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# WHATCOM COUNTY COVID-19 REVIEW

COUNTY COUNCIL PRESENTATION | SEPTEMBER 13, 2022



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# AGENDA

1. Introductions
2. Project Purpose and Process
3. Scope of Work &  
Recommendations Review
4. Health Board Recommendation
5. Conclusions

## **MEETING OBJECTIVES**

- Share final report and responses to two motions approved in July 12 meeting
- Hear Council feedback and questions on revised final recommendations



# PROJECT PURPOSE AND PROCESS



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## PROJECT PURPOSE AND PROCESS

### **Project Purpose**

Reflect on the County's response to the public emergency, evaluate the systems in place to respond to the event, and identify opportunities to improve and be even better prepared for the next global emergency.

### **Work Completed to Date**

- Reviewed incident documentation, existing plans, county code, meeting notes.
- Conducted 24 interviews with Whatcom County staff and outside partners.
- Presented initial findings and draft report to County Council on June 21, 2022.
- On July 12, Council asked for scope review and additional detail on Health Board recommendation.
- Added 10 recommendations (for a total of 30) to the final draft based on Council feedback and prepared a transmittal memo to address Council questions.

## SUMMARY THEMES

- Emergency management is more critical with the arrival of a pandemic disease and increased weather incidents.
- As Whatcom County grows and evolves, it must build its capabilities and capacity to respond to such events.
  - Volunteers and partnerships with regional businesses and community-based organizations can supplement the County's resources, but the focus should be on building self-sufficiency and maturation of the County's emergency management capabilities.
- Role clarity and unity of effort are essential. These are achieved through clear plans and policies, with regular training and exercise.

### **Clarify the County's Emergency Management Model**

- Role of Council, Executive, Policy Group
- Composition and role Health Board
- ECC Model
- Plans, policies, procedures

### **Train & Exercise**

- Policy makers
- Staff

### **Support**

- Shared information
- Staff capacity
- Financial policies and procedures



# SCOPE OF WORK & RECOMMENDATIONS REVIEW

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## RECOMMENDATIONS: OVERVIEW

<b>Category</b>	<b>Applicable to Most Emergencies</b>	<b>Applicable to Pandemic Response in Particular</b>
<b>Planning, Training, and Exercises</b>	✓	
<b>Policy Roles and Responsibilities</b>	✓	✓
<b>Staffing</b>	✓	✓
<b>Financial Authority During Disasters</b>	✓	
<b>Information Management</b>	✓	✓

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## PLANNING, TRAINING, AND EXERCISES

- Update the County's Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan (CEMP) and add a Pandemic Annex.
- Review and update departmental Continuity of Operations Plans regularly.
- Develop and update plans, procedures, and job aids to build a stronger capability to respond to disasters.
- Conduct training and exercise programs for staff who could potentially work in WUC, including just-in-time training materials for first-time participants.
- Clarify the line of succession and the lead agency for specific disasters in plans and County Code. (added)



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## POLICY ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

- Include councilmembers in training and exercises. Councilmembers can help the County be successful in establishing unity of effort. Councilmembers should receive Situation Reports and updates so they can help keep constituents informed. (added)
- Expand the membership of the Health Board to include members with public health expertise and representatives from cities within the county.
- Consider alternative models for managing the ECC depending on the type of disaster. (added)
- Discuss roles and responsibilities of those in command positions and what types of issues will be escalated to the WUC Policy Group. (added)

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## STAFFING

- The County Executive should take a more direct leadership role during a declared disaster and direct departments to support the ECC as needed. (added)
- Ensure Health Department staffing remains at a level to appropriately support the ongoing response to the pandemic.
- Add positions to the Division of Emergency Management to support public information and planning.
- Evaluate the costs and benefits of repositioning the emergency management function within the County organization. (added)

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## FINANCIAL AUTHORITY DURING DISASTERS

- Conduct training on emergency procurement policies and procedures.
- Clarify the policies and procedures around emergency procurement with Finance Department staff as well as those working in WUC Finance Section, which would result in a more streamlined and efficient response.

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## INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

- Develop protocols for sharing confidential and sensitive information, including distribution guidelines.
- Establish a Situation Report (SITREP) and distribute it widely during events. (added)
- Establish a single Joint Information Center (JIC) that is managed by a single individual. Develop JIC procedures, train to them, and exercise them. Include department public information officers in training and exercises. (added)



# HEALTH BOARD RECOMMENDATION



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## HEALTH BOARD RECOMMENDATION

- Our interviews revealed two current challenges:
  - A lack of clarity around the role of the Health Board in comparison to the role of the County Council.
  - A need for expertise to oversee the public health aspects of the pandemic response.

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## HEALTH BOARD RECOMMENDATION

- Per RCW 70.05.035, the County may keep the current Health Board structure [County Council as Health Board supplemented by the Public Health Advisory Board] or expand its membership.
- Several similar sized counties are expanding their Health Boards to add community representatives.
- Our framework provides a way to evaluate maintaining the existing Health Board membership or expanding the membership.
- Using this framework, we find that an expanded Health Board membership provides advantages in many areas.

## HEALTH BOARD EVALUATIVE FRAMEWORK

Category	Evaluative Criteria	Maintain Existing Health Board	Move to Expanded Membership
<b>Alignment with State Legislative Intent</b>	Does the Board have subject matter expertise?		✓
	Is the Board broadly representative of the community?	✓	✓
<b>Clarity of Roles</b>	Is it clear the Board is a distinct body?		✓
<b>Accountability</b>	Can the Board be held accountable by the public?	✓	
<b>Practical Feasibility</b>	Can Board positions be consistently filled?		✓
	Can the Board be staffed and supported?		✓



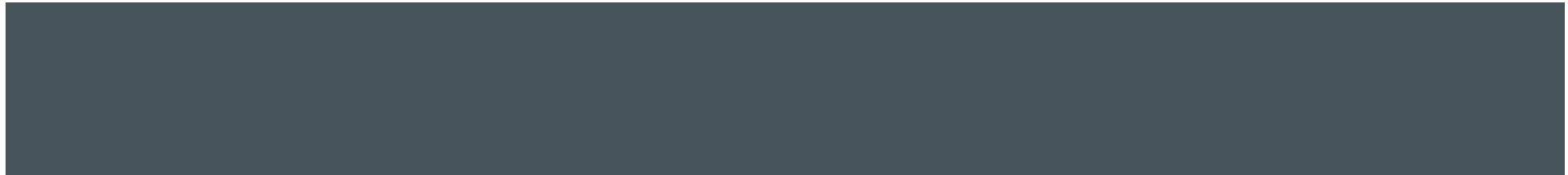
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THANK YOU!

QUESTIONS?



# SUPPORTING SLIDES



## RECOMMENDATIONS AND ALIGNMENT WITH SCOPE OF WORK

Recommendation	Applicable to Most Emergencies	Applicable to Pandemic Response in Particular
<b><i>Planning, Training, and Exercises</i></b>		
1. Update the CEMP to ensure it complies with current federal and state requirements. Consider using Washington State Emergency Management Division (EMD) assistance, either on-line tools or technical support. Add a Pandemic Annex.	✓	
<b>2. Address inconsistencies in the CEMP and County Code regarding authority in a disaster and line of succession.</b>	✓	
3. Review and update Continuity of Operations Plans annually with particular attention to orders of succession and delegations of authority whenever personnel changes affect key positions.	✓	

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND ALIGNMENT WITH SCOPE OF WORK

Recommendation	Applicable to Most Emergencies	Applicable to Pandemic Response in Particular
<b><i>Planning, Training, and Exercises</i></b>		
4. Develop and update plans, procedures, and job aids to build a stronger capability to respond to and recover from disasters. Conduct training and exercise programs for all levels from elected officials to all those working within or supporting unified command.	✓	
5. If the County continues to use Incident Command System (ICS), a much more concerted effort must be established to implement ICS at the Emergency Coordination Center (ECC).	✓	
6. Ensure job aids, videos, or other just-in-time training materials are available to orient first-time responders to the facility, processes, and their assigned positions.	✓	

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND ALIGNMENT WITH SCOPE OF WORK

Recommendation	Applicable to Most Emergencies	Applicable to Pandemic Response in Particular
<b><i>Policy Roles and Responsibilities</i></b>		
7. Conduct training for councilmembers, elected officials, and department heads on crisis communications.	✓	
<b>8. Establish healthy working relationships between county leaders during non-disaster times so that trust between organizational elements exists when disasters do strike.</b>	✓	
9. Councilmembers should not work or drop by unannounced at executive work areas, including the ECC, during disasters. Protocols should be established, and appropriate training delivered.	✓	
10. Review the language in the County Code to define the Health Board’s powers and responsibilities clearly. Include elected officials in disaster preparedness training and exercise activities to include roles and responsibilities during disasters.		✓

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND ALIGNMENT WITH SCOPE OF WORK

Recommendation	Applicable to Most Emergencies	Applicable to Pandemic Response in Particular
<i>Policy Roles and Responsibilities</i>		
<b>11. Councilmembers can help the county be successful in establishing unity of effort. If the Executive provides situation reports and updates, the council can help keep constituents informed and collect information from them to assist the Executive in response efforts.</b>	✓	
12. Expand Health Board membership to include representatives from public health/medical fields. Consider adding elected officials from cities. Update Whatcom County Code to reflect changes.		✓
<b>13. Explore the use of different models for ECC organization depending on the disaster. If a future disaster is similar in scope and breadth to the pandemic, a Departmental Structure model is recommended.</b>	✓	
<b>14. During training, the ICS Command and General Staff Section Chiefs should meet with the WUC Policy Group and clearly discuss roles and responsibilities, to include what types of issues will be escalated to the policy group.</b>	✓	

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND ALIGNMENT WITH SCOPE OF WORK

Recommendation	Applicable to Most Emergencies	Applicable to Pandemic Response in Particular
<b><i>Policy Roles and Responsibilities</i></b>		
<b>15. Expand the WUC Policy Group and come to a clear understanding of which issues will be forwarded to that group for a decision.</b>	✓	
16. Establish one organizational structure for the response effort. Once that executive-level decision is made, individual departments need to work together within that unified structure toward common goals.	✓	
17. Develop and practice a virtual operational capability and develop social distancing guidelines in the ECC. If space becomes an issue, consider some functions that may be able to work off-site or remotely .	✓	✓
18. Use common terminology for the emergency coordination center. Choose the name and refer to the facility by that name in documentation, training, exercises, and incidents.	✓	

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND ALIGNMENT WITH SCOPE OF WORK

Recommendation	Applicable to Most Emergencies	Applicable to Pandemic Response in Particular
<b>Staffing</b>		
<b>19. The County Executive should take a more direct leadership role during a declared disaster and direct departments to support the ECC as needed.</b>	✓	
20. Elected officials are not only accountable to constituents but must be leaders and cheerleaders to county employees.	✓	
21. Maintaining Health Department staffing at levels able to perform mandated requirements as well as support community expectations will benefit Whatcom County as they recover from this disaster.		✓
22. Add one public information position and one planning position to the emergency management staff.	✓	
<b>23. Evaluate the costs and benefits of repositioning the emergency management function outside the Sheriff's Office.</b>	✓	



## RECOMMENDATIONS AND ALIGNMENT WITH SCOPE OF WORK

Recommendation	Applicable to Most Emergencies	Applicable to Pandemic Response in Particular
<b><i>Financial Authority</i></b>		
24. Conduct training on emergency procurement policies and procedures.	✓	
25. Health Board / Council members should consider alternatives to standard procedures when a timelier model will improve disaster response.	✓	

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND ALIGNMENT WITH SCOPE OF WORK

Recommendation	Applicable to Most Emergencies	Applicable to Pandemic Response in Particular
<b><i>Information Management</i></b>		
26. Public Health should develop and then achieve concurrence on a policy regarding sensitive health information.		✓
27. Develop procedures to ensure appropriate personnel receive information that keeps them informed.	✓	
<b>28. Improve incident information sharing by establishing a Situation Report (SITREP) format and distributing it widely during events.</b>	✓	
29. Establish a single JIC that is managed by a single individual. Develop procedures, train to them, and exercise them.	✓	
<b>30. Provide training and exercises to department Public Information Officers so they understand the functions of the JIC and the role they will play.</b>	✓	