

COW Testimony – Kurt Triplett, Executive's Chief of Staff

Good Morning Mr. Chair, members of the Council. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to comment on behalf of the Executive on whether a Charter Amendment creating an elected auditor should be placed on the ballot this year.

The answer is no. **Now** is not the time. Clear progress has been made in elections and placing this measure on the ballot this year will stop that improvement dead in its tracks.

The Executive's position has always been clear and unambiguous.

Time spent by an elections official focused on poll numbers and fund raising is time not focused on running good elections.

King County is best served by an appointed professional elections manager rather than politicizing that position by filling it with an elected official

Why an Elected Auditor?

But before I focus on the benefits to the citizens of King County of professional management of elections, I would like to briefly address the arguments that have been made in favor of an Elected Auditor.

Everyone else has one.

Much has been made of the fact that King County is the only county in Washington State without an elected auditor. But we are not like other Washington counties. In the 2004 general election King County counted nearly 900,000 ballots. More ballots were counted here than were counted in Pierce, Snohomish and Spokane counties COMBINED.

King County also runs the two largest types of elections in the state simultaneously. In 2004 nearly 63% of King County voters cast an absentee ballot. Nationally, only LA County processes more absentee votes than King County. But the remaining 330,000 citizens who chose to vote at the polls was a number larger than the entire vote count in Pierce County, Washington second's largest county. When it comes to running elections, King County has less in common with other Washington State counties, like Mason or Okanogan, and much more in common with the nation's

largest urban counties, like Los Angeles or Dallas. Most of the largest counties employ appointed professionals to manage elections due to the sheer complexity and quantity of ballots moving through those systems.

King County's large, complex absentee and poll operations are best handled by a seasoned, professional elections manager, not the candidate with the biggest war chest or best sound bite.

Accountability.

The chief argument for an elected auditor is that is directly accountable to the voters. Those who advocate an elected position apparently feel that neither the Executive nor the Council is accountable to the public or shown leadership on elections.

We utterly reject this notion. The King County Executive is elected countywide and is accountable to the voters of King County. To those who would say Executive races focus on "other things" we would point out that the ability of the Executive to manage elections was the centerpiece of the campaign in 2005.

More needs to be done, but we have made tremendous reforms in elections. Whenever problems have surfaced, the Executive has acted. The Executive convened an independent Elections Task Force who reviewed all aspects of King County elections and made tough recommendations. Most of those recommendations have been implemented. Staff have been replaced, budgets have been increased, new processes and procedures have been implemented. Continuous improvement has occurred. And all of these actions have been taken much more rapidly than the four year election cycle of an elected auditor.

We believe the Council is also accountable to voters of King County and has demonstrated strong leadership in election reform. This Council has made it law that the legislative branch must confirm both the Director and the Superintendent of Elections to ensure any candidate is thoroughly vetted and a top-notch professional. The Council has reconvened the Citizens Elections Oversight Committee and brought in the nationally respected Elections Center to audit King County elections. Both groups have lauded the progress already made in King County and proposed additional improvements. Nearly all of those have been made as well.

The Council has provided the Elections Division with the resources it needs and has exercised its appropriate oversight role to make sure the improvements were made. And it is working. Acknowledging problems and fixing them are the definition of leadership and accountability. The citizens of King County can be proud of the actions taken by both branches of government to improve elections. No new elected office is needed.

Budget

Another argument is that an Elected Auditor can better advocate for necessary budgets that might be denied them by the Executive or Council. This is simply false. In fact, the data shows the opposite to be true. From 2003 until 2006, during the worst fiscal crisis King County has ever experienced, King County's election budget rose from 8.6 million to 11.8 million dollars. And that figure does not include the millions in federal and state grant money King County has been awarded. Over the same period the budgets of the elected auditors of Pierce, Snohomish and Spokane counties have actually declined.

Professional manager works.

The professional manager model is working. Again, let us look at the facts. Not only have budgets increased significantly under the appointed system, but King County leads in nearly every category of voter participation. Of all of the large counties in Washington State, King County has the highest elections spending per capita. King County has the highest percentage of registered voters per capita. In 2004, King County's remarkable 83% percent voter turnout at 83% was nipped only by Snohomish County's 84%. Despite this success, we are striving to improve every day,

Third party validation.

And this improvement has been recognized nationally. On August 5, the National Association of County Recorders, Election Officials and Clerks honored King County Elections with the Best Practice Award for mail ballot processing. King County Elections was chosen for its significant improvements in ballot count accuracy and implementing nationally recognized quality standards

using the same "Six Sigma" process of world class organizations such as General Electric, Motorola and Bank of America.

This Association consists of 250 professional court clerks, recorders, and election officials from across the country and annually recognizes best practices in the field of elections achievements. Association members will take the procedures outlined by King County and immediately put them to use in their own jurisdictions

Finally, each of three outside independent groups found that King County ran excellent elections in 2005 and had made great strides in addressing the problems of 2004.

Not now.

Even for advocates of an Elected Auditor, 2006 is not the time to place this issue on the ballot.

The best way to avoid repeating the errors of 2004 is to eliminate the dual system of voting and move King County to vote by mail. Each of the outside independent reviews identified the "dual track"

system of absentee and poll elections as a significant contributor to the errors that occurred.

We have a strong plan to move to vote by mail. We just received a \$4.7 million federal grant to purchase mail ballot accountability equipment, high speed tabulation devices designed for a central counting, ballot sorting and election project management scheduling software and a web-based, employee training program. These grants will help us today, but more importantly, are the critical investments needed to move us to vote by mail.

This Council has endorsed our vote by mail plan and has already made the policy decision to change. But by Council ordinance adopted earlier this year, the transition cannot happen until the Council has approved a director of elections and a superintendent. If we can hire these positions quickly, achieving vote by mail in 2007 is still a realistic possibility. And achieving it by 2008 is a virtual certainty.

Therefore, the top priority for both the Executive and the Council must be to recruit and hire top-level managers for Division Director and Superintendent of Elections and to proceed with

implementing the mandatory vote-by-mail system authorized by the Council.

But if the Council places this charter amendment on the ballot, we will lose the outstanding candidates we have. Nor is it likely that additional candidates of high caliber will emerge until the issue is settled. It is a chilling disincentive for any top-level elections manager from other parts of the country to move themselves and their family to King County. Without invested professional management, vote-by-mail will certainly be delayed, if not revisited altogether.

If reforming KC elections is your goal, regardless of your position on Elected Auditor, the best action you can take is to delay this ballot measure until after a professional elections manager has been hired and vote by mail has been implemented. Anything sooner will simply destabilize and paralyze King County elections.

This is not a theoretical problem. It is real and immediate.

We have been engaged in significant discussion with a candidate for the Director of REALS over the last several weeks. These conversations have resulted in 3 trips to the Seattle area to meet

with the Executive, key staff and to tour our facilities. Our candidate has also met with Councilmember Ferguson to discuss elections and management philosophy.

We will now enter into formal negotiations and hope to successfully conclude those discussions within the next two weeks.

Pivotal to our candidate's willingness to take this position is the question of an Elected Auditor. For reasons which don't require a lot of elaboration, he is not interested in leaving a good job to take a position that is slated for elimination before he has arrived. Nor is he ever interested in being an Elected Auditor. He is excited about the prospect of implementing vote by mail and is well suited for bringing about this kind of organizational and operational change.

Similarly we are engaged in discussions with a candidate for Superintendent of Elections. We ran a formal process and interviewed 5 candidates. These candidates have similar concerns. We want to ensure chemistry and a strong working relationship between both of these candidates and feel confident that this will be the case. In an ideal world we will have both managers on board before the September primary.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude my remarks by reiterating that large, complex counties need appointed professionals. The final reforms needed in elections cannot wait for an Elected Auditor to solve them two years in the future. The benefits of an Elected Auditor are uncertain and unknowable but the consequences to further improvement are clear. The choice in front of the Council is simple. Place this amendment on the ballot in 2006 and stop further progress. Or hold off, at least until after 2008 so that top level managers can be hired and vote by mail can be implemented and the transition complete.

Thank you.