

# STATE OF WHATCOM COUNTY 2021

COUNCIL MEETING, APRIL 6

Good evening Whatcom County Council, County residents, County employees and other elected officials. This is my first address on the State of the County, and I am pleased to share that the State of the County is strong.

In January 2020, I started my term as Whatcom County Executive, ready to take up the challenges of our common interest and lead County employees and our citizens towards a better future. What a year 2020 was! I think we are all glad that it is over, and we expect a better 2021, with schools, businesses, and restaurants open and a return to some normalcy in our personal and professional lives. At the same time, I can assure you that many changes brought about in our daily routines by COVID-19 are here to stay. The pandemic dramatically accelerated many processes, catapulting the world about 10 years ahead in many respects.

We all remember the Super Bowl floods in Nooksack and Sumas in February 2020, and then the global pandemic followed immediately in March. A little over a year ago, I declared a local emergency to stand up Whatcom Unified Command, as schools, businesses, and offices were shut down. Then life came to a virtual standstill.

In the closing days of the year, we saw a major disaster averted, when the crude oil train derailed in Custer. A timely and well-executed response by local emergency responders saved the day. Their professionalism and courage are commendable.

Today optimism is in the air. We can start breathing a little easier as vaccines are being administered. Nearly one in three residents of our county have initiated the vaccination process and one in five have completed it. Restaurants and cafes are again serving customers, and schools are returning to in-person instruction. Our County departments are planning steps to open our offices and safely provide public access.

However, a word of caution is needed. We are not out of the woods yet. An ounce of prevention will go a long way toward achieving our goal of a healthy community and thriving economy.

I would like to offer my sincere thanks to County Council for shepherding County policy and supporting my Administration and County employees during this pandemic.

Faced with an unprecedented challenge, Whatcom County Government rallied, demonstrating its resourcefulness and resilience. Despite the obstacles, we succeeded in maintaining a good level of service for our citizens across many departments. We have accomplished many things on many fronts, and we are now focusing our attention on areas where progress has lagged. As you know my major focus areas are: affordable housing, water for fish and farms, the Child and Family action plan, racial inequity, capital projects, and securing state and federal resources for County priorities.

Let me share some highlights of County operations in 2020. The detailed accomplishments of each department are enclosed for your reading as the full document of State of the County 2021 and will be posted on the County website.

## COVID-19 RESPONSE, HEALTH DEPARTMENT AND WHATCOM UNIFIED COMMAND

The County Administration and Council reacted quickly to the pandemic. This included restricting access to our facilities, creating work-at-home options for employees where possible, and instituting other safety precautions. Every department, every manager and every elected official did their best to ensure that we keep our employees safe. And it worked. We have seen only a small number of incidents related to our staff.

Whatcom County Sheriff's Emergency Management Department stood up Whatcom Unified Command and coordinated the COVID-19 response, learning and adapting as the pandemic unfolded. The Sheriff's deputies, EMS, firefighters and other first responders deserve recognition for their heroic service.

The County Health Department under the new leadership of Erika Lautenbach was immediately faced with the COVID-19 response. Staff was augmented and volunteers joined the effort to support Unified Command. Thirty-nine new staff members and 383 general volunteers helped with COVID-19 response.

Focused teams, including healthcare, business, education, and isolation/quarantine, were created with tailored expertise to help organizations navigate through the unprecedented situation. This extraordinary effort included 49 Case and Contact Investigators, who completed 5,529 case interviews and 8,708 contact interviews. Two fixed sites for testing and a mobile unit were put into operation.

An Employer Support Task Force brought employers, non-profits, and businesses together to problem-solve how to operate under Washington State's guidance for safe reopening. The ongoing campaign, Safer, Stronger, Together, continues to support local businesses now.

In addition, \$450,000 in rental and mortgage assistance was provided to over 150 households using CARES Act funding, and contracts totaling \$500,000 were executed with housing and behavioral health providers. A collaborative -- the Community Vaccination Center was created -- in partnership with private healthcare partners, a local pharmacy, BTC, and WCC. Launched on March 6, the clinic has administered more than 2000 doses and is ready to vaccinate 4,400 people each week. As of last week, 63,000 residents have received first dose and 38,000 have been fully vaccinated.

## INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Whatcom County's Information Technology Department played a pivotal role in our response to COVID-19 in 2020 and it continues to provide a backbone for our operations in 2021. Without the timely response from the IT department, the pandemic would have totally overwhelmed our ability to provide services, county operations and continuance of government in a coherent manner.

The IT department immediately sprang into action to implement remote access to the County government by deploying new digital technologies to maintain government services. It facilitated the remote work opportunities for our employees, transitioned County Council meetings to Zoom, and created physically distanced communications opportunities for all departments and our interaction with the public and partner organizations.

The IT department provided crucial support to the Auditor's office for the Presidential Election, installing new servers, self-service kiosks, election security measures and cameras to live-stream the ballot counting process.

## WHATCOM COUNTY EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES

The Whatcom County Emergency Medical Services system was quick to respond to the increased demand for services. There were more than 25,000 responses in 2020. EMS kept first responders safe, and the EMS team leaders quickly mobilized to create response plans, safety guides and worst-case scenarios for system overload. EMS continues to support various components of the COVID response.

## HUMAN RESOURCES DEPARTMENT

Our Human Resources Department was able to respond to the pandemic in a timely and equitable manner. Our HR team ramped up employee communications and staffed Emergency Operations with people from County departments, several city departments, and private companies. Recognizing the economic uncertainty and need for fiscal prudence, they implemented a hiring freeze and furloughs and reached agreements with all labor groups to forego cost of living increases. Thanks to these actions, we were able to avoid layoffs and keep our teams intact, which was very important to me.

## PARKS AND RECREATION DEPARTMENT

Our Parks and Recreation Department was able to keep our parks and trails open throughout the year. Although COVID-19 restrictions and closures impacted campgrounds, picnic shelters, historical museums, border crossings and events, the department overall saw an additional 341,000 visitors for a 22% increase in use over the same period as the previous year, and a year-end total of over 1,546,000 visitors. With the physical buildings closed, the Parks staff continued to maintain outreach to residents by newsletter, phone and online classes and activities.

## AUDITOR, ASSESSOR AND TREASURER'S OFFICES

In 2020, the pandemic created some unique challenges for the Auditor, Assessor and Treasurer's offices. They were forced to develop new strategies to continue providing customer service while keeping our staff and the public safe. The Auditor's office flawlessly handled record-breaking voter turnout – nearly 88%, processing 25,000 more ballots than the previous record.

All three offices were closed to walk-in customers, and scheduled appointments were required for usual services in all these offices. In the Auditor's office, the number of recorded documents increased to 63,080 documents, up 47% from 2019; and electronic recording increased to 75%, enabling staff to record documents while working from home. This was made possible again by deploying new equipment and technology.

The Assessor's office implemented an electronic delivery option for business and personal property listings and notices, while the new Parcel Viewer GIS interactive map was launched for public use. The Assessor's office also completed the revaluation of all property in the county; physically inspecting one sixth of the properties.

The Treasurer's office continued to maintain access to public services with the deployment of new technology and an appointment scheduling system that kept employees and the public safe. The Treasurer also took the step to

postpone the property tax deadline for the first half payments, which created some breathing room for people whose lives were disrupted by the impacts of the Stay Home order.

## LAW AND JUSTICE

Like the rest of Whatcom County Government, Whatcom County Superior Court and District Court endured significant challenges during the past year related to the impact of the COVID pandemic. The courts were able to keep their doors open and provide services and access to justice despite having to rapidly adapt to the realities presented by the spread of the disease.

The County Prosecutor's office and Public Defender's office also immediately adjusted to the new reality and worked with the judges to follow the State Supreme Court guidelines and the State Department of Health protocols.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that the functioning capacity of the courts has been severely constrained, causing a significant backlog of unresolved cases. This impacts our entire justice system and the people it serves. It will require a special effort and resources to overcome this backlog and return to a properly functioning justice system.

## FINANCE AND ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICES

The Finance Department along with Administrative Services teams of Facilities, HR and IT deserve accolades for a job well done. With their dedication to the work on hand, almost twice the number of annual contracts and transactions were accomplished without additional staff. Despite the uncharted territory of handling additional pandemic-related expenses, threats of a financial downturn, business closures, and high unemployment, they had a plan, adapted that plan as needed and ended up being quite successful.

As of December 31st, 2020:

- The General Fund Cash balance at year-end was \$14,904,554, which is higher than the original projections for the 2020 budget.
- The COVID 19 Fund, which started in March 2020 with a \$4 million loan from the EDI fund, is now close to \$12 million.
- Property tax revenues came in at 99% of budget.
- Sales tax revenue were at 96.5% of budget.

Our Facilities team oversaw the construction and completion of the new Crisis Stabilization Center. This \$13 million project more than doubled the number of beds available for detox and mental health stabilization in our county. The center is well-designed and staffed with professionals who can get the patients stabilized and ready to enter a longer-term and less intensive care environment. It's already changing the lives of our community members for the better.

I'd like to say a few words about CARES Act Funds and how we used them for the benefit of our community. First of all, the most significant achievement we attained was the high level of cooperation and collaboration between the County Administration, all seven cities of the county and the Regional Economic Partnership at the Port of Bellingham. All the efforts to manage and mitigate the impacts of this pandemic would not have been possible

without this full cooperation across these jurisdictions. We owe a debt of gratitude to all the mayors. Each of them recognized the ‘need of the time’ and worked collaboratively to “do the right thing” for our community.

We pooled all the CARES ACT funding and planned together to deploy the funds for various programs through joint consultations. We received approximately \$26 million in CARES Act allocations for the County and all cities. The money was distributed as follows:

- Over \$10 million spent on Public Health Emergency Response (WCHD and WUC staffing, contact tracing, testing, Isolation/Quarantine, and current vaccination efforts)
- Almost \$12 million spent on Community programs as following:
  - Approximately \$5 million for small business support helping 420 businesses and providing financial support for the “Think Local First” campaign
  - \$2.6 million in rural school district support for technology, PPE, and other equipment
  - \$1 million to support over 30 local childcare facilities.
  - \$1 million for social services (behavioral health/human services),
  - \$650,000 in food security to support food banks in Bellingham, Blaine, Foothills, Salvation Army, Ferndale, Project Hope and Council on Aging with the acquisition of new equipment and refrigerated delivery trucks.
  - \$500,000 in housing assistance with direct support for rent and mortgage payments
  - \$600,000 in homeless shelter for support toward Base Camp and temporary shelter at Bellingham High School
  - Over \$500,000 for purchase of tiny homes for unsheltered people in our county

Whatcom County Health Department is currently using the remaining \$2.9 million of CARES Act funds for vaccination and COVID-19 testing efforts.

Whatcom County Council passed the 2021-22 Biennium budget with approximately 9% cuts from the 2020 budget. As we continue to see better than anticipated revenues and will have a significant injection of federal aid, I expect there will be reasons to revisit some of the austerity measures which were taken when drafting the budget.

In 2021, Whatcom County has received approximately \$17 million directly from the US Treasury for rental assistance, and we are working with our Housing agencies, including Opportunity Council to deploy these funds till 2024. Whatcom County agencies were also awarded \$8.5 million from the Washington State Housing Trust Fund for four affordable housing projects to build 170 homes:

- Lhaq'temish Foundation (Eagle Haven),
- Housing Authority of the City of Bellingham (Samish Commons Senior),
- Mercy Housing Northwest (Barkley Family Housing),
- Kulshan Community Land Trust (Telegraph Townhomes).

Just two weeks ago, the Whatcom County Council approved an ordinance under HB 1590 to fund affordable housing and behavioral health services. Together with the City of Bellingham’s portion, this initiative will provide \$5,000,000 annually to be deployed in support of affordable housing in our community. This is the first time that all small cities will be able to bring forward affordable housing projects to leverage funds from State and Federal agencies.

We are in discussions with all mayors to expand Economic Development Investment funding to support infrastructure for private housing developments that would include a certain percentage for affordable housing. We are also working with the Regional Economic Partnership and mayors to reform the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) List and review the EDI application process and policies for future projects.

## AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN ACT FOR 2021 AND BEYOND

Everyone is talking about the American Rescue Act funds being allocated to Whatcom County and each of the city governments. It is expected the combined total of \$150 million is expected to be deployed to all Whatcom County governments, tribes, schools, WTA, childcare, and other entities. We are waiting for guidance from Treasury and anticipating close to \$45 million allocated to Whatcom County government over the next 3 years. We will use the lessons learned during this pandemic to deploy these funds in such a way as to have the greatest positive impact on our community.

## UPDATES ON OTHER EXECUTIVE INITIATIVES:

My administration will continue to work on the priorities laid out at the start of my term in January 2020. These include:

### WATER SETTLEMENT

We have continued dialogue with the Department of Ecology, Lummi Nation, Nooksack Tribe, Agriculture Water Board, and other caucuses from the Planning Unit to bring out the ideas for solving our water issues. I published a White Paper to guide future discussions. We are awaiting a decision from the Washington state legislature on the proposal presented by the Department of Ecology to move further on this subject.

### AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Affordable housing is much more than just the housing crisis. It is intertwined with economic development and the future tax base for all local governments. Many local companies are finding it difficult to expand and hire new employees because of exorbitant housing costs. Also, potential new companies are weighing the cost of housing as a serious factor when deciding whether to set up business in Whatcom County. With all the industrial land we have available in Whatcom County, new companies are finding it difficult to find *ready-to-build* commercial industrial land, which is hampering our economic development efforts.

Affordable housing is a nationwide issue, as average wages have not kept up with average house prices. Half a million dollars for an average 3-bedroom home is not affordable or sustainable. My administration is working with all mayors to use EDI funds, 1406 Funds and, in the near future the 1590 fund, to support efforts to increase the inventory of affordable housing in our county.

I would like to emphasize that money alone is not a good answer to the affordable housing problem. We must reform our land use policies, increase the buildable lands, create countywide coherent land use policy, and reform the permitting systems to incentivize the new construction. I am proposing to develop a wetlands mitigation bank to alleviate many issues for new construction. I will be bringing a resolution to this effect to the County Council and seek your support for this initiative.

## CHILD AND FAMILY ACTION PLAN

This much needed community initiative was proposed by the Council in the 2021-22 biennium budget approval process. We all know that the first 1,000 days in the life of a newborn child are most critical for better outcomes in later life. This action plan is being implemented as the Council recently appointed the Child and Family Task Force to establish the new structures and processes to elevate the well-being of all children and families as a county priority.

## RACIAL EQUITY

A year ago, there were protests in the streets all across America, including right here in Whatcom County. The killings of people of color, some caught vividly on film, provoked outrage and disgust. In the wake of those events, a community listening series on racial inequity was organized by Bellingham Mayor Fleetwood and my office. One of the key takeaways of those discussions was the need for an organized process to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. Formal discussions have already started to develop a countywide organization under the name of Racial Equity Commission or “Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Commission” that could examine how we can make our community free from embedded prejudices and inequities and suggest steps local governments could take to rid ourselves of this legacy.

I appreciate that the County Council accepted my budget request to fund this effort over the next two years. After extensive collaborative work with concerned community members and the City of Bellingham, we now have a roadmap for the development of the commission, which will be a community-led process. I anticipate bringing an interlocal agreement forward for Council’s approval in the very near future.

## BORDER COMMUNITIES

Before I conclude, I would like to recognize the special sacrifices made by some of our community members. I want to commend the residents of Point Roberts for the resilience and patience they have shown during the Covid-19 pandemic. This unique community is going through tough challenges because of the closure of the Canadian Border and travel restrictions. I will continue to push our representatives at the federal level to find reasonable solutions to allow the border to open sooner rather than later for Point Roberts residents.

The border closure has caused untold hardship to many families both in Whatcom County and British Columbia. Canadian business investments, new enterprises and shoppers are an important part of Whatcom County’s economy. Even though commercial traffic has remained open, many small businesses in Sumas, Blaine and Lynden have been significantly impacted financially and socially during this year-long border closure. We hope the border restrictions may be relaxed this summer as more and more people receive vaccination in the coming months on both sides of the border. In particular, it would be wonderful if we could celebrate the Peace Arch Centennial in September with open arms and an open border!

My report would be incomplete without a message of gratitude to staff. I’d like to thank our engaged staff for their ongoing enthusiasm, intelligence and support through my first year as County Executive. I knew as a County Council member that the staff at Whatcom County were good – but now I know that more than ever, as I have learned what they do and have experienced the depth and breadth of their knowledge, which is invaluable to me. Our combined ability to work across offices and departments and problem solve and support each other has been

vital. We learned a lot of lessons and we learned that we are truly a team with the culture that we are all in this together.

We are also blessed to have in our County many people who volunteer to be on boards and commissions that provide direct advice and assistance to us in County government. I applaud their public service; and it has been vital to me this first year as it will be on an ongoing basis to work with many, many citizens, engaged with local tribes, small city mayors, Mayor Fleetwood and all of our external agency partners in the important work of achieving great things for our citizens.

Let me end as I began, with a note of optimism. I have found, in this first year of learning that the job is not without challenges and frustrations, but I remain positive about our collective future. I have learned a lot and spoken to countless groups, citizens and leaders this year and I will continue to do so. In connection with this, it is more important than ever to be a team, with County Council on the legislative side, to bring projects and plans to fruition and to move forward on our longer-term initiatives. We have a ferry to build, bridges to construct, policies to refresh and code changes to initiate. When I see agencies come together to solve an issue that impacts the lives of the underserved in our communities, I'm hopeful.

I am also hopeful that in the coming months we will see infection rates decline and vaccination rates increase to the point that can welcome the public back into County offices and provide more in-person services, as soon as it is prudent to do so. We will win the battle against COVID, and we will also make significant progress on other fronts – housing affordability, community health, a more inclusive society and a more prosperous county. I will continue to focus on our goals for 2021 and beyond and am fully committed to that end with your support.

That concludes my report for this year. Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you and our citizens. Please know that anyone who wishes to contact me on any topic can always do so by contacting my office or sending me an email. Good evening.

## **State of Whatcom County Departmental Accomplishments and Initiatives 2020-2021**

Following is more information on specifics from Whatcom County Government Offices and Departments.

### **Health Department**

The County Health Department under the direction of Erika Lautenbach since the retirement of Regina Delahunt was immediately faced with the COVID-19 response. This required expanded staff and volunteers to support the operation and 100% of health department staff at varying levels. Thirty-nine new staff members were hired to support COVID-19 response and 383 general volunteers aided in the response.

Focused teams were created with tailored expertise to help organizations navigate through COVID-19, such as healthcare, business, education, isolation/quarantine, and a data team. This herculean effort included 49 Case and Contact Investigators who completed 5,529 case interviews and 8,708 contact interviews. Two fixed sites for testing and a mobile unit were implemented. An Employer Support Task Force brought employers, non-profits, and businesses together to problem-solve how to operate under Washington State's guidance for safe reopening. An ongoing campaign, Safer, Stronger, Together, continues to support businesses at each stage of the pandemic with up-to-date information and peer guidance.

In addition, \$450,000 in rental and mortgage assistance was provided to over 150 households using CARES Act funding and contracts totaling \$500,000 were executed to housing providers and behavioral health providers. A collaborative vaccine clinic was created -- the Community Vaccination Center -- in partnership with private healthcare partners, a local pharmacy, BTC, and WCC. Launched on March 6 with a pilot that vaccinated 240 people, the CVC aims to ramp up to vaccinate 4,400 each week.

In July 2020, Whatcom County Health Board passed a resolution declaring racism a public health crisis. This important resolution not only acknowledges the significance of systemic racism in contributing to health and well-being, but sets a foundation for promoting health equity by addressing racism as a root cause of poor health.

In early 2020, the Whatcom County Health Board adopted a Child and Family Action Plan. The plan called for the development of an official Child and Family Well-being Task Force to provide additional recommendations to County government on policies, practices and funding to support young children and families. The Task Force, made up of 30 diverse organizational and community representatives, launched on March 8, 2021.

### **Administrative Services**

#### **Finance**

The County's finances even in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic are stable. The General Fund collected 86.98% of its budgeted revenues. Total 2020 revenues are projected to be \$6.6 million under budget. Approximately \$2.1 million of budgeted 2020 revenue will be carried over to 2021 for COVID-related and Homeland Security grants. The General Fund expended 89.25% of its 2020 budget. Total expenditures are projected to be \$10.5 million under budget. Continuing appropriations will carry over \$1,016,000 of 2020 budget authority into 2021. In addition, a significant amount of grant-related appropriations was carried over to 2021. The COVID crisis did result in lost

revenue in sales taxes, permitting, fee for service, traffic infractions and interest income. The County responded promptly to anticipated revenue shortfalls by instituting hiring freezes, furloughs and discretionary spending curtailments.

Other department highlights included the immediate onsite and offsite financial section support at the Emergency Operation Center March through July which included purchasing, accounting, contracting, grant compliance and grant billing support. The department developed a system for staff to process accounts payable and payroll transactions remotely. Over \$10 million COVID-19 related expenditures were purchased and processed.

The 2019 Comprehensive Annual Report and annual audit completion resulted in an audit report with no findings. The 2021-2022 biennial budget was completed and adopted by Council. The accounting system was upgraded to the latest release with the help of Information Technology staff.

## **Facilities**

Facilities worked with departments that remained open during the pandemic, to implement safety and social distancing protocols and improvements to keep staff safe and secure. Safety improvements to the Courthouse were completed such as hands-free toilet flushing and hands-free faucets to reduce unnecessary contact with highly touched areas. Improvements or modifications to the HVAC systems were completed to ensure air was exhausted or filtered to meet CDC recommendations. Facilities staff even manufactured hand sanitizer stands and plexiglas desk shields when they were not available on the market, and more frequent and thorough cleaning and sanitizing protocols were adopted.

**The Crisis Stabilization facility was completed within budget and opened recently, bringing online another important cog in the continuum of care for our vulnerable citizens.**

## **Human Resources**

In 2020, a hiring freeze (frozen positions are subject to evaluation based on 2021 revenues) and unpaid furloughs helped stabilize the General Fund through the economic impacts of the pandemic. For 2021, unrepresented employees and most labor agreements settled with no cost of living increases. Bargaining was completed for all labor groups.

There were no layoffs.

Net turnover rate was relatively steady and the workforce is stable

- 8.36% 2019
- 7.79% 2020

From 2019 to 2020, resignations were at 20%; retirements were up 16%

Forty-one positions were filled from within, aligning our goals of continued advancement and succession opportunities.

The 2020 election and retirements resulted in turnover in several elected positions: Auditor, Assessor, Executive, Council member Brenner, Judge

Set path for future reductions in medical costs by transitioning away from self-insurance

The COVID-19 response resulted in increased electronic employee communications; assisting with staffing for the Emergency Operations Center and Health Department and attention to shifts in policy for leave management, work restructuring and workplace safety.

## **Information Technology**

Below are a few major accomplishments from 2020 outside of the all-consuming response to COVID-19 and some that are underway in 2021:

### *Geographic Information Systems (GIS)*

Many years of investment in geographic information systems (GIS) allowed deployment of a number of popular online applications in 2020. This includes the GIS Tax Parcel viewer for Assessor property information and the County Travel Planner for active Public Works road projects and other information.

- [Whatcom County Tax Parcel Viewer \(arcgis.com\)](https://arcgis.com)
- [County Travel Planner \(arcgis.com\)](https://arcgis.com)

### *Presidential Election*

Significant effort went into supporting the Auditor's Office to prepare and securely administer the 2020 Presidential Election. This included new election servers, self-service kiosks, security initiatives and cameras to live stream the ballot counting process to YouTube.

### *Technology Modernization*

Keeping technologies current that are used by departments to serve citizens continued to be a priority. Major upgrades to our telecommunications and back-up systems were completed and a new detection system was added to our network to enhance cybersecurity. Over 350 new computers were deployed to our departments in 2020.

Despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are making progress on the large multi-year effort to implement a new permit system for land management activities involving Planning, Public Works, Health, Assessor and Auditor. We plan to go live with the new system prior to the end of this year.

In 2021 efforts have been restarted to modernize case management systems for the Prosecutor, Public Defender and Juvenile Probation. Superior Court and District Court are expecting to be part of statewide efforts to pilot electronic filing. There are also projects underway in our Sheriff's Office for inmate communications, body worn cameras and electronic medical records.

New digital technologies used heavily to maintain government services during the global pandemic are here to stay. Video conferencing, electronic appointment software, web, GIS and other new online technologies will continue to be advanced in 2021 and beyond.

## **Public Works**

Public Works most prominent achievement this past year was successfully delivering our essential services without interruption under the burden of COVID. Our preparation, the amazing commitment of our employees, and plain hard work allowed us to perform necessary maintenance, operations, and construction while rebuilding our business processes from the ground up – and changing them nearly every day.

Of particular note was the bulk of construction on the Birch Bay Berm and Pedestrian facility which restored 1.6 miles of shoreline along Birch Bay Drive (Granite Construction). This \$15M infrastructure investment now protects the road, businesses and residents from storm damage, and leaves that section of shoreline as a more natural ecosystem for wildlife (<https://whatcomcounty.us/2560/Birch-Bay-Dr-Project-Summary>).

In addition, our Engineering Division oversaw \$4M of repaving projects on E. Smith Road and parts of Northwest Drive and Slater Road. Those arterial sections are like new, with much improved ride and improved fish passage culverts. Our maintenance crews prepped and chip sealed most of the roads on the Lummi Peninsula and Lummi Island- some of those for the first time in 15 years. Chip sealing is an important part of our pavement management program, substantially extending the life of roadways between repaving.

In a welcome step toward quieting train noise while preserving safety at crossings, Public Works engineers completed Quiet Zone improvements at BNSF crossings at Cove Road and Cliffside Drive. These are Quiet Zones number two and three since Public Works picked up this challenge four years ago. Consultations are currently underway with residents near the Wynn Road and Country Lane crossings for future possible applications.

On the stormwater front, an additional Lake Whatcom TMDL-focused improvement was completed along Northshore Drive at Edgewater Lane. Revenues from the new Lake Whatcom Stormwater Utility are now driving greater investment in those projects. Stormwater improvements also targeted Birch Bay in coordination with the Birch Bay Berm project.

Finally, we harken back to the 2020 Superbowl Day flood and the snow storm that preceded it. These all-hands-on deck winter weather emergencies played havoc with our 2020 maintenance and construction work as they generated a substantial body of clean up and repair projects that continue into the current year.

A more complete list of work appears below.

### ***Maintenance and Operations***

- Shoulder picked, ditched and chip sealed Lummi Island and Lummi Peninsula roads +/- 75 miles
- Painted 970 miles of white lane markings and nearly 600 miles of yellow centerline markings
- Replaced the Central Rd. culvert and several small non-fish passage culverts
- Repaired many deficient components of the Ferry Terminal and transfer spans
- Hired and trained over a dozen new employees
- Responded to the 2020 Superbowl flood and the snow storm that preceded it
- Responded to significant numbers of after-hours downed trees over several different wind storms
- Maintained an appropriate level of service for snow response while being short 18 CDL drivers
- Responded to single lane failures on S. Pass and Marshall hill in early 2021- implemented emergency safety measures, repairs not yet complete

## **Public Works Capital Projects Achievements and Plans**

### *Construction*

- Abbot Levee repair and improvement.
- NW Drive and East Slater overlays. \$1.6M.
- E Smith Rd overlays. \$2M
- Lummi Island Ferry Terminal preservation. \$0.8M
- Birch Bay Drive and Pedestrian Improvements and Shoreline Restoration. \$15M
- Northshore Drive Lake Whatcom (\$0.6M) and Leeward Way (\$0.2M) stormwater improvements.
- Cove Road and Cliffside Drive Railroad Quiet Zones. \$15K

### *Design*

- New roundabout at E Smith/Hannegan, Birch Bay Lynden/Blaine, NW/Smith
- Bike & pedestrian improvements along Marine Drive
- Flood mitigation on E Hemmi Road
- Bridge replacement Jackson Road Bridge at Terrel Cr.
- Bridge replacement N. Lake Samish Bridge
- Fish passage culvert replacement N. Fork Road at Kenney Creek
- Fish passage culverts under Truck Road.
- Preservation of Gooseberry Point ferry terminal.
- Storm drainage improvements at Harborview Road

## **Parks and Recreation**

The Parks & Recreation Department was able to keep parks and trails open throughout the year. Although COVID-19 restrictions and closures impacted campgrounds, picnic shelters, historical museums, border crossings and events, the department overall saw an additional 341,000 visitors for a 22% increase in use over the same period as the previous year, and a year-end total of over 1,546,000 visitors.

The department also began work on new shower and restroom buildings for campground facilities at Silver Lake Park -- the first major building improvements for the park in over thirty years.

Senior centers remained closed most of last year and didn't provide congregate meal programs, but a substitute weekly meal program was instituted by the Whatcom Council on Aging where seniors could pick-up five meals and a gallon of milk once a week at specified center locations. This program was in addition to the county-wide "Meals-on Wheels" delivery program which continued throughout the year. With the physical buildings closed, center staff maintained outreach to members by newsletter, phone and on-line classes and activities.

## **Auditor**

In 2020, COVID created some unique challenges for the Auditor's office, figuring out how to provide customer service while keeping our staff and the public safe. It was a record-breaking year for Elections in terms of voter turn-out, a year of increased transactions in Recording and a year for finding creative solutions with installation of new equipment and technology to meet the needs for service and safety. The Auditor's office worked for most of the year with a frozen staff position reducing the office size from 17 to 16. The office was closed to walk-in

customers, and appointments were set up for marriage licensing, mobile home transactions and map recording. During elections, all the staff worked in the office and in person services were allowed for elections. Plexiglass screens were added to all the customer service counters and a door-bell was installed at the front door. The majority of transactions in the Auditor's office can be handled remotely, so customers either mailed in paperwork or delivered it to secure drop-boxes.

Notable highlights include recorded documents 63,080 documents in 2020 vs. 42,929 in 2019; electronic recording increased to 75% as compared to 48% in 2019 and enabled staff to record documents working from home. Although fewer marriage licenses were issued due to COVID restrictions, overall the auditor's office collected \$766,361 in general revenue.

Elections was busy in 2020 with four countywide elections – the general election had a record turnout of 87.9%. The election center was upgraded with webcams and new ballot scanners and equipment and larger ballot boxes were put in place. In addition, 8,377 new voters were registered.

Licensing collected \$1,578,416 for the general fund.

## **Assessor**

In the Assessor's office the new Parcel Viewer GIS interactive map was launched to the public. Significant improvements were made to Assessor webpages. An insert was developed for Change of Value notices to increase public information regarding property valuation and property tax. Electronic delivery options were also implemented for these notices and for business and personal property listings.

The department was able to complete the revaluation of all property in the county; physically inspecting one sixth of the properties and statistically updating the rest.

## **Law and Justice**

### **Public Defender**

The department has gone to great lengths to keep people as safe as possible. This included implementation of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) before the state-wide recommendations were in place; screening, disinfecting, remote appearances, and other safety measures to minimize close proximity with the public and co-workers.

Two grants were applied for and obtained from different sources to increase staffing while not costing the county funding for those positions. Caseloads were successfully reduced by utilizing CARES Act funds. A Case Weighting System, approved by the County Council, was implemented to bring us in line with other agencies within the state.

The Public Defender's Office worked with other stakeholders in criminal justice, courts, prosecutors and law enforcement, to implement ways to streamline the justice system, divert matters out of the courts, and make court processes more efficient and fairer.

### **Superior Court**

Like the rest of Whatcom County government, Whatcom County Superior Court endured significant challenges during the past year related to the impact of the COVID pandemic. The Court was able to keep its doors open and

provide services and access to justice despite having to rapidly adapt to the realities presented by the spread of the disease. We thank all members of county government for their steadfast support during these trying times, but would particularly like to acknowledge the prompt, expert and dutiful service of every member of the Information Technology, Facilities following offices:

This past year has been a year of transition for Superior Court. Judge Deborra Garrett, a trailblazer as the first woman elected to the Whatcom County Superior Court bench retired and we welcomed our newest elected judge, Judge Evan Jones.

Information Technology helped Superior Court throughout the entirety of the past year by rapidly deploying remote meeting software which have made remote hearings possible, testing and troubleshooting ways to use technology to permit social distancing in our courtrooms, installing cameras and audio-visual equipment in our courtrooms, responding to cyber threats, and helping us with day-to-day computer woes, on behalf of every employee in Whatcom County Superior Court, I would like to thank every Information Technology employee for jobs well done.

The ability of Superior Court to function with all of the changes that were needed to keep members of the public and court personnel safe in our courthouse would not have been possible without the hard work of employees in Facilities Management. Thank you for responding to all of our myriad (and varied!) requests, running the gamut from courtroom restructuring to equipment necessary to return to jury selection – you have the court’s gratitude.

Whatcom County Sheriff’s Office Corrections Division – the professionalism of the deputies responsible for keeping courtrooms and detained persons safe cannot be overappreciated. The work of corrections deputies under very trying circumstances this past year has included coping with the COVID pandemic and its impact on jail operations during a time of decreased available staffing. Some persons have to be detained by the court, and when we do so, we do so with great confidence that they will always be treated respectfully and with dignity, all while ensuring that everyone remains safe in our jail and in the courthouse. A big thank you to every corrections deputy for your dedication to serving Whatcom County.

On March 15, Superior Court commenced its first 12-person jury trial in over a year. This trial was conducted with COVID-19 precautions in mind – large jury trials are limited to one at a time. The inability to hold large jury trials during the pandemic significantly reduced Whatcom County residents’ access to justice to which they are entitled. We are cautiously optimistic that in the near future we will be able to resume conducting multiple trials at once while supporting routine court functions and day-to-day court calendars.

### **District Court/District Court Probation**

Both District Court and District Court Probation lobbies have been fully open to the public since June. Safe social distancing capacities has been established and implemented. The Courts provided some innovative ideas for helping the public including telephones placed in the hallway to allow direct access to staff; drop boxes along with a date stamp machine and commonly requested forms were installed. Because neither department had a remote work option, extensive safety measures for the back areas of the offices installed. Safe social distancing markers were installed in the public hallway.

District Court implemented remote appearance options for most hearings including remote viewing of courtroom proceedings on YouTube and installing a TV monitor in the hallway for each courtroom to allow the public to see

when safe social distancing space is available in the courtroom. Electronic communication between the department, clients, courts, and other law and justice agencies has increased.

## **Sheriff's Office**

In cooperation with the Prosecuting Attorney's Office, the Health Department and other community partners, the Sheriff's Office remained focused on enhancing public safety, where safe and reasonable, through existing behavioral health diversion opportunities, the law enforcement assisted diversion program and other similar strategies. All deputies receive regular ongoing training on assisting both the mentally ill and the addicted, de-escalation techniques and community options for diversion. In 2020, the Sheriff's Office conducted 6 murder investigations - an increase over 2019.

Successful efforts have been made to disrupt and eradicate criminal organizations and networks that are involved in trafficking and manufacturing dangerous drugs. A recent state Supreme Court decision is anticipated to impact investigative strategies and limit options for residents who are impacted by drug-related activity. As the law stands today, there is no prohibition against the simple possession of scheduled drugs (except marijuana) without regard to age or quantity.

The jail system, under enhanced restrictions since the start of the COVID outbreak and coupled with changes in judicial practices a significant reduction in the jail population. Facilities completed the replacement of the jail doors and locks. Further impacts and changing trends are anticipated to occur as jury trials resume.

The Sheriff's Emergency Management Division continues to support the Health Department with COVID efforts as well as the usual work of preparing for a multitude of natural and manmade disasters. A recent exercise simulating an oil car derailment proved valuable when our community experienced a real-life scenario. The Sheriff's Office, along with my office, are championing efforts to secure funding sources and partnerships for the establishment of a county-wide interoperable radio communications system to finally solve the issue of failing communications in areas of the County that are particularly vulnerable.

## **Planning and Development Services**

In Planning and Development Services overall there was only a slight drop (8%) in total permit applications in 2020 compared to 2019. Total land use and building permit applications were 2,161 in 2020 compared to 2,362 in 2019. Decreases were seen in shoreline exemptions and detached structures.

Single Family permit applications received in 2020 (513) actually exceeded 2019 (503). This is attributed to pent-up demand resulting from the initial spring COVID construction closures; low housing inventory in the existing market; rising housing construction costs for materials and new state energy code changes; even with reduced revenue overall in 2020, 66% of expenses were covered – still in line with the annual goal.

The department has implemented digital submission of permit applications and created policies that will automatically extend building permit expiration timelines so applicants are able to complete their work if constrained due to COVID.

With the challenges of the pandemic, PDS quickly transitioned to the implementation of online meetings and public hearings with the Planning Commission and Hearing Examiner. Up to half of department staff are either mostly working remotely or working a modified schedule.

Completion of the “EnerGov” permit processing system which will make the application, fee processing and permit tracking more automated and efficient for both our customers and staff is still scheduled for “go live” mid-summer if the schedule can be maintained. COVID has presented timeline challenges to both the county and the vendor.

### *General Applications/Permitting Status Highlights*

#### *Legislative Initiatives*

The Shoreline Master Plan Update is currently in review by the Planning Commission. The deadline for Council adoption is June 2021.

The Buildable Lands Program has received new pass-through grants from Commerce; the consultant and city/county planner group are preparing updated methodology. There will be a public review process including Planning Commission review and ultimately County Council review and approval in 2021.

Staff has been working on docketed surface mining related policy and code amendments through the Surface Mining Advisory Committee, Agricultural Advisory Committee and Forest Advisory Committee. The Planning Commission should see those this spring and to Council this summer.

Cherry Point Fossil Fuel Amendments are being drafted by the Stakeholder Group and environmental community. It is expected that this will be ready for Council adoption this year.

Code Amendments are in process to authorize development of tiny homes and encourage duplexes in current zones. This should be coming to Council this spring for review and referral to the Planning Commission.

Permanent regulations are being developed to cite temporary homeless encampments in the unincorporated county. Draft regulations and Planning Commission review are expected this summer to meet Council adoption prior to expiration of the current interim ordinance in November 2021.

#### *Planning Initiatives*

Affordable Housing Action Plan—Working with the Mayors and city planners from the seven cities to develop an Affordable Housing Action Plan to address barriers and challenges to providing affordable housing and identify strategies and tools to overcome those barriers.

Wetland Mitigation Program work is being done on the concept of an off-site wetland buffer mitigation approach that would facilitate a public site for private or public projects that need mitigation due to wetland or habitat conservation area buffer impacts from development proposals that cannot be done on-site due to parcel constraints.

### **Emergency Medical Services**

The Whatcom County Emergency Medical Services system is thriving and responding to increased demands for services. There were more than 25,000 responses in 2020 and volume continues to increase as our county grows.

The EMS levy, now in its fourth year has proven be a reliable funding source that provides a stable/dependable budget promising citizens access to highly trained critical care paramedics and emergency medical technicians no matter your geographical location or social-economic status. With careful financial management and guidance from the TAB and EOB efficiencies were achieved and resulted in a healthy end fund balance well above projections at the beginning of this levy cycle. The Levy Fund supports personnel and operational costs for the Advanced Life Support system including training, equipment and prevention programs and it also supports limited Basic Life Support functions.

The EMS response to the COVID-19 was focused on keeping responders safe as well as on how to respond to what could have been a significant mass casualty. Leaders among the EMS community quickly mobilized to create response plans, safety guides and worst-case scenarios for system overload. Our private ambulance partner, Cascade Ambulance also provided capacity and leadership that supported the Incident Management Team at the EOC. EMS continues to support various components of the COVID response.

Levy Funds support the Mobile Integrated Health program that partners with the GRACE teams. Teams work in all sectors of the county.

Paramedic training provided by the Bellingham Fire Department and Bellingham Technical College graduated 6 new Paramedics in January 2021. The levy supports Paramedic training and there will be an additional 10 Paramedics needed to staff a new unit in Lynden in early 2021.

One of the highest measures of EMS system success is related to survival from sudden cardiac arrest and accidental trauma. Whatcom County resuscitation rates from cardiac arrest are 38% percent (above the national average).

*Other 2020 Accomplishments:*

- Full integration of the Electronic Patient Care Records System (Image Trend) with Julota, a community connector HUB that links jail, hospital and EMS information for the GRACE program.
- Operationalized a 6-month transportation program for COVID-19 positive patients supporting the Mobile Integrated Health Programs, GRACE Base Camp, hospital and other service organizations. This is a response to lack of transportation for those that need to isolate because of COVID-19 exposures or infection.
- Supported funding for development of Peer Support Programs addressing mental health and understanding PTSD for first responders.