

Amend county constitution carefully, or not at all

HIGHLIGHTS

Pierce County Charter Review Commission is hard at work for six months

Listening to citizens and preserving direct democracy is part of its job

That doesn't mean it must advance a long slate of charter amendments





FROM THE EDITORIAL BOARD

Grass-roots democracy doesn't come any grass-rootsier than the Pierce County Charter Review Commission. Think of it as a trusty old lawn tractor that seldom leaves the barn, but when it runs, the blade is always at the lowest level.

Can representative government get more down-to-earth than this? Commission members meet in no-frills annex rooms and school auditoriums. On a rainy night last week, cookies and pastries greeted a dozen or so earnest citizens who turned out at Peninsula High School to urge the commission to make changes to the county's home-rule charter.

In an impressive display of Jacksonian democracy, they discussed initiative and referendum powers, term limits and other wonky but important rules designed to keep county government subservient to the people.

The charter, adopted in 1980, contains a requirement that it be reviewed at least every 10 years in a process that stretches over a full year – a marathon ill-suited for the fainthearted or easily bored. Last fall, voters elected 21 citizens to sit on this obscure panel, which will meet six months and then go out of business.

The commission has the option to leave the charter untouched, but it's likely to propose amendments and forward them to the November ballot. In the last go-round a decade ago, nine amendments were sent to voters.

In some ways the charter resembles the U.S. Constitution, right down to the “We the People” leading the preamble. They're also similar in that the freeholders/forefathers intended for them to be changed rarely and cautiously.

Look back to the 2006 charter review cycle for an example of a commission taking a wrong turn. Ranked-choice voice was the next cool election idea, winning the support of the commission, the voters and this newspaper's editorial board. But instead of being as “easy as 1-2-3,” RCV caused rampant confusion and was repealed a few years later.

It would behoove this year's review panel to remember that mistake. The national and state election ballot will be crowded enough without a dizzying list of local charter amendments thrown in.

Before last year's election, most of the 88 commission candidates said they weren't running with preconceived agendas to monkey with the charter. "If it's not broken, don't fix it," said former County Executive John Ladenburg, one of many experienced hands who ran and won.

But this group was elected against the backdrop of a nasty referendum fight over the county's plans to build a \$230 million administrative headquarters. Gig Harbor resident Jerry Gibbs was sued by the county when he filed to put the building proposal to a public vote. He ultimately gathered enough signatures to secure a spot on the ballot. Voters then overwhelmingly blocked the building.

Sure enough, Gibbs and his supporters were first in line at last week's charter review meeting, asking for stronger referendum rights. The commission should think carefully before complying. The charter's authors had respect but not worshipfulness for direct democracy, making it neither too difficult nor too easy.

Other ideas that have bubbled up from the public range from the reasonable (require County Council meetings to be held during evening hours) to the ridiculous (increase the size of the County Council from its current seven highly paid politicians).

Charter review members also have begun to pitch their own amendments, such as thought-provoking proposals to change the council and the prosecuting attorney to nonpartisan positions.

County freeholders were wise to call for periodic vetting of the charter they wrote. But this year's commission would be misguided to think that to justify going through the decennial exercise, it must present voters with a long menu of amendments.

Every good landscaper knows that when a blade cuts too aggressively, it can weaken the roots and increase the risk of weeds.

MORE MEETINGS AHEAD

The next meeting of the Charter Review Commission will be Wednesday (March 16) at 7 p.m. at the Pierce County Annex, 2401 S. 35th St., Tacoma. For a calendar of other meetings, go online to co.pierce.wa.us