**Pierce County executive vetoes formation of equity commission. Here are his reasons**

BY BECCA MOST OCTOBER 11, 2023 5:00 AM

Read more at: https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/local/article280319149.html#storylink=cpy

Pierce County Executive Bruce Dammeier has vetoed an ordinance to create an equity commission, a motion the Pierce County Council passed 4-3 along party lines last month. Democrats, including the Council Chair Ryan Mello, Marty Campbell, Jani Hitchen and Robyn Denson voted in favor of creating the commission. Republicans Amy Cruver, Paul Herrera and Dave Morell voted against. Dammeier, who is a Republican, told The News Tribune he supports work at the county level to address racial and socioeconomic disparities but said establishing a 11-member Commission on Equity would create more bureaucracy “with very little accountability and very little focus.”

 TOP VIDEOS “I’m concerned that it won’t yield kind of anything that is tangible or beneficial and will just be a lot of process and a lot of talk,” said Dammeier, who issued his veto Monday. “I would argue that its predecessor, the Equity Review Committee, struggled with its purpose and mission and outcomes. And I think we are much better served to focus our moneys on very targeted initiatives.”

Dammeier said he’d like to focus on initiatives that “are yielding demonstrative results,” like work done by the Criminal Justice Work Group; county hiring initiatives to diversify the workforce; the Pierce County Business Accelerator program; and other boards and commissions that are currently “addressing equity as part of their charter.” Monday was the eighth time Dammeier has issued a veto in his six-and-a-half years as executive. In order to override the veto the council would need a two-thirds majority vote.

Dammeier he doesn’t anticipate that happening given the makeup of Sept. 26’s council vote to form the commission. “We have new tools and existing tools that are already in play, so adding this on top of all of that — I didn’t think was justified,” he said.

Mello denounced the executive’s decision. “I can’t understand how an Executive who supported the formation of an Equity Committee to review how our local government can be more equitable would then go and veto the sole recommendation that the committee made — the formation of a Commission on Equity,” Mello said in a Monday email to The News Tribune. “The only thing I can come up with is he fell prey to the disinformation and politicization of the term ‘equity’ by a vocal minority.”

In anticipation of the Sept. 26 vote, state Sen. Jim McCune, who is a Republican and former County Council member, and Christian advocacy group, the Family Policy Institute of Washington, sent emails urging constituents to contact Dammeier and the Pierce County Council in opposition to adopting Diversity, Equity and Inclusion policies they claim “push the LGBTQ agenda.” A FPIW campaign email sent to The News Tribune called DEI policies “un-American” and claimed they subvert a merit-based system, “leading to unequal treatment for one group in the quest of ‘equity’ for the other.” For about an hour of public comment on Sept. 26, many residents made comments along those lines. Many residents also spoke in favor of forming an Equity Commission.

Moving forward, Mello said the council would “look for every way” to reduce systemic barriers in Pierce County. “An Equity Commission would have really helped inform that work,” Mello said. “It’s disheartening, and frankly disappointing, that our County Executive, who I thought was an ally in making our government smarter and more effective for all our community members, would describe the very people who could have helped inform our efforts to enhance equity as an unnecessary ‘new bureaucratic structure to talk about this work.’”

WHAT WOULD THE COMMISSION ON EQUITY HAVE DONE? The formation of a volunteer Commission on Equity came out of recommendation from the Equity Review Committee, which met 10 times from December 2021 to September 2022. According to the committee’s final report, its only recommendation to the County Council was to “create a permanent and adequately funded board, commission or similar structure to engage and collaborate with impacted communities and to advise Pierce County government on equity issues as identified by the board, commission or structure.”

According to the ordinance the council passed Sept. 26, the Commission on Equity would have served as an advisory board to the legislative and executive branches of Pierce County government, “act as a conduit to promote two-way communication between the community and decision makers” and develop recommendations and promote policies “that ensure all people have access to the resources and opportunities necessary to achieve their full potential – regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, income, neighborhood or other factor.”

The commission would have been made up of residents from each Council District, as well as a tribal government-appointed representative, an enrolled tribal member, one member aged 15-17 and another aged 18-21. The commission would have met no more than 24 times a year. Members who are low-income, meaning a resident’s income is no more than 400% of the federal poverty level, might have received $200 each day they attended a commission meeting, provided that they were not otherwise compensated for their attendance. In 2023, a member with a household of one would have to make less than $4,860 a month to qualify.

Some of the responsibilities of the Commission on Equity would have been to: Identify, engage and collaborate with affected communities regarding equity issues Hold community meetings and consult with various county boards and commissions, civil rights organizations and federal, tribal, state and local government entities Develop written recommendations that address problems identified in the Public Review Committee report and Equity Review Committee report Develop written recommendations on the creation of a permanent Equity Office within Pierce County Government

WHAT WORK DID THE EQUITY REVIEW COMMITTEE DO? In August 2021, the Pierce County Council created a 22-member Equity Review Committee to review and recommend policies related to countywide Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiatives designed to address disparities in Pierce County that have happened as a result of systemic racism and other factors. The Equity Review Committee held 10 meetings from December 2021 to September 2022. Among the priorities the committee identified as important issues were

to conduct a Criminal Justice Workshop with further analysis of criminal justice data,

 expand county staff DEI training and policies,

 create a Pierce County Equity Index that maps areas of Pierce County where equity can be improved and

include equity notes on proposed ordinances that include additional information about potential impacts on residents’ prosperity, health and safety.

The Criminal Justice Workshop was formed in July 2020, and two resolutions requesting the executive develop and recommend specified DEI initiatives to the Equity Review Committee were approved Aug. 3, 2021 by the County Council.

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