

CLERK OF THE COUNCIL

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COUNCILMEMBER

Carol Frazey

MEMORANDUM

TO: Whatcom County Council

FROM: Carol Frazey, Councilmember

RE: Language Inclusivity Resolution

DATE: July 25th, 2023

Historically, government statutes have contained biased language that can perpetuate harmful and exclusive stereotypes about marginalized people. Over time and with cultural changes, these communities have identified more appropriate and inclusive language that should be adopted to uphold the respect and dignity of all people. As we, Whatcom County, continue to take steps toward becoming more inclusive, welcoming, and accessible to our diverse community, we must make changes to our code to reflect that commitment to equity.

Across the nation, local governments have acknowledged out-of-date language, its harm, and have implemented changes that make their code gender-neutral. In 2019, the City of Berkley, California adopted a gender-neutral language policy amending the City's code, changing the instances of masculine pronoun usage. In a push to be more inclusive toward gender-nonconforming individuals, this change was a small but meaningful way of acknowledging and supporting the 2SLGBTQIA+ community.

Since 1983, RCW 44.04.210 requires that all new WA state statutes be "written in gender neutral terms". Across the state, many local governments including King County, the City of Shoreline, and the City of Everett have implemented changes to their codes to make its language gender neutral. These changes do not change the meaning of the code's provisions, but rather, they modernize the code to reflect the awareness of the gender binary and exclusion that this construct can inflict upon members of the genderqueer community.

In addition to modifying the instances of male/female pronouns and other types of gender specific language, the Language Inclusivity Resolution modernizes other terms that are outdated and generally inappropriate to use when referring to issues such as substance use, people experiencing poverty or homelessness, and people with disabilities. Instances of changes unrelated to gender specific language within the code have been made with reference to the American Psychological Association's [Inclusive Language Guidelines](#), a collection of information and direction on language that advances the values of equity, diversity, and inclusion.

The Council's contract with the Code Publishing Company stipulates a charge of approximately \$23.00 per page of edits to the code. Since the changes in the resolution's exhibits are small but expand across the entirety of the Whatcom County Code, the cost of revising all of the code at once to reflect these changes could potentially amount to tens of thousands of dollars. To avoid the steep cost of implementing all of the changes at once, the resolution outlines a cost-efficient method of doing so. As the County Executive's office brings forth future code updates, the exhibits of the resolution will be referenced and the corresponding revisions will be included in the code amendment. With this method, the code revisions will be implemented as the code updates over time, eliminating any costs associated with making these language inclusivity changes.

The resolution brought forth today is a way that Whatcom County can show with action, through language, that all people in our community belong in spaces of government. I would like to thank Sophia Rey, Council Intern, for her diligent work and help in bringing this resolution forward. It is my hope that through the passing of this resolution and the changes that it brings to our legislative language, there will be a greater opportunity for civic participation, engagement, and representation of the queer community, women, and other marginalized groups in Whatcom County. Words matter, and the words that govern our county must represent all individuals and their capacity to take up space in government, decision-making, and leadership.