
**State Government, Elections &
Information Technology Committee**

HB 1535

Brief Description: Addressing county commissioner elections.

Sponsors: Representatives Riccelli, Ormsby and Tharinger.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Requires noncharter counties with a population at or over 400,000 to conduct district-based elections for commissioner positions, beginning in 2022.
- Allows other noncharter counties to choose by ordinance of county vote to conduct district-based commissioner elections.

Hearing Date: 2/7/17

Staff: Sean Flynn (786-7124).

Background:

The Washington Constitution broadly sets out the form of county government, including the establishment of county commissions as the governing body of the county. Counties also may adopt their own form of government by county charter. The Legislature may proscribe the election, terms of office, and duties of the noncharter county commissioners, as well as other county officials.

Under state law, noncharter county commissions are comprised of a three-member board, elected on a partisan basis to four-year staggered terms. Noncharter counties with populations over 300,000 may choose to increase the number of commissioners from three to five, if approved by the voters at a general election. Currently, only Spokane County fits within this category.

Each county is divided into districts to correspond with the number of commissioner positions. Each commissioner district must have approximately the same population. Candidates for each

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commissioner position are nominated in a district-based primary by voters from the district. Qualifying candidates from all districts then run in a countywide general election, with voters of the entire county electing the commissioners for each commissioner position.

The county commissioners may redistrict their districts after each decennial federal census, in order to readjust the population equivalence of each district. The county commissioners must provide public notice and hold at least one public hearing before adopting any redistricting plan.

Summary of Bill:

District-Based Elections - Mandatory

Beginning in 2022, each noncharter county with a population at or over 400,000 must provide district-based general elections, where voters within each commission district elect the commissioner from their district. Any commissioner with over one year left on his or her term by the end of 2022 is subject to the new election. The initial term of one of the commissioner positions at the first election must be a two-year term, in order to implement staggered terms. A noncharter county that changes to a five-member county commission must provide district-based elections.

Before conducting the new elections system in 2022, the county must adopt a new redistricting plan in that same year. The plan requires the formation of a five-member redistricting committee to approve the redistricting plan. The committee must appoint a districting master to create the plan within 45 days of his or her appointment. The committee must adopt or amend the plan after holding a public meeting. The redistricting plan becomes effective the following even-numbered year.

District-Based Elections - Optional

Any non-charter county with a population under 400,000 may elect to change to district-based elections for county commissioners. The change may be adopted by ordinance or through a voter initiative. A petition for a voter initiative must be at least 10 percent of the votes cast in the last general election, with at least 20 percent of the petition including residents from each commissioner district. Upon adoption of a district-based election system, the county must redistrict the county in the same method used for counties required to adopt district-based elections in 2022.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Requested on January 25, 2017.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.