

An important milestone was reached February 23 for all Whatcom citizens who want to see fair and equitable representation restored to our County Council. The Charter Review Commission's vote to recommend to the voters Charter Amendment 1, calling for District voting, represents a giant first step. It is important, however, to recognize that with this step, the Commission's job is only half done.

Ten years ago the 2005 Charter Review Commission proposed a charter amendment to the voters offering them the opportunity to choose to elect their Council representatives from within the respective council districts, rather than electing them countywide in at-large general elections. The voters responded overwhelmingly in favor of the amendment. Before the new system for electing Council had been in place long enough for all the Council positions to be filled and to operate with district-based representation, Council itself, acting under Charter Section 8.23 initiated an ordinance to abandon fair and equitable representation by district. Council's ordinance led to the amendment of Section 2.13 and to a return to countywide, at-large elections for all County Council positions.

Council should not be allowed to change or set the terms for their own elections as was done in this case. These conditions are set forth in Article 2 of the County's constitution, the Home Rule Charter and framework for our county government. There was no "emergency" requiring Council to abuse their authority to amend the Charter in this way, when a significant part of the county had so recently expressed the desire to try fair representation by district.

Proposed Charter Amendment 1, if approved by the voters in November, will modify Charter Section 2.13 and provide for a return to the election of council members from within their respective council districts. Amendment 1 will thus repeal Council's hasty and premature 2008 action to return to at-large elections.

In order for the people to ensure that representation by district remains in effect for a meaningful period of time, *the Charter Review Commission must also allow the voters to remove Council's current power to amend Charter Section 2.13.* The intent of Proposed Charter Amendment No. 10 is to do just that, and complete the "second half of the job" as referenced above.

Article 8 of the Whatcom County Home Rule Charter establishes processes for periodic charter review and for amending our charter, often referred to as our county constitution. Three methods are provided for proposing amendments to the charter. These include amendments proposed by the Charter Review Commission during charter review (Section 8.21), amendments proposed by the People by means of an initiative petition (Section 8.22), and amendments proposed by the County Council by enacting an ordinance for this purpose (Section 8.23). No matter which method is employed, or where a proposal for amending the Charter begins, all proposed amendments must be approved by the voters before taking effect.

Proposed Charter Amendment Ten is specifically and narrowly focused only on removing the County Council's current power to propose an ordinance aimed at changing the County Charter in such a way as to affect how they (Council) are themselves elected (thus, the references specifically to Sections 2.12 and 2.13 in Proposed Amendment Ten). If approved by the voters, the amendment would not change, restrict or remove any of Council's other current powers to propose amendments to the County Charter in any way. The public (by initiative petition), or future Charter Review Commissions would continue to have the power to propose amendments to Charter Sections 2.12 or 2.13.

In conclusion, it will do supporters of fair and equitable representation by district little good to campaign for and pass Charter Amendment 1 if the current Charter Review Commission does not also provide those supporters with a means for removing the County Council's power to amend the Charter and set the terms for their own election as spelled out in Charter Sections 2.12 and 2.13. Proposed Charter Amendment Ten will accomplish this purpose.