Council Election by Wards or Districts

The Municipal Research and Services Center (MRSC) is a nonprofit organization that helps local governments across Washington State better serve their citizens by providing legal and policy guidance on any topic.

This page provides an overview of city council wards and districts in Washington State, including how to establish or abolish districts and a list of all cities MRSC is aware of that have established wards or districts.

Overview

While many cities in Washington elect all their city councilmembers at-large, others have chosen to establish wards or districts, in which some or all of the councilmembers are elected by and represent specific geographic areas of the city.

The establishment of wards or districts is specifically authorized by RCW 35A.12.180 for code cities and RCW 35.23.051 for second class cities, while first class cities may adopt districts by charter.

Establishing City Council Wards or Districts

Dividing a city into districts (wards) is specifically authorized by RCW 35A.12.180 as long as it not done within three months of a municipal general election.

The process for establishing a ward or district system is fairly straight-forward. RCW 35A.12.180 provides that the first step is for the council to pass an ordinance establishing a ward or district system; there is no required public vote on the matter, although the council could choose to conduct an advisory election on the issue. The council will need to decide how many districts it wants to establish and whether it wants any at-large positions. For example, the council could establish seven districts with one councilmember per district, or it could establish five or six districts and one or two at-large positions, or it could establish three districts with two councilmembers for each district, and one at-large position, etc. The councilmembers that are elected by district would be chosen at the primary election only by voters in their districts and then by all the voters at the general election unless the city had prior to January 1, 1994, limited the voting in the general election for any or all council positions only to the voters residing within the ward associated with that council position. If a city had limited the voting in the general election only to voters residing within the ward, then the city is authorized to continue to do so.

RCW 35.23.051 provides a similar process for second class cities.

The bulk of the work in establishing a ward/district system would be, of course, in determining district boundaries. RCW 35A.12.180 provides that "The representation of each ward in the city council shall be in proportion to the population as nearly as is practicable." It does not say anything about how to go about establishing the boundaries of the districts, but it requires that, when districts are redrawn, the redrawing of boundaries should be done according to Ch. 29A.76 RCW. RCW 29A.76.010 states that the redistricting is to be "based on population information from the most recent federal decennial census." So, presumably, the initial establishment of a ward/district system would use federal census data, along with any other sources that would make that data more current.

Although the county has no role in a city's decision to establish a wards system, the county's election supervisor must be properly notified so that the primary election ballots can be prepared and the primary election conducted.

Cities with Wards or Districts

Below is a list of all the cities MRSC is aware of that have established wards or districts. Most of these cities still retain at least one or two at-large positions, although there are a few examples that elect the entire council by district. In most cases, there are more district/ward representatives than at-large councilmembers, but again there are a couple exceptions.

First Class Cities

- Aberdeen - 12 councilmembers: 2 each from 6 wards
- Bellingham - 7 councilmembers: 1 at-large, 6 wards
- Bremerton - 7 councilmembers: 7 districts
- Seattle - 9 councilmembers: 2 at-large, 7 districts
- Spokane - 6 councilmembers: 2 each from 3 districts
- Tacoma - 8 councilmembers: 3 at-large, 5 districts
- Yakima - 7 councilmembers: 3 at-large, 4 districts

Second Class Cities

- Colville - 7 councilmembers: 1 at-large, 2 each from 3 districts
- Ritzville - 7 councilmembers: 2 at-large, 5 districts

Optional Municipal Code Cities

- Anacortes - 7 councilmembers: 4 at-large, 3 wards
- Bainbridge Island - 7 councilmembers: 1 at-large, 2 each from 3 wards
- Blaine - 7 councilmembers: 1 at-large, 2 each from 3 wards
- Burlington - 7 councilmembers: 1 at-large, 6 wards
- Camas - 7 councilmembers: 1 at-large, 2 each from 3 wards

- Centralia - 7 councilmembers: 3 at-large, 4 wards
- Chehalis - 7 councilmembers: 3 at-large, 4 districts
- Chelan - 7 councilmembers: 1 at-large, 2 each from 3 wards
- Hoquiam - 12 councilmembers: 2 elected from each of 6 wards
- Mount Vernon - 7 councilmembers: 1 at-large, 2 each from 3 wards
- Kennewick - 7 councilmembers: 4 at-large, 3 wards
- Pasco - 7 councilmembers: 2 at-large, 5 wards
- Pullman - 7 councilmembers: 1 at-large, 2 each from 3 wards
- Puyallup - 7 councilmembers: 1 at-large, 2 each from 3 districts
- Sedro-Woolley - 7 councilmembers: 1 at-large, 6 wards
- Sunnyside - 7 councilmembers: 3 at-large, 4 districts

Examples of Code Provisions

- Bainbridge Island Municipal Code Ch. 2.06 - Wards
- Mount Vernon Municipal Code Ch. 1.12 - Wards and Election Precincts
- Puyallup Municipal Code Ch. 1.04 - Precincts and Districts, and Sec. 2.04.070 - Election of council members to districts

Election Procedures

Council candidates must be a resident of the ward they wish to represent. Candidates are elected by the voters within the ward at the primary election to select the finalists who will appear on the general election ballot for election by all voters in the city.

Redistricting

Adjusting Ward Boundaries after Federal Census

After each federal census the city must review and redraw its district boundaries to ensure equal representation. The pertinent statutory provisions are in Ch. 29A.76 RCW, local government redistricting. RCW 29A.76.010 provides some time frames and other details on redistricting by local governments. When districts are redrawn, the redrawing of boundaries should be done according to Ch. 29A.76 RCW. RCW 29A.76.010 states that the redistricting is to be "based on population information from the most recent federal decennial census." As with the initial establishment of the wards RCW 35A.12.180 provides that "The representation of each ward in the city council shall be in proportion to the population as nearly as is practicable." This process must be completed within eight months of receiving the official notice and census information from the State Redistricting Commission.

Abandonment of the Ward System

Several cities that established a system of wards have decided to abandon this method of electing their councilmembers. Like the decision to establish wards the decision to abandon them is entirely local. As with the decision to adopt a ward system, the county legislative body has no

role in the process but the county's elections supervisor must be advised in order to properly conduct the succeeding elections.

Examples of City Ordinances Abandoning the Ward System

- Bonney Lake Ordinance No. 1383 (2011)
- Snohomish Ordinance No. 2005 (2002)
- Prosser Ordinance No. 1278 (1984)
- Kennewick Ordinance No. 2536 (1980)
- Ellensburg Ordinance No. 2771 (1969)

Recommended Resources

- Redistricting Commission - Secretary of State
  - RCW 44.05.030 - Redistricting commission - Membership - Chairperson - Vacancies
- Ward Electoral Systems in Oregon Cities, by John Rehfuss (2003)
- Seattle Citizen Advisory Panel on Council Elections Final Report (2003)

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