



King County

Ron Sims
King County Executive

King County Charter Review Commission Public Hearing Summary – June 5, 2007 Shoreline Center, 6:30pm-8:00pm

The 2007-2008 Charter Review Commission held its first of nine public hearings on Tuesday June 5, 2007 at the Shoreline Center. The purpose of the meetings is to gather input from the public on how the county charter should be amended.

Commissioner Kirstin Haugen chaired the meeting. Other commissioners in attendance were Gregg Hirakawa, Terry Lavender, Gary Long, Allan Munro, and Mike Wilkins. Councilmember Bob Ferguson was also present.

Ms. Haugen gave opening remarks and introduced the commissioners. Councilmember Ferguson welcomed citizens to the meeting and thanked the commission for its service. He flagged two issues he expected to be considered during the course of the commission's work: whether the Elections Director should be an elected position or not, and the size of the Council.

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

Ms. Haugen then opened the floor for citizen comments. Ten people made remarks.

Summary of issues:

Sheriff's Office (4 comments)

- Preferred appointed (3 people)
- Preferred elected (1 person)

Director of Elections Position (6 comments)

- Preferred elected, and requested that this issue be taken to the ballot (4 people)
- Urges caution on electing an elections officer (1 person)
- Additional comments regarding this office (1 person)

Council (5 comments)

- Preferred partisan (4 people)
- Preferred non-partisan (1 person)

Elections (4 comments):

- Online signatures for voter registration (1 person)

- Paid signature gathering for initiatives (2 people)
- Elections should not be so expensive to run (1 person)

Amending the Charter (4 comments)

- Signature threshold for amendment by initiative should be as high as the state's (1 person)
- Consider requiring Council to vote on commission recommendations (1 person)
- Consider requiring a supermajority public vote for citizens to amend the charter (1 person)
- The Charter should not be amended by initiative (1 person)

Campaign finance reform (public funding) (3 comments)

- Public funding is needed for county elections

Whistleblower Protections (3 comments)

- Whistleblower protection is needed for county employees

Other Comments

Strengthen Public Disclosure laws	2 people
Council should not meet without a quorum	2 people
Local services in the unincorporated areas	1 person
Sunset Law	1 person
Ombudsman's Office	1 person
PAO	1 person
Budget Provisos	1 person
Regional Committees	1 person
Transit Committee	1 person
Hearing Examiner's office	1 person
Emergency Ordinances passed in Council	1 person
Executive Sessions of Council	1 person
Consultants on County Projects	1 person

Summary of Comments by Name:

Chris Eggen, of Shoreline:

- An elected Auditor would be preferable to an appointed position.
- Campaign finance reform is needed. Campaign costs are climbing, and soon, the average person will not be able to run for office.

Elaine Phelps, of Shoreline:

- King Conservation District votes should be included on the regular ballot. She noted that it is often prohibitively expensive for a local organization such as the King Conservation District to put an item on the ballot.
- The Sheriff should not necessarily be elected. The Sheriff's office should be under another authority, not independent as it is now.

Robert Ransom, of Shoreline, Mayor of Shoreline:

- The Director of Elections should be elected, not appointed. The position should remain under the Executive.
- The Sheriff should be an appointed police chief under the Executive, not elected.
- The Council should remain partisan.

Juli Pettingill, of the University District in Seattle:

- The Director of Elections should be elected, not appointed. If I-25 (an initiative to elect the Director of Elections, potentially on the November 2007 ballot) passes, the commission should not interfere with the will of the people to elect the Director.

Donn Charnley, of Shoreline, former state Senator:

- The Sheriff should be appointed, not elected. An elected Sheriff is too political.
- Campaign finance reform is needed; the change would need to happen at the state level, but local politicians can lobby the legislators.
- The Council should remain partisan; it is better for the people to know who's who at the top levels of government.

Sandra Cohen, of Seattle:

- The Council should not be partisan, because politicians are often beholden to the parties they identify with. However, because the issue is contentious it should be put before the voters to allow them to decide whether it should be a partisan body or not.
- The Charter should not be amended by initiative; the Charter should be difficult to amend.
- Regional committees are not as strong as they could be. The role of the cities and towns on the committees should be strengthened. The regional transit committee should have a stronger role.

Lois North asked Ms. Cohen about amending the Charter by initiative, noting that in other counties the recommendations go straight to the ballot.

Ms. Cohen answered that the goal should be to avoid the constant change we have seen in tax laws, in the Charter. She suggested striking a balance between the citizen's right to amend the charter, and the stability of the charter. For example, we could require a supermajority of council members to vote down a recommendation of the charter review commission.

Elaine Phelps returned to give another comment:

- The signature threshold to amend the charter should be as high as the threshold to amend the state constitution.

Brian Derdowski, of Issaquah, former county councilmember:

- The Council should vote on every recommendation the charter review commission puts before them. The Council in the past has sometimes ignored and tabled their recommendations. The commission's recommendations could be put before the voters directly if a supermajority vote was required.
- The kickoff of each commission could begin with a proposed amendment from the Executive and an official council hearing, to get people interested.

- Councilmembers from urban areas should not be allowed to vote on issues relating to unincorporated areas. It is a violation of the 1 man-1 vote rule. Members representing unincorporated areas should have more staff than urban areas.
- The Ombudsman's office needs to be independent, with a dedicated budget to prevent interference with investigations by other departments.
- The Auditor should have the authority to perform performance audits and reviews, and have a sufficient budget.
- Electing the Director of Elections is of concern.
- Campaign finance reform is necessary.
- Councilmembers should recuse themselves from matters in which they have a personal interest.
- The Prosecuting Attorney's office lacks direction in how it handles cases for county departments. It is often unclear who the client is when a department is sued. No list of current cases exists, and there are no statistics on the win vs. loss rate of the PAO.

Mrs. North noted that the charter cannot affect the PAO or the judges.

Mr. Derdowski replied that the representation of the departments in civil cases appears to be under the Executive's authority. The CRC should ask the WA Attorney General if a CRC can address the nature of this representation.

Mr. Derdowski continued:

- The Council overuses the emergency ordinance provision of the charter to pass legislation. The language of the provision is too broad.
- County employees deserve whistleblower protections (audience applause). A report showed that 65% of DES employees felt they had been forced to take actions that were unethical or contrary to the law.
- It is not clear whether budget provisions can be enforced. There are some checks and balances between the Executive and the Council, but this should be clearer.
- Independence should be preserved for the Hearing Examiner position.
- The Council should not hold obligatory meetings without a quorum, as they often do. This requirement should be put into the Charter.
- Executive sessions of the Council should be taped and a copy given to the PAO to ensure that conversations that belong in a public meeting are not occurring within the sessions.
- The Council should remain partisan. Party affiliation provides transparency to the public.

Mr. Munro asked what I-25 is. Ms. Pettingill responded to the question, answering that it is an initiative to amend the charter to elect the Director of Elections for King County.

Mark Early, of Seattle, from Washington Public Campaigns:

- The number of consultants working on large capital projects should be reduced, as consultants are extremely expensive.
- Digital signatures should be used to sign initiatives online, implemented with secure server technology. Online signing would allow groups who cannot afford paid signature gatherers to put initiatives before the public.

- Paid signature gathering should be prohibited. Alternatively, signature gatherers could be required to live in the electoral district they are collecting signatures for.
- Public disclosure laws should be more generous to the needs of the public. Metro, for example, is an “impenetrable fortress” with regard to disclosure of requested information.
- There should be regular review of the performance and efficiency of county departments (a kind of Sunset Law).

Mr. Munro asked if, provided that it can be constitutionally done, we should attempt to prohibit the paid solicitation of initiative signatures.

Mr. Early responded that he would support such a prohibition, if it were constitutional.

A member of the audience asked if Mr. Early had considered the possibility of limiting solicitors, whether paid or unpaid, to the areas in which they are voters.

Mr. Early said he would look into that possibility and perhaps submit a written comment to the Charter Review Commission.

JuliAnne Kempf, of Green Lake in Seattle, former King County Superintendent of Elections:

- The Director of Elections should be elected. Appointed officials can be just a political. More direct accountability is required. The switch to an elected Sheriff was positive because the department pushed for more resources and responsibility, which led to the apprehension of Gary Ridgeway.
- Partisanship can be a positive thing. Voters want more information about candidates, and party identification provides information.
- Public disclosure requirements should be strengthened. There is not real time limit on how long a department has to respond to a disclosure request.
- Whistleblower protections are needed. Employees need support to be able to tell the truth.

Richard King, of Ravenna in Seattle:

- The Council should follow quorum rules in holding their meetings.
- Whistleblower protections are needed.
- If signature gatherers are required to prove a local place of residence, those signature gatherers without a regular address will be cut off from a good source of employment.

Donn Charnley returned to add another comment:

- The county’s primary responsibility is in the unincorporated areas, because people who live in cities have that government to provide for their needs and concerns. However, the county also has to answer the needs of the county as a whole, including densely populated areas. It is difficult to balance both unincorporated and regional demands on the county’s resources.