

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 5370

As Reported by Senate Committee On:
Local Government, February 6, 2025

Title: An act relating to lengthening port commissioner terms.

Brief Description: Lengthening port commissioner terms.

Sponsors: Senators Harris, Chapman, Krishnadasan, Lovelett and Nobles.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Local Government: 2/03/25, 2/06/25 [DPS].

Brief Summary of First Substitute Bill

- Allows port district commissioner terms to be increased from four to six years through a ballot proposition.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Majority Report: That Substitute Senate Bill No. 5370 be substituted therefor, and the substitute bill do pass.

Signed by Senators Salomon, Chair; Lovelett, Vice Chair; Torres, Ranking Member; Bateman and Goehner.

Staff: Rohan Bhattacharjee (786-7534)

Background: Washington has 75 port districts which are independent government entities run by elected port commissioners. The port commissioners establish long-term strategies for a port district, and create policies to guide the development, growth, and operation of the port. They are also responsible for a port's annual budgets, approving tax levy rates, and hiring the professional staff members responsible for a port's daily functions.

Commissioners of a port district are elected to either four- or six-year terms. In every

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countywide port district with a population of 100,000 or more, the term of office of each port commissioner is four years. If there are five port commissioners, they hold office for four years.

For a port district with six-year terms of office, the port commissioners or the voters of the district may by resolution or petition, submit a ballot proposition to reduce the terms of port commissioners from six years to four years. The petition of the voters must be signed by at least 10 percent of the voters of the district voting in the last general election. The petition must be submitted to the county auditor.

If the petition has sufficient valid signatures, the ballot proposition is submitted at the next general election that occurs 60 or more days after the adoption of the resolution or submission of the petition. If the ballot proposition is approved by a simple majority vote, the port commissioner or commissioners elected at that election would be elected to four-year terms of office. The terms of office of existing port commissioners will not be reduced, but each successor would be elected to a four-year term.

Most port districts have three port commissioners serving six-year terms. There are seven port districts with three port commissioners serving four-year terms.

Summary of Bill (First Substitute): This bill allows port commissioners or the voters of a port district with four-year terms of office, by resolution or petition, to submit a ballot proposition to increase the terms of office of port commissioners from four years to six years. The petition of the voters must be signed by at least 10 percent of the voters of the district voting in the last general election and then submitted to the county auditor.

If the petition has sufficient valid signatures, the ballot proposition must be submitted at the next general election that occurs 60 or more days after the adoption of the resolution or submission of the petition. If the ballot proposition is approved by a simple majority vote, the port commissioner or commissioners elected at that election would be elected to six-year terms of office. The terms of office of existing port commissioners will not be lengthened, but each successor would be elected to a six-year term.

If two commissioners are elected in that election or the next subsequent general election, the commissioner receiving the highest number of votes is elected to a six-year term of office and the other commissioner is elected to a four-year term of office. Each successor commissioner is elected to six-year terms.

EFFECT OF CHANGES MADE BY LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE (First Substitute):

- Clarifies that the commissioners are elected to different lengths of terms if two commissioners are on the ballot in the same election, to ensure staggered terms.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Creates Committee/Commission/Task Force that includes Legislative members: No.

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

Staff Summary of Public Testimony on Original Bill: *The committee recommended a different version of the bill than what was heard.* PRO: The need to prevent excessive turnover in port district leadership is emphasized. In districts with four-year terms, two-thirds of the commission could be replaced in a single election cycle, disrupting ongoing projects and creating leadership gaps. Six-year terms, already used in most port districts, provide stability, ensure continuity for long-term infrastructure and economic development projects, and maintain institutional knowledge, especially in smaller communities where it can be difficult to recruit candidates. The bill would not automatically change term lengths but would enable districts to put the decision before voters through a ballot proposition.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Senator Paul Harris, Prime Sponsor; Eric ffitch, Washington Public Ports Association; John Spencer, Port of Camas-Washougal; Rick Hoffman, Port of Lopez.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: No one.