

September 11, 2023

MEMORANDUM

To: Finance and Housing Committee
From: Lish Whitson, Analyst
Subject: Resolution to place Amendments to the City Charter to change Council Terms on the November 2024 ballot

On September 14, 2023, the Finance and Housing Committee will receive a briefing on a Resolution proposed by Councilmember Mosqueda (Attachment 1). This Resolution would place a measure in front of the City’s voters to change the terms of some City Council seats, and to authorize the Council to amend the terms of service of all City elected officials by ordinance if the State authorizes such a change. The Resolution would place the Charter Amendment on the November 2024 ballot. Attachment 2 is the legislation’s Summary and Fiscal Note.

This memo briefly describes the proposed changes included in the Resolution.

Resolution to Adjust Council Terms

Revised Code of Washington (RCW) [29A.04.330](#) requires that City, town and district elections occur in odd years and City Charter [Article XIX, Section 3](#) states that “The Terms of the Mayor, the City Attorney, and of Councilmembers shall be four years.”

The specific years when Councilmembers are elected was determined in 2013 under Charter Amendment 19, enacted in City Charter [Article IV, Section 2](#). Under that section of the Charter, District Council seats (positions 1 through 7) are up for election in 2023, and will be on the ballot in 2027, 2031 and 2035. The two Citywide Council seats (positions 8 and 9) were last elected in 2021, and will be on the ballot in 2025, 2029, and 2033. The result of this system is that seven of the nine City Councilmembers are up for election every four years, resulting in the possibility of significant turnover in those years.

The proposed Resolution would place a charter amendment on the November 2024 ballot that would, if approved by the voters, reduce the terms of four Council seats (Districts 2, 4, and 6, and Citywide seat 9) to two years for one term only. The effect of the change would be to have all even Council seats on the ballot in 2029 and 2033, and all odd Council seats on the ballot in 2027, 2031 and 2035. Attachment 3 provides tables showing how elections would change under the proposed charter amendment.

District 2 is the most diverse Council District, and the only majority Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) district in Seattle.¹ District 6 is the least racially diverse Council district. The Councilmember elected in 2027 to each of these positions would serve for a two-year term, alongside the Councilmember representing District 4. The Councilmember elected to Citywide Position 9 in 2025 would also have a two-year term. These positions would have elections three times over seven years, rather than three times over nine years. Campaign costs would increase in these districts over this period, and these districts may have less stable representation on the Council over this period.

While having even and odd Council positions have their elections occur at the same time makes intuitive sense, there are a wide range of combinations of positions could be shifted to meet the goal of reducing the number of Council seats up for election at one time. For example, shifting the elections of any two district Council seats to be on the ballot in 2029 would result in four Council races that year, and five Council races in 2031.

The charter amendment placed on the ballot under the proposed Resolution would also authorize the Council to amend Council terms by Ordinance if the State authorizes or requires the City to have its elections in even years. Even year elections, because of the presence of federal races on the ballot, generally have much higher turnouts than odd-year elections. For example, in 2022, 70.3 percent of Seattle's registered voters voted, compared to 55.3 percent voting in 2021.

This spring, the Washington State Legislature considered legislation to authorize even-year elections and may take up the issue again in the future. Rather than requiring a separate Charter amendment to make such a change, the proposed Charter amendment that would be placed on that ballot would also allow the Council, by Ordinance, to adjust terms so that all elections take place in even years. This section would apply to the terms of the City Attorney and the Mayor as well as Councilmembers.

Next Steps

The Committee will be briefed on the Resolution at its meeting on September 14. If the Council introduces and refers the Resolution to the Committee on September 19, the Committee may vote on it on September 20. If the Committee votes on the Resolution on that date, it could be on the City Council agenda as early as September 25.

If the Council adopts the Resolution, the City Clerk, Executive Director of the Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission, and King County Director of Elections would be requested to place the proposed Charter Amendment on the General Election ballot in November 2024. The Resolution includes a proposed ballot title, but the City Attorney may update the title, as appropriate. In order to pass, the Charter amendment would require approval of a simple majority of the voters.

¹ Information from Dave's Redistricting, [DRA 2020 \(davesredistricting.org\)](https://davesredistricting.org), <https://davesredistricting.org/maps#stats::4f892594-3e4c-4572-8397-09316e7e97bb>, September 11, 2023

If the Charter amendment were to pass, it would change the terms of office of the Councilmember elected to position 9 in 2025, and the Councilmembers elected to represent Districts 2, 4 and 6 in 2027.

Attachments:

1. Proposed Resolution
2. Summary and Fiscal Note
3. Current and proposed election schedules

cc: Esther Handy, Director
Aly Pennucci, Deputy Director
Yolanda Ho, Supervising Analyst

CITY OF SEATTLE

RESOLUTION _____

..title

A RESOLUTION submitting a proposition to the qualified electors of the City to amend Section 2 of Article IV and Section 3 of Article XIX of the City Charter to provide for changes to the terms of office under specified conditions; authorizing the City Clerk and the Executive Director of the Ethics and Elections Commission to take those actions necessary to enable the proposed amendment to appear on the November 5, 2024 ballot and in the local voters’ pamphlet; requesting the King County Elections Director to place the proposed amendment on the November 5, 2024 ballot; and providing for publication of the amendment.

..body

WHEREAS, Section 3 of Article XIX of the City Charter provides that all elected officials shall serve four-year terms, unless otherwise specified in the Charter; and

WHEREAS, Section 2 of Article IV of the City Charter currently provides that seven of the City’s nine Councilmembers have terms that start and end at the same time; and

WHEREAS, this can result in a supermajority of Councilmembers whose terms end at the same time; and

WHEREAS, by changing the sequencing of Council elections, the City can avoid the disruption caused by a supermajority of Councilmembers being up for election in the same year; and

WHEREAS, by staggering the sequencing of Council elections voters will have the opportunity to support the election of a more representative selection of members each election cycle, allowing for more consistent elections and greater opportunity to make voters voices heard more swiftly and consistently; and

WHEREAS, the Washington State Legislature has considered changing the election dates of local elected officials; and

WHEREAS, currently the City can only respond to the need to change the terms of elected officials through a Charter amendment; NOW, THEREFORE,

1 **BE IT RESOLVED BY THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF SEATTLE THAT:**

2 Section 1. In accordance with Section 1 of Article XX of the City Charter, Section 2 of
3 Article IV of the City Charter is proposed to be amended as follows:

4 **Article IV Legislative Department**

5 **Sec. 2. CITY COUNCIL, MEMBERS:**

6 To ensure members of the ~~((city council))~~ City Council are closer to the people they represent, to
7 enable voters to better know their Councilmembers, and to provide a mixed system of district
8 and at-large representation, the City Council shall consist of nine ~~((9))~~ members, with positions
9 1 through 7 elected by districts and positions 8 and 9 elected from the City at-large.

10 * * *

11 ~~((Subdivision E. TRANSITION PROVISIONS:~~

12 ~~Notwithstanding Article XIX, Section 3, the four positions elected at the 2013 general~~
13 ~~municipal election (positions 2, 4, 6, and 8) shall each be for two year terms ending at midnight,~~
14 ~~December 31, 2015. The two at large positions created by Section 1 of this Amendment and~~
15 ~~elected at the 2015 general municipal election shall be for two year terms ending at midnight,~~
16 ~~December 31, 2017. The seven district positions created by Section 1 of this Amendment and~~
17 ~~elected at the 2015 general municipal election shall be for four years terms ending at midnight,~~
18 ~~December 31, 2019. After the 2015 general municipal election, all nine City Council positions~~
19 ~~shall be for four year terms under Article XIX and this Subdivision shall be of no further effect.))~~

20 Subdivision E. TERM STAGGERING PROVISIONS:

21 Notwithstanding Article XIX, Section 3:

1 (1) Position 9 as elected at the 2025 municipal general election shall have a term
2 of two years. As elected at the 2027 municipal general election and thereafter, that position shall
3 have a term of four years.

4 (2) Positions 2, 4, and 6 as elected at the 2027 municipal general election shall
5 have terms of two years. As elected at the 2029 municipal general election and thereafter, those
6 positions shall have terms of four years.

7 After all Councilmembers elected at the 2029 municipal general election start their terms,
8 this Subdivision expires and may be removed from the Charter.

9 Section 2. In accordance with Section 1 of Article XX of the City Charter, Section 3 of
10 Article XIX of the City Charter is proposed to be amended as follows:

11 **Article XIX Officers; Terms and Vacancies**

12 **Sec. 3 TERMS OF ELECTIVE OFFICERS:**

13 The terms of the Mayor, the City Attorney, and of Councilmembers shall be four years, except
14 when this Charter provides otherwise, or when an ordinance creates shorter or longer terms to
15 accommodate moving municipal elections to even-numbered years.

16 Section 3. The City Clerk is authorized and directed to take those actions necessary to
17 place the proposed City Charter amendment before the voters at the November 5, 2024 election,
18 including but not limited to publishing the proposed amendment as provided by state law and the
19 City Charter.

20 Section 4. The Executive Director of the Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission is
21 authorized and requested to take those actions necessary to place information regarding the
22 proposed City Charter amendment in the November 5, 2024 voters' pamphlet.

SUMMARY and FISCAL NOTE*

Department:	Dept. Contact:	CBO Contact:
Legislative	Lish Whitson/206-615-1674	N/A

** Note that the Summary and Fiscal Note describes the version of the bill or resolution as introduced; final legislation including amendments may not be fully described.*

1. BILL SUMMARY

Legislation Title: A RESOLUTION submitting a proposition to the qualified electors of the City to amend Section 2 of Article IV and Section 3 of Article XIX of the City Charter to provide for changes to the terms of office under specified conditions; authorizing the City Clerk and the Executive Director of the Ethics and Elections Commission to take those actions necessary to enable the proposed amendment to appear on the November 5, 2024 ballot and in the local voters’ pamphlet; requesting the King County Elections Director to place the proposed amendment on the November 5, 2024 ballot; and providing for publication of the amendment.

Summary and Background of the Legislation:

This Resolution would place a proposed Charter Amendment on the next general election ballot to modify City Council terms. Under the current City Charter, the seven Council district positions are up for election at the same time. The two Citywide Council positions are up for election two years after the district election position.

The proposed Charter Amendment would make two changes to Seattle’s Charter:

1. Changes Councilmember terms by limiting the term for Citywide Position 9 to two years, starting in 2025, and limiting the terms for District seats 2, 4, and 6 to two years starting in 2027. All even-numbered Council positions, including citywide position 8 would be up for election in 2029, 2033, 2037 and every four years after that. Terms for the odd positions, including citywide position 9, would end in 2027, 2031, 2035 and every four years after that. Those positions would then be up for four-year terms after subsequent elections.
2. The City Council would be authorized to change terms of elective officers, including Councilmembers, Mayors, and City Attorneys, by ordinance in order to switch election years to even years. The Washington State legislature has considered amending the Revised Code of Washington to allow even-year elections for City offices, but currently State law requires City elections to occur in odd years.

2. CAPITAL IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

Does this legislation create, fund, or amend a CIP Project? Yes No

3. SUMMARY OF FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- e. **Please describe any perceived implication for the principles of the Race and Social Justice Initiative. Does this legislation impact vulnerable or historically disadvantaged communities? What is the Language Access plan for any communications to the public?**

District 2 is the most diverse Council District, and the only majority Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) district in Seattle. District 6 is the least diverse Council district. The Councilmember elected in 2027 to each of these positions would serve for a two-year term, alongside the Councilmembers representing District 4. The Councilmember elected to Citywide Position 9 would also have a two-year term. These districts would have elections three times over six years, rather than three times over eight years. Campaign costs would increase in these districts over this period, and these districts may have less stable representation on the Council over this period.

- f. **Climate Change Implications**

1. **Emissions: Is this legislation likely to increase or decrease carbon emissions in a material way?**

No.

2. **Resiliency: Will the action(s) proposed by this legislation increase or decrease Seattle's resiliency (or ability to adapt) to climate change in a material way? If so, explain. If it is likely to decrease resiliency in a material way, describe what will or could be done to mitigate the effects.**

No.

- g. **If this legislation includes a new initiative or a major programmatic expansion: What are the specific long-term and measurable goal(s) of the program? How will this legislation help achieve the program's desired goal(s)?**

Not applicable.

Current Schedule of Elections

	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030	2031	
District 1	4-year Term		4-year Term			4-year Term					
District 2	4-year Term		4-year Term			4-year Term					
District 3	4-year Term		4-year Term			4-year Term					
District 4	4-year Term		4-year Term			4-year Term					
District 5	4-year Term		4-year Term			4-year Term					
District 6	4-year Term		4-year Term			4-year Term					
District 7	4-year Term		4-year Term			4-year Term					
Citywide Position 8	4-year Term				4-year Term				4-year Term		
Citywide Position 9	4-year Term				4-year Term				4-year Term		
Total Council Races		7		2		7		2		7	

Mayor	4-year Term				4-year Term				4-year Term		
City Attorney	4-year Term				4-year Term				4-year Term		
Total City Races		7		4		7		4		7	

Proposed Schedule of Elections under the Charter Amendment

	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030	2031	
District 1	4-year Term		4-year Term			4-year Term					
District 2	4-year Term		4-year Term			2-year Term		4-year Term			
District 3	4-year Term		4-year Term			4-year Term					
District 4	4-year Term		4-year Term			2-year Term		4-year Term			
District 5	4-year Term		4-year Term			4-year Term					
District 6	4-year Term		4-year Term			2-year Term		4-year Term			
District 7	4-year Term		4-year Term			4-year Term					
Citywide Position 8	4-year Term				4-year Term				4-year Term		
Citywide Position 9	4-year Term				2-year Term		4-year Term				
Total Council Races		7		2		8		4		5	

Mayor	4-year Term				4-year Term				4-year Term		
City Attorney	4-year Term				4-year Term				4-year Term		
Total City Races		7		4		8		6		5	