



Whatcom County Executive & County Council 2025 State Legislative Priorities (Draft)

This agenda is not comprehensive and may be modified. Whatcom County may support or oppose other emerging legislative priorities during the 2024 Washington State legislative session.

Lummi Island Ferry

- Rising costs have made both the operation and replacement of the Lummi Island ferry a challenge given limited local funding resources.
- Whatcom County seeks capital/transportation support for:
 - Replacement of aging dockside infrastructure
 - New vessel construction

Swift Creek Cleanup

- Whatcom County and the Washington State Department of Ecology are under a consent decree to mitigate asbestos at Swift Creek. We are working in partnership with Ecology on the next stage of project planning.
- Whatcom County advocates for full funding of the mutual commitments of the county and state agreed upon in the consent decree. Funding need for 2025-2027 is \$11.6M.

Nooksack Basin Water Rights Adjudication

- State-mandated water rights adjudication for the Nooksack basin has created administrative, financial and capacity burdens on Whatcom County. We request the legislature to fund the following needs:
 - Construction of courthouse space and expanded court administrative costs
 - Establishment of federal settlement framework (collaborative solutions table)
 - Technical assistance for affected water users
 - Funding for technical studies and collaborative process

Affordable Housing and Economic Development

- Wetland Buffer Mitigation Project
- Wetland bank planning and design funds (Port, COB and County)
- Policy advocacy to reduce bureaucratic constraints limiting speed of wetland bank approval, geographic coverage, etc., (Port, COB and County)
- Funding for UGA infrastructure to facilitate annexation

Behavioral Care Center – Prosecutorial Division Program.

- Whatcom County is planning for a Behavioral Care Center to divert individuals from jail into secured therapeutic care as an alternative to incarceration. The goal is to provide intensive behavioral health treatment for legal system-involved individuals, reducing recidivism and offering a path toward rehabilitation rather than punitive measures.
- Whatcom County seeks State financial support to design the facility, with requests for state capital construction funding likely in subsequent sessions.

Youth Co-Occurring Treatment Facility

- There is an urgent demand in our community for youth treatment services. The County is exploring multiple opportunities to specifically address the critical need for youth-focused co-occurring treatment services, integrating mental health and substance use care.
- Whatcom County advocates for State investment to build and operate a new youth facility, potentially with regional scope to serve North Sound communities.

Regulatory Framework and Operating Funds for Crisis Relief Center

- The County is collaborating with community partners to develop the design and operating model for one of the first such crisis relief centers in the state. Reimbursement mechanisms, the service model, staffing model, etc. all need further refinement.
- Whatcom County advocates for collaboration on a regulatory framework and operations funding as well as workforce development on a regional basis

Increase Medicaid Reimbursement Rates for Providers

- Whatcom County advocates for higher reimbursement rates to ensure providers can meet operational costs and offer quality care. Increased rates are essential for recruiting, training, and retaining qualified staff, and ultimately for the success of all existing and new behavioral health facilities.

Fund Medicaid Eligibility Waiver in Jail

- Whatcom County will advocate for adequate funding and a policy framework to implement the Medicaid waiver authorized for incarcerated individuals 90 days prior to release.

Housing Policy Modernization for Individuals with Severe Behavioral Health Conditions

- Whatcom County is requesting the State to provide a regulatory framework, capital investment and operational funding for the development of larger housing models with integrated daily living supports, ensuring long-term sustainability and community-based care.

Strengthening 911 and 988 System Coordination

- Whatcom County supports enhanced coordination between the 911 emergency response system and the 988 behavioral health crisis line will ensure individuals in crisis receive the most appropriate care, whether it's law enforcement, medical response, or mental health intervention.

Improving Involuntary Treatment Act (ITA) Legal Framework

- Whatcom County supports legal reforms to the ITA to expand treatment criteria, streamline court processes, and enhance coordination with crisis services to improve behavioral health outcomes and public safety; for example, broadening the criteria to include individuals whose mental health conditions pose a significant risk to themselves or others, even before a crisis reaches imminent danger.

Funding for Indigent Defense

- Proposed caseload standards for indigent defense would require counties to rapidly expand their public defender's staff. Local governments are under-resourced to meet the standards, and no state funding has been offered.
- Whatcom County joins other counties and cities in advocating for adequate state funding for public defense.

Food Security

- Support Washington State Department of Agriculture's request to include \$93.25 million for sustained enhanced food assistance in the governor's 2025-27 biennial budget.
- Increased funding for state grants to support local food system infrastructure.
- New policy solutions and additional food bank funding resources.

Increase the Personal Property Exemption to \$50,000, from \$15,000

- Legislation will be introduced to provide relief for small businesses, and administration relief for the Assessor's and Treasurer's office. Administration of personal property accounts and tax requires significant time and resources, for relatively little revenue.
- In Whatcom County almost 70% of our approximately 5300 accounts are under the \$50,000 threshold, and account for ~5.5% of all personal property value and less than 0.08% of the total taxable value in the county.

REET Technology Fee Increase

- Washington Association of County Assessors proposes to increase the Real Estate Excise Tax (REET) Technology Fee from \$5 to \$20.
- The Legislature established the REET technology fee to help offset the expansion of services and cost of required software changes prompted by changes in state law. But this fee has not increased since 2013 and is insufficient in supporting both Treasurer software and operations and County Assessor annual revaluation system related to REET as was intended.

Cost-Recovery Mechanism for Treasury Services

- The Washington State Association of County Treasurers proposes to initiate cost-recovery fee to taxing districts receiving treasurer services.
- The County's General Fund currently is supporting other taxing districts by covering the Treasurer's costs associated with property tax billing, collection, and distribution operations. If this legislation is enacted, the General Fund's contribution to these costs would be proportional to the County's property levies. The proposal would recover allowable prior year actual costs on a pro rata from each billable levy.

Key State Funding Buckets with Whatcom County Projects and Programs

- Foundational Public Health Services (FPHS)
- Floodplains by Design
- Recreation and Conservation Office
- Brian Abbott Fish Passage
- Model Toxics Control Act Capital Fund (Plantation Rifle Range)
- Continued state support for Response Systems Division: LEAD, ART, GRACE and Co-Responder

PRIORITY ISSUE AREAS

Whatcom County wishes to advance funding and policy solutions in the following areas:

- Policy and funding for Search and Rescue
- LAMIRD Reform
- Opioid response and behavioral health
- Housing affordability, homeless services, and severe weather shelter (e.g. smoke, heat, cold)
- Broadband, including use of hybrid deployment
- Fully funding implementation of medical examiner accreditation requirements
- State support for high-needs school districts and junior taxing districts reliant on timber revenue
- Preservation and maintenance funding for the county transportation system.