



Health Equity Zones: Born from Policy, Built by People

- In 2021, the Washington State Legislature passed Senate Bill 5052, which officially authorized DOH to identify and support “health equity zones”, geographic areas where communities face significant barriers to health.
- DOH launched the initiative with a core belief: the people who are most impacted by health inequities are also the best positioned to design solutions.
- Beginning in July 2021, DOH worked alongside agency and community partners to build the HEZ model, focusing first on partnerships, community engagement, and designing a process where residents would help pick priorities, lead decision-making, and build sustainable systems.

Overview

- The Health Equity Zone in East Whatcom, which encompasses the entire Mt Baker School District, has been focused on one big goal this past year; building a transparent, resident-led system for identifying and prioritizing community needs.
- Instead of outside agencies deciding what's best for East County, we've built a process where local residents, through our Community Advisory Board (CAB), set the agenda, design the decision-making tools, and lead the work.

How It Started

We've spent the year building relationships and testing ways to make government processes actually accessible.

- **Engagement:** Over 1,150 residents connected through workshops, focus groups, tabling events, and community gatherings.
- **Supports:** Events include, childcare, translation (Spanish, Ukrainian, Russian, Punjabi), and are held in accessible locations. Attendees are also compensated with Visa gift cards for their time and expertise.
- **Trusted Messengers:** 29 local residents helped share information, reaching another 1,000 households through the Foothills Connection HUB.

Key Take-Aways

- East Whatcom communities carry real hesitation, years of being promised help with little follow-through.
- Trust wasn't built through words; it came from consistency, transparency, and showing up.
- Each small action, a conversation, an event, a visible result, helps build credibility.
- Lesson: Lasting change will only happen when community sees that this time, their voice truly matters.

How It's Going

The CAB: The Heart of the Work

- Formed intentionally — 22 applications, 15 one-on-ones, 11 dedicated members by June 2025.
- The CAB isn't just "advisory." They decide how ideas are scored, what goes on the ballot, and which projects move forward.
- Rarely seen before, East Whatcom residents are governing their own investment pipeline.
- Their leadership transformed HEZ from a program into a resident-run process that reflects lived experience, not outside assumptions.

What That Looks Like

We developed a new framework called the **Community Priorities Pipeline**, our version of participatory budgeting adapted for our current process.

- **Here's how it works:**
 - **Community Ideas:** Anyone can submit a proposal (simple form — no grant writing required).
 - **CAB Scoring:** The CAB evaluates each idea for impact, feasibility, and sustainability.
 - **Community Voting:** In January 2026, everyone 14+ who lives, works, or learns in the Mount Baker School District can vote online, on paper, or at events.
 - **Funding Prep:** In February–March, top priorities will move into the funding pipeline for grants, partnerships, or advocacy support.

Currently we have six proposals on hand ranging from local transportation options to a community farmers' market and youth mentorship programs.

Where We Are Headed!

The next phase is about growing local leadership — identifying and supporting a team of Mount Baker community members to carry this work forward.

- The goal: a self-sustaining, ad-hoc community council that keeps this momentum alive long after HEZ funding ends.
- East Whatcom's lack of consistent representation has had real consequences. This is our moment to change that — by helping the community build the structure to speak for itself.
- Every step we've taken has been about giving this community the one thing it's always deserved: a clear, collective voice that's heard and respected.

THANK YOU!

