

# Pierce County Charter Amendments on the Ballot

By Lyz Kurnitz-Thurlo

Every ten years, the voters of Pierce County elect a Charter Review Committee. Their job is to look at all aspects of the County Charter, discuss anything that anyone thinks needs changing, and decide what changes, if any, should be sent to the voters. This year, they chose four items to send to us, the voters, and recommended four to the County Council for them to consider changing.

A majority vote will pass these changes. Below are summaries of what it says in the Voters' Pamphlet. The statements below are NOT opinions of LWVT-PC. Everything except the percentages required in other counties for initiatives and referenda appears in the Ballot Title, For, or Against statements in the County Voters' Pamphlet.

## **Proposed Charter Amendment No. 41 - Initiative Procedures**

Currently, the Pierce County Charter currently provides that the minimum number of signatures required to validate an initiative petition is 10% of the number of votes cast in the last election for County Executive. This proposed amendment would reduce the required number to 8%.

**FOR:** This brings Pierce County in line with the State Constitution.

Signature-gathering is difficult and can be costly.

Most commissioners voted for it.

**AGAINST:** Initiatives are often poorly written and should not be easier to get on the ballot. Ten per cent ensures that it has wider support.

Voters have turned this down twice before.

While this proposed amendment would bring Pierce County in line with the rules for getting an Initiative on the State ballot, other counties which have adopted Initiative and Referendum either have the same limits as Pierce does currently (King, Snohomish, Clallam), or HIGHER (San Juan, Whatcom).

## **Proposed Charter Amendment No. 42 – Referendum Procedures**

Currently, our Charter requires 8% of the number of votes cast in the last election for County Executive as the minimum number of signatures in order to validate a referendum petition. This proposal would reduce the number to 4%. See For and Against arguments above. They are very similar.

**FOR:** Improving the referendum process was the number one priority of the Charter Review Commission. This brings us in line with State Constitution.

**AGAINST:** This would make it easier for a small group of unelected special interest groups to override legislation which was publicly debated and legally vetted and verified.

## **Proposed Charter Amendment No. 43 - Referendum Procedures**

This would increase to 15 business days the time period for the Prosecuting Attorney to formulate a ballot title, notify the proponent if the referendum is not legal, and provide reasonable attorney fees if the proponent prevails in a legal challenge to the referendum filed by the County. It would also suspend the 120-day signature-gathering period for up to 45 days, pending the conclusion of the legal challenge.

**FOR:** Referendum proponents have gathered signatures and gotten measures passed only to have them overturned in court. This would provide for a legal opinion on the legality of the measure before signatures are gathered, before a lot of money is spent, and before it goes to the voters. It also protects filers from the financial burden of defending a referendum if the County should challenge it, and the Court decides that the referendum is proper.

**AGAINST:** This is here because of one isolated incident. A predetermined opinion of not legal can influence public perception, intimidate petitioners, discourage donations, and unnecessarily burden the Prosecutor's office. Judges determine legality, not prosecutors. This is an unnecessary law.

#### **Proposed Charter Amendment No. 44 - Conflict of Interest**

This amendment would prohibit Councilmembers, the Executive, the Assessor-Treasurer, the Auditor, the Sheriff, and the Prosecuting Attorney from holding any other elected public office during their term of office, except the office of political party precinct committee officer.

**FOR:** These people are paid to represent over 830,000 citizens. These are full-time jobs. Holding dual public offices can create conflicts of interest, and compromise decision-making.

**AGAINST:** It does nothing to stop unethical politicians. This only removes potential candidates from your ballot. It would restrict officials from holding ANY other elected position, even those which are temporary and/or unpaid. If it applies to all elected positions, it should apply to precinct committee officers as well. The Pierce County Council is also proposing a charter amendment.

#### **Proposed Charter Amendment No. 45 - Purchasing, Contracts, Claims and Bonds**

This amendment proposes to amend section 9.15 of the Charter, which provides that the County must use competitive bidding in all public works construction with value of more than \$25,000. Would remove the \$25,000 threshold and require that the county use competitive bidding when required to do so by state law or county ordinance.

**FOR:** This would bring Pierce County in line with State law, which, since 2009, has allowed the use of county forces and equipment for public works construction projects. It would therefore allow the County to analyze a project and, if it proves cost effective, and within county plans and capabilities, allow county forces to complete the project. It would bring us in line with state law and allow savings of time and money.

**AGAINST:** This seeks to eliminate the use of competitive bidding, eliminate the use of independent contractors, and use only county employees. Competitive bidding invites competition, and helps to secure the best work at the lowest cost.

These, as well as all State Ballot Issues, will be discussed at the October Unit meetings, as well as at the Ballot Issues Forum on Wednesday, October 19, from 6:30-8:30 p.m. at the Main Branch of the Tacoma Library.