

Dear Councilmember Stremmer,

I am writing to express my concerns as you consider the composition of the Health Board. In 2022, I was asked by the Health Director to introduce an ordinance to change the Health Board's makeup to include members other than elected officials. However, after learning that Washington state law regarding Health Boards was set to change on July 1, 2022, I decided not to move forward with the ordinance. Since Whatcom County is a Charter County, I realized we had the option to retain our current Health Board structure, and I thought it would be valuable to wait a few years and observe the health outcomes from the Covid response and outcomes across the state before making any changes.

I encourage you to ask these specific questions before making your decision:

1. How does Whatcom County's response to health outcomes, such as Covid, compare with other counties?
2. If an unelected individual is added to the Health Board, do we need to follow the requirements of Washington State Law E2SHB 1152?
 - Attorney Karen Frakes confirmed that if the Health Board's makeup changes to include unelected members, Whatcom County would need to comply with E2SHB 1152, which dictates the composition of Health Boards by law.

Specifically, Section (2) of the law states:

"(2) A local board of health comprised solely of elected officials may retain this composition if the local health jurisdiction had a public health advisory committee or board with its own bylaws established on January 1, 2021. By January 1, 2022, the public health advisory committee or board must meet the requirements established in RCW 70.46.140 for community health advisory boards. Any future changes to local board of health composition must meet the requirements of subsection (1) of this section."

3. Where was the community survey posted, and how many people responded?
The survey was said to have received feedback from 76.3% in support of expansion, but I only saw it shared on social media by PHAB members, not on the county's official website. This raises the question: Was the survey broadly advertised, and how many people actually participated?
4. Would PHAB have supported mandatory Covid vaccines for county employees when they became available?
Do you feel this would have been beneficial to the people in our county? It is my opinion that as elected officials, you take a broader scope of what is best for the community, not just one aspect. That is why I recommend that the Health Board continue to be made up of elected officials.

It is important to note that PHAB's role is to provide input on public health policies, priorities, and community health needs while ensuring public participation and accountability. Unfortunately, over the past four years, PHAB has focused primarily on changing the composition of the Health Board rather than recommending policies for the Board to consider. What truly matters is the health and well-being of our community members.

As a former member of the Health Board during Covid, I saw first-hand how political the response and views on health became. As elected officials, you take a broader scope of what is best for the community, not just one aspect. That is why I recommend that the Health Board continue to be made up of elected officials. I found that if the health of our community is going to be political, we should keep the valuable recommendations from PHAB and keep the final decisions to people elected to represent our community.

Thank you,
Carol Frazey

P.S. I highly recommend rewatching the following Health Board Meetings, where we discussed the makeup of the Health Board.

2/1/22 https://whatcom.granicus.com/player/clip/679?view_id=1&redirect=true Health Board Meeting (minutes 38-59)

3/29/22 https://whatcom.granicus.com/player/clip/708?view_id=1&redirect=true Health Board Meeting (Minutes 58-1:22)

Honorable Councilmembers,

I understand there is a discussion to change the composition of the Health Board has come up again. I was asked to support this idea pre-Covid and frankly I was almost convinced. Then Covid came along, and it changed my mind completely.

While I deeply appreciated the hard work and sacrifice of the medical profession in Whatcom County, Covid left me convinced the Health Board should remain comprised of elected rather than unelected representatives of the community.

Allow me to explain what informed my opinion:

1. The County Councilmembers are drawn from the population at large, a good Council is made up of people with multiple different areas of expertise, not just medicine. Who are deeply connected with the communities they represent.
2. When Covid first started the Health Officer downplayed the concerns. The Health Board (County Council) was forced to rely on the Bellingham Herald reports rather than the Health Officer who refused to disclose what was happening in the community aged care facilities. It was the Health Board (County Council), not PHAB, not the health professionals that pushed the Health Officer to clarify what we were hearing was happening in other communities around the world.
3. The Health Board (County Council) was consistently denied access to information related to COVID to provide to the public. Communications that did come out of the Health Officer contradicted what was being reported around the rest of the world. It got so bad the County Council had to change the County Code to force disclosure of information the Community demanded.
4. Very early in 2020 it was the Health Board (County Council) that was first convinced things would get much worse very soon and Council provided the Health Officer ~\$250,000? to immediately begin buying PPE to prepare for a Pandemic.
5. When the pandemic hit in full swing about 4 to 6 weeks later, the Health Officer was asked to confirm he had bought the PPE he was instructed to buy - he said NO, HE DECIDED IT WASN'T NECESSARY. He said he had never experienced any problems buying PPE in the past and didn't understand why he would in the future. This fundamental lack of understanding of Supply and Demand, of Logistics and global markets resulted our Law enforcement, Corrections officers, Doctors, Nurses, Residential Care staff all without PPE when Covid hit in full force. Other jurisdictions had prepared, and we could have been well ahead of the situation, but we lost the opportunity.
6. Skagit and other jurisdictions soon had their Covid testing stations up and running. Yet for months the Health Board (County Council) kept on getting excuses as to why it couldn't be done in Whatcom. It was only the Health Board (County Council) that forced the issue, to set up a testing station in Whatcom County.

7. The Health Officer refused to assist St Joseph's Hospital in the collection of cloth masks when commercial PPE was unavailable even though the reason he gave directly contradicted published CDC guidelines. - I could go on.
8. COVID was far more than a "health crisis" it rapidly impacted every aspect of life, employment, education, economics, justice system etc.
9. Medical professionals are great, caring dedicated people. BUT:
 - a. They typically do not have training in logistics, crisis communications and the dozens other skills required to support a community during a pandemic
 - b. Most (not all) of them are individual contributors who have never managed large teams.
 - c. Fewer are accustomed to dealing with large groups of angry and frightened constituents that turn up to meetings in a crisis.
10. Encourage the best medical professionals you can find to participate in PHAB – and listen to their ideas related to public health. But don't delegate the Council's authority to an outside authority that won't be accountable to the people.

To Summarize:

Throughout Covid the County Council was consistently denied access to the information it needed to respond to citizens' concerns and to make informed decisions.

This is EXACTLY same issue that arose 102 years ago when officials refused to share accurate information about the Spanish Flu – and millions of deaths may have been avoided.

As the author concludes in the book the Great Influenza *"The final lesson of 1918, a simple one yet one most difficult to execute, is that...those in authority must retain the public's trust. The way to do that is to distort nothing, to put the best face on nothing, to try to manipulate no one. Lincoln said that first, and best. A leader must make whatever horror exists concrete. Only then will people be able to break it apart."*

To "retain the public's trust" the elected leaders of the County must be able to get the information THEY decide they need to address ALL the community concerns.

The County Council was ONLY able to force this issue by using its authority as the Health Board.

Please don't give this tool away – future Councils will need it when the next health crisis hits our community.

Thanks for listening

Rud

Dear Members of the Small City Caucus,

October 13, 2025

I have been asked by Councilman Stremmer to give my opinion on the proposed change to the Whatcom County Board of Health (BOH) from a medical perspective. I am a Board Certified physician in practice for 34 years. I have a scientific background with bench research during my training years and have served as Chief of Staff, Board of Trustees, Internal Medicine Division Chief, Medical Director of Northwest Gastroenterology, PLLC for 10 years, and several other committees. I understand how medical and scientific committees work, and how an entire committee can be persuaded by just one expert.

The current Whatcom County Board of Health (BOH) is composed of the seven County Council members who take advisement on public health decisions from the 21 member Public Health Advisory Board (PHAB), of which 85% have medical or science expertise.

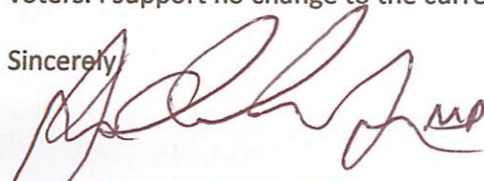
There is now a proposal to restructure the BOH and the PHAB. In the document **Restructuring the Whatcom County Board of Health**, there are three *Versions* which propose changes to the composition and number of BOH members. I see a problem in that there would be only 1 or 2 experts on the BOH. This would place 1 or 2 public health experts unopposed among 9 to 17 other BOH non-scientific members. If the expert(s) did not agree with the PHAB recommendation, they could single handedly persuade BOH opinion, and subvert the scientific consensus reached by the PHAB. My opinion is the proposed BOH restructuring exposes Whatcom County to risk that a dissenting expert(s) could cancel the collective scientific opinion of the 21 member PHAB.

Additionally, the proposal allows for "restructuring" of the PHAB without a definition of what this means. It is important to maintain the current PHAB which is heavy on the science and recruits very diverse backgrounds. The PHAB policy of membership states:

"Membership preference shall be given to tribal, racial, ethnic, and other minorities. The advisory board shall consist of a balance of persons with expertise, career experience, and consumer experience in areas impacting public health and with populations served by the health department, including healthcare access and quality; physical environment, including built and natural environments; social and economic sector, including housing, basic needs, education, and employment; business and philanthropy; communities that experience health inequities; government, and; tribal communities and tribal government..."

For the BOH to function in our County's best interest, it needs the scientific input and diverse background we get from the existing PHAB structure. The BOH also needs to remain accountable to its constituency, and not be diluted with well intentioned members who do not have to answer to the voters. I support no change to the current BOH and PHAB.

Sincerely,



James Schoenecker, Jr., M.D.

To Whom It May Concern,

October 16, 2025

My name is Margaret Burden. I am a family physician who practiced in Lynden from 1990 to 2022. It has come to my attention that there is discussion on changing the present structure of the Whatcom County Health Board. Presently the Health Board is represented by the Whatcom County Council with the Public Health Advisory Board giving input on issues that may arise. This present structure allows the council members to represent their constituents concerns and inputs as decisions are made.

It is my understanding that the proposed new health board would be made up partially of medical professionals who would be making countywide policy decisions. Did your communities ask for this change?

As a physician who practiced through the heat of the Covid pandemic, I can attest to the pressures placed on medical providers to adhere to the talking points handed down by the various “experts”, professional boards and government health organizations. Those that questioned or expressed concerns were silenced or threatened with loss of their licenses. We learned many lessons from Covid. We learned that the “experts” weren’t, the science wasn’t and vaccines didn’t. Trust in medical professionals, pharmaceutical companies and government health agencies has been significantly diminished. People in our communities want to contribute to discussions and decisions.

Please do not mute their voices.

I strongly urge you to not support any change to the current Health Board or PHAB.

Thank you,

Margaret Burden MD