



Legislation Text

File #: CB 120957, Version: 1

CITY OF SEATTLE

ORDINANCE _____

COUNCIL BILL _____

AN ORDINANCE relating to publicly-financed election campaigns; providing for the submission to the qualified electors of the City at an election to be held on August 5, 2025, of a proposition authorizing the City to levy regular property taxes for up to ten years in excess of the limitation on levies in chapter 84.55 RCW for the purpose of funding the cost and administration of the City’s Democracy Voucher program and other City purposes; outlining a process for contemplation of changes to the program; applying RCW 84.36.381’s senior citizens and disabled persons exemption to such levy; and ratifying and confirming certain prior acts.

WHEREAS, in November 2015, Seattle voters approved Initiative 122, a people’s initiative designed to build

“honest elections in the City...by: giving more people an opportunity to have their voices heard in our democracy”; and

WHEREAS, Initiative 122 also created “a Democracy Voucher campaign public finance program...to expand

the pool of candidates for city offices and to safeguard the people’s control of the elections process in Seattle”; and

WHEREAS, the levy backing the Democracy Voucher campaign public finance program began in 2015 and

lasted for ten years; and

WHEREAS, the Democracy Voucher program has been successful and popular, with more than 105,000

Seattleites using Democracy Vouchers to contribute to candidates for City office since the program’s inception; and

WHEREAS, Seattle has had among the highest rates of people contributing to local candidates in the country

since the program’s inception; and

WHEREAS, The City of Seattle intends to place a levy proposal on the August 5, 2025, primary election ballot

to replace the expiring levy that has supported the Democracy Voucher program, in order to continue to provide financial support for the program for the next ten years; and

WHEREAS, after ten years of use, changes to the Democracy Voucher campaign public finance program may be desired; and

WHEREAS, this legislation requests the Executive, the City Council, and the Ethics and Elections Commission to commence a stakeholder process beginning in 2026 (after the November 2025 general election) to consider any potential changes to the Democracy Voucher campaign public finance program, and to make recommendations to the Mayor and City Council regarding those changes; NOW, THEREFORE,

BE IT ORDAINED BY THE CITY OF SEATTLE AS FOLLOWS:

Section 1. Definitions. As used in this ordinance:

"City" means The City of Seattle.

"Democracy Voucher program funding" means not less than \$45,000,000 of the increased levy amount over ten years resulting from the proposition's passage.

"Levy proceeds" means that portion of regular property taxes levied and collected as authorized by voter approval pursuant to this ordinance, and all interest and other earnings thereon, and, if the City issues bonds, notes, interfund loans, or other evidences of indebtedness payable wholly or in part from the additional taxes authorized under this ordinance, as permitted by Section 4 of this ordinance, then "levy proceeds" also includes the proceeds of those bonds, notes, interfund loans, or other evidences of indebtedness.

Section 2. Levy of regular property taxes submittal. The City submits to the qualified electors of the City a proposition as authorized by RCW 84.55.050 to exceed the levy limitation on regular property taxes contained in RCW 84.55.010 for property taxes levied in 2025 through 2034 for collection in 2026 through 2035 respectively. The proposition shall be limited so that the City shall not levy more than a total tax rate of \$2.27 per \$1,000 of assessed value in the first year, representing an additional tax rate of \$0.015 per \$1,000 of assessed value in the first year. The proposition is expected to raise approximately \$45,000,000 in aggregate

over ten years for Democracy Voucher program funding purposes. The levy amount in the first year shall be used to determine subsequent years' allowable regular levy limit in accordance with chapter 84.55 RCW. Amounts collected in excess of the Democracy Voucher program funding amount are available for other City purposes for which the City's regular levy may be applied. In accordance with RCW 84.36.381 and RCW 84.55.050, the City will exempt seniors, veterans with disabilities, or other persons with disabilities who qualify under RCW 84.36.381 from the increased levy amount resulting from the proposition's passage. Pursuant to RCW 84.55.050(4), the maximum regular property taxes that may be levied in 2035 for collection in 2036 and in later years shall be computed as if the limit on regular property taxes had not been increased under this ordinance.

Section 3. Deposit of levy proceeds. Unless otherwise directed by ordinance, Democracy Voucher program funding shall be deposited in the Election Vouchers Fund to fund the Democracy Voucher program. The levy proceeds may be temporarily deposited or invested in such manner as may be lawful for the investment of City money and all investment earnings on Democracy Voucher program funding shall be deposited in the Election Vouchers Fund. The Director of Finance is authorized to create other accounts within the Elections Vouchers Fund as may be needed or appropriate to implement the purposes of this ordinance.

Section 4. Bond and notes. To the extent permitted by applicable law, the City may issue bonds, notes, or other evidences of indebtedness payable wholly or in part from the additional taxes authorized under this ordinance, and may pledge and may apply such taxes to the payment of principal of, interest on, and premium (if any) on such bonds, notes, or other evidences of indebtedness and to the payment of costs associated with them.

Section 5. Use of levy proceeds. The Democracy Voucher program funding amount shall be used solely for the Democracy Voucher campaign public finance program in accordance with the provisions in Section 6 of this ordinance and in accordance with RCW 84.55.050. If levy collections exceed the Democracy Voucher program funding amount, the excess funds are available for City purposes for which the City's regular levy may

be applied.

Section 6. Democracy Voucher campaign public finance program. The Democracy Voucher campaign public finance program includes costs for administering the program as well as the cost of supporting the campaign contributions backed by Democracy Vouchers. Administrative costs include items such as voucher printing and mailing, staff, outreach, and King County Elections voucher processing costs.

Section 7. Workgroup process. The Executive, the City Council, and the Ethics and Elections Commission are requested to convene a workgroup in early 2026 to recommend to the Mayor and City Council improvements to the Democracy Voucher campaign public finance program, including addressing the impact of Political Action Committees in City elections. The stakeholder process should include input from candidates, campaign staff, professional elections consultants, good government advocates, and the Executive Director and members of the Ethics and Elections Commission.

Section 8. Reporting. The Executive Director of the Ethics and Elections Commission will prepare and submit to the City Council and the Mayor a progress report on levy spending and project and program delivery after each year in which the voucher program is utilized in an election.

Section 9. Election ballot title. The City Council directs that the City Clerk file this ordinance with the Director of Elections of King County, Washington, as ex officio supervisor of elections, requesting that the Director of Elections call and conduct a special election in the City in conjunction with the primary election to be held on August 5, 2025, for the purpose of submitting to the qualified electors of the City the proposition set forth in this ordinance. The City Clerk is directed to certify to the King County Director of Elections the ballot title approved by the City Attorney in accordance with the City Attorney's responsibilities under RCW 29A.36.071. The following ballot title containing a statement of subject and concise description is submitted to the City Attorney for consideration:

CITY OF SEATTLE

PROPOSITION NO. 1

The Mayor and Seattle City Council passed Ordinance XXXX, concerning replacing funding for Seattle's Democracy Voucher campaign public finance program.

If approved, this proposition would replace an expiring levy to fund the City's Democracy Voucher campaign public finance program, including the costs of administering the program.

It authorizes a ten-year levy for collection beginning in 2026 of an additional \$0.015/\$1,000 assessed value, for a maximum total levy rate of \$2.27/\$1,000. The 2026 amount will be the base for subsequent levies through 2035. RCW 84.36.381's senior citizens and disabled persons exemption applies.

Should this levy be approved?

Yes

No

Section 10. Section titles. Section titles are for convenient reference only and do not modify or limit the text of a section.

Section 11. Severability. The provisions of this ordinance are declared to be separate and severable. The invalidity of any clause, sentence, paragraph, subdivision, section, or portion of this ordinance, or the invalidity of its application to any person or circumstance, does not affect the validity of the remainder of this ordinance or the validity of its application to other persons or circumstances, including the validity of authorizing additional taxes by levy.

Section 12. Any act consistent with the authority of this ordinance taken after its passage and prior to its effective date is ratified and confirmed.

Section 13. Those portions of this ordinance providing for the submission of a ballot proposition to the voters shall take effect and be in force 30 days after its approval by the Mayor, but if not approved and returned by the Mayor within ten days after presentation, it shall take effect as provided by Seattle Municipal Code Sections 1.04.020 and 1.04.070. Those portions of this ordinance that are dependent upon voter approval of said

ballot proposition shall take effect in accordance with applicable law.

Passed by the City Council the _____ day of _____, 2025, and signed by
me in open session in authentication of its passage this _____ day of _____, 2025.

President _____ of the City Council

Approved / returned unsigned / vetoed this ____ day of _____, 2025.

Bruce A. Harrell, Mayor

Filed by me this _____ day of _____, 2025.

Scheereen Dedman, City Clerk

(Seal)