

Recommendation:

Background

City Council Resolution 20230309-025 establishing the 2024 Charter Review Commission indicated City Council's intent to hold an election in November 2024 to allow voters to decide on several important changes to the charter including *"changes to petition requirements for initiative and referendum or City Charter amendments including (...) Use of a durable signature threshold that utilizes a percentage of the total number of registered voters in the City."*

Among the reasons cited for this change, the Resolution stated:

"WHEREAS, in November 2012, voters approved a Charter amendment to change the number of required signatures for initiative and referendum petitions to be equal to the number of signatures required by state law to initiate a Charter amendment: 5% of qualified voters or 20,000, whichever number is smaller, and this change resulted in petitioners needing fewer than half the number of signatures than before;"

and

"WHEREAS, in 2012, when the change was made, 20,000 signatures was 4% of qualified voters, but this fixed number represents a steadily decreasing percentage of Austin voters as the City's population continues to grow;"

and

"WHEREAS, an October 2019 report by the City Auditor regarding citizen initiatives to amend the City Code noted that most peer cities require more signatures for citizen initiatives than Austin and that only Austin provides for a set number of signatures required or a percentage requirement, whichever is smaller".

The Charter Review Commission established the Petition Process Working Group on October 2nd, 2023. Its membership consisted of Commissioners Cowles, Dwyer, Greenberg, McGivern and Van Maanen.

This recommendation was presented to the full Commission on XX/XX/XXXX. It was adopted/rejected by a X-X vote.

Substance of the Proposed Amendments, Revisions or Repeals to the Charter

This recommendation sets a durable signature threshold for the approval of citizen initiative and referendum petitions at 3.5% of qualified Austin voters.

The Charter Review Commission recommends amending Article IV, § 1 by replacing the current language:

“Any initiated ordinance may be submitted to the council by a petition signed by qualified voters of the city equal in number to the number of signatures required by state law to initiate an amendment to this Charter.”

with the following amended language:

“Any initiated ordinance may be submitted to the council by a petition signed by three and a half percent of qualified voters of the city.”

and amending Article IV, § 2 by replacing the current language:

“a petition signed by qualified voters of the city equal in number to the number of signatures required by state law”

with the following amended language:

“a petition signed by three and a half percent of qualified voters of the city”.

Policy Reasons for the Recommendation

This recommendation provides a durable threshold for the approval of petitions that retains its value over time by accounting for the continued growth of Austin’s population.

At this time, a 3.5% threshold roughly aligns to the current effective threshold of 20,000 signatures, and so does not unduly burden petitioners.

Estimated Fiscal Budgetary Impact for the Recommendation

No fiscal impact is anticipated.

Impact of the Recommendation on Existing City Laws, Rules, Practices and Procedures

The recommendation requires two amendments to Article IV of the Charter. Additionally, City staff and Council may need to develop or change procedures and/or ordinances to harmonize their processes in accordance with the Charter recommendation.

Proposed Ballot Language

“Shall the city change the number of signatures required to validate petitions for citizen-initiated changes to the municipal code from 20,000 to 3.5% of qualified voters?”

Alternative Implementation Options

Given that this proposal directly conflicts with current City Charter language, no alternative implementation options are available.