

Whatcom County Council (Special)

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



Minutes - Draft Minutes

Tuesday, October 29, 2024

1 PM

Hybrid Meeting - Council Chambers

**2025-2026 WHATCOM COUNTY BUDGET REVIEW WORK SESSION - HYBRID
MEETING (PARTICIPATE IN-PERSON, SEE REMOTE JOIN INSTRUCTIONS AT
www.whatcomcounty.us/joinvirtualcouncil, OR CALL 360.778.5010)**

COUNCILMEMBERS

Barry Buchanan
Tyler Byrd
Todd Donovan
Ben Elenbaas
Kaylee Galloway
Jon Scanlon
Mark Stremler

CLERK OF THE COUNCIL

Cathy Halka, AICP, CMC

Call To Order

Council Chair Barry Buchanan called the meeting to order at 1:01 p.m. in a hybrid meeting.

Roll Call

Present: 6 - Barry Buchanan, Todd Donovan, Ben Elenbaas, Kaylee Galloway, Jon Scanlon, and Mark Stremler

Absent: 1 - Tyler Byrd

Announcements**Discussion**

[AB2024-669](#) Discussion of the County Executive's recommended 2025-2026 Biennium Budget

The following people answered questions throughout the presentations:

- Aly Pennucci, Executive's Office
- Satpal Sidhu, County Executive
- Kayla Schott-Bresler, Executive's Office
- Andrew Tan, Administrative Services Department Finance
- Brad Bennett, Administrative Services Department Finance
- Randy Rydel, Administrative Services Department Finance Director

The following people briefed the Councilmembers on their respective department budgets and answered questions:

Superior Court Administration and Juvenile Court

Approximate Video Timestamp: 00:01:09

- Stephanie Kraft, Superior and Juvenile Court Administrator
- Judge David E. Freeman, Superior Court

Kraft read from a presentation (on file) and answered questions. She answered whether resources associated with the State creating a new Superior Court position would help with filling in other needed positions or whether the new position creates more demand that we cannot fund. She stated the State would fund half of a judge's position, but it does not come with funding for the administrative side of supporting another judge. She answered questions about current pay for detention staff, the good or bad in the high ratio of Whatcom County commissioners compared to judges, and whether our lobbyists should be working on getting more judge appointments.

Judge Freeman answered what a referee is for water adjudication, and stated

the court has the ability to send fact finding issues to the referee, have them make the determination, and then send it up to the judge for a final review and their determination. He answered how the position is filled.

Kraft answered what a re-entry program might look like, and stated their intent would be to have a full-time reentry specialist. She described what they would do. She answered questions about their contract with Lifeline (that provides some behavioral health services in detention and some reentry support) which is paid out of the Behavioral Health Fund, and did not make it through Finance.

Pennucci stated they will look into the contract and get more information for Council.

Sidhu answered questions about facility space challenges for the courts.

Superior Court Clerk's Office/Law Library

Approximate Video Timestamp: 00:39:07

- Raylene King, Superior Court Clerk
- Sandra Kiele, Superior Court

King read from a presentation (on file). She spoke about challenges for the court, including processing cases in a timely manner with current staffing levels, needs associated with the WRIA 1 Nooksack Basin adjudication process, an increase in protection orders because of legislative mandates, security, and courtroom and office space. She answered questions about challenges with data and communication of systems between departments and agencies.

She and Kiele answered what office security looks like in court offices in other counties and where they would like to see enhanced security here. King stated she would like to make sure that the office has security glass and she would like to see armed security at the front door of the courthouse.

Schott-Bresler spoke about the security request and stated they agree it is a significant need. She spoke about the Administration's plan to bring this back as a supplemental budget request after the Clerk works with Facilities to evaluate a cost estimate and they look at funding sources. She stated if the Council wants to prioritize this as a General Fund expense, the Administration can accommodate that through the use of fund balance, but Council might prefer they use a capital facilities funding source.

District Court/ District Court Probation

Approximate Video Timestamp: 01:11:48

- Jake Wiebusch, District Court Administrator
- Judge Angela Anderson, District Court

Wiebusch read from a presentation (on file). He spoke about an increase in case filings and in jury trials in the last two years and answered questions about what is driving the increase. He spoke about the additional service requests (ASRs) for juror costs, office equipment, and interpreter services and answered questions about those, then about ASRs for District Court probation.

Judge Angela Anderson spoke about District Court services.

Both speakers answered questions about juror pay and how long it has been at the current rate of \$10 a day, whether interpreter services are grant funded, and whether they cover any language that is needed.

Public Defender

Approximate Video Timestamp: 01:27:10

- Stark Follis, Public Defender

Follis read from a presentation (on file) and spoke about why they are not asking for any full-time employees this time, including space issues, a previously-granted increase in staffing which has helped them stay on top of standards, the fact that ARPA-funded positions were moved into the General Fund, shifting the burden to that fund, and that they did not feel it was appropriate to ask for budget for the pending new caseload standards which are not yet a reality. He summarized what the department is asking for in the form of ASRs and the department's accomplishments, and he spoke about caseload standards and answered questions.

Prosecuting Attorney

Approximate Video Timestamp: 01:54:54

- Eric Richey, Whatcom County Prosecuting Attorney
- Melissa Isenhardt, Prosecuting Attorney's Office

Richey stated he is not asking for any money at all and spoke about their new office manager, staff they were able to hire, concerns around retention

which affects caseloads, and likely impacts of the impending new caseload standards.

Isenhart spoke about the office's new facility dog, what he does to provide a calming influence for victims and witnesses, and the costs associated with using him in this capacity and training a successor.

Clerk's note: Isenhart showed a short video as part of her presentation, but it had no sound.

Richie answered what the impact might be on staffing when the new caseload standards are put in place, and he spoke about the history of juror pay, data sharing, the fact that they have 20 homicides currently open, time that people who are pre-trial are spending in jail, and what counsel looks like for Councils in other counties of our size.

Sheriff and Jail

Approximate Video Timestamp: 02:18:14

- Donnell Tanksley, Sheriff
- Caleb Erickson, Sheriff's Office Corrections

Tanksley spoke about the department's requested ASRs and answered questions about the co-responder program, the fact that their budget is going down, and what requests were not approved.

Pennucci spoke about why two funding requests for software training were not included in the Executive's budget, and stated in HR's budget, there is an ASR to implement a countywide training software so some individualized training management requests in departments were not approved.

Tanksley, Erickson, the Administration, and Finance discussed the ten vacant positions in corrections and recruitment issues, how much of not having in-person visitation and the booking restrictions are related to staffing levels or constraints with space, funding for enhanced search measures in the jail, the corrections requests and the fact that the budget that they put forward is largely the same as the budget asks in 2024 with the exception of the increases for contractual obligations through their bargaining units, time constraints for the requested training software, the intergovernmental revenue in the department's revenue summary, and where they may see cost increases for services in corrections.

Tanksley spoke about an ASR from Health and Community Services for

“Jail Behavioral Health and Re-Entry Services” (#7343) for \$310,000 for 2025 and for 2026 that was not approved, and he stated that will severely impact what they are doing at the jail in terms of reentry services and behavioral health.

Erika Lautenbach, Health and Community Services Director, stated the Behavioral Health Fund is under stress for a variety of reasons. They are working with the Executive’s Office and Finance on how they can make it more sustainable. She stated the Lifeline contract spoken about by Superior Court and the Sheriff’s Office is a high priority; they just need to figure out some budgetary details and right-size the Behavioral Health Fund over the course of the next few weeks and months.

Council, Erickson, and Finance discussed the use of Medicaid for behavior health in jails and the years-long timeline for getting those types of funds, whether that process could be sped up, and the earlier question about revenue summary.

This agenda item was PRESENTED AND DISCUSSED.

Items Added by Revision

There were no agenda items added by revision.

Other Business

There was no other business.

Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 4 p.m.

ATTEST:

WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCIL
WHATCOM COUNTY, WA

Cathy Halka, Council Clerk

Barry Buchanan, Council Chair

Kristi Felbinger, Minutes Transcription