



Whatcom County Executive & County Council 2026 State Legislative Priorities - REVISED

Whatcom County will continue to communicate with the state legislature and executive agencies about the importance of providing adequate state funding to local jurisdictions to carry out mandated services and respond to emerging community needs.

This agenda is not comprehensive and may be modified. Whatcom County may support or oppose other legislative priorities during the legislative session.

Key Objectives

Legislation Enabling Whatcom County to Consider Formation of Ferry District

Whatcom County is submitting legislation to remove the requirement that county ferry districts only provide "passenger only" service. This change would enable Whatcom County to consider this mechanism for funding both operating and capital needs of the County's ferry system, which represents a significant burden on the Road Fund.

Increased Flexibility for State Capital Allocation for Behavioral Health Facility

In past sessions the State Legislature provided Whatcom County with a capital appropriation of \$11.2 million dollars for a "23-hour crisis center." In 2025, Whatcom County took a closer look at the crisis center operating model as well as the spectrum of community behavioral health needs. The emerging consensus is that more flexibility in the parameters of would allow Whatcom County to create a facility with a more sustainable financial model and better adapted to the wide range of needs in the community. Whatcom County is requesting modification of the language associated with this allocation to allow for more flexibility in its use (i.e., a multi-license facility).

Superior Court Funding for Adjudication Needs

Whatcom County Superior Court has submitted through the Administrative Office of the Courts a request to fund extraordinary costs related to the adjudication filed by the Department of Ecology to resolve groundwater and surface water rights in WRIA 1. This request adds staff in the Superior Court and Clerks Office to manage claim filings and evidence, provides for a traveling court and rural outreach to inform and serve unrepresented litigants, and invests in technology infrastructure needed to facilitate the process. The request includes \$817,000 for the current biennium (2025-2027) and anticipates \$1,292,000 in ongoing costs for the next biennium (2027-2029).

Other Priority Topics

Whatcom County will emphasize the importance of the following issues when they are brought up for discussion by the legislature.

Funding for Indigent Defense

The caseload standards adopted by the Supreme Court for indigent defense requires counties to expand their public defender's staff. Local governments are under-resourced to meet the standards, and the level of state funding remains insufficient. Whatcom County joins other counties and cities in advocating for adequate state funding for public defense.

Food Security

Given the disruption of SNAP benefits and reductions in federal food programs, Whatcom County advocates for state support of local food system infrastructure, including support for food banks.

Personal Property Exemption ([HB1004](#))

Legislation was introduced last year to provide relief for small businesses, and administration relief for the Assessor's and Treasurer's office by increasing the personal property tax exemption from \$15,000 to \$15,000. Administration of personal property accounts and tax requires significant time and resources, for relatively little revenue. In Whatcom County almost 70% of our approximately 5300 accounts are under the \$50,000 threshold, and account for ~5.5% of all personal property value and less than 0.08% of the total taxable value in the county. Whatcom County will continue to support this administrative relief.

Swift Creek Cleanup

Whatcom County and the Washington State Department of Ecology are under a consent decree to mitigate asbestos at Swift Creek. Funding provided for the current biennium was less than half the planned allocation. We will continue to remind our legislators and partners about the importance of fully funding the agreed mitigation program.

Technical Assistance for Water Users Affected by Adjudication and Technical Studies

The current state operating budget includes \$200,000 for technical assistance in FY2026. This was significantly less than the \$600,000 requested for the biennium. Whatcom County will be requesting an additional \$200,000 for technical assistance to allow these efforts to continue into FY2027. Whatcom County will also continue to request funding for WRIA 1 Watershed Management Board for technical studies, which were not funded in the biennium budget.

Funding for Mediated Settlement Efforts in the Water Adjudication Process

Whatcom County supports state funding to pursue a mediated settlement framework within the WRIA 1 water adjudication. A supported mediation process would allow water users, local governments, and the Department of Ecology to collaboratively resolve water-rights disputes outside of full litigation. Mediation can reduce overall adjudication costs, create faster and more durable agreements, lessen burdens on Superior Court, and help ensure solutions are grounded in science, local knowledge, and practical implementation capacity. Whatcom County requests that the State Legislature appropriate dedicated funds to support impartial facilitation, technical analysis, and community engagement necessary for a robust mediation pathway.

Youth Co-Occurring Treatment Facility

North Sound BH ASO is currently studying needs in the North Sound Region and will be reporting on this to the State Legislature. Whatcom County will support cooperative efforts to address the critical need for youth-focused co-occurring treatment services, integrating mental health and substance use care across this region.

Regulatory Framework and Operating Funds for Crisis Relief Center

The County will continue to collaborate with community partners to refine reimbursement mechanisms and the staffing model for crisis relief centers.

Increase Medicaid Reimbursement Rates for Providers

Whatcom County advocates for higher reimbursement rates to ensure providers can meet operational costs and offer quality care. Increased rates are essential for recruiting, training, and retaining qualified staff, and ultimately for the success of all existing and new behavioral health facilities.

Strengthening the 988 System ([SB 5762](#))

Whatcom County supports increased funding for the 988 behavioral health crisis line to ensure individuals in crisis receive appropriate and timely care.

Areas of General Interest

Whatcom County will actively monitor legislative proposals related to the following areas:

- Policy and funding for Search and Rescue
- State funding for BECCA cases
- Habitat Recovery Pilot Program (HRPP) extension (HB 1209)
- Monitoring of Climate Commitment Act opportunities, e.g., fish passage, habitation restoration, etc.
- Commercial fishing revenue options to for communities dependent on the industry ([HB 1806](#))
- LAMIRD Reform
- Childcare, including easing regulatory burden on providers
- Opioid response and behavioral health
- Housing affordability, homeless services, severe weather shelter (e.g. smoke, heat, cold)
- Broadband, including use of hybrid deployment
- Fully funding implementation of medical examiner accreditation requirements
- State support for high-needs school districts and junior taxing districts reliant on timber revenue
- Preservation and maintenance funding for the county transportation system.

WSAC Priorities (for reference only)

- New county revenue
- Funding for indigent defense
- Funding for rural County Coroners
- Addressing county housing access and affordability
- Funding for the preservation and maintenance of the county transportation system
- County fiscal relief