

27 July 2005

The Honorable Ron Sims
King County Executive
Office of the King County Executive
701 Fifth Avenue, Suite 3210
Seattle, WA 98104

Dear Executive Sims,

On behalf of all the members of the Independent Task Force on Elections, I am pleased to submit to you our Report and Recommendations to the King County Executive on the county's elections system.

We first want to commend you for appointing a task force of people with such diverse backgrounds, interests, training and political perspectives. We took very seriously your challenge to recommend changes that will most significantly improve King County's elections system.

As we began, none of us completely appreciated the enormity of that challenge. After devoting hundreds of hours to this work, we deeply appreciate what a solemn public trust it is to guarantee and protect the most powerful of all civic rights, the right to vote.

We anchored all our deliberations on the powerful ideal that every vote does indeed count. This ideal, we believe, is at the heart of our democracy, and must be restored and sustained for the people of King County and all citizens of the state.

Our recommendations are guided by our commitment to achieving that ideal and upholding the public trust. Our goal throughout this process was to restore public trust and confidence in King County's elections system. We believe these recommendations will help lay the foundation for King County to build a model elections system in the nation.

Although events related to the 2004 elections have created a significant crisis in public confidence and trust, they are truly the symptom of problems that have evolved over many years. Given the number and chronic nature of the problems that have been revealed during the past four years, the Task Force's key finding is that there has been a failure of leadership and a breakdown in

accountability. Despite significant leadership changes and the current leadership team's efforts to improve the organization, King County's organizational culture and structure continue to prevent effective and rigorous compliance with elections laws, policies and procedures.

Responsibility and public accountability for the elections process ultimately reside in the Office of the King County Executive. As you have stated in the past, real and significant change in the County's organizational culture requires a fully engaged and focused leadership effort that starts with the King County Executive.

The Task Force has found that the leader of the Records, Elections and Licensing Services (REALS) Division cannot alone make the kinds of changes that are critical to restoring public trust and confidence in our elections system. We believe these changes can be accomplished only if spearheaded by an independent, external "turnaround" team that reports directly to and is accountable to the King County Executive. Throughout the time that the turnaround team is in place, the Executive and the County Council must have the fortitude and courage to ensure that organizational transformation will be supported and achieved. We believe this transformation can succeed only if fully endorsed and articulated as a vision for change by executive and legislative leadership.

The most compelling reasons for recommending the turnaround team are the crisis in public confidence in the elections system, and the variety of disturbing organizational issues revealed by a survey of King County Elections Section employees. King County and its citizens cannot afford to wait for a year, or two or three, to resolve the leadership, organizational culture, policy and operational problems that confront the elections office. Granting an external, independent turnaround team the responsibility and authority to change the election office's organization and culture to improve the elections system is an essential, immediate step to address the crisis in public confidence.

In the longer term, the Task Force believes a separately elected official with primary responsibility for elections will increase accountability to citizens and more effectively advocate for improved technology and resources as needed. The Task Force acknowledges that electing a leader of the elections office does not guarantee an effective leader who can establish a more credible and independent elections system in King County. The public is demanding more accountability in the elections process and so we believe the proposal is worthy of public discussion and debate.

The Task Force has also found that despite recent reforms, federal, state and county statutory or policy mandates create an external environment that significantly impedes the ability of elections administrators to conduct fair and equitable elections.

The two most important policy reforms that King County should enact to ensure fair and equitable elections are: 1) institute vote-by-mail and regional voting centers in 2006; and 2) during recounts, place two elections observers at or adjacent to counting stations.

The State Legislature bears some of the responsibility for the chaos and layers of complexity that needlessly undermine our elections system and public confidence in it. The Task Force strongly recommends that the King County Executive and Council allocate resources to champion the following reforms in the way Washington State conducts elections: 1) Change the date of the primary election to the first Tuesday of June; 2) Reduce from six to four the number of elections held in Washington State during the calendar year; 3) Automatically restore voting rights to former felons upon their release from prison; 4) When a recount is necessary, conduct only one and require that it be manual; and 5) Require that state and county elections officials receive all ballots by eight o'clock on election night, except those of military and out-of-state voters, which must be received before the election is certified.

We believe that the adoption and implementation of these recommendations will achieve five preeminent public interests: restore public trust and confidence in the elections system; make the voting process less complicated; provide substantive and perceived fairness to all citizens, including voters, candidates and political parties; promote accurate results in a manner that allows the public to hold King County elected and/or appointed officials accountable; and ensure that the solution works over the long-term no matter who is in charge and no matter which party is in political power.

Thank you, again, Executive Sims, for creating this Task Force and giving us the mandate and opportunity to propose improvements in King County's elections system. As you requested, we are prepared to reconvene in January 2006 to review and comment on the turnaround plan and to support King County in its efforts to achieve reforms at the state level.

Our deliberations, including our discussions with dozens of stakeholders such as current and former county, state and federal elected officials, the Elections Section employees, and representatives of business, labor, education and civic organizations, have crystallized for us the vital role that the franchise of voting plays in our democracy and in the public's ownership of it. The strategies described above and explained in more detail in the attached report will restore public trust and confidence while helping make King County's elections system a model for the nation.

Sincerely,



Cheryl M. Scott
Chair, King County Independent Task Force on Elections