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Counties, Alas, Looking to East

COUNTY government often has been weak and sometimes has been corrupt, but when it disappears, local government by the people will be little more than history.

The National Association of Counties (NACo), an organization that might be expected to support local government, will meet in Honolulu during the coming week. Advance information does not indicate that much will be said or done to perpetuate local government. All eyes will look to the east.

NACo's national publication, "County News", has printed a set of proposed resolutions which, if adopted and fully implemented, would reduce county commissioners and other county officials to the equivalent of federal clerks.

The primary thrust of the publication is toward more federalism. Six pages are devoted to a conference held in Washington in February where public officials "discussed how today's federalism is working and what its chances are for tomorrow."

The outline of resolutions is preliminary and incomplete, but the striking thing about the data presented is its continual ringing of the federal bell on every subject, with minimal attention given to survival of local or county government.

For example, on community development, references are made to the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974, full funding for the Rural Development Act of 1972 is stressed, and Washington is urged to "meet its obligations" concerning

federally owned residential properties.

National legislation is urged to assist state and local governments in reducing crime and improving criminal justice systems, although it is noted that cities and counties have "primary functional responsibility."

NACo suggestions include a "comprehensive national energy plan," federal water standards, the idea that "the federal government must take a more active role in promoting recycling and resource recovery," plus similar patterns concerning health and education, transportation, manpower, welfare and social services.

NACo supports the concept of local determination in land use management and indicated that "nothing in any federal land use legislation should be construed to require states and/or local governments to formulate and implement land use plans." It does not seem to oppose federal land use planning, if it provides enough money and allows counties to be the primary spending agencies.

It might seem that county officials would be among those who recognize the vital role of local government in a free country and resist the stampede toward centralization of power, money and functions in Washington. It looks doubtful.

Final action of the NACo convention may be different from what has been indicated, but as outlined, the theme implies adoration for the federalist system, just as long as county officials can get control of revenue sharing and other handout funds.