

## **Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission Regular Meeting**

**September 3, 2025**

The September 3, 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 Kristin Hawes and Kai Smith participated via Webex. Commissioners Bobby Forch and Vivian Vassall were absent. Executive Director Wayne Barnett and staff members Fedden Amar, Cliff Duggan, and René LeBeau were present. 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 4:01 p.m.

### **Discussion of Written Public Comment** (if applicable)

The Chair proposed moving discussion of written public comment to Final Action Item 2.

### **Final Action Items**

#### **1. Adoption of August 6, 2025, SEEC Regular Meeting minutes**

Commissioner Hawes made the motion to adopt the August 6, 2025, SEEC Regular Meeting minutes, and it was duly seconded. The motion passed with four ayes.

#### **2. 2026 City Council District 5 Special Election**

The Chair acknowledged the Commission's receipt of three written public comments (People Powered Elections Washington Coalition; Andes Kong, Chinese Information and Service Center; and Erin Schultz, NWP Consulting). The Chair opened the floor for oral public comment.

Ron Davis, former City Council District 4 candidate, Hannah Lindell-Smith, People Powered Elections Washington, and Nilu Jenks, D5 resident and former City Council D5

candidate spoke to the Commissioners. All three recommended that vouchers be issued for a total of \$100 per voter instead of a total of \$50.

Mr. Davis said that the proposed plan would be inequitable for candidates and access relative to other years. Mr. Davis said that contributors cross districts all the time in other elections and believes D5-only would substantially hamper people who rely on vouchers by taking six-sevenths of the population off the table. For consistency, issuing vouchers Citywide would still have the same absolute number of people who are allowed to participate.

Hannah Lindell-Smith, People Powered Elections Washington, asked the Commission to ensure that the special election be as people-powered and community-led as possible. People Powered Elections Washington recommends:

1. Maintain program consistency by keeping the model of four \$25 vouchers (total \$100).
2. Distribute vouchers only to District 5 (D5) residents because these people should be able to choose and fund their candidates.
3. Invest strongly in the D5 community outreach and partner with trusted organizations to raise awareness and encourage use of the Special Election vouchers.

Having used it, Ms. Jenks said she is definitely a fan of the voucher program. Ms. Jenks stated her campaign received vouchers from people across the City who contributed to her campaign for a variety of reasons. Candidates will be reaching out to the rest of the City. Even if a candidate receives ten percent of D5 vouchers, it will cause a real burden at the start of campaign funding.

Ms. Jenks believes limiting vouchers to only D5 residents would create a disincentive to participate in the program. Ms. Jenks is worried that people will definitely reach out to people with means to do that initial funding of their campaign. Ms. Jenks prefers people to give vouchers. Vouchers are not votes.

The Chair thanked the speakers for their comments. The Chair asked the Director if there was anything to add or change to the August 6, 2025, memo to the Commissioners regarding special election decisions.

The Director believes the staff recommendation remains to do \$100 total in vouchers instead of \$50 total. The Director considers that mailing to only to District 5 best serves the goals of the program which is to put candidates in touch with their voters and donors.

Vice-Chair Schirmer said the consistent thing that was heard is the request for the voucher amount to be a \$100. As to the issue of where to geographically send the vouchers, the Vice-Chair believes that sticking to D5 will create a more representative pool of people to give their vouchers.

Commissioner Hawes agreed with the Vice-Chair's comments and is comfortable with raising the amount of allocated vouchers to \$100. Based on the feedback received from People Powered Elections and various other community and good government groups, Commissioner Hawes believed that distribution to just D5 would concentrate campaigning in the district as opposed to requiring candidates to campaign outside of the district. The Commissioner understands the equity concerns raised by Mr. Davis and Ms. Jenks, but said the other groups were more persuasive overall. It is also consistent with how the program operated and the intent. The Commissioner thinks people perceive the voucher program as being focused or tied to elections in a particular place as opposed to everyone getting vouchers all the time. Commissioner Hawes remarked that the Commission has an onus and a responsibility to administer these funds wisely and create the perception of judicious administration.

Commissioner Smith said his thoughts were aligned with those articulated by his colleagues, particularly with respect to setting the dollar amount. The Commissioner thinks that

there are significant tradeoffs between distributing the vouchers Citywide or in-district but ultimately is inline toward the proposal expressed by the staff to distribute them just to D5.

The Chair thanked the Commissioners for their comments and consensus. The Chair was persuaded to limit vouchers to D5 for two reasons. One, it is a simple limitation of funding due to budget constraints. Secondly, the Chair is intrigued at the possibility of a district-only voucher experiment that may enable the Director, Ms. LeBeau, and their team to fine-tune some strategies for enhancing participation in the program one district at a time rather than Citywide. The Chair thinks that a district-only voucher distribution for this one time, without setting a precedent or an iron-clad rule, is how it must be going forward, and provide an opportunity to figure out how we can make it even better going into the next decade or more.

Before a motion was entertained, the Director mentioned two revisions to the August 6 memo. Under **3. Action: Determine budget for Democracy Voucher Outreach Fund**, Ms. LeBeau said staff will be considering awards up to \$25,000 (up from the \$20,000 amount mentioned in the memo). For **4. Action: Determine the number and distribution of Democracy Vouchers**, the consensus was for two \$50 vouchers in place of four \$25 vouchers.

The Vice-Chair made a motion for the 2026 Special Election to have two \$50 vouchers (capped at \$100) with distribution limited to D5, and it was duly seconded. The motion passed with four ayes.

The Chair again thanked all of the public commenters in person, by Webex, and in writing. Hearing from the community's perspective is much appreciated. It is really valuable to hear different views.

## **Discussion Items**

### **1. Democracy Voucher Program report**

Ms. LeBeau reported that September 2, 2025, was the last day the office received vouchers for candidates who did not get past the Primary Election. The candidates were notified that the deadline to wind up a Primary campaign will be September 22.

A little over \$3M (33 percent utilization rate) has been distributed to candidates. Community-Based Organizations (CBO) will be closing out their efforts and providing their final reports. Staff is building the RFP to go out for the 2026 D5 election outreach.

### **2. Executive Director's report**

#### **a. Council on Governmental Ethics Laws Annual Conference**

The Director requested Commission permission to attend the Council on Governmental Ethics Laws (COGEL) 47<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference December 7-10, 2025, in Atlanta, Georgia. The Director will be participating in the Public Campaign Financing Administrator Roundtable in addition to being a panelist on the Public Campaign Finance Session “America's Next Top Model.” The registration and expenses will be charged to the ETVOUCH fund as the Director’s primary focus will be on the voucher program.

The Chair mentioned that the related cost made sense and approved the Director’s participation.

The Director has not heard back from the Council President’s office regarding Commissioner Richard Shordt’s replacement. The Director will continue to monitor the request.

Hearing no further comments for the good of the order, the September 3, 2025, SEEC Commission Regular Meeting was adjourned at 4:36 p.m.