

Whatcom County Council as the Health Board

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



Minutes - Draft Minutes

**Tuesday, February 3, 2026
10 AM**

Hybrid Meeting - Council Chambers

**JOINT HEALTH BOARD/PUBLIC HEALTH ADVISORY BOARD MEETING -
HYBRID MEETING - ADJOURNS BY 12:00 P.M. (PARTICIPATE IN-PERSON, 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

Health Board Chair Jon Scanlon called the meeting to order at 10:01 a.m. in a hybrid meeting.

Roll Call - Health Board

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

Roll Call - PHAB

PHAB members present: Alan Lifson, Joni Hensley, Shu-Ling Zhao, Carl Isom-McDaniel, Nathaline Nivens, Sterling Chick, Deb Shawver, Alison Fontaine, Robyn Phillips-Madson, Markis Dee Stidham, Ben Twigg, Amelia Vader, Ashley Thomasson, Chris Kobdich, Jon Scanlon, and Amy Harley

Announcements

Public Comment

The following people spoke:

Natalie Chavez

Hearing no one else, Scanlon closed the Public Comment period.

Special Order of Business

1. [AB2026-003](#) Reorganization of the Whatcom County Council for 2026

Scanlon called for motions to appoint a Health Board Chair.

Buchanan moved to appoint Scanlon as Chair of the Health Board.
Galloway seconded the motion.

The motion carried by the following vote:

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

Nay: 0

Scanlon called for motions to appoint a Vice Chair of the Health Board.

Elenbaas moved to appoint Stremler as Vice Chair of the Health Board.

Rienstra moved to appoint Boyle as Vice Chair of the Health Board.

Boyle seconded the motion to appoint either Stremler or Boyle as Vice Chair of the Health Board.

Boyle was appointed with five votes as follows:

Boyle: 5 - Buchanan, Galloway, Rienstra, Scanlon, and Boyle

Stremler: Elenbaas and Stremler

This agenda item was NOMINATED AND APPOINTED.

Motion approved to appoint Jon Scanlon as Chair of the Whatcom County Health Board.

Motion approved to appoint Elizabeth Boyle as Vice Chair of the Whatcom County Health Board.

Special Presentation

1. [AB2026-106](#) Update from the Health Director

Champ Thomaskutty, Health Director, provided an update on foundational public health service funding, which was originally scheduled for a \$300 million allocation across all jurisdictions in the 2026-2027 budget, but which is now facing a significant cut in the Governor's proposed budget. Thomaskutty said there are four bills percolating at the State House focused on addressing the shortfall in funding.

Shu-Ling Zhao, PHAB, asked what bill numbers people should be tracking.

Thomaskutty said the bills are Senate Bill 6129, Senate Bill 6116, House Bill 2383, and House Bill 2439.

Stremler asked how Whatcom County interacts with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and their recommendations on childhood vaccines.

Dr. Amy Harley, Health Officer, said she would speak directly to changes in vaccine policy later in the meeting.

Thomaskutty stated that the county utilizes federal information systems, which provide insights into state, regional, and local health issues and behaviors for different populations, but the youth information systems have broken down, and the county has had to look for other sources for that data. He said that they are still assessing how changes at the federal level impact various information systems. He added that Whatcom County does not have any direct funding from the CDC, though there is some CDC funding that comes to the state. Thomaskutty said the health department is moving forward cautiously in terms of taking on new programs and strategies in

order to only take on new projects for which there is stable, consistent funding.

Stremmer asked how the county determines whether or not to align with CDC recommendations.

Joni Hensley, PHAB, said that the CDC Epidemiology (EPI) Team has assisted in investigations of large-scale E. coli outbreaks in the past. Hensley said these teams were incredibly helpful.

Thomaskutty said there is no CDC dictate guiding county decisions. The county health department relies on the medical community, state law, and the existing body of medical evidence for strategies, tactics, and implementation of regulations. He said they lean on science as the basis for decisions.

Scanlon stated that he is working on a resolution in support of state funding for local health departments, and he hopes to bring that to Council acting as the Health Board for a vote at a future meeting.

This agenda item was PRESENTED.

2. [AB2026-107](#) Update from the Health Officers

Dr. Amy Harley, Health Officer, shared information about the Centers for Disease Control's (CDC) recent changes to the child immunization schedule. Harley said the unified national childhood immunization schedule has been a benefit to childhood health and was developed through a robust, transparent process. A federal memo released in January dramatically reduces the number of vaccines recommended for all U.S. children, which has really important implications for the health of children and communities, especially in the midst of outbreaks of measles in the country. A number of major medical societies have joined together to endorse continued reliance on science-based vaccination policy for children, diverging from the current CDC recommendations. The American Academy of Pediatrics Adolescent and Childhood Immunization Schedule has now been endorsed by at least 12 medical societies, as well as the West Coast Health Alliance, state health departments in Washington, Oregon, California, and Hawaii, and others, including Whatcom County. Harley stated that parents are always the healthcare decision makers for their children, but there is no debate around vaccine science amongst medical providers. She stated that it continues to be beneficial to vaccinate children against all 18 childhood diseases, and the evidence is continually reviewed and monitored for safety.

This agenda item was PRESENTED.

3. [AB2026-108](#) Update from the Public Health Advisory Board Chair

Joni Hensley, PHAB, speaking on behalf of the PHAB Chair, welcomed new partners and members to the group. She stated that the next meeting is Thursday, February 12 at 7 a.m. and asked new members to show up prepared to make a brief introductory statement.

This agenda item was PRESENTED.

4. [AB2026-111](#) Presentation from the Public Health Advisory Board on 2025 accomplishments and 2026 workplan

Joni Hensley, PHAB, provided an overview of PHAB's 2025 accomplishments as outlined in their annual report, including their participation in the hiring process for a new director of Whatcom County Health and Community Services. Hensley stated that the 2026 workplan was discussed and modified at the last PHAB meeting. Part of the workplan is to continue efforts to streamline and clarify PHAB member recruitment and membership to comply with state code. The work plan also outlines much of the subgroups' strategies, and Hensley encouraged new members to consider joining one of the subgroups. PHAB will also be involved in supporting public health priorities and planning for the new community health assessment.

Ben Twigg, PHAB, asked whether new members received a copy of the workplan.

Shu-Ling Zhao, PHAB, stated that the workplan was included in an email with information about the day's meeting.

Sterling Chick, PHAB, asked about the subcommittees.

Hensley said there will be subcommittees for infrastructure and code changes, new member orientation, contingency planning for health board reconfiguration, communications, budget, training and education, Medicaid, and the Community Health Assessment.

Scanlon stated that he would like to hear from the community about what to prioritize if state funding gets cut.

This agenda item was PRESENTED.

5. [AB2026-054](#) Presentation on locally-led health initiatives

Scanlon introduced a series of presentations on community health

initiatives from Birch Bay-Blaine Thrives, Growing Veterans, Ferndale Community Coalition, and Health Ministries Network. A similar set of presentations were shared at a Health Board meeting in October 2025.

Birch Bay-Blaine Thrives (Approximate Timestamp 52:56)

Geof Morgan, Pennie Allsop, Kari Holley, and Adeline Holley shared a presentation on Birch Bay-Blaine Thrives (on file), a community organization that works to foster resilience among youth, families, schools, and the community to help prevent youth substance use.

Morgan shared information about the coalition's history in Whatcom County and its funding sources.

Allsop said that true community health happens when all sectors are involved, including schools, families, law enforcement services, mental health services, and youth. She said Birch Bay-Blaine Thrives built a bunch of partnerships with other community organizations and coalitions throughout Whatcom County, and they continue to try to build on those partnerships and provide programming to connect the community's youth, including animals as natural therapy, field trips, and resource fairs.

Adeline Holley, a Blaine High School student, spoke about a Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America (CADCA) trip to Washington D.C. and read a speech she presented to U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell regarding drug prevention.

Allsop continued to share information about Birch Bay-Blaine Thrives' initiatives, including the trusted adult workshop, and their impact, noting that the data that they've seen is showing positive change, with substance use declining and conversations shifting. She concluded by encouraging listeners to attend a meeting at the Blaine School District Board Room if they happen to be in Blaine at 1 p.m. on the third Wednesday of the month.

Growing Veterans (Approximate Timestamp 1:09:50)

Cody Call, Executive Director of Growing Veterans, and Mike Hackett, Growing Veterans Board Member, shared information about the Growing Veterans program.

Call said the mission of Growing Veterans is to cultivate purpose and belonging and end the isolation that leads veterans to suicide through the growing of food and community. He described some of the barriers

veterans face when attempting to access services or get support, and he said the goal is to meet veterans where they are at, reduce stigma, and provide mental health help before veterans are in crisis. Call explained that the Growing Veterans program allows veterans to come together and work on their mental health while being outside growing organic produce that gets donated to local food banks. Call noted that the program is entirely community and grant funded, which is challenging in terms of retaining staff.

Joni Hensley, PHAB, asked whether Growing Veterans has a program or team in place to support veterans who go into crisis.

Call said Growing Veterans does not provide clinical support, but they make themselves available to talk to whomever needs it and make connections to clinical support as needed.

Buchanan thanked Call for Growing Veterans' work and asked whether referrals are needed to get into the program.

Call stated that no referrals are needed and everyone is welcome.

Hackett stated that he was part of the Growing Veterans program when it first started, and, as a combat veteran, the program saved him. He stressed the program's importance for the community and his desire to see it continue to grow.

Shu-Ling Zhao, PHAB, asked about the annual budget for the organization.

Call stated that the annual cost is \$244,000, which pays for three staff members, rent, farm maintenance, etc. He said they anticipate serving over a thousand people in 2026, as they are partnering with Western and have interns from Whatcom Community College.

Zhao asked how many pounds of food the program anticipates being able to grow in 2026.

Call said that, if they are able to get additional hoop houses and grow food year-round, they may be able to grow 7,000 pounds this year.

Ferndale Community Coalition (Approximate Timestamp 1:27:17)

Rebecca Snearly, Whatcom County Health and Community Services (WCHCS) and Kaatri Jones, Ferndale School District, shared a presentation

(on file) about the Ferndale Community Coalition.

Snearly stated that the Ferndale Community Coalition's mission is to engage the community to promote healthy youth development by addressing equity, safety, and substance abuse issues. The coalition consists of multiple sectors of the community and has over 70 active members. It uses a Strategic Prevention Framework and is designed to provide local substance abuse prevention services and strategies.

Jones spoke about the positive impacts of community coalitions such as Birch Bay-Blaine Thrives and the Ferndale Community Coalition. She highlighted Ferndale Community Coalition programs including, the student assistance program, which enables staff to do individual interventions with students and form clubs and hold prevention events, and a communities in schools program, which provides mentorship and basic needs support.

Boyle thanked Birch Bay-Blaine Thrives and the Ferndale Community Coalition for their work and asked how the county can support their efforts.

Kari Holley stated that raising awareness about the groups' work is important and a great way to support their efforts.

Health Ministries Network (Approximate Timestamp 1:41:46)

Ali de La Bruere, Health Ministries Network Executive Director, and Rebecca Cavanaugh, Health Ministries Network nurse and board member, shared a presentation (on file) about the Health Ministries Network Ask a Nurse Program.

De La Bruere stated that Health Ministries Network is an interfaith organization serving Whatcom, Skagit, Island, and San Juan Counties. The Ask a Nurse program has served rural east Whatcom County, which faces a number of healthcare access barriers, twice a month for the past five years, providing limited healthcare screenings, referrals, and transportation vouchers. De La Bruere stated that the program is staffed by a dedicated group of volunteer nurses acting under their own licenses and has grown in recent years to include the Nooksack Valley Food Bank, the Bellingham Goodwill and Eleanor Apartments, and more. The Ask a Nurse Program is fueled by local grants, foundations, partners, and volunteers. They partner with nursing students from Western Washington University's School of Nursing who provide research, data, and suggestions for improvement.

Cavanaugh said the most impactful stories from her work with the Ask a Nurse program are those from people who come back and let them know

that they received the treatment they needed.

Following the presentations, Health Board and PHAB members asked questions and engaged in discussion.

Elenbaas asked if non-veterans are able to volunteer with Growing Veterans.

Call stated that non-veterans are welcome to volunteer.

Elenbaas asked if Growing Veterans partners with livestock producers for animals as natural therapy.

Call said they have had experience with animals as natural therapy and they also have visits from the Whatcom service dogs every third Friday of the month.

This agenda item was PRESENTED.

Other Business

Scanlon stated that the afternoon’s Special Committee of the Whole meeting will include a discussion about councilmember projects, which may include health priorities.

Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 11:54 a.m.

ATTEST:

WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCIL
WHATCOM COUNTY, WA

Cathy Halka, Council Clerk

Jon Scanlon, Health Board Chair

Meeting Minutes prepared by Jenna Gernand