

Election by District Initiative, City of Richland

Last year, a group of Richland residents created A Better Richland (ABR) to promote updating the method for electing the seven Richland City Councilmembers. The group believes that the city has outgrown the current all at-large system adopted in 1958 and needs some representatives who live in and are familiar with issues in the neighborhoods they represent. ABR proposed a plan that will better represent the different areas of the growing city by having five councilmembers elected from districts of almost equal population while two will continue to be elected at large.

Over 60 volunteers collected almost 4,000 signatures on petitions asking for a vote to amend the 1958 Richland City Charter to revise the all at-large system. Each proposed district in the ABR plan has about 12,000 residents based on 2020 census data provided by the Benton County Information Technology Department.

Benton County Auditor Brenda Chilton determined in October 2024 that the petitions presented to the Richland city clerk had more than enough valid signatures to put the matter before the Richland voters and she decided that RCW 25.22.120 directed that it be on the November 4, 2025, ballot.

Richland has grown.

Richland has grown since it was incorporated as a Washington First-Class City in 1958 when it had 24,000 residents by Atomic Energy Commission estimates and a land area of about 8 sq. miles.

Today, the 2020 U.S. Census counted 60,560 people in Richland in an area of 35 sq. miles that stretches from Horn Rapids in the north to Badger Mountain South at the other end.

Surrounding Washington cities have councilmembers representing districts.

Pasco and Kennewick already have city council election districts.

Among Washington's first-class cities, Vancouver is the only other one that currently has an all at-large council, but that may change in November. The Vancouver City Council recently voted to put a charter amendment to create council districts on their November 4, 2025, ballot.

History of election by district in the Richland Charter

When the 15 "freeholders" elected by Richland citizens in 1958 wrote the Richland City Charter, they considered having five members of the city council elected from districts and two elected at large. Council to the Freeholders said, "in a city anywhere near the size of Richland, there is no reason for electing councilmen from wards." (Herald Sept. 11, 1958). The freeholders rejected the district plan.

In 1960, (1960 census 23,548) the city council put the election by district issue on the ballot. It failed and opponents said that citizens needed more time to see how well the at-large system worked.

In 1971 (1970 census 26,290) there was another vote to change the system to five districts and two at-large members that failed. Many voters opposed an unusual provision that allowed a candidate to run from any district regardless of whether they lived in it. Also, opponents worried that a provision to elect every member of the city council every two years, could result in seven councilmembers with no experience.

When it comes to introducing charter amendments, city council requirements differ from petitioners' requirements.

Voters must approve all amendments to the Richland City Charter.

A vote of four or more city councilmembers can put a charter amendment on the ballot at any election.

By state law petitioners must collect signatures from registered Richland voters equal to 15% of the number of voters in the previous general election.

The citizen petition process is outlined in RCW 35.22.120 and requires elections resulting from citizen petitions to be at the "next regular municipal election."

The Washington Supreme Court is currently reviewing the definition of "next regular municipal election." A decision is not anticipated soon enough to affect the auditor's choice to include the charter amendment on the November 2025 general election ballot.

City Council consideration of Charter amendments

Richland City Attorney Heather Kintzley has raised the issue of amending the Richland City Charter at least three times since 2020.

At a September 17, 2021, city council workshop meeting, City Attorney Heather Kintzley reminded councilmembers that they had begun talking about amendments to the city charter in 2020 with conversations about the provision that the city manager must live in the city. The goal had been to put amendments on the 2020 general election ballot, but COVID interrupted that plan.

During the workshop in September 2021, City Attorney Heather Kintzley provided a one-hour presentation on possible amendments to the city charter. She included council by district, as well as term limits for councilmembers and updating charter language like the references to "councilmen." The city council decided to wait until the new council took office after the election.

At the January 2022 council workshop, Kintzley discussed changes again. Councilmembers said that there was too much on their plate already and changes were not "mission critical."

Minutes from the meeting read:

"City Attorney Kintzley provided a brief overview of the charter amendment discussion held during the September 17, 2021, City Council Fall Retreat. City Attorney Kintzley reminded Council that, at the conclusion of the presentation in September, she was directed

to bring the matter back after the first of the year to determine whether the newly constituted Council wanted to pursue amendments to the City Charter in 2022. After discussion, Council reached a consensus that charter amendments were not necessary at this time.”

At the January 21, 2025, Richland City Council meeting Councilmember Ryan Lukson said that council mostly gave up on amending the charter. “People started finding 18 things that they wanted and all of a sudden it was 50,” he said.

After voter approval

The Benton County auditor’s attorney has determined that if the initiative passes in November, RCW 35.22.190 takes effect. It reads:

“If a majority of the voters voting upon the adoption of the proposed new, altered or revised charter favor it, it shall become the charter of the city and the organic law thereof, superseding any existing charter. All bodies or offices abolished or dispensed with by the new, altered or revised charter, together with the emoluments thereof shall immediately cease to exist, and any new offices created shall be filled by appointment of the mayor until the next general election subject to such approval by the city council as may be required by the new, altered or revised charter.”

The auditor’s attorney has determined that based on the state law, the election of the new councilmembers under the amended charter would occur at the February 2026 special election.

The council could submit a competing proposal.

By a majority vote, the Richland City Council could offer another election-by-district proposal for the November ballot. They have until August to submit an amendment to the auditor. The proposal with the most votes would prevail. So far, there has been no public information that they plan to do so.

Interactive Map

Voters can see which district they would live in by typing in their address on an interactive map at A Better Richland’s website, abetterrichland.com [Interactive Proposed Districts Map — A Better Richland](#)

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Sources: Tri-City Herald archives, city council minutes and agendas, Richland City View council meeting videos, Revised Code of Washington, Richland City Charter.