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Satpal Singh Sidhu, County Executive
Address to Whatcom County Council and Public January 14, 2020

For Immediate Release, January 14, 2020

Good Evening Council Members and Residents of Whatcom County!

Fifty years ago, when man landed on the moon in July 1969, I received my degree in Physics and Mathematics in India. I was 19 years old. I had the same dream as millions of young kids all over the world to become an engineer and work in America, the land of opportunity! I then became an electrical engineer and immigrated 40 years ago. And today, here I am! A true American dream is unfolding in front of us.

I would like to start with the acknowledgment that we are gathered here on the ancestral homelands of the Coastal Salish Peoples, the Lummi Nation and Nooksack Tribe, and thank them for their enduring care and protection of our shared lands and waterways.

I am so humbled and honored by the incredible support and trust from varied groups like farmers, labor unions, firefighters, environmental groups, tribal members, business owners, professionals, doctors, lawyers, teachers, students and common Americans, who gave me the opportunity serve as your County Executive.

The most asked question during the past year has been: **Why do you want this job and what is your vision for Whatcom County?**

It is my passion and commitment to serve my community and share the values of fairness, inclusion, and equal opportunity for all. Together we can address the challenges before us.

My leadership vision is that working together, we can achieve something bigger than all of us, which we may not perceive or create as individuals.

And now the work begins! This is a tall promise, easier said than done. We all know the only constant in life is "change". That is where you all come in: I need your help to bring that change.

There are two immediate challenges. **The first is getting Whatcom County working together.** We all know that we are better than our current politics. Our land, water, housing, environment, climate change, jobs, criminal justice and most other local issues are not liberal or conservative issues. We as a local community are paralyzed to solve our common issues because of our inability to have civil and meaningful conversation. We must lower the temperature.

The second challenge is getting to consensus. Consensus does not mean we agree on everything. It means, we can all live with the solutions we propose collectively. We have more in common than what divides us. Let's not deprive our kids and grandkids from a bright and joyful future because of our empty and meaningless rhetoric of labels. We, the people of Whatcom County, need to have the courage to disagree and still love each other.

There are several local issues requiring our commitment to work together and seek practical solutions we can all live with. There will be new issues in coming months and years. Let's take a break from ideologies and labels of all kinds and try something simple and practical. Let me share few words about some of these issues, not in any order of priority:

Concept of a Joint Civic Plaza

I have met a few times with the new Mayor of Bellingham, Seth Fleetwood to discuss how we can work together on issues which are important to both the City of Bellingham and the County. One such thing is developing the concept of a Joint Civic Plaza plan for the next 25 years. Both the County and City can build joint buildings and save millions of dollars for you, the taxpayers.

Housing and Land Use Policies

The rising cost of housing, at all income levels, is a serious threat to our economic vitality, public well-being and the health of our community. It challenges the very livelihood of our future generations. Our businesses are unable to expand because employees earning decent wages are also not able to find affordable housing.

I will seek leadership and advice from the County Council and the governments of Bellingham and all small cities to develop county-wide coherent land use policies to create mixed housing zones and expand the availability of residential lots over the next 25-30 years.

Criminal Justice Reforms, Health and Human Services

Meeting the most basic needs of health and human services of our community is a floor, not a ceiling. Our criminal justice system reforms must prioritize providing behavioral health treatment, drug and opioid addiction rehabilitation services, and new alternatives to incarceration before any brick & mortar investments. I will seek leadership and advice from the County Council and other stakeholders to move forward with the proposed reforms in the criminal justice system.

I would like to note that County Prosecutor, Eric Richey and Sheriff Bill Elfo have done a marvelous job implementing new alternatives to incarceration like bail reforms, electronic home monitoring, programs like the Law Enforcement Assistive Diversion (LEAD) and Ground level Response and Coordinated Engagement (GRACE) and other administrative changes.

The Incarceration Prevention and Reduction Task Force has been diligently working on the criminal justice reforms since 2017 with positive tangible outcomes. Our local government budgets are already stretched to invest more funds to improve behavioral health services, addiction treatment, homelessness, and affordable housing. But together, we must seek additional resources from State, Federal and other organizations to support and expand our programs and services to reach all residents in need of these services.

Tribal Relations

We recognize the inherent sovereignty and treaty rights of Lummi and Nooksack Tribes. We must expand our cooperation for a meaningful and respectful relationship with Tribal Nations and embark upon the projects of mutual importance like water, salmon habitat enhancement, cultural heritage preservation, creating new jobs, economic expansion and other projects in the best interest of all residents. I look forward to starting a new era of cooperation with both Lummi and Nooksack governments and tribe members.

Protecting Our Environment and Climate Change Mitigation

Let me reiterate that climate change is not a hoax, it is real, ask our local farmers. We must take immediate steps to address this serious issue.

I have taken preliminary steps to organize a movement to plant one million new trees over the next 5 years. The motto of this program is: **One Tree Per Person Per Year**. This will not be a County Government Program, but a community led movement with support from industry, business entities, educational institutions, other organizations and residents of Whatcom County.

For the sake of our future generations, we must continue to protect our critical environmental areas, salmon and wildlife habitat, and the Salish Sea. I will be starting conversations with Cherry Point industry leaders, tribal leaders, environment groups, major businesses, Western Washington University and other interested organizations to develop a common platform for sharing ideas and projects to work cooperatively to address the ways of mitigating impacts of climate change and enhance our environment for our future generations.

Water for Farmers, Fish and Forestry

Water is a vital resource for our food supply, economy and lifestyle for the Tribes and other residents alike. I pledge to work with all stakeholders to move forward the discussions and possible consensus on many aspects of water needs in our county. We all win when we can reach mutually agreeable settlements rather than seeking help from the courts.

Inclusion, Diversity, Immigrants

I cannot emphasize enough that hate and discrimination has no place in Whatcom County. We respect the equality and dignity of all people and I firmly believe diversity is our strength, not our problem. We know that today's immigrants are tomorrow's County Executives, or University Presidents, or Government Leaders, farmers, teachers, doctors, lawyers, soldiers, entrepreneurs, activists, and pillars of our communities. The American dream continues!

I am very thankful for the assistance (former County Executive) Jack Louws and the Administration Staff Team has provided me to make sure our transition is smooth. Also, I have a diverse Transition Team hard at work to assist me in ensuring that we have the information and broad perspective to tackle the issues facing our County.

I see myself more as Public Servant-in-Chief than as County Executive. I recognize that I am joining a group of dedicated, capable and productive public servants led by talented department heads.

I look forward to working with Whatcom County Council members and other elected officials, mayors and councilmembers of Bellingham and all small cities, all other quasi-government organizations like (WTA) Whatcom Transportation Authority, (PUD) Public Utility District, Council of Governments and others. And most important of all, I look forward to working with you the voters—bosses of all governments.

I would like to thank my wife, Mundir and my family for supporting my public service. This is an exciting moment in my life. I look forward to the months and years ahead, as we build a prosperous future for succeeding generations to treasure and enjoy.

God Bless you and God Bless America.

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For more information contact the Whatcom County Executive's Office: 360 778 5200