

Infrastructure

Fish Barrier Removal

In Washington many threatened or endangered salmon and steelhead cannot access critical upstream habitat to spawn because thousands of culverts block their way. This loss of habitat has been such a factor in the steep decline of salmon and steelhead that the state is under court order to fix many of their fish blocking culverts by 2030.

- Counties also have thousands of fish blocking culverts that need to be repaired or replaced, which will cost billions of dollars counties don't have.
- Counties support a comprehensive and coordinated statewide program; prioritizing both watersheds and species to determine the removal of state, local, and private barriers to maximize habitat recovery.

Broadband Access

Broadband access is critical to the modern economy, essential for education, and vital to innovative health equity. Increasing access to underserved areas is essential.

- Geographic, economic, and other variables hinder access to quality high-speed broadband for too many Washington residents, with inadequate and unaffordable service in every county across the state.
- Improving broadband access is a long-term process that will be expensive, but the return on investment to local economies will be profound.

Preserve and Maintain County Roads and Bridges

Counties are responsible for roughly half of Washington's transportation system that residents rely on to get to school, work, and move products to market.

- Counties face this responsibility at a time when motor vehicle fuel taxes are declining, and the cost of preservation and construction are on the rise.
- These funding challenges will lead to deferred maintenance, increased risk to safety, and costlier reconstruction of necessary infrastructure. Counties need more shared revenue from the state for maintenance.

Capital Investment

Counties are responsible for maintaining a variety of public facilities and infrastructure critical to public health and safety. Counties increasingly need state investment in sewer, water, solid waste, and buildings to keep them safe and functional.

- Investments in infrastructure are vital to economic growth and essential to vibrant communities and yet too often maintenance competes with mandates while facilities age and deteriorate.
- Investing in infrastructure spurs economic development - every \$1 invested generates \$1.50 in economic output. Investments in core infrastructure" like roads and railways result in even higher returns.





Environment

Growth Management Act

Counties are required to protect farm and forest lands, rivers and lakes, and other sensitive environments. Many must also manage for growth. However, there are updates and reforms needed to make the GMA more functional and effective.

- Planning is expensive, and without reliable and sustainable funding, counties will continue to struggle to satisfy legal requirements.
- Counties cannot absorb new planning requirements without the Legislature providing ongoing financial support for any additional responsibilities. Counties support local flexibility for planning.

Water

Water is vital to local economies, agriculture, recreation, and environmental health. Counties have a strong interest and responsibility in managing water to meet current and future demand.

- Fair and equitable water distribution is essential to meeting the needs of all counties. Regardless of water rights ownership, effective and efficient water management is in the public interest.
- Programs that improve water quality or support and enhance water supplies for various uses, including environmental, require funding.

Climate Change

Climate change impacts county residents and the environment. Counties can help the state meet its goals for reducing climate change causes but cannot take on more responsibilities without additional funding.

- The Legislature must provide the financial resources necessary if requiring counties to take on new climate change impact and reduction responsibilities.
- Counties face different impacts, and solutions for meeting climate change-related goals should be flexible and tailored to local conditions.

Forest Maintenance

Forestlands are essential resources that create jobs, support education and other services, and meet cultural and recreational needs. Forest health is critical to a healthy environment, clean water, and wildlife habitat.

- Active forest management strategies like thinning, prescribed burning, and logging are vital for maintaining forest health.
- When forestlands are unharvested to support wildlife, forest health management must continue. County revenues and rural jobs must be supported by replacing affected forestlands with other harvest opportunities or through other means.

Solid Waste

Managing garbage and recycling collection and hazardous waste disposal is primarily the responsibility of counties. These services are not uniform statewide, and costs can vary widely. Significant changes in recycling markets and service level adds to the confusion.

- Counties support a uniform standard for recycling available to all residents with consistency to minimize confusion and improve recycling markets.
- Recently approved and emerging statewide priorities for waste reduction, greenhouse gas emissions reduction, litter control, and others that impact county solid waste programs should include collaboration with counties and must include resources for implementation of new requirements.

🕐 Unfunded Mandates

In 1993, the citizens of Washington State passed Initiative 601 that, in addition to establishing state spending limits, created a requirement that local governments must be reimbursed by the state for the costs of any new programs or increased services imposed upon them.

- Counties, as agents of the state, are tasked with implementing laws and court mandates. Therefore, the Legislature must ensure that counties have adequate resources to perform these constitutional and statutory responsibilities.
- The Legislature must not continue to shift costs through policy changes without addressing the underlying funding problems that face county budgets.

📈 Long-term Change

Counties face three primary challenges with the revenue sources available to fund essential state services at the local level: lack of revenue diversity, flexibility in how they can use revenue, and revenue streams that do not keep pace with expanding population and inflation.

- With an overdependence on property tax, a smaller share of sales and use tax, and the lack of flexibility in the use of other revenues, counties are structurally unable to meet current and future service demands.
- The county financial structure must meet the needs of modern county governments. The Legislature must help by giving counties the authority to control their cost drivers and providing revenue sources that keep pace with costs.



Public Health

Local health jurisdictions are the frontline defenders against community threats like infectious diseases, chronic illness, environmental toxins, and public health emergencies.

- Local public health works to reduce health disparities created when specific populations have worse health outcomes or are more susceptible to illness and injury due to systemic and institutional barriers.
- Local public health must be well-funded to increase capacity, modernize, and quickly adapt to manage both new threats and long-standing health impacts.

Behavioral Health

Mental health and substance use disorder treatment programs are essential county services made even more significant during a pandemic.

- The pandemic has increased the need for care of those with mental health and substance use problems and those suffering from the psychosocial consequences of the pandemic.
- County jails inappropriately serve as substance use disorder and mental health institutions but are not designed or staffed to provide sufficient treatment for these individuals making treatment insufficient and expensive. The Legislature must ensure that the behavioral health system is sufficiently funded, including support for county jails.

Access to Judicial Equity

Access to a defense attorney is a fundamental constitutional right, the responsibility for which the Legislature passed down to counties.

- Improving access to justice is a critical component in tackling inequality, and ensuring that access is equal, regardless of where you live.
- With the Legislature funding less than 4% of trial court public defense costs, counties are left to foot the ever-increasing \$160 million bill with dwindling and unequal resources, which risks the funding for other non-constitutional but equally important human services.

Responding to the Blake Decision

The Supreme Court's decision in State v. Blake presents an unprecedented challenge to the state's criminal justice system that severely impacts the already backlogged court system caused by the pandemic.

- Although the State has provided counties funds to alleviate some of the fiscal impact of resentencing and vacating convictions (\$44.5 million) and reimbursing the associated legal and financial obligations (\$23.5 million), it has not provided counties with nearly enough money to cover the full costs necessary to unwind 50 years of simple possession convictions.
- The State should provide additional funds to counties to cover the full cost of Blake.

Affordable Housing

Even before the pandemic, Washington communities faced a massive affordable housing shortage and a growing number of persons entering homelessness.

- The pandemic created even greater strains on our communities - with increasing unemployment, growing numbers of people facing eviction or foreclosure, and a decreasing supply of affordable housing.
- The Legislature must invest in stabilizing housing situations for both tenants and homeowners.





Emergency Response and Recovery



Pandemic Resiliency

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted all facets of our health, well-being, and society. It spotlights the critical need for county programs and service investments to protect individuals and build up community resiliency for future emergencies.

- Everyday programs and services should be leveraged to break down barriers to accessing whole-person care to promote individual and family resilience during emergencies.
- Efforts that address community health and health equity should be strengthened to address underlying causes of inequity, complex and multi-faceted issues like injury and violence, and guide local priorities and investments.
- State and local communities must look beyond the immediate needs of the pandemic. They must consider how to address inequities in health, access to critical services, and systemic discrimination by bolstering networks that include social services, behavioral health, businesses, public health, and healthcare.
- Consistent and timely information and education that uses public health, behavioral health, emergency preparedness, and community health interventions can help people face everyday challenges and facilitate a community's recovery post-disaster.



Fire

Wildfires affect all counties and are becoming more frequent across the state, and air quality has been extremely hazardous for long periods due to smoke.

- The Legislature should continue to dedicate more resources to improving forest health and enhance fire resiliency for communities in all high fire hazard areas. Immediate rehabilitation is necessary to prevent catastrophic flooding, and the Department of Ecology should collaborate with the counties on prescribed burns.
- Legislative investment is needed to increase the ability of local fire districts and the Department of Natural Resources to respond to and contain wildland fires, with more airplanes and helicopters, trained firefighters and other operational staff, and engines and other technologies.
- Investments in redundant power and emergency communications (e.g. 911) systems are critical to effective fire response.



OPMA/PRA

Washington's Open Public Meeting Act (OPMA) and Public Records Act (PRA) place strict requirements on when and how public meetings are conducted and records provided to the public. Necessary pandemic response measures have made it practically impossible to comply with every requirement and highlighted that the OPMA is in need of modernization to take advantage of new technologies.

- The OPMA should be updated to allow use of new remote technologies that better serve the public and members and provide flexibility to public meetings and testimony, especially in emergency situations.
- PRA response timelines must be flexible in an emergency where physical access to documents is impaired or when mail delivery may be less frequent due to remote work arrangements.

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