

Whatcom County Council Committee of the Whole

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



Committee Minutes - Final

Tuesday, June 24, 2025

1:35 PM

Hybrid Meeting - Council Chambers

**HYBRID MEETING - ADJOURNS BY 4:30 P.M. (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 Stremmler**

CLERK OF THE COUNCIL

Cathy Halka, AICP, CMC

Call To Order

Council Chair Kaylee Galloway called the meeting to order at 1:55 p.m. in a hybrid meeting.

Roll Call

Present: 7 - Barry Buchanan, Tyler Byrd, Todd Donovan, Ben Elenbaas, Kaylee Galloway, Jon Scanlon, and Mark Stremler

Announcements

Special Presentation

1. [AB2025-368](#) Presentation on the independent study of the countywide fire and EMS system by Rick Harrison, Mission Critical Partners

Rick Harrison, Mission Critical Partners, read from a presentation (on file) on a progress report of the fire/EMS (Emergency Medical Services) assessment project, the goals of the study, what stakeholder interviews have been completed, the preliminary findings regarding provisions in the Revised Code of Washington under which the fire districts operate and the limited authority which county government has, highlighted recommendations that will be discussed in more detail in the final report, and the project timeline, and anticipated delivery date of the final report.

He answered whether they have gotten all the information they need for the study, and stated they are still waiting for information from the Prospect Fire Dispatch Center. He answered what their recommendation for EMS deployment will look like, and stated different deployment models will be laid out in the report. He answered whether they look at things like demographics (like districts where it is easier to pass a bond) when they consider consolidation of districts, and Scanlon stated it should be considered. He answered whether the report dove into the County's internal structure systems and the roles of the different areas of County government as it pertains to increased involvement, and whether they found opportunities to improve those systems. He stated he studied the various committees which are involved in this topic but did not dive deeply into the Council's responsibilities. Galloway stated she would like to make sure that both the administrative and legislative elements of "increased involvement" are explored.

This agenda item was PRESENTED.

2. [AB2025-478](#) Update on the EMS budget and related programming
Kayla Schott-Bresler, Executive's Office, read from a presentation (on file) regarding the health of the Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Fund,

including challenges in the fund created by expense escalation and stagnant revenues, a difficulty in reducing costs because they are often associated with existing contracts, and consideration of the EMS Finance Committee's recommendation to the EMS Oversight Board (EOB) regarding banked capacity. She and the following people discussed the item with councilmembers:

- Mike Hilley, Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Manager
- Satpal Sidhu, County Executive
- Aly Pennucci, Executive's Office
- Christopher Quinn, Prosecuting Attorney's Office

They discussed with councilmembers that the fund's trajectory (as shown in the presentation) assumes the one percent annual increase in the levy amount but not the banked capacity, but that the banked capacity amount can be levied in addition to the one percent, that one of the strategies being considered for the future is discussing the reserve target for this fund, that they need to look at both revenue and expenses and holistically at the entire EMS fire system (including the individual fire districts) in order to come into balance and make the fund sustainable for the long term, if they could also look at County expenditures on administration though that may not significantly change the trajectory of the fund, a history of why the reserve target was set at 70 percent but that it should maybe be reassessed, getting input from the fire chiefs as decisions and funding requests are made, that the roles and structure for the County EMS are in the adopted levy plan, that they should maybe specify the amount to be collected for the levy in the ballot measure wording as opposed to a rate, that the Council, Administration, and EMS have a shared responsibility in County funds that are struggling but that it is also due to things out of their control, that revenues cannot keep up with labor costs which escalate at five percent a year, and that the intention in the levy plan was that they would be spending less than collections in the first three years then spending down reserves in the second three years, and that they are just seeing an exacerbation of what was an already-anticipated trend.

Councilmembers and the speakers discussed that the original levy rate was lowered so as not to bring in more than what was originally planned but that they should maybe revisit that, and that they should consider lowering the fund balance reserve target, cuts in expenses, using banked capacity, and not always just approving funding requests. They discussed looking at what the potential impact would be on the community (such as EMS response time) as they consider these measures and so that they are informed before making decisions.

Christopher Quinn, Prosecuting Attorney's Office, spoke about comments that were made about proposing a levy *amount* on a ballot as opposed to a *rate* and that by statute, they have to identify the rate. He stated that they do identify a number up front that they would like collect and use that to calculate the rate based on what they believe the value of property in the county is at the time.

Councilmembers and the speakers discussed looking at other revenue options that they have not used, and Hilly spoke about dispatch fees and a proposal from the fire chiefs to consider looking at raising the public safety tax by one tenth of one percent to potentially offset the portion of dispatch fees that comes out of the levy funds.

Hilley read from a presentation on the 2024 annual report (report on file) and answered questions about the 2025 to 2026 projected revenues.

This agenda item was PRESENTED.

Committee Discussion

1. [AB2025-438](#) Discussion relating to preliminary Planning Commission recommendations on Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan Chapter 1 (Introduction and Growth Projections) associated with the 2025 Comprehensive Plan Update

Galloway spoke about the Comprehensive Plan review process. Councilmembers submitted proposed amendments and questions and those were compiled in the "Proposed Amendments Table" (on file). They are also reflected in the version titled "Chapter 1 - Council Proposed Amendments" (on file) which the following discussion was based off of.

She asked about the Growth Management Act (GMA) goals on page 1-1, under "How the Plan was Created" and whether that language is word for word from the statute, and Aamot stated it is. She did not make a motion to amend that language.

Galloway moved to amend the section "How the Plan was Created," at the top of page 1-3 of the "Chapter 1 - Council Proposed Amendments" to change "citizen" to "community" and to add "consistent with the Public Participation Plan" (linked) at the end so that it reads:

Third, extensive community participation was facilitated through meetings, presentations, public hearings, and written comments made throughout this process, consistent with the Public Participation Plan.

The motion was seconded by Donovan.

Matt Aamot, Planning and Development Services Department, answered whether they anticipate an update to the Participation Plan and Galloway stated the reference can be whatever the most up-to-date version of that document is.

The motion carried by the following vote:

Aye: 7 - Buchanan, Donovan, Elenbaas, Galloway, Scanlon, Stremler, and Byrd

Nay: 0

Galloway asked whether the document has a land acknowledgement and whether there is interest in referencing other indigenous populations. Councilmembers and Aamot discussed that there has not been a land acknowledgement in the Comprehensive Plan in the past, that they would want to get feedback and suggestions on the right language, that they have not heard of a specific request for it from the Tribes, and that they should hold off on it and maybe ask the Tribes for consultation on the language.

Aly Pennucci, Executive's Office, stated what they are looking for from Council in terms of amendments is the specific language they would like added. She answered whether the Administration will do a read over of the document to make sure they are not retaining outdated language, and stated it would be more making sure policies are not in conflict as opposed to rewriting whole sections that just need to be updated based on current times.

No motion was made.

Donovan spoke about amending the first sentence in the section "Countywide Planning Policies" on page 1-3 and stated it does not make sense since they changed the policies that were existing before the process began.

Councilmembers and Aamot discussed the amendment language and that ultimately the Comprehensive Plan has to be consistent with the countywide planning policies that exist.

Donovan moved to amend the first sentence in the section "Countywide Planning Policies" on page 1-3 so that it reads:

During the Comprehensive Plan process, the Whatcom County Council, in conjunction with the cites, adopted a set of Countywide

Planning Policies (see Appendix C).

The motion was seconded by Galloway.

The motion carried by the following vote:

Aye: 5 - Donovan, Galloway, Scanlon, Stremler, and Buchanan

Nay: 2 - Byrd and Elenbaas

Galloway moved to amend Goal 1A (page 1-4) to add “accessible,” after “accountable” so that it reads:

Ensure that government activities, regulations and policies are transparent, accountable, accessible, and easy to understand.

The motion was seconded by Donovan.

Councilmembers discussed the motion.

The motion carried by the following vote:

Aye: 6 - Donovan, Elenbaas, Galloway, Scanlon, Buchanan, and Byrd

Nay: 1 - Stremler

Galloway moved to amend the first sentence of the third paragraph under section “Population Projections” (page 1-8) to strike “and therefore requires no further justification” so that the first sentence reads:

The County's 2045 population projection of 303,438 is within OFM's range.

The motion was seconded by Donovan.

Councilmembers discussed the motion and the previous amendment.

The motion carried by the following vote:

Aye: 7 - Elenbaas, Galloway, Scanlon, Stremler, Buchanan, Byrd, and Donovan

Nay: 0

Galloway spoke about item number seven on the table of amendments regarding population projections. She stated she did not have a motion but wants to make sure, as they make these technical decisions, that they understand the budget and policy implications for opting for a projection higher than OFM medium, and councilmembers discussed her comments.

Galloway spoke about item number eight on the table of amendments

regarding Table 4, and asked whether there was council interest in reverting to OFM medium for the Birch Bay and Columbia Valley Urban Growth Areas (UGAs). Councilmembers discussed the question and Aamot stated that OFM medium is a projection for the county as a whole, so they do not make projections by UGA. Councilmembers discussed that they are not ready to have this discussion until they get the final environmental impact statement (EIS) and until they understand the costs of mitigation for climate projections. No motion was made.

Donovan moved to amend section “Employment Projections” (page 1-10) to preserve the word “Projections” so that the section is titled “Employment Projections” as opposed to “Employment” and to amend the third paragraph under that section (page 1-10) so that it reads:

Employment allocations were based largely on the local request recognizing the incentives that cities have for larger employment areas (sales tax, property tax). Most of the employment projections displayed in Table 5 for the Urban Growth Areas and the area outside UGAs greatly exceed the “high” projections provided in the Technical Analysis (Leland Report).

The motion was seconded by Galloway.

Aamot and councilmembers discussed the rationale for the language as presented and the proposed amendments.

The motion carried by the following vote:

Aye: 4 - Stremmler and Buchanan, Donovan, and Galloway

Nay: 3 - Scanlon, Byrd, and Elenbaas

Galloway spoke about item number fifteen on the table of amendments regarding Current Land Use, and **moved** to amend the fourth paragraph under section “Current Land Use” (page 1-14) so that it reads:

The majority of single-family homes are concentrated in the cities, Urban Growth Areas (UGAs), Limited Areas of More Intense Rural Development (LAMIRDS), and other unincorporated areas within the county designated for urban growth such as Sudden Valley, Columbia Valley, Glacier, Lake Samish, Lake Whatcom (north end), Cain Lake, Birch Bay, Sandy Point, and Lummi Island.

The motion was seconded by Donovan.

Galloway gave her rationale for the motion.

Aamot stated he would recommend they take out the part after (LAMIRDS) because there are no unincorporated areas designated for urban growth. They are basically UGAs. He stated he would also recommend taking out Lummi Island from the list because it does not have any LAMIRDS or anything like that.

Galloway amended her motion to amend the fourth paragraph under section "Current Land Use" (page 1-14) so that it reads:

The majority of single-family homes are concentrated in the cities, Urban Growth Areas (UGAs), Limited Areas of More Intense Rural Development (LAMIRDS), such as Sudden Valley, Columbia Valley, Glacier, Lake Samish, Lake Whatcom (north end), Cain Lake, Birch Bay, and Sandy Point.

Aamot answered whether the list misses any LAMIRDS and spoke about why others are not listed. This list just shows examples.

The motion carried by the following vote:

Aye: 4 - Buchanan, Donovan, Galloway, and Scanlon

Nay: 3 - Byrd, Elenbaas, and Stremmler

Donovan spoke about item number sixteen on the table of amendments regarding Current Land Use, and stated the amendment is no longer needed in light of Galloway's amendment. No motion was made.

Donovan spoke about item number seventeen on the table of amendments regarding Current Land Use, and stated they have gotten a report from Planning and Development Services saying that short term rentals are likely affecting housing prices and his proposed amendment recognizes the impact of vacation units.

Donovan moved to amend the fifth paragraph under section "Current Land Use" (page 1-14) to add a sentence to the end so that the paragraph reads:

A prominent characteristic of Whatcom County housing is the high number of vacation, resort, and second-home units found throughout the county. In 2020, approximately 50% of the "vacant" units were occupied part of the year for seasonal, recreational or occasional use (2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table B25004). Over 1,000 single-family housing units in the unincorporated areas are used as short-term vacation rentals, which likely increases housing costs (cite the study PDS provided Council).

Clerk's note: A "Short Term Rentals White Paper" attached to **AB2023-310**, states, "in August 2021, in Granicus' presentation of their software capabilities to Council, they identified **1,656** unique rental units in unincorporated Whatcom County."

The motion was seconded by Galloway.

Councilmembers discussed that some vacation rentals serve a purpose for housing in Whatcom County, such as housing for seasonal workers or temporary dwellings for someone whose house is damaged.

Donovan amended his motion to delete "which likely increases housing costs" so that it would now read:

A prominent characteristic of Whatcom County housing is the high number of vacation, resort, and second-home units found throughout the county. In 2020, approximately 50% of the "vacant" units were occupied part of the year for seasonal, recreational or occasional use (2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table B25004). Over 1,000 single-family housing units in the unincorporated areas are used as short-term vacation rentals (cite the study PDS provided Council).

The motion carried by the following vote:

Aye: 7 - Buchanan, Byrd, Donovan, Elenbaas, Galloway, Scanlon, and Stremmer

Nay: 0

This agenda item was DISCUSSED AND MOTION(S) APPROVED.

MOTION 1

Motion approved to amend the section "How the Plan was Created," at the top of page 1-3 of the "Chapter 1 - Council Proposed Amendments" to change "citizen" to "community" and to add "consistent with the Public Participation Plan" at the end so that it reads:

Third, extensive community participation was facilitated through meetings, presentations, public hearings, and written comments made throughout this process, consistent with the Public Participation Plan.

MOTION 2

Motion approved to amend the first sentence in the section "Countywide Planning Policies" on page 1-3 so that it reads:

During the Comprehensive Plan process, the Whatcom County Council, in conjunction with the cities, adopted a set of Countywide Planning Policies (see Appendix C).

MOTION 3

Motion approved to amend Goal 1A (page 1-4) to add “accessible,” after “accountable” so that it reads:
Ensure that government activities, regulations and policies are transparent, accountable, accessible, and easy to understand.

MOTION 4

Motion approved to amend the first sentence of the third paragraph under section “Population Projections” (page 1-8) to strike “and therefore requires no further justification” so that the first sentence reads:
The County's 2045 population projection of 303,438 is within OFM's range.

MOTION 5

Motion approved to amend section “Employment Projections” (page 1-10) to preserve the word “Projections” so that the section is titled “Employment Projections” as opposed to “Employment” and to amend the third paragraph under that section (page 1-10) so that it reads:
Employment allocations were based largely on the local request recognizing the incentives that cities have for larger employment areas (sales tax, property tax). Most of the employment projections displayed in Table 5 for the Urban Growth Areas and the area outside UGAs greatly exceed the “high” projections provided in the Technical Analysis (Leland Report).

MOTION 6

Motion approved to amend the fourth paragraph under section “Current Land Use” (page 1-14) so that it reads:
The majority of single-family homes are concentrated in the cities, Urban Growth Areas (UGAs), Limited Areas of More Intense Rural Development (LAMIRDS), such as Sudden Valley, Columbia Valley, Glacier, Lake Samish, Lake Whatcom (north end), Cain Lake, Birch Bay, and Sandy Point.

MOTION 7

Motion approved to amend the fifth paragraph under section “Current Land Use” (page 1-14) to add a sentence to the end so that the paragraph reads:
A prominent characteristic of Whatcom County housing is the high number of vacation, resort, and second-home units found throughout the county. In 2020, approximately 50% of the “vacant” units were occupied part of the year for seasonal, recreational or occasional use (2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table B25004). Over 1,000 single-family housing units in the unincorporated areas are used as short-term vacation rentals (cite the study PDS provided Council).

2. [AB2025-480](#) Discussion on Ferry System fares

Aly Pennucci, Executive's Office, stated the executive order to increase ferry fares was issued on June 18th, and they will be back in July to update councilmembers on the capital program and any other things they are working on.

Byrd thanked the Executive and his staff for the quick action for the ferry.

Scanlon spoke about code language that says the executive “shall” adjust fares for inflation based on the Consumer Price Index in January each year,

and whether that is something they should look at since they have communicated that the fare increases received from the executive are to get us through the end of 2026.

Pennucci answered whether they will barely break even on code requirements with this calculation, and stated the intent was to do the minimum fare increase, using the fare structure generally that was approved in the Unified Fee Schedule in November, to meet the requirement by the end of 2026. She stated that with this change in 2025, they will almost completely deplete the reserve that they started the year with (about \$720,000), and they are projecting to end 2026 with a pretty small reserve.

This agenda item was 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 4:33 p.m.

The County Council approved these minutes on July 8, 2025.

ATTEST:


Cathy Halka, Council Clerk

WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCIL
WHATCOM COUNTY, WA


Kaylee Galloway, Council Chair

Meeting Minutes prepared by Kristi Felbinger