

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HB 1554

As Reported By House Committee On:
Government Operations

Title: An act relating to citizen participation in the discussion of public issues.

Brief Description: Creating the citizen councilor program.

Sponsors: Representatives Reams, Jacobsen, L. Thomas, Dellwo, Robertson, Valle, Van Luven, Kremen, Chopp, Scott, Cole, Thibaudeau, Wolfe, Ebersole, Poulsen and Costa.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Government Operations: 2/24/95, 2/28/95, 3/1/95 [DPS].

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 8 members: Representatives Reams, Chairman; Goldsmith, Vice Chairman; L. Thomas, Vice Chairman; Chopp; Honeyford; D. Schmidt; Van Luven and Wolfe.

Minority Report: Do not pass. Signed by 7 members: Representatives Rust, Ranking Minority Member; Scott, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; R. Fisher; Hargrove; Hymes; Mulliken and Sommers.

Staff: Bonnie Austin (786-7135).

Background: The State Center for Volunteerism and Citizen Service within the Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development was established to: Provide information about volunteer programs to volunteers and organizations; facilitate the involvement of business, industry, government, and labor in community service and betterment; and sponsor recognition events for outstanding individuals and organizations. The center is assisted by a Council on Volunteerism and Citizen Service whose members are appointed by the Governor.

Some parties believe that citizen alienation from the political process can be alleviated if citizens are well-informed and are given a meaningful and convenient way to participate in political decisions beyond the traditional public hearing process.

Summary of Substitute Bill: Citizen Councilors. The Office of Citizen Councilor in the Department of Community, Trade, and Economic Development (CTED) is created. Any citizen registered to vote may become a citizen councilor on request by sending a letter to CTED or calling a special toll-free number, and paying a \$10 to \$15 fee. Citizen councilors act collectively as official advisors and a sounding board for public officials and agencies and legislative study committees on issues of public interest or concern. Conveners of citizen councilor groups are those designated by the Citizen Councilor Coordinator (coordinator) or deputy coordinator from among citizen councilors who volunteer to host a group. A citizen councilor may participate in a citizen councilor organizational group, a citizen councilor group usually organized by residence or work area zip code, or as an individual.

Issues and Materials. CTED will recommend suggested issues for consideration by citizen councilors to a steering committee. The steering committee is composed of four voting members, one member of the minority and one member of the majority party from each house of the Legislature. Other nonvoting members of the steering committee are: a representative from the Governor's Office; a representative from any organization participating with over 50 groups of eight to 12 persons; and the coordinator and deputy coordinator. In the case of a tie, the coordinator or deputy coordinator may vote.

CTED must assign the issue or issues approved for discussion by the steering committee to the coordinator for preparation and implementation by value reporters and others. Value reporters assigned to gather information on issues must be careful to present all issues as evenhandedly as possible. Value reporters are to conduct interviews of experts, officials, and others to solicit their various viewpoints and record such interviews on audio or video tape for later reproduction and distribution to citizen councilor groups.

CTED must approve the public information materials prepared by the citizen councilor coordinator and authorize their distribution to citizen councilors.

Coordinator. The offices of Citizen Councilor Coordinator and Deputy Citizen Councilor Coordinator are created within CTED. The director of CTED appoints the coordinator and deputy coordinator with the advice and consent of the steering committee. The coordinator and deputy coordinator serve at the pleasure of the director and the steering committee and serve without compensation except reimbursement for actual expenses incurred in carrying out their duties.

The coordinator and deputy coordinator are required to: Promote the Citizen Councilor Program; oversee the preparation, tabulation, summarization, and dissemination of data and information by the volunteer staff; employ a value reporter and other paid staff to assist the volunteer staff; contract for services; solicit

volunteers to assist in administering the program; solicit citizen councilor groups from existing organizations; solicit individual citizen councilors to participate in local groups; assign value reporters to conduct interviews; mail public information materials to citizen councilor conveners and individual citizen councilors; scan or tabulate citizen councilor response sheets; prepare summary reports of data generated and press releases; mail summary reports and other information to all citizen councilors, conveners, and participating organizations; and maintain data generated for public and media reference.

The department may provide the coordinator and the volunteer staff with space in existing offices and with clerical services from existing staff to assist in establishing and conducting the Citizen Councilor Program.

Groups. The coordinator must encourage citizen councilor groups to form throughout the state. These groups are to consist of eight to 12 regularly assigned members and meet on call of their convener. The groups are normally to meet three or four times per year on state issues. Members of the group may respond to issues anonymously making their opinions known on individual mark-sense response sheets for return to the citizen councilor coordinator for analysis. Eight to 12 citizens from existing organizations may enroll as an organizational group with their own convener designated.

Funding. Each citizen councilor shall be asked to make donations estimated at \$10 to \$15 per year to help cover the costs of the citizen councilor program. Program expenses may not exceed available funds. The coordinator and deputy coordinator may receive gifts and donations.

A Citizen Councilor Revolving Fund is created. It consists of donations and any moneys appropriated to it by law for specific purposes. The State Treasurer is the custodian of the fund. The coordinator may authorize disbursements from the revolving fund; no appropriation is required.

The Citizen Councilor Program expires June 30, 1999.

Substitute Bill Compared to Original Bill: The intent section is rewritten. Provisions are deleted specifying procedures for high school student and SPI involvement, authorizing governmental units to purchase mailing labels, and requiring participation by state officials.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date of Substitute Bill: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Testimony For: This program would be the first state program of its kind in the nation. The city of Redmond has used this process since 1990 and citizen participation has increased. Trust in government has gone from over 75 percent in 1964 to less than 20 percent in 1994. This process will allow citizens to become more involved in the political process. This program is self-funded by fees and donations.

Testimony Against: The legislative process is not broken and does not need to be fixed. There are many sources for legislative news information. This bill establishes a process that will allow unelected representatives (citizen counselors) to have more input than regular citizens. It adds to the bureaucracy, will cost money, and adds to agency workload.

Testified: Jim Spady, Forum Foundation; and Pari Johnson, citizen.