

Multnomah County Ballot Measure 26-234

Official Title: Amends charter: establishes ombudsperson function in county auditor's office

Question: Should Charter establish ombudsperson function in Auditor's office to impartially investigate complaints about County administrative actions, make reports requiring response?

Financial Impact: Unclear. The Charter amendment does not stipulate whether the position is full- or part-time, what the pay and benefits would be, nor how the office would be staffed. Minimum salary for the Portland Ombudsperson is \$84,656 per year; minimum salary for the Portland Deputy Ombudsperson is \$66,872.

Probable Results of "Yes" Vote: A new ombudsperson position would be established in the County Auditor's office to take complaints from constituents and report its investigations.

Probable Results of "No" Vote: No new position would be established. Complaints from the public would continue to be directed to the Commissioners, Chair and relevant County offices.

Background: This measure arose from a proposal by the County Auditor, and the language reflects that of the Portland City Charter, which also establishes the ombuds function in the City Auditor's office. The ombudsperson would report to the County Auditor and respond to complaints from the public. On receiving a complaint, the Ombudsperson would investigate and report its findings to the Auditor. The County Chair, Board of Commissioners or other relevant officials would describe in writing what actions, if any, were taken in response.

In testimony, the Portland Ombudsperson noted several examples of investigations undertaken by her office. These include inquiries into a sobering station that was reported to be unsafe, the City's emergency response to a house fire, and lead dust in a home demolition. In each case, she also noted the City's action in addressing the problems investigators presented. In describing her office's work, the Portland Ombudsperson noted, "An ombuds seeks justice for individual community members while pressing for systemic change when patterns of unfairness emerge through complaints."

Summary of Measure: This measure establishes an ombuds function in the office of the County Auditor. The ombudsperson would take complaints from the public, investigate and then report on its findings. The measure also requires that the County Chair or other official respond in writing and detail actions taken in response. According to the measure's explanatory statement, the ombudsperson would not investigate

- actions of an elected official or the official's personal staff
- any issues in litigation
- issues subject to collective bargaining agreement grievances,
- any violations of personnel rules
- accusations of discrimination from an employee or job applicant

Supporters Say:

- According to Margie Sollinger, Portland Ombudsperson, "Every level of government should have an ombuds office. This is especially true for governmental entities, like the County, that provide services to vulnerable and disenfranchised populations, such as people who are incarcerated, experiencing houselessness, receiving behavioral health services, or living in residential care settings, etc."
- Even good governments can make mistakes. In these cases, an ombudsperson will take constituents' complaints seriously and advocate for solutions that protect their rights.

Opponents Say:

- It's unclear that there are currently problems with personnel or systems that go unaddressed within the County.