



“Engage in Long Term Strategic Planning”

The residents of Whatcom County, via the Whatcom County Charter, provided direction to the County Council to “engage in long term strategic planning”. To that end, the seven County Councilmembers met on February 17, 2026, to discuss an array of issues, challenges, and opportunities that present themselves in Whatcom County.

Initiating a process to establish strategic goals and objectives is an iterative process designed to start broadly and work towards identifying specific key actions to undertake. With this in mind, this initial report is a summary that --

- Compiles individual County Councilmember comments and ideas that were shared, articulated, and voiced.
- Reflects Councilmember ideas that were shared or written. There was limited discussion on issues put forward and no effort to find agreement on specific ideas and thoughts shared. The process was designed to assure each Councilmember had a chance to voice their perspectives and identify the broad challenges, opportunities, and issues that confront the County, communities, and residents.
- Acknowledges that no decisions were made by the County Council. Rather this meeting summary and its content attempts to illustrate the concepts and ideas shared.
- Describes a beginning step designed to identify the strategic threads and themes that emerged from council discussions and dialogue.

The following sections summarize the meeting outcomes and next step recommendations:

- Emergence of Strategic Themes
 - Core Strategic Values
 - Strategic Policy Priorities
 - Ongoing Strategic Focus
- Executive Branch Participation and Collaboration
- PESTAL EXERCISE
- Recommended Next Steps

Emergence of Strategic Themes

During the February 17, 2026, Whatcom County Council Planning Workshop, discussions and issues shared by Councilmembers, were grouped and provided the basis for the following set of preliminary strategic themes:

CORE STRATEGIC VALUES:

AN ENGAGED COMMUNITY

**AN EFFECTIVE AND EFFICIENT COUNTY
GOVERNMENT: MEASURING PERFORMANCE**

STRATEGIC POLICY PRIORITIES:

HOUSING

WATER RESOURCES

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

COMMUNITY HEALTH AND WELLNESS

ONGOING STRATEGIC FOCUS:

WHATCOM COUNTY BIENNIAL BUDGET

**WHATCOM COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN
AND DEVELOPMENT REGULATION UPDATES**

CORE STRATEGIC VALUES

AN ENGAGED COMMUNITY

- Partners
- Communicating Well
- Telling our “Why”
- Intentionally Connecting with Constituents
- Creating a Culture of serving the public and getting to yes
- Building Trust
- Clarity
- Accountability
- Belonging
- Certainty
- Build on Trust

AN EFFECTIVE AND EFFICIENT COUNTY GOVERNMENT: MEASURING PERFORMANCE

- Implement Performance Audits
- Delivering Value to the Community
- Collecting Data on Efficacy of Programs
- Assuring decisions are based on facts and data to inform decisions
- Value for the Dollar (Taxes/Taxpayer)
- Do the Core Function of County Government Well
- A well-functioning Government that serves and protects all residents of Whatcom County

STRATEGIC POLICY PRIORITIES

HOUSING

- Create a permitting culture that expedites housing permits
- No child Unhoused in Whatcom County (Functional Zero)
- Whatcom County efforts lead to homeless population of Functional Zero
- Increased access to housing affordability to all economic segments – including housing type diversity to meet people’s needs
- Year-round shelter services that will lead to better outcomes and overall community sees and feels the results of improved outcomes.
- All youth and families are housed.

WATER RESOURCES

Flooding – Comprehensive Plan and Approach Needed

- Prevention
- Mitigation
- Response
- Emergency Housing
- Housing

Adjudication

- Policy directive to drive towards and facilitate funding and resources to pursue a mediated negotiated settlement for the water adjudication to run a parallel path that is providing county solutions sooner that have lasting impacts toward water certainty and river management.

Infrastructure

- Groundbreaking for long term flood mitigation projects

Low Flow

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

- Business Community is Thriving
- Growth Happening
- Existing Employers: Stable and Growing
- New Business and Employers Moving Here
- High paying jobs that helps families and our overall community health.
- Encourage Business and Industry
- Employer and Investment
- Certainty
- Economic Impact Study/Analysis of County “Investment” of Funding Decisions
- Support employers with supportive, affordable, accessible, quality child care.
- Review Comprehensive Plan, development regulations, and policies to assure they are staying current with what is happening on the ground.

COMMUNITY HEALTH AND WELLNESS

Justice and Behavioral Health

- Design, Build and Open Jail/Behavioral Care Center
- Regional Behavioral Health
- Reduction in incarceration due to upstream BH investment and access to prevention services.
- Zero wait time to access behavioral health services and substance use disorder treatment in Whatcom County
- Our Community is feeling the positive impact of access to Behavioral Health and Substance Use Disorder Care
- A Justice System that is –
 - o Efficient
 - o Effective
 - o Restorative
 - o Compassionate
 - o Achieves justice for survivors and victims

Child and Youth

- Implementing Healthy Children's Fund
- Families are enjoying access to affordable, accessible, quality childcare
- Increase the number of Childcare spots in Whatcom County
- No Child Unhoused

Public Health

- Access to Preventative Health Care Services
- Improve health outcomes in East Whatcom County

Parks and Recreation

- Regional Trail Partnership and Connections

ONGOING STRATEGIC FOCUS

WHATCOM COUNTY BIENNIAL BUDGET

- Create a clear and simple budget process for both the council and public. Allows for more council and public involvement and engagement.
- Understanding What the New Normal is and is Not
- Creativity in Funding/Bonding
- Constrained Resource Limits
- Development of County Government open budget and data platform with live info on budget and results.

WHATCOM COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN AND DEVELOPMENT REGULATION UPDATES

- Create and assure a framework to make a positive impact on housing affordability.
- Modern and efficient land use and development codes to include improved permitting processes.
- Create comprehensive plan policies and implement regulations that maintain the ability of farming and the viability of the agriculture industry into the future.
- Assure comprehensive plan reflects council and community priorities including those associated with environmental, climate, and natural resources.

Executive Branch Participation and Collaboration

Whatcom County Executive Sidhu and Jed Holmes, Public Affairs & Strategy Manager, shared with the Council the *“2026 Whatcom County – Department Priority Deliverables”*. (Attached) This list provided was a “non-exhaustive list of key deliverables” beyond day-to-day operations. In reviewing the list, there are a number of activities and issues that parallel and align with the County Council’s preliminary set of strategic themes.

The Council recognizes the importance of collaboration with the Executive Branch and the County Charter state a clear expectation that “each branch shall strive to work with the other branch for a unified government for the people of Whatcom County.” The Council understands that most of the actions necessary to respond to these strategic priorities will take time, resources, and the commitment of both current and future County Councils. The Council discussed and understood that it will take collaboration with the County Executive, other elected officials and departments, as well as our cities and communities, tribal council and staff, local and regional partners, state and federal agencies, state and congressional delegation members, as well as a myriad of local community organizations, groups, and most importantly, our residents.

PESTEL EXERCISE

In developing strategic issues and themes, the Councilmembers undertook an exercise to look at the range of factors currently impacting, influencing, and affecting the governance and administration of County Government. The PESTEL (political, economic, social, technological, environmental, legal) framework is one tool that allows a group to assess how external (and at times internal) issues affect an organization. This analysis can help identify potential opportunities and challenges that aid in strategic planning and decision-making.

This PESTEL exercise was intended to bring out ideas. There was no discussion or debate on the impact of any individual factor. Nor was there any attempt to bring agreement on the potential impact – positive or negative – to county policy development, operations, legislative function, or administration.

POLITICAL

- Divisiveness
- Represent People or Ideas
- Competing Interests
- Frustration/Distrust Spilling into Local Politics
- Demonize Others' Ideas
- Dismissing Others' Ideas
- Not listening or having an honest conversation
- Cross Border Tensions – Between Ottawa and DC
- Congress and White House Leadership
- State Legislature Leadership and Governor Leadership
- Long Term Decline in Trust in Government
- Statewide and Local Ballot Initiative
- Fear and Uncertainty
- Public is Tax Weary
- Mis-Information
- Senior Legislative Delegation (Federal)
- Community Engagement Passionate
- State Legislature – District 40 and 42 in the majority (42 Swing District)
- Dealing with Federal Policies
- Closing the Divide

ECONOMIC

- Remote Work
- Budget Challenges – Federal, State, and Local
- Traditional/existing funding sources and methods may not be sufficient.
- Sometimes the public that is engaged in public processes are not interested in finding solutions – just want their prescribed outcome. Not in my backyard. I am here now so we must limit growth.
- Families struggling - increased need for services.
- The Council and County – through some of our decisions has created in part our own fiscal and economic challenges.
- We cannot afford a lot of what we try to do but people do not have the ability to pay more now.
- Geographic challenges – cross border economy.
- Federal Funding Cuts
- Industrial Lands
- Cost of housing, health care, and childcare.
- Regional Transit
- Inflation
- Fading opportunity and losing the “American Dream”.
- People leaving community – lack of affordability.
- Competing interests for scarcity of resources.
- Widening Wealth Disparity
- Economics are tied to county revenue.
- There is an economic stimulus of government in Whatcom County.

SOCIAL

- As a Councilmember – I look at issues through a lens of finding a solution(s).
- Just say no Mentality
- Generational Issues
- Divisiveness
- Collaboration
- Community Champions
- Role of County Serving the Community
- Shifting Expectations of Service Providers
- Bowling Alone – Stopped socialization
- Post Pandemic Hangover – Decline in Social Ties
- Demographics –

- o Aging Population in some areas
 - o K-12 More Diverse
 - o 20s – 30s Gap
- Social Media
- Isolation
- Health Outcomes
- Tension between younger and older environmentalists.

TECHNOLOGY

- Understand the parameters and applicability of the appropriate use of AI in County Government.
- Expensive
- Be careful not to spend away our future on latest and greatest gadgets.
- Harder and better at the same time.
- Modernization
- Changes to Workload
- Uncertainty
- Social Media: Trap or Beneficial?
- Accessibility – Technology Divide
- Access to High Speed Internet
- Affect Public Discourse
- Energy Transition
- Fleet and IT

ENVIRONMENTAL

- Impact of Climate Change on Most Vulnerable
- Flooding – 100 Year Floods
- Increase in Peak Nooksack River Flows
- Sea Level Change
- Wildfire
- Melting Glaciers/Low Snowpack
- Misinformation
- Assuming you have to choose between outcomes. You can have it all. You can have clean water or agriculture. You can have clean air or industry. You cannot have both.
- Conflict between short term choices/benefits and long term choices/benefits.

- Competing Demands and Interests
- Environmental regulation drastically effect housing cost.
- Conservation Work
- Adaptation and Mitigation
- Environmental cost versus effectiveness costs.

LEGAL

- Risk Aversion
- Supreme Court's Public Defense Case Load Standards
- Who is most likely to sue? We are at times driven by lawsuits. Policy solutions are directed to who is the least likely to challenge our decision in court. So we capitulate to the biggest bully regardless of what the community is looking for.
- Impact of adjudication on the Whatcom County Superior Court.
- Who does the law apply to the most?
- Need to get state law changes to allow for flexibility in county operations.
- Charter limits powers – theoretically a co-equal branch of government.
- Respond to State Mandates
- Treaty Rights
- Columbia River Treaty

Recommended Next Steps

The Whatcom County Council has taken an important first step to identify eight strategic themes to focus resources and attention on. The following steps are recommended to both refine the strategic themes but to also proceed with establishing a set of key actions associated within each strategic theme.

1. Review, refine, and clarify the strategic themes:
 - o AN ENGAGED COMMUNITY
 - o AN EFFECTIVE AND EFFICIENT COUNTY GOVERNMENT: MEASURING PERFORMANCE
 - o HOUSING
 - o WATER RESOURCES
 - o ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
 - o COMMUNITY HEALTH AND WELLNESS
 - o WHATCOM COUNTY BIENNIAL BUDGET
 - o WHATCOM COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN AND DEVELOPMENT REGULATION UPDATES
2. Prepare a preliminary set of key actions associated with each strategic issue that are “SMART”:
 - o Specific
 - o Measurable
 - o Achievable
 - o Realistic/Relevant
 - o Timebound
3. Review possible key actions with County Executive to understand alignment and collaboration opportunities from within those areas identified with the *“Whatcom County - 2026 Department Priority Deliverables”*.
4. Engage Councilmembers and Council staff, and as appropriate, elected and appointed county staff, and others in the development of preliminary key actions associated with the strategic themes.
5. Identify possible council and county leads for each key action as well as potential timeframe for implementation.
6. County Council and their staff shall work with other elected and appointed officials, community groups and organizations, and interested stakeholders and individuals on identifying potential partners and stakeholders for each key action.

Prepared by Eric Johnson, Partner, Columbia Policy Advisors

