

CLERK OF THE COUNCIL
Dana Brown-Davis, C.M.C.

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



COUNCILMEMBERS
Rud Browne
Barry Buchanan
Tyler Byrd
Todd Donovan
Ben Elenbaas
Carol Frazey
Kathy Kershner

WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCIL

JULY 22, 2020
2:30 P.M. VIRTUAL MEETING

MEETING PARTICIPANTS

Lisa Anderson, Bellingham City Councilmember	Michael Jones, Blaine City Manager
Kate Bishop, Ferndale City Councilmember	Tom Jones, City of Nooksack Councilmember
Rud Browne, Whatcom County Councilmember	Kathy Kershner, Whatcom County Councilmember
Barry Buchanan, Whatcom County Councilmember	Scott Korthuis, Mayor of Lynden
Tyler Byrd, Whatcom County Councilmember	Gene Knutson Bellingham City Councilmember
Ross Cline, Nooksack Tribe	Nick Laninga, City of Lynden Councilmember
Kyle Christensen, Mayor of Sumas	Michael Lilliquist, Bellingham City Councilmember
Eric Davidson, Blaine City Councilmember	Mike Martin, Lynden City Administrator
Melanie Dickinson, Everson City Clerk/Treasurer	Richard May, Blaine City Councilmember
Todd Donovan, Whatcom County Councilmember	Ryan O'Larey, City of Ferndale Councilmember
Ben Elenbaas, Whatcom County Councilmember	Bonnie Onyon, Blaine City Councilmember
Seth Fleetwood, Mayor of Bellingham	John Perry, Mayor of Everson
Carol Frazey, Whatcom County Councilmember	Herb Porter, Ferndale City Councilmember
Mark Gardner, City of Bellingham Legislative Analyst	Satpal Sidhu, Whatcom County Executive
Cathy B. Halka, County Council Legislative Analyst	Paul Shuey, City of Ferndale Councilmember
Greg Hansen, Mayor of Ferndale	Hannah Stone Bellingham City Councilmember
Brian Heinrich, Bellingham Deputy Administrator	Kyle Strengholt, Lynden City Councilmember
Dan Hammill, Bellingham City Councilmember	Pinky Vargas, Bellingham City Councilmember
Hollie Huthman Bellingham City Councilmember	Mark Wohlrab, Lynden City Councilmember

CALL TO ORDER

Council Chair Barry Buchanan called the virtual meeting to order at 2:30 p.m. and introduced the following agenda item:

1. Discussion with city leaders to explore ways to collaborate to improve efficiency for the benefit of taxpayers (AB2020-304)

Chair Buchanan thanked all participant for joining the meeting and asked Councilmember Browne to explain the proposed meeting expectations.

Councilmember Browne thanked meeting attendees for participating and stated he is heartened by the huge number of representatives joining from most all jurisdictions in Whatcom County. The meeting turnout clearly shows a commitment to trying to find ways to provide the same or better level of service to the community even in the face of a pretty significant financial challenge moving forward. The purpose of the meeting is to look at some of the collaborative services currently being provided to the community, like jail and specific Treasurer services, and discuss ideas for additional opportunities to consolidate and collaborate.

Chair Buchanan opened the meeting up for comments and the following participants spoke:

- Pinky Vargas, Bellingham City Councilmember: Focus on items that are redundant and will actually save money, not cost jurisdictions more money. Examples of services that could be consolidated are anything in the public safety realm, including emergency management, mental health services, and dispatch.
- Todd Donovan, Whatcom County Councilmember: Research legality of combining certain services. Consolidating some services may be more challenging than others, both legally and financially.
- Dan Hammill, Bellingham City Councilmember: Not interested in creating another layer of bureaucracy in a municipal shared multi-jurisdictional LLC unless there is a compelling reason to do so. Collaborative opportunities may be found in 911 call response, mental health and substance use response, criminal justice facilities, and emergency management.
- Lisa Anderson, Bellingham City Councilmember: Planning may not be an area to consolidate, but opportunities may be found in purchasing bulk items, sharing equipment through lease or contract, and sharing certain positions. Bring department heads into the discussion to identify areas where partnerships could be beneficial. Look to the long term by supporting a state bank.
- Michael Lilliquist, Bellingham City Councilmember: Supports any ideas that can deliver services cheaper and more efficiently. Explore all levels of cooperation. Efficiencies may be found in merging functions without having to fully merge services. Supports looking at all efficiencies that can be realized.
- Michael Jones, Blaine City Manager: Cooperation could work well in areas where delivered services are very uniform across the board, like jail services and some parks services, but may not work well in other areas like planning and public works.
- Eric Davidson, Blaine City Councilmember: Areas that could work are shared vehicles in public works and shared human resources services, especially between the small municipalities. Don't make change for change sake, just because it feels good. Wants to see the numbers, but cost per constituent shouldn't always be the bottom line. Customer service is very important, so if it costs a little extra to continue to provide that, its important to do so.
- Scott Korthuis, Mayor of Lynden: Consolidation of What-Comm 911 could be a huge opportunity to consolidate services. It will take political will to make this happen and save money for the community. There would be push-back by police and fire.
- Gene Knutson, Bellingham City Councilmember: As a next step, have staffs get together and discuss the ideas brought up today and see what's feasible and what's not feasible and go from there.
- Richard May, Blaine City Councilmember: Reallocation of resources. Look at possible changes to 911 dispatch to send specific types of responses to specific situations. Share some staff positions and seldom used resources.
- Barry Buchanan, Whatcom County Council Chair: One area to look at for consolidation is Hearing Examiner services, possibly as a pilot project. Next steps should be getting staffs together to look at the list of ideas from today and give feedback on feasibility and technical aspects and look into legalities.
- Seth Fleetwood, Mayor of Bellingham: As policy makers, if the group agrees there is wisdom and broad agreement and sees opportunity to reduce cost through improved efficiencies or reduction in duplications, have staff leaders work with their staff members to come up with a list of areas where they see opportunities and those ideas can be brought back to the group at a future meeting.

- Michael Lilliquist, Bellingham City Councilmember: Agrees with Mayor Fleetwood's comments and if a majority of the policy makers agree, move forward with the exercise. The City contracts for Hearing Examiner services ...(Councilmember Lilliquist's phone disconnected before he finished commenting).
- Todd Donovan, Whatcom County Councilmember: In addition to getting department heads and staff involved there needs to be a discussion with the County Treasurer about all the different pools of money that area already dedicated and may be a barrier to combining some services. Find out what barriers there are in state law and what examples are available from other jurisdictions.
- Rud Browne, Whatcom County Councilmember: The legal structure of shared services and expenses can be navigated. Legal guidance will be requested before moving forward.
- Tyler Byrd, Whatcom County Councilmember: Get department heads from the different municipalities together to brainstorm opportunities and how they can work together.
- Satpal Sidhu, Whatcom County Executive: Schedule a joint meeting like this on a regular basis, maybe twice a year. Get department heads together and have them look at potential joint efforts from their perspective. Water is a countywide issue where all jurisdictions will need to come to a settlement, compromise, or agreement. Any suggestions are welcome. Parks and recreation and forest management may be areas where there can be good cooperation.
- Pinky Vargas, Bellingham City Councilmember: Supports talking to department heads. Human resources and IT are complicated departments and may not be easily shared. Look at legalities of combining planning and development services. Look at state regulations. The City of Bellingham is looking to shift to a different approach to justice, mental health, and crisis management and how to provide those services in a more humane and effective way. Work together to do the right thing for our cities and the County. Important to get a list from departments of what can actually work and then see what the political will of the group is and go from there. It's going to be challenging. Uniting is going to be a very important part of being effective.
- Dan Hammill, Bellingham City Council: Encouraged the group to watch upcoming meetings of the Bellingham City Council's Public Health, Safety, and Justice Committee where several of the items mentioned today related to mental health will be discussed. In addition to seeking resources from Municipal Research and Services Center (MRSC), look at National Association of Counties (NACo) and National League of Cities (NLC) for information. Discuss possibility of adding small cities to the agreement between the Port of Bellingham, City of Bellingham, and County for shared lobbyist.
- Bonnie Onyon, Mayor of Blaine: Rely on staff to focus in on where cost saving can occur. Areas that may work are equipment sharing, lawn mowing, and maybe behavioral health. Look to MRSC for examples of cooperation between cities and counties.
- Tyler Byrd, Whatcom County Councilmembers: Related to IT, look at providing off-site secondary data storage shared between jurisdictions and the possibility of sharing software like the County's agenda management system so all meeting information can be located in one place. Look into the possibility of sharing staff members across jurisdictions and sharing in the cost of wages and benefits.

Council Chair Buchanan thanked all the meeting participants for attending the meeting.

Councilmember Browne provided a brief recap of the meeting and mentioned the consistent theme of combining 911 services. He asked the group if there were any objections to opening up the conversation of consolidating 911 to include Skagit and San Juan counties (comments provided later in the meeting note that participants require more information before agreeing to pursue this idea further). He also stated that the possibility of sharing expensive capital equipment was noted several times during the meeting. Browne noted that there may be cost savings in a shared common health care plan.

NEXT STEPS

- City and County leaders will go back to department heads and staff and ask for ideas on where consolidation and collaboration will work best.
- Cathy B. Halka, County Council Legislative Analyst, will research the jurisdictional questions asked during the meeting and provide information back to the group prior to the next meeting.
- Proposed next meeting dates are September 9 and 16 at 1 p.m. Cathy B. Halka will follow-up with participants to get the next meeting scheduled.

ADJOURN

The meeting adjourned at 3:38 p.m.

ATTEST:

WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCIL
WHATCOM COUNTY, WASHINGTON

Dana Brown-Davis, Council Clerk

Barry Buchanan, Council Chair

Dana Brown-Davis, Minutes Transcription

DRAFT