

Whatcom County Council as the Health Board

**COUNTY COURTHOUSE
311 Grand Avenue, Ste #105
Bellingham, WA 98225-4038
(360) 778-5010**



Minutes - Final

Tuesday, March 31, 2026

10 AM

Hybrid Meeting - Council Chambers

**JOINT HEALTH BOARD/PUBLIC HEALTH ADVISORY BOARD MEETING -
HYBRID MEETING - ADJOURNS BY 12:00 P.M. (PARTICIPATE IN-PERSON, SEE
REMOTE JOIN INSTRUCTIONS AT www.whatcomcounty.us/joinvirtualcouncil, OR
CALL 360.778.5010)**

COUNCILMEMBERS

Elizabeth Boyle
Barry Buchanan
Ben Elenbaas
Kaylee Galloway
Jessica Rienstra
Jon Scanlon
Mark Stremmer

CLERK OF THE COUNCIL

Cathy Halka, AICP, CMC

Call To Order

Health Board Chair Jon Scanlon called the meeting to order at 10:01 a.m. in a hybrid meeting.

Roll Call - Health Board

Present: 7 - Elizabeth Boyle, Barry Buchanan, Ben Elenbaas, Kaylee Galloway, Jessica Rienstra, Jon Scanlon, and Mark Stremmer

Roll Call - PHAB

PHAB Members Present: Alan Lifson, Joni Hensley, Shu-Ling Zhao, Carl Isom-McDaniel, Mike Cohen, Sterling Check, Deb Shawver, Alison Fontaine, Robyn Phillips-Madson, Rachel McGarrity, Markis Dee Stidham, Amelia Vader, Ashley Thomasson, Guy Occhiogrosso, Chris Kobdich, Kendra Cristelli, Jon Scanlon, Amy Harley, Meg Lelonek

Announcements**Public Comment**

The following people spoke:

- Ryan Bowman

Hearing no one else, Scanlon closed the public comment session.

Special Presentation

1. [AB2026-245](#) Update from the Health Director
Champ Thomaskutty, Whatcom County Health and Community Services (WCHCS), provided an overview of recent health department activities, including monitoring a pertussis outbreak; supporting nursing homes, assisted living facilities, and other congregate settings where communicable diseases have broken out; streamlining the contracting process; and hosting a successful intern program.

Thomaskutty stated that the Response Systems Division received a number of funding cuts in the 2026 legislative session, but they have partnered with the City of Bellingham and the Sheriff's Office on a grant application to the Public Safety Grant fund to replace funding that was reduced for programs like GRACE, LEAD, etc. He continued, noting that the county's severe weather shelter operations have ceased for this cycle, and the new staffing model helped provide consistent care and stability.

Thomaskutty highlighted additional funding cuts that occurred during the recent legislative session, including a \$21 million cut from the foundational public health services fund across the public health system, which he said could result in a \$500,000 impact to Whatcom County.

Following the presentation, Councilmembers asked questions and engaged in discussion with WCHCS Director Thomaskutty regarding his update.

This agenda item was PRESENTED AND DISCUSSED.

2. [AB2026-246](#) Update from the Health Officers

Dr. Meg Lelonek, Co-Health Officer, provided an update on pertussis. She said that pertussis starts like a common cold, but the cough can last weeks or months. Antibiotics can reduce severity if caught early. Vaccination prevents severe disease and death. The disease is spread via droplets from coughs or sneezes. Newborns and children under one are most at risk.

Lelonek provided an overview of pertussis' history, sharing the story of researchers Grace Eldering, Loney Clinton Gordon, and Pearl Louella Kendrick, who began work on a pertussis vaccine.

Lelonek stated that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends the pertussis vaccine for people of all ages. She said boosters are recommended for adults and for pregnant women. To prevent infection, it is important to know the signs and stages of pertussis. Lelonek said people should stay home when sick, noting that an individual can be contagious 21 days after the start of the cough or the day after completing five days of antibiotics.

Lelonek shared national, state, and local data regarding pertussis. In Washington State, Whatcom County had the fourth highest number of cases in the state in 2024.

Lelonek stated that Whatcom County Health and Community Services (WCHCS) hosts vaccine clinics on Wednesdays and Fridays at 509 Girard Street in Bellingham. The department hosts school-based vaccine events, collaborates with school nurses and superintendents, and more. She concluded her presentation by asking Health Board and PHAB members about potential next steps.

Joni Hensley, PHAB, stated that, during the last pertussis outbreak, they partnered with pharmacies to provide vaccines. She stated that pharmacies are trusted healthcare providers in communities, and she encouraged partnership with them.

Lelonek stated that they work closely with pharmacies, and there have not been any vaccine shortages.

Markis Dee Stidham, PHAB, asked about outreach to people of advanced age.

Lelonek stated that she is not aware of any specific outreach to the elder community regarding vaccines, but she thinks it is a great idea to explore.

Shu-Ling Zhao, PHAB, stated that there is a lot of distrust regarding vaccines, so creating trust between healthcare professionals and community members is important.

Rachel McGarrity, PHAB, asked whether the recent pertussis outbreak is related to the decline in vaccination rates or a decline in herd immunity due to COVID-19.

Lelonek stated that it is a complex and complicated situation. She said there is a correlation across the country between the declining vaccination rates and increasing rates of disease. She stated that the decline is not the only factor, but it is the most modifiable factor.

Elenbaas asked if there is data regarding how many individuals who contract the disease are vaccinated.

Lelonek stated that most adults who contract the disease have been vaccinated, but the vaccine immunity wanes over time. She stated that vaccination helps prevent series illness and death even if it does not prevent illness outright. She said these are important conversations to have with the community regarding how to prevent the spread of disease.

Scanlon stated that it is important to share information regarding vaccine clinics and other health information.

Alan Lifson, PHAB, asked if there are guidelines about screening pertussis in children.

Amy Harley, PHAB, stated that pediatricians are well aware of pertussis incidents in the community and are often the first to notify WCHCS regarding incidents

Rienstra asked if there is a mobile vaccination unit for the county.

Lelonek stated that there used to be mobile a vaccination unit, but funding was provided through a grant program which has concluded.

Scanlon asked about the funding source for the vaccination clinics.

Lelonek stated that the vaccines are from the state's supply, and program employees are funded through a variety of sources.

Champ Thomaskutty, WCHCS, stated that funding for the TB team has been reduced, so one position was not renewed for 2026.

Lelonek stated that they are working with limited resources and are doing the best with what they have.

Amelia Vader, PHAB, stated that extending the vaccine clinic hours to 5:30 p.m. could be beneficial.

This agenda item was PRESENTED AND DISCUSSED.

3. [AB2026-247](#)

Update from the Public Health Advisory Board Chair

Rachel McGarrity, Vice Chair of PHAB, provided an update on the advisory board. She stated that they recently welcomed eight new members and provided new member orientations. She said they have also formed eight subcommittees on critical areas such as board infrastructure, communication, budget review, homelessness and housing, etc.

Shu-Ling Zhao, PHAB, introduced a presentation on community health improvement with Amy Rydel and Jake Brandvold of Whatcom County Health and Community Services (WCHCS).

Zhao said the goal of community health improvement is to achieve health equity. She provided an overview of the framework PHAB uses, which is MAPP 2.0 (Mobilizing for Action through Planning and Partnerships).

Rydel stated that the community health improvement cycle is a multi-year, community-centered process to improve health and advance equity and justice. The work is called Healthy Whatcom and is organized in three phases: build the community health foundation, tell the community story, and continuously improve the community. The whole process takes approximately five years. Rydel emphasized that community members and partners are involved throughout the whole process.

She provided an overview of the draft timeline. Phase 1 is planned to start in April and last through December 2026. It will focus on building

partnerships, engaging the community, learning from the past cycle, and setting a shared direction. Phase 2 will start in January 2027 and go through September 2027 with a focus on gathering data and working with community members to interpret, add context, and identify priorities. Phase 3 is the longest and will go through 2031, as it requires community and partners to build and carry out a shared plan for action and monitor progress.

Brandvold provided an overview of phase 2, which is when the Community Health Assessment (CHA) will happen. Under MAPP 2.0, there are three separate assessments, the context, status, and partners assessments.

Zhao shared background regarding how the assessment turns into action and provided an overview of what to expect in phase 1.

Following the presentation, councilmembers and PHAB members engaged in discussion.

Sterling Chick, PHAB, shared an example of the importance of data.

Amelia Vader, PHAB, asked how human services and healthcare services data are documented. She said she is interested in seeing evidence of gaps in healthcare.

Brandvold stated that he currently only has access to a short list of data sources, but the county is going to be part of a pilot program to access a claims database to look at insurance claims, which is something they have never had access to before. He noted that access to care and quality of care metrics are not easily available.

Amy Harley, PHAB, stated that WCHCS is working to get access to healthcare data, but it is fragmented at the state level, which creates obstacles.

Ashley Thomasson, PHAB, asked about balancing immediate needs with prevention strategies, particularly in regard to housing scarcity.

Zhao responded by saying that it is important to take a step back and use the data to set priorities.

Thomasson asked how PHAB and the Health Board can support the process.

Rydel stated that there is a core team of staff who are going to move the

project forward, along with a subcommittee that will provide support. She said that there are a lot of different ways WCHCS can work with PHAB and the Health Board. She provided examples of previous community health assessments and how the Health Board and PHAB supported efforts to expand participation and engagement.

Rachel McGarrity, PHAB, stated that there is a principle in research called the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, which says it is impossible to observe a system without changing the system. She asked if there is a communication plan or staff member in place to connect with the community.

Rydel stated that WCHCS has a fantastic communications team who will be helping get the information out.

Buchanan stated that the Justice Project ordinance called for collaboration with the CHA. He asked how that would be accomplished.

Vader stated that she has worked to identify connections between the community health work and other work happening in the community. She said that she has been coordinating with leadership in the Justice Project to determine how to move forward.

Rienstra asked about potential barriers to staying on the set timeline.

Rydel stated that budget and staff capacity are potential barriers. She said that community will is another aspect to consider. She said she wants to make sure that there is consideration about how to move from data collection to action. She added that limited access to data is another barrier.

Champ Thomaskutty, WCHCS, stated that data sources may change over time, making comparisons over time more difficult. He added that staff have many responsibilities, and some of those responsibilities may require time away from the project.

Scanlon asked how community partners are investing in the process.

Rydel stated that traditionally community partners have shown up in amazing ways. She noted that there is also an amazing public-private partnership which has provided stipends for people with lived experience to participate.

This agenda item was PRESENTED AND DISCUSSED.

Other Business

Scanlon shared a reminder about upcoming meetings: Annual Lake Whatcom Joint Councils and Commissioners Meeting on April 1; PeaceHealth Community Forum on April 2; Whatcom County Special Committee of the Whole meetings on the Comprehensive Plan on various dates; and PHAB on April 9.

Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 11:54 a.m.

The County Council approved these minutes on April 14, 2026.

ATTEST



Cathy Halka, Council Clerk

WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCIL
WHATCOM COUNTY, WA

Jon Scanlon, Health Board Chair

Meeting Minutes prepared by Jenna Germand