



KING COUNTY AUDITOR'S OFFICE

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King County's Government Relations Functions: No Evidence Consolidation Would Improve Effectiveness

TO:

Metropolitan
King County
Councilmembers

FROM:

Kymber Waltmunson,
County Auditor

King County employs at least 24 people with specific government

relations responsibilities. These individuals work across King County in departments ranging from Natural Resources and Parks to the Department of Local Services, as shown in Exhibit A, below. We conducted this review in response to a proviso in the 2019–2020 King County Budget. We did not find evidence that a consolidated government relations office would increase efficiency or effectiveness of government relations functions, which was one of the questions posed in the proviso.¹

EXHIBIT A: Government relations staff work across King County

Departments	Number of Staff
Natural Resources and Parks	7
Executive's Office	4
Metro Transit	4
Executive Services	2
King County Council	2
Assessments	1
Community and Human Services	1
King County Information Technology	1
Local Services	1
Public Health	1
Total	24

Source: King County Auditor's Office analysis of data provided by Department of Human Resources



King County

¹ King County Ordinance 18835 specifies that the special study report shall include, but not be limited to: A. An inventory of: (1) all government relations FTE positions in county agencies and the budgeted costs for each position; and (2) contracts for lobbying or government relations services, including the contract's dollar value and term; B. Information on other jurisdictions' government relations functions and how they are organized; and C. Recommendations on improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the county's government relations functions, with specific consideration of whether a consolidated government relations office serving all county agencies would improve efficiency and effectiveness.

What functions do government relations staff perform?

King County's government relations personnel handle a variety of tasks in addition to advocating on behalf of King County interests at the local, state, and federal level. At its core, government relations involves working with elected officials and agencies in other jurisdictions. We interviewed 19 of the 24 (79 percent) King County government relations staff members and found that personnel with government relations-related titles worked on many tasks that went beyond government relations. For example, several staff worked with other departments within King County to further agency priorities. Additionally, some staff help to ensure that their departments are responsive to provisos and other requests from the King County Council.

During interviews, it was clear that some staff without government relations-related titles also work with other governments to accomplish shared goals. Overall, we found that job titles do not clearly capture all of the County's government relations efforts and that this work represents a portion of job responsibilities for many staff.

Why is government relations important?

Government relations staff ensure that King County is responsive to local, state, and federal concerns and can fulfill its policy, legislative, and intergovernmental initiatives. This work is extremely important because King County:

- receives more than \$1 billion or almost 10 percent of its biannual revenues from state and federal grants and other transfers
- is subject to mandates and other requirements imposed by other governments
- works with other cities, counties, and community partners to implement programs that further county goals.

Government relations staff facilitate effective regional collaboration helping King County to accomplish its goals.

How much do government relations functions cost King County?

The total cost of government relations activities in King County is approximately \$4.7 million. Of this total, salaries and benefits for the 24 government relations staff is \$4.3 million in 2019. In addition to personnel costs, King County has contracts for state and federal lobbying totaling about \$360,000 per year (\$100,000 for state lobbying and \$260,000 for federal lobbying).









How do other jurisdictions perform government relations? Are there any best practices?

The four other jurisdictions we interviewed had consolidated government relations offices; however, there are no clear best practices. We spoke to government relations staff in Snohomish and Multnomah counties, the City of Seattle, and Sound Transit. They all have centralized government relations offices ranging in size from a single individual to 10 people. They told us that they consult with subject matter experts in departments when developing and responding to state and federal legislative agendas. So, the number of people who work on government relations tasks in these jurisdictions is greater than the one to ten people who work in their consolidated government relations offices.

Should King County consolidate its government relations resources?

Through interviews with national associations and peer jurisdictions we did not find any evidence suggesting that a consolidated government relations department would improve efficiency or effectiveness. While other jurisdictions possess consolidated government relations departments, it was not clear that a unified department decreased their reliance on department-based subject matter experts. Since departments may defer to different subject matter experts depending on the legislative consideration in question, it is not possible to accurately capture the total number of personnel that contribute to government relations functions. As a result, it is difficult to compare the size of the government relations workforces across jurisdictions or determine whether any potential differences in staff size lead to increases in efficiency or effectiveness. See Exhibit B, below, for a summary of some of the potential benefits and drawbacks of the two government relations structures. Centralizing government relations could facilitate communication and coordination among staff compared to a decentralized structure. King County staff attempt to mitigate this issue by holding regular coordination meetings among government relations staff. Having formal opportunities to coordinate and communicate will continue to be important if or when the number of King County government relations staff increases or decreases.

EXHIBIT B: Potential benefits and drawbacks of government relations structures

FACTOR	GOVERNMENT RELATIONS FUNCTION		KING COUNTY'S MITIGATING STEPS
	DECENTRALIZED (KING COUNTY)	CONSOLIDATED	
Both Executive and Council interests fully represented			-
Direct access to subject matter experts			-
Efficiency of government relations work			-
Communication among government relations staff to ensure a consistent message			King County holds regular meetings among relevant staff

Source: King County analysis

How do we know if government relations functions are working?

Government relations professionals throughout King County and its peer jurisdictions indicated that establishing valid metrics for success is problematic due to the ever-changing, relationship-based nature of the work. They stated that legislative outcomes such as passing or not passing bills are influenced by a wide variety of factors outside of government relations efforts and, therefore, these outcomes are not an independent or effective means to measure success. Instead, staff track progress toward preferred legislation and the ability to recognize opportunities to get favorable legislation on the agenda. We found that there are no standardized metrics for government relations in the profession. Nonetheless, staff reported that there are some informal measures that they consider. For instance, staff

we spoke with said that they measure success by their relationships with other government entities. Teams also reported meeting after the legislative session to discuss lessons learned. King County government relations staff suggested potential indicators of success, including:

- effectively maintaining working relationships with peer jurisdictions
- actively informing stakeholders of progress towards legislative goals
- successfully meeting the County's stated objectives and legislative deadlines.

Grant Dailey, Management Auditor, and Ben Thompson, Deputy County Auditor, conducted this review. If you have any questions or would like more information, please contact Ben at 206-477-1035.

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Statement of Compliance, Scope, Objective & Methodology

Statement of Compliance with Government Auditing Standards

We conducted this performance audit in accordance with Generally Accepted Government Auditing Standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Scope of Work on Internal Controls

We assessed internal controls relevant to the audit objective. This included review of expected roles and responsibilities of governmental relations personnel as well as interviews with knowledgeable staff across multiple departments and jurisdictions.

Scope

The report examined the roles, duties, and responsibilities of current King County employees with government relations job positions.

Objectives

The objective of the report was to determine how much King County spends on government relations functions and how King County government relations functions compare to those in peer jurisdictions.

Methodology

To address the report objectives, we reviewed the full salary and benefits costs for King County government relations staff in 2019, as well as the costs of the county's state and federal government relations contracts. We also interviewed government relations staff in peer jurisdictions and representatives of national professional associations.

Advancing Performance & Accountability

KYMBER WALTMUNSON, KING COUNTY AUDITOR

MISSION Promote improved performance, accountability, and transparency in King County government through objective and independent audits and studies.

VALUES INDEPENDENCE – CREDIBILITY – IMPACT

ABOUT US The King County Auditor's Office was created by charter in 1969 as an independent agency within the legislative branch of county government. The office conducts oversight of county government through independent audits, capital projects oversight, and other studies. The results of this work are presented to the Metropolitan King County Council and are communicated to the King County Executive and the public. The King County Auditor's Office performs its work in accordance with Government Auditing Standards.



This audit product conforms to the Generally Accepted Government Auditing Standards for independence, objectivity, and quality.