

# North Highline Unincorporated Area Council

## Listening Session On Preliminary Governance Recommendations – November 21, 2005

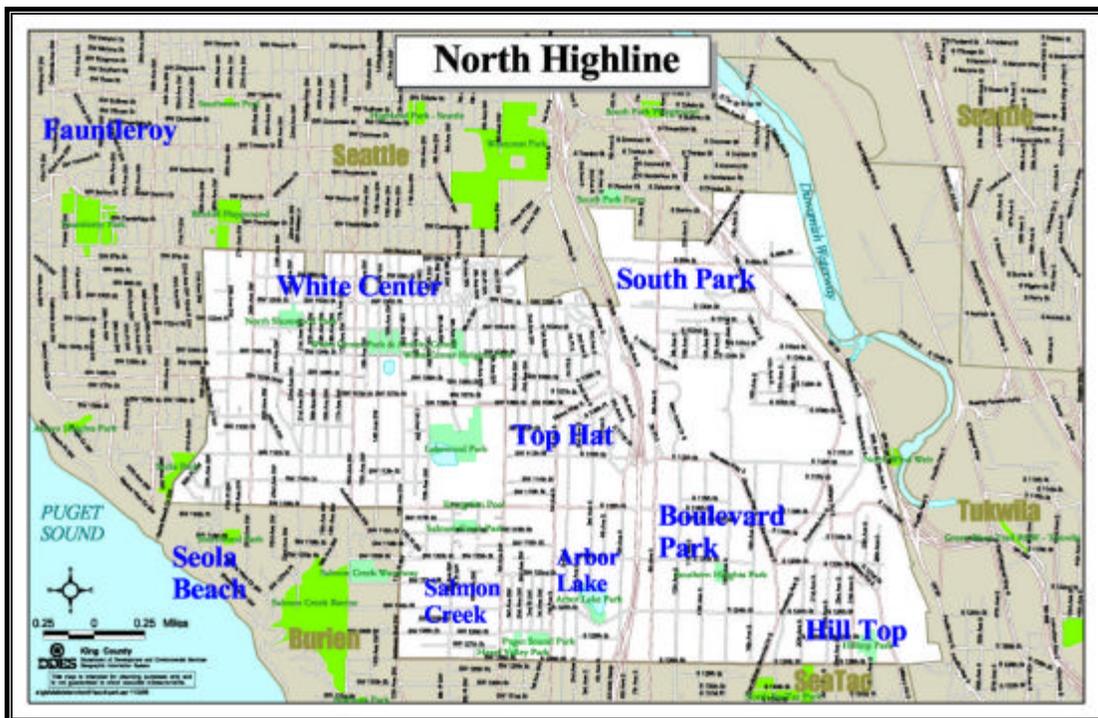
### FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

#### Why is North Highline considering incorporation or annexation?

Under the provisions of our State's Growth Management Act and by broad consensus of city and county governments, local governmental services to urban areas are to be provided by cities by the year 2013. Some of these urban but currently unincorporated areas will incorporate to form new cities; others will annex into existing cities. In either case, areas which are fundamentally urban in nature will not remain unincorporated permanently. In King County, there are ten major unincorporated urban areas, of which North Highline is one of the largest. King County is energetically seeking the shift of local services in these areas to cities.

#### How big an area is being talked about?

North Highline totals about 6 square miles. It is the home to about 32,500 people in over 12,000 households, including the communities of White Center, South Park, Top Hat, Boulevard Park, Hill Top, Arbor Lake, Salmon Creek and others. The map below portrays the North Highline unincorporated area.



North Highline Neighborhoods

## **Hasn't this subject of incorporation and annexation been studied before?**

Governance of North Highline has been analyzed about 10 times from a number of different perspectives over the last 12 years. The studies include various annexation analyses by Seattle, Burien and King County; demographic and revenue analyses; and two incorporation studies, including this one. Some of the work has included public surveys. The Fiscal Bases report of this study compared the data of the other work and found it all to be remarkably similar in conclusions about the financial implications of incorporation or annexation. This study was intended to address the question of whether incorporation might be financially viable if different taxes were included in the incorporation assumptions and to educate the public about governance options.

## **Who has overseen this governance study?**

The sponsor of this study was King County, through King County Council member Dow Constantine. It was supported by King County Executive Ron Sims' staff. The study advisory committee is the North Highline Unincorporated Area Council (UAC), a 13-member body elected by residents of North Highline to serve as an advisory body to represent the residents, business owners, and property owners of the North Highline unincorporated area in their dealings with the government of King County and other entities with respect to issues affecting them and their property. The UAC reviewed each report of this study and gave direction on key aspects of the approach, such as levels of service to assume in the analysis of cost of service for incorporation and on the public involvement portions of the study.

## **Why do we need to incorporate as a new city or annex to an existing city? Why can't we just stay unincorporated?**

Beyond the policies adopted under the Growth Management Act, incorporation or annexation of unincorporated urban areas is a dollars and cents issue for counties. The costs of the delivery of urban services to unincorporated areas in King County have been conclusively shown to *far* exceed the revenues which these areas generate, exacerbating the severe budget squeeze faced by King County in recent years and forcing service cutbacks and large layoffs. Funds for regional services across the County are subsidizing local services in urban but unincorporated areas. Although awkward and unpleasant for any official to sketch in detail to his or her constituents, the inevitable picture is that the level of service in these unincorporated urban areas – police services, road maintenance, parks maintenance, etc. – will decline. Any of these remaining unincorporated areas could conceivably choose to remain unincorporated, but it would over time see eroding levels of service.

## **What services would change if we incorporated or annexed?**

Contrary to general perception, most services would not change upon incorporation or annexation. (See below.) One's local government and local representatives would indeed change, from County Councilmember and Executive to City Councilmember and Mayor. The maintenance of local roads and local parks would also shift from the County to the City. Responsibility for police services would shift from County to City, but some cities, such as

Burien, provide these services by contracting with King County Sheriff, thereby keeping the actual provider unchanged. (Seattle has its own police department.) Incorporation or annexation also removes any area from a fire district or from a library district – although cities often chose to rejoin the district immediately, as Burien has done, also keeping these providers unchanged. (Seattle would use its own fire department and library system.)

## **What services would stay the same?**

State and regional taxes and services would not change. Most taxing district boundaries are unaffected by new or changed municipal boundaries, so most services would not change. School, port, public utility, cemetery, and hospital districts are completely unchanged by incorporation or annexation. Specifically, in North Highline this means that the Highline School District would continue as the provider of local schools. Even if North Highline became part of the City of Seattle, it would *not* become part of the Seattle School District, a separate entity from the City of Seattle. Similarly, no change in water or sewer district boundaries occurs upon incorporation or annexation, so North Highline would continue to be serviced by its current providers, although it is possible that Seattle Water might in the future seek to annex areas which had become part of the City of Seattle. The health and human services that King County provides regionally would also remain the same.

## **Does the fiscal analysis show a City of North Highline to be feasible?**

Unfortunately and definitively, no. A City must balance its revenues and its expenditures, and the shortfall under current levels of taxation and services in North Highline would be \$6.6 million annually beyond the projected revenues of \$8.0 million for operations and maintenance items in the City, plus a shortfall of \$3.2 million annually in funding projected capital needs.

## **How did today's governance study come to that conclusion?**

The current study approached the feasibility of incorporation in five steps:

1. Collection and calculation of the fiscal parameters upon which revenues and costs will be calculated,
2. Development of revenue estimates, both current and potential future,
3. Assessment of levels of service,
4. Estimation of the costs of these levels of service, and
5. Comparison of revenues and costs and determination whether incorporation is financially feasible.

## **But what if we tightened our belts and even raised revenues through some new taxes?**

Under the assumed conditions of substantially increased utility taxes and business and occupation taxes (important tax authorities available to cities but not to counties) and substantially reduced services, the projected City budget would still not be balanced, showing a shortfall of \$2.3 million in operating funds and \$3.2 million in capital funds.

## **Why are we considering annexing to Burien or Seattle?**

The principle behind this and previous reviews of North Highline governance is that as an urban area of the county, North Highline's services must be provided by an incorporated entity in the future. The County cannot continue to provide urban levels of service to the remaining unincorporated areas within the County's urban growth area. Thus, the choices are incorporation to form a new city or annexation to an adjacent city. Typically, the areas remaining unincorporated within the County's urban growth area are designated as the potential annexation area of one adjacent city. Although North Highline has not yet been designated as a potential annexation area for any city, both Burien and Seattle have expressed specific interests in the potential annexation of North Highline. The other cities adjacent to North Highline, SeaTac and Tukwila, have not expressed a similar interest.

## **How has the public been involved in this study?**

This study has included two public surveys (one still in progress; the other conducted in May of this year); seven meetings with the North Highline Unincorporated Area Council (UAC)— all of which were open to and included members of the public – regarding specific reports from this study, and two meetings (including this one) for the UAC to hear feedback from the public prior to making formal recommendations. There have been two mailings to every household in the North Highline area. All of the study products have been posted on the internet for public review as soon as they have been presented to the UAC.

## **What actions has the UAC taken?**

To date, the UAC has guided and monitored this study and has hosted public hearings and testimony. They have taken no formal actions to date but have made a preliminary recommendation for public review and comment. That preliminary recommendation includes the following conclusions:

- Incorporation as separate city would not be financially possible for North Highline.
- North Highline should not be split between Seattle and Burien.
- North Highline should annex to Burien.

These preliminary recommendations will be reviewed with consideration to the comments received in the public survey and this meeting and a final recommendation to the public and to King County will be made by the UAC in December.

## **Why did the UAC recommend annexation to Burien instead of Seattle?**

The UAC recommended Burien for the following reasons. The UAC concluded that:

- North Highline citizens could have more local control in governance as residents of Burien than of Seattle. In Burien, the North Highline citizens would be half of Burien's population, while as residents of Seattle, North Highline citizens would comprise only 1/20 of the city population.

- Annexation to Seattle could increase property values to the point that housing would no longer be affordable.
- Taxes are lower in Burien relative to Seattle (due primarily to utility taxes but also to B&O taxes).
- Annexation to Burien would allow continuity of police and fire service with the existing County and Fire District providers.
- There would be a greater ability to retain the "small town" culture of North Highline with Burien, compared to Seattle.

## Can the North Highline area be split into two parts, with part going to Seattle and part to Burien?

North Highline could be divided into two parts, with one part annexing to Seattle and the other to Burien. However, this was not included in the UAC's preliminary recommendation, and the consultants were not given direction to develop any boundary for splitting North Highline. The following reasons for not splitting the area between Seattle and Burien were discussed by the UAC:

- The UAC felt there was no way to find a boundary that would be logical, as the surveys showed that people living close to Seattle are not necessarily interested in annexing to Seattle nor vice versa for Burien. The people who have an affinity for Seattle are not geographically isolated within North Highline.
- If either of the two business centers were split from the rest of the North Highline area, the remaining area would be even less financially viable for the city annexing it.

## Do we get to vote on which City we would like to annex to?

Annexation is a complex process and there are several ways to achieve it. In short, among the methods for annexation to occur, some allow for votes of the people, while one does not. **In the case of North Highline, King County has committed that before annexation would occur, the proposition would be placed on the ballot for a vote of the North Highline public.** The UAC recommendation that will be finalized in December would simply *begin* the process of formal discussions between the County, Burien (or Seattle, if the recommendation changes), and the North Highline public about the specific circumstances and timing for a vote of the public.

Annexation may be initiated by citizen petition requesting annexation election, with signatures equal to 10% of the votes cast in last general election. With this petition approach, the City Council would then determine whether to accept the petition.

Alternatively, a City may pass a resolution expressing its intent to annex and call for an election by the population to be annexed. A simple majority vote would be needed for annexation to be approved.

Another option is for the County to arrange annexation with the annexing City, and a vote is not required if the unincorporated area is entirely surrounded by incorporated area. However, in this case, if this approach is used, the City and County agreement is subject to a referendum by vote of the people if requested.

Annexations are subject to State Boundary Review Board approval, and cities can choose to reject annexation even if the election vote is favorable.

## **How can I have an affect on the choices about to be made?**

There are a several avenues for influencing the decisions that will be made. These include:

- Attending and/or monitoring future meetings of the UAC and City of Burien (or Seattle, should the recommendation change) related to the issue of annexation.
- Send letters or emails to the UAC and/or to King County Council member Dow Constantine.
- Vote, if/when the ballot proposition is put forth.

## **What happens next?**

At its next meeting (12/1/05), the North Highline Unincorporated Area Council (UAC) will consider its preliminary recommendation in light of comments received from tonight's meeting (11/21/05), from the door to door survey currently being conducted in North Highline neighborhoods, and from other sources and make a final recommendation on governance. This recommendation will be presented to the King County Council for its consideration.

## **Where could I learn more?**

The analyses and reports produced in this study are available for download from the UAC web site ([www.northhighlineuac.org](http://www.northhighlineuac.org)) as are notices of coming meetings, updates on governance, and other items of interest to North Highline.