

Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission Regular Meeting

May 7, 2025

The May 7, 2025, Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission (SEEC) Regular Meeting convened in Seattle Municipal Tower Conference Room 4096 and remotely. Chair Zach Pekelis and Commissioner Vivian Vassall were present. Vice-Chair Jonathan Schirmer and Commissioners Bobby Forch, Kristin Hawes, and Richard Shordt participated via Webex. Executive Director Wayne Barnett and staff members Fedden Amar, Cliff Duggan, and René LeBeau were present. Staff Chrissy Courtney, Randal Fu, Polly Grow, and Marc Mayo 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.

Final Action Items

1. SEEC F-1 Modification Request (Erika Evans)

The Chair recused himself from the proceeding due to a personal and professional relationship with Ms. Evans' spouse. Per the Chair's request, Commissioner Hawes carried the discussion and action forward. Commissioner Hawes acknowledged that the Washington State Public Disclosure Commission had previously approved Ms. Evans' modification request in light of potential concerns for safety associated with their prior employment. Commissioner Vassall made the motion to approve Ms. Evans' request to modify the SEEC F-1 disclosure requirements as outlined in her application. The motion was duly seconded and passed with five ayes.

2. Adoption of March 5, 2025, Commission Regular Meeting minutes

Hearing no discussion of the meeting minutes, the Chair called for a motion. Commissioner Hawes made the motion to approve the March 5, 2025, SEEC Commission Regular Meeting minutes. It was duly seconded and passed with six ayes.

Discussion Items

1. Code of Ethics Ordinance, Council Bill 120978 Version: 1

The Executive Director gave a brief introduction on the proposed amendment to the Ethics Code. The Director advised the Commissioners of their role to interpret and advise on the law. The Chair noted that Commission is not a legislative body and has limited authority to issue regulations under the Code and does not have the authority to amend the Code. The Chair encouraged all those who had concerns about the revisions to notify the City Council.

Public Comment Period

The following speakers gave comment against the proposed Ethics Code legislative revisions: Hanna Jones, Crown Hill resident; Rea Clute, Rainier Beach resident giving public comment for the first time; Natalie, Seattle resident and an organizer for a Democracy Forward organization; Reid Smith, Ballard resident giving public comment for the first time; Clarke R., Seattle resident giving public comment for the first time; Rachael Snell; Jordan Crawley, Chair of the 34th District Democrats. Mr. Crawley referenced a May 8 letter to City Councilmembers signed by five of the six District Democrats (representing 98% of the City) opposing the amendment; Valerie Schloredt, District 2 resident; Kate Rubin, Beacon Hill renter, co-executive director at *Be:Seattle*, and interim Co-Chair of the City's Seattle Renters' Commission; Howard Gale, District 7 resident and member of the 36th District Democrats; Carl Nelson, Seattle resident, renter and member of the Cedar Crossing Tenants Association; Elizabeth Stanton; and Aidan Carroll, District 6 resident and Secretary for the 46th District Democrats.

The Chair thanked the public commenters. Commissioner Hawes echoed the Chair's appreciation of all the comments delivered both in person and online. Commissioner Vassall acknowledged the Commission's receipt of 30+ pages of written public comment (75 individual complaints) and believes they are all of the same spirit as the presentations made today. The Commissioner encouraged people to submit their comments to the City Council.

The Chair offered Councilmember Cathy Moore time to respond and comment. Councilmember Moore stated that she is concerned that the Code is casting the net so wide that people who were elected to represent particular voices in the City may be disenfranchised. The Councilmember hoped that full disclosure will actually increase transparency. She also noted that the proposed changes in the legislation are within the full context of the Seattle Municipal Code as well as within the context of the Washington State/Public Disclosure Commission ethics rules.

Commissioner Hawes mentioned that several people had raised the issue that good government is a particular concern right now. The Commissioner thought the enforcement mechanisms Councilmember Moore mentioned were after-the-fact. The Commissioner is concerned from a good governance perspective and the perception of many of the voters how this change will be perceived especially in the current political climate.

Councilmember Moore responded that the problem was getting into the weeds with exemptions and shared interests. The Councilmember questioned the definition of a "substantial segment" of the population and wondered who would define "financial interest." The Councilmember said rules need to be in place, but also to make sure they do not unnecessarily hamper people's ability to act.

The Chair thanked Councilmember Moore for her comments.

The Chair mentioned members of the Ethics Commission have to be focused on the obvious and difficult ethical issues that the bill would present. One way to mitigate against the appearance that ethics rules are being changed solely for the purpose of advancing substantive policy goals would be for a future Council to revise the Code. Another area of concern was that disclosure was inadequate for the average citizen if a financial conflict of interest was disclosed publicly just before Councilmembers cast their vote.

1. CY2024 Financial Interest Statement Summary

The Executive Director reported that all of the 2,073 identified employees had submitted their Financial Interest Statements for CY2024 by May 1. The focus will now be on following up with the remaining identified City Boards and Commission members who have not submitted.

2. Democracy Voucher Program report

Ms. LeBeau reviewed the Democracy Voucher Program update report for May 7.

3. Executive Director's report

The Executive Director encouraged the Commissioners to view the Council's Governance, Accountability & Economic Development Committee meeting on May 8 at 2:00 p.m.

Hearing no further comments for the good of the order, the May 7, 2025, SEEC Commission Regular Meeting was adjourned at 5:02 p.m.