



**Snohomish County**

**Treasurer's Office**

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To: Snohomish County Charter Review Commission

From: Bob Dantini, CPA Snohomish County Treasurer

Re: Comments on Potential Charter Revisions

First, I want to thank each of you for participating in the charter review process. I view it as a primary opportunity to improve the operation and administration of county government.

I've been employed by Snohomish County for 23 years. I was appointed by the Snohomish County Council in 1983 as program/ performance auditor and served in that capacity for over 12 years before running for County Treasurer in 1995. During this time, I have gained a unique understanding of the political landscape and what works well from an operational and administrative perspective.

I've enclosed a copy of SCC 2.100.080 which identifies the powers reserved to the county treasurer; an executive summary of ESHB 1064 which discusses performance audit authority granted to the state auditors office, and; a copy of the Snohomish County Treasurer's Office most recent annual report. This report will give you perspective on the broad range of entities served and the services we provide.

Thank you for the opportunity to convey my thoughts on a number of important charter review issues.

## **TERM LIMITS:**

There has already been substantial testimony before the Commission on this topic but I wish to provide my own perspective. I am not in favor of term limits for the following reasons:

- Seeking any public office is a career choice. Qualified professionals will not choose to sacrifice an already lucrative career when there is an inherent limitation in the amount of time they can serve in their "new" career. The most highly qualified individuals are less likely to seek office unless they've already been employed in the public sector for a substantial length of time.
- These public offices require a substantial learning curve. For example, there is no such thing as "instant treasurer, just add money". It takes a great deal of time to learn and understand all of the duties, responsibilities and intricacies of the job. Term limits result in an abandonment of institutional knowledge and encourage "termed out" elected officials to seek other elected offices. Pierce County is a prime example.
- The public can exercise their right to make a change if a change is warranted.

***Note: An amendment was made to the Washington State Constitution in 1948 resulting in the removal of term limits from local elected positions.***

## **ELECTEDS' SALARIES:**

The existing system has been politicized and does not work, as intended. I suggest one of two options be considered:

- Establish electeds' salaries as a percentage of the county executive's salary. The executive's salary would be established by a salary review commission much the same as it is now but not subject to approval by the county council. Alternatively;
- Establish electeds' salaries at the same level as heads of county departments with step increases given, within the relevant salary range, based on longevity.

## **ELECTED VS. APPOINTED:**

I will address this issue as it relates to the office of county treasurer. I strongly believe it is in the public's best interest to independently elect this position. My reasons are as follows:

- The Snohomish County Treasurer is ex-officio treasurer for almost 70 separate legal entities as well as serving the taxpaying public. Snohomish County Government is just one of these 70 entities. It is imperative that the treasurer position be impartial. The office is responsible for among other things, billions of dollars of public funds. There are many policy decisions that can influence the equitable distribution of these funds. If the position were appointed by the county executive, the treasurer's allegiance would presumably be skewed to serving the best interests of Snohomish County Government. This would impair the impartial distribution of that money.
- The position should not be combined with that of county assessor. Again, independence is the cornerstone of accountability in the public sector. Our offices are separate for a good reason. It provides a clear audit trail with the necessary checks and balances that provide for fairness, responsiveness and eliminates the possibility for favoritism and/or cronyism.

## **BIENNIAL BUDGETS:**

- I am in favor of biennial budgeting. The existing budget process is extremely time consuming as proposed budgets are first presented to results teams, then reviewed by finance department budget analysts, then examined by the county executive's staff, given approval by the county executive and finally presented to the county council for final consideration. In addition to the time necessary to prepare each department's budget, there is substantially more time required to explain and re-justify to each subsequent review group.

Limiting the budget process to once each two years will save a vast amount of staff time which would translate into higher service levels in every county department.

- I believe it is worthwhile to consider establishing a "joint" (Council/ Executive) budget process with the council being involved much earlier to assess and agree on the validity of financial projections. If both branches (council and executive) can agree on projected fund levels and available resources earlier in the process, it would

- enable departments to assemble their budgets with more knowledge, predictability and efficiency.

## **PERFORMANCE AUDITS:**

Having served as the county's performance auditor for 12 years, I offer the following viewpoints:

Independence from political pressure and influence is crucial. This is especially important in the public sector due to the political environment and to the sensitivity of potentially volatile findings by the audited public official.

The performance audit function should add value for its citizenry. This means it should result in a positive net inflow of resources to the organization by way of the audit findings and subsequent recommendations made. If it does not, it is a waste of precious taxpayer dollars. Having said that, the audit project prioritization and scoping process are important steps towards adding value in this endeavor.

I suggest placing the performance audit function under the county council with two possible alternatives:

- Potential audit projects should be carefully identified and prioritized annually. Audits could be contracted to audit professionals through the state auditor's office (SAO) or; independently by the county council.

NOTE: ESHB 1064, copy enclosed, provides an ongoing funding source for performance audits through the SAO. This appears to be economically advantageous to the county. I am not sure if the county council would retain the same level of control/ supervision, if the SAO is involved.

I believe either of these alternatives would provide the necessary independence and serve the taxpayers' best interests accordingly.

Bob Dantini, CPA  
Snohomish County Treasurer