



Jessica Vega Pederson Multnomah County Commissioner

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Dear Multnomah County Charter Review Committee members:

Thank you for receiving my written testimony on the recommendations being considered by the Multnomah County Charter Review Committee. I wanted to follow up on my oral testimony and share some thoughts I wasn't able to share at the June 15th, 2022 whole committee meeting.

As you all know, a county's home rule charter is its constitution. It contains important rights, principles, and responsibilities. So amending it is not something to be taken lightly. As this committee likely knows, the Oregon constitution in many ways is a mess of very specific policies now enshrined in the constitution due to special interests using the initiative process to their own narrow advantage. You see this in property tax limitations and gas tax limitations that now tie the hands of local and state officials in ways that have serious consequences for how our state is run. I know you'll be mindful of that as you consider changes to our county charter.

Expanding Voting Rights

When it comes to elections, I'm very open to expanding our elections to non-citizens, and I've looked at doing so for non-citizens. My office has met with Samantha Gladu to discuss the recommendation put forth by the Equitable Representation Subcommittee, and I appreciate the thought that has gone into this recommendation. I support amending our County Charter to allow noncitizens to participate in our democratic process. We have one of the best Elections divisions in the nation, capable of expanding who we serve during elections.

Jail Inspections by Board of Commissioners

1. How would the commissioner describe the purpose of the current inspections of county correctional facilities?

I would say that the purpose of the inspections is to familiarize the board with the facilities of the jails; the operations of the jails, including the process by which someone is brought into the jails; the programming and services offered; to meet with and understand the organization of the staff; learn about the medical services and processes delivered by Corrections Health, and to converse with Corrections leadership on the main issues and challenges the jails are facing, for example, staffing challenges, impact of the protests on jail staff and facilities, shut down of court operations during COVID on jail population, etc.

2. What information is typically provided to the board during these inspections?

See above. I would say that these tours are an opportunity to begin conversations in these areas, which then the board in its capacity to oversee the operations of the county, can dive into more detail and/or do follow up through board briefings, one on ones with corrections leadership, including the sheriff, or outreach with other partners in the public safety system.

3. Is there a report or some other form of public communication that happens after the board inspects correctional facilities to educate the public about the board's observations?

There isn't a report produced after the tours but there is a lot of public information, including the board meetings where corrections topics are discussed and the monthly jail report (please let me know if you haven't seen this and would like a copy) that are available to the public.

I think a report summarizing the tour and the issues discussed after a tour that's available to the public on a county website would be a good thing.

4. Does the commissioner/chair think the inspections could be improved or expanded? If so, how?

The sheriffs office has always been very open about hearing what the board is interested in learning about or observing prior to our tours. I've always gotten the sense that they strive to make these tours as informative to us as possible. The nature of these visits is very structured and I would characterize them more as thorough tours than inspections. Our visits happen during the day, and I think an improvement would be to have a visit during the evening or night time hours to observe the differences in operations.

I also think it would be good to have some kind of tie in between the board's visit, the work of the grand jury panel in reviewing jail operations, and information presented in the monthly jail reports. A requirement of a briefing to the board on the findings of the grand jury panel and follow up items from the jail tour would be more impactful than an additional tour of the jail, in my opinion.

5. What does the commissioner think about the requirement to do four inspections a year with three constituents?

I think four inspections a year is too many, and wouldn't yield more or better information than one or two visits a year. For me, I would like to get a sense of what the charter committee is trying to achieve by having more visits and see if we could reach the same outcome by changing the way the visits happen or adding something, like a report, instead of increasing the number of visits to four. If the charter committee feels strongly about adding another tour, I would recommend adding one more and request that one take place during evening hours.

The charter committee should know that members of the board normally go on a separate tour of the jails with a representative from the Corrections Deputies union. So in 2022, I have already visited the jails two times. Visiting with a corrections deputy yields different information and insights about the jails and their operation which I find very valuable. This tour happens 1:1 with a commissioner and union representative and is a great chance for deeper conversation about what's happening in the jails.

I do think having constituents join would be a great addition. I'm hesitant to put a number into the charter requiring three constituents. Perhaps something more flexible like at least one constituent would be better. I wouldn't want to be in a situation where a tour would have to be delayed or canceled if we weren't able to have three constituents attend with each board member.

Public Financing (for the consideration of a future Charter Review Committee)

The county's charter review process has often been a testing ground for ideas, like campaign finance, which we have implemented and are learning from. The campaign finance limits are intended to level the playing field of who can contribute to a political campaign. Having gone through this past election cycle under those limits, I do have some suggestions gained through my experience.

First, the same limit of a \$500 contribution applies to someone running for a district seat, which has less than 150,000 voters, and to someone running for a countywide seat, offices with over 570,000 voters. Having run both countywide and in a single district, I know it costs more to run a campaign countywide than in a district. But as it stands provisions that differentiate between the two situations are not in the charter, and perhaps should be reconsidered.

Second, campaign finance limitation without *public financing* makes it much more difficult to effectively communicate with voters in a campaign. I think it will be important to pair contribution limits with public financing, as the city has done, perhaps with a small donor match program. Because it can be difficult to raise sufficient funds to communicate with voters in a meaningful way. And we've seen in this past election cycle that wealthy candidates can still self-finance their campaign with ten of thousands of dollars in contributions to their own campaign.

Public financing would help level the playing field, as I assume the campaign finance limitations were originally intended to do. This may not need to be done in the charter, but in county code at some point in the future. This year, I have put forward a budget amendment to start looking at the county initiating a public campaign finance program.

Finally, campaign finance limitations are currently written in the charter with per election cycle, with election cycle defined as "the period between an election at which a candidate is elected and the next election for that same office, disregarding any intervening primary or nominating election, any recall election, or any special election called to fill a vacancy." The part of that refers to "disregarding an intervening primary" means that limitations apply to both the May and November elections. In practice if someone donated at the full limit for a May election, they are not allowed to donate anything for the November election. As a candidate, I must pay staff, and communicate to voters. I don't know if this charter review committee has the ability to make these changes to campaign finance rules this time around. However, I strongly encourage some fine tuning of the program to be considered for the *next* charter review committee.

I know this committee will think strategically, wisely, and humbly, and with the long term vision in mind as you consider your work. Again, thank you for your commitment and your work. I'd be happy to answer any questions you have. And I'm also happy to engage in conversation with any committee members who might want to follow up on my comments.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jessica Vega Pederson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Commissioner Jessica Vega Pederson
Multnomah County, District 3