

# **Guidelines for Local Government Agencies in Election Campaigns\***

P4070-1

## **Public Disclosure Law Re: Use of Public Facilities in Campaigns**

**Revised September 28, 2006**

### **USE OF THE GUIDELINES**

These Guidelines are meant to aid and assist in compliance with the law.

This document is an educational tool that is an expression of the Commission's view of the meaning of RCW 42.17.130 and relevant administrative rules and case law involving local government and election campaign activity. It is intended to provide guidance regarding the Commission's approach and interpretation of how the statutory prohibition on the use of public facilities for campaigns impacts activities that may be contemplated by government employees and other persons who may seek to utilize those public facilities. Readers are strongly encouraged to review the statute and rules referenced in these Guidelines.

For ease of reference, the majority of this interpretation is in chart form. In part, the chart identifies categories of persons, some possible activities, and some general considerations. These illustrative examples in the columns of the chart are not intended to be exhaustive.

For example, the categories of persons identified are, in many cases, illustrative only and simply identify groups of persons more likely to undertake or consider undertaking the activity mentioned in the adjacent columns. If an activity is described as being viewed as "Permitted," it is viewed as permitted for all agency personnel otherwise having the authority under law or agency policy to undertake that action, not just the persons identified in the chart or in a particular column. The same approach is applied to the "Not Permitted" column. Further, the remarks in the chart's "General Considerations" column have relevance for the entire section and are not limited to the specific bullet point immediately to the left of the general consideration.

As noted in the Basic Principles section below, hard and fast rules are difficult to establish for every fact pattern involving agency facilities that may occur.

\*School Districts are directed to Guidelines for School Districts in Election Campaigns, Interpretation 01-03.

Situations may arise that are not squarely addressed by the guidelines or that merit additional discussion. The PDC urges government agencies to review the guidelines in their entirety, and to consult with their own legal counsel and with the PDC. The PDC can be reached at [pdcc@pdc.wa.gov](mailto:pdcc@pdc.wa.gov), 360/753-1111 or toll free at 1-877-601-2828.

## RCW 42.17.130

### Use of public office or agency facilities in campaigns — Prohibition — Exceptions.

No elective official nor any employee of his [or her] office nor any person appointed to or employed by any public office or agency may use or authorize the use of any of the facilities of a public office or agency, directly or indirectly, for the purpose of assisting a campaign for election of any person to any office or for the promotion of or opposition to any ballot proposition. Facilities of a public office or agency include, but are not limited to, use of stationery, postage, machines, and equipment, use of employees of the office or agency during working hours, vehicles, office space, publications of the office or agency, and clientele lists of persons served by the office or agency. However, this does not apply to the following activities:

(1) Action taken at an open public meeting by members of an elected legislative body or by an elected board, council, or commission of a special purpose district including, but not limited to, fire districts, public hospital districts, library districts, park districts, port districts, public utility districts, school districts, sewer districts, and water districts, to express a collective decision, or to actually vote upon a motion, proposal, resolution, order, or ordinance, or to support or oppose a ballot proposition so long as (a) any required notice of the meeting includes the title and number of the ballot proposition, and (b) members of the legislative body, members of the board, council, or commission of the special purpose district, or members of the public are afforded an approximately equal opportunity for the expression of an opposing view;

(2) A statement by an elected official in support of or in opposition to any ballot proposition at an open press conference or in response to a specific inquiry;

(3) Activities which are part of the normal and regular conduct of the office or agency.

#### Notes:

**Finding -- Intent -- 2006 c 215:** "(1) The legislature finds that the public benefits from an open and inclusive discussion of proposed ballot measures by local elected leaders, and that for twenty-five years these discussions have included the opportunity for elected boards, councils, and commissions of special purpose districts to vote in open public meetings in order to express their support of, or opposition to, ballot propositions affecting their jurisdictions.

(2) The legislature intends to affirm and clarify the state's long-standing policy of promoting informed public discussion and understanding of ballot propositions by allowing elected boards, councils, and commissions of special purpose districts to adopt resolutions supporting or opposing ballot propositions." [2006 c 215 § 1.]

## **WAC 390-05-271**

### **General applications of RCW 42.17.130.**

- (1) RCW 42.17.130 does not restrict the right of any individual to express his or her own personal views concerning, supporting, or opposing any candidate or ballot proposition, if such expression does not involve a use of the facilities of a public office or agency.
- (2) RCW 42.17.130 does not prevent a public office or agency from (a) making facilities available on a nondiscriminatory, equal access basis for political uses or (b) making an objective and fair presentation of facts relevant to a ballot proposition, if such action is part of the normal and regular conduct of the office or agency.

## **WAC 390-05-273**

### **Definition of normal and regular conduct.**

Normal and regular conduct of a public office or agency, as that term is used in the proviso to RCW 42.17.130, means conduct which is (1) lawful, i.e., specifically authorized, either expressly or by necessary implication, in an appropriate enactment, and (2) usual, i.e., not effected or authorized in or by some extraordinary means or manner. No local office or agency may authorize a use of public facilities for the purpose of assisting a candidate's campaign or promoting or opposing a ballot proposition, in the absence of a constitutional, charter, or statutory provision separately authorizing such use.

Similar prohibitions on the use of public facilities by state employees and state officers are described in a memorandum from the Attorney General's Office regarding RCW 42.52 and available at <http://www.atg.wa.gov/pubs/publicfundsmemo062800.htm>

## **BASIC PRINCIPLES**

1. Public facilities may not be used to support or oppose a candidate or ballot proposition. RCW 42.17.130. Facilities include local government agency equipment, buildings, supplies, employee work time, and agency publications. The statute includes an exception to the prohibition for "activities which are part of the normal and regular conduct of the office or agency."
2. The Public Disclosure Commission holds that it is not only the right, but the responsibility of local government to inform the general public of the operational and maintenance issues facing local agencies. This includes informing the community of the needs of the agency that the community may not realize exist. Local governments may expend funds for this purpose provided that the preparation and distribution of information is not for the purpose of influencing the outcome of an election.
3. Public employees do not forfeit their rights to engage in political activity because of their employment. Neither may agency employees be subjected to coercion, pressure, or undue influence to participate in political activity or to take a

particular position. Public officials and employees should make it clear that any participation is personal rather than officially sponsored.

4. Supervisory personnel have a duty to know, apply, and communicate to their staffs the difference between acceptable information activities and inappropriate promotional activities in support of local government ballot measures.
5. Local elected officials are free to support agency ballot issues and engage in other political activities as long as such activities do not make use of government facilities, time or resources and do not either pressure or condone employees' use of agency facilities, time or resources to support ballot issues.
6. The PDC is charged with enforcing RCW 42.17.130. This requires consideration and analysis of activities, which may or may not be determined to be in violation of the statute. The PDC has, over the years, developed methods of considering and analyzing activities engaged in by public offices. Among the factors considered are the normal and regular conduct and the timing, tone, and tenor of activities in relation to ballot measure elections. As in any matter where intent is to be considered, hard and fast rules, which will be applicable to all situations, are difficult to establish.  
The combination of a number of activities into a coordinated campaign involving close coordination between agency activities and citizens' committee activities which closely resembles traditional election campaign activities and which is targeted at and/or occurs close in time to a ballot measure election is likely to draw close scrutiny and careful consideration by the PDC as to whether a violation has occurred.
- 7.a. Historically, the PDC has routinely advised and held that with respect to election-related publications, one jurisdiction-wide objective and fair presentation of the facts per ballot measure is appropriate.

In addition, if an agency\* has also customarily distributed this information through means other than a jurisdiction-wide mailing (e.g. regularly scheduled newsletter, website, bilingual documents, or other format), that conduct has also been permitted under RCW 42.17.130 so long as the activity has been normal and regular for the government agency.

- b. The PDC will presume that every agency may distribute throughout its jurisdiction an objective and fair presentation of the facts for each ballot measure. If the agency distributes more than this jurisdiction-wide single publication, the agency must be able to demonstrate to the PDC that this conduct is normal and regular for that agency. In other words, the agency must be able to demonstrate that for other major policy issues facing the government jurisdiction, the agency has customarily communicated with its residents in a manner similar to that undertaken for the ballot measure.
- c. Agencies are urged to read the definitions of "normal and regular" at WAC 390-05-271 and WAC 390-05-273. **Agencies need to be aware, however, that in no case will the PDC view a marketing or sales effort related to a campaign or election as normal and regular conduct.**

8. The PDC attributes publications or other informational activity of a department or subdivision as the product of the local agency as a whole.
9. Providing an objective and fair presentation of facts to the public of ballot measures that directly impact a jurisdiction's maintenance and operation, even though the measure is not offered by the jurisdiction, may be considered part of the normal and regular conduct of the local agency. The agency must be able to demonstrate that for other major policy issues facing the jurisdiction, the agency has customarily communicated with its residents in a manner similar to that undertaken for the ballot measure.
10. State law provides certain exemptions from the prohibition on the use of public office or agency facilities in campaigns for an elected legislative body, an elected board, council or commission of a special purpose district, and elected officials that are not afforded appointed officials. RCW 42.17.130 (1) and (2) apply only to these elected bodies and elected officials.\*\*

\*Agency means any county, city, town, port district, special district, or other state political subdivision.

\*\*See Chapter 215, Laws of 2006 and AGO 2005 No. 4.

Reviewed: January 16, 2013