

Memo

To: Commissioners

From: Wayne Barnett

Date: August 22, 2011

Re: Printing the full text of ballot measures in the voters' pamphlet

Issue

Should the Commission recommend that the City eliminate the City code requirement that the full text of ballot measures appear in the voters' pamphlet, and lobby the state to eliminate a comparable provision in State law?

Legal background

SMC 2.14.010.A.1 requires that the City's voters' pamphlet contain "[f]or each measure, the identification by serial number, the ballot title, the text, an explanatory statement, and arguments for and against the passage of the measure."

RCW 29A.32.241(4) requires that local voters' pamphlets contain "[t]he text of each measure accompanied by an explanatory statement...."

Discussion

The voters' pamphlet is the largest non-staff related expense in the Commission's budget. In 2012, if there are two ballot measures, each requiring approximately four pages in the voters' pamphlet, the cost will be approximately \$24,000. In addition, these four sheets of paper, when multiplied by the approximately 350,000 copies of the pamphlet printed, amount to 1.4 million pieces of paper. So there are environmental costs to printing the full text of measures as well.

The impacts of eliminating the practice are difficult, if not impossible, to quantify. I believe that it is reasonable to assume that a small proportion of voters, after reading the ballot title, the explanatory statement and the arguments promoting and opposing a ballot measure, flip to the back of the voters' pamphlet to read the complete text of the measure. It further seems reasonable to assume that most voters who would be interested in reading the complete text of the measure would have Internet access. (As of 2007, the last year for which I could find data, 77 percent of Seattle households had Internet access.)

Obviously, though, there are many without Internet access. The Commission cannot ignore the fact that such a change could make it harder for those on the wrong side of the “digital divide” to read the full text of a ballot measure before casting their vote. This unintended consequence could be ameliorated by printing in the voters’ pamphlet alternative ways of obtaining the full text (libraries, community centers, neighborhood service centers, mail, etc.)

With the City’s budget under continuing pressure, and with the City’s commitment to reducing paper usage, and with the opportunity for most Seattleites to access the full text of measures electronically, I believe this is a good time to weigh whether the cost of printing the full text of ballot measures in every pamphlet outweighs the benefit.