

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 5319

As Reported By Senate Committee On:
State & Local Government, February 3, 1999

Title: An act relating to voting for port commissioners.

Brief Description: Requiring the creation of five commissioner districts for port districts with a population of one million or more.

Sponsors: Senators McCaslin, Patterson, Heavey, Haugen, Kline and Roach.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: State & Local Government: 1/27/99, 2/3/99 [DP].

SENATE COMMITTEE ON STATE & LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Majority Report: Do pass.

Signed by Senators Patterson, Chair; Haugen, Kline and McCaslin.

Staff: Diane Smith (786-7410)

Background: Port districts are authorized to acquire, build, maintain, operate, develop, and regulate the commercial transportation, transfer, storage, handling, and terminal facilities and industrial improvements within the district. They are formed by a vote of county voters. They may encompass the whole county or only part of the county. The powers of the port district are exercised by either three or five elected port commissioners. Port districts must be divided into commissioner districts when the district is not coextensive with the county boundaries and the county has a population of 500,000 or more. When the district has three commissioner positions, is coextensive with the county boundary, the county has a population less than 500,000, and there are three county legislative authority districts, then the port commissioner districts are the same as the county legislative authority districts.

Commissioner districts are used as a residency requirement to determine the eligibility of candidates for port commissioner and to limit the voters who may vote for primary candidates to only those voters of the commissioner district. In the general election, all voters of the district may vote for commissioners from all districts which is termed an election at large.—

Summary of Bill: Every port district with a population of one million or more is divided into five commissioner districts and has five commissioners. The commissioners are nominated and elected by district. The currently elected commissioners serve out their terms unaffected by the bill, except that they represent their respective commissioner districts, not the port district as a whole. The port commissioners may submit to the voters of the port district the option to return to election of the commissioners at large.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Not requested.

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

Testimony For: The port has the authority to levy property taxes without a vote of the people yet no one but the Seattle Chamber of Commerce has a say on what projects the port undertakes. Rural areas are not represented by an at-large election in a district as big as the Port of Seattle. One area can elect the whole commission. With each commissioner representing 1,600,000 people, they lose contact with individual voters and respond to the whim of large factions. The port has provided a return on assets on only 0.3 percent. The bill promotes participation and representative democracy.

Testimony Against: This bill has been introduced every year for the last eight or nine years. It was the Legislature that gave ports at-large elections in the 1960s after 50 years of district elections. The Legislature went to at-large elections because the port could not make quick decisions and was torn by district rivalries. District elections are good for general governments but not for ports that have to concentrate resources in a couple areas: the airport and waterfront. Local projects for local areas– is the antithesis of what a port should do. Ports need a countywide and statewide view.

Testified: PRO: Chuck Savage, Common Cause WA State; Dan Caldwell, Des Moines Chamber of Commerce; Jim Bartlemay; Clark Dodge; Al Furney; CON: Terry Finn, Port of Seattle; Dana Childers, Greater Seattle Chamber of Commerce.