



**King County**

**Ron Sims**

King County Executive

**King County Charter Review Commission  
Public Hearing Summary – June 21, 2007  
Preston Community Center, 6:30pm-8:00pm**

The 2007-2008 Charter Review Commission held its sixth of nine public hearings on Thursday June 21, 2007 at the Preston Community Center. The purpose of the meetings is to gather input from the public on how the county charter should be amended.

Commissioner John Jensen chaired the meeting. Other commissioners in attendance were Kirstin Haugen, Tara Jo Heinecke, Terry Lavender, Gary Long, Mike Lowry, and Allan Munro. Councilmember Kathy Lambert was also present.

Mr. Jensen gave opening remarks and introduced the commissioners.

Commission staff member Corrie Watterson gave a presentation on the charter and the charter review process.

Councilmember Lambert welcomed citizens to the meeting and thanked them for attending. She recommended that we look at changing the charter to create a more representative and responsive government. She explained that though she has 44 charter issues to present to the commission, she would present the full list at the June commission meeting instead of at this hearing.

Ms. Lambert noted that there is a lot of division in King County over land use issues. She gave an example of the ‘rural subsidy’, the idea that urban residents are subsidizing the government services of rural residents. She pointed out that because of restrictions on shopping centers in rural areas, residents spend their money in more urban areas, and that this spending and tax dollars are not credited to rural residents.

Ms. Lambert said that it is important for the commissioners to know that rural and unincorporated areas expect better local services from King County. She expressed that though the county does a good job of providing regional services, local services are the primary function of county government.

Mr. Jensen then opened the floor for citizen comments. Thirty-five citizens were present at the meeting, and 14 made remarks.

## **Summary of issues:**

### Improve Rural/Unincorporated Representation (12 comments)

- Establish a Rural Affairs Department (1 person)
- Create a Rural Advisory Commission (1 person)
- Special representation for unincorporated residents (3 people)
- Public process needed for significant rural decisions (3 people)
- A voice in town/city government for unincorporated areas (1 person)
- Strengthen role of local community organizations (2 people)
- Investigate option of townships (1 person)

### Land Use (4 comments):

- No free upzones for private property owners (1 person)
- DDES should report to Councilmembers Dunn and Lambert (1 person)
- Potential Annexation Areas should be locally controlled (1 person)
- The county should not have so much power over rural property (1 person)

### Council Districting / Number of Councilmembers (4 comments)

- Expand the council (3 people)
- Redistrict to include rural areas in more districts (1 person)

### Instant Runoff Voting (2 comments):

- For IRV (2 people)

### Electing the Elections Director (1 comment):

- Elect a non-partisan Elections Director, and create a separate Department of Elections (1 person)

### Electing the Sheriff (1 comment):

- Preferred elected (1 person)

### King County Library System (1 comment):

- Give the council authority to oversee the Board of Trustees (1 person)

### King County Parks (1 comment):

- County parks should not have to be profitable (1 person)

### Non-partisan Council (1 comment):

- Make council non-partisan (1 person)

### Council Elections (1 comment)

- Favors an at-large system (1 person)

### FEMA (2 comments)

- FEMA's regulations are overly burdensome and the agency is unresponsive (2 people).

## Summary of Comments by Name:

Gary Robinson, of Mercer Island:

- The King County Library System is governed by a board of trustees; that board needs more oversight by county government. The Library is not operating at the level that the patrons would like, and they very little power to influence how it functions. The county council could be given authority in the charter to oversee the board of trustees.

Edwin Nelson, of Fall City:

- Establish a rural affairs department, with offices in Monroe, North Bend, and Enumclaw. Such a department is needed because rural residents' voices are not heard on issues such as the transfer of Fall City Park to the Snoqualmie Tribe (Olive Taylor Quigley Park should be stricken from the transfer), and the teardown of the Fall City Library (was it necessary to rebuild the library?).

Goodspaceguy Nelson, of West Seattle:

- County council elections should be run at-large.
- All county elected positions should be non-partisan.
- Create a category of 'helper' employees to help with menial jobs, who are paid below minimum wage. The goal would be to reduce the significant unemployment rate in Washington State.
- Enact a system of preference/ranked/choice voting: voters should be able to vote for their first choice and not have their vote wasted.

Ken Konigsmark, of Preston:

- Create a rural advisory commission to advise the council on rural affairs. There is no advisory body to consider such issues as siting large schools and churches in rural areas, and rural wineries. Citizens take on the consideration of these issues themselves, which takes significant time. The unincorporated area councils, Agriculture Commission, and Rural Forest Commission are too narrow in focus and geographic region to meet this need.
- King County Parks should not be required to be a revenue-generating operation. This attitude creates pressure to sell off public assets, and is an affront to the proper management of open space for the public good. The charter should include protection of our public open spaces.
- The council should not give free upzones to private property owners. In almost all cases, private owners should buy density credits through the existing transfer of development rights (TDR) program. The public interest in appropriate zoning is being thwarted, and the TDR program is also being crippled financially by the free upzones.
- The council should also not downzone properties without compensating landowners. They should receive compensation or a tax reduction for the loss of their development rights. Rural parcels are already overly taxed compared to the services provided. To finance compensation for rural landowners, taxes could be assessed across all urban parcels; the benefits and burdens of preserving open space should be shared by everyone.

Alan Dujenski, of Woodinville:

- The charter does not create a truly representative county. The council needs to have more control.
- The county should not have so much power over the use of rural property.

Toby Nixon, of Kirkland, former State Representative:

- Create a separate department of elections, headed by a non-partisan, elected director. Two expert panels, the Elections Task Force, appointed by the council, and the Citizens Elections Oversight Committee both recommended this change. The text of the charter amendment implementing the change could be drawn from Initiative 25.
- Ranked choice / instant runoff voting would open up more diversity in the elections process and enable more voices to be heard, allowing voters to choose their first choice without the fear of wasting their vote. The charter review commission could use the new ranked choice in Pierce County as a model.

Peter Lamana, of Woodinville:

- King County government's large real estate transactions should go to either a special or general election vote of county residents. The county government owns too large a portion of the county's land.

Rick Ransom, of Fall City:

- Small homestead farm was flooded, now FEMA will not let them rebuild their farmhouse under flood control laws.

Sherry Thompson Ransom, of Fall City:

- There is no one to turn to in King County to help understand FEMA's new rules, which do not allow their family to rebuild their historic homestead home. The rules are unreasonable.

Melody Scherting, of Issaquah:

- There should be some type of special representation for residents of unincorporated King County. The county works well as a regional government, but fails as a local government.
- Changes that affect the community, such as the transfer of the local Fall City Park to the Snoqualmie Tribe, should not be done without public notice, public comment, and public vote.

*Initiative 25:*

Mr. Jensen asked Mr. Nixon to elaborate on the issue of Initiative 25, specifically, what action the Charter Review Commission could take after I-25 goes to the ballot. Mr. Nixon said that it would probably not make sense for the commission to put the same language before the voters again if it fails. The commission could alternatively recommend that the county have an elected auditor who is responsible for elections, finances, records, licensing, and other items.

Mr. Jensen noted that some people feel that the signature threshold to qualify an initiative

for the ballot is too low. Mr. Nixon said he believed that the threshold was too high if anything.

*Sheriff:*

Mr. Nixon explained that he thinks citizens chose an elected sheriff because they wanted an independent voice, who would advocate for the resources needed to protect lives and property.

*Rural governance:*

Ms. Lavender offered a number of ideas for the problem of local services in unincorporated areas: townships, strengthening the unincorporated area councils, creating a rural advisory commission, and increasing rural councilmembers' staff and budget. She asked the audience to comment on these ideas.

Matt Larson, of Snoqualmie, Mayor of Snoqualmie:

- One group that has effectively represented local rural areas has been the Snoqualmie City Government Association, though Fall City is left out of that. Mr. Larson encouraged a charter change that would give unincorporated areas such as Fall City a voice in local government.

Susan Miller, of Fall City, Fall City Community Association:

- The county must communicate better with the public on issues such as the park swap. The deal occurred 'behind closed doors'. The county should send a departmental representative to the local community organization meetings, such as the Fall City Community Association's, whenever an issue like this arises. They did a good job, however, on communication regarding the new roundabout in Fall City.

Jim Davie:

- The county should work very hard to listen to and understand rural residents' issues. There is a difference between a request for services, and a general understanding of the differences between urban and rural needs and perspectives.

Ken Hearing, of North Bend, Mayor of North Bend:

- Rural residents are substantially underrepresented, with only two councilmembers representing the 20% of King County's population that needs the most attention. Many people in unincorporated areas around North bend call him for help, signaling a need for additional representation of some kind.

Mr. Munro noted that unincorporated area councils are supposed to be representing the unincorporated areas, but large areas of the county do not have organized councils. In addition, councilmembers do not have time to go to all of the meetings of the councils, and may not be hearing anything helpful from them when they do go.

Mr. Hearing responded that he did not know the answer, but that people needed to be

motivated to volunteer to help, whether by running for office or some other way.

Mr. Lowry said that elected representatives are the most responsive to the citizenry, which points toward annexation of the incorporated areas to provide residents with more local representation. Being incorporated would also provide for additional revenue from local taxation.

Mr. Hearing responded that annexations are effective as long as the annexation area is not a drain on the city's services

Councilmember Lambert responded that people do not get involved both because they are busy and because they have already communicated their issues to their representatives. However, with only two rural councilmembers, there still is not enough representation for rural citizens. DDES should report to her and Councilmember Dunn, as they really work for the incorporated areas. She also suggested that the Boundary Review Board allow the leaders of the cities who will absorb the Potential Annexation Areas to govern the land use policies in those areas.

She also suggested strengthening the Fall City Community Association and the Preston Association.

*Expanding the council:*

Mr. Munro asked Councilmember Lambert if the council should be expanded back to thirteen members, to provide increased rural representation.

Councilmember Lambert responded that there would still be the same proportion of rural and urban councilmembers on an expanded council.

Mr. Nelson returned to add that he believes a 13-member council would provide more leadership, particularly if they were elected at large.

Mr. Konigsmark returned to suggest that the council should be expanded, but half of the districts, for instance, could be required by the charter to include rural areas. Most districts should include both urban and rural areas so that there is responsibility and ownership of at least half of the council for the rural areas. These districts would look like long horizontal strips across the county.

Mr. Nixon returned to note that King County has a great population than eleven states. The county would not be disserved by having many more councilmembers. One option to improve representation would be to greatly expand the size of the council and have smaller districts.

Mr. Lamana returned to respond to Ms. Lavender's question about rural representation options, particularly the township model. He recommended that the commission investigate this option.

Mr. Nelson returned to suggest:

- Create an employment category of ‘helper citizens’ to reduce the significant unemployment rate in Washington State.

Mr. Jensen thanked all of the attendees, and adjourned the meeting at 8:05pm.