

I-135, Seattle's social housing initiative, gets enough signatures for 2023 ballot

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Homes above Lake Union in Seattle. I-135, a ballot initiative that would create a public developer in Seattle tasked with creating housing that is permanently affordable, has qualified for a 2023 special election ballot. (Ellen M. Banner / The Seattle Times)

By

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King County Elections confirmed Monday that Seattle voters will have their say on a ballot initiative that establishes a public developer to create permanently affordable housing in a city known for rising rents and a growing homelessness crisis.

Just not in November.

Initiative 135 qualified to appear on the ballot in a special election in early 2023 after a second, successful signature-gathering effort by the campaign.

If passed, the measure would establish a public development authority, the Seattle Social Housing Developer, that would use government and philanthropic dollars to build new housing and take over existing properties to establish renter-governed housing that would be protected from rental market forces. This model is picking up steam in other states, including Hawaii and California, and is popular in other countries, including Austria and Singapore.

“It was a huge community effort,” Tiffani McCoy said of the signature-gathering process. She’s co-chair of the housing and homelessness advocacy coalition House Our Neighbors, which is behind the effort.

As of Monday morning, the measure had 27,220 verified signatures, 700 more than what was needed to qualify, according to King County Elections.

After submitting more than 29,000 signatures in June, elections staff determined that the campaign was short by 5,033 verified signatures, McCoy said.

The 70% of signatures that were thrown out and therefore uncounted were from people not registered to vote or registered with a home address outside of Seattle, according to Halei Watkins, spokesperson for King County Elections.

Under Seattle’s charter, the initiative was allotted an additional 20 days for signature collection. Within that time, organizers were able to turn in more than 9,500 to get them past the finish line. Before it can go before voters, the initiative will go before the Seattle City Council. Councilmembers could decide to skip the public vote altogether and pass the initiative, making it a city ordinance. But if that doesn’t happen, then it will advance to voters’ mailboxes.

After the November general election, the next Seattle special election is scheduled for February 2023.

“We need to implement [social housing] here if we are truly serious about having this be a city that is affordable to everyone, not just folks that have generational wealth, or middle-to-high-six-figure income,” said McCoy, who is also the advocacy director at Seattle’s street newspaper Real Change.

An hourly worker in the Seattle-Bellevue area would need to make about \$39 an hour to afford a two-bedroom apartment, [according to the National Low Income Housing Coalition](#).

The plan has faced [opposition from the Housing Development Consortium](#), a lobbying group whose members include King County’s major nonprofit housing developers, local housing authorities and financial institutions.

“We do not need another government entity to build housing when there are already insufficient resources to fund existing entities,” the consortium said in April.

Some low-income housing providers that fall under the consortium’s umbrella, including the Low Income Housing Institute and Solid Ground, have endorsed the effort, according to the endorsement list on the House Our Neighbors website.

House Our Neighbors formed last year in opposition to the Compassion Seattle ballot initiative, which would have made part of the city’s charter a mandate to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on shelter and housing as well as to enforce homeless camping laws.

This new measure, I-135, would create a public corporation operating under state and local laws that would be run by a governing board. Out of the 13-member board, two members would be appointed by Seattle City Council and one by Seattle’s mayor.

Unlike current forms of public housing operated by agencies like the Seattle Housing Authority, the corporation would not have to abide by federal rules in determining who qualifies for housing. It also would expand eligibility for rent-controlled housing.

The initiative’s language says it would create housing for people who earn from 0% to 120% of the area’s median income. Most federal housing funds

go to people who make 80% or less of area median income.
Seattle's [median household income was \\$102,500](#) in 2019.

McCoy said that organizers have already begun talks with the city about setting aside money in next year's budget to help get the public developer off the ground, if the measure passes.

But if they aren't able to secure funding, McCoy said, they're prepared to ask voters to pass a funding ordinance.

"This is not about political posturing," she said. "We want this to happen."

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