

May 10, 2021

MEMORANDUM

To: Community Economic Development Committee
From: Asha Venkataraman, Analyst
Subject: Extending the length of the SOCR Director's term

On May 18, 2021, the Community Economic Development Committee (CED) will discuss and possibly vote on [Council Bill \(CB\) 120000](#) that would extend the Seattle Office for Civil Rights (SOCR) Director's term from December 31, 2021 to December 31, 2022. Councilmember Morales is sponsoring CB 120000. This memorandum will provide background explaining how the legislation came about and a description of the impacts of the bill.

Background

In 2017, Councilmembers heard a variety of concerns from stakeholders that SOCR's structure and authority within the Executive branch limited its ability to fulfill its mission. Central Staff examined the possibility of increasing SOCR's independence from the Executive branch as a potential way to address the challenges raised (see [Central Staff memo](#) for more detail). The Council decided to request SOCR conduct a racial equity toolkit (RET) on SOCR's structure and function. To ensure that the RET was insulated from any real or perceived undue influence, the Council passed [Ordinance 125470](#), which provided the next SOCR Director confirmed by Council with just cause removal protections and a limited term ending December 21, 2021. The bill also required that the future Mayor consult with SOCR staff and the SOCR commissions (the Seattle Women's Commission, the Seattle LGBTQ Commission, the Seattle Disability Commission, and the Human Rights Commission) about appointment and removal.

Though the Council intended to consider legislation regarding the permanent structure and design of SOCR, the Director's term, and appointment and removal provisions in 2018, the RET report was not ready for release until October 2019. Since the RET analysis began, the Council and Executive have taken steps towards implementing the recommendations, including adding staff and resources for increased outreach, commission support, and the Race and Social Justice Initiative. However, several report recommendations involve larger structural change rather than simply adding staffing and resources. During the Fall 2020 budget adoption process, the Council passed Statement of Legislative Intent OCR-002-A-003, requesting that a Council-convened work group review and determine how to implement remaining report recommendations. This work is ongoing.

CB 120000

CB 120000 would extend the term of the SOCR Director from December 31, 2021 to December 31, 2022. It would also remove the language added in Ordinance 125470 that asked the department to conduct an RET, as the RET is now complete.

CB 120000 would extend the Director's term for two primary reasons. First, any potential legislation resulting from the SLI is unlikely to take effect until late 2021 or early 2022; and any structural or functional transition implemented by the legislation will be made easier with the retention of a stable director position.

The second reason for extending the term relates to one of the indicia of increased independence – staggered terms with the appointing authority. The renewed Black Lives Matter protest movement in 2020 and racial inequities exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic have made the need to enhance SOCR's ability to advocate for anti-racism in Seattle's government even more urgent. Regardless of the outcome of the SLI, staggered terms could increase SOCR's ability to function more independently.

Please note that even if the SLI response does not recommend passage of legislation or structural or functional transition, Central Staff's understanding is that it is not the sponsoring Councilmember's intent to keep extending the Director's term until final legislation is decided upon, which could potentially take longer than currently estimated. Rather, CB 120000 includes a one-time extension to account for the time needed to deliver this specific SLI response.

Next Steps

If committee members recommend the legislation be passed, Full Council will likely vote on CB 120000 on May 24, 2021.

cc: Dan Eder, Interim Director