



## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** Whatcom County Council  
**FROM:** Satpal Sidhu, Whatcom County Executive  
**RE:** Executive Feedback on Ordinance to Establish a Task Force to Develop a Whatcom County Forest Resilience Plan  
**DATE:** October 9, 2023

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I appreciate Council's willingness to dive into this difficult and important policy issue, as well as the desire to look at this holistically.

It is important to provide context to this Council discussion within the broader set of key priorities that Council and the Administration are tackling over the next two years, including the Comprehensive Plan update and affordable housing land use policies and strategies; jail planning and financing; behavioral health expansion and criminal justice reform; bonding for County facilities and new ferry; water adjudication; Child and Family programs; and climate resiliency and impact mitigation. Council will need to make strategic choices about what additional issues to take on and where to invest staff and budget capacity if we are to tackle these issues on top of the County's core services.

As Council considers adding capacity for the County to work on sustainable forestry planning and implementation, we offer the following feedback for your review.

The Executive's Office convened staff from Public Works, Parks & Recreation, and Planning & Development Services to assess what the County is currently doing around forest management, what departments plan to do moving forward, and to reflect on the purpose and structure of the proposed task force.

### **Existing Work, Coordination, and Budget:**

- Parks Department is working hard to plan for the management of county-owned forest lands, with the first priority being the Lake Whatcom Watershed.
- Public Works also has connection with forestry through the Climate Action Plan and planning around Stewart Mountain and Canyon Lake Community Forests.
- Planning and Development staff works with the Forest Advisory Committee and processes forest practices applications in Urban Growth Areas, as well as manages the Conservation Easement program to include working forests and ecologically significant forest lands. Additional planning work will occur through the Comprehensive Planning process, in line with Council's Comprehensive Plan direction with regard to forestry.

To coordinate all of these departmental activities, Public Works, Parks, and PDS have developed an internal Land Management Committee. They are coordinating on County property planning, use and management, including contributing input to the RFP for forest management planning on Lake Whatcom Park. This staff coordination structure and direct staff-to-staff connections, which includes coordination with other institutions and governments, is an efficient mechanism for planning around the County's own land management.

Council's recent discussions have helped staff recognize an opportunity to integrate this work with existing boards and committees and Council policy conversations, which we plan to do moving forward.

With respect to increasing staff capacity to work on these issues, we do anticipate supplemental requests to hire a Conservation and Parks Steward position in the Parks Department, who will have forest management experience. We are also supportive of hiring a forest policy consultant for either the Council or Executive's Office.

Below is a summary of budgeted items and upcoming departmental requests related to Forestry:

Department	Work Item	Amount	Notes
Public Works	Stand/roads inventory for Stewart Mountain	\$50,000	In 2023 budget
Public Works	Stewart Mountain Forest Management Plan and Forest Practice Application Development	\$100,000-\$200,000	2024 budget request
Public Works	Forestland emissions inventory	TBD	2024 budget request (revenue received)
Public Works	Acquisition of Stewart Mountain Phase 2	\$5.5M in revenue received; \$8M additional needed	TBD, based on timing of state/federal grants
Public Works	Stewart Mountain management activities (thinning, etc.)	\$500,000	2024 budget request
Public Works	Climate Commitment Act forestry grant matching for sequestration and urban forestry projects	\$50,000	2024 budget request

Public Works/PDS	Comprehensive Plan updates related to forestry	\$27,000	2024 budget request (revenue received)
Parks	Lake Whatcom Forest Management Plan	\$200,000	Half already budgeted
Parks	Parks Department Staffing on Forest Management Planning	\$93,322	Existing staffing + forestry activities of proposed 2024 stewardship position
Parks	Canyon Lake Forest Planning	\$200,000	Not budgeted; approximately five years out
Parks	Ongoing implementation of Forest Management Plans	TBD	Dependent on revenue received from management activities

**Timeline of Lake Whatcom Management Plan:** Council allocated resources and encouraged Parks to pursue a management plan for the Lake Whatcom reconveyance lands. Parks has established a scope of work and expects to release an RFP imminently for that management plan, with the goal to get under contract in early 2024. The Parks Department intends to proceed with this work as planned, and we are concerned about wrapping this work into a new task force and delaying a management plan. The intent in development of the Management Plan is to work with many stakeholders, including the Lake Whatcom Policy Group, Parks Commission, Forest Advisory Committee, Climate Impact Advisory Committee, City of Bellingham and others. We believe these stakeholders are an avenue to get community input with respect to the County's own land management plans.

**Staff Investment:** The ordinance indicates that the proposed Task Force will have full support from the Executive's Office and County departments. It also indicates four staff members would serve on the Task Force. We expect staff to also be asked to participate on committees of the proposed Task Force, and we estimate each staff member will end up spending 5-10 hours a month on this work, in addition to their existing workplans which include forest management/planning activities and comprehensive plan coordination.

If the proposed Task Force is approved, given the number of competing and critical priorities underway, the Executive recommends amending the ordinance to assign only one Executive designee to the Task Force, either staff or a consultant, who could then coordinate with the staff Land Management Committee. We also recommend amending the ordinance to focus the Task Force more as a Council advisory body, striking the language about the Executive's Office and County departments providing full support.

**Department of Natural Resources Coordination:** We agree that a comprehensive approach to engagement with DNR is preferable to a sale-by-sale policy position. Commissioner Franz's

recent letter outlines a number of new policy tools that Whatcom County and DNR could utilize in partnership to balance conservation goals with maximum sustainable yield. The County is not currently equipped with existing staff to engage in this policy discussion. If Council wishes to engage meaningfully with DNR, additional resources will be needed. The Executive or Council office could contribute to this work by hiring a policy consultant to help advise the County on these issues and have a Whatcom County presence on DNR-led advisory bodies related to this work. The County Council's Natural Resource Committee could be one avenue for the consultant to engage in meaningful policy dialogue with Council with respect to the DNR toolbox, regardless of whether Council establishes a new Task Force.

**Feedback Synopsis:** Overall, the purpose of this Task Force as presented is very broad, which makes for an ambitious workplan. Is Council's intent to coordinate with DNR on Trust Lands; provide a forest management framework for the County's own lands; or address the impacts of climate on forest health generally for all public and/or private lands across the County?

We would like to hear more dialogue from the full Council about its specific policy goals in establishing this Task Force and whether there is a desire to narrow its scope or to affirm the broad vision outlined in the Ordinance. Once we have a better understanding of Council's initial priorities for a Task Force workplan, we can be more helpful in providing specific feedback or a formal recommendation.

The County has ongoing efforts related to forest management and climate action. We want to ensure we are maximizing staff time for those existing commitments and that we can deliver on a Lake Whatcom Management Plan in line with Council and stakeholder expectations.