

Whatcom County Council (Special)

**COUNTY COURTHOUSE
311 Grand Avenue, Ste #105
Bellingham, WA 98225-4038
(360) 778-5010**



Minutes - Draft Minutes

Tuesday, February 17, 2026

9:30 AM

Hybrid Meeting - Council Conference Room

**COUNCIL INFORMATIONAL RETREAT (PARTICIPATE IN-PERSON AT 311
GRAND AVENUE, SUITE 105, SEE REMOTE JOIN INSTRUCTIONS AT
www.whatcomcounty.us/joinvirtualcouncil or CALL 360-778-5010)**

COUNCILMEMBERS

Elizabeth Boyle
Barry Buchanan
Ben Elenbaas
Kaylee Galloway
Jessica Rienstra
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 9:33 a.m. in a hybrid meeting.

Roll Call

Present: 7 - Elizabeth Boyle, Barry Buchanan, Ben Elenbaas, Kaylee Galloway, Jessica Rienstra, Jon Scanlon, and Mark Stremmler

Announcements**Committee Discussion**

1. [AB2026-158](#) Annual Council informational retreat to review general Council rules, policies, and procedures, and participate in a facilitated discussion regarding 2026 Council strategic planning

COUNCIL OFFICE UPDATES

Cathy Halka, Clerk of the Council, introduced Council Office Staff and spoke about the Open Public Meetings Act (OPMA).

Tara Jackson, Council Office Staff, spoke about OPMA.

Lisa Bruner, Council Office Staff, spoke about public records requests and Hearing Examiner.

Jenna Gernand, Council Office Staff, spoke about the councilmember handbook, available communication services (how she can help individual councilmembers with their jobs and communications work for the whole Council), and accessibility requirement updates.

Kristi Felbinger, Council Office Staff, spoke about the agenda management system, the public-facing Legislative Information Center, and the process for reimbursing Councilmember travel expenses.

Liia Bray, Council Office Staff, spoke about the Board of Equalization and flood revaluations being done by the Assessor's Office. She and Janie Randall, Council Office Staff, answered questions.

Kiana Oos, Council Office Staff, spoke about types of legislative support Council Office staff can give to councilmembers, best practices for proposing legislation, and how to amend an item that is already on the agenda.

Kirsten Smith, Council Office Staff, spoke about upcoming documents

regarding Council authority in emergencies and an Emergency Council Office Operations Plan, and spoke about the Council Office internship program.

Scanlon moved to hire an intern for the spring quarter.

The motion was seconded by Boyle.

Councilmembers and Council staff discussed the motion, who the internship is open to, and if the number of hours is flexible.

Donnell Tanksley, Sheriff, stated he has a connection to the internship program at Western Washington University.

The motion carried by the following vote:

Aye: 7 - Boyle, Buchanan, Elenbaas, Galloway, Rienstra, Scanlon, and Stremmler

Nay: 0

Elenbaas moved to nominate himself and Stremmler to be on the selection process team.

The motion was seconded by Stremmler.

Elenbaas stated the north county is not usually represented on the hiring team.

Scanlon suggested a friendly amendment to also include Rienstra.

Elenbaas accepted the friendly amendment.

They and Council staff discussed which Council staff also participates and whether Kiana Oos (former intern, now employee) could participate, and the timeline for the application process.

The motion carried by the following vote:

Aye: 7 - Buchanan, Elenbaas, Galloway, Rienstra, Scanlon, Stremmler, and Boyle

Nay: 0

Jill Nixon, Council Office staff, spoke about advisory groups and other boards, and the appointment process.

Kimberly Thulin, Prosecuting Attorney's Office, and Nixon answered questions.

Elenbaas stated he would like to get input on opportunities to simplify the boards.

Halka spoke about agenda deadlines.

COMPREHENSIVE PLAN PROCESS (Approximate Timestamp: 1:26:23)

Kiana Oos spoke about the proposed Comprehensive Plan councilmember update process and how councilmembers should propose amendments.

Councilmembers discussed making the Comprehensive Plan a priority in Committee of the Whole meetings.

LEGAL UPDATES (Approximate Timestamp: 1:40:30)

Kimberly Thulin, Prosecuting Attorney's Office, introduced Council to the new Chief Civil Prosecutor Tom Seguire and spoke about legal updates including the scope of representation as the attorney that is assigned to the Council, attorney-client confidentiality, executive sessions, and obtaining legal advice.

Councilmembers, staff and Thulin discussed the update and rules about entering into an executive session during another meeting.

MEETING PROCEDURES (Approximate Timestamp: 2:05:39)

Councilmembers discussed meeting procedures including the allowance for public comments, and whether councilmembers should have some type of mechanism to address or respond to them or let people know they are listening. They discussed how they have been sequencing discussion, introduction and action of ordinances and that they might choose which agenda items should require discussion before introduction.

Galloway spoke about expectations for the Council and staff, expectations of committee chairs and vice chairs and the possibility of exploring subcommittee-type work, and the role of councilmember representatives and alternates in outside boards and committees.

Councilmembers took a lunch break at 12:07 p.m. and the meeting reconvened at 1 p.m.

EXECUTIVE OFFICE UPDATES (Approximate Timestamp: 3:30:01)

The following people gave Executive's Office updates:

- Satpal Sidhu, County Executive
- Jed Holmes, Executive's Office

They spoke about a desire for councilmembers to reach out to the Administration, that councilmembers should reach out directly to department heads and copy the Executive's Office when they need information, the budget schedule for the year with an earlier submittal time, a suggestion for a Council amendment to the Charter to give more time for year-end financial reports, and department priorities for 2026.

They answered questions about quarterly reports, departments having a public-facing "policy book," fully staffing the Planning Department, and the timeline for starting the Critical Areas Ordinance.

COUNCIL PRIORITIES ([Approximate Timestamp: 4:01:10](#))

Eric Johnson, Columbia Policy Advisors, facilitated a discussion regarding councilmember priorities. He read from a presentation (on file).

The first facilitated exercise was for Councilmembers to go around the table and name strategic issues (focusing on issues and not the answers), which are things that are affecting the community (or internal organization) that need to be resolved. They were:

- Finishing the Comprehensive Plan update (Galloway)
- Doing the basics (core functions of county government) well (Elenbaas)
- Housing and care (support) for our unstably- or under-housed individuals (Boyle)
- Flood recovery and response to those who are displaced by disaster and related prevention-focused longer-range planning (Rienstra)
- Improving access to preventative health services (Scanlon)
- Designing, building, and opening our new justice and behavioral care center (Buchanan)
- Encouraging business/industry growth (Stremmler)
- Water resources and issues - flood and education (Galloway)
- The Budget (Galloway)
- Long-range flood mitigation and water solutions/infrastructure (Scanlon)
- Certainty (for permitting, water resources, business/industry growth) (Elenbaas)
- How they get the community to trust and feel engaged in government and know why government is doing what they are doing (Boyle)

- Clarity, accountability, and creating belonging (Rienstra)
- Transparency (Scanlon)
- Figuring out a new normal for how they do business (especially as it relates to revenue) (Buchanan)
- Seeing more land available for people to build a home on (Stremmler)
- An economic impact/activity statement for county investments (what role government can play in the broader economic development strategy with the funds they spend) (Galloway)
- Value - being able to recognize (and make decisions using facts and data on) what we are doing that is working and invest in that (Elenbaas)
- Successful implementation of the Healthy Children's Fund (Boyle)
- Enhancing partnerships with community and intergovernmental work (Rienstra)
- Hearing from some less-organized communities in unincorporated areas about their hyperlocal concerns (Scanlon)
- Collecting data and evaluating some of the programs that are out there with our community partners to find their activity (Buchanan)
- Whatcom County (government) being the gold standard for efficiency (determining if county government employment numbers have outpaced population) (Stremmler)
- Staying current with economic development policies (compared to what is happening on the ground) around agriculture (Elenbaas)
- Regional trail connections (Scanlon)
- Regional cooperation on behavioral health services (Buchanan)

(Approximate Timestamp: 5:25:10)

Johnson led councilmembers in an exercise using sticky notes to project three years into the future and write what they would list as council or county accomplishments. Johnson read those and councilmembers shared their reactions to them. They discussed celebrating small successes even though reaching functional zero may not be a reality, communicating those to the community, and that they maybe spend a lot of time focusing on problems that require money instead of looking at what they can do that would not even cost money. Johnson spoke about setting strategies and identifying actions to get to their goals but also to be able to communicate to the public as accomplishments.

Councilmembers went into recess starting at 3:16 p.m. and reconvened the meeting at 3:26 p.m.

(Approximate Timestamp: 5:56:00)

Johnson led councilmembers in another exercise to think about political, economic, social, technological, environmental, and legal realms and write down how the current operating environment and culture (or what is happening on a local, state, and federal level) for each of those is going to affect the work that they have coming up, their decision-making, or county business they are responsible for. Councilmembers shared what they wrote down.

Johnson highlighted some themes that came out of the exercises and how they might be categorized into “buckets,” and he stated the next step would be to spend more time building out the goals and objectives for the strategic issues discussed. Councilmembers can work through that with staff or he and the chair can discuss whether he has a role in helping with that piece as well.

Councilmembers and Johnson gave closing comments on the process.

This agenda item was DISCUSSED AND MOTION(S) APPROVED.

MOTION SUMMARY FOR THE MEETING:

Motion approved 7-0 to hire an intern for the spring quarter.

Motion approved 7-0 to appoint Elenbaas, Stremmler, and Rienstra to be part of the hiring committee for the Council Office internship.

Items Added by Revision

There were no agenda items added by revision.

Other Business

There was no other business.

Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 4:26 p.m.

ATTEST:

WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCIL
WHATCOM COUNTY, WA

Cathy Halka, Council Clerk

Kaylee Galloway, Council Chair

Meeting Minutes prepared by Kristi Felbinger