

It's Time to Fully Implement the Local Government Provisions of Our Constitution.

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On the eve of the 50th anniversary of Alaska's Constitutional Convention and the beginning of our 46th year of statehood, it is fitting to reflect on how we have implemented our Constitution. For the most part, it seems we have done quite well, with one major exception – fully implementing the local government article.

Framers of Alaska's Constitution provided for a system of boroughs. Boroughs were a new concept, envisioned to provide self-government and public services on an areawide basis. Since statehood, 16 boroughs have been organized in regions as diverse as Anchorage, Kodiak Island, and the North Slope. Half were organized by legislative mandate, while the others formed voluntarily. Organized areas encompass about forty percent of Alaska.

The Constitution requires that the entire state be divided into boroughs – organized or unorganized. Each was to encompass a large, natural region reflecting social, cultural, economic, geographic, and other characteristics. But rather than dividing the state into boroughs, the 1961 legislature simply grouped all non-organized areas into a one unorganized borough, which forms a meaningless glob that stretches from one end of Alaska to the other. Subsequent legislatures have shirked their responsibility to make the system work.

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Constitutional provision for unorganized boroughs was made to allow for transition to organized status, and to recognize that some regions might lack the fiscal and administrative capacity to operate boroughs. In either case, the State was to provide services in unorganized boroughs, use them as regional planning units, and allow for maximum local participation and responsibility. It is time for the State to initiate establishment of unorganized boroughs, as required by Alaska's Constitution.

A number of unorganized areas have the capacity to operate boroughs, but their residents have not initiated action to do so. There are serious disincentives to incorporation as a borough.

Continued on back

They include mandates to pay a portion of school operations, inadequate money for organizational planning, lack of assessment data, and concern over school district consolidation.

There are many public policy reasons to promote borough formation. Boroughs provide (1) maximum local self-government, (2) a legal framework for regional services, (3) stable administrative capacity, (4) local responsibility and control over local affairs, (5) accountability to the public, (6) increased local and private land ownership, (7) greater control over education and ability to supplement state school funding, (8) consolidation of school districts, (9) the means for regional alcohol control, (10) ability to promote economic development, (11) a proper role for State government, and (12) greater taxpayer equity.

Boroughs are Alaska's vehicle for regional self-rule. They have proven effective both when they cover urban areas and when they encompass exclusively rural populations. Today, seven out of every eight Alaskans live in organized boroughs, as do two-thirds of all Alaska Natives. Many reside in boroughs where citizens have adopted home rule charters, exercising the ultimate level of self-government.

Action is way overdue to divide this amorphous mass into regional units that make sense. Some years ago, after thorough study and extensive hearings, the Alaska Local Boundary Commission divided the state into "model boroughs." In accordance with the Constitution, the models encompass large, natural regions and reflect social, cultural, economic, geographic and other characteristics.

The time has come to create a series of organized and unorganized boroughs in the rest of the state as set out in the Constitution.

Both State and local leadership will be required to carry out the Constitution's stated purpose "to provide for maximum local self-government". The effort of creating boroughs will be worthwhile, for it will give the people of local communities a real voice in how government touches their lives, as well as pursuing the general public interest.

Thirty years ago, the late Eben Hopson – territorial legislator, State senator, and first mayor of the North Slope Borough – stated: "If I were governor, organization of regional borough government would become one of my primary goals." Wise words.

Arliss Sturgulewski is a Republican, and Victor Fischer is a Democrat. Both have expertise in matters of local government; both have distinguished records in terms of public service at the local and state levels, including the Alaska State Senate. Victor Fischer was a delegate to Alaska's Constitutional Convention, where he served as Secretary of the Local Government Committee.