compensation of county commissioners, sheriffs, clerks, treasurers, prosecuting attorneys, and other necessary officers.

The state constitution prohibits the creation of a new county with fewer than 2,000 residents or which has the effect of reducing the population of an existing county to less than 4,000 residents. No territory can be taken from any county unless a majority of the voters living in the territory petition for the change in boundaries. Any county taking territory from another county is liable for a just proportion of existing debts and liabilities of the county losing territory.

Five new counties have been formed since statehood, and no new counties have been formed since 1911. No counties have ever been dissolved.

At present, Washington has 39 counties with populations ranging from 2,400 to 1.7 million. 34 of these counties operate under the commission form of government and 5 have adopted "home rule"

charters, pursuant to provisions in the state constitution and legislation enacted in 1948. The five "home rule" charter counties are Clallam, King, Pierce, Snohomish, and Whatcom.

Summary of Bill:

The bill creates a ballot initiative for consideration at the next general election proposing the amendment of Article XI, Section 3, of the state constitution, so as to allow counties to consolidate or merge any statutory or constitutional function or structure.

The proposed constitutional amendment would also authorize the legislature to pass laws necessary to implement the proposed constitutional amendment and to impose additional requirements or conditions required for such implementation. Any such laws must be "general" laws applicable to the whole state.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.