

Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission Regular Meeting

March 5, 2025

The March 5, 2025, Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission (SEEC) Regular Meeting convened in Seattle Municipal Tower Room 4080 and remotely. Vice-Chair Jonathan Schirmer was present. Chair Zach Pekelis, Commissioners Kristin Hawes, Richard Shordt, Susan Taylor, and Commissioner-elect Vivian Vassall participated via Webex. Commissioners Bobby Forch and Chalia Stallings-Ala'ilima were absent. Staff members Cliff Duggan and René LeBeau were present. Executive Director Wayne Barnett and staff members Chrissy Courtney, Randal Fu, 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 4:03 p.m.

Final Action Items

1. Adoption of February 5, 2025, SEEC Regular Meeting minutes

Hearing no objections to the draft February 5, 2025, SEEC Regular Meeting minutes, the Chair called for a motion to adopt. Vice-Chair Schirmer made the motion, and it was duly seconded. The February 5, 2025, SEEC Regular Meeting minutes were adopted with five ayes.

2. Adoption of CY2024 Financial Interest Statements Rule (SMC 4.16.080.B)

The Executive Director summarized the annual process requirement to adopt the names and titles of employees who must file Financial Interest Statements covering the previous calendar year. Hearing no discussion from the Commissioners on the submitted employee list, the Chair called for a motion to adopt the Financial Interest Statements Rule for Calendar Year 2024. Commissioner Hawes made the motion, and it was duly seconded. The motion carried with five ayes.

Discussion Items

1. Draft Ordinance amending Code of Ethics (SMC 4.16.030 and 4.16.070)

The Chair welcomed Councilmember Cathy Moore to discuss a draft ordinance amending the Code of Ethics. The Councilmember reported that back in early November, the Executive Director sent to the Council's legal counsel an email detailing his thoughts on amending the Ethics Code to provide for disclosure by elected officials rather than a recusal. The Councilmember asked Council's legal staff, Lauren Henry, to do some background research. Numerous examples that showed Seattle's current ethics law is a bit of an outlier.

The draft presented represented an approximate middle ground that authorizes elected officials to disclose and participate in a legislative matter where if there is any implicated financial interest, it is no greater or lesser than other members of a similarly situated group as said Councilmember. If there is a discretionary gain or law that is somewhat unique to that Councilmember, the Council would retain the requirement of recusal in that situation.

With the Chair's encouragement, Commissioners shared their high-level thoughts on the legislation including whether they favor a disclosure regime as opposed to a disqualification regime. The Chair offered to work with the Councilmember and their office to provide more granular edits based on the Commission's reading of the legislation.

Councilmember Moore said the discussion was very helpful and touched on the highlight issues. The Chair thanked the Councilmember for the opportunity to dialogue and provide input on this important legislation.

2. DVP Report

Ms. LeBeau presented the Democracy Voucher Program update.

The Executive Director took the opportunity to remind the newer Commissioners that they are not allowed to submit Democracy Vouchers. [SMC 3.70.060 – Neutrality in political campaigns]

3. Executive Director's report

Vivian Vassall's nomination to the Commission is scheduled to be reviewed at the March 13 Council Governance Committee. The Executive Director has communicated with the Mayor's Office and with the Council President regarding the two current Commissioner vacancies.

With respect to the Ethics Code revisions, the Chair requested the Commissioners share their comments and edits directly with the Chair and Vice-Chair.

The Executive Director and Chair thanked Commissioner Taylor for her service. The Commissioner will miss the Commission but is thrilled that Ms. Vassall is joining.

Since there was no further business, the March 5, 2025, SEEC Commission Regular Meeting was adjourned at 4:47 p.m.