



King County

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King County Executive

King County Charter Review Commission Public Hearing Summary – June 12, 2007 Seattle Public Library, 6:30pm-7:20pm

The 2007-2008 Charter Review Commission held its third of nine public hearings on Tuesday June 12, 2007 at the Seattle Public Library. The purpose of the meetings is to gather input from the public on how the county charter should be amended.

Commissioners Gregg Hiramawa and Bryan Glynn chaired the meeting. Other commissioners in attendance were Juan Bocanegra, Kirstin Haugen, Tara Jo Heinecke, Terry Lavender, Lois North, and Mike Wilkins. Councilmember Larry Phillips was also present.

Mr. Hiramawa and Mr. Glynn gave opening remarks and introduced the staff, commissioners, and Councilmember Phillips. Mr. Glynn invited Councilmember Phillips to speak.

Mr. Phillips thanked the commission for its work. He commended the significant public service that the co-chairs, Lois North and Mike Lowry, have given to King County. He praised the charter as a useful and organic document that provides checks and balances and a solid governmental structure.

Mr. Phillips presented the following ideas:

The partisan affiliation of county officials

- Our current charter serves the citizens well, including the partisan nature of elected county offices.
- The public is demanding transparency in government, from the federal to state to local governments. Partisan affiliation provides transparency to the voter.
- Over time, the council has well represented the breadth of political views of county residents.
- There is a sense that the county council is overwhelmingly partisan. However, looking back over nearly five thousand votes on the council for the last nine and a half years, almost all of our legislation over those nine and a half years has been unanimous.
 - Only six percent of nearly five thousand votes have been split.
 - Of the votes that are split, one-half of one percent have been partisan.

- Most of the split votes have not been along party lines, but more along geographic lines between urban, suburban, and rural King County.
- This unanimity is because the council works hard on the legislation in committee before it comes to a full vote before the council.

Amending the charter by citizen initiative

- The charter and its review process have been very effective of the past 40 years. I opposed the State Supreme Court's decision to allow the charter to be amended by initiative.
- The referendum section of our current charter and its signature requirement should not be used for the initiative process. The latter must have its own section, so the charter will need to be rewritten by this commission to take this decision into account.

Council committees

- The size and number of the regional committees is a strain on the remaining nine council members. The commission could look at ways to better structure the regional committees to allow councilmembers to better represent their districts.

Mr. Glynn opened the floor to the commissioners to ask Mr. Phillips questions. Ms. Lavender asked if the rejection of the blanket primary and the new one-party primary system had caused the council to become more partisan. Mr. Phillips answered that he did not think so, though that is something to think about for the future.

Commission staff member Mark Yango then gave a presentation on the charter and the charter review process.

Mr. Glynn opened the floor for citizen comments. Neither of the citizens present were interested in addressing the commission.

The commissioners and Mr. Phillips then engaged in a lengthy discussion:

Regional committees –

Ms. Lavender asked whether the reduced number of councilmembers should translate into a reduced number of city members on the regional committees. Mr. Phillips answered yes. He noted that in some instances committee members from cities have been given half a vote, to preserve geographical representation and the voices of each city representative.

Ms. Lavender clarified that councilmembers now must sit on two of the regional committees. Mr. Phillips said that they sit on two or even three. New regional committees have been added over the years, adding to councilmembers' and the executive's workload. Councilmembers are also now representing two hundred thousand constituents. Members cannot fully participate in the regional committee work because they are so busy.

Mrs. North asked Mr. Phillips how he would suggest that this problem be addressed. He answered that the structure of the committees needs to be addressed. For example, the committees could meet quarterly instead of monthly, a month could be devoted to each major topic on a rotating basis, or the committee could meet for an entire day less regularly instead of for two hours once per month. He acknowledged that a charter amendment might not be needed to make these kinds of changes.

Mrs. North noted that the council often does not vote on regional committee recommendations, and said that some members of those committees have expressed their desire for the council to have to take an up or down vote on the committee recommendations within a month or six weeks.

Mr. Phillips answered that that had not been his experience. He explained that under the charter, if a regional plan or policy comes over to the council from the executive, it is a mandatory referral to a regional committee. If the council changes or defeats the action proposed by the regional committee, it goes back to the committee. With regard to operational or budget issues, Mr. Phillips noted that it has been a raging debate for some time as to what constitutes a policy issue versus a budget or operational issue; the regional committees are intended to consider policy alone. He believes that councilmembers have been respectful of this line of demarcation.

County government –

Ms. Heinecke commented that many people are confused about the role and mission of county government, and acknowledged that solving this problem is beyond the scope of the charter review process. Mr. Phillips said that this situation derives from the populist tradition of Washington State, in which the people want their government to be as close to them as possible. For most people, this is their municipal government and other local governments, such as school districts.

He noted that the role of county government is to be a local and regional government provider. King County government has been simultaneously meeting the needs of urban and rural residents for as long as he has been in county government. Mr. Phillips said that in his opinion, King County was slowly emerging as more of a regional government than a provider of local government services, with the exception of the rural areas. There will then be even more opportunity for agencies such as the sheriff's department to work for cities by contract, which would be good for efficiency.

Immigration –

Mr. Bocanegra explained that in terms of public safety, immigration raids by the federal government (ICE) create a very threatening situation for many workers, who find themselves unable to speak out against their treatment. He recommended that the county take action, through ordinance or a charter amendment, to make it clear that the county and its public safety officials will not cooperate with such raids. Mr. Phillips thanked Mr. Bocanegra for his comments.

After asking for final comments, Mr. Glynn and Mr. Hirakawa thanked the participants and adjourned the meeting.