

FINAL REPORT

May 26, 2000

Management Audit

Pierce County Council

Staff Organization and Management

Audit Conducted under Contract with Pierce County Council

by

Dr. Lowell L. Kuehn
Pacific Northwest Consulting Services, Inc
University Place, WA

Executive Summary

This report addresses the organization and management of the 22 staff of the Pierce County Council. In evaluating office organization, staffing level, and related issues, we tried to determine to what extent the current arrangements help the Council fulfill its mission as "the policy determining body of the County."

Since no objective standards are available as to how many staff are needed, we compared the staffing level of Pierce County Council with that of three other bodies: Snohomish County Council, King County Council, and Seattle City Council. Our comparative findings, briefly stated, are as follows:

- With 3.14 staff per councilmember, the Pierce County Council has the lowest staffing ratio among the four councils.
- The Pierce County Council has the lowest number and percentage of research staff and the highest percentage of clerk/operations staff.

We recommend that the Council begin a strategic planning process to define its mission, goals, and objectives more clearly. Among other things, this includes a functional review of Council operations (such as the standing committees) and consideration of the staffing level and staff organization needed for the Council to better achieve its mission.

As currently structured, the functions needed to support effective legislative practices are unevenly balanced in the office of the Pierce County Council. More staff are assigned to clerk functions than to policy research. Most notable is the lack of staff for budget and fiscal analysis. If the Council wishes to take more initiative in making county policy and a more proactive role on fiscal issues, additional research and budget staff are essential.

The Council adopted a "shared management strategy" in 1999. The clerical and research administrators supervise their respective work units and are co-administrators of the office. Management responsibilities are placed in a team made up of the same two positions plus the Legal Counsel and three councilmembers. We believe this strategy cannot succeed in the long run. The Council needs a Council Administrator. The purpose of the position is to provide cohesive staff leadership, handle employment matters, provide a clear line of administrative authority, perform management work now done by members, and act as a catalyst for the Council to function more effectively as a legislative body.

We reviewed staff salaries of the Pierce County Council by comparing the salary ranges with Snohomish County Council, King County Council, and Seattle City Council. The salaries are similar for Council Research 3 and 4 and for the vacant Administrator position. All other salary ranges for the office are dissimilar to those found in the other jurisdictions.

Our conclusions and recommendations may be found starting on page 21 below.

Table of Contents

Chapter		Page
1	Introduction	1
	Audit Standards	1
	Sources	1
	Current Organization of the Council Office	2
	Report Overview	5
2	Staffing Comparisons with Other Councils	6
3	Council Staff Organization and Management	11
	Research and Policy Staff	11
	Councilmember Assistants	13
	Clerk/Operations Staff	13
	Council Administrator	16
	Job Descriptions and Personnel Evaluations	17
	Salaries	17
	Technology	20
	Space Issues	20
4	Conclusions and Recommendations	21
Appendix		
1	Audit Objectives	24
2	Agency Response	25

Chapter 1

Introduction

This is a management audit of the office of the Pierce County Council. It focuses on the way in which staff are organized and managed to serve the Council's mission as "the policy determining body of the County." The audit concerns staff support for the conduct of legislative business, but it does not evaluate the Council's public policy decisions.

The County Charter requires comprehensive, ongoing performance audits. The Council volunteered to be audited to show that it embraces the Charter provision on performance audits, set an example for other agencies of county government, and address issues about Council staff organization and management.

Audit Standards

Since staffing arrangements in a legislative body can be quite "political," we want to be clear about the standards used to assess the Council's office organization and operations. We used three kinds of standards:

1. **Generally accepted management principles.**
2. **The Council mission** as described in the County Charter. According to Section 2.10, the Council is "the policy determining body of the County." The Charter also outlines a Council role in the annual budget process. Thus, in evaluating Council organization, staffing levels, and similar issues, we have tried to determine to what extent the current arrangements help the Council fulfill its mission.
3. **Principles of organizational development.** We examined whether the staffing arrangements help the Council develop as an organization with a unified strategic purpose and direction. From a staff perspective, the basic question is whether the staff serve seven elected officials or one Council.

Audit objectives appear in Appendix 1.

Sources

The Pierce County Council commissioned two earlier reviews of office organization, one conducted by Dr. Richard Olufs of Pacific Lutheran University (1984) and the other by the Tacoma accounting firm of Knight, Vale and Gregory

(1991). These reports suggested different organizational structures. The county-wide survey by KMPG (1998) calculated spans of control and layers of management, but it did not otherwise analyze Council organization.¹

The current report goes beyond its predecessors by taking a critical approach, reporting comparative information from other jurisdictions, and focusing on organizational development.

The most important sources were interviews with each councilmember and with each staff member. We reviewed a large number of Council documents concerning office organization, policies, and other matters. Observations of meetings and office processes aided the study. We also considered provisions of state law, the Charter, ordinances, and resolutions that bear on the Council's performance of its duties.

Finally, we reviewed literature pertinent to county government and collected specific data from other councils. Matt Temmel, Pierce County Performance Audit Coordinator, collected some of the data from other councils and turned the material over the consultant for review and analysis.

Current Organization of the Council Office

The Home Rule Charter adopted in 1980 created an elected County Council with seven members and an elected County Executive to replace the three person County Commission. Over the last 20 years, the Council has grown to a staff of 22 employees who provide policy research, legal counsel, administrative support, and constituent service.

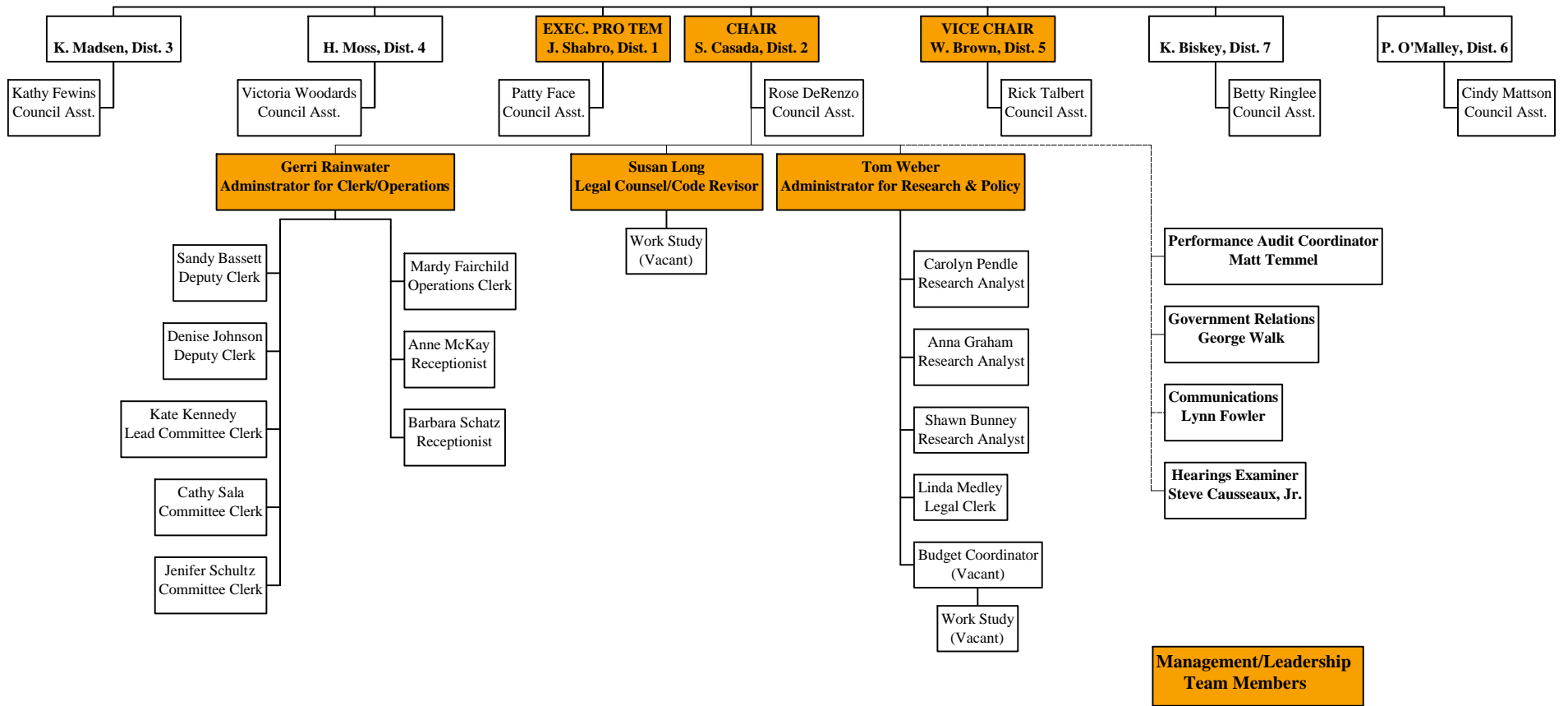
Exhibit 1 shows the organization of the Council office as of April 2000.²

¹ Another source was an unpublished report (1998) on the Seattle City Council office. The report included (1) a survey of City Council employees about organizational climate, and (2) extensive and diverse survey information about how city councils in other states are organized and staffed.

² Exhibit 1 shows four entities with dotted lines that are outside the scope of this study. The Performance Audit Coordinator has a separate budget and reports to the Performance Audit Committee. Government Relations has a separate budget and reports to the Executive and Council. The Communications staff reports to the Executive and is funded mainly through the Executive. The Hearings Examiner is a contractor, not staff.

Exhibit 1

Pierce County Council Organization Chart



Revised: April 21, 2000
Council Organization

Since mid-1998, the Council has operated without a Council Administrator. Supervisory responsibilities are shared by two co-administrators who head the clerical and research units. They work with a management team that includes those two positions plus the Legal Counsel and three councilmembers. The management team is shaded in the table of organization.

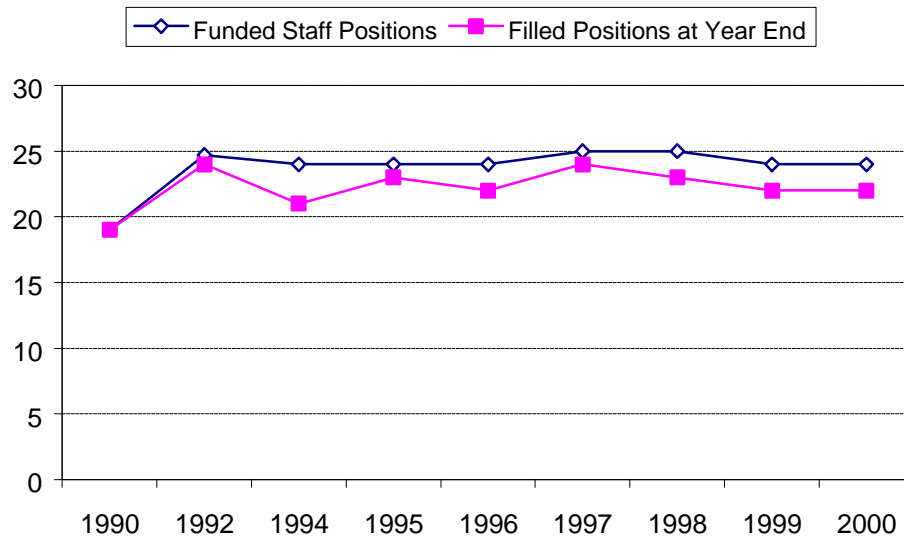
As shown in Exhibit 1, the office includes three work units (clerical, legal, and research), plus the seven Councilmember Assistants. All staff are exempt positions.

- The Clerk/Operations staff perform procedural functions connected with the passage of legislation. This includes public notice and public records—such as meeting notices, agendas, minutes, tape recording of public meetings, procedural aspects of ordinances and resolutions, legal notices, and retention of records. Related work includes clerical coverage for the weekly Council meetings, meetings of the Council’s four standing committees (Rules, Public Works, Budget and Operations, and Planning), as well as meetings of other committees and task forces (Performance Audit, Criminal Justice, committees of the whole, and study sessions). Operations staff also perform office support functions such as payroll, budget preparation, computer support, and reception.
- The Research and Policy staff conduct research, develop legislation, and monitor county operations and issues as directed by councilmembers. To some extent, the research staff also assist members in answering questions from constituents.
- The Legal Counsel provides legal advice to the Council and is the official Code Revisor. This work unit contains only one person. Assistance in updating the county code is provided by a Legal Clerk who reports to the Administrator for Research and Policy. In addition, the Council receives legal advice as needed from the Office of the Prosecuting Attorney.
- The seven Council Assistants are personal staff to each councilmember. While their duties vary, all Council Assistants provide constituent service and other direct support for the councilmember.

In recent years, the staffing level has been relatively stable, as shown in **Exhibit 2** below.** The current budget provides funding for 24 staff, but two positions are not filled (council administrator and budget coordinator). The council administrator functions have been divided among other staff members, while budget analysis is currently handled on a contract basis.

Exhibit 2

Pierce County Council Staff since 1990



Report Overview

Chapter 2 presents comparative information from other councils, with the focus on types of staff and staffing levels.

Chapter 3 analyzes the organization and operations of the office of the Pierce County Council. This includes detailed analysis of staffing levels compared with other councils and comparative data on salary ranges.

Chapter 4 presents our conclusions and recommendations.

** In this Internet edition of the report, Exhibit 2 has been revised to correct a data error discovered after the report was presented on May 26, 2000. The exhibit now correctly displays the number of filled positions at year end.

Chapter 2

Staffing Comparisons with Other Councils

Since no objective standards are available as to how many staff are needed to support the Council, we looked to other jurisdictions and collected information on their staffing and organizational arrangements. The comparisons are meant to be instructive, not normative.

As possible “comparables,” we considered the three other counties that have home rule charters—Snohomish, King, and Whatcom. We also considered the City of Seattle, which has an elected council and an elected executive and thus is similar to home rule.³ **Exhibit 3** presents basic data on Pierce County and the other jurisdictions.

Exhibit 3

Legislative Councils in Five Jurisdictions

Council	Estimated Population (1999)	Square Miles	Population Density	Council Members	Citizens per Council Member	Unincorp. Population	Unincorp. Citizens per Member
Pierce County	700,000	1,676	418	7	100,000	316,566	45,224
Snohomish County	583,300	2,098	278	5	116,660	290,240	58,048
King County	1,677,000	2,128	788	13	129,000	387,148	29,781
Seattle City	540,500	84	6,451	9	60,056	-	-
Whatcom County	161,300	2,126	76	7	23,043	73,049	10,436

2000 Budget (in millions)

Council	General Fund	Total Budget
Pierce County	\$188	\$625
Snohomish County	151	597
King County	447	2,700
Seattle City	550	2,097
Whatcom County	50	108

³ We excluded other cities in Washington because there is nothing of comparable size that has an elected city council with its own staff. We excluded other counties in Washington because they all have the commissioner form of government, and thus no elected policy-making council with its own staff. We also excluded jurisdictions in other states because of the structural differences in government.

Snohomish County is the best "comparable." It is similar to Pierce County in terms of population, geography (located next to the metropolitan county), economy based on a port, budget size, and separate executive and legislative branches via a home rule charter. The other comparisons are more problematic.

King County and Pierce County have major differences in population, economy, cost of living, budget, and the scope of council responsibilities. The King County Council oversees transit, public health, and other regional services that are outside the scope of responsibility of the Pierce County Council. These are major differences that contribute to higher staffing levels and salaries in King County. Nevertheless, we include the King County Council in the analysis because comparisons with Pierce County are inevitable.

Seattle City Council also has drawbacks for comparisons with the Pierce County Council in terms of population, density, budget size, and the different kinds of legislative problems presented in an exclusively urban area. However, we include Seattle in the analysis because the organization of its council offers a few interesting points for comparison with the Pierce County Council.

Whatcom County is geographically remote and much smaller than Pierce County. The Whatcom County Council has only five staff and is not a helpful comparison with the Pierce County Council in our opinion. Therefore, we exclude Whatcom County from the later comparisons made in this report.

Thus, to make comparisons with the office of the Pierce County Council, we reviewed the organization charts, types of staff, and other information from the Snohomish County Council, King County Council, and the Seattle City Council.

Exhibit 4 on the next page compares the councils in terms of staff numbers and percentages by functional category. The figures have been adjusted to exclude staff who are placed organizationally in the legislative department but perform non-legislative functions, as detailed in the footnotes to the exhibit.

In Exhibit 4, "Personal Staff" refers to the Council Assistants or Legislative Aides employed by individual members. "Research/Policy/Budget" means all staff devoted to those functions, including analysts and managers. The term "Clerk/Operations" refers to Clerk of the Council work, committee support, and general office support, including managers. "Other Staff" refers to the Council Administrator, Chief of Staff, legal counsel, and communications staff if any.

As indicated by the shading in Exhibit 4, Pierce County has the lowest proportion of Research/Policy/Budget staff and the highest proportion of Clerk/Operations staff.

Exhibit 4

Council Staff in Four Jurisdictions

Council	Members	Total Staff ¹	Personal Staff		Research/Policy/Budget		Clerk/Operations		Other Staff	
			Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Pierce County ²	7	22.0	7	32%	4	18%	10	45%	1	5%
Snohomish County ³	5	17.0	5	29%	5	29%	5	29%	2	12%
King County ⁴	13	100.2	41.2	41%	28.5	28%	23.5	23%	7	7%
Seattle City ⁵	9	53.3	24	45%	13.7	26%	14.6	27%	1	2%

See page 7 for definitions of the various kinds of staff

Notes

¹ Total staff includes actual staff and excludes vacant positions as of May 2000.

² Pierce County Council excludes performance audit (separate budget), government relations (separate budget), communications (funded through County Executive), and two funded positions that are vacant.

³ Snohomish County Council includes all Council positions. Excludes performance audit (located in another department).

⁴ King County Council excludes the "independent legislative branch agencies" (performance auditor, board of appeals, civic TV, citizen complaints/tax advice, and hearing examiner), government relations, and 9.8 vacant personal staff positions.

⁵ Seattle City Council excludes city auditor, archives, and records preservation staff and two other positions that are vacant.

Note: Percentages may not add to 100% because of rounding.

Source: Analysis of data received from the four councils.

Various computations can be made from the data on the previous page, such as the number of staff per councilmember.

Exhibit 5

Staffing Ratios: Staff per Member

<i>Council</i>	<i>Personal Staff</i>	<i>Total Staff</i>
Pierce County Council	1.00	3.14
Snohomish County Council	1.00	3.40
King County Council	3.17	7.71
Seattle City Council	2.67	5.92

As shown in the table, the Pierce County Council has the lowest staffing ratio among the four councils. We believe the comparisons are fair, but some of the complexities should be mentioned.

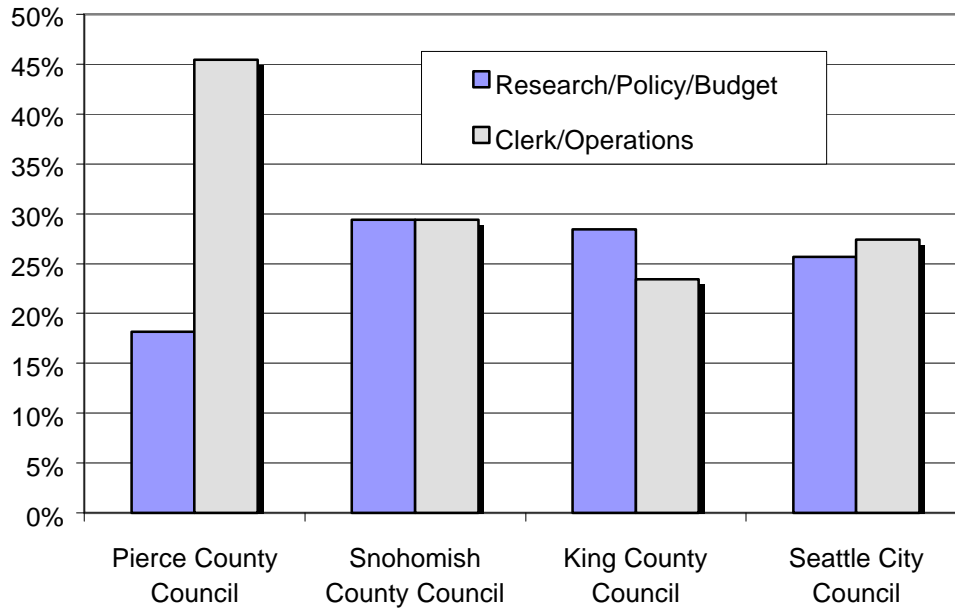
- The figures for the other jurisdictions include communications staff (1 in Snohomish, 4 in King County, and 1 in Seattle), but the Pierce County Council receives its communication staff work from the Executive's office. Adjustments could be made for this structural difference, such as by excluding the communications staff altogether. If this is done, the Pierce and Snohomish ratios are almost identical (3.14 in Pierce, 3.20 in Snohomish) and the other ratios decrease marginally (7.40 in King and 5.81 in Seattle).
- The personal staff (council assistants or legislative aides) have somewhat different functions across jurisdictions, as shown later in the report.
- The higher staffing ratios in King County and Seattle are due in part to the larger populations and budgets in those jurisdictions and the larger scope of council responsibilities.

Putting aside all the complexities, our main comparative findings are as follows:

1. Pierce County Council has the lowest staffing level among the four councils.
2. It has the lowest number and percentage of research staff and the highest percentage of clerk/operations staff. This point is graphed on the next page.

Exhibit 6

Council Staff for Research and Clerk/Operations



In conclusion, we want to repeat a basic point made earlier: the comparative data are suggestive, not conclusive, and require further analysis. To be valid for the Pierce County Council, the interpretation needs to be supported by auditor observations and interview information. This is done in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Council Staff Organization and Management

This chapter reviews each work unit of the Council office in the following order: research staff, council assistants, clerk and operations staff, and council administrator. Cross-cutting issues are then considered, including job descriptions, performance evaluations, and salaries. The overall question is whether the Council staff are organized and managed in a way that best supports the Council mission.

Research and Policy Staff

As discussed in the previous chapter, the comparative data suggest that the Pierce County Council is understaffed for policy research. The Council employs four research staff (or three staff plus the administrator). Each analyst is responsible for research in multiple issue areas.

The Council conducts annual planning retreats to identify policy issue priorities. While these annual plans are useful in making short-term decisions about the chief issues of interest, they do not provide long-term direction for what the Council needs in terms of operations or staffing.

Even if there are further incorporations, the Council's need for research and policy analysis is likely to increase, as incorporations raise complex issues about coordination of services between local governments, and criminal justice remains a county-wide issue. New issues such as salmon protection are emerging, and growth management remains a high priority. In addition, the research staff are responsible for monitoring many other issues as well as operation of the county departments. Our impression is that the research staff are stretched thin to cover planning, land use, criminal justice, and other matters.

According to the Charter, policymaking is the Council's main function. Over the long term, the Council has developed a competitive but cooperative relationship with the Executive. The executive branch has far greater staff resources. Thus the Council depends heavily on executive branch sources for information and often leaves the initiative in policymaking to the Executive. If the Council wishes to take a more leading role in policymaking, as it often maintains, it should increase the number of research staff.

The Council appears greatly under-staffed in the budget area. By charter, the Executive submits a proposed budget by mid-October, and the Council is

required to approve a budget by around December 1. Historically, the Council's response to the Executive budget has been reactive and rushed.

Over the years, the Council has employed budget staff on occasion. However, the Budget Coordinator position is currently vacant and the Council has no staff assigned specifically to budget and fiscal issues. Last year, a contractor (and former staff member) led the Council's review of the Executive's proposed budget, as will occur again this year. This may be a good temporary solution until the Council clarifies its role in the budget process. If the Council wishes to take a more proactive role on the budget, it needs full-time staff devoted to budget and fiscal analysis.

When the Pierce County Council reviews the Executive's proposed budget in October and November, one or perhaps two of the research staff are assigned to assist in the budget review. In Snohomish County Council, it appears that all research staff members are assigned to assist the Council's budget coordinator. The main point is that all three of the other councils employ budget analysts for year-round work, as shown in the following chart. The budget and fiscal staff are a subset of the research staff.

Exhibit 7

Research and Budget Staff in Four Councils

<i>Council</i>	<i>Total Research Staff</i>	<i>Dedicated Budget and Fiscal Staff</i>
Pierce County Council ¹	4	0
Snohomish County Council	5	1
King County Council	28.5	7.5
Seattle City Council	13.7	3
¹ Pierce hired a contractor for budget analysis in 1999 and 2000.		
<i>Note: Figures include the administrator, if any, of the research unit.</i>		

The above figures make clear that other councils devote more resources to budget and fiscal analysis. Besides wanting a more proactive budget role, some members of the Pierce County Council expressed a desire in interviews for better information on agency performance after the budget has been approved. This kind of work requires ongoing budget and fiscal analysis by full-time staff and also, possibly, creating a closer relationship between the performance audit function and the budget process.

Council Assistants

In the early to mid 1990s, Council Assistant (CA) positions were gradually introduced as personal staff to councilmembers. According to the job description, "work is performed with considerable independence and with supervision from the Councilmember." The seven Assistants have a mix of job responsibilities at the discretion of their member. The one commonality is constituent service.

Based on interviews, the seven Assistants have varying views of their roles in the office in relation to the clerical and research staff. Some CA's perform work similar to that of a clerk, and some overlap in function with the research staff. Because the CA's differ in work style, the other Council staff, especially the clerks and receptionists, have developed different ranges of coverage and support for the various councilmembers. The situation appears very fluid and dependent on personality.

In interviews, some councilmembers expressed concern about the uneven workload among the Assistants and wondered whether each member requires personal staff. This is a political question that we could not address, since it is difficult to measure workload among the Assistants. In other councils, as shown in the previous chapter, each member has at least one personal assistant. (The figures are one aide per member in Snohomish County Council and an average of 3.17 per member in King County and 2.67 per member in Seattle.)

In the Snohomish County Council and Seattle City Council, legislative aides work as personal staff to their members and have a role in committee work. Besides providing constituent service, they also work as clerk staff in the committee chaired by their member. Thus the legislative aides in Snohomish County Council and Seattle City Council perform functions that in Pierce County are divided between two kinds of positions: council assistants and clerical committee staff.

Clerk/Operations Staff

The Council employs nine Clerk/Operations staff, or ten if we include the Legal Clerk who is placed in the research unit. The Clerk/Operations unit includes three sets of integrated activities:

1. **Clerk of the Council functions (3 staff).** This includes work to support the weekly Council meetings, such as preparing the agenda and meeting notice, recording votes, maintaining the official record, and other duties. This work

is performed by the Clerk of the Council (Administrator for Clerks and Operations), assisted by two deputies.

2. **Clerical support for committees of the Council (3 staff).** This work is similar to the Clerk function at Council meetings but is less formal. The staff include the Lead Committee Clerk and two Committee Clerks.
3. **Office support (3 staff),** such as reception, payroll, budget preparation, invoices, training, web site, and computer support. The staff are the Operations Clerk and two Receptionists.

In all areas of Clerk/Operations, job assignments are not closely related to the job descriptions. When asked why they were assigned to particular committees or certain tasks, some clerks were unsure. In some cases, staff inherited their duties when another staff member was on sick leave. In other cases, work assignments are a matter of staff preference or member preference. Overall, the assignment of work among the clerk/operations staff does not seem to follow the basic management principle that work tasks should be associated with positions, not with individuals.

Clerk of the Council

The office of the Clerk of the Council is mentioned in the Council's Rules of Procedure (Pierce County Code, Chapter 1.28). The duties are to publish legal notices of public hearings on proposed ordinances, determine the format of resolutions and ordinances, provide access to public records, and other matters. Clerk functions are combined with supervisory authority, as the Clerk of the Council is also the Administrator for Clerks and Operations.

The Clerk function is organized and staffed somewhat differently in the various jurisdictions, as shown below.

Exhibit 8

Clerk of the Council Staffing

<i>Council</i>	<i>Clerk of Council Staff</i>	<i>Functions</i>
Pierce County Council	3	Clerk
Snohomish County Council	3	Clerk and Code Revisor
King County Council	7	Clerk and Code Revisor
Seattle City Council	3	Clerk

Clerk of the Council staff in Snohomish and King County are responsible for performing both Clerk and Code Revisor functions. The Code Revisor function in Pierce County is assigned to the Legal Counsel assisted by the Legal Clerk (located in another organizational unit). If the Pierce County Council wishes to reorganize these functions, other models can be found in the other councils.

Clerical Committee Staff

Three clerks provide direct support for the Council’s four standing committees. The committees are Rules, Budget and Operations, Planning, and Public Works; two committees meet weekly, and two meet every other week. There may be room for greater efficiencies in this area, as suggested by the comparative data.

Exhibit 9

Standing Committee Clerical Staff in Four Councils

<i>Council</i>	<i>Standing Committees</i>	<i>Assigned Clerical Staff</i>
Pierce County Council	4	3
Snohomish County Council	5	0*
King County Council	13	5
Seattle City Council	10	0*
* In Snohomish and Seattle, this function is performed by legislative aides (personal staff of councilmembers).		

The clerk staff in Pierce County also provide support for other public meetings, such as the monthly Performance Audit Committee meeting, the bi-weekly meeting of the Criminal Justice Task Force, and weekly committees of the whole and study sessions. The three other councils also have a significant number of meetings besides the standing committees that require clerk coverage.

Other Matters

The clerks formerly provided member support by doing some of the work now performed by the council assistants. It seems likely that clerical unit workload diminished after the council assistant positions were created several years ago.

Technology issues related to clerical staffing are discussed later in the report (page 20). The issues relate not so much to staffing level but to making greater use of technology to simplify clerical processes and perhaps indirectly lighten the clerical workload.

Conclusion

Overall, the available evidence suggests that the Council may be overstaffed in Clerical/Operations. The main points are as follows:

- Six clerks (Clerk of the Council staff and committee staff) cover Council meetings and committee hearings, and four other clerks provide office support. This seems a lighter workload and higher staffing level than in the other councils.
- The evolution of the Council Assistant positions eliminated the need for clerical staff to provide direct member support and constituent relations work, yet there was no reduction in the clerical staff.
- Greater efficiency would be gained by assigning the Council Assistants to provide clerk support for committees, as is the practice in Snohomish County Council and Seattle City Council.
- Workload does not appear to be balanced evenly across the clerical staff.
- A factor that may contribute to clerical overstaffing is the hierarchy of job classifications (Council Administration 1, 2, 3, and 4) and the resulting semi-supervisory role associated with some positions. It is hard to see a need for so many job classifications.

Council Administrator

The Council office has operated without a Council Administrator since mid-1998. In 1999, the council chair took on the interim functions of a staff director while also performing the duties of a councilmember. Rather than fill the Council Administrator position, the Council eventually decided to restructure the office and share management responsibilities.

In September 1999, the Council enacted Resolution R99-105. It formally established “a shared supervisory administrative structure” headed by the Administrator for the Clerks and Operations and the Administrator for Research and Policy. Management responsibilities were placed in a management team made up of the same two positions plus the Legal Counsel and three councilmembers (chair, vice chair, and executive pro-tem). The management team is shaded in the table of organization (page 3 above).

In interviews, most councilmembers and staff reported that they are satisfied with the present arrangement and that the two main units, research and clerical, operate well as separately administered units. However, we have a different assessment than what we heard in interviews.

The present arrangement does work, but at a price. In our opinion, the shared management strategy deprives the Council of cohesive staff leadership, tends to perpetuate the status quo, and accepts as a fact of life the Council's lack of strategic direction. Shared management also means that the three officers of the council (chair, vice chair, and executive pro tem) operate as part-time office managers. This raises the issue of whether a councilmember can legislate and manage effectively at the same time.

The primary function of a Council Administrator should be to act as a catalyst for the Council to function more effectively as a legislative body. The Council chair changes each year. With term limits, the members change over time. To provide more continuity, vision, and sustained leadership, we believe a Council Administrator is needed. Shared management has increased the salaries of the two office co-administrators. In the long run, it may be less expensive to hire a single Council Administrator.

Job Descriptions and Personnel Evaluations

Many of the current job descriptions are very general, and they do not provide meaningful standards for staff performance. There are probably too many job classes (e.g., Council Research 1, 2, 3, and 4; Council Administration 1, 2, 3, and 4). This may encourage unnecessary hierarchy in the office. In our opinion, the job descriptions need to be re-done.

Many personnel evaluations are not current. As of December 1999, 44 percent of staff evaluations had not occurred within the required year. (As of May 2000, as this report was being completed, about 23 percent of the evaluations are not current.) As a result, a staff member's role tends to become more personally defined when personnel evaluations are not conducted on a regular basis.

Salaries

We studied the salary ranges of Council staff and developed comparative data from three other councils (Snohomish, King, and Seattle). We did not study internal equity--that is, how actual salaries for particular Council staff relate to each other or how they relate to salaries for other Pierce County employees.

Our external comparison of salary ranges is based on the view that legislative staff functions in local government are basically similar across jurisdictions, no matter what the specific job descriptions might say. (Problems in the Pierce County job descriptions are mentioned above.)

Exhibit 10 on the next page presents the salary ranges on an annual basis.⁴ The exhibit requires careful study. Shading indicates the Pierce County positions with salary ranges that are similar to those in other jurisdictions (within a band of about 5 percent). Our three main findings are as follows.

1. The salary range for the Council Administrator position (not filled) is similar with Snohomish County Council and King County Council. This position does not exist in Seattle City Council.
2. The salary ranges for the main research positions (Council Research 3 and 4) are similar to Snohomish County Council and Seattle City Council. The research salaries in King County Council are higher.
3. For all other positions shown in the chart, the Pierce County Council salary ranges are quite dissimilar to those in the other councils:
 - Much higher than in Snohomish County
 - Quite mixed (some higher, some lower) when compared with King County and Seattle.

The salary data may be considered in relation to other factors discussed in the report, such as the apparent overstaffing of clerk/operations functions and the limited clarity of the current job descriptions. Another related factor is the absence of a Council Administrator. This means that salary decisions are decentralized and, in our opinion, more subject to political factors.

Salary ranges for individual positions may be found by studying the exhibit. We believe the positions shown in the chart are broadly comparable. However, when considering individual salaries, it must be cautioned that specific jobs may vary across jurisdictions in scope of responsibility, employees supervised, and other matters. This is evident from the organization charts and related materials that we collected from the other jurisdictions. The materials are available in the work papers of this report.

⁴ The official work week is 35 hours in Pierce County and King County, and 40 hours in Snohomish County and the City of Seattle; thus salaries are sometimes analyzed on an hourly basis. While hourly comparisons are technically accurate, they are not realistic for two reasons: (1) Council staff put in the hours needed to complete the job, without regard to the official work week; and (2) For professional staff, annual salary is a better measure than hourly wage.

Exhibit 10

Annual Salary Ranges in Four Councils

Shading indicates Pierce County salary ranges are similar to other councils (plus or minus 5%)

No shading means that the salary ranges are not similar

Pierce County Position (or counterpart in other jurisdictions)		Pierce County Council	Snohomish County Council	King County Council	Seattle City Council	Percentage Difference: Pierce Compared with Others		
						Snohomish County Council	King County Council	Seattle City Council
Council Member		66,225 some at 65,405	73,576 Chair +10%	95,056	84,815 some at 77,465	-10%	-30%	-22%
Council Administrator (position not filled in Pierce)	Low	78,515	72,563	87,870	--	+8%	-11%	
	High	105,979	102,533	109,738	--	+3%	-3%	
Administrator for Research & Policy	Low	67,740	--	87,870	77,423		-23%	-13%
	High	91,400	--	109,738	104,087		-17%	-12%
Clerk of the Council	Low	67,740	47,919	67,613	60,155	+41%	+0%	+13%
	High	91,400	58,211	84,440	85,023	+57%	+8%	+8%
Deputy Clerk (Council Deputy Clerk 2 in Pierce)	Low	49,704	43,429	50,481	--	+14%	-2%	
	High	67,085	52,835	63,044	--	+27%	+6%	
Deputy (Assistant) Clerk (Council Deputy Clerk 1 in Pierce)	Low	38,875	35,931	--	35,809	+8%		+9%
	High	52,489	43,696	--	41,635	+20%		+26%
Committee Clerk (composite of Pierce Council Admin 2, 3, 4)	Low	38,875	--	34,622	40,048		+12%	-3%
	High	67,085	--	47,460	46,729		+41%	+44%
Admin Support (Pierce Admin 3: personnel, budget, computers, etc.)	Low	42,479	32,430	several positions,		+31%		
	High	57,330	39,434	cannot compare		+45%		
Receptionist (Council Admin 1 in Pierce)	Low	30,376	25,903	29,847	28,522	+17%	+2%	+6%
	High	38,220	31,455	38,093	32,761	+22%	+0%	+17%
Entry-Level Research (Council Research 1 in Pierce)	Low	38,875	--	50,481	46,855		-23%	-17%
	High	52,489	--	63,044	62,598		-17%	-16%
Main Research Position (Council Research 3 in Pierce)	Low	56,857	55,410	66,761	56,689	+3%	-15%	+0%
	High	76,749	78,298	83,376	76,379	-2%	-8%	+0%
Top Research Position (Council Research 4 in Pierce)	Low	64,100	--	76,776	66,565		-17%	-4%
	High	86,559	--	95,882	86,234		-10%	+0%
Council Assistants (LA 2 in King, LA band 2 in Seattle)	Low	46,082	37,743	36,000	38,315	+22%	+28%	+20%
	High	62,226	51,881	76,600	76,630	+20%	-19%	-19%
Legal Counsel 1	Low	60,479	--	76,776	--		-21%	
	High	81,663	--	95,882	--		-15%	
Legal Counsel 2 (In Pierce, this position is not used at present)	Low	78,515	--	87,870	--		-11%	
	High	105,979	--	109,738	--		-3%	
Code Revisor (King Co. only--- overlaps with Pierce Legal Counsel 1)	Low	--	--	58,053	--			
	High	--	--	72,501	--			
Legal Clerk (assistant Code Revisor, committee support, etc.)	Low	38,875	--	--	--			
	High	52,489	--	--	--			

Source: informal survey, May 2000.

Technology

Conventional PC-based applications for word processing, spreadsheet analysis, desktop publishing, and e-mail are available and used often by clerical and other staff. The staff recently performed (and survived) a transition from WordPerfect to Word software. Some of the clerical staff are beginning to use e-mail to send notices of public meetings, thereby reducing postage costs.

The Council's page on the county website was recently improved and provides good information about the Council, but more substantive information could be included. For example, the web site has a list of ordinances enacted in 2000, but there is no link to the text of the ordinances. These items must be retrieved manually by Council staff.

Overall, it appears that some of the work in Clerical/Operations is unautomated, labor intensive, paper-driven and process-focused and does not use existing technology to the fullest degree. Software applications exist to help staff track ordinances, notify citizens of hearings by e-mail, and scan documents rather than maintain a large manual file of ordinances and resolutions.

Space Issues

Physical working conditions are inadequate. Seven councilmembers and the 22 staff are shoe-horned into space on the tenth floor of the County-City Building. Offices for the policy staff and clerical staff are cramped cubicles that lack privacy and have congested aisles. The work environment is crowded and stressful. Because of the physical limitations, it is unlikely that the work space can be redesigned to better accommodate the current level of Council staff.

Beyond issues of space and design, it is open to question whether the location of the Council Chambers and offices compromises public access. The County-City Building has limited parking and a large number of visitors, many involved in court appearances. It can take 10 minutes to travel by elevator from the lobby to the tenth floor. If better quarters can be found out of the County-City Building, we encourage the Council to explore that possibility.

Chapter 4

Conclusions and Recommendations

This audit examined whether the Council staff are organized and managed in a way that supports the Council's mission as "the policy determining body of the County." We identified several areas for improvement, such as less involvement by members in management functions, need for a Council Administrator, insufficient research and budget staff, apparent overstaffing of clerical functions, and salary ranges that for many jobs are dissimilar to salaries in other councils.

These are issues of staff organization and management. Before taking action on the staff issues, however, the Council should address basic issues about the Council's role in county government. We believe the Council could benefit from engaging in a planning process with two related components: strategic planning and a functional review of Council operations.

1. Strategic planning could help clarify the Council's mission and role in county government. This would involve assessment of the Council's role in policymaking and the budget process, including the needed staffing level. Strategic planning would also involve coming to agreement on long-term policy priorities for the county.
2. A functional review of Council operations would assess how the Council conducts the business of legislating.

The planning process is intended to provide a framework for Council action in the future, including what to do about the staff issues. For example, the report suggests that the Council needs budget staff. However, prior to hiring budget staff, we think the Council should consider and formally agree on the Council's role in the budget process. The same could be said about the Council's need for more policy researchers. Before hiring or reassigning staff, the Council should first clarify its role in policymaking.

Council organization and operations affect many of the staffing issues addressed in this report. If the Council wishes to play a larger role in policymaking, as all members suggested in interviews, it should reconsider its standing committee structure (currently Rules, Public Works, Planning, and Budget and Operations). Three examples are given below.

- The Rules Committee is exclusively concerned with setting agendas for the Council and the committees, which raises questions about the use of member and staff time. None of the three other councils considered in this study has a Rules Committee; agendas are set by administrative action, or by the Council chair and the committees chairs.
- Members are keenly aware of the public policy importance and large financial impact of criminal justice issues. The Council recently organized a Criminal Justice Task Force with representatives from various county agencies, but the Council has no standing committee on criminal justice.
- Budget and Operations has a very wide scope of responsibility (all budget and fiscal aspects of county government, plus all county operations). This may be an efficient structure if supplemented by other committees or sub-committees charged with oversight of selected parts of county government.

All organizations, including the Council, grow and develop, learn from their experiences, and adopt new practices to become more effective organizations. Twenty years is a short time in the evolutionary history of legislative bodies. The Council is still new and finding its way.

As the Council leadership changes each year and the membership changes over time through elections and term limits, it is difficult to see a Council that is greater than the sum of its members. In our opinion, the Council needs to develop a long-term strategic direction. The absence of a strategic plan places staff in a difficult position without a firm sense of job requirements.

A strategic plan could give the Council the direction it needs to make decisions about the distribution of its staff resources. A strategic plan would also define a set of standards for evaluating whether the Council is functioning effectively as a legislative body and playing an appropriate role in county government. By setting long-term operational goals, the Council would be in a better position to determine what it wants to do regarding issues such as the following:

- ❑ Role of the Council in policymaking (as opposed to the policy choice itself).
- ❑ Role of the Council in the budget process.
- ❑ Role of the Council in monitoring County operations.
- ❑ Structure of the standing committees of the Council, including the number of committees and subject matter.
- ❑ Functional review of other aspects of Council operations as needed.

- ❑ Distribution and organization of staff resources, that is, the type and number of staff needed to support Council operations and Council priorities.
- ❑ Procedure for identifying priority policy issues and allocating staff resources to these issues.
- ❑ Clarification of working relationship with the County Executive.
- ❑ Needs for technology and other forms of support.
- ❑ Expectations and provision for public involvement.

Our recommendations for the Council's consideration are as follows.

1. The Council should begin a strategic planning process to define its mission and long-term goals, thereby identifying the kind of staff structure and support that is needed. Planning should also include a functional review of Council operations, such as the committee structure and other important aspects of legislating.
2. Hire a Council Administrator. Phase out the current co-administration and shared management (Resolution R99-105) in one to two years, as the Council wishes.
3. Revise job descriptions, eliminate unneeded job classifications, and revise salary schedules as needed to be comparable with other jurisdictions. Ensure that staff performance evaluations are completed on schedule.
4. Increase the number of policy research staff, especially staff devoted to budget analysis on a year-round basis, if the Council wishes to take a more proactive role in the budget process.
5. Reorganize clerical support, including Clerk functions and committee support based on the Council's expectations consistent with its strategic plan. Automate clerical processes, such as sending meeting notices by e-mail and tracking ordinances electronically. Consider assigning Council Assistants to committee clerical work, as done in Snohomish County Council and Seattle City Council. Following this recommendation may require the Council to make clerical staffing reallocations or reductions.

Appendix 1

Audit Objectives

1. Assess the Council's standards and expectations for support of its legislative function.
2. Evaluate the effectiveness of the current administrative structure in meeting the functional needs of the Council.
3. Compare the Council's level of staffing, workload, productivity, and salaries to benchmarked legislative organizations.
4. Analyze or develop possible performance measures for the Council. *
5. Review the effectiveness of Council internal communications and decision-making processes; review ways to streamline process requirements.

* During the audit process, we found it was not feasible to address performance measures at this time. We believe that performance measures can be best addressed as part of strategic planning, which is recommended in the report.

Appendix 2

Agency Response

The Council reviewed a draft of this report, agreed orally with most of the recommendations, but chose not to submit a written response.