

Whatcom County Council Committee of the Whole

**COUNTY COURTHOUSE
311 Grand Avenue, Ste #105
Bellingham, WA 98225-4038
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Committee Minutes - Final

Tuesday, June 10, 2025

1 PM

Hybrid Meeting - Council Chambers

HYBRID MEETING - ADJOURNS BY 4:30 P.M. (PARTICIPATE IN-PERSON, SEE REMOTE JOIN INSTRUCTIONS AT www.whatcomcounty.us/joinvirtualcouncil, OR CALL 360.778.5010); AGENDA REVISED 6.9.2025

COUNCILMEMBERS

Barry Buchanan
Tyler Byrd
Todd Donovan
Ben Elenbaas
Kaylee Galloway
Jon Scanlon
Mark Stremmler

CLERK OF THE COUNCIL

Cathy Halka, AICP, CMC

Call To Order

Council Chair Kaylee Galloway called the meeting to order at 1:02 p.m. in a hybrid meeting.

Roll Call

Present: 7 - Barry Buchanan, Tyler Byrd, Todd Donovan, Ben Elenbaas, Kaylee Galloway, Jon Scanlon, and Mark Stremler

Announcements**Special Presentation**

1. AB2025-432 Presentation from the Whatcom County climate planning consultant team, Cascadia Consulting Group, regarding the Climate Element of the 2025 Comprehensive Plan

The following people read from a presentation (on file) and answered questions.

- Lauren Clemens, Public Works Department, Climate Action Manager
- Andrea Martin, Cascadia Consulting Group
- Osamu Kumasaka, Cascadia Consulting Group

Clemens introduced the presentation and stated representatives from Cascadia Consulting Group will provide an overview of some technical work they have completed on behalf of the County to support the climate element of the Comprehensive Plan.

Martin read from the presentation on an overview of the relevant regulatory requirements for Whatcom County's Comprehensive Plan, the consulting group's greenhouse gas emissions analysis and its findings, and a greenhouse gas emission forecast which can be used to identify the most efficient local strategies for achieving the long term 2050 emission reduction.

Kumasaka read from the presentation on the climate hazards and impacts assessment and its findings, with a particular focus on sea level rise, erosion, landslides, flooding, and alluvial fans hazard exposure.

Donovan stated, from reading the memo about what information they would be getting from this endeavor, he thought councilmembers would be getting tools (the technical reports) which they could then apply to the different Comprehensive Plan chapters.

Clemens stated this was just an introductory presentation. They will be going to the Planning Commission on the 26th but wanted the consultant to have the opportunity to explain some of their technical work while they are still under contract. Council will be receiving the technical reports as part of the parallel Planning Commission and Council review.

Donovan spoke about his frustration with the process and that they are going through the chapters with insufficient information.

Aly Pennucci, Executive's Office, stated she gets that this is frustrating and that it is a challenge to get everyone the information.

Clemens answered what their recommendations are for how Council should use this information as they will be making final decisions on where to allocate population and employment growth, and stated the intention in providing these technical reports in advance of the chapter introduction on June 26 is so that both the Planning Commission and Council can consider effectiveness and priorities for what to focus on for the two sub-elements. She answered whether this presentation will be going to the cities, and stated the reports will be sent to each city planner. She answered what the actual schedule was that was built in to the contract and whether they are on track with that, and stated Cascadia is completing everything two weeks ahead of schedule.

Councilmembers discussed why there does not seem to be sufficient time in today's agenda to ask questions on this, and that some of this information may be late since the environmental impact statement, the county-wide planning policies, and non-binding multi-jurisdictional resolution are done.

This agenda item was PRESENTED.

2. AB2025-399 Presentation from Rep. Alex Ramel regarding post-session legislative updates
- Representative Alex Ramel updated councilmembers on the legislative session and spoke about the new government affairs team and how valuable they have been, how he and other legislators act as a team, highlights of the budget, proposals that did and did not pass, progress made on housing and rent stabilization policies, and investments that were made to fund several Whatcom County projects. He stated he does not have a lot of progress to report regarding the Lummi Island ferry, but is hopeful that there is room for collaboration between Whatcom and Skagit counties to maybe get a bit of a bulk purchase discount if they work together. He closed by stating an overwhelming majority of the bills that they pass in Olympia are bipartisan.

Scanlon stated he hopes that Ramel and his colleagues in the legislature

also look at counties and cities when it comes to discussions around regressive versus progressive revenue in the state, and asked what he sees as the top themes or agenda items for next year's legislative session.

Ramel spoke about a proposal which did not cross the finish line that would have given counties the option to go to the voters and ask for a real estate excise tax option to fund housing, similar to the Bellingham Home Fund. He stated as far as what he sees on the horizon, he thinks they will continue to have budget challenges for the foreseeable future, and he spoke about continuing to work on electricity transmission legislation that did not make it over the finish line in this session.

Councilmembers spoke about maybe finding State funding for the new Public Defender caseload standards and legislative asks around the Lummi Island ferry.

Aly Pennucci, Executive's Office, stated there is a technical change needed to the Revised Code of Washington (RCW) regarding the local funding options around a countywide ferry district or Lummi Island-only ferry district, and stated we would love some state funding to support our ferry.

This agenda item was PRESENTED.

3. AB2025-351 Presentation on the annual review of ferry system services

Clerk's note: The discussion on this item continued with and also applied to the next agenda item. See notes on **AB2025-428**.

Galloway read both items into the record.

Jill Boudreau, Executive's Office, read from pages 1-28 of the presentation (on file and also attached to **AB2025-428**) and the memo (on file), and stated they want to talk about the capital project needs but to also consider long term operational and long term capital expenses. She spoke about potential grant and loan funding, being proactive on having a plan for financing, and three potential project cost scenarios, depending on different types of debt.

She answered a question about their confidence in the ability to get Federal funds and spoke about the TIFIA loan. She stated they have to move forward on investigating all these options whether they pan out or not. She spoke about options for raising revenue to cover the debt service and answered questions about those. She spoke about the legislative changes to the Revised Code of Washington (RCW) that would make the option of a ferry district possible and help with maintenance and repair contracts, scenarios for raising different types of revenue at different levels, what the

Executive's Office recommends, and policy questions for the Council to consider.

Councilmembers discussed whether they should be asking everyone in the county to cover these costs, looking at reducing level of service, what is meant by "immediately follow Whatcom County Code WCC 10.34 to set fares," and that community engagement should not stop.

See part two of this presentation in **AB2025-428**.

This agenda item was PRESENTED.

4. AB2025-428 Presentation on the financing of the ferry replacement and terminal modernization project

Clerk's note: The discussion on this item also applied to the previous item on the agenda. See notes on **AB2025-351**.

Laura Frolich, Public Works Department, read from a presentation (on file, and starting on page 25) about the ferry system's annual operating review for fiscal year 2024, what was included as fare box revenue for that year, projecting for an operating reserve target and how they need to be building that up, the capital surcharge, and fare box projections showing insufficient revenue to cover the operating program's projected future costs.

Aly Pennucci, Executive's Office, stated they need to increase fares to generate at least 50 percent more revenue, and she spoke about how the equation has been masked by one-time revenue infusions. She stated they are looking to issue an executive order to increase fares hopefully next week, but they are trying to determine what level is sufficient to generate enough to both meet the 55 percent requirement and project at least some contribution to the reserve.

The following people discussed the presentation with councilmembers:

- Aly Pennucci, Executive's Office
- Elizabeth Kosa, Public Works Department Director
- Laura Frolich, Public Works Department
- Jill Boudreau, Executive's Office
- Satpal Sidhu, County Executive

Discussion included how big the fare increases would need to be and that they are looking at doing one-time fare changes to get through 2026 and then on a biennial basis, that they need to wait for a legislative change to be able to consider a taxing district, looking at ways to avoid significant future

fare increases such as reducing level of service and setting up an electronic ticketing system, that ER&R sets aside a portion of ferry rental income for future replacement but that they could not afford the rental rate which would accomplish that, what expenses the revenue from a ferry district might cover, that they are projecting that there would be no increase to the needs-based fares, looking at fare structures that help to achieve other goals such as climate goals, looking at the ideas of the Whatcom County Ferry Advisory Committee, that they are already looking at and planning for 2027 and beyond, various factors that should be considered in the determination of fare increases, learning more from Skagit County about the one-time and annual costs to utilize electronic ticketing and comparing those to the costs of the current system, looking into whether there would be cost savings if there were some kind of joint project between Whatcom and Skagit County (as discussed earlier in **AB2025-399**), looking at vacation rental fees as opposed to a summer ferry surcharge, looking for ways to soften the blow of fare increases, and whether it is possible to turn the ferry over to Whatcom Transportation Authority (WTA) or to the State.

This agenda item was PRESENTED.

Committee Discussion

1. AB2025-417 Discussion of an ordinance granting Whatcom County Water District #7 a franchise for the provision of water services in Whatcom County

Andrew Hester, Public Works Department, briefed the councilmembers and stated this and the next two agenda items (**AB2025-419** and **AB2025-421**) are basically identical but for different water districts and in different areas. This one is for water District 7 and is a 25-year term. He answered whether they are new franchises, and stated these are all existing water associations but the franchises have just expired so these are renewals. He answered whether the water districts coordinate with other utilities if they ever have to open up the infrastructure, and stated he does not think the County has finalized a policy about that but any time there is a county road project, there has to be lots of coordination between all of the utilities.

This agenda item was DISCUSSED.

2. AB2025-419 Discussion of an ordinance granting Whatcom County Water District #2 a franchise for the provision of water services in Whatcom County

Clerk's note: This item was also discussed in **AB2025-417**.

Andrew Hester, Public Works Department, briefed the councilmembers and stated this (District 2) is a different water association and a different area than the one in the previous agenda item but otherwise they are carbon copy language agreements.

This agenda item was DISCUSSED.

3. AB2025-421 Discussion of an ordinance granting Whatcom County Water District #18 a franchise for the provision of water services in Whatcom County

Clerk's note: This item was also discussed in **AB2025-417**.

Andrew Hester, Public Works Department, briefed the councilmembers and stated the only difference between this and the previous two agenda items is the water district and area. But otherwise, it is the same language as the other ones. He stated they will be introduced and a public hearing will be scheduled at a subsequent meeting.

Cathy Halka, Clerk of the Council, answered when the hearing would be.

This agenda item was DISCUSSED.

4. AB2025-438 Discussion relating to preliminary Planning Commission recommendations on Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan Chapter 1 (Introduction and Growth Projections) associated with the 2025 Comprehensive Plan Update

Matt Aamot, Planning and Development Services Department, read from a memo (on file) regarding the contents of Chapter 1, and the proposed changes.

Donovan spoke about the population and employment projections and whether Appendix C reflects changes they made to the countywide planning policies and Aamot responded to questions.

They discussed motions by the Planning Commission that only received four votes (out of the nine members) and a question that was asked about whether that was a majority. Aamot stated the final recommendation of the Planning Commission has to have a majority of the total members (five votes), but their recent vote was not a final recommendation, so legal had to check on the rules for that.

Dan Dunn, Planning Commission, stated, in this case they had a quorum of five members present and a majority of the quorum voted in favor.

Donovan asked why there are three maps in the attachment when only one map is referenced in the chapter, whether the maps show current urban growth areas (UGAs) or UGAs that will be swapped or expanded, and what the word "vacant" means on the third map since it is not a term in the planning code. Aamot stated he believes these maps show city limits but the maps for Chapter 2 will be more detailed with all the designations. He stated these maps show land use Assessor codes which show current

classification of how the land is assessed and do not show future land use designation.

Aly Pennucci, Executive's Office, spoke about the classifications referred to on the maps and stated some of the Assessor's land use categories are the same as our zoning categories and some are not, so it can get confusing.

Scanlon spoke about the process for editing the chapters and that he thought they would be looking back at what happened when this document was edited a decade ago and how things went, and then projecting forward and doing some visioning. He stated if they are just line-editing a document from a decade ago, they do not need to put that many resources into it. Donovan stated they did not get the option to start the Comprehensive Plan from scratch. Galloway stated she feels they are doing the less ambitious thing *and* it is resource-intensive. Aamot stated there is a vision statement in Chapter 2.

Councilmembers discussed making the document easier to read for the public and to implement, that what might seem like minor line edits may be big policy changes, and that it is the maps in Chapter 2 that matter.

Galloway spoke about working with Council staff on a format to receive Council amendments and questions. She spoke about a possible amendment to add a reference to the Public Participation Plan in the "How the Plan was Created" section and asked whether they are going to be updating that plan. Aamot stated he thinks that would be a good thing to pursue.

Aamot answered what the policy implications are of opting for a population projection higher than OFM medium and whether it backs them into a corner, obligating them to approve UGAs before even seeing them. He stated in the Growth Management Act (GMA), it says that UGAs have to have adequate densities and area to accommodate the projected growth, so you can increase densities in the city UGA, you can expand the UGA, or you can do a combination of both.

Mark Personius, Planning and Development Services Department Director, spoke about a presentation he will be giving to the Planning Commission in July regarding the preliminary preferred alternative to be identified in the final environmental impact statement (EIS). It does not mean that is a final plan, but it is a way to move forward.

Aamot stated if they are thinking of changing the projections that were in the multi-jurisdictional resolution, it would be good to let the cities know

in advance so they have a chance to be part of the discussion.

Councilmembers and the speakers discussed the population and employment growth proposals and how the Council can avoid having their hands tied to have to just approve the UGAs, whether Personius will be using the information from the consultants who presented earlier in this meeting (see **AB2025-432**) regarding climate planning as he puts together his presentation for the July meeting, how Leland Consulting Group came up with the population and employment growth projections, frustration that they make the projections based on land use policy they have made in the past (which drives decision making or investment) and then keep planning for what they have created as opposed to having the Comprehensive Plan address and enable land use policy or procedures that will drive the growth where they want it, the implications of employment projections and allocations being OFM high or above high and disproportionate to population growth projections in Kendall/Columbia Valley, being mindful of the types of jobs that would be created there, and what the zoning would allow.

This agenda item was DISCUSSED.

Committee Discussion and Recommendation to Council

1. AB2025-413 Resolution requesting information from the Executive and Planning and Development Services regarding the 2025 Comprehensive Plan update

Donovan and Scanlon briefed the councilmembers. Donovan stated the goal with this resolution is to outline short term asks for information from Planning and Development Services before the environmental impact statement (EIS) is finalized. Scanlon stated they would be considering the substitute, which is the most up to date version.

Mark Personius, Planning and Development Services Department Director, stated if Council approves this tonight, Planning will forward it on to their consultants and make sure they address as many of the requests as they can in the final EIS and develop any policy language that they can as part of the Comprehensive Plan update to address some of the concerns.

***Scanlon moved* that the SUBSTITUTE Resolution be RECOMMENDED FOR APPROVAL.**

The motion was seconded by Donovan.

Elenbaas stated the reason he wanted to be part of the conversation and support the resolution is because it represents them striving to do this

better, and Donovan stated the strikethrough version shows things that are more long term that they want to come back to.

Personius answered what "Transit Oriented Development" means in the resolution and Councilmembers discussed getting a presentation from WTA on their routes and how many people are riding them.

Scanlon's motion that the SUBSTITUTE Resolution be RECOMMENDED FOR APPROVAL carried by the following vote:

Aye: 7 - Buchanan, Byrd, Donovan, Elenbaas, Galloway, Scanlon, and Stremmer

Nay: 0

Items Added by Revision

There were no agenda items added by revision.

Other Business

There was no other business.

Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 4:28 p.m.

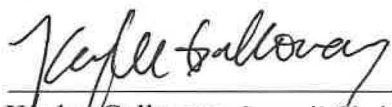
The County Council approved these minutes on June 24, 2025.

ATTEST:



Cathy Halka, Council Clerk

WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCIL
WHATCOM COUNTY, WA



Kaylee Galloway, Council Chair

Meeting Minutes prepared by Kristi Felbinger