



Legislation Text

File #: 2025-0070, **Version:** 4

AN ORDINANCE providing for the submission to the qualified electors of King County at a special election to be held in King County on August 5, 2025, of a proposition authorizing a property tax levy in excess of the levy limitation contained in chapter 84.55 RCW for a period of six consecutive years, at a total rate of not more than \$0.2329 per one thousand dollars of assessed valuation in the first year and limiting annual levy increases by the King County inflation plus population index published by the King County office of economic and financial analysis, or the chapter 84.55 RCW limitation, whichever is greater in years two through six for the purpose of maintaining and operating King County's open space system; improving parks, recreation, access, and mobility in King County by acquiring lands and continuing to develop and support parks, recreation facilities, and regional trails; improving parks and trails in and acquiring lands by metropolitan parks districts, towns and cities in King County; funding environmental education, maintenance and conservation programs at the Woodland Park Zoo; funding environmental education, maintenance and conservation programs at the Seattle Aquarium; funding development, maintenance, and programming for Seattle's Waterfront park; funding environmental and climate stewardship and education at Pacific Science Center; funding a capital project at Memorial Stadium; and funding capital improvements at public pools, for all King County residents.

STATEMENT OF FACTS:

1. King County owns and operates a system of regional and local parks and trails that consists of thirty-two thousand acres of parklands and more than one hundred eighty-five miles of regional trails. The county provides regional trails, regional recreational facilities, regional natural areas, regional parks, and local parks in unincorporated areas. Examples of regional and local county parks and trails include Marymoor park, Cougar Mountain Regional Wildland park, Steve Cox Memorial park, Dick Thurnau Memorial park, the Weyerhaeuser King County Aquatic Center, and the Sammamish River trail.
2. Parks, natural areas, and trails contribute to a high quality of life. A robust system of parks and trails provides: physical, social, and mental health benefits to individuals; economic opportunity through recreation and tourism; economic growth for private businesses that must attract and retain skilled workers; increased climate resilience; environmental benefits like clean water and healthy habitat; and cultural resource protection through open space conservation. King County's open space system provides all these benefits to King County residents and businesses.
3. Provision of urban green space, through parks or other investments such as street trees, is particularly important to achieve the benefits listed above. The addition of trees and plants to concrete-dominated urban areas can help reduce the higher ambient temperatures in those areas, which are anticipated to worsen as anthropogenic climate change progresses. That contributes to health and quality of life for nearby residents, in addition to providing additional capacity to sequester planet-warming greenhouse gases.
4. The 2002 Parks Business Transition Plan, adopted by the King County council and enacted by Ordinance 14509, became the blueprint for establishing the regional open space system we have today. Building on that blueprint, the county has adopted open space plans, which have

provided the framework guiding King County in the acquisition, planning, development, stewardship, maintenance, and management of its complex system of parks, regional trails, and acres of open space. The latest open space plan was updated in 2022 and adopted by Ordinance 19501.

5. In implementing the open space plan, the parks and recreation division of the department of natural resources and parks has successfully focused its lines of business on regional parks and trails, backcountry trails, natural areas, and local parks in unincorporated King County and has implemented business practices that generate revenue from park system assets by implementing or increasing user fees and establishing corporate and community partnerships that enhance park amenities and leverage public and private dollars to improve parks and increase access to parks.

6. Consistent with the recommendations of past parks-related task forces and community advisory committees, the county has sought voter-approved levies on four prior occasions: in 2003, enacted by Ordinance 14586, to provide maintenance and operating funding for the parks and recreation division for 2004 through 2007; in 2007, enacted by Ordinance 15759, to provide funding for maintenance and operations as well as funding for open space acquisition, regional trail development, the Woodland Park Zoo and for King County towns and cities for use in their open space acquisition and trail projects for 2008 through 2013; in 2013, enacted by Ordinance 17568, to provide funding for maintenance and operations as well as for open space acquisition, asset maintenance and improvement, parks and trails projects, the Woodland Park Zoo and for King County towns and cities to use for their parks and recreation for 2014 through 2019; and in 2019, enacted by Ordinance 18890, to provide funding for maintenance and operations as well as for open space acquisition, asset maintenance and improvement, parks and trails projects, the Woodland Park Zoo, the Seattle Aquarium, aquatic facilities, and for King County towns and cities to use for their parks and recreation for 2020 through 2025. Voters approved the funding

measures on all four occasions that they were on the ballot. The voter-approved levies have helped keep the open space system clean, safe, and open.

7. Tribal nations are comanagers with the county in managing our shared public lands, waters, and resources. The county recognizes that this relationship is informed and guided by the treaty rights, which many tribes exercise within King County. The department of natural resources and parks has undertaken many actions with tribes as comanagers in an effort to foster mutual respect, and establish regular and meaningful communication, cooperation, and consultation with tribal officials in developing and executing state and King County policies that have tribal implications. The county has an ongoing goal to strengthen the government-to-government relationship with tribes that share territory with and have interests in King County

8. The 2020 through 2025 voter-approved parks, trails, and open space replacement levy provides approximately eighty-five percent of the operating budget of the parks and recreation division, with approximately fifteen percent generated through business activities and entrepreneurial efforts. King County general fund support to the parks and recreation division was eliminated as of 2011.

9. The community partnerships and grants program enacted by Ordinance 14509 enhances parks amenities by partnering with parks and recreation organizations. Since the inception of the community partnership and grant program in 2003, more than seventy projects representing more than seventy million dollars' worth of new, enhanced, or preserved public recreation facilities have been completed, with only twenty-two million dollars of King County capital investment.

10. The Woodland Park Zoo received distributions from the past three voter-approved levies to supplement zoo operating revenue for education and conservation programs, horticulture and maintenance, and capital improvements. Levy proceeds distributed to the zoo provided

environmental education, programming and transportation focusing on accessibility for underserved areas, supported thousands of students-annually, and benefitted residents throughout King County. Levy proceeds also provided conservation and animal care for threatened Pacific Northwest species.

11. The Seattle Aquarium received distributions from the past voter-approved levy for capital costs for the Ocean Pavilion project to amplify the aquarium's existing global conservation efforts by bringing visitors face-to-face with tropical species native to the Coral Triangle and by housing approximately three thousand five hundred sustainably sourced tropical fish and invertebrates, including rays, sharks, mangroves, and up to thirty species of coral.

12. The Memorial Stadium project will create an innovative multi-purpose student and community events facility at Seattle Center. That transformative project will be led by Seattle Public Schools and the city of Seattle, providing an improved venue for local and regional sports and events.

13. The removal of the Alaskan Way Viaduct provided an unprecedented opportunity to create new green space in the heart of Seattle. The resulting waterfront park is a twenty-acre public space stretching from Belltown to Pioneer Square, providing the entire region lasting economic, social, and environmental benefits. Seattle's Waterfront park will link iconic attractions including Olympic Sculpture park, Pike Place Market, the Seattle Aquarium, the Colman Dock ferry terminal, Pioneer Square, stadiums, and surrounding neighborhoods.

14. King County towns and cities received funding from the past three voter-approved levies. In 2008 through 2013, towns and cities could use levy proceeds for open space and natural lands acquisition and development of town or city trail projects that supported connections to the regional trail system with distributions being contingent upon an equal or greater contribution of matching moneys from the recipient town or city for the same project. In the 2014 through 2019

and the 2020 through 2025 levies, types of uses for the distribution to King County towns and cities were broadened to provide flexibility and better meet the parks and recreation needs of cities.

15. Parks levy oversight committees were established to monitor the expenditures of the proceeds from the 2004 through 2007, 2008 through 2013, 2014 through 2019, and 2020 through 2025 levies. Annual committee review has concluded that the county has complied with all levy requirements.

16. During the 2008 through 2013, 2014 through 2019, and 2020 through 2025 levy periods, the process for developing, reviewing, and recommending potential conservation futures tax and parks levy acquisition projects has maximized acquisitions for open space, natural lands, and regional trail rights of way due to the similar objectives for the conservation futures tax and parks levy acquisition programs. Parks levy open space funding distributed to King County is a critical component of match for county applications for conservation futures tax funding. The process for conservation futures tax outlined in K.C.C. 26.12.010 maintains transparency, accessibility, and consistency of the distribution of conservation futures tax and parks levy acquisition funds for the public, stakeholder groups, government agencies, and officials.

17. King County is growing rapidly as a region. In 2024, King County's population increased by more than thirty thousand people; over the next ten years, the county is expected to grow by another two hundred fifty thousand people. Recent trend reports indicate that participation in outdoor recreation continues to grow, increasing by more than four percent nation-wide in 2023. More and more people are using King County parks and trails, which puts greater pressure on the system. As development increases to accommodate population growth, the risk of losing open space lands, including urban greenspaces throughout the county grows. Those valuable lands contribute to King County residents' high quality of life. The cost of land to accommodate

this growth and preserve open spaces is also increasing. Today is the opportune time to address future needs of residents by investing in our parks and trails and accelerating conservation of open space.

18. In King County, many communities have experienced a history of inequitable and limited regional investments in parks, recreation, and open space, limiting the ability of residents to lead healthy lives. Approximately five hundred thousand King County residents live without ready access to parks, recreation, and open spaces. There is a need to address disparities in access to parks, recreation, and open space for traditionally underserved areas and communities, including people with disabilities. This ordinance provides an opportunity to address parks and recreation needs of these traditionally underserved areas and communities, including people with disabilities.

19. Recognizing growth in population, increased use of parks and trails and the need to address disparities, to prepare the 2026 through 2031 levy, the parks and recreation division conducted outreach to obtain feedback on the current park system and future parks and recreation needs for all King County residents. In March and April 2024, parks and recreation division staff conducted twenty-one in-person and virtual community engagement events and hosted two online surveys across eight languages. Participants represented all geographic areas of the county including towns and cities, business, recreation, community, and environmental interests. More than four thousand eight hundred people across all nine King County Council districts participated in the surveys. Parks and recreation division staff also met with towns and cities, parks districts, and key partners to receive additional feedback about the levy.

20. Feedback from engagement events, online surveys, and meetings showed support for the King County open space system and defined measures of success. Four themes emerged as top priorities: safety and belonging; new parks, trails, recreation, and infrastructure; equity,

representation, inclusion, and access; and maintenance, repairs, and staffing. Feedback supported funding for King County towns' and cities' parks and recreation programs; expansion of the regional trails system; and natural lands conservation.

21. From January through July 2024, parks and recreation division staff convened a Community Advisory Committee tasked with recommending how to preserve King County's open space system of parks, trails, and natural areas and resource lands after the 2019 through 2025 levy expires. The Community Advisory Committee also advised staff about how best to meet the growing parks and recreation needs in King County and the region. Representing King County Boards, cities, non-profit organizations, community and environmental interests, businesses, and sports, the Community Advisory Committee met nine times to provide guidance on developing the 2026 through 2031 levy.

22. The King County executive took into consideration information obtained from this engagement, the region's growing population, increased use of parks and trails across King County, and the lack of parks, recreation, and open space in some communities, and has put forth this ordinance that acknowledges the changing landscape and the need to grow the open space system to keep up with regional demand. This ordinance is also consistent with the goals and priorities of past levy task forces.

23. This proposal would exempt low-income seniors, disabled veterans, and other people with disabilities from the regular property tax increase on their residences resulting from a levy authorized by this ordinance if they have been approved for an exemption under RCW 84.36.381.

BE IT ORDAINED BY THE COUNCIL OF KING COUNTY:

SECTION 1. Definitions. The definitions in this section apply throughout this ordinance unless the context clearly requires otherwise. For those definitions herein that contain terms not defined but include a

reference to the 2022 Open Space Plan adopted by Ordinance 19501, or the provisions of the Growth Management Act, chapter 36.70A RCW , then the definition or categorization found in the referenced document shall apply.

A. "Aquatic facilities grants program" means the program through which King County provides moneys to publicly owned pools for: capital improvement projects, including planning, feasibility studies, preconstruction and design, and construction; and major maintenance repair or replacement projects.

B. "Ballfield access and preservation grant program" means the program through which King County provides moneys to eligible entities to increase public access to ballfields.

C. "Community partnerships and grants program" means the program through which King County provides moneys to recreation-oriented groups, sports associations, and community-based organizations to undertake any combination of developing, operating, or maintaining a recreation facility or public park in unincorporated King County and King County towns and cities for public benefit.

D. "Conservation" means protection of natural areas, as defined in the county's open space plan, natural resource lands, categorized in RCW 36.70A.170, from development through fee or easement acquisition, restoration of natural functions, and administration of incentives for landowners that voluntarily preserve open space.

E. "Conservation futures tax program" means the program defined in K.C.C. chapter 26.12.

F. "Educational and civic venues" means the Woodland Park Zoo, Seattle Aquarium, Memorial Stadium, Seattle's Waterfront park, and Pacific Science Center.

G. "Get active/stay active grant program" means the program through which the King County council provides councilmanic grant awards for youth or amateur sport activities or facilities.

H. "Healthy community and parks grants program" means the program through which King County provides moneys to eligible entities in order to achieve equitable opportunities and access to parks and recreation for traditionally underserved areas and communities, including people with disabilities, located in

unincorporated King County and King County towns and cities.

I. "Levy" means the levy of regular property taxes for the specific purposes and term provided in this ordinance and authorized by the electorate in accordance with state law.

J. "Levy proceeds" means the principal amount of moneys raised by the levy, any interest earnings on the moneys, and the proceeds of any interim financing following authorization of the levy.

K. "Limit factor" means the most recent published King County office of economic and financial analysis King County inflation plus population index, or the limitation contained in chapter 84.55 RCW, whichever is greater.

L. "Open space system" means the categories of King County's open space system of parks, including recreation and multiuse sites, regional trails, natural areas, and natural resource lands. "Open space system" also includes structures or buildings owned or otherwise under the jurisdiction of the parks and recreation division of the department of natural resources.

M. "Open space" means any land defined as part of the open space system or a parks district, town, or city parks system.

N. "Parks district" means the active metropolitan park districts under chapter 35.61 RCW and parks and recreation service areas under chapter 36.68 RCW in King County.

O. "Town or city parks system" means any building or other structure related to parks or recreation; parks, trails, natural areas, natural resource lands, and other parks or recreation property owned or otherwise under the jurisdiction of a town or city within King County.

SECTION 2. Levy submittal to voters. To provide necessary moneys for the purposes identified in section 4 of this ordinance, the King County council shall submit to the qualified electors of the county a proposition authorizing a regular property tax levy in excess of the levy limitation contained in chapter 84.55 RCW for six consecutive years, with collection commencing in 2026, at a rate not to exceed \$0.2329 per one thousand dollars of assessed value in the first year of the levy period. The dollar amount of the levy in the first

year shall be the base upon which the levy amounts in year two through six shall be calculated. In accordance with RCW 84.55.050, this levy shall be a regular property tax levy subject to the limit factor.

SECTION 3. Deposit of levy proceeds. The levy proceeds shall be deposited into a dedicated subfund of the parks and recreation fund, or its successor.

SECTION 4. Eligible expenditures. If approved by the qualified electors of the county, levy proceeds shall be used for the following purposes:

A. Costs incurred by the county that are attributable to the special election called for in section 5 of this ordinance as well as future parks, recreation, trails, and open space levy elections;

B. Distributions to educational and civic venues, limited to the following facilities:

1. Up to forty million dollars for distribution to the Woodland Park Zoological Society which shall be used solely for: environmental education with an emphasis on accessibility to traditionally underserved areas and communities, including people with disabilities; horticulture and maintenance of buildings and grounds; conservation of threatened species; and development of conservation and education strategies to mitigate impacts to animals and habitats from climate change;

2. Up to twelve million dollars for distribution to the Seattle Aquarium which shall be used solely for: environmental education with an emphasis on accessibility to traditionally underserved areas and communities, including people with disabilities; maintenance of buildings and grounds; conservation of threatened species; and development of conservation and education strategies to mitigate impacts to animals and habitats from climate change;

3. Up to two million five-hundred thousand dollars for distribution to the city of Seattle, which shall be used solely for capital costs for the Memorial Stadium project;

4. Up to six million dollars for distribution to the Pacific Science Center, which shall be used solely for capital or operations and maintenance purposes relating to environmental and climate stewardship and education; and

5. Up to six million dollars for distribution to the 501(c)(3) organization, registered with the Washington secretary of state under number 1133863 and known as Friends of Waterfront Park or its successor 501(c)(3) organization registered with the Washington secretary of state, which shall be used solely at Seattle's Waterfront park, and which shall be used solely for: accessibility to the park for traditionally underserved areas and communities, including people with disabilities; support for a clean and safe environment; free arts, culture, wellness, and recreation programming to all visitors; and development of inclusive community partnerships;

C. Twenty-five million twenty-five thousand dollars for a municipal parks capital and open space pass through distribution to towns and cities in King County for their town or city parks system operations and capital improvement projects. These moneys shall be distributed based on 2025 population and presence of opportunity areas as defined in K.C.C. 26.12.003.J.1., as follows:

1. Algona and Pacific - two hundred fifty thousand dollars each;
2. Enumclaw - five hundred thousand dollars;
3. Tukwila, SeaTac, Des Moines, and Burien - one million dollars each;
4. Auburn, Federal Way, Renton, and Kent - one million nine-hundred fifty thousand dollars each;
5. Seattle - two million eight-hundred thousand dollars;
6. Skykomish, Beaux Arts Village, Hunts Point, Yarrow Point, Milton, Carnation, Medina, Clyde Hill, Normandy Park, Black Diamond, North Bend, and Duvall - one hundred twenty-five thousand dollars each;
7. Lake Forest Park, Newcastle, Woodinville, and Snoqualmie - two hundred fifty thousand dollars each;
8. Covington, Kenmore, Mercer Island, Maple Valley, Bothell, Issaquah, Shoreline, and Sammamish - five hundred thousand dollars each; and
9. Redmond, Kirkland, and Bellevue - nine hundred seventy-five thousand dollars each.

D. Up to sixty-eight million dollars for aquatic facilities, limited to the following:

1. Up to forty-six million dollars for the aquatic facilities grant program; and

2. Up to twenty-two million dollars for the Weyerhaeuser King County Aquatic Center for major maintenance capital projects;

E. Up to ten million dollars for the Get Active/Stay Active grant program, to be divided evenly among the nine council districts;

F. At least thirty million dollars for distribution to eligible entities for the healthy communities and parks grant program;

G. Up to twelve million five-hundred thousand dollars for distribution to eligible entities for the community partnerships and grants program;

H. Up to thirteen million five-hundred thousand dollars for distribution to eligible entities for the ballfield access and preservation grant program;

I. The remainder of levy proceeds for the following purposes:

1. forty percent of levy proceeds for maintenance and operations of King County's open space system;

2. fifty percent of levy proceeds for:

a. Acquisition, conservation, and stewardship of additional open space, including urban greenspaces, natural areas, natural resource lands, and rights of way for regional trails;

b. Acquisition of rights of way for and development of regional and other publicly owned trails; and

c. Capital improvement projects and major maintenance repair or replacement of open space system infrastructure, town and city parks system infrastructure, and recreation facilities owned or operated by a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization;

3. Ten percent of levy proceeds for distribution to towns, cities, and parks districts in King County for their town or city parks system operations and capital improvement projects, of which amount:

a. Seventy-five thousand dollars shall be distributed annually to each town and city, and to each of the following parks districts that predominantly serve unincorporated King County: Fall City Metropolitan Park District; Si View Metropolitan Park District; and Vashon Park District;

b. An additional fifty-thousand dollars shall be distributed annually to each town and city with a population of over four thousand; and

c. Of the remainder of levy proceeds, after the distributions made in accordance with subsection E.3.a. of this section, sixty percent shall be distributed in proportion to each town or city's population and forty percent shall be distributed in proportion to the assessed value of parcels within each town or city;

4. Of the levy proceeds distributed to entities other than King County, a portion shall be retained by the county to be used for expenditures related to administration of the distribution of levy proceeds. Eligible administrative expenditures shall include all costs and charges to the parks and recreation division or the county associated with or attributable to the purposes listed in this section as well as sections 6 and 7 of this ordinance.

SECTION 5. Call for special election. In accordance with RCW 29A.04.321, the King County council hereby calls for a special election to be held in conjunction with the primary election on August 5, 2025, to consider a proposition authorizing a regular property tax levy for the purposes described in this ordinance. The King County director of elections shall cause notice to be given of this ordinance in accordance with the state constitution and general law and to submit to the qualified electors of the county, at the said special county election, the proposition hereinafter set forth. The clerk of the council shall certify that proposition to the King County director of elections in substantially the following form, with such additions, deletions or modifications as may be required for the proposition listed below by the prosecuting attorney:

King County

Proposition No. 1

Parks, Recreation, Trails, and Open Space Levy

The King County council adopted Ordinance _____ replacing the expiring parks levy. If approved, this proposition supports county, city, park district, and town parks, open space, and trails; recreation; public pools; and educational and civic venues. It authorizes an additional six-year property tax beginning in 2026 at \$0.2329 per \$1,000 of assessed valuation, uses the 2026 levy amount to compute annual increases in 2027-2031

by the King County inflation plus population index or chapter 84.55 RCW limitation, whichever is greater, and exempts qualifying seniors, veterans, and disabled persons under RCW 84.36.381. Should this proposition be:

Approved? _

Rejected? _

SECTION 6. Distributions. Before distribution of levy proceeds to an entity other than King County, the receiving entity and the county shall have fully executed a contract setting forth the terms and conditions, including the applicable eligible purpose or purposes identified in section 4 of this ordinance, under which the entity is receiving a distribution of levy proceeds.

SECTION 7. Parks levy oversight board established.

A. If the proposition in section 5 of this ordinance is approved by the qualified electors of King County, a parks levy oversight board shall be appointed by the executive. The board shall consist of nine members. By March 31, 2026, each councilmember shall nominate a candidate for the board who resides in the councilmember's district. If, by March 31, 2026, the executive does not appoint the person nominated by a councilmember, the executive must request that the councilmember should, by June 30, 2026, nominate another candidate for appointment. Members shall be confirmed by the council. Members may not be elected or appointed officials of any unit of government, except that individuals serving in a civic capacity on a local board or commission would be eligible to serve on the parks levy oversight board.

B. The board shall review the allocation of levy proceeds and progress on achieving the purposes of this proposition. On or before December 31, 2027, the board shall review and report to the King County executive, the King County council and the regional policy committee on the expenditure of levy proceeds for 2026. Thereafter, the board shall review and report to the King County executive, the King County council and the regional policy committee annually. Each report shall include an accounting of levy spending by King County council district and ZIP Code, grouped by purposes described in section 4.B. through I.2. of this ordinance. Any report to the King County council under this section shall be electronically filed with the clerk of the

council, who will retain an electronic copy and provide an electronic copy to all councilmembers, the council chief of staff, and the chief policy officer. The board expires December 31, 2032.

SECTION 8. Exemption. The additional regular property taxes authorized by this ordinance shall be included in any real property tax exemption authorized by RCW 84.36.381.

SECTION 9. Ratification. Certification of the proposition by the clerk of the King County council to the director of elections in accordance with law before the election on August 5, 2025, and any other acts consistent with the authority and before the effective date of this ordinance are hereby ratified and confirmed.

SECTION 10. Severability. If any provision of this ordinance or its application to any person or circumstance is held invalid, the remainder of the ordinance or the application of the provision to other persons or circumstances is not affected.