

Whatcom County Council as the Health Board

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



Minutes - Final

Tuesday, February 3, 2026

10 AM

Hybrid Meeting - Council Chambers

**JOINT HEALTH BOARD/PUBLIC HEALTH ADVISORY BOARD MEETING -
HYBRID MEETING - ADJOURNS BY 12:00 P.M. (PARTICIPATE IN-PERSON, SEE
REMOTE JOIN INSTRUCTIONS AT www.whatcomcounty.us/joinvirtualcouncil, OR
CALL 360.778.5010)**

COUNCILMEMBERS

Elizabeth Boyle
Barry Buchanan
Ben Elenbaas
Kaylee Galloway
Jessica Rienstra
Jon Scanlon
Mark Stremmler

CLERK OF THE COUNCIL

Cathy Halka, AICP, CMC

Boyle seconded the motion to appoint either Stremler or Boyle as Vice Chair of the Health Board.

Boyle was appointed with five votes as follows:

Boyle: 5 - Buchanan, Galloway, Rienstra, Scanlon, and Boyle

Stremler: Elenbaas and Stremler

This agenda item was NOMINATED AND APPOINTED.

Motion approved to appoint Jon Scanlon as Chair of the Whatcom County Health Board.

Motion approved to appoint Elizabeth Boyle as Vice Chair of the Whatcom County Health Board.

Special Presentation

1. [AB2026-106](#) Update from the Health Director

Champ Thomaskutty, Health Director, provided an update on foundational public health service funding, which was originally scheduled for a \$300 million allocation across all jurisdictions in the 2026-2027 budget, but which is now facing a significant cut in the Governor's proposed budget. Thomaskutty said there are four bills percolating at the State House focused on addressing the shortfall in funding.

Shu-Ling Zhao, PHAB, asked what bill numbers people should be tracking.

Thomaskutty said the bills are Senate Bill 6129, Senate Bill 6116, House Bill 2383, and House Bill 2439.

Stremler asked how Whatcom County interacts with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and their recommendations on childhood vaccines.

Dr. Amy Harley, Health Officer, said she would speak directly to changes in vaccine policy later in the meeting.

Thomaskutty stated that the county utilizes federal information systems, which provide insights into state, regional, and local health issues and behaviors for different populations, but the youth information systems have broken down, and the county has had to look for other sources for that data. He said that they are still assessing how changes at the federal level impact various information systems. He added that Whatcom County does not have any direct funding from the CDC, though there is some CDC funding that comes to the state. Thomaskutty said the health department is moving forward cautiously in terms of taking on new programs and strategies in

This agenda item was PRESENTED.

3. [AB2026-108](#) Update from the Public Health Advisory Board Chair

Joni Hensley, PHAB, speaking on behalf of the PHAB Chair, welcomed new partners and members to the group. She stated that the next meeting is Thursday, February 12 at 7 a.m. and asked new members to show up prepared to make a brief introductory statement.

This agenda item was PRESENTED.

4. [AB2026-111](#) Presentation from the Public Health Advisory Board on 2025 accomplishments and 2026 workplan

Joni Hensley, PHAB, provided an overview of PHAB's 2025 accomplishments as outlined in their annual report, including their participation in the hiring process for a new director of Whatcom County Health and Community Services. Hensley stated that the 2026 workplan was discussed and modified at the last PHAB meeting. Part of the workplan is to continue efforts to streamline and clarify PHAB member recruitment and membership to comply with state code. The work plan also outlines much of the subgroups' strategies, and Hensley encouraged new members to consider joining one of the subgroups. PHAB will also be involved in supporting public health priorities and planning for the new community health assessment.

Ben Twigg, PHAB, asked whether new members received a copy of the workplan.

Shu-Ling Zhao, PHAB, stated that the workplan was included in an email with information about the day's meeting.

Sterling Chick, PHAB, asked about the subcommittees.

Hensley said there will be subcommittees for infrastructure and code changes, new member orientation, contingency planning for health board reconfiguration, communications, budget, training and education, Medicaid, and the Community Health Assessment.

Scanlon stated that he would like to hear from the community about what to prioritize if state funding gets cut.

This agenda item was PRESENTED.

5. [AB2026-054](#) Presentation on locally-led health initiatives

Scanlon introduced a series of presentations on community health

veterans face when attempting to access services or get support, and he said the goal is to meet veterans where they are at, reduce stigma, and provide mental health help before veterans are in crisis. Call explained that the Growing Veterans program allows veterans to come together and work on their mental health while being outside growing organic produce that gets donated to local food banks. Call noted that the program is entirely community and grant funded, which is challenging in terms of retaining staff.

Joni Hensley, PHAB, asked whether Growing Veterans has a program or team in place to support veterans who go into crisis.

Call said Growing Veterans does not provide clinical support, but they make themselves available to talk to whomever needs it and make connections to clinical support as needed.

Buchanan thanked Call for Growing Veterans' work and asked whether referrals are needed to get into the program.

Call stated that no referrals are needed and everyone is welcome.

Hackett stated that he was part of the Growing Veterans program when it first started, and, as a combat veteran, the program saved him. He stressed the program's importance for the community and his desire to see it continue to grow.

Shu-Ling Zhao, PHAB, asked about the annual budget for the organization.

Call stated that the annual cost is \$244,000, which pays for three staff members, rent, farm maintenance, etc. He said they anticipate serving over a thousand people in 2026, as they are partnering with Western and have interns from Whatcom Community College.

Zhao asked how many pounds of food the program anticipates being able to grow in 2026.

Call said that, if they are able to get additional hoop houses and grow food year-round, they may be able to grow 7,000 pounds this year.

Ferndale Community Coalition (Approximate Timestamp 1:27:17)

Rebecca Snearly, Whatcom County Health and Community Services (WCHCS) and Kaatri Jones, Ferndale School District, shared a presentation

that they received the treatment they needed.

Following the presentations, Health Board and PHAB members asked questions and engaged in discussion.

Elenbaas asked if non-veterans are able to volunteer with Growing Veterans.

Call stated that non-veterans are welcome to volunteer.

Elenbaas asked if Growing Veterans partners with livestock producers for animals as natural therapy.

Call said they have had experience with animals as natural therapy and they also have visits from the Whatcom service dogs every third Friday of the month.

This agenda item was PRESENTED.

Other Business

Scanlon stated that the afternoon’s Special Committee of the Whole meeting will include a discussion about councilmember projects, which may include health priorities.

Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 11:54 a.m.

The County Council approved these minutes on February 24, 2026.

ATTEST



Cathy Halka, Council Clerk

WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCIL
WHATCOM COUNTY, WA


Jon Scanlon, Health Board Chair

Meeting Minutes prepared by Jenna Gernand