

MEMO

To: LSOHC members
From: David Hartwell, Chair
Date: November 8, 2025
Re: Executive Director Hiring Process

I wanted to provide the entire council with background and detail on the process we followed in our search for a new executive director prior to our meeting so that everyone has the same information and a thorough understanding of the steps taken to date.

A few months ago, our long-term Executive Director announced his intention to retire around the end of the year. Over the summer, volunteers from the Council along with nonpartisan staff from LCC, House, and Senate began the process of looking for a new director.

At the July Council meeting after a presentation by Michelle Yurich, the Executive Director of the LCC, there was a request that those that wanted to participate in the hiring process let the chair know. Because of the Open Meeting law, this could not include more than six members of the Council. As it happened, there were five members beyond the chair that volunteered – Ted Suss, Darrel Palmer, Suzanne Baird, Kristin Eggerling and Matt Kucharski. At the time there were no legislative members that volunteered for this work.

This panel met with the LCC staff who then posted the job. The LCC received over 100 applications for the position. They then did an initial screening and brought forth seventeen candidates that met the minimum qualifications for the job for consideration by the panel. The panel decided to interview seven candidates with one alternate in case someone dropped out which did happen – so the panel which also then included nonpartisan staff interviewed seven candidates initially.

At the Council's September meeting, Senator Lang indicated that he was also willing to participate. But in trying to arrange schedules, it became apparent that the dates that had been set aside for interviews would not work for him (and someone would have had to step off the panel as his addition would put the number of members above the threshold for the open meeting law). So as an alternative, there was an interview session scheduled for a legislative group and to ensure the overall bipartisan and bicameral involvement in the process, Representative Vang and representatives of the other caucuses were invited to participate.

From the group of seven candidates initially interviewed in early October, the panel chose three candidates for a second round of interviews. Prior to that second interview the candidates were asked for professional references and those were checked by the LCC so they could be discussed by the panel.

The second round included an exercise each candidate needed to complete in preparation for the interview. At the end of this second round of interviews, two candidates were asked to then participate in a separate interview with Representative Vang and Senator Lang and staff members from the other two legislative caucuses.

The legislative panel interviews took place on October 30th and neither of the candidates was ruled out. There was a request for who would be the preferred candidate and there was no consensus on one candidate.

One of the discussions that the interview panel and nonpartisan staff had was how to handle the process of the final interview in front of the entire council. The council members of the interview panel expressed a strong support for forwarding just one candidate for a public interview rather than having multiple candidates and discussion in public about the strengths and shortcomings of multiple candidates. The council panel voted five to one to only forward one candidate to the full Council for a final interview and a vote to hire or not hire this candidate. Nonpartisan staff did not participate in any votes.

The council panel then took a vote on which candidate to forward for consideration to the full Council, and the top candidate was chosen by the majority (not unanimous) as the finalist candidate. The top candidate then submitted information for a criminal background check as this is part of the LCC hiring process which brought up no issues.

Everyone who participated in this process was informed that all discussions were to remain confidential and not be discussed with anyone outside of those that were part of the interviews. This was to give candidates assurance that the process would not identify them unless they were selected as a finalist and to ensure the process did not become compromised generally. Unfortunately, this confidentiality was not honored as there have been comments that have come back to both the LCC and me that indicate there is knowledge of who the candidates are, that there is just one candidate being forwarded to the full Council and specific concerns about individual candidates. To say this is disappointing is an understatement.

It is also quite unfortunate that the primary concerns I have heard expressed about the candidate that was recommended by the majority of the council are inaccurate and being distorted to promote a certain version of the truth. The candidate being recommended by the panel has been described as having “no conservation experience” and having made “significant political contributions.” In fact, the candidate in the past has worked in the conservation arena for both the DNR and Metro Council and has been involved for many years in on the ground local conservation work (and has won awards for this). The claim of significant political contributions is inaccurate as the total of political contributions by the recommended candidate over the last decade is actually less than \$250.

The Council will have an opportunity to interview the finalist candidate at its upcoming November 12th meeting. At that meeting it can vote to approve the single finalist candidate or reject that candidate and reopen the process in some way.

I do want to acknowledge that this has been a thorough process and in the end, there is not a single candidate that garnered 100% support from the council panel or legislative members. But there was a majority recommendation to forward the top candidate to you as the council panel's recommended candidate.

At our meeting, I am assuming that you may have questions for the council panel on the process and recommendation which we will allow time for, but I wanted you to understand the process we have undergone before the Council meeting.