

Metropolitan King County Council

News from Council District 7

Councilmember Pete von Reichbauer



King County

www.metrokc.gov/vonreichbauer

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von Reichbauer calls for non-partisan county government

Today King County Councilmember Pete von Reichbauer introduced a charter amendment that gives voters an opportunity to weigh in on partisanship in county government. The legislation, if adopted by the King County Council, would ask voters to make the offices of County Assessor, Executive, and County Council non-partisan at this November's general election. (The State Constitution regulates the election of the County Prosecutor)

"There is no such thing as a Republican pothole or a Democratic stop light," said von Reichbauer. "Since 2000 the council has adopted over 3,000 pieces of legislation and less than 14 of those were voted along party lines. County government has little to do with partisanship and everything to do with providing basic services."

The measure also eliminates the controversial "pick a party primary" for King County offices, giving voters the ability to support any candidate. "Our region is known for its political independence, and many voters are refusing to select a party in the primary. Under the current system those votes don't count. That is unconscionable," said von Reichbauer.

Non-partisan proposals in King County have a history dating back to the original freeholders who advocated for non-partisanship back in 1952. Charter Review Commissions in 1977 and 1997 as well as the 1992 Metro/King County merger committee also proposed putting the issue before voters. In all three instances a partisan county council blocked the vote before the public had an opportunity to decide.

Several former King County Councilmembers have introduced similar measures, including now State Democratic Chair Dwight Pelz (1999) and Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels (1991).

In 1996 Councilmember von Reichbauer sponsored the amendment to legislation creating a partisan elected sheriff making the position non-partisan.

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Why Non-partisan?

King County Government Fact Sheet

County Work is Not Ideological:

- Non-partisan elections make sense. The day-to-day responsibilities of county government have little to do with partisan ideologies and everything to do with service. There is no such thing as a Republican pothole or a Democratic stop light.
- In the past eight years only 16 out of over 3,500 measures approved by the county council was voted along partisan lines. *That is less than ½ of 1%.*

Primary Problems and Voter Choice:

- This change eliminates the controversial “pick a party primary” for King County offices, and gives voters back their freedom of choice.
- Some are concerned that by eliminating party identification voters will have a harder time with the candidate selection process. Many partisan districts trend heavily in favor of one party where the “real election” occurs in the primary. Voters are then forced to choose between members of the same party, making the designation meaningless.

Increase Competition in Elections:

- Parties limit competition, especially when a member of their party is the incumbent. Many decisions in partisan races are made behind closed doors, well before the public has a say.
- In the 1999 primary 22 candidates were vying for the five non-partisan Seattle city council seats, compared to only nine candidates campaigning for six partisan county council seats. In 2003, 26 council hopefuls challenged five incumbents in Seattle, while only seven challengers emerged against the six county council incumbents. In 2005, only eight newcomers entered the race against the recently reduced 9-member county council, leaving two incumbents unopposed.

Most Large Counties are Non-Partisan:

- Sixty Percent of the most populous 15 counties in the U.S. are non-partisan. King County is the 12th largest by population.

Non-Partisan Counties

Los Angeles County, CA
Harris County, TX
Orange County, CA
San Diego County, CA
Miami-Dade County, FL
San Bernardino County, CA
Riverside County, CA
Broward County, FL

Partisan Counties

Cook County, IL
Maricopa County, AZ
Dallas County, TX
Wayne County, MI
King County, WA

Non-Partisan Partners:

- The County primarily works with local governments; (city councils; fire, hospital, conservation, water, sewer, and utility districts); which are all non-partisan. Local officials need to be able to view policy through the same non-partisan lens. This measure supports their ability to work together without the influence and distraction of partisan labels.

Organization Support:

- As early as 1967 the *Municipal League* endorsed the idea that all King County offices be non-partisan.
- In 2005, the *League of Women* voters publicly supported putting the non-partisan issues before the voters.

Bi-Partisan Advocates for Change:

- Both Democrats and Republicans have sponsored legislation to adopt non-partisan county council elections, yet the council has never put it to a public vote.
 - 1975 Bernie Stern (D)
 - 1991 Audrey Gruger (D)
 - 1991 Greg Nickels (D)
 - 1999 Dwight Pelz (D)
 - 2007 Pete von Reichbauer (R)