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Area Comment...

Questions rural representation...

Somewhere deep in the bowels of the County Courthouse in Dillon is a three-person committee reviewing county government for Beaverhead County. I don't know when, where or what subjects they are pondering. I have seen no progress reports nor any interest to go to the various parts of the county for public input. My concern is with the representation of the rural interests in the deliberations of the county commissioners.

What I see is that the county commission has become the upper legislative body of the Dillon City Council. This is confirmed with the last election for commissioner. In the past, the Wisdom area has a local commissioner who knew everyone by name and background. We may not have always shared the same views on issues, but we got a sympathetic hearing at least. With a 15-minute drive, a toll-free local phone call, we could be in contact with the representative. Moreover, they passed though town or business or mail (as well as their wives) who could collect our concerns. In the rural parts of the district he represented he got barely one out of three votes. All of the city councilmen and all of the county commissioners live and work within a few miles or less of either city hall or the county courthouse. One of the great tension lines in Beaverhead County is between the interests of the city and town and that of the country and rural areas. Thus, when it comes push to shove, the city will always win by a score of three to nothing. I have made my own study of the matter of representation and have proposed ADDITION to the county charter. I will outline my proposed addition and then briefly explain my research which lead to that result.

PROPOSED ADDITION TO THE COUNTY CHARTER

That each commissioner be required to hold an informal, regularly scheduled monthly "coffee hour" within the rural voting precinct within the commissioner district he represents. For transportation, he should ride with county officials who already have official vehicles and the expectation to go to these areas as a part of their official duties.

Explanation:

Transportation could be riding with the county road supervisor, the sheriff deputy assigned to that area or perhaps even have the sheriff himself or the under sheriff to go to these coffee hours. The agenda can be very loose. If nothing more than just passing the time of day and an interest in what the locals are doing so that there is a personal relationship developed. They could discuss the issues coming before the county and what they are doing. Here in Wisdom when I pay my taxes, there is an item "Wisdom Improvement," but no one really knows what it all should cover. Some years ago we did find out

	Population	Square Miles.
District 3 on the north	2,729	1,858
District 1 in the middle	2,728	1,869
District 2 in the south	2,729	1,856

Totals 8,186 5,583

It would seem logical to elect commissioners from and within each of the commissioner districts. However, while the candidate is expected to reside in the commissioner district when elected by a county-wide vote, the real problem comes in coordinating the 15 voting precincts for the county with the commissioner districts. The problem is keeping the population balance. For example, one precinct within Dillon is represented by all three commissioners, another by two. It is similar in the outlying districts, for example, the Jackson Precinct is divided between commissioner III and commissioner I. Thus we elect on a county-wide basis.

We will revisit the square mile data in another context. However county government is foremost a people activity, "Government of the people, by the people and for the people." Concern with the square miles or surface is incidental to governing. It is what the people do with the square miles that is secondarily a governmental concern. They may be farming, ranching, logging, mining or manufacturing on the land. Why not draw commissioner districts on the basis of voter distributions?

I use voter registration data because children and teenagers do not vote and there are some adults who refuse to register to vote. Some very specifically because they do not want to take charge of being called to jury duty.

My data comes from the clerk and recorder's office. As of March 8, 1995, the voter rolls were closed in preparation for the school elections. There are a total of 4,834 eligible voters in all of Beaverhead County. If you put together the five Dillon Precincts, they provide about 59 percent of the Beaverhead voting population.

1. Dillon S. Central	579.
2. Dillon South	622.
6. Dillon N. Central	567.
7. Dillon East	712.
14. Dillon	378.

Total 2,858.

What this means is that six of every ten Beaverhead County voters live in Dillon. But, related to the commissioner situation, it means that nearly two of every three voters live in Dillon. On the basis of voter registration, Dillon could elect two commissioners and all the rest of the county could elect the third. For one commissioner to represent all the rest of the county would be quite difficult. Moreover, on some very specific issues, it would create a strong us-and-them situation which would be easily decided by

one thing that it covers—the street lighting. The commissioners collected the money but did not pay the bill. They spent the money elsewhere. They were finally reminded that the bill was still due, thus the next year the tax was raised in order to pay the past-due bill, as well as the current one. The fact that they make an appearance and are available for talk should be enough. A commissioner might reply that he goes there to meet with friends. He certainly can do that in his private life, but if it is offered as a political savvy of the area, that is pure croneyism. It is like meeting only with those who donated funds to his political campaign. The meetings should be publicly announced specifying the day of the month, the time and place for the “coffee hour.”

Trips should be made in all kinds of weather so that they can see what the locals deal with on a regular basis.

TEETH TO THE PROPOSAL

Because the commissioners are elected at-large, that is on a county-wide vote, the current philosophy has been “everybody’s responsibility is nobody’s responsibility.” Thus the specific designations for meeting for each commissioner within his district. There need to be some teeth to the proposed addition.

PROPOSED TEETH:

A commissioner, who during a calendar year fails to make 25 percent of the scheduled monthly meeting at any one voting precinct location or 20 percent of the overall total, will be **REQUIRED** to stand for election at the next regularly scheduled county-wide election.

MY BACKGROUND STUDY AND ANALYSIS OF THE MATTERS

I fully realized that when getting down to the nitty-gritty of matters, the devil is in the details. Before I made any proposed changes, I should try to understand what presently exists. From the clerk and recorder’s office, I got copies of the commissioner districts and of the voting precinct maps. I got other data, such as the registered voters for each precinct, as a total number, not by individuals. To this I added data from my own holdings in maps, such as land holdings of federal and state agencies. There is a lot of calculations and thinking about the matter which I will summarize.

COMMISSIONER DISTRICTS

The last government study commission created a map for the present commissioner districts. Their concern was the U.S. Supreme Court ruling of “one man, one vote.”

Each district has a slice of Dillon. The three districts are nicely balanced in population and land area. The other district covers Jackson, Wisdom, Dewey, Birch Creek-Glendale and Glenn so that it can have continuity with the eastern slice of Dillon. Here are the total on the commissioner district map.

a two-to-one vote. Another alternative, of course, is to increase the number of commissioners, but I don’t think the voters would even consider it. Therefore, it seems worth trusting that our commissioners have a sense of responsibility to listen, thus my suggested additions to the county charter to assure that they do make those visits.

To complete the data of voter registrations by voting precinct in the following shows how thin the voter distributions are outside of Dillon.

23. Dewey	140.
21. Wisdom	210.
20. Jackson	102.
19. Polaris-Bannack	86.
18. Glenn	41.
17. Birch Creek-Glendale	56.
8. Grant	110.
5. Dell	128.
4. Lima	247.
2. Argenta-Barretts	856.

Total 1,976.

HOW SMALL CAN THE GOVERNMENT OF A BIG COUNTY BE?

The Beaverhead County government, in theory, has jurisdiction over all of the 5,582 square miles within the county. As stated earlier, the role of government is not the surface of the land, but an interest in the residents and the use they make of that land. Thus, the areas of the commissioner districts in the voting precincts are very large. The maps reflect that theoretical jurisdiction over all of the county. But what the maps do not reflect is how useless the county agencies are on most of the land. Above, we noted that the county has 5,583 square miles, but this is greatly reduced by the government-owned lands within the county. The three largest land holders are the U.S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management and the Department of State Lands. The Beaverhead National Forests alone controls about 2,110 square miles of land which is about 37 percent of the county area. When you add in the areas of the BLM and the DSL, it is a little over half of the county. There are smaller government holdings ranging from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Agricultural Experiment station to the Bureau of Reclamation and the National Park Service to the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks. This, of course, is a very practical consideration. As a result of the commissioner district and the voter precinct maps were and are well-crafted under these circumstances.

MY PURPOSE

I write this in the hope that I can get others interested in the work of the County Government Study Commission. There are some who might have comments of their own. To direct them to me is shooting blanks. I’m only a citizen, a resident, a small-tax payer and a voter. I can do nothing. Direct your comments to the study commission, which has such powers.

Alfred W. Schulmeyer
Wisdom.