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**Senior Project Write-up**

**Project Title**: Rethinking Municipal Annexation: The Case of North Highline

**Research Question**: What are the practical impacts of the potential annexation of North Highline by Seattle on the residents of the area?

**Abstract**

Municipal Annexation is one of the most powerful tools in urban planning, yet its use often sparks controversy and drawn-out political conflicts. In the Seattle area, the potential annexation of the unincorporated area of North Highline has been a subject of debate for over a decade. Annexation studies on unincorporated areas in the Seattle region are common but almost universally focus on the impacts from the perspective of the annexing city. In this study, I design a report to investigate the practical impacts of the potential annexation of North Highline by Seattle on the residents and business owners of the area. This serves to educate residents and address their most common questions to allow for informed decision making in the case of an election as part of the annexation process. Using a variety of resources collected from the City of Seattle and King County, I create a report detailing the major changes in taxation, regulation, and services that will affect North Highline residents following annexation. This will serve as a basis for discussion in the community by providing a shared set of facts and a method by which individuals can come to their own conclusions regarding the prospect of annexation.

**Introduction**

North Highline is a section of unincorporated King County located along Seattle’s southern border. It is made up of the neighborhoods of White Center, Roxhill, Top Hat, Beverly Park, and parts of Boulevard Park. The area has an estimated population of 17,392, across an extent of 2,045 acres. Despite remaining unincorporated, it is a highly developed and urbanized area and as such demands many services the county does not have the financial or logistical capacity to address. North Highline has been a candidate for annexation by the City of Seattle for several decades, creating an ongoing debate among Seattle and North Highline residents alike as to whether or not the area should be annexed.

Seattle is no stranger to annexation. The city engaged various forms of annexation repeatedly in the early to mid 20th century, attributing much of its territorial and population expansion to the process. Between 1905 and 1910 Seattle annexed eight nearby towns, nearly doubling the territorial size of the city (Annexed Cities, 2018). Many iconic and distinctive communities were added to Seattle at this time including Ballard, Columbia City, West Seattle, and Georgetown to various levels of resistance. The next major wave of annexations took place following WWII in the late 1940’s and early 50’s, involving the incorporation of most of North Seattle. North Highline would represent the first major annexation Seattle has engaged in since the mid 20th century, though with a radically different legal and cultural framework informing the entire discussion.

North Highline has existed as unincorporated area since its first settlement in the first half of the 20th century. The economic boom the region experienced during WWII drove further development especially after the establishment of a military Relocation and Training center in the area. The area continued to grow and urbanize while remaining unincorporated, reaching a population of over 20,000 by 1990. Under the State Growth Management act of the same year, both Seattle and Burien identified parts of North Highline as potential annexation areas. Seattle conducted a series of feasibility studies into the financial and service impacts of annexation. In 2008, Seattle and Burien resolved their overlapping potential annexation areas by splitting the North Highline area into two parts. The cities came to an agreement in which Burien was given the opportunity to annex the southern part of the unincorporated territory, known as Area X, while Seattle was given the northern part, Area Y. In 2009, Burien’s annexation of Area X was put up as a ballot measure for the residents of North Highline, who approved it, paving the way for the annexation of the southern portion of unincorporated North Highline the next year.

In 2011, the City of Seattle notified Burien it was not planning to annex Area Y, opening up the opportunity for Burien to annex, per the 2008 agreement. Burien did so, holding a referendum on the annexation of Area Y in 2012, which was ultimately rejected by the residents of the area. At this point, Burien decided to no longer pursue annexation in North Highline, and turned the area over to Seattle. Seattle has made slow progress towards this end, submitting a notice of intention for annexation in 2014 and securing a State sales tax benefit in 2015 that would help cover the costs of incorporation in the event that annexation was enacted.

**Section I: General Features of Annexation**

We will begin with a broad overview of the main features of municipal annexation. Municipal annexation is defined as a process by which a municipality expands its boundaries into adjacent areas not already incorporated into the municipality. It serves as the primary method by which cities expand. One of the most important aspects to consider are the benefits and costs of annexation, both to the annexing body and residents of the annexed area. For the municipality, annexation carries with it a series of financial costs but also offers the potential of increased revenue. Oftentimes, the perceived costs of annexation dissuade lawmakers from taking a risk to pursue the action.

Due to the nature of annexation, a set of key stakeholders often emerge. These groups may differ in their specifics but the tend to follow similar patterns. Annexation can often be understood by the relationship between its three main stakeholders: municipal officials, residents, and the officials of other local governments. In my stakeholder review, I identify the City of Seattle, residents of North Highline, and the King County and Washington State governments as the specific actors present in these roles in the North Highline situation. The key features of municipal annexation are its legal status, role in expansion of boundaries and services, and interactions between key stakeholders. Ultimately, municipal officials act strategically to determine the best annexation option they have available, accomplishing their goals in a time and cost-conscious manner using the regulatory framework they are given.

Finally, it is important to take note of the numerous obstacles to annexation that can stall or derail the entire process. Carr and Feiock identify the fear of an area ‘losing its character’ as a reason resident may oppose annexation. Coe lists several additional issues that block annexation including “the restrictiveness of State laws governing annexation” and “the increasing urbanization of unincorporated areas” (44).

The Boundary Review Board (BRB) is an independent quasi‐judicial agency established by state mandate (RCW 36.93, et seq) which provides review of proposals for boundary changes by cities, fire districts, water, sewer, and irrigation districts within King County, including city or district annexations, new city incorporations, and district mergers. The Board employs three staff members: an executive director, administrative staff member, and independent legal counsel as required by various statutory mandates. The Board consists of 11 members: four members appointed by the King County Executive; four members appointed by the cities of King County and three members appointed by Special Purpose Districts. In the case of annexations, mergers, and similar actions, the Board provides both administrative public review and, upon request, a comprehensive public hearing process leading to a final decision on the proposed action. In the case of new city incorporations, the Board oversees preparation of an impartial consultant study to assess the financial feasibility of the proposed new city. Following completion of the study, the Board holds a public hearing, establishes final boundaries, and makes a recommendation to the voters, who make the final decision in an election on the incorporation. The Boundary Review Board provides a single, integrated product: the review and adjudication for all Notices of Intention (applications) for proposed creation of/changes to jurisdictional boundaries, summarized by a decision report. The primary customers served by this product are municipal governments and regional governing agencies including cities and special purpose districts.

Now that we have established the basis of municipal annexation, it is important to ask the question of why cities engage in the process. The main rationale behind annexation in the 20th century can be summed up in two quotes from the American Society of Planning Officials’ 1958 study: "What is urban should be municipal," and "Annexation is a means for fitting the city line to the area that has become the city or is becoming the city, or that somebody thinks should or might become the city, or that needs to be controlled in order to protect the city" (1). The first phrase refers to the generally held belief that municipal governance structures should be extended over all areas deemed urban, accomplished through the process of annexation. This is the driving principle behind the State and County’s push for the annexation of North Highline, an urban but unincorporated area. However, this also raises the question of what exactly counts as urban, which plays a role in defining any debate over annexation. Carr and Feiock discuss how suburbanization, which drives wealth to the periphery of the city, often motivates municipal annexation with the intent of maintaining a city’s economic base (48). They add that: “Annexation may appear to be in the long term fiscal interests of cities by expanding the property tax base and increasing revenues” (48). It is the results of this fiscal calculus that often acts as the biggest motivator for municipal governments. Residents of suburban areas may favor annexation to expand the public services they have available, or fully exploit the opportunities of the central city. However, when they are able to ‘free ride’ off services or fear their money going toward redistributive means elsewhere in the city, they may oppose annexation.

**Section II: Local Context and Legal Framework**

Now that we have established the basis of municipal annexation, it is important to ask the question of why cities engage in the process. The main rationale behind annexation in the 20th century can be summed up in two quotes from the American Society of Planning Officials’ 1958 study: "What is urban should be municipal," and "Annexation is a means for fitting the city line to the area that has become the city or is becoming the city, or that somebody thinks should or might become the city, or that needs to be controlled in order to protect the city" (1). The first phrase refers to the generally held belief that municipal governance structures should be extended over all areas deemed urban, accomplished through the process of annexation. This is the driving principle behind the State and County’s push for the annexation of North Highline, an urban but unincorporated area. However, this also raises the question of what exactly counts as urban, which plays a role in defining any debate over annexation. Carr and Feiock discuss how suburbanization, which drives wealth to the periphery of the city, often motivates municipal annexation with the intent of maintaining a city’s economic base (48). They add that: “Annexation may appear to be in the long term fiscal interests of cities by expanding the property tax base and increasing revenues” (48). It is the results of this fiscal calculus that often acts as the biggest motivator for municipal governments. Residents of suburban areas may favor annexation to expand the public services they have available, or fully exploit the opportunities of the central city. However, when they are able to ‘free ride’ off services or fear their money going toward redistributive means elsewhere in the city, they may oppose annexation.

In Washington State, modern municipal annexation is driven by the goals laid out in the 1990 Growth Management Act. The goal of this landmark act was to address uncontrolled growth and limit sprawl through a vast overhaul of the State mandated municipal and regional planning process. The act also fundamentally changed the annexation process, serving to facilitate the process of annexation through the comprehensive planning process it mandates (MRSC, 2014). The GMA functions by imposing limitations on and establishing a territorial framework for the annexation authority of cities, which they are ultimately intended to annex completely. Cities must designate potential annexation areas within these zones. The local and regional planning requirements of the GMA thus serve to integrate city annexations into a county-wide or regional planning scheme (ibid). These changes replaced much of the old annexation system, integrated municipal annexation into the overall planning process, and designated specific areas for municipalities to annex to avoid urban sprawl and uncontrolled growth.

In the wake of the Growth Management Act, cities identified their potential annexation areas and began incorporating annexation into their comprehensive plans mandated by the act. There was a wave of annexations in the early 2000s as cities began to enact these annexation plans. Another motivating factor was the passing of RCW 82.14.415 in 2006, which allowed cities in King, Pierce and Snohomish counties to deduct a portion of the state sales tax in order to pay for the costs associated with annexation (State Tax, 1). With the opportunity for financial credit to offset some of the costs of annexation, the fiscal calculus for many cities began to turn in favor of annexation. This program expired in 2015, however, the State legislature agreed to redirect more than $7 million dollars annually in sales tax credits to Seattle in the case that the annexation of North Highline is approved (Seattle times). King County has also voiced support for annexation due to the cost of maintaining a high level of service for urbanized unincorporated areas, which the county is often less equipped to deliver.

The inclusion of several new annexation methods also helped expand and streamline the annexation procedure. One major issue annexation can bring is uneven patterns of municipal expansion. This is often the result of cities annexing areas with high tax yields, such as those with large amounts of commercial development, while dismissing those that have lower revenue potential and higher costs, such as low density residential neighborhoods. Conversely, counties or special service districts may want to maintain their highest revenue producing areas as unincorporated territory, while pushing for cities to annex their less profitable tracts. This phenomenon is heavily influenced by the relative wealth of households and businesses in an area, as richer areas generally have higher revenue potential and fewer service needs, bringing up issues of social equity as well. To combat this trend, the GMA introduced the unincorporated islands method of annexation in which a local jurisdiction can resolve to annex unincorporated islands containing less than one hundred acres and having at least sixty percent of their boundaries contiguous to the city or town (Washington State, 2013). The process is initiated by a petition signed by 10% of the area’s residents, at which point a public hearing is held to approve or reject the petition for annexation. The annexation is then subject to referendum for 45 days after the resolution is adopted (ibid). The inclusion of this option emphasized the State’s preference for uniform annexation of all suitable unincorporated areas by providing a simple and straightforward path for cities to use to specifically address it.

Another recently introduced method of annexation is the Interlocal Agreement. This method serves to annex specific territory quickly without the need for extensive public input. It is initiated through the combined agreement of the county, annexing city, and any special service districts affected, which details all aspects of incorporation. The proposal must be submitted for administrative review but there is no opportunity for a full public hearing for this proposed action (Washington State, 2013). However, if challenged, there is opportunity for a public referendum. This method significantly expedites the annexation process while reducing costs associated with outreach and elections. It has become a very popular option for cities to resolve small annexation disputes but does not translate as well to larger or more complex annexation areas.

The Growth Management Act fundamentally overhauled the municipal annexation process in the State of Washington, facilitating a massive increase in the incidence of annexation of unincorporated areas since the 1990s. However, remnants of the old system still play a large role in annexation. The State Legislature established boundary review boards in 1967 to guide and control the creation and growth of cities (Goodnight, 2015). These bodies were mandated in the four largest counties of the state but have since been established in an additional 14. King County maintains a boundary review board made up of 11 members. Four are appointed by the county executive, four are appointed by city mayors, and the additional three are appointed by nominations from special purpose districts. (kingcounty.gov) The Boundary Review Board works to evaluate and act upon applications for creation of or changes to boundaries within the Urban Growth Area, including annexations, incorporations, mergers, and similar actions (ibid). As such, it is involved in almost every annexation proposal in King County, no matter which method is used. After receiving a notice of annexation, the Board notifies all potentially interested jurisdictions of the action and invites public comment during a 45-day public review period (ibid). The Board then holds a public meeting to review the proposal with respect to State and County regulations before deciding whether to approve or modify the action. The Board plays a major role in annexation in King County, and serves as one of the main forums for public involvement in the process.

Looking into current city and regional plans, it is clear that annexation is a major objective. The regional Vision 2040 plan, sets the goal that: “All unincorporated lands within the urban growth area will either annex into existing cities or incorporate as new cities” (Puget Sound, 53). There are further provisions in favor of annexation including the recommendation that all unincorporated lands appropriate for annexation be affiliated with an adjacent city as well as joint planning between cities and counties to work cooperatively in planning for urban unincorporated areas to ensure an orderly transition to city governance (ibid). In addition, one of the county level actions calls on “countywide planning bodies, in cooperation with their cities, to develop approaches to reconcile different standards for development and infrastructure in unincorporated urban areas” (64), serving to facilitate the annexation process. The clear goals laid out in this plan serve to put annexation in focus and inform the policy goals of municipalities in the region, including Seattle.

The Seattle comprehensive plan also lays out a set of policies on annexation. Annexation is highlighted as a main feature of the city’s growth strategy over the next twenty years. Firstly, the city aims to “designate unincorporated land for potential annexation where the area has access, or can easily be connected, to City services, and the boundary-change agreements will result in an equitable distribution of revenues and costs” (City of Seattle, 36). Additionally, the comprehensive plan makes clear Seattle will: “consider annexation requests by the residents of unincorporated areas as a way for the City to meet regional growth management goals” and “support annexations of unincorporated areas to surrounding jurisdictions by taking part in public engagement efforts to determine local sentiment” (ibid). Figure 5 in the comprehensive plan specifically defines North Highline as a potential annexation area, in line with the county’s designation (2008 King County, 133). While there are no specific plans set forward as to the process and timeline of annexation for North Highline, the comprehensive plan makes it clear that Seattle is on track to begin annexation and sees it as major goal. However, this document also highlights three potential roadblocks that will need to be addressed: City service integration, distribution of revenues and costs, and public support for annexation.

**Section III: Current Status in North Highline**

There are several methods by which municipalities can annex unincorporated areas in the State of Washington. The two most suited for large, urban unincorporated areas, such as North Highline, are the election and petition method. Of these two, the 60% petition method is used the most frequently. To initiate this process, petitioners must provide notice to the city council of the annexing body of the intention to commence annexation proceedings, which must be signed by 10% of the residents of the proposed annexation area (MRSC, 2015: 49). The council will then hold a meeting with petitioners to decide whether to accept, reject, or modify the annexation proposal, including finalizing the boundaries of the proposed annexation area and agreeing upon an annexation timeline. Oftentimes, the city council will pass a resolution at this time declaring their intent to annex. Upon approval, the petition for annexation is then sent out to residents of the area. The petition must be signed by the owners of 60 percent of the property value in the annexation area, computed according to the assessed valuation of the property in the proposed annexation area (MRSC, 2014:49). Cities may also conduct public hearings during this time, which are paid for by the petition signers (51). Once the 60% threshold has been reached, a formal ordinance is enacted by the city and the incorporation process is set into motion. This method is widely used in Washington State due to the higher degree of responsibility it places on the residents of an annexation area. They bear the majority of the costs related to outreach while allowing the city to dictate the terms of the annexation through its role in approving the petition.

The election method can be initiated through two different steps. The first is using a petition which must be signed by qualified voters residing in the area proposed for annexation equal in number to 20 percent of the votes cast in the last election (MRSC, 2014: 41). The petition must then be reviewed by reviewed by the county prosecuting attorney before coming before the annexing city’s council for approval. Alternatively, the city council may enact a resolution that petitions for an election on the annexation question among the voters of a potential annexation area, while describing the boundaries of the area to be annexed and identifying the number of voters in the area.

After either initiation method is completed, the city then indicates an election date on the annexation proposal to the county auditor. The city must bear the costs for an election, which can be a major deterrent in the case that approval is not overwhelmingly likely. Additionally, cities may choose to adopt an ordinance authorizing the publication and distribution of a local voters’ pamphlet to provide information on ballot measures, in which case they must formally appoint a committee to prepare arguments in favor of and against the annexation measure (). Annexing cities are required to post a notice for an upcoming election on annexation, stating the hours and locations of polling places, and the purpose of the election. Up until this point, there is no mandated public outreach, and local residents may lack the necessary information needed to make an informed decision in the upcoming election.

After the election is held and the results are certified by the county auditor, the city must adopt ordinances providing annexation in the case it is approved by voters. An effective annexation date is fixed, and notices of annexation are given out to relevant bodies including the State Office of Financial Management, the Department of Revenue, local utilities, service districts, and internal city departments (). The election method is a far more involved process, which requires more political and financial responsibility by the annexing city. The main roadblock are the capital costs associated with administering an election, which often limits its use except in cases where approval is extremely likely.

The City of Seattle has decided to propose annexation of North Highline using the resolution initiated election method. The Seattle City Council approved resolution 31559 on December 15th, 2014, which calls for the annexation, by election, of the North Highline Annexation Area. A representative from the city explained this decision was based off the difficulty in organizing a petition-method annexation considering the large population of the area, as well as a desire to have public input remain a central part of the annexation process, which they believed an election accomplishes. A notice of intention was submitted to the King County Boundary Review Board on June 4th 2015, setting the city up to hold an election on the proposed annexation. However, as of this time, the city has not yet set a date for an election, and thus the situation remains in flux.

**Methodology**

To begin implementing my project, I needed a better understanding of the way annexation works in the state of Washington, the factors that go into the decision and process, and the major issues and obstacles that arise. I decided to meet with planners in the area with expertise in annexation to discuss some of the issues, gain a broader context for annexation, and identify resources that could be useful for me to use for my project. The MRSC website emerged as a major resource for me at this point. Using the resources they had available, including the State’s annexation handbook, allowed me to understand the purpose and methods of annexation in the region. I had a sense for the steps in the annexation process and the materials related to each. I received an example of an annexation-related informational documents from a planner in Bonney Lake, which helped give me the idea for my final product (Fig. 1).

I then applied the information I had learned from my exploratory investigations to the case study of North Highline. Using the legal framework of annexation, I identified the status of North Highline as a potential annexation area for Seattle as well as the major stakeholders and their roles in the annexation process. I then began looking through the history of the annexation process, identifying the steps that had already been completed. I read through the Burien and Seattle fiscal impact studies that had been completed to assess the fiscal impacts of annexation, as well as the Seattle comprehensive plan and documents from the county which outlined the reasoning for annexation.

It was at this point that I met with Kenny Pittman from the City of Seattle, who had led the push for annexation from within Seattle’s government. We discussed the current state of Seattle’s annexation efforts and went over some of the main impacts on the city and North Highline that annexation would bring. He shared the City’s 2014 Notice of Intention of Annexation, which effectively outlined the City’s annexation plan and served as a valuable resource in my product. From this discussion, I learned that the city was planning on pursuing annexation by the Election method. From my research into the different methods of annexation, I understood that this would require the public’s approval in the form of an election for any final determination for annexation. I looked through the available online resources made as part of the City’s public outreach efforts and found the information presented to be to be extremely lacking. There was not a lot available in and the resources I did find were either out of date, provided very little detail, or were not geared specifically towards residents of the area (Fig. 2). This was the gap in the literature that I would be addressing, and I then decided on my final product for this project. I would be making a detailed informational reference report that would update residents on the current progress into annexation, provide them with information showing the likely impacts, identify and address major issues, and link them to other resources available.

With this plan in place, I set out creating an outline of my final report (Fig. 3). I built this off the major goals my product intended to address. Central to this was a list of all the major impacts that I would have to explain and/or calculate. I divided these up into three main sections: taxation, regulation, and services. Within each, I listed specific issues I would have to address. For instance, I listed specific services such as Fire, Police, Schools, and Roads which I had identified as important through my general research into annexation or specific investigation of North Highline.

Finally, I met with community leaders and representatives from North Highline to review my outline. The intention of this step was to make sure I was addressing all the impacts and issues that the residents of North Highline felt strongly about in an appropriate manner. Because I did not have the time for more thorough, direct outreach to residents, I reasoned that by meeting with groups that served as representatives of the community, I could accurately reflect the overall concerns of North Highline residents. I met with representatives from two groups: the White Center Community Development Association (WCCDA) and the North Highline Unincorporated Area Council to review my outline and discuss additional issues surrounding annexation I would want to include or at least be aware of. These meetings allowed me to finalize my product outline and begin working on the final report.

In my final report, I explained and calculated the impacts of annexation for every issue I identified. I accomplished this in two main steps. The first usually involved consulting the Notice of Annexation or through discussions with Kenny and other officials from Seattle and King County. This gave me an understanding of the plan the City had regarding each issue and how it would be addressed during annexation. Once I had a explanation of how each issue would be handled, I began collecting the information necessary to determine and spell out the impacts of that change. I detail the sources of information I used in the report itself, which I broadly break into three main categories. The first is official documents published by Seattle and King County, such as budgets, tax documents, and annexation plans. The second is information I received from the government officials I spoke to. I met with five policy experts from both Seattle and King County in this process. The third is information from official websites for government agencies, many of which I link to in the report for reference.

While in the process of writing and researching my report, I also had to create a presentation for senior project night. The main purpose of this was to introduce my project and justify its importance to an outside audience. Because of this, my presentation focused heavily on providing a solid background and context for the audience to introduce them to the issues at stake before understanding how my project fits in. I began by defining annexation and drawing the distinction between municipal and unincorporated governance. I then moved into explaining the annexation process in North Highline and the local context and history of the practice in the Seattle area. Finally, I detailed the current progress on annexation in North Highline, drawing upon the work from my literature review, before finally introducing the project itself. The rest of the presentation went through my methodology, design, and next steps, but the main focus was clearly on justifying the basis for the project, shown by an emphasis on the earlier slides.

The last month of the project was spent finishing a completed version of the final report. I wrote out each section and created graphs and charts as visual aids. It was at this point that I realized the report could more effectively act as a reference, providing connections to primary research material rather than being completely self-contained. I made an effort to identify and link as many relevant resources as I could within the report to provide readers with the resources to conduct further independent research on a specific topic. With the conclusion, I decided to abandon my original idea of providing a recommendation or list of steps to take in the future. Instead, I wanted my report to simply highlight and explain the issues and allow readers to draw their own conclusions. I took time at the end of the report to summarize each section and focus in on the key issues I identified out of the entire analysis. I made sure that my writing was clear and concise to speak to the broadest audience possible.

At this point, I have a completed report for the purposes of the project, yet I intend to expand and finalize it further. My goal is to have a presentable version that can serve as a public facing resource. After verifying my information and content with Kenny Pittman, I plan on meeting with the WCCDA once more to develop a plan for hosting the report on their website. First, I will have to formalize the layout and formatting of the report to create a product which meets the basic standards of a professional, public facing report. I also plan on creating shorter form brochures or documents that can be publicly distributed. These will serve to both summarize findings from the report and highlight specific issues in detail. I will look to the CDA for guidance in designing and developing these products. They might also assist in distributing it among residents or building upon my findings for further analysis.

**Figure 1: Bonney Lake Informational Brochure**

A screenshot of a cell phone

Description automatically generated A screenshot of a newspaper

Description automatically generated

**Figure 2: City of Seattle Informational Material**

A screenshot of a cell phone

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**Figure 3: Final Product Outline**



**Conclusion**

Ultimately, the goal of my project was to answer a research question, which I decided to accomplish through my report. Upon completion, I found that the answer was more complex than I had anticipated. Although I did not reach a clear determination over the annexation question, I was able to identify several key takeaways that I believe are crucial to understanding the specific situation of North Highline.

Firstly, North Highline residents stand to gain a lot from annexation. They will see improvements to the level of public services they receive without a similar increase in taxes. This stems from the municipal structure of Seattle’s government, which grants it greater revenue generating powers which leads to increased organizational capacity. Municipal governments are simply better equipped to provide urban services. This is especially crucial for the lower income, immigrant, and minority populations in North Highline which generally rely more on public services.

On the other hand, landlords and business owners will see increased burdens in the form of taxes and regulations upon entry into Seattle. Some of the strongest opposition to annexation in the past has come from business owners. The organized opposition of the business community would represent a major obstacle in the case annexation were formally proposed. In addition, North Highline’s lack of political or economic clout once within the City could lead to issues of underrepresentation. We tend to see this problem with comparable Seattle neighborhoods such as South Park or Rainier Beach. Many residents oppose annexation due to the fear of rapid development and resulting displacement that will happen without their say. While this is very difficult to predict, we have seen a similar trend throughout Seattle’s lower income neighborhoods, which the City’s policies may have only exacerbated.

As a whole, residents seem eager to discuss and engage with the debate over annexation. The main obstacle to annexation I found instead comes from within Seattle’s City government. Progress has been both slow and erratic for more than a decade. Even engaged residents of North Highline have expressed uncertainty over the current situation and frustration over the lack of understanding. Many have even grown to distrust the City. Annexation is currently stalled due to a lack of political will from within the City Council. It is an issue that is not as pressing as others and doesn’t attract much attention or grassroots support for residents of Seattle. Nevertheless, I believe it is still useful to foster a healthy and vibrant conversation over the issue, as seeing it will pressure those within the political system to act.

This project helped me better appreciate the function and influence of local government in shaping the daily lives of its citizens. The far reaching effects of taxation, regulation, service provision, planning, political representation, and other aspects of government play a major role in shaping the opportunities and development afforded to their citizens. Thus, jurisdictional boundaries are oftentimes both arbitrary yet extremely meaningful. Living on one side of an imaginary line provides a Seattle resident a set of benefits, challenges, opportunities and other circumstances that differ widely from those across the border in North Highline. This makes annexation a deeply consequential and oftentimes controversial decision, as it can fundamentally alter the trajectories of both individual people and entire communities. Finally, I learned to accept that complex problems often have complex solutions. It is through the continued intermediate work of asking question, gathering knowledge, and engaging with others that we build toward a greater understanding.

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