

Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission Regular Meeting

December 3, 2025

The December 3, 2025, Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission (SEEC) Regular Meeting convened in Seattle Municipal Tower Conference Room 4080 and remotely. Chair Zach Pekelis [Chair], Vice-Chair Jonathan Schirmer [Vice-Chair], Commissioners Bobby Forch, Kristin Hawes, and Kai Smith participated via Webex. Commissioner Vivian Vassall was absent. Five Commissioners present constituted a quorum. Executive Director Wayne Barnett [Director] and staff members Fedden Amar, Cliff Duggan, Randal Fu, and René LeBeau were present. Staff members Chrissy Courtney, Amanda Francke, Polly Grow, and Marc Mayo as well as Assistant City Attorneys Joe Levan and Gary Smith participated via Webex.

The Chair called the meeting to order at 4:04 p.m.

Discussion of Written Public Comment (if applicable)

No Written Public Comment was received for the Commission.

Final Action Items

1. Appeal of *Armstrong for All* Campaign's Late Filing Penalty

The Director reviewed the Break Blue Strategies Consulting Services Agreement for *Armstrong for All* campaign signed by Ry Armstrong on February 8, 2025. As there was no violation of SEEC Elections Code Rule 16.J, the \$30,000 charge for voucher gathering was approved. The Director was, however, concerned by the fact that it was not filed with the SEEC until September 2025. A late filing penalty of \$1,500 was assessed as a result.

The Chair asked Mx. Armstrong if there was anything they would like to add or highlight in the appeal of that issue.

Mx. Armstrong said there were two separate issues at play, one being the reimbursements to them, and then the \$30,000 payment. Speaking to their experience running for office, they thought there was a structural issue with the Democracy Voucher Program (DVP) when it came to the response time for qualification and disbursement. They worked with the team, and it took a lot longer to get qualified than anticipated. In May, Mx. Armstrong did a personal audit of what was happening to make sure that the campaign was trying to be in compliance as much as possible. Mx. Armstrong appreciated both Adam [Tradii] and Jeanne [Legault] in the efforts they put into the campaign.

To Mx. Armstrong's second point, the \$30,000 should have been reported by the consultant to the treasurer. They suggested consultants should be accredited by the SEEC when working with the DVP and be required to take on a certain amount of liability if they make mistakes during a campaign.

They also mentioned the Commission could take it upon itself to make sure that monthly payments are the only way that people could contract as consultants in the future.

The Chair stated that compliance with campaign finance disclosure requirements are a critical component of our democracy. Unfortunately it does not leave this Commission with a great deal of discretion, particularly once a violation has been found. The Commission's task is to determine if the amount of the assessed penalty is not only appropriate, but whether it is so excessive that it defies a rational basis.

The Chair stated that Mx. Armstrong's written submission did not contest the findings of the Director. They referenced in their appeal document that the Wilson campaign had also been fined for a late filing. Mx. Armstrong argued that the amount of the penalty assessed on their campaign was excessive in relation to the Wilson campaign. It is the Chair's understanding that

the Wilson campaign was assessed a penalty of \$500 as the degree of the violation was much lower (i.e., the Wilson campaign was three weeks' late). Mx. Armstrong expressed frustration that the penalty came up after the fact of the previous appeal instead of being brought up at the same time. The Director explained that he thought it would be excessive for the campaign if both issues were brought up at the same time.

The Chair confirmed that the Director and Staff will be flexible on the penalty payment. The Director said they would work with Mx. Armstrong on a payment agreement.

The Vice-Chair noted that the SEEC website lists all the regulations but asked if there were additional training materials provided to the candidates about deadlines for financial disclosures. The Director responded that Ms. Grow does extensive training with candidates and campaigns. Mx. Armstrong stated he cannot fault Polly's training; they went through the training and read the material.

The Chair polled each of the Commissioners, in order of seniority, as to whether they would vote to affirm or reverse the Director's assessment of the *Armstrong for All* campaign late-filing penalty. Vice-Chair Schirmer, Commissioners Forch, Hawes, and Smith, and Chair Pekelis all voted to affirm the Director's assessment.

2. Adoption of Elections Code Rule 17 Revised Contribution Limits

The Director explained that the Rule changes the contribution limit for non-Voucher Program participants to \$700 adjusted for inflation. The \$350 DVP limit remains unchanged. The Director mentioned that the \$350 does not include the amount of vouchers a DVP candidate may receive. The contribution limits will be reviewed before the 2029 election for the Mayor, City Attorney, and At-Large Council positions.

The Vice-Chair made the motion to adopt the revised Rule 17, and it was duly seconded. Revised Elections Code Rule 17 - Revised Contribution Limits was passed with five ayes.

3. Adoption of Elections Code Rule 18 Special Elections

The Director explained that the revised Elections Code Rule 18 is to update information for the 2026 D5 Special Election. The key items are that only qualified D5 voters will be sent two \$50 vouchers starting March 16, 2026.

Commissioner Smith made the motion to adopt the revised Elections Code Rule 18 Special Elections, and it was duly seconded. The motion passed with five ayes.

4. Adoption of November 5, 2025, SEEC Regular Meeting minutes

Commissioner Smith made the motion to adopt the November meeting minutes. It was duly seconded. Chair Pekelis, Vice-Chair Schirmer, and Commissioners Forch, Hawes, and Smith voted to adopt the November 5, 2025, SEEC Regular Meeting minutes.

5. Merit Leave (possible Executive Session)

Chair Zach Pekelis announced an executive session to discuss and review the performance of a public employee, specifically the Executive Director, pursuant to the Open Public Meetings Act. The Executive Session was called at 4:28 p.m.

The Executive Session concluded at 4:34 p.m., and the Commissioners re-joined the open session. The Chair requested a motion on the merit leave bonus for the Director. Vice-Chair Jonathan Schirmer made the motion to award Executive Director Wayne Barnett six days of merit leave at Level Three. The motion was duly seconded. The motion carried with five ayes.

The Chair inquired about a vote on the Annual Wage Increase (AWI). Commissioner Hawes made the motion to endorse the AWI increase for the executive director. The motion was duly seconded. The motion carried with five ayes.

6. Election of 2026 Commission Chair and Vice-Chair

Given that there is not a full complement of Commissioners at the meeting, the vote for the 2026 SEEC Vice-Chair will be held at the next Commission meeting. In the tradition of the Commission, the Vice-Chair becomes the Chair at the end of the one-year term.

Commissioner Hawes made the motion to elect Vice-Chair Jonathan Schirmer as the 2026 SEEC Chair effective January 1, 2026. The motion was duly seconded. Commissioners Forch, Hawes, Smith, and Chair Pekelis approved the motion with Vice-Chair Schirmer abstaining.

Discussion Items

1. Democracy Voucher Program report

Ms. LeBeau presented the Democracy Voucher Program report. Fourteen RFP responses were received for the 2026 D5 Special Election outreach.

2. Executive Director's report

The Director has informed Mayor-elect Wilson's chief of staff of the pending departure of Commissioners Hawes and Pekelis. When the new City Council president is elected, the Director will reach out regarding filling the vacancy of Commissioner Shordt and the term renewal of Chair-elect Schirmer.

The Director has met with newly elected D2 Councilmember Eddie Lin and Position 9 Councilmember-elect Dionne Foster as well as Mayor-elect Wilson. Also planned is a meeting with City Attorney-elect Erika Evans.

The Director will be flying to Atlanta on December 6 to attend the annual COGEL Conference. He will be participating in the Public Financing Administrators Roundtable and will be a panelist for the Public Campaign Finance: America's Next Top Model concurrent session.

While there, the Director will share how well the Democracy Voucher Program is working and is doing what it is intended to do, which is to really shake up City government.

Chair Pekelis and Commissioner Hawes plan on attending next month's meeting. The Director will email all of the Commissioners by the end of December to ensure they will be available for the January 7, 2026, SEEC Commission Regular Meeting.

Hearing no further comments for the good of the order, the December 3, 2025, SEEC Commission Regular Meeting was adjourned at 4:44 p.m.