



City of Seattle

Ethics & Elections Commission

MEMO

To: Commissioners
From: Wayne Barnett
Date: August 6, 2025
Re: Decisions re. special election

SMC 2.04.690.I provides: “If any special election is called, the Commission shall set aside Program Funds for such election in an amount it deems appropriate. The Commission may set, implement, or modify standards, procedures, limits, and deadlines similar to those in this Subchapter VIII as the Commission deems proper and necessary for such special election, taking care to not unduly prejudice accumulation of Program funds.”

This memo contains a list of programmatic decisions the Commission will need to make before staff can proceed with preparing for the 2026 Special Election to fill the City Council District 5 (D5) vacancy.

1. Action: Move the initial mailing date to the week of March 16, 2026.

This change will allow a relatively new IT team the time it needs to accurately process the closure of 2025 while launching 2026.

2. Action: Set Available Program Funds Limit.

The maximum campaign valuation for City Council District positions was last adjusted ahead of 2024 and is \$225,000 (up to \$112,500 for the primary). To fully fund six candidates entirely with Democracy Vouchers, the available funds should be set at \$900,000. The Commission is required to publish this fund limit by January 1, 2026.

3. Action: Determine budget for the Democracy Voucher Outreach Fund.

The Democracy Voucher Outreach Fund was established in 2018. It was one of the recommendations made by BERK and has been crucial to reaching Seattle’s historically underserved communities. For reference, the funding amount for 2025 is \$300,000.

Staff recommend a fund total of \$100,000, with awards up to \$20,000. A Request for Proposals process will be conducted to ensure awardees who meet Democracy Voucher Fund goals and have proven experience engaging with D5 residents.



4. Action: Determine the number and distribution of Democracy Vouchers

There are two items for consideration. The first item is should we distribute vouchers city-wide (~500,000 residents) or only to D5 (~72,000 residents). The second item is the quantity of vouchers for each resident.

The chart below shows the percent of residents who could have their vouchers redeemed if they give all vouchers to qualified candidates. It assumes six candidates fully utilizing the \$900,000 in funding.

	Citywide	D5-only
Distribute \$100 in vouchers	2%	13%
Distribute \$50 in vouchers	4%	26%

We examined voucher usage in 2023. The chart below shows the number of vouchers assigned to candidates by the City Council District the voucher user lives in. D5 had a lower, but not the lowest, participation rate. This chart also shows whether those vouchers were given to candidates in the user's same district or outside their district. D5 does not appear to stand out in either case.

2023 Vouchers assigned to candidates by home district of voucher user							
	District 1	District 2	District 3	District 4	District 5	District 6	District 7
Vouchers assigned	20,160	13,639	21,998	15,801	13,342	18,006	12,481
% to candidates in same district	83%	66%	72%	71%	67%	57%	63%

Next, we examined voucher funding distributions across the districts. D5 candidate funding does not appear to stand apart from average funds distributed to candidates, however those candidates appear to have the smallest portion of in-district voucher funding.

2023 Funds distributed to candidates by district							
	District 1	District 2	District 3	District 4	District 5	District 6	District 7
Number of qualified candidates	6	2	8	3	4	4	3
Total funds distributed	\$455,100	\$283,625	\$514,075	\$321,900	\$333,425	\$290,250	\$204,525
Average per candidate	\$75,850	\$141,813	\$64,259	\$107,300	\$83,356	\$72,563	\$68,175
Percent funding from in district	77%	66%	66%	66%	55%	78%	72%



City of Seattle

Ethics & Elections Commission

After reviewing voucher usage and candidate funding, we believe distributing to D5 empowers residents to support local candidates and encourages candidates to campaign locally. Staff recommend providing D5 residents with four \$25 vouchers, allowing for greater participation than if vouchers were distributed city wide. Preliminary feedback from folks who conduct outreach/advocacy work supports D5 only, and we hope to gather more feedback before the Commission makes this decision.

Providing four vouchers addresses some concerns that candidates will be unable to rely on vouchers to collect sufficient money to fund their campaigns. The two general election candidates in 2023 raised \$108,625 and \$141,900, respectively (the cap at the time was \$187,500), with residents receiving \$100 worth of vouchers. We discussed this concern with campaign professionals, and so far, they generally support four vouchers to just D5.

Additionally, distributing to just D5 residents has a positive impact on program administration. The cost to produce, mail, and process vouchers will be reduced by at least two-thirds. Staff will be managing the close out of 2025, the production of 2026, and possibly the ramp up to 2027 simultaneously. If program funding is renewed, staff anticipate also working with a to-be-determined task force to explore program changes. Administering the 2026 program for only D5 residents creates capacity for staff to work on these additional priorities.

Conclusion

These decisions will allow staff to begin preparing for 2026.