

Study commission hopes to tune up local charter

By BILL HEISEL JR.
of *The Montana Standard*

ANACONDA — The six members of the Anaconda-Deer Lodge County Study Commission think they have a pretty good idea of the changes voters would like to see in their local government.

They've talked to nearly every county employee, interviewed past elected officials and conducted a sizable survey of area residents.

They've also gathered opinions at four public hearings and held open meetings most weeks since they were elected in November 1994.

"We've worked really hard to have an open process," said com-

mission member Mike Grayson.

As a result of that process, the commission is proposing five amendments to the local government charter, in many cases small changes that the members believe will effect big improvements. Residents will vote Tuesday on the proposals.

■ Charter Amendment No. 1 would require that all county boards be created by the county commission by ordinance with specific requirements, such as duties, meeting times and expiration dates.

The commission crafted this proposal in response to complaints from boards that felt they lacked direction. Many boards are still on the books, although they haven't met for

more than 10 years and some members have passed away.

■ Charter Amendment No. 2 would give the county chief executive the power to veto decisions by the county commission, although the veto could be overturned by a 4-1 vote of the commission.

When voters made the chief executive an elected position in 1993, they didn't give the office any authority over the commission. Grayson said the proposal would balance out the power between the commission and the chief executive, similar to the situation in Butte-Silver Bow County. Only one of the six candidates running for commission seats this election has stated clear opposition to the proposal.

■ Charter Amendment No. 3 would eliminate the local Advisory Councils and change the method of filling vacancies on the Anaconda-Deer Lodge County Commission.

Created when Anaconda and Deer Lodge County merged in 1977, five advisory councils were set up to make up for the loss of elected leaders during the change. In recent years, the membership of the five Advisory Councils has dwindled, leaving only eight members out of 15. And the councils, although made up of elected members, have no authority to enact their ideas.

Instead of filling commission vacancies with advisory council members, the commission would appoint the candidate for the

vacant commission district who had received the second-highest total of votes in the previous election.

■ Charter Amendment No. 4 would change the county attorney position from a partisan post to nonpartisan.

The county attorney is the last bastion of local Democratic politics, although a study commission survey showed that most area residents want nonpartisan local offices. For the past two elections the outcome of the general election has been determined months earlier in the Democratic primary, essentially preventing Republicans from voting in the county attorney race.

■ Charter Amendment No. 5

would define the duties of the chief of law enforcement. For example, it would make it clear the chief could not serve as ambulance service director and coroner. The chief executive could appoint another officer to those positions.

Commission Chairman Jake Maciag said current Chief Jim Connors continued to carry the title of coroner after the position was changed to an elected office in 1993, although the commission could have appointed a different person as coroner. "These are just common-sense approaches to strengthen the charter," Maciag said. "If we can strengthen local government, we can strengthen the community."