

**Municipal League of King County  
Ballot Issues Committee**

**City of Seattle Charter Amendment No. 1  
Election of City Council Members by District  
1995 General Election Ballot Measure**

**Summary**

Seattle Charter Amendment No. 1 would change the election of Seattle City Council members from an at-large system to a district system. Currently, council members are elected "at-large," with voters city-wide voting on all nine council members. This proposal would have the current city council create nine districts and have each district elect one council member starting in 1997. Council members would be required to live in the district in which they run.

**Arguments For**

Amendment proponents believe that changing to a district system would provide more accountability by council members to the citizens of Seattle. Proponents argue that by having each council member elected from a district, council members would be more responsive to neighborhood issues and citizen concerns because he or she would be more familiar with the priorities and problems of their own district. Citizens would have a single council member to contact regarding issues before the council or to complain to about city services.

Proponents also claim that this proposal would provide more diverse viewpoints on the council. They say they feel "out of touch" with the current council, and point to the unanimous decisions by the council to place recent city bond and levy measures that then failed at the polls as an indication that current council members all represent the same viewpoint and are not representative of the citizens of Seattle. Proponents also suggest that the City's Comprehensive Plan, which focuses additional growth in urban villages throughout the city, is not reflective of what people want or what can realistically be achieved.

Finally, supporters also believe elections of council members would be, less expensive, more focused, and allow for personal campaigning. They argue that because candidates today must run city-wide campaigns to get elected, they must spend up to \$150,000 on mass media. Under a district system, each candidate would only need to reach 60,000 people instead of 500,000, which would make it possible for people with more limited resources to run. Proponents also argue that covering a district instead of the entire city would allow more "retail" campaigning conducted in neighborhood meetings, at coffee hours, and by going door-to-door.

**Arguments Against**

Opponents believe that a district system would give voters less of a voice, especially if they are dissatisfied with their current representation. They point out that in dealing with constituent issues today, citizens can bring their concerns to any of nine council members. Furthermore, depending on the staggered terms, Seattle voters currently decide on four or five council members every two years. Under a district system, they

would vote for their one district council member only every four years, and they would have less opportunity to change the overall composition of the City Council. Opponents believe that district-elected council members would develop a narrow, parochial perspective, being only interested in issues affecting or benefiting their own neighborhoods, to the detriment of other areas. They argue it would be difficult to address special needs for city services or facilities in a certain district if other districts don't have a similar need or benefit. Opponents fear this could lead to "horse-trading" or other back-room political activities.

Amendment opponents also say that being effective as a City Council member is not only managing the city and its delivery of services to Seattle neighborhoods, but also working with other jurisdictions that affect Seattle's quality of life. Having council members who run and are elected city-wide gives them more experience, knowledge, and credibility in dealing with King County, the Port of Seattle, the Seattle School Board, the State Legislature, and other jurisdictions that affect the City of Seattle.

Finally, the opponents claim that having an at-large system helps the working relationship between council members since all share a similar experience of a city-wide campaign, have the same constituency, and can focus on issues, not district competition or infighting. Since all council members have the interests of the city as a whole in mind, they can work on different issues according to their expertise and interest.

### **The Municipal League Recommends: NO**

#### **Analysis**

Many supporters of this Charter Amendment feel out of touch with government, dissatisfied with their current situation, and want change in how government does business. However, the Municipal League believes the best way to do that is by electing different representation, not by changing the way we elect the City Council.

The League does not feel the proponents have adequately justified why the Seattle election system needs changing and how this proposal would make the situation better. For example, the failure of bond and tax measures at the polls, such as the Public Safety Building and Library Bonds, may be an indication of problems with those proposals or voter anti-tax sentiment, rather than a call for a new form of representation. (Other examples of failed proposals, such as the Regional Transit Plan, Seattle Schools bonds, and a new baseball stadium, were put on the ballot by the Regional Transit Authority, the Seattle School Board, and the Metropolitan King County Council respectively.)

One significant benefit is that smaller districts may allow for campaigns closer to individual voters. But the trade-off with a district system is that voters would be able to vote the council members for their district only once every four-year term. Today, you can vote for four or five council members each election.

However, the greatest risk to the Charter amendment is that district representation does not guarantee more effective or accountable government. District-elected council members could defend parochial interests, engage in "pork-barrel" politics, or obstruct proposals of benefit to other parts of the city or to the city as a whole.

**The Municipal League recommends that you vote NO** on the City Charter Amendment. The best way to get the attention of the Seattle City Council, make them aware of your neighborhood concerns, and change the direction the city is headed is to vote for the candidates that represent your needs.

A charter amendment is the equivalent of changing the constitution for the City of Seattle. This amendment changes the way we elect our city government, a major step that should not take place without a considerable amount of public discussion and consideration. If you are interested in more information regarding this issue, the Municipal League Foundation's *Issue Watch* newsletter from September 1994 outlines different options used nationwide for electing city councils, including district systems, at-large systems, proportional representation, and other models. It also presents different opinions of the advantages and disadvantages of each system.