

Opinion: Oak Grove annexation into Milwaukie makes sense

Valerie Chapman

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Valerie Chapman: Incorporation means higher taxes, but money is available to cities that is not available for unincorporated areas.

After retiring in 2017, I began attending the Oak Grove Community Council (OGCC) meetings regularly, became a member of the OGCC Board in 2019 and currently serve as its vice-chair. I represented the OGCC on the McLoughlin Area Plan Implementation Team (MAP-IT) and serve as chair of the Park Avenue Community Advisory Committee. These activities have shaped my views of local governance.

Before becoming more involved in the community, if someone had suggested incorporation or annexing into Milwaukie, I would have asked, "Why?" For all practical purposes my family lives in Milwaukie. Our address is "Milwaukie." We have the 97222 Milwaukie ZIP code. We go to the Ledding Library, go out to eat, go to the post office, go to church, attend classes, participate in festivals and frequent the farmers' market, all in Milwaukie. We can walk into Milwaukie or hop on the MAX and be there in three minutes. My area, the north end of Oak Grove, is oriented north toward the city, but we cannot vote on issues related to the city because we do not in fact live in Milwaukie. We are "non-city residents" who participate without a voice and without the benefits of localized planning and zoning.

For legal matters, permits, planning, code enforcement, etc., we turn south, through one city, Gladstone, and into the next one, Oregon City, to reach the county seat and location of governance for Oak Grove. When we put solar panels on our house the whole process was held up for weeks because the contractor "assumed" we lived in Milwaukie. He had to reapply for permits in the correct jurisdiction, Clackamas County. The

county inspector was booked weeks-out with work. When my car was stolen, I worked through the sheriff's office, whose deputies worked with me professionally, but Milwaukie police officers would have been convenient.

Working on the Orange Line, MAP-IT and the Park Avenue Project taught me that this rapidly urbanizing area would be better served by a localized urban government rather than the rural government it has. To move projects forward as an unincorporated area, decisions ultimately fall to the Board of County Commissioners, which oversees the entire county, which is an exceptionally large and diverse area. As a city, elected officials would live inside the city boundaries. Our commissioners live anywhere in the county. On the Clackamas County Coordinating Committee (C4) which considers issues across the county, every city has a representative but there is one single representative for the unincorporated areas. Decisions that take a vote, like the question of mass transit in the future or urban renewal in unincorporated areas must be voted on by the whole county. But many decisions are made by the five-member Board of County Commissioners.

The current governance structure does not allow the Oak Grove area with its distinctly urban character to have much agency regarding local issues that concern us, yet the Oak Grove/Jennings Lodge area is as large or larger in both area and population than many cities in the state. Even when decisions can be made at the county level, the area must wait its turn based on the needs of the whole county. After being frustrated by the cumbersome pathway for needed change, which often dead-ends even after a thorough public process, incorporation or annexation into Milwaukie makes sense to me. I believe we need more localized control. Before the pandemic closed in-person meetings, I attended a forum hosted by County Commissioner Paul Savas. He suggested beginning to explore incorporation because the financial health of the county was not good. I heard what he said. I have also heard that people are afraid that annexation/incorporation only means higher taxes, but there is also money available to cities that is not available for unincorporated areas. As an incorporated area we could use our collective share of tax revenues to better fit community needs. The Oak Grove/Jennings Lodge area is rapidly changing, and it will continue to change. We can either be part of the

process, deciding and guiding what we want, or allow others to decide for us.

Thanks for reading this. I look forward to conversations within the community.

If you want to learn more about Oak Lodge Governance Project, please connect with us at oaklodgegovernance@gmail.com facebook.com/Oak-Lodge-Governance-Project-117770633469296, twitter.com/OakLodgeGP and instagram.com/oaklodgeproject. Our website is forthcoming.

Valerie Chapman, a volunteer on the Oak Lodge Governance Project Steering Committee, has lived in the Oak Grove area since 1981, raising six children who attended various area schools, mostly in Milwaukie.