

Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission Regular Meeting

August 6, 2025

The August 6, 2025, Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission (SEEC) Regular Meeting convened in Seattle Municipal Tower Conference Room 4080 and remotely. Chair Zach Pekelis, Vice-Chair Jonathan Schirmer, and Commissioners Bobby Forch, Kristin Hawes, Kai Smith, and Vivian Vassall participated via Webex. Executive Director Wayne Barnett and staff members Cliff Duggan, Randal Fu, and René LeBeau were present. Staff members Chrissy Courtney and Polly Grow participated via Webex as well as Assistant City Attorneys Joe Levan and Gary Smith.

The Chair called the meeting to order at 4:01 p.m.

The Chair and Commissioners welcomed newly-appointed Commissioner Kai Smith.

Written Public Comment

The Commission had a discussion regarding a July 7, 2025, an email comment concerning the public comment section of the May 7, 2025, SEEC meeting minutes. The minutes were revised by staff per the Chair's June 4 meeting request. Commissioners noted that if any additional details are needed, the meetings may be viewed on the Seattle Channel.

Final Action Items

1. Adoption of Revised May 7, 2025, SEEC Regular Meeting minutes

Vice-Chair Schirmer made the motion to adopt the minutes of the May 7 meeting as revised, and it was duly seconded. The revised May 7, 2025, SEEC Regular Meeting minutes were adopted with four Ayes; Commissioner Smith abstained.

2. Adoption of June 4, 2005, SEEC Regular Meeting minutes

Commissioner Hawes made the motion to adopt the June 4 minutes, and it was duly seconded. The May 7, 2025, SEEC Regular Meeting minutes were adopted with four Ayes; Commissioner Smith abstained.

Discussion Items

1. Decisions regarding 2026 Special Election

The Director stated that Councilmember Cathy Moore's July 7 resignation has necessitated a special election next year to fill the District 5 (D5) vacancy. It is the Commission's job to design the Special Election Democracy Voucher Program to run in a way that does not endanger the program's fund balance and also serves the purposes of the initiative (Honest Elections Seattle Initiative No. 122).

The first item for consideration is moving the initial voucher mailing date to the week of March 16, 2026. This will allow time to wrap up the 2025 election cycle, begin working with the Voucher Program task force looking at changes to the current program, and to start preparation for the 2027 election cycle.

The second item is to set the available program funds limit for 2026 candidates choosing to participate. Staff recommends that the City Council District limits remain the same as the 2025 election cycle. For campaign spending during the Primary Election, the limit would be \$112,500; for the Primary and General Elections, the combined spending limit would be \$225,000.

The third item is to determine the budget for the Democracy Voucher Outreach Fund. After discussions with Community-Based Organizations, Staff recommends a maximum overall budget of \$100,000 with four individual awards of up to \$25,000. The RFP process will focus on organizations that have proven experience engaging with District 5 constituents. Planning next

year will also utilize the Department of Neighborhoods' experience and large presence in the district.

The fourth item is to determine the number and distribution of Democracy Vouchers. There are two components to consider: Should vouchers be distributed Citywide (~500,000 residents) or just to D5 (~72,000 residents), and what should the quantity of vouchers be for each resident. Staff recommends mailing \$100 in vouchers to only District 5 residents.

This may set a precedent as all previous General and Special Elections have included Citywide races. Therefore, every time vouchers were mailed, everyone who received vouchers would also receive a ballot. If 2026 Special Election vouchers were mailed Citywide, approximately 86 percent of people would not be receiving a ballot. On principle, a district has the right to elect a candidate from their community to represent them. It is unsure if it serves the district's purpose to have vouchers mailed Citywide encouraging people to raise money outside of their district.

If vouchers are mailed only to D5, the cost would be on the order of \$7,500. This represents a huge cost savings from a Citywide mailing costing \$400,000-\$450,000. Commissioner Hawes mentioned that the last Special Election was allotted \$50 worth of vouchers to each resident and questioned raising the amount to \$100. Ms. LeBeau explained that the last Special Election was a Citywide election. Even in the 2023 election, District 5 was not as active in terms of voucher collection as the other six districts. To make sure the program is going to work for candidates and residents, the recommendation is \$100.

The Director strongly requested that the Commission take action on these matters at the September 3 Commission meeting.

The Chair said it was a difficult decision on whether to send the vouchers Districtwide or Citywide and would prefer to have input from campaign professionals and members of the public. The Chair proposed to set public input as an action item on September's agenda.

Commissioner Hawes expressed concern of setting a precedent where vouchers are sent to voters to assign dollars to someone who is not going to represent their district. In terms of overall cost and allowing people to influence an election for someone who is not their Councilmember representative raises issues. The Commissioner's inclination would be to remain in D5 for both financial reasons and also reasons of focusing the process amongst D5 voters rather than voters Citywide.

The Chair raised the concern that only districtwide may deter D5 participation in the program. If a candidate is limited to vouchers in the district, would a candidate make a judgment that it is not worth participating in the program because their base is one-seventh of the population? The Chair said that some Councilmembers have stated that they provide constituent services targeted to their districts but also see themselves as representing the City and its best interests as a whole.

The Director and staff will notify campaign professionals and community partners of the opportunity for 2026 Special Election public comment at the next Commission meeting. The Director advised the Commissioners to listen to the campaign professionals with the lens that they will have an interest in, and benefit from, the election.

2. Democracy Voucher Program report

Ms. LeBeau presented the current Democracy Voucher Program report. Commissioner Hawes inquired if there had been any feedback with respect to candidate-collected vouchers given the rule change (SEEC Elections Code Rule 16.J. Regulating the Collection of Democracy

Voucher Replacement Forms). Ms. LeBeau said that campaigns have not raised questions. However, there will be a post-election discussion regarding the collection process.

3. Executive Director's report

a. Late- Filing Penalty KW 8/4/2025

The Director assessed a late-filing penalty against the Wilson for Seattle campaign regarding a 21-day C-4 report due July 17, 2025. No more discussion was held as the campaign may appeal the penalty.

The Director has contacted the Council President regarding Commissioner Richard Shordt's replacement. The Council Governance, Accountability & Economic Development Committee will be meeting on September 11 and may present a candidate at that time.

The Director also noted that the terms for the Chair and Vice-Chair will end on December 31, 2025. The Chair stated that he has had two very satisfying terms but will not seek reelection. The Vice-Chair expressed interest in serving a second term.

Hearing no further comments for the good of the order, the August 6, 2025, SEEC Commission Regular Meeting was adjourned at 4:34 p.m.