

# INCORPORATIONS IN KING COUNTY

*Historical Paper No. 2*

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## Introduction

This paper outlines the history of incorporation of cities and towns in King County. King County, if it were to be considered as a state, would rank as the 48th in territory and the 32nd in population. It currently has 39 incorporated cities and towns with a population of nearly 1.6 million persons. It is the most populous, developed, and governmentally complex political unit in Washington State. It was organized by the Oregon Territorial Legislature in 1852, some 37 years before Washington was admitted to statehood. After several major and minor territorial realignments, it assumed its present boundary configuration about 1901. The very nature of King County often renders analysis of its political infrastructure difficult.

Some discrepancy exists in the records kept by public agencies as to dates of incorporation, merger or annexation. This may be due in part to the fact that the popular vote or local government action for annexation, incorporation or merger does not always come in the same year as official certification by the state and actual startup of the municipality. Under the law, incorporation elections and the election of the first public officials of a municipality are separate ballot issues.

## *IN THE BEGINNING*

Seattle was designated the county seat in 1852 by the Oregon Territorial Legislature, some 13 years before it was first incorporated. Seattle first attempted to incorporate in 1865, but the effort was ruled invalid. A second attempt was made in 1869 with a revised charter, and Seattle then became the first municipality in King County. Although there were other settlements around the county in its early decades, most remained small agricultural communities, reliant upon waterborne transportation.

Seattle and King County experienced slow economic and population growth while railroad transportation to the county's eastern interior was lacking. In the late 1870s and in the 1880s Seattle interests developed two local railroads, the Seattle and Walla Walla and the Seattle, Lakeshore, and Eastern which opened up vast tracts in east and southeast King County to development of their agriculture, lumber and coal resources. With this growth in the development of resource lands and with the economic development associated with the Gold Rush of 1897, maritime trade, local manufacturing and the hydropower industry, the city-county population experienced population booms, especially in the decades of the 1880s and the 1900s. Although national depressions and economic downturns affected the region in the 1890s and 1900s, Seattle was still considered to be among the fastest growing major cities in the western United States during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Rapid growth and development has

had much to do with the discrete time periods associated with "waves" of incorporation around King County.

### *THE FIRST WAVE: 1890s-1910s*

Population growth, industrial expansion, the development of new overseas and coastwise markets, and new technological developments stimulated the first "wave" of incorporations in King County from the 1890s through the 1910s. In a little over twenty years 24 municipalities were incorporated in King County! Many of these were relatively older, established rural communities which had been settled as early as the 1850s, such as: Auburn (Slaughter); Enumclaw; Issaquah (Gilman); Kent; North Bend; and Renton. Others were communities neighboring Seattle which were incorporated and annexed as part of the Queen City's "Greater Seattle" expansion drive. In total, the City of Seattle annexed a total of eight municipalities in the decade of the 1900s, including: Ballard; Columbia City; Georgetown; Ravenna; Southeast Seattle; South Park; South Seattle; and West Seattle. The other First Wave incorporations included: Bothell; Carnation (Tolt); Duvall, Kirkland, Pacific; Redmond; Skykomish; Snoqualmie; and Tukwila.

While communities such as Ravenna and Southeast Seattle eagerly sought incorporation primarily as a stepping stone to their desired annexation to Seattle, the Ballard annexation was resisted. Its annexation was considered something of a "hostile takeover." Ballard finally submitted to annexation only at Seattle's refusal to provide further service from its water system. Ballard capitulated rather than see its industry, then "the shingle capital of the world", destroyed. Later, when annexation goals were achieved, Seattle water again flowed to the suburbs as it does today. Control of the water supply has continued to be a regional issue between Seattle and its suburban municipality clients.

Over a period spanning more than three decades, from World War I through the depression to the end of World War II, no new municipalities were incorporated. The post war economy of the region in the 1920s was slack in many areas, even before the depression. There was a net decrease in the number of incorporated communities when the mining town of Ravensdale, near Black Diamond, ceased to operate, probably in the 1920s (no record could be found of actual disincorporation, and no formal disincorporation procedure was followed. While a "municipality" may exist on paper, it does not exist in actual operation. Ravensdale's municipal status may be a matter for lawyers to determine). Repeated disasters and tragedies in the mines there had destroyed the industry upon which the town depended. It is most likely that when the mines shut down, most of Ravensdale's populace, including the local government representatives, simply closed their doors and moved away to another active mining operation. Ravensdale ceased to operate, perhaps sometime in the 1920s.

### *THE SECOND WAVE: 1947-1961*

With the coming of World War II, the economy of Puget Sound, which had been lagging for several decades, picked up considerably. Midwestern dust bowl conditions, favorable press, and the prospect of jobs in the agricultural, lumber, shipyard and defense industries contributed to a massive influx of population to the region. "Caravans to the Northwest" saw entire families relocating to the state and to the city-county area in search of work. The wartime industrial

boom resulted in a permanent population increase for the city-county area of several hundred thousand persons.

Improved roads and the Mercer Island Floating Bridge, which opened in 1940, made for easier access to and development of eastside suburban areas during and after the war. In the post-war era, Shoreline, Highline, Eastside, and Green River Valley areas all began to develop into residential, commuter, or “bedroom communities” for Seattle, precipitating a steady decline in the “small town” character of rural King County. In the 1950s and 1960s, several small towns, including Tukwila, flirted with disincorporation, though the attempts proved unsuccessful. The Municipality of East Redmond, incorporated in 1956, was administratively disincorporated in 1964 by the Superior Court when its incorporation process was found to be invalid.

The population growth spurt during and after the war resulted in a second “wave” of incorporations, which extended from 1947 to 1961. During this period, 15 additional communities successfully incorporated, while another half dozen or so failed in the attempt. Many of the cities and towns were (and are) small residential communities with little if any industrial or commercial tax base. A number of these communities allegedly incorporated in order to establish community land use control for their territorial interests. Some of the smaller communities have, however, experienced difficulty in maintaining an adequate level of professional municipal services. Both the powers and the duties of local governments have increased significantly since the 1900s.

Second Wave incorporations included: Algona; Beaux Arts Village; Bellevue; Black Diamond; Clyde Hill; Des Moines; East Redmond; Houghton; Hunts Point; Lake Forest Park; Medina; Mercer Island (City and Town incorporated separately, later merged); Normandy Park, and Yarrow Point.

### *ENTER THE BOUNDARY REVIEW BOARD*

In 1967, the State Legislature augmented its existing legislation on the process of incorporation, Chapter 35.02 of the Revised Code of Washington (RCW) by authorizing the creation of Boundary Review Boards (BRB) in the class of county to which King County belongs (AA) under RCW 36.93. The purposes of the legislation include: preventing haphazard extension of municipal boundaries; and preventing competition to extend municipal boundaries. Among the objectives of the BRB of King County are:

- maintaining quality, quantity, and cost of municipal services
- insuring the financial integrity of municipalities
- promoting consistency of local regulations
- preventing disorganizing effects on land use
- preserving property values
- maintaining consistent, comprehensive land use planning in populated areas

In short, the BRB prevents “frivolous” incorporation attempts and reduces competition between municipalities for unincorporated areas and between junior taxing districts. Blocking development or eluding county permit restrictions were typical “frivolous” incorporation motives during the period when incorporation proceedings were handled by the county commissioners. Since its establishment, the BRB has taken precedence over county (Council) legislative authority in certain areas defined by state code.

It should be noted that no new incorporation attempts in King County were successful for the first two decades that the BRB was in existence. In the state as a whole, only several incorporation attempts were successful over a period of the BRB's first twenty years. Some attempts, such as those of Federal Way, failed repeatedly.

Under the present BRB legislation, it is questionable if many of King County's currently incorporated cities and towns could successfully petition the Boundary Review Board for an incorporation election. Had BRB rules been in force from the beginning, many of the smaller suburban residential cities and towns would simply not exist.

### *THE THIRD WAVE: 1989 TO DATE*

From 1961 until 1989, there were no new incorporations in King County. Even though population growth and development pressure was building, none of the communities could yet achieve "critical mass" in their incorporation attempts. There were many failed attempts. In King County, following closely on a successful incorporation in Snohomish County, the breakthrough came in 1989, the year of the State Centennial. That year, two new cities incorporated: Federal Way and SeaTac. Since then, there has been about one new successful incorporation per year, constituting a Third Wave. Among the Third Wave municipalities are: Burien; Covington; Federal Way; Kenmore, Maple Valley; Newcastle; Sammamish, SeaTac; Shoreline; Woodinville.

### *INCORPORATION & REGIONAL ISSUES*

State Growth Management legislation enacted beginning in 1990 under RCW 36.70 recognizes cities as primary providers of urban governmental services within urban growth areas. In King County the urban growth boundaries included a number of urbanized, but unincorporated areas, many of which are looking to annexation or incorporation in order to sustain service levels. Growth Management laws and planning activities have thus been a significant stimulus to both annexation and incorporation efforts. A number of urbanized but unincorporated areas are also looking toward their options under state Growth Management laws, and it is anticipated that at least some of them will incorporate in order to maintain the traditional identity, relationship to school districts and economic integrity of their communities and existing services. SeaTac, Shoreline, Covington and Maple Valley are notable examples of communities that have incorporated due, at least in part, to annexation pressure from adjacent municipalities.

There can be little doubt, at least at one level, that incorporations tend to reduce the "labyrinth" of local governments and taxing districts within certain boundaries. At the same time, incorporations as well as annexations tend to reduce the territorial extent and population over which county government has authority or jurisdiction. As this trend continues, the scope and role of county government is changing dramatically. Growth Management laws adopted beginning in 1990 also have limited the involvement of County government in the delivery of urban services.

At another level, incorporations add to the number of municipalities which must be factored into the equation of regional issues beyond local boundaries, such as water supply, solid waste, shoreline management, transportation and so on. Incorporations, then, have at least a two-tiered effect.

Neither the historic nor the current role of county government, as intermediary between local and state governments, has been well defined for the public. In fact, a number of incorporations have been motivated, at least in part, by the desire to get out from under what is perceived as a “distant” county bureaucracy and establish more accessible home rule government. The statutory powers and responsibilities of county governments have been evolving for well over a century, but they are still often ill suited for the delivery of certain services to urbanized populations.

The state legislature occasionally adds to the complexity of local/regional governmental issues when it authorizes the creation of new types of taxing districts. The enormous number of districts and jurisdictions already extant in the state (there are over 2500) and in the county (there are over 160) is a feature of our historic character. James Farley’s (Roosevelt Administration) oft-quoted phrase “the 47 states and the Soviet of Washington” could easily be construed to allude to our seeming preoccupation with government. The region is very well known historically for its populist politics and its penchant for governmental structure. One recent governor found, to his dismay, that there was (and is) a large number of powerful boards and commissions at the state level.

All of this contributes to the “balkanization” of political power, in which regional consensus on issues becomes difficult. The problem has long been recognized—calls for city-county consolidation were recorded here as early as 1897, but the successes over the years have been limited: the creation of METRO (The Municipality of Metropolitan Seattle); the formation of PSCOG (Puget Sound Council of Governments) now the Puget Sound Regional Council; and finally the consolidation of METRO and King County in 1992.

An historian of Seattle (Nard Jones) once said that “Seattle is King County, and vice versa”. While that may have been good rhetoric for the “Greater Seattle” movement, the notion has been totally eclipsed by the growth and development of trans-Seattle King County since World War II. While Seattle maintained its position as the major population base (as much as 80% of King County residents in early decades), it dominated political, economic and cultural affairs. Since the 1960s, however, the balance of population, together with considerable political, economic and cultural clout, has shifted to trans-Seattle King County. By the 1990s, two thirds of the County's population was living in rural and suburban areas outside of Seattle. All of the incorporated communities in the county as well as any future municipalities will want a voice in regional issues.

There has traditionally been little available published overview material about King County government for the citizenry as a whole, especially for educational purposes. Consultants and civic groups have prepared studies and charts on county governmental organization over the years. The textbook *Government in King County* (Seattle Public Schools) last appeared in 1935. In recent years, County Council members have issued a *Citizens' Guide to Metropolitan King County Government* that provides valuable insight into the range of County government services. The King County website at [www.kingcounty.gov](http://www.kingcounty.gov) is currently the most accessible source of County government information. King County Television (KCTV) also provides information about the County. For information visit the program’s website [www.kingcounty.gov/kctv.aspx](http://www.kingcounty.gov/kctv.aspx).

*CURRENTLY INCORPORATED*

Algona	1955
Auburn (Slaughter)	1891
Beaux Arts Village	1954
Bellevue	1953
Black Diamond	1959
Bothell	1909
Burien	1992
Carnation (Tolt)	1912
Clyde Hill	1953
Covington	1996
Des Moines	1959
Duvall (Cherry Valley)	1913
Enumclaw	1913
Federal Way	1989
Hunts Point	1955
Issaquah (Squak, Olney, Gilman)	1892
Lake Forest Park	1961
Kenmore	1997
Kent (Yesler, Titusville)	1890
Kirkland	1905
Maple Valley	1996
Medina	1955
Mercer Island (City)	1960
Milton	1907
Newcastle	1993
Normandy Park	1953
North Bend	1909
Pacific	1909
Redmond (Salmonberg)	1912
Sammamish	1999
SeaTac	1989
Renton	1901
Sammamish	1998
Seattle	1869
Shoreline	1994
Skykomish	1909
Snoqualmie	1903
Tukwila	1908
Woodinville	1991
Yarrow Point	1959

*ANNEXED/MERGED MUNICIPALITIES*

	<u>Inc.</u>	<u>A-M</u>
Ballard (Seattle)	1890	1907

Columbia City (Seattle)	1892	1907
Georgetown (Seattle)	1904	1910
Houghton (Kirkland)	1951	1968
Mercer Island (Town-M.I. City)	1960	1960
Ravenna (Seattle)	1909	1909
South Park (Seattle)	1902	1907
Southeast Seattle (Seattle)	1906	1907
South Seattle (Seattle)	1905	1909
West Seattle (Seattle)	1902	1907

### *INTERCOUNTY MUNICIPALITIES*

	<u>Inc.</u>
Bothell (to Snohomish)	1909
Milton (from Pierce)	1907
Pacific (to Pierce)	1909

### *DISSOLVED/ INACTIVE MUNICIPALITIES*

	<u>Inc.</u>	<u>Dissolved/Inactive</u>
Ravensdale	1913	Inactive 1920s?
East Redmond	1956	Dissolved 1964

### *FAILED ATTEMPTS/INVALIDATED INCORPORATIONS*

(petitions denied, issue defeated, election invalidated/partial list)

Angle Lake	1958
Burien/Highline	1954/60/84
Federal Way	1971/81/85
Harrisburg	1913
Kenmore	1954/56
Midway	1957
Newcastle	1981
Newport Hills	1992
Norwood Village	1950s
Sammamish	1992
Seattle	1865
Skyway Heights	1954
Vashon	1994
Woodinville	1981/89

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