

# City of Vancouver 2024 Charter Review Committee

February Meeting, February 27, 4-6 pm, Vancouver City Hall, Aspen Conference Room

## ATTENDEES

### Committee members present

Johnathan DeBellis  
Lynn Samuels  
Mark Meckler  
Nelson Holmberg  
Russ Beacock  
Josh Egan  
Terah Ebie  
Janet James  
Lisa Ghormley  
Ron Zito  
Janet Landesberg  
Mike Pond  
Janet James  
Cherry Mercado

### Members absent

Alicia Cummins  
Ben Moll – *Arrived at second half of meeting*

### Community members

*No community members in attendance*

### Staff

Aaron Lande, Policy and Program Manager  
Nena Cook, Deputy City Attorney  
Kerry Peck, City Manager's Office Administrative Assistant  
Ben Duncan, Facilitation Lead  
Gillian Garber-Yonts, Tech Support  
Maria Verano, Notetaker

## MEETING DOCUMENTS

- Meeting agenda
- Presentation
- Councilmember Address Map

## WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

Ben Duncan, Facilitation Lead opened the meeting, and participants introduced themselves, stating their name and affiliation.

## CHARTER REVIEW TIMELINE AND AGENDA REVIEW

Ben presented the Charter Review timeline and reminded the Committee members they will have the opportunity to hear Subcommittee report-outs and discuss the four Committee proposed amendments.

He reviewed the agenda ([linked here](#) on the City of Vancouver website) and shared the following February Meeting objectives.

- Discussion and deliberation of amendments
- Invited Guest: City Manager
- Subcommittee Report-outs

## DECEMBER 2023 AND JANUARY 2024 MEETING MINUTES

- A Committee member moved to approve the December Meeting Minutes. Another Committee member seconded the motion.
  - **Decision:** The December 2023 Vancouver Charter Review Committee Meeting Minutes were approved unanimously.
- A Committee member moved to approve the January Meeting Minutes. Another Committee member seconded the motion.
  - **Decision:** The January 2024 Vancouver Charter Review Committee Meeting Minutes were approved unanimously.

#### **ACTIVE PROPOSAL: SECTION 11.05 – CONTRACTS BEYOND ONE YEAR**

Ben reminded the Committee members that they had received additional rationale from the City Attorney's Office regarding the proposed amendment to Section 11.05 – Contracts Beyond One Year in their meeting packets. He asked the Committee whether they were ready to approve the proposed amendment to Section 11.05, or if the amendment should be held for additional discussion at the 2024 Vancouver Charter Review Committee Meeting on March 19.

- A Committee member moved to approve the proposed amendment to Section 11.05. Another Committee member seconded the motion.
  - **Decision:** The Committee voted (11 for, 1 against, and 1 abstention) to approve the proposed amendment to Section 11.05.

#### **INVITED GUEST: VANCOUVER CITY MANAGER, ERIC HOLMES**

Eric Holmes, Vancouver City Manager, introduced himself and thanked the Charter Review Committee for their work. He shared that on February 26, 2024, he had announced his intent to retire to the Vancouver City Council and shared his appreciation for his time with the City of Vancouver.

The City Manager shared a presentation with the Charter Review Committee (Slide 11-21 of the February Charter Review Committee Meeting Slide Deck [linked here](#)). During his presentation the City Manager shared the following.

- Overview of the Council-Manager form of government
- Roles of the City Council and the City Manager
- Practical considerations regarding the effectiveness of the Council-Manager Form of Government
- Considerations for Charter Committee reflection around districting and councilmember compensation

#### **Discussion**

- A Committee member noted that during the last Charter Review process, it came up that other cities have had to shift to districts as the result of litigation. The Committee member asked whether that is something that the City of Vancouver could face?
  - The City Manager shared that the Voter Rights Act gives voters the authority to challenge the structure of an electoral process. If the current form of governance excludes minority representation the Voter Rights Act would apply. This happened in the City of Yakima. The City Manager shared that it is his understanding, based on consultation with the City Attorney's Office, that the City of Vancouver is at low risk of a

challenge of that nature being successful. He noted that depending on how districts were drawn, the risk of litigation might be increased.

- A Committee member asked whether the current form of governance would ensure minority representation in the case that the city annexed additional areas.
  - The City Manager shared that the city doesn't know. He shared that if the city were to annex new territory and population it would need to do a demographic analysis to see where districting would support representation, and whether the size of the city would enhance the effectiveness of leadership. He shared that the city is not on the cusp of annexing areas.
  - The Committee member shared that they were led to believe by Councilmember Stober that annexation would happen in the next year or so.
  - The City Manager shared that it would be technically possible to annex a substantial area in the next few years. He added that you could comply with the law and end up with a new geographic boundary for the city, but that practically, the time it would take to transfer assets and staffing would take years. He shared an example of the recent annexation of Van Mall North and noted that the process took four years and resulted in a total population change of 5,000 people.
- A Committee member shared that a critical role of the City Council is making sure they hire the right City Manager. The Committee member asked whether there is anything the City Manager thinks the Charter Committee should recommend regarding the selection of the City Manager's replacement.
  - The City Manager shared that every time there is a change in City Manger the circumstances will be different. He advised against any recommendation and noted that including a specific process in the Charter could tie the hands of council.
- A committee member asked whether the Council-Manager form of governance will remain effective as the Vancouver population grows. They asked whether the City Manager had any recommendations on how to ensure council representation is equitable.
  - The City Manager shared that he doesn't think that population should dictate the form of governance. The question is how many councilmembers there should be, and whether districts should form. He shared that things will likely not need to be changed in the next five years and noted that the current Council is the most diverse in Vancouver history. He shared that current councilmembers identifying future community leaders and encouraging them to take on city leadership roles is one of the most effective ways to diversify representation on City Council.
- A Committee member asked whether there is anything outside of equity, that the Charter Review Committee should be considering for proposed amendments.
  - The City Manager did not have any suggestions and shared that changes should have a reason and move the community towards what it is trying to become.

### **SUBCOMMITTEE REPORT-OUTS**

The following summarizes the Subcommittee report-outs around the following four proposed Charter amendments.

- Signatures for Petition
- Mechanism for Obsolete Language Updates
- Councilmember Pay
- Districting

Ben Duncan reminded the group that there will be additional opportunity for discussion around the proposed Charter amendments at future Charter Review Committee meetings.

#### Signatures for Petition

- **Problem:** The current signature requirements in the Charter limit accessibility for Vancouver community members collecting signatures for a petition.
- **Proposal:** Update the Charter language to allow for electronic signature collection

The Signatures for Petition Subcommittee Lead shared the following report-out.

- Section 10 of the Charter requires a “wet signature”.
- An update to the Charter could allow for a change to the requirements for signature collection, but the RCW and the Clark County Elections Office also dictate the way that signatures can be collected.
- The group is proposing moving forward with the amendment so that the Charter does not limit electronic signature collection should the Clark County and State rules around signature collection change.
- Section 9 of the Charter employs language around ranked choice voting that could be replicated for the signatures for petition topic.
- The Subcommittee opted to take steps towards priming the city to allow electronic signature collection.

#### **Discussion**

- Nena Cook, Deputy City Attorney, shared that the City of Vancouver passed an ordinance allowing electronic signatures, and the State of Washington enacted a similar law (RCW 1.80.010) on June 11, 2020, that allows for electronic signature collection. It describes an electronic signature as an electronic sound, symbol, or process attached to or logically associated with a record and executed or adopted by a person with the intent to sign that record. Once the County Auditor technically makes the change to accept electronic signatures, the state law would trump anything that is, or would be listed in the Charter. Nena cautioned that the risk of updating the language in the Charter could lead to misalignment with state law. The Committee could opt to do nothing and wait for Clark County to update their signature collection or update the Charter language and risk approving language that conflicts with state law.
- The Subcommittee lead asked the Committee members if there was continued interest in moving forward with the proposed amendment. The Committee members expressed support for the proposed amendment in concept.

#### Mechanism for Obsolete Language Updates

- **Problem:** There is out of date information in the Charter that has become obsolete.
- **Proposal:** Include language in the Charter that allows City of Vancouver legal and communications staff to review the Charter every five years. Include direction for the Charter Committee to review City Staff suggestions at the beginning of each Charter Review Process.

The Mechanism for Obsolete Language Updates Subcommittee lead shared the following report-out.

- During the last two Charter Review processes there have been updates for gender neutral language, discrimination language, and pronouns.
- The proposed amendment would allow City of Vancouver staff to provide recommendations for amendments prior to the convening of the Charter Review Committee.

### Discussion

- A committee member noted that everything the Charter Committee approves goes to the City Council for approval. They asked whether there is a way to update language in the City Charter as language is updated at the state level without it going to the City Council and the voters.
  - Ben Duncan clarified with the Subcommittee lead that the proposal referred to automating a process every five years where City staff conduct a review and update Charter language as an administrative process.
  - Nena Cook shared that during the Charter Review process, the City Attorney’s office recommended amendments for Committee consideration. The City Attorney’s Office did not go through the Charter and review for obsolete language, or language that conflicts with state law, because it is superseded by state law. Those changes would also add unnecessarily to the list of amendments going forward to the voters. Nena cautioned that the Committee should consider if it wants to propose substituting the charter review process, including the City Council vote and public vote on proposed Charter amendments, with the discretion of the City Attorney.
  - Aaron Lande noted that issues cost money to put to the ballot.
- A committee member shared that the City Clerk has the authority to change specific Charter language, including gendered terms, and that the intention behind the proposed amendment was to look at the possibility of assigning powers to change additional language such as out of date salary numbers.
- One Committee member asked whether granting the City Council the authority to approve language changes would save money.
  - Aaron Lande shared that the power to change the Charter language can be delegated to anyone but cautioned that there can be unintended consequences of that action.

### Councilmember Pay

- Problem: Salary Rate for Vancouver councilmembers creates barriers to running for council and can limit the time councilmembers can dedicate to their duties.
- Proposal: Add language providing parameters for a base salary for councilmembers and expand the position to full-time.

The Councilmember Pay Subcommittee lead shared the following report-out.

- The Subcommittee focused on the question of whether the Councilmember position is full-time or part-time.
- The Subcommittee posed a questionnaire to the City Councilmembers.
- The Subcommittee Lead shared one Councilmember’s response to the question, “Would being paid a ‘livable wage’ affect the amount of time you have available for council duties?”
  - Anonymous Vancouver Councilmember: “Absolutely. As a “first generation everything”, a single mom, and millennial (youngest on council), I am greatly affected by this. These unique qualities I bring to council were what I ran on during my campaign and the

people spoke and said they wanted this representation that has been lacking from our council. I am the first Indigenous, one of the first Latine, and the first Millennial on our city council. Firsts that honestly are way overdue. I must work a normal full-time job, in addition to being on council to pay bills and support myself, my child, and often my extended family. I do not have a safety net if I lose my job, there is no wealth that I have access to either generationally or within myself. Because of this, my job must take priority to meet my and my family's basic needs. I also do not have a live-in partner/spouse so I am on my own for household emergencies and other caregiving. As much as I would like the civic duties of my council position to be priority, like they are in my heart and conscious, I cannot do so because of the economic factors I have to deal with to survive in our society. It is incredibly frustrating and stressful on my conscious, and I think about it a lot, about how I would like to be able to do more with my position on council if it wasn't for having to "work to live". It places an unfair burden on those who would make great representatives of our community but who can't serve because of finances. We need to eliminate this barrier because it is a disservice to our rapidly changing and diverse community. Economic factors are also much different now. Millennials have less wealth than prior generations were afforded, housing is at an all-time low level of affordability, and wages are stagnant while costs have risen substantially through out the last few decades. We have to ask ourselves if we are willing to pay councilmembers, our representatives, a decent wage for the job being asked of them by the public (which by the way is ever increasing in its demands), or are we okay with them just showing up to required meetings to vote and then go home? What type of government leadership serves our community the best and are we willing to pay for that? Currently the only people that can feasibly serve if we expect more than just showing up to required meetings is those who are retired, have a wealthy family, or have a wealthy spouse to support them. Those that aren't must do their best to meet expectations, and by doing so, inevitably will burn out. We may have been afforded some diverse representation recently, but burnout is inevitable and how does a representative who is doubly worked do their best? Does this represent our community and its current and future needs to have those with less privileged backgrounds but all the other necessary skills be burnt out or have a short-lived term?

Additionally, because council makeup is now so much different, there has been a rub between expectations and reality. The systems and norms have not been adapted to this kind of diversity. Someone recently told me that though we have broken the glass ceiling at the council level, we are unfortunately feeling the shards hit us by being the first to break through. At a minimum, I hope my words can help all who travel behind me with similar or more winding paths and lived experiences. I am still very privileged in many other ways. This change can mean you all reading this and making and suggesting changes that are within your power."

- The Subcommittee Lead shared the following council-manager city populations size and Councilmember salaries for reference.
  - City of Spokane
    - Population: 232,700

- Counselor Salary: \$47,624/year
- City of Vancouver
  - Population: 199,000
  - Counselor Salary: \$29,693/year
- City of Tacoma
  - Population: 222,400
  - Counselor Salary: \$63,000/year

### Discussion

- One committee member shared that the framing should be around a competitive wage for the job as opposed to full-time vs. part-time.
  - The Subcommittee Lead shared that none of the Cities mentioned dictate the full-time vs part-time nature of their councilmember positions, instead they defer to their salary commissions.
- One committee member shared that the estimated hours required to do the Councilmember job shared by the City Manager could be limiting to working parents or caretakers.

### Districing

- Problem: City Council lacks geographic diversity, and citywide representation creates barriers for representation in lower-income and historically underserved communities.
- Proposal: Shift to district representation on City Council with four districted councilmembers, two at-large councilmembers, and a citywide mayor.

The Districing Subcommittee lead shared the following report-out.

- Districing has come up in the past three Charter Review processes.
- The Districing Subcommittee lead shared the following questions for Committee reflection and requested that Committee members share any feedback following the meeting.
  - Who are the champions we can rely on for communication across the city (i.e., neighborhood associations, social media influencers, city staff (in regular communication) should the measure pass?
  - What are the findings of other subcommittees that might be important for the districing subcommittee to consider? Is there overlap in our work with other subcommittees?
  - How many districts does the full committee feel would be effective?
  - Should the 2024 Charter Review Committee recommend creation of a districing commission to work on implementation?
- At a Council Meeting a City Councilmember had shared recently that he had responded to a request to attend an event with 60 frustrated community members who felt that they were not represented by Council.
- Four of the City Councilmembers live in West Vancouver.
- The Subcommittee is proposing starting districts in 2027.

## **Districting**

- A Committee member shared that they also look for economic diversity when they look at diversity on City Council.
- A committee member shared that one of the possible benefits to shifting to districts would be lowered campaign costs.
- A Committee member asked whether the general election would be citywide or by district.
  - The Subcommittee lead shared that details would be discussed in a future Subcommittee meeting.

## **PUBLIC COMMENT/COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS**

Ben opened the floor for public comment. No public comments were shared.

## **NEXT STEPS AND CONCLUSION**

Ben thanked the Subcommittee members for their work and shared that the proposed amendments would be revisited at the March 19 Charter Review Committee meeting.

## **CLOSING REMARKS**

Aaron thanked the Committee members for their time and shared that the Signatures for Petition, Mechanism for Obsolete Language, and Councilmember Pay Subcommittees still have open seats that could be filled by interested Committee members. The meeting was adjourned.