

Exploring a Home Rule Charter for Walla Walla County, Washington

Executive Summary

This paper examines the feasibility and implications of adopting a home rule charter in Walla Walla County, Washington. Authorized under Article XI, Section 4 of the Washington State Constitution, home rule charters give counties the authority to design their own governmental structures and expand opportunities for citizen participation, subject to state constitutional and statutory limits.

Seven Washington counties have already adopted charters. Their experiences provide insight into the benefits and challenges of this form of governance. For Walla Walla County, a charter could allow residents to redesign county government to improve representation, increase accountability, and expand democratic tools. At the same time, the process requires significant community engagement, careful drafting, and voter approval.

This white paper reviews the legal framework, potential advantages and disadvantages, case studies from other counties, and options for Walla Walla County. It concludes by recommending that community leaders initiate exploratory discussions and consider forming a charter commission to assess the county's specific needs.

1. Background

1.1 Walla Walla County Context

- Population: ~63,000 (2023 estimate)
- County seat: Walla Walla
- Economy: Agriculture (wine grapes, wheat, onions), education (Whitman College, Walla Walla University), corrections, healthcare, tourism.
- Current governance: A three-member Board of County Commissioners, elected by district but serving countywide, holds both legislative and executive authority. Other elected officials include the sheriff, auditor, treasurer, and assessor.

1.2 Washington State Legal Framework

- The Washington Constitution permits counties to adopt "home rule charters," effectively local constitutions.
- RCW Title 36 provides the statutory framework.
- As of 2023, seven counties have adopted charters: King, Pierce, Snohomish, Whatcom, San Juan, Clark, and Clallam.

2. What is a Home Rule Charter?

A home rule charter is a governing document drafted and approved by county residents. It gives local communities the ability to design the government that works best for them, rather than relying only on the default system set by state law. A charter can:

- Restructure government beyond the default commissioner system.
Instead of three commissioners holding both legislative and executive power, the county can design a structure that better matches modern needs.
- Separate legislative and executive powers.
For example, residents may choose to elect a county council to pass laws and a county executive to carry them out—similar to how cities and the state government already operate.
- Establish methods for electing officials.
Communities can decide whether leaders should be elected by district (to ensure every area has a voice), at-large (to represent the whole county), or a combination of both.
- Grant citizens initiative, referendum, and recall powers.
This means residents can propose laws, vote directly on key issues, or hold elected officials accountable between elections.
- Create new offices or boards to improve accountability.
For example, the county could establish an independent ethics board, a public advocate, or other offices tailored to local priorities.

Charters must comply with the Washington State Constitution and general state law.

3. Why Consider a Charter in Walla Walla County?

There are several reasons residents may want to explore whether a Home Rule Charter would improve how our county government works:

- Representation – Under the current system, all power is concentrated in three county commissioners who represent large geographic districts. With only three voices at the table, it can be difficult to reflect the wide range of perspectives across our county—from city neighborhoods to rural communities like Waitsburg, Prescott, Touchet, and Burbank. A charter could allow voters to create a larger council with both district and at-large members, ensuring more communities have a seat at the table.
- Separation of Powers – Today, county commissioners hold both legislative and executive authority. This means the same people who write the rules also carry them out. A charter could separate these functions—establishing, for example, a legislative county council and an elected executive—providing checks and balances similar to those that exist at the state and federal level.
- Citizen Engagement – Many charter counties grant their residents the ability to propose laws directly through initiative, or to reject unwanted measures through referendum. This empowers citizens to have a more direct role in shaping county policy beyond voting in elections every few years.

- **Modernization and Accountability** – A charter gives residents the flexibility to design tools for greater oversight and trust, such as independent ethics boards, an ombuds office to handle complaints, or an independent auditor to review county finances. These modern governance practices can increase transparency and accountability while reducing the influence of political personalities.

4. Potential Advantages

- **Local Control** – A charter allows residents of Walla Walla County to design a system of government that reflects local values and needs, rather than relying only on the default model established by state law. Decisions about structure, offices, and processes are made here, by the people who live here.
- **Improved Accountability** – With the authority to create independent offices such as an auditor, ethics board, or ombuds office, a charter can establish clearer checks and balances. This ensures that elected officials and administrators are answerable to the public, not just to one another.
- **Expanded Representation** – Instead of being limited to three county commissioners, a charter can provide for a larger county council elected from districts. This can give more communities—rural and urban alike—a real voice in county decision-making.
- **Citizen Empowerment** – Charter counties may allow initiative, referendum, and recall at the county level. These tools give residents direct power to propose laws, overturn unpopular decisions, and hold officials accountable between elections.
- **Administrative Flexibility** – A charter provides the freedom to modernize how county government operates. For example, duties can be reorganized among departments, new offices can be created, and outdated practices can be updated without needing state legislation.
- **Streamlined and Professionalized Leadership** – A charter can reduce the number of independently elected county officials (currently about 12, including commissioners and department heads such as the auditor and clerk) by consolidating responsibilities under a council or council–executive model. This concentrates accountability in a smaller number of leaders who are subject to ongoing oversight.
- **Potential for Cost Savings** – By restructuring offices and setting clear salary rules, a charter can make government less expensive over time. For example, the charter could cap commissioner compensation at a percentage of the lowest-paid full-time county employee (e.g., 140%), tying elected officials’ pay directly to the local workforce. This could address concerns about current commissioner salaries (about \$114,000 annually plus benefits for each of three commissioners in a county of roughly 60,000 residents) which are nearly double the county’s median household income. Properly designed, a charter can align costs with community expectations while maintaining fair compensation for public service.
- **Civilian Oversight of Law Enforcement** – A charter could make the sheriff an appointed position, reporting to elected civilian leadership rather than operating as an independently elected official. This change would strengthen public oversight while maintaining professional standards in law enforcement.

- Professionalized Administration – By clearly separating political decision-making from daily operations, a charter makes it possible to employ professional administrators and staff with defined lines of authority. This structure can improve efficiency, consistency, and responsiveness in county services..

5. Potential Challenges

- Complexity of Drafting and Approval – Creating a charter is not a simple process. It requires electing a freeholder board, holding public hearings, drafting the governing document, and then putting it before the voters for approval. The process can take months or even years, and requires broad public input to succeed.
- Transition Costs – Moving from the current commissioner system to a new charter form of government often involves costs—such as staffing, training, technology upgrades, or new office space—especially if new elected or administrative offices are created. While these costs are usually one-time, they can be significant upfront.
- Cost of Expanded Government – Although a charter can reduce duplication among elected offices, creating a larger county council or adding an elected county executive involves new salaries, staff, and administrative support. These ongoing costs must be weighed against the long-term benefits of increased accountability and efficiency.
- Compensation Concerns – Commissioner salaries were recently increased (reportedly by 19% in 2023; exact figures should be confirmed). Adding more council members or creating new executive positions could significantly increase payroll costs even if compensation per official remains unchanged.
- Increased Partisanship – Although charters can be written to encourage nonpartisan elections, they can also open the door to more political competition and party involvement. Depending on how the charter is structured, elections may become more contested, which some residents may see as a downside.
- Requirement of Voter Approval – Even after all the work of drafting a charter, it does not take effect unless county voters approve it at the ballot box. This means that months of planning and debate could end without change if a majority of voters decide against it.
- Uncertain Long-Term Outcomes – Because every charter is unique, it is difficult to predict exactly how a new system will function over time. Some changes may work well, while others may have unintended consequences. Counties often need several years of experience to fully understand how their charter impacts governance.

6. The Charter Adoption Process

This section explains how a Washington county moves from idea to adopted home-rule charter. Two distinct paths can start the process: (A) the county legislative authority (the Board of County Commissioners) places the question on the ballot by resolution; or (B) county voters force the question by petition. The constitution and state law set several specific procedural requirements

(petition thresholds, how freeholders are elected and convene, publication rules, and certification by the county auditor).

1. Initiation–

Legislative initiation: the county commission may pass a resolution placing on the ballot (for a general or special election) the question whether to elect a board of freeholders to draft a charter. Citizen petition: registered voters representing 10% of the voters of the county who voted at the last preceding general election may file a petition calling for an election of freeholders. (This 10% figure is constitutional language — confirm the exact numeric target with the County Auditor because the turnout number used in the calculation changes each election cycle.)

2. Drafting and circulating the petition-

Petitions must be signed by qualified registered voters in the county; the filing officer forwards petitions to the auditor for verification. Within a few working days the petition is transmitted to the auditor for sufficiency review. If the auditor finds the petition insufficient, petitioners typically have a short cure period (commonly ten days) to submit additional valid signatures; if the petition is certified sufficient the auditor issues a certificate and transmits it to the board of county commissioners.

3. Election to decide whether freeholders should be elected and to elect freeholders.

If the county commission has caused an election, or if a sufficient petition triggers one, voters decide whether to elect a board of freeholders. If the proposition to elect freeholders passes, the freeholder candidates on the ballot (or those elected simultaneously) become the charter commission. The state constitution mandates that a county's freeholder board must consist of not less than fifteen (15) nor more than twenty-five (25) freeholders (the legislative authority ordinarily fixes the exact number), that each be a qualified elector and a county resident for the period required, and that the freeholders shall convene within 30 days after the election.

4. The freeholder (charter) commission's workplan & legal constraints.

Once seated, the freeholder board conducts public meetings, forms subcommittees, holds public hearings across the county, and drafts a proposed charter. The constitutional text and state practice emphasize open process and public notice; freeholders usually adopt rules of procedure, may request clerical/legal support, and may be reimbursed for reasonable expenses as allowed by law. The freeholders' drafting timeline is often set by local direction or precedent (city charter commissions are sometimes given 120–180 days under statute, while county practice varies), so sponsors should build realistic time for outreach, legal review, and multiple drafts. Voter Approval – Explain that the charter cannot take effect without a majority vote of the people at a general election, ensuring broad legitimacy.

5. Filing the proposed charter, publication, and ballot materials.

When the freeholders adopt a final draft it is filed with the county auditor for placement on the ballot. The constitution requires the proposed charter be published in two legal newspapers in the county at least once a week for four consecutive weeks before submission to the voters; in addition, statutory deadlines govern local voters' pamphlet content, ballot title preparation, and printing schedules (the ballot title and explanatory statement processes and appeal windows are governed by election law). Work with the auditor early to meet local voters' pamphlet and ballot-title deadlines

6. Voter approval and implementation.

A proposed charter becomes effective only after approval by the voters (a majority vote on the measure). The charter should specify transition rules (timing for new elections, whether terms of incumbents terminate and when, assignment of duties to new offices, interim appointments, and budget/implementation steps). The state constitution also preserves certain elected offices (for example, the election of the prosecuting attorney and judges is not affected by a home rule charter), so the freeholder draft must respect those constitutional limits.

7. Case Studies from Other Washington Counties

King County (1969)

King County was the first in Washington to adopt a home rule charter, responding to rapid population growth in the Seattle metro area. The charter created a strong executive–council system: one county executive elected countywide, and a nine-member council elected by district. This structure separated legislative and executive powers, improving accountability and allowing for more professional administration of county services. Over time, King County’s charter has been amended to adapt to changing needs, but the executive–council framework has provided stability in governing a large and diverse county.

Whatcom County (1978)

Citizens in Whatcom County adopted a charter to expand representation and provide more tools for public involvement. The charter established a seven-member county council elected by district, ensuring that different communities across the county had direct representation. It also granted initiative and referendum powers, which allow voters to propose ordinances or overturn council decisions. These provisions have encouraged greater citizen engagement, though they have also introduced more debate and sometimes political conflict. Overall, Whatcom’s system shows how a charter can balance representation with direct democracy.

San Juan County (2005, amended 2013)

San Juan County, with a much smaller population spread across multiple islands, crafted its charter to emphasize citizen access and participation. Initially, a three-commissioner system was replaced with a nine-member council, but this proved unwieldy for a small county. In 2013, voters amended the charter to create a five-member council, which better fit local needs. The charter also enabled local initiative and referendum, and created structures for more transparent governance. San Juan’s experience highlights how a charter can be adjusted over time and tailored for the scale of the community.

8. Options for Walla Walla County

- Maintain Status Quo (Three Commissioners)

The county could choose to keep the current system of three commissioners who combine both legislative and executive responsibilities. Supporters of this option often point to familiarity, stability, and avoiding transition costs. However, critics note that three members may not adequately represent the county’s diverse communities.

- Expanded Council (Five or Seven Members)

Instead of three commissioners, Walla Walla could elect a larger council, with members chosen from districts across the county. A 5- or 7-member council would broaden representation, ensuring that smaller communities like Waitsburg, Prescott, Burbank, and Touchet have a stronger voice in county decision-making.

- Executive–Council Model

This model separates powers by creating an independently elected county executive (similar to a mayor) alongside a legislative council. The executive manages day-to-day administration, while the council focuses on lawmaking. This clear separation can improve accountability and reduce the concentration of power in a small group.

- Hybrid Approaches with Initiative Powers

Some counties combine representative structures with direct democracy tools, such as initiative and referendum. These powers allow citizens to propose laws, repeal ordinances, or even recall elected officials, giving residents a more active role in shaping county policy.

- Ethics Oversight and Independent Auditing Offices

A charter can also create new offices that strengthen transparency. Examples include a county ethics board to review conduct of officials, or an independent auditor to oversee finances and performance. These safeguards help ensure county government remains accountable to the public.

9. Conclusion and Recommendations

A home rule charter offers Walla Walla County an opportunity to modernize local governance, improve representation, and expand citizen participation. Washington’s process for adopting a charter requires careful planning over multiple election cycles.

Recommendations:

1. Begin circulating petitions immediately following the November 2025 general election, once the number of required signatures is known.
2. File petitions with the Walla Walla County Auditor in 2026 to place the measure on the ballot.
3. In the November 2026 general election, voters will decide whether to form a charter commission and elect freeholders to serve on it.
4. Support the freeholders’ work through robust public engagement so that a draft charter is completed by mid-2027.
5. Place the draft charter before voters in the November 2027 general election.

10. Roadmap & Timeline Toward a Charter

Step 1: Petition Phase

- After the 2025 general election is certified, determine the required number of petition signatures (10% of the votes cast for governor in Walla Walla County).
- Circulate petitions and submit them to the County Auditor for verification.

Step 2: Freeholder Election

- If petitions are sufficient, the ballot will include two items:
 1. The Charter Question: “Shall a board of freeholders be elected to prepare a home rule charter for Walla Walla County?”
 2. Election of Freeholders: Voters simultaneously elect 15 to 25 freeholders (county residents who are qualified electors).
- Freeholders run for office much like candidates for county positions.
- They file for election, appear on the ballot, and are elected by the voters at large.
- If the charter question fails, the freeholder election results are void. If it passes, those elected immediately form the charter commission.

Step 3: Charter Drafting

- The freeholder commission has up to one year to draft the charter.
- Public hearings and forums are required to ensure community input.
- The final draft is filed with the County Auditor for placement on the ballot.

Step 4: Charter Adoption

- The draft charter is presented to voters.
- If approved by a majority, it becomes the county’s governing charter.

Step 5: Implementation

- Transition planning begins immediately after adoption.
- New elections may be required for positions created by the charter (e.g., county council, county executive).
- County codes and administrative structures are revised accordingly.

A. Washington Constitution, Article XI, Section 4 (excerpt)

Article XI, Section 4. County Government — Home Rule Charter.

Any county may frame a “Home Rule” charter for its own government subject to the Constitution and laws of this state. Such charter may provide for the form of county government, the powers and duties of county officers, and for their election or appointment, compensation, and removal. It may also provide for the exercise by the people of the powers of initiative and referendum in county matters.

The charter shall be prepared by a board of freeholders elected by the voters of the county, and shall be submitted to the voters for their approval or rejection. If approved by a majority, it shall become the charter of the county.

The number of freeholders, manner of their election, submission of the charter to the people, and other details shall be provided by general law.

B. Comparison Table

County	Population (approx.)	Year Charter Adopted	Key Features
King	2.3 million	1969	Executive-Council, 9 districts
Pierce	921,000	1980	Executive-Council, 7 districts
Snohomish	850,000	1980	Executive-Council, 5 districts
Whatcom	230,000	1978	7-member council, initiative powers
San Juan	18,000	2005	3-member council, small population focus
Clark	530,000	2014	Executive-Council, 5 districts
Clallam	78,000	1976	Commission-Administrator hybrid
Walla Walla (proposed)	63,000	TBD	Options: expanded council, initiative, oversight boards