

Draft Memo - Geographic Representation For Everett City Council 11/8/17

To: Everett City Council

Fr: Council Member Paul Roberts

Re: Proposal Establishing A Committee To Examine Geographic Representation Of City Council, And Consider Electing Council Members By Wards Or Districts

The City Council wishes to establish a Committee to examine geographic representation and explore election of City Council members by districts. The work of this Committee shall be conducted in a transparent manner, intended to inform and involve the public as to the issues and alternatives associated with geographic representation and governance, and to seek public involvement in the course of this work. The Committee will make recommendations to the City Council in a timely fashion in order for the Council to consider such recommendations, and consider placing a measure on the general election ballot in November 2018.

The charge of the Committee shall include the following tasks:

Review recent history regarding consideration of geographic representation in Everett including: the 2016 Charter Review Committee record (this record includes submittals by district advocates and detailed reports by Charter Review Committee Members Megan Dunn and Michael Swanson); MRSC briefing memo "Council Election by Wards or Districts" which outlines the RCW citations for creating districts and provides examples of cities in Washington State with districts (copy attached); the Everett City Council General Government Subcommittee report of February 2017, considering forming geographic Council districts; and such other information the Committee deems appropriate.

Consider issues associated with geographic representation including but not limited to: The relationship of districts to governance under at-large and district structures; Models for a district structure (e.g. how many districts, how many at-large, geographic boundaries for districts, number of representatives per district etc); Voter history and turnout in Everett municipal elections; Diversity, socioeconomic factors and demographics in Everett; Potential size of districts or wards, and the relationships of district size to voting and participation for each voter; and Relationship of district models to Everett's neighborhoods and social structure.

Develop a set of alternatives for geographic representation and, with assistance from City staff (Public Information Office, Office of Neighborhoods and Planning Dept.), undertake a public involvement process to educate and solicit public input on the issues of geographic representation and alternatives.

Consider and evaluate input from public outreach, and formulate a set of recommendations to the City Council. The recommendations shall be provided to the Council no later than May of 2018.

The Committee shall strive for consensus in its recommendations. However, if consensus cannot be reached, a majority of Committee members voting shall constitute the recommendations of the Committee. Committee members may submit minority or supplemental reports regarding the Committee's recommendations. Any such report(s) will be transmitted to the City Council along with the recommendations of the Committee.

The Committee will require staff assistance to conduct its work. This will include: a "District Master" who can advise on such matters as geography and population, GIS capabilities, legal advice and a facilitator for the Committee's work. The Council believes the GIS and legal advice can be provided by existing City of Everett staff. A budget estimate for the District Master and facilitator will need to be developed and included in the FY 2018 budget.

How shall we select the Committee?

Selection of Committee members

It is the intention of the City Council that this Committee is comprised primarily of individuals who have relevant experience and are committed to an open and thoughtful examination of the issues associated with governance and geographic representation. We recommend inviting applications from the public. Each City Council member and the Mayor nominate one member from the applicants, and the Committee chooses another. That would provide for 9 members on the Committee.

Council Election by Wards or Districts

This page provides an overview of city council wards and districts in Washington State, including how to establish or abolish districts and a list of all cities MRSC is aware of that have established wards or districts.

Overview

While many cities in Washington elect all their city councilmembers at-large, others have chosen to establish wards or districts, in which some or all of the councilmembers are elected by and represent specific geographic areas of the city.

The establishment of wards or districts is specifically authorized by [RCW 35A.12.180](#) for code cities and [RCW 35.23.051](#) for second class cities, while first class cities may adopt districts by charter.

Establishing City Council Wards or Districts

Dividing a city into districts (wards) is specifically authorized by [RCW 35A.12.180](#) as long as it not done within three months of a municipal general election.

The process for establishing a ward or district system is fairly straight-forward. [RCW 35A.12.180](#) provides that the first step is for the council to pass an ordinance establishing a ward or district system; there is no required public vote on the matter, although the council could choose to conduct an advisory election on the issue. The council will need to decide how many districts it wants to establish and whether it wants any at-large positions. For example, the council could establish seven districts with one councilmember per district, or it could establish five or six districts and one or two at-large positions, or it could establish three districts with two councilmembers for each district, and one at-large position, etc. The councilmembers that are elected by district would be chosen at the primary election only by voters in their districts and then by all the voters at the general election unless the city had prior to January 1, 1994, limited the voting in the general election for any or all council positions only to the voters residing within the ward associated with that council position. If a city had limited the voting in the general election only to voters residing within the ward, then the city is authorized to continue to do so.

[RCW 35.23.051](#) provides a similar process for second class cities.

The bulk of the work in establishing a ward/district system would be, of course, in determining district boundaries. [RCW 35A.12.180](#) provides that "The representation of each ward in the city council shall be in proportion to the population as nearly as is practicable." It does not say anything about how to go about establishing the boundaries of the districts, but it requires that, when districts are redrawn, the redrawing of boundaries should be done according to [Ch. 29A.76 RCW](#). [RCW 29A.76.010](#) states that the redistricting is to be "based on population information from the most recent federal decennial census." So, presumably, the initial establishment of a ward/district system would use federal census data, along with any other sources that would make that data more current.

Although the county has no role in a city's decision to establish a wards system, the county's election supervisor must be properly notified so that the primary election ballots can be prepared and the primary election conducted.

Cities with Wards or Districts

Below is a list of all the cities MRSC is aware of that have established wards or districts. Most of these cities still retain at least one or two at-large positions, although there are a few examples that elect the entire council by district. In most cases, there are more district/ward representatives than at-large councilmembers, but again there are a couple exceptions.

First Class Cities

- Aberdeen - 12 councilmembers: 2 each from 6 wards
- Bellingham - 7 councilmembers: 1 at-large, 6 wards
- Bremerton - 7 councilmembers: 7 districts
- Seattle - 9 councilmembers: 2 at-large, 7 districts
- Spokane - 6 councilmembers: 2 each from 3 districts
- Tacoma - 8 councilmembers: 3 at-large, 5 districts
- Yakima - 7 councilmembers: 3 at-large, 4 districts

Second Class Cities

- Colville - 7 councilmembers: 1 at-large, 2 each from 3 districts
- Ritzville - 7 councilmembers: 2 at-large, 5 districts

Optional Municipal Code Cities

- Anacortes - 7 councilmembers: 4 at-large, 3 wards
- Bainbridge Island - 7 councilmembers: 1 at-large, 2 each from 3 wards
- Blaine - 7 councilmembers: 1 at-large, 2 each from 3 wards
- Burlington - 7 councilmembers: 1 at-large, 6 wards
- Camas - 7 councilmembers: 1 at-large, 2 each from 3 wards
- Centralia - 7 councilmembers: 3 at-large, 4 wards
- Chehalis - 7 councilmembers: 3 at-large, 4 districts
- Chelan - 7 councilmembers: 1 at-large, 2 each from 3 wards
- Hoquiam - 12 councilmembers: 2 elected from each of 6 wards
- Mount Vernon - 7 councilmembers: 1 at-large, 2 each from 3 wards
- Kennewick - 7 councilmembers: 4 at-large, 3 wards
- Pasco - 7 councilmembers: 2 at-large, 5 wards
- Pullman - 7 councilmembers: 1 at-large, 2 each from 3 wards
- Puyallup - 7 councilmembers: 1 at-large, 2 each from 3 districts
- Sedro-Woolley - 7 councilmembers: 1 at-large, 6 wards

- Sunnyside - 7 councilmembers: 3 at-large, 4 districts

Examples of Code Provisions

- Bainbridge Island Municipal Code [Ch. 2.06](#) - Wards
- Mount Vernon Municipal Code [Ch. 1.12](#) - Wards and Election Precincts
- Puyallup Municipal Code [Ch. 1.04](#) - Precincts and Districts, and [Sec. 2.04.070](#) - Election of council members to districts

Election Procedures

Council candidates must be a resident of the ward they wish to represent. Candidates are elected by the voters within the ward at the primary election to select the finalists who will appear on the general election ballot for election by all voters in the city.

Redistricting

Adjusting Ward Boundaries after Federal Census

After each federal census the city must review and redraw its district boundaries to ensure equal representation. The pertinent statutory provisions are in [Ch. 29A.76 RCW](#), local government redistricting. [RCW 29A.76.010](#) provides some time frames and other details on redistricting by local governments. When districts are redrawn, the redrawing of boundaries should be done according to Ch. 29A.76 RCW. RCW 29A.76.010 states that the redistricting is to be "based on population information from the most recent federal decennial census." As with the initial establishment of the wards [RCW 35A.12.180](#) provides that "The representation of each ward in the city council shall be in proportion to the population as nearly as is practicable." This process must be completed within eight months of receiving the official notice and census information from the State Redistricting Commission.

Abandonment of the Ward System

Several cities that established a system of wards have decided to abandon this method of electing their councilmembers. Like the decision to establish wards the decision to abandon them is entirely local. As with the decision to adopt a ward system, the county legislative body has no role in the process but the county's elections supervisor must be advised in order to properly conduct the succeeding elections.

Examples of City Ordinances Abandoning the Ward System

- Bonney Lake [Ordinance No. 1383](#) (2011)
- Snohomish [Ordinance No. 2005](#) (2002)
- Prosser [Ordinance No. 1278](#) (1984)
- Kennewick [Ordinance No. 2536](#) (1980)
- Ellensburg [Ordinance No. 2771](#) (1969)

Recommended Resources

- [Redistricting Commission](#) - Secretary of State
 - [RCW 44.05.030](#) - Redistricting commission - Membership - Chairperson - Vacancies

- [Ward Electoral Systems in Oregon Cities](#), by John Rehfuss (2003)
- Seattle [Citizen Advisory Panel on Council Elections Final Report](#) (2003)

Last Modified: January 17, 2017