

Tape 27, Side 2

CH This is an interview with Governor Atiyeh at his office in downtown Portland, Oregon. The interviewer, for the Oregon Historical Society, is Clark Hansen. The date is May 21, 1993, and this is Tape 27, Side 2.

Yesterday we were talking about the boundary commissions and your recommendation that they be abolished. You had mentioned off tape, then, afterwards something about the Columbia Region of Associated Governments and Metro.

VA This is a good example of how government grows, and people don't really pay much attention to it. The Columbia Region Association of Governments, which was Clackamas, Washington, and Multnomah Counties, and the theory was that a lot is going on in terms of providing services. It was being uncoordinated, like water and sewer, and pipes were different sizes, and transportation and all the rest, and what really ought to happen is that these governments, cities and counties, officials ought to get together and kind of coordinate, all of which sounds like a pretty good idea, and that they would assess themselves, that is, each county, a minimal amount, and the state would help a little bit in the process.

I think earlier in our discussions - I come from the position of the government closest to the people is the best. I believe that very strongly. And I think I do recall saying that democracy is not an efficient form of government. You try to make it as efficient as you can, but it is not an efficient form, and the more efficient you make it the more removed it gets. And the most efficient form is a dictatorship. That's very efficient. One guy decides what's going to happen. So anyway, that's my own personal philosophy.

They were then formally approved by the people. In other

words, rather than this ad hoc kind of thing put together, there was a ballot measure and the people voted yes. Now formalize it. But on the same ballot there was an establishment of a tax base for them. That failed. So now they're coming to the legislature for some money. I still don't like them. Incidentally - I'll think of his name at the Oregonian, but he was a strong regional government guy, and he kept editorializing against me, that I didn't care about metropolitan government. That was the position he was coming from.

Anyway, I'm going to kind of skip a little bit, because in the ensuing period of time, from that little nucleus of very minimal cost we now have Metro, which has a huge, multi-million dollar building. They do have elected officials, and I would venture to guess if we walked down the street and asked a thousand people - I don't want to limit it to just a few because they're so remote. I bet you if we asked a thousand people, you couldn't get any one of them out of a thousand to tell you who their representative is at Metro. So now what we have is what I call a shadow government costing us huge amounts of money, and it all started from this little, tiny thing. They've just hung on, and hung on, and hung on, and hung on. And that's how it happened. People wonder about how come government costs us so much.

Their first job charged was to deal with solid waste, and then they came to us, came to the legislature, for the authority to deal with mass transit. My position was, Hey, you haven't done a good job with solid waste. Now you want to come and get mass transit. Do a good job with solid waste and I'll think about mass transit. Well again, my position, you see, isn't prevailing, and we know exactly what's going on. But, you know, I'm looking at this building, which is right near where I was born and raised, the Sears building. It's millions of dollars for that building housing I don't know how many bureaucrats,

plus, of course, the elected officials. And I can't tell you that I think really things are any better. Certainly solid waste isn't any better. It still isn't any better. They're great coup is MAX, and that's running well and doing a good job, not necessarily because of Metro government. And now, of course, we're spending billions of dollars, or hundreds of millions, to go out into the west side and dig a tunnel and wake up everybody in the grave in the Sunset Cemetery. I feel very strongly about it. I think it's a crime, I think it's a shame, I think it could have been done in a much better way than it is, a great deal less cost than it is, but that's not what we have.

Now, what makes it even worse, in my mind - and I find it incredible. Again, the people don't understand what's going on. At the last election they allowed them to become like a city or a county. They can do ordinances, they can pass taxes, they don't have to come to the legislature anymore. They can do anything they want. And what do we have? We have city government, we have county government, we have metropolitan government, and we have state government.

CH So there's an extra layer in there.

VA There's a layer in there that nobody knows about, and it's costing them a lot of money. So that's my comment on CRAG.

CH Would some of these - CRAG is the acronym for...

VA That was Columbia Region Association of Governments.

CH Would there have been a better way to handle metropolitan area decisions, then? Like the counties getting together, some kind of liaisons between the counties or...?

VA They should have just continued doing what they were doing. And responsible elected officials should have welcomed the opportunity to sit down and do these things in a coordinated fashion, and just talking with each other and say, We're going to do this. How's that going to affect you over here? But, you know, there was this whole theory [that] this is more efficient, this is going to cost you less money. It's very much like the educational service districts. Here, we've got all these schools. Yeah, but we've got small schools and big schools, and if we create this educational service district, then they can buy things in a carload lot, if you will, and it was going to cost less. Or we can provide foreign languages for little schools that can't afford it themselves. All of it sounds so great, and, yet, I can remember them coming, and they were talking about building these buildings. And I said, Whoa, whoa, wait a minute. We're already paying for primary and secondary schools and we're paying for community colleges. You want to build some more buildings to create this educational service district? Now I notice the trend is to get rid of them. In the meantime, we all spent a lot of money in the process. I get very excited about things like that. I just - it just doesn't match my view of what a democracy is all about. And to me that's very important, very important, but it doesn't seem to be very important to some people.

VA Did you have your own solid waste disposals for this term or session?

VA No - well, you mean how to get rid of it, how to deal with it?

CH Yeah.

VA Not really. Going back to our discussions on when I was in the legislature and talking about clean air and clean water - and I've said repeatedly that Oregon has done an exceptional job in terms of clean air and clean water, but we hadn't done a good job in terms of, I say, air pollution, water pollution, we hadn't done a good job on ground pollution, which, of course, is solid waste. And even yet today we haven't. They're beginning to do some recycling. I personally was involved because I'm a board member of Riedel Environmental Technology, and we had that plant out there. The plant does work, it really does work. The fact is, it was just put in the wrong place.

CH This is the plant that was put in...?

VA Yeah, for recycling. The smell. But functionally the thing works. It just was in the wrong place and it smelled. If you put it out somewhere where it doesn't smell so much, or if people get used to it - it's like the people in Camas, Washington. They got used to that smell. I mean, they're living right there where the pulp mill is. And every once in a while it drifts over on our side. But anyway, the standards - well, there are no standards, incidentally, either state or national standards for this recycled material. There are none. And our adviser, meaning Riedel's adviser, put standards that really weren't essential or necessary for different kinds of residues. It was too high. So there's a variety of reasons, and it finally went out. And Riedel didn't have the wherewithal to spend another \$3 million to enclose this thing, and now it's closed, which is unfortunate.

Incineration is another good way of doing it. People get all excited about, Oh, this terrible stuff's coming out of the smokestacks. But we have to do things like that. You know, okay, so you want to get rid of a lot of ground pollution for

maybe a little bit of air pollution. You know, there's a balance in there. But no, we can't do incineration, you can't do the recycling thing. And again, I think it's - you know, how - local government is, How do we do this? What do you want to do? Someone expressed it one time very well in terms of garbage. Everybody wants us to pick it up, but nobody wants us to put it down. And it's true. You see, that's one of those things. Landfills are okay, and you're going to have to use landfills. The whole idea of recycling or incineration is just to eliminate, what, 25 percent, 50 percent, or whatever, into a landfill.

CH Of course, now they're shipping it out to Arlington.

VA Arlington, yeah. So they said, Okay, it's okay to put it down in Arlington, but just don't put it down here. So what happens? Every household is paying more money for garbage pickup. But still, that's not a solution. A solution of just putting it on the ground isn't a solution. Well anyway, we just haven't done a good job there.

CH Well, we'll talk a little bit more about this later when we - you got into the fray over the transfer site in Washington County later on, and maybe we'll pick up that issue then.

You had other priorities for that session as well, I believe. Didn't you work on the state's merit or civil service system during that session, or wasn't your intention to do that? And also dealing with the way federal employment and training funds are handled?

VA Yeah. CETA, which was the predecessor to the program that exists today, was a miserable failure. A federal government deal. And again, it's one of those things that the idea is good, the execution is lousy, it cost us a lot of money with no

productive results. So the Job Training and Partnership Act was the one that succeeded it, and I said, We're going to make that darn thing work. The long and the short of all of it is that I watched pretty carefully, we got it going, we got good people, and Oregon was recognized as the one state that was doing an outstanding job in the Job Training and Partnership Act. The whole idea was that the government and private enterprise would work together to train and get jobs for these people, which worked marvelously well. It created these different pockets of supervision. I recall we had a bit of difficulty when you get out in eastern Oregon with a whole bunch of counties. You know, you have to really consolidate them, and they were a little suspicious of it, but I actually finally put that consortium together. [They were] perfectly happy, and it's worked very well. So actually, Oregon has done very well.

The whole idea, to me - we've talked about it a number of times. You know, I do value the taxpayer's dollar very much. So many people that really haven't worked very hard for their pay, they treat the tax dollar like poker chips. It's not real money. But I value it very highly. It's the whole idea you work very hard to preserve that or to spend it as wisely as you can, to do the best job can with that tax dollar, because I relate to the person - I personally relate to the person who's paying taxes. You know, when they tell me that we get a tax-free day sometime in the middle of May, that means we work from January 1 to the middle of May just to pay taxes. That's terrible. A quarter of the year, almost. It is a quarter of the year. That is not right. Okay, if that's what's going to happen, then you go spend my tax dollar wisely. Well, they don't do that. That's why people are finally waking up. They are not quite sure what the problem is, they just know they've got a problem. So they say, Well, what do you want me to do to solve it? You can't expect the citizen on the street to say, Well, you do this, and you do

this, and you do this. That's not what their job is. They elected me to do that job, and they want me to do it well.

CH But don't citizens keep clamoring for more government services?

VA Well, there's a small element that does. When I say that, they may not necessarily be the same people, and they might even be conservatives - you know, the government ought to do this - not just necessarily liberals. The government ought to do this - or moderates. The government ought to do this, the government ought to do that. But they're not the same. I'd say, Government ought to do this - that's me, now, talking - but government ought not to do what you want. They ought to do what I want, but they're wasting money doing what you want. That's sort of a paraphrase of what's going on. People would write to me, both as a legislator and governor, you know, You've got to cut the budget, but don't cut here. Well, whenever I'd get that kind of a letter I would ignore it, because you don't really want me to cut the budget. If you really want me to cut the budget, then you say, Cut where my special interest is as well as there. Then I know you want to cut the budget.

CH That's a - I mean, it's hard to actually put that into practice, though, isn't it, because everybody's special interest is their primary concern.

VA Sure it is. That's the problem we're having.

CH Especially nationally, where...

VA Nationally, you get all these people pushing and pulling and tugging, and it is a problem. There's always that delicate

balance. I know that - let me give you a good example, although it's bigger than I want to give you, but the example is still good. When Ballot 5 came down the pike, and now we see the fight in the Oregon legislature, and the big thing on the front page was how much are you going to give to schools, we have to understand when they say to schools, we're talking about primary and secondary education, we're not talking about higher education. There's a large constituency for primary and secondary. They've got Oregon Education Association, a very strong lobby. So the scrap is on to get as much money as you possibly can for primary and secondary. Higher education has a much smaller constituency. They are not organized into an OEA type thing. They don't have that giant lobby. So I told my friends the greatest at-risk under Ballot 5 this session was higher education because the money is then going to be spent - now we've only got so much money left. We've now given it to primary and secondary, and the legislature has done that. Now we've only got so much left, so we've got to cut into what's left. The next major constituency is human resource. That includes a whole lot of things: welfare, children's services, corrections, a whole bunch of stuff. And so they've got a large constituency, so they're going to suck up a lot of money. So this smaller constituency is having a tough time, meaning higher education. When I said you have to be careful, there are things like this in a much smaller level in terms of dollars, and you know it's important, but there aren't very many people there, there's not much constituency there, so as you go through this process, this has to - we have to get rid of this but we've got to keep that, you always keep in mind these smaller constituencies that don't have a loud voice, don't have much power, but they do need to be taken care of. These are all subjective things. So you say to yourself, Okay, what kind of a philosophy is our leader - now we get back to philosophy, and

that's how this balance takes place. It does make a difference as to who is governor. It makes a big difference.

While I was governor there were certain things that just would not pass the Oregon legislature, under ~~any~~ ^{any} circumstance. I don't know if you noticed, but I had a strong traffic safety. We talked about that. There was no way that the speed limit was going to be increased while I was governor, and the legislature knew it. The minute I left, the speed limit went up. That's only one example of the kinds of things that can happen. If we look at the national level, look what Jimmy Carter did. So one person does make a difference. You know, interest rates way up there, inflation rampant. Imagine 13 percent inflation. It's incredible. Twenty-two percent, or thereabouts, interest rates. Terrible. That's one person who was president of the United States. You know, I'm interested in my country. I really worry about Clinton, where he's going. So, you know, a person does make a difference. So when I start talking about, okay, here's a small constituency; they need to remain. It depends on who's there to decide what that small constituency is. We got off the trail a little bit, I think.

CH Well, we're going to talk about this a lot when we get to taxes, and especially the sales tax issue, because that became a major effort in your - well, taxes were always a major effort in your career.

What were the differences like, moving over to the executive branch, having been so many years in the legislative branch?

VA It was marvelous.

CH Was it really?

VA Oh. Understand that I was a member of the minority party my

entire legislative career, and one of thirty or one of sixty. All of a sudden, I'm one of one. In other words, I'm now in a position to work at what I think - where we need to go, I can at least propose my propositions, I can work for - yeah, I had to get through the senate and the house, but at least I had a plan, I could develop plans. It was marvelous. I finally - you know, it broke my shackles, and I can get now where I can really propose something instead of try to be a roadblock as a legislator, or trying subtly to amend bills that I think are bad and try to get good amendments into it. That's hard work.

CH Why is it that a state or a country like ours will vote majorities of Democrats into the legislature, either state-wise or nationally, and then have Republican governors and presidents?

VA The answer is fairly simple. I know I think I said that regardless of how people are registered in Oregon, by and large they're moderates. So when I'm running statewide, Oregonians are willing to vote outside their party; in other words, Republican for a Democrat or a Democrat for a Republican. They're willing to make those shifts if they hear the right words. And the statewide candidate is visible enough and singular enough that people can see the difference between the two. In, particularly, single-member districts, which is what we have right now, and particularly in urban areas, especially in urban areas, it's very hard for people to discern what the differences are. Now, they talk about candidates knocking on doors and all the rest, but it's very hard for the candidates to get people to zero in as here's Joe and here is Mary. So, you know, for a house member to buy ads in the Oregonian or to go on television or radio, when they do that they're buying the entire market, not just their district. And so it's very costly for them to try to extricate themselves. So under those circumstances, people will go to the

polls and say, Joe Smith, Democrat. Well, I'm a Democrat; I'll vote for that person. And that's why you get that kind of a shift. They don't know the other candidate, no matter how hard they try. That's why I think I'm constantly opposed to limitations, spending limits, or limitations, actually, on elections, because what you do, then, is you really lock in the incumbent. The incumbent's got an advantage. And in order to try to overcome that advantage - try - you have to spend more money. Once you limit - see, I'm the incumbent senator, and I've got somebody running against me. I've got an immediate advantage. I am the incumbent. One way or another, people hear from me because I'm there in the news or you send letters or whatever. They know I'm there, and that's an advantage. And you put a limit on it, I'm locked in. My opponent just doesn't have a chance. I don't believe in locking in the incumbent. You've at least got to give the challenger an opportunity. So this whole idea of limiting elections I just oppose. Now, I don't support the idea of spending so much money for these elections. You'll enjoy this. I think it was 1982, and my - and finally a race hit a million dollars, which was my race for governor. I was traveling around talking to television stations, and I can remember very - You know, it's a lot of money; you know, that's a lot of money. My answer was, Yeah, that's a lot of money, but, I said to them, your prices went up. If you charge what you charged four years ago, it wouldn't cost me so much. And radio went up and newspapers went up and mail went up, postage went up, and telephone went up. You know, just that. So if you charge me what you charged me in 1979, maybe it wouldn't have cost me so much to run for office.

CH But is there any way of dealing with that problem of the high cost of running a campaign?

VA No. Well, there's a solution, but I object to the solution. The solution is to limit, and I don't believe in that.

CH What about the political action committees and things like that? We'll talk a little bit more about that later when we get into your campaign with Ted Kulongoski, but...

VA I'll talk about it anytime you want, wherever you want to position it, because I've got thoughts on that too.

CH Okay. We'll talk about that a little later, then.

But you liked the transition, you liked going into the administrative end of things.

VA Very much. I think I yearned for that, meaning to be free to make my own decisions, even while I was in the rug business with my brothers, because we constantly had different ways of trying to achieve whatever we wanted to achieve. And I guess my own personal makeup was, Doggone it, I want to run this by myself and do my own thing. That's why I decided, before I left office, that I wasn't going to come back to the rug business. I liked being my own boss, and I wanted to continuing being my own boss. So, you know, I guess the joy of now being able to look at all of government, to have some plans of my own, to move forward on my own. Yes, I know how to do this through the legislative process and open hearings, I knew that, but the advantage an executive always has is that you can plan the whole thing. The legislature deals with it a piece at a time, and not always the same - it will be one committee and another committee and another committee. But, the governor has the big plan, and that's the only one that has the big plan. That's the advantage - and I knew that when I was a legislator - that was the advantage the executive had over the legislative branch of government.

CH Was it much different working with the legislature than you thought it would be being governor, or were there any differences that what you had imagined?

VA Well, it's hard to say what differences, obviously. I'm now the governor and no longer a legislator, but I had just left that body; they knew me, I knew them. And, you know, I knew what I was up against, and I knew the characters, and some were very political and some weren't. There was a difference, yes, but it was a difference that I knew. I had known it when I was a legislator versus the governor. I knew, even when I was dealing with a Republican governor. Okay, that's Mark's idea or Tom's idea, but I don't happen to agree with that idea, or, I agree with it. I wasn't slavish to what the governor wanted. He had to convince me.

[End of Tape 27, Side 2]