

Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission Regular Meeting

January 6, 2021

A regular meeting of the Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission (SEEC) convened remotely. Commission Chair Richard Shordt called the meeting to order at 4:03 p.m. Vice Chair Hardeep Singh Rekhi and Commissioners Brendan Donckers, Susan Taylor, and Judy Tobin were present. Commissioner Bruce Carter was absent. Executive Director Wayne Barnett was present and was joined by staff members Chrissy Courtney, Polly Grow, René LeBeau, Marc Mayo, Neelam Shah and Annie Tran, along with Assistant City Attorneys Teresa Chen and Gary Smith.

The Chair began by thanking everyone who joined the meeting since it had been a sad, frustrating, and infuriating day after closely following the violence unfolding in Washington, D.C., and he was appreciative that the commission and staff could come together and keep working, in part to provide a respite from the awful events, and to keep the important work of the commission going.

Action Items

1) Minutes for December 2,2020 regular meeting

The Chair moved to the first order of business, the minutes from the December 2, 2020 regular meeting. The Chair asked if there were any comments or edits to the minutes and there were none. Commissioner Donckers moved to approve the minutes and Commissioner Taylor seconded the motion. The motion was approved unanimously.

2) Appeal of dismissal of Case No. 20-1-1129-1

The Chair asked the Director to lay out the facts for the appeal of the dismissal. The appellant was not present for the meeting. The Director said that a complaint came in that the

Seattle Public Library and a newsletter produced by the Seattle Public Library Foundation had promoted an event sponsored by the Seattle Public Library Foundation at the Seattle Public Library that featured a book that was written by Ron Chew, one of the library's trustees. The Director continued that this was a Seattle Public Library Foundation event, and the Library Foundation is separate from the Seattle Public Library itself, and while they share a mission, there is no formal relationship beyond a contract. The Director explained that while it would have been improper for the library to feature Mr. Chew's book, but not books from other authors in the series, the Ethics Code does not require that Mr. Chew be treated worse than other individuals, it just required that he not be treated any better. The Director provided the example that if someone had a pothole in front of their house and they worked for the Seattle Department of Transportation, they cannot jump to the front of the line, but like any other resident they can still go through the normal process to request to have the pothole filled. The Director said he would urge the commission to deny the appeal and he would be happy to answer any further questions.

The Chair asked if there were any questions. Commissioner Tobin said that she wanted to disclose that she was on the board of trustees of the Wing Luke Museum while Mr. Chew was the director. The Vice Chair asked if there was any evidence presented that would indicate that Mr. Chew was being treated better than anyone else. The Director answered no, the library newsletter regularly featured these events, and this event followed the same procedure. Commissioner Taylor said she thought it made sense to have richly experienced people on the library board and there was no evidence that he was involved in the decision or that he was trying to enrich himself, so there didn't seem to be a problem. The Chair agreed and asked if there was a motion needed to deny in the absence of the appellant. The Director said yes, there

would need to be a motion, second, and vote. The Chair asked if there were any motions and Commissioner Tobin made a motion to deny the appeal and Commissioner Taylor seconded the motion. The motion to deny the appeal was approved unanimously.

Discussion Items

3) Democracy Voucher Program report

René LeBeau, the Democracy Voucher Program manager, said that the program was still on track to meet the February 9th mail out deadline and there have been meetings with IT to get everything ready. The program will also be adding two additional languages, Japanese and Arabic, and the languages that are already supported will continue to be supported, so there will be 18 languages supported through 2021. The cost of supporting translations in 2019 for 197 unique pieces of communication was only \$48,000, so the cost to provide the additional languages can be supported administratively. The Chair said it was fantastic that so many languages were supported and asked if there was feedback from the community in having these different languages. Ms. LeBeau said that the feedback was provided to the Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs (OIRA) from various stakeholder groups and the Democracy Voucher Program received those recommendations from OIRA.

Ms. LeBeau continued that the program was getting prepared for launch, and based on a recent file of Seattle's 542,000+ registered voters, 46 thousand are considered inactive voters. A postcard notification will be sent to these inactive voters to have them update their registrations with King County Elections (KCE) if they're eligible. The rest will get paper vouchers mailed, and those who have opted into the online system, close to 10,000 people, will get an email notification letting them know their online vouchers are available. The cost for mailing the paper vouchers and the postcards will be around \$120,000 and the next steps are to focus on hiring

temporary workers, getting training materials updated, and getting the office situated to allow for safe work in-person. There are lots of interested people from the community getting information about the program, both residents and campaigners, and there is a basic training video being produced for candidates to view online since there is a lot to learn.

Commissioner Tobin said that one thing that was being talked about last time was the scenario of the musical chairs, which received a lot of coverage, and she was wondering if that was going to be considered more at this meeting or if it was going to the next meeting, because she did think it would be good to keep up with that as more and more people use the voucher program. The Director said that one of the benefits of the Mayor making her announcement so early was alleviating the big fear in the discussion last time, which was a scenario where the vacancy would have been announced in late April, which would impact campaigns that were already underway when that information came to light. The Director said that he agreed it was still a scenario that needed rules, but it was a less pressing discussion at this time.

Ms. LeBeau said that one of the things she was working on with KCE, which would also involve the courier, was setting up expectations on how quickly things can be turned around, in terms of paper documents, since KCE was also working with a skeleton crew. Staff will make sure campaigns understand the challenges and will be asking for patience as the paper records are processed. KCE is absolutely supportive of the program, but it will be a challenge.

Commissioner Donckers spoke about the plan for workers to be back in the office safely and asked if it was because of the paper issues and interacting with campaigns that folks would need to be in the office. Ms. LeBeau said that the most critical piece that had to be kept secure was the vouchers themselves, of which there can be thousands of envelopes received per day, and which have to be kept secure on site, and there will need to be supervision in place for the

temporary workers. So, the plan to return, in terms of employee safety, was about the space available. Everyone could not safely be in the voucher processing space at the same time, so there will be things moved around in the office to keep people at a safe distance from each other, and any work that does not need to be done in the office can be done at home.

Commissioner Donckers asked if enlarging the space was going to be enough to make everyone feel comfortable, noting that hopefully everyone would be vaccinated by the summer, but he was assuming the plans were not contingent on vaccinations, given the uncertainty of that roll out. Ms. LeBeau said the city had guidance on how to handle the spaces, and since the office would not be fully open, the plan would probably look a little different than most reopened offices. Ms. LeBeau continued that there would be quite a bit more space available and they would try to not hire as many temporary workers, but there are a lot of materials that are produced which would require space needs that are complicated. The Director said that one of the approaches will also be staggering times when people are in the office and keeping communications over the phone and through the computer to keep people apart, so keeping people both temporally and spatially apart was part of the plan. Commissioner Donckers said that this was clearly essential work and he just wanted to make sure that the folks that are doing the essential work are safe and comfortable and if the Director felt that there was something that the commissioner could do to help staff, he would personally support that and hoped that was understood. The Director thanked Commissioner Donckers and said he appreciated that offer. Ms. LeBeau said that they would also be making sure that staff would be fully video capable to be able to talk and work collaboratively remotely, and that she felt okay about going into the office on a staggered basis. Commissioner Donckers said he hoped that the staff would feel

comfortable coming to the commission if circumstances were identified where more resources were needed, and Commissioner Taylor agreed. The Director thanked them for their support.

The Chair asked what would happen if the online voucher users who were sent emails had an inactive email. Ms. LeBeau answered that if an email had bounced back from an active registered voter they could follow up by mail, and paper vouchers could be reissued. Ms. LeBeau thanked the Chair for the question about the kicked back emails, so that could be added to the list of things to check. The Chair asked if there was an effort to focus, particularly this year, on electronic voucher processing. Ms. LeBeau said yes, and in addition to the effort by the office, when the messages were boosted by other local residents and former candidates with large networks, the online voucher message was really getting out there. Last year around 9,000 people signed up for electronic vouchers, and it will continue to be pushed as a key message to residents, but the competing news of the past year made it more difficult to get out the message about online vouchers.

The Chair asked if it was part of the candidate training program to remind the candidates that electronic vouchers were an option. Ms. LeBeau said it had not been a topline message for candidates because if a campaign was working with a resident who may have lost their vouchers, the campaigns could provide a campaign replacement form directly or electronically to the resident. However, to become an online user, a request was needed from the resident, so while campaigns were informed that it was an option for residents, the messaging to candidates was more focused on the requirements for participation in the program as a candidate.

Ms. LeBeau ended her report saying that the program was ready, and she was really excited. The Chair thanked Ms. LeBeau for all the hard work and wished her good luck in the coming busy weeks and months.

4) Executive Director's report

The Director said the new and improved lobbying law did pass the council, and was signed by the Mayor, but there will be a delayed effective date to roll out that new law since it will land in the middle of an election year. Administering the new law will be a lot of work and elected officials will need to allocate more resources for that work, and the Director was hoping to request a first quarter supplement in order to be able to hire for the new position, but obviously given the state of the budget these days, there were no guarantees.

The Director noted that former Chair, Nick Brown, was no longer a member of the commission, and Commissioners Donckers and Carter's terms have expired. The Mayor's office has been contacted to remind them that there needed to be another set of appointments, but obviously there are some other big things on their plate, so the Director will continue to encourage them to act on those appointments. The Director ended his report by saying that 2020 was about as good of a year as the office could have had and hopefully 2021 will be a great year. The Commissioners thanked the Director and the Chair thanked everyone and brought the meeting to a close.

The Regular Commission meeting of January 6, 2021 adjourned at 4:35 p.m.