King County

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King County Charter Review Commission
Public Hearing Summary – June 14, 2007
Bellevue Community College, 6:30pm-8:00pm

The 2007-2008 Charter Review Commission held its fourth of nine public hearings on Thursday June 14, 2007 at the Bellevue Community College. The purpose of the meetings is to gather input from the public on how the county charter should be amended.

Commissioners Doreen Cato and Sarah Rindlaub co-Chaired the meeting. Other commissioners in attendance were Mike Lowry and John Jensen. Councilmember Jane Hague was not present.

Ms. Cato and Ms. Rindlaub gave opening remarks and introduced the commissioners.

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

Ms. Cato then opened the floor for citizen comments. Four people gave remarks.

Summary of issues:

Sheriff's Office (1 comments):
- Preferred elected (1 person)

Director of Elections Position (3 comments):
- Preferred elected (3 people)
- Preferred appointed/elected non-partisan elections director (1 person)
- Additional comments regarding this office (1 person)

Elections (1 comment):
- Paid signature gathering for initiatives (1 person)
- Retain the initiative process (1 person)

Amending the Charter (4 comments):
- Reducing the number of Regional Committees – eliminate doubles (1 person)

Transportation (1 comment):
- Reduce the amount of money allocated to transit in proportion to people who drive

Summary of Comments by Name:

Robert Harper, of Mercer Island:

- Department of Elections should be non-partisan, either elected by the people or appointed by a non-partisan commission in some way
- The Budgeting process is partisan. In a corporation, you ask for funding for high priority items and allocate dollars on a priority basis

Richard Tait, of Mercer Island:

- Seconded the need to appoint the elections director. Has distrust in the electoral system
- Initiative Process: Avoid attempts to remove initiative process from King County Council's decision-making
- Should also resist any attempt to stop paid signature gathering. With the number of people involved, there should be an opportunity to have paid signature gatherers

Lori Sotelo, of Mercer Island:

- Elect the Elections Director
- Retain an Elected Sheriff
- She supports partisan positions

Since no more people volunteered to give testimony, Ms. Cato and Ms. Rindlaub began a discussion on the three questions in the public hearing presentation.

Mr. Harper returned to give another comment:

- He felt that too much money is spent on transit. He believed King County transit should decrease the percentage of funds allocated for mass transit, and thinks we should spend the dollars in proportion to the number of people who are using the public highways and public transit

Sonny Putter, of Newcastle, Councilmember for City of New Castle:

- Suburban Cities Association will not be ready to provide views until June 20th
- 3 KC Regional Committees – Water quality and Policy
    - Wants to strengthen the sustained regional committees
- Since the reduction of the Council from 13 to 9 members, Mr. Putter believes we should eliminate doubles, issues that both regional committees and King County standing committees must address
- Permit Regional Committees to select Chair from among their own membership rather than appointed by Chair of KC Council
- Give Regional Committees final authority over its yearly workplan
- Consider adding budget authority over the enterprise fund, transit, water quality to the Regional Committee's scope of work – Give some element of financial authority to regional committees in these two areas

Ms. Cato asked if the regional committees looked at aquifer.

Mr. Putter replied that King County does not have any direct authority on water supply

Mr. Lowry asked Mr. Putter what the makeup of the regional committee is as opposed to like County Council members, City, and other people.

Mr. Putter replied that the regional transit committee consists of six votes of county council members, six votes combined from the City of Seattle and the suburban cities. There are also four full votes that have been allocated to suburban cities, two full votes that have been allocated to the City of Seattle, and six to the County Council members.

The regional policy committee works in a similar way – four votes to the suburban cities outside Seattle, including Bellevue, two to the City of Seattle, and six to the County Council members.

The regional water quality committee works differently because of the amount of water and sewer districts that are their own separate governance.

Mr. Lowry then asked Mr. Putter if that is the right apportionment of votes – in terms of six and six.

Mr. Putter replied that it is the right apportionment in terms of votes.

Mr. Lowry then asked if Mr. Putter feels if there are an impossible number of committees that the County Council members need to serve on.

Mr. Putter replied that many of the committees are not strictly King County Committees. There may be some room to consolidate committees but it is a difficult question to answer.

Mr. Jensen asked the three citizens who provided public testimony if they would speak more at length on the entire elected versus appointed positions and expound upon it.

Mr. Harper replied that he didn't care if the position was elected or appointed, but if it was appointed, it should be appointed by a nonpartisan commission as opposed to appointed by an elected official, who's part of a party. You have to isolate the person from the politics of the situation so the election is carried out honestly and fairly.

Mr. Jensen suggested a firewall between the elected officials and the person overseeing the elections.

Mr. Harper agreed. It could be described in the charter that it could be equal numbers of people from each party that would appoint this person. He favors appointments by a nonpartisan because we can get people who are more experts in the field.

Mr. Tait then seconded Mr. Harper's comments. King County's election problems are serious enough that we have to do something. But he falls back on an elected position as opposed to an appointed position because no one in the game is really nonpartisan.

Ms. Sotelo reaffirmed her position towards partisanship and how one of the most fundamental rights of the people is to vote and that the person counting the votes must be fair. There has to be standards, and someone has to be accountable.

June Thornton, of Mercer Island:

- Agrees with an elected elections director

Mr. Lowry then reminded people that everything being said tonight is being recorded and we have nine public hearings.

Mr. Cato then asked a question about the initiative process. She asked Mr. Tait why he favored paid signature gatherers or a combination of volunteer versus paid signature gatherers.

Mr. Tait replied that the initiative process is another issue where there have been allegations and concerns about the process – the validity of signatures. Professional signature gatherers are much better equipped to insure the integrity and validity of the signatures collect. The more professional it is, the better off we are. I feel strongly that retaining the initiative process is an important part of what we can do as members of the electorate to exert some further influence on the people who are accidentally elected a couple years before.

Ms. Rindlaub asked if citizens had any comment on meeting the needs of both rural and urban areas since it is going to be a very heated issue at other meetings. She then asked if anybody wanted to make a comment about King County government in general.

One audience member asked what issues are being proposed at this point in terms of rural//urban issues.

Ms. Rindlaub replied that there are a lot of issues related to land use and also with the protection of the Sheriff's department. Then she invited Mr. Putter to weigh in.

Mr. Putter talked about the impending structural financial problem in both the structure of King county government and the structure of the Cities. He mentioned that the long-term structural problem has not gone away in King County because the economy has improved. He pointed out that costs are rising faster than revenue generated.

Mr. Putter suggested that King County and the cities need to find some collaborative approach that helps broach the financial difficulty of absorbing the urban unincorporated areas into cities.

Mr. Harper asked Mr. Putter what is the rate of increases.

Mr. Putter replied that the rate is in the four to five percent number. And the increase in revenue is in the three percent range.

Mr. Harper asked if King County received property taxes.

Mr. Putter said the problem with property taxes under statewide initiative 747, property taxes may not be raised more than one percent per year. Not for individuals. So even though cities annex unincorporated areas, it's not enough to offset the cost of providing the services.

Mr. Harper then asked again if property taxes are limited to the one percent year increase.

Mr. Putter replied that it only applies to jurisdiction not to individual. It applies to King County and the City of Seattle. It's the cumulative effect of a number of jurisdictions. King County collects fifteen percent of the taxes for themselves – the rest are collected on behalf of all the jurisdictions – with well over a hundred separate jurisdictions in King County alone – all tax raising jurisdictions.

Mr. Lowry added that Mr. Putter's description is spot on but we also need to include voter approved increases such as schools.

Ms. Cato then adjourned the meeting.