

State of the County 2023

Presented to Whatcom County Council June 20, 2023

Good evening, Councilmembers, my fellow Elected Officials, County Employees and members of the public.

I am pleased to report that Whatcom County is moving forward on our shared priorities, addressing today's challenges while also preparing for tomorrow's. We are blessed to have a dedicated workforce, reliable community partners, and a tradition of collaborative leadership between the administration, County Council, and other elected officials. The state of our County is strong, and I am grateful to you all for your contribution to the well-being of our community.

Tonight is the first time that I have been able to provide this annual update to the Council while not under the shadow of a pandemic emergency proclamation. Although we are all fatigued by talk of COVID, I want to take this opportunity to speak about our success in getting through one of the most difficult challenges to face our country.

First, we saved lives. Washington State had the sixth lowest mortality rate in the nation, and Whatcom County performed even better than the statewide average and had the seventh lowest mortality among counties in our state.

These statistics are more than numbers; they are very meaningful. If we had rates similar to Arizona, Florida, or New York, our death toll would have more than doubled, and we would have lost 500 to 600 more community members. I credit our robust local response, especially the efforts of our Health Department, for this success. I thank everyone who participated in our years-long response.

Second, I want to recognize the strong partnerships which grew out of our pandemic response. Our relationships with Bellingham and the small cities, the Port and PUD, our state and federal representatives, and the Governor's Office have never been stronger. We learned a lot from our collective response, and that is proving useful now, particularly with flood planning, which I want to address next.

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Just recently I joined the mayors of all the small cities in signing the Nooksack River Flood Disaster Mitigation Plan agreement, which outlines the principles of cooperation for our joint efforts on flood planning. This agreement recognizes the shared responsibility of all communities living along the Nooksack River in coming up with solutions that improve our readiness to react to extreme events like the atmospheric river in November 2021.

I want to commend our Public Works Department for their efforts to repair the numerous roads and bridges damaged by the floods. In total, the county road system sustained \$12 million in FEMA and Emergency Relief reimbursable damage and impacts. This added an enormous amount of work to the department's regular workload.

The international aspect of flood planning is also moving forward. Last week the leadership group of the Nooksack Transboundary Flood Initiative met to discuss the collaborative framework for our joint efforts.

This group includes the Lummi Nation and Nooksack Tribe as well as First Nations north of the border, the City of Abbotsford and Whatcom County, and the State of Washington and Province of British Columbia. As a collaborative leadership group, we will provide guidance for the policy team and technical experts on both sides of the border.

We know that the long-term solutions to flooding on the Nooksack will be very costly, and we will need continued support from our state and federal partners to implement them. I want to thank our state legislators for the significant budget allocations this past session to support our planning efforts and floodplain projects, as well as our recovery and relief efforts. Just last week we received official notification of a \$10 million grant for phase 3 of our “Floodplains by Design” project.

We also received significant support from the state budget to acquire properties in the South Fork Valley and on Stewart Mountain. These acquisitions, approved by Council, will allow for habitat protection and restoration, reconnect the floodplain and support salmon recovery. It has also made possible the creation of the Stewart Mountain Community Forest, an ambitious project to adopt approximately 5,500 acres of forestland into local ownership, to be managed for the use and benefit of the surrounding community.

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The state legislature also supported the adjudication of water rights in the Nooksack Basin along with separate funding for technical studies and talks on water supply solutions. I am thankful to the County Council for supporting my budget requests to facilitate bringing the various parties to the table. These efforts have been recognized at the state level as critical to achieving win-win solutions. I believe that we all share the goals of restoring salmon to our rivers and streams and ensuring that farming can remain sustainable for future generations.

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Our Parks & Recreation Department welcomed a new director last year, and I am excited to see Bennett Knox leading the team. One of the first challenges he’s had to face is the daunting task of remediating historic lead contamination of Plantation Rifle Range and bring the County into full compliance with relevant environmental regulations. I am glad to report that significant progress is being made here.

Visitors to Lake Whatcom Park will soon have a new trail to explore. The EH1 connector links the Chanterelle Trail to the Hertz trail, creating a great loop hike through the reconveyance lands on the north side of Lake Whatcom.

Earlier this month Bennett identified a railbanking (rails to trails) opportunity. With the support of the leadership of Lynden, Everson, Nooksack, Sumas and my office, the Parks Department will be exploring this opportunity to acquire land to build a trail connecting these cities. Negotiations with BNSF will begin later this summer.

I also want to say a few words about our efforts to restore public access to Canyon Lake Community Forest. We are actively negotiating with SPI, and our respective legal counsels are reviewing draft easements that

would allow the public to cross private logging roads to get to the trailhead and enjoy all that the park has to offer. I expect to bring this for Council's consideration in the near future.

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Planning and Development Services completed the development, public review and adoption of Whatcom County's first ever Buildable Lands Report. This sets us up to move forward on the 2025 Comprehensive Plan Update, which will take up a lot of time and effort over the next couple of years. The department has also put a renewed emphasis on process improvement and customer relations, and I'm happy to report that I've seen a number of very positive reviews of the work of our permitting staff. PDS is also working with BIAW to improve the permit application process.

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I'd like to highlight what we've been able to accomplish with the funds provided through the American Rescue Plan Act. With policy guidance from Council, we are investing over \$7 million in affordable housing projects, \$13 million in childcare, \$5 million in homeless services and shelter, and \$6 million in addressing the court backlog. Additionally, leveraging ARPA funds, we helped the PUD secure a state grant to provide broadband access to Point Roberts, which will help ensure the connectivity of that community.

We've also been able to provide support to the Bellingham Food Bank, which continues to see high demand. I am concerned about the implications of this ongoing and unprecedented demand on food banks. This is a clear sign that not all families have been able to benefit from the economic rebound, and we need a long-term strategy to address this. The proposed Whatcom County Food System Plan, which is up for consideration by Council in July, provides some helpful suggestions in this area.

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Last November voters approved the Healthy Children's Fund, and the Health Department – now Whatcom County Health and Community Services – did a great job developing an implementation plan with broad community participation. These efforts are building on our ARPA investments, and I know that families are eager to see these new programs get off the ground and running.

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Homelessness continues to be a persistent and difficult challenge. I was saddened to see the increasing numbers in the latest Point-in-Time Count. Local government policies are not the root causes of homelessness, but we are expected to provide solutions with our limited resources. Whatcom County Health & Community Services, the City of Bellingham and our numerous community partners are working to prevent and resolve homelessness, but people are becoming homeless faster than we can get them back into housing.

I am pleased to report that work on the Way Station is progressing, and we expect it to open in 2024. This unique facility will serve people in need of hygiene, medical and behavioral care, or medical respite, providing access to wrap around services, including help into long-term housing.

We've also had some success with providing reliable emergency shelter services during severe weather events, and I am thankful to our community partners who have helped make this possible.

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I want to wrap with a reflection on the jail and our initiatives to prevent and reduce incarceration. A lot has already been said about this, so I will keep these comments brief:

First, we've come a long way. The needs assessment, implementation plan and ballot ordinance represent a dramatic departure from past efforts to address our community's needs related to criminal justice. The current proposal goes above and beyond any previous proposal in terms of funding community-based programs and services aimed at preventing and reducing incarceration.

Let me say, we are not going to be able to get to a perfect proposal. We do not have enough resources to address all our community's needs; and we have different perspectives on the priority of our needs. I encourage everyone to recognize the value of this good proposal: it embodies compromise and a deliberate balance of needs. Don't let perfect become an obstacle to progress.

We all know that the current facility neither meets the community's public safety needs, nor provides a safe and humane space for the rehabilitation of inmates, nor offers a safe and comfortable workplace for our staff. The need for a new facility is urgent and critical.

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Let me conclude my remarks with an expression of appreciation and gratitude to the employees of Whatcom County. I appreciate your service to the community, and I am proud of your accomplishments! You do excellent work!

Thank you!

Submitted by Executive Satpal Singh Sidhu

June 20, 2023