



WHATCOM COUNTY STRATEGIC PLAN 2001-2002

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

SUMMARY

Chapter 1 describes the purpose of the Strategic Plan, the process used to develop the Plan, and how it will be used in the future. This chapter also provides background information on Whatcom County, including an overview of the services currently provided by county government.

In today's fast-paced environment, county government needs to be positioned to keep up with the changes our community demands. This Plan is designed to provide a solid foundation to assist the County in charting its future as it strives to provide the best possible service to the citizens and businesses in Whatcom County. While the Plan is a guide to the future, it also includes near-term Action Plans to address current needs.

The strategic planning process instituted over the past four years has provided the analysis, communication and deliberations that led to the development of this Plan. While the Administration and County Council took the lead role, employees were also involved in the process.

The Plan is designed to be useful to many different entities. Council members, elected officials, department heads, managers and employees will all use the document, although different chapters may be more relevant to some than others. Likewise, the county's citizens, businesses and other local governments will find the document a useful way to understand their county government and to track its activities.

INTRODUCTION

A. Purpose of Whatcom County Strategic Plan

The world in which citizens, businesses and their governmental institutions operate is changing rapidly. While it is not possible to know with certainty all of the challenges that the future will bring, one assumption is certain: today's practices will not adequately meet tomorrow's needs. The purpose of the Whatcom County Strategic Plan is to chart a course for a viable future for county residents and to ensure that all of the various actions and other plans of county government work together to achieve that future.

This Plan identifies a long-term vision and mission for the County and near-term policy priorities to achieve that vision and mission. The document also includes goals and objectives for each policy.

B. Process for Developing the Plan

This is the fourth year of strategic planning for Whatcom County. Section 1.51 of the County Charter mandates the executive and legislative branches “engage in long-term strategic planning to establish organizational structure, priorities and performance measurement.” For each of the last three years, administration staff has met with the Council to develop the vision and mission statement as well as set goals. This Strategic Plan then forms the basis of our budget development for the year. This year, employees were also given the opportunity for input on the development of the goals and strategies.

C. How to Use the Plan

The Plan is organized into three Chapters:

- Chapter 1 - Introduction
- Chapter 2 - Plan Foundations
- Chapter 3 - Action Plan

The Plan is designed to be used by many audiences. While the entire document will have some interest and relevance to most people, different chapters will be more important than others will. For example, within the County:

- The County Council and Administration will utilize the Policy Priorities to determine how best to allocate their own efforts;
- Departments will use the Action Plan, Goals and Objectives (Chapter 3) to establish program priorities and monitor performance;
- New employees will find the Vision, Mission and Policy Priorities important elements of their orientation to Whatcom County;
- All employees will be encouraged to use the Action Plan to help establish goal and objective timelines and prioritize their work;
- The Plan will be an integral part of the budgeting process and provide a basis for performance accountability at all levels of the County.
- The citizens of the county can examine the vision, mission and policy priorities to make sure they are consistent with their own values; and
- Other governments and special purpose districts can use this Plan as the basis for understanding the future direction of the County and helping to make their own decisions about how best to meet citizen needs in the future.

D. Vital Statistics

Whatcom County is the northernmost county in Washington situated in the northwest corner, containing 2,151 square miles. The 1999 estimated population was 161,300; 49% live in unincorporated areas, 51% live in incorporated areas. The county's assessed valuation as of 1999 was \$10.7 billion.

E. Local Governments

The county contains one major city of 65,000 and six smaller cities. It also provides assistance to numerous special districts, serving water, fire, sewer, flood, and diking districts.

F. County Services

By virtue of its "Home Rule Charter" adopted in 1978, Whatcom County is one of only five counties in the state that have a "county constitution." This constitution or "charter" gives control of county affairs to the people of the county rather than the state legislature. As a charter county, there are two primary factors that make Whatcom County different from other counties. The first is a separation between legislative and administrative functions. This is accomplished through an elected nonpartisan seven-member, part-time county council (legislative) and a full-time elected county executive (administrative). The second difference is the right of initiative and referendum provided to county citizens by the charter. The County Charter defines duties and responsibilities of the branches, elected officials and departments. The county residents also elect five other officials who supervise offices in county government:

- Prosecuting Attorney
- Sheriff
- Assessor
- Auditor
- Treasurer
- Superior Court & District Court Judges

In addition, the County provides a wide range of services through the following other departments or organizational units:

- Administrative Services
- Cooperative Extension
- District Court
- District Court Probation
- Health & Human Services
- Juvenile Services
- Parks & Recreation
- Planning & Development Services
- Public Defender's Office
- Public Works
- Superior Court/County Clerk

The Boundary Review Board, Hearing Examiner's Office, Law Library and Medical Examiner also provide additional services.

CHAPTER 2 – WHATCOM COUNTY VISION, MISSION AND POLICY PRIORITIES

SUMMARY

Chapter 2 of the Strategic Plan includes a Vision Statement, Mission Statement and six Policy Priorities. The Vision Statement is the county government's hopes for its citizens and businesses as a whole. The Mission Statement relates specifically to county government, setting forth proposed guidelines for operation. The Policy Priorities provide a foundation to guide all of the County's employees as they conduct their various activities. The priorities also speak to what kinds of services the County should provide, and how the County should conduct itself as it provides those services.

Taken together, the Vision Statement, Mission Statement and Policy Priorities identify the basic values important to Whatcom County. They are intended to provide the focus for all county processes, from choosing which services to provide and establishing budget priorities, to how the County communicates and interacts with its citizens on a daily basis.

VISION STATEMENT

Whatcom County is envisioned as a place where people are able to enjoy an abundant, safe and healthy life. It is a place rich in natural beauty and renewable resources that provide plentiful recreation, life style and economic opportunities. A vibrant economy and diverse community resources provide family wage jobs, affordable housing and exceptional social and educational opportunities. Public services are responsive, transportation is convenient, regulations are user-friendly and justice is prompt and fair. It is a community where citizens and their government work together to preserve the rights of the individual while protecting the essential natural environment in which they live.

MISSION STATEMENT

Whatcom County government will strive to promote, enrich and enhance the freedoms, opportunities and safety of its citizens. It will provide essential and desirable public services in a cost effective and accountable manner. It will provide vision, leadership and responsiveness while addressing community issues and conducting the business of the people. It will encourage community involvement in public issues while protecting the rights of the individual and encouraging respect for diversity. It shall serve as an active catalyst for individuals and other entities to participate in achieving a positive vision for the future of Whatcom County.

POLICY PRIORITIES

Core elements of the Mission and Vision demand that Whatcom County government be:

- responsive;
- user-friendly and helpful;
- effective;
- efficient and accountable; and
- a catalyst for positive change.

To fulfill these elements, the following policy priorities have been established for the Plan:

1. Whatcom County shall conduct the public's business in a customer-focused, user-friendly, helpful and effective manner.
2. Whatcom County shall be accountable and efficient in the services provided to its citizens.
3. Whatcom County shall improve public awareness and understanding of the roles and services of county government.
4. Whatcom County shall identify and fund essential and other appropriate county government services.
5. Whatcom County shall support a work environment that values productive employees and encourages progressive personnel practices and employee skill development.
6. Whatcom County shall, when appropriate, work in partnership with cities, tribes, special districts, other government entities, agencies, citizens, businesses and other stake holders to jointly facilitate the most effective and efficient governance and means of delivering services.

CHAPTER 3 – ACTION PLAN

Chapter 3 is a near-term Action Plan. It identifies general goals for each of the six Policy Priorities. The goals provide the categories for specific objectives. The goals and objectives are listed separately as they are expected to have different life spans. Goals will tend to remain more constant over time than objectives as the Plan is updated. For example, one of the goals for Policy Priority #1 is: "The County shall measure and report the effectiveness of countywide and departmental services." The objectives, or strategies, to accomplish the goal will change regularly, although it is likely that working measures of service effectiveness will remain continually important.

Policy #1: Whatcom County shall conduct the public's business in a customer-focused, user-friendly, helpful and effective manner.

Goal 1-A: Assure that County government is providing responsive and fair customer service.

- Objectives:
1. Establish standards for customer service.
 2. Review staff training needs.
 3. Provide customer service training to all departments.
 4. Provide sufficient resources/staff to all departments to enable appropriate customer service.
 5. Evaluate the need for other public services.

Goal 1-B: Assure that all Whatcom County facilities are safe and easily accessible by all citizens.

- Objectives:
1. Develop an overall master plan and inventory all County facilities addressing:
 - a. Accessibility
 - b. Signage
 - c. Safety (including parking, security doors, after hours building access, lighting, camera monitoring)
 - d. Building maintenance and ventilation
 - e. Space needs (inventory all County-owned facilities and meet with department managers to gather information on present and future space needs)
 - f. Parking (review current and projected facility plans and evaluate existing employee and customer service requirements).
 2. Transmit hazard concerns about buildings to Safety Committee.
 3. Ensure that all facility concerns are addressed through the building permit process when planning new facilities.
 4. Review plans for consolidation of facilities and services (include departmental feedback) for:
 - a. Health and Human Services
 - b. Public Works/Sheriff/Emergency Management
 - c. Cooperative Extension
 - d. Consolidate, where appropriate, compatible functions and services
 5. Provide facility maps and brochures at various locations throughout the County (create one brochure containing a brief description of the major services provided by the County, which department provides those services, and where they are located).
 6. Create a physical plant/capital facilities fund to ensure the long-term preservation of the County's investment in buildings and related equipment.

Goal 1-C: Develop and maintain technology solutions that improve delivery of County services and assure full utilization of the county's technology system.

Objectives: 1. Improve the electronic transfer of data between departments (software compatibility insured).

Targeted Action:

- Courthouse infrastructure project
- Increased use of on-line forms (fill in on-line) and ability to transmit forms
- Increase and enhance business practice of paperless, on-line transaction
- Imaging for contract administration and other uses
- Develop electronic signature protocol

2. Support and require coordination of common objectives across departments.

A. Coordinate use of Geographic Information system (GIS) among multiple departments.

Targeted Action:

- Provide policies that require coordination of common objectives/interests.
- Review and implement recommendations of GIS task force at CTAC.
- Increased deployment on websites.
- Ascertain the structure of Countywide GIS System Coordination.

B. MIS/data sharing system by 1/1/03.

Targeted Action:

- Implement business plan for criminal justice data sharing.
- Commence MIS development.

C. Policies and Procedures

Targeted Action: Develop administrative and departmental policies and procedures.

D. Legal Pleadings

Targeted Action:

- Coordinate use of legal pleadings.
- Explore options and opportunities.
- Develop Policies and Procedures for online access and deployment.

3. Continue to improve e-government development by implementing Web Plan, including intranet plan.

Targeted Action: Include intranet applications and data exchange network; database development.

4. Develop options for stable funding for information technology.

Targeted Action:

 - Keep County Council informed regarding the need for improvements in technology; quarterly updates to Council.
 - Develop a report and present to council late March or early April re outline and accomplishments.

5. Enhance technology staff availability and expertise.

Targeted Action:

 - Increase number of staff.
 - Additional training where necessary.
 - Offer study enhancements and competitive salaries.
 - Add bank of business process developers/database developers.
 - Survey needs from departments for programming/development.
 - Increase staff availability to departments.
 - Determine staffing requirements (nature of expertise needed).
 - Needs assessment.

6. Provide applicable technology training to all employees.

Targeted Action:

 - Expand available funding and provide strong policy support for staff participation.
 - Increase offerings (#) of training classes.
 - Commitment to time availability.
 - Applications fair of what departments are using for sharing with others.

7. Provide for coordination, integration and planning of technology systems through CTAC.

Targeted Action:

 - Develop two year technology plan with annual update.
 - Review of standards of hardware on annual basis or as needed based on changing software applications.
 - Look at outside resources to come in and evaluate system and setup.

8. Review infrastructure for maximizing capabilities for offering best practices/options (platforms, wiring, etc.).

Targeted Action: Complete technology plan - including forward looking infrastructure planning.

Goal 1-D: Measure and report the effectiveness of Countywide and departmental services.

- Objectives:
1. Define and prioritize performance standards and measures for County and departmental goals and objectives.
 - a. Provide training to managers on how to effectively measure performance using internal and industry standards.
 - b. Review current measures from County budget to assure they measure

- key elements.
- c. Incorporate measurement recommendations from 2000 strategic planning process into department budgets.
- d. Identify how performance measures can improve service.
- e. Revise standards and measures where necessary.
- 2. Monitor and report performance measurement results.
 - a. Review quarterly within department.
 - b. Review annually during strategic planning.
 - c. Review annually during budget process.
- 3. Evaluate and update performance measures for effectiveness.
 - a. Review quarterly within department.
 - b. Review annually during strategic planning.
 - c. Review annually during budget process.

Policy #2: Whatcom County shall be accountable and efficient in the services provided to its citizens.

Goal 2-A: Develop coordinated departmental mission statements to enhance service delivery and responsiveness.

- Objectives:
1. Provide mission focus that is consistent among all departments.
 2. Define departmental duties and relationships.
 3. Provide detailed overview and description of departmental operations.
 - a. Provide clear direction to staff regarding rules, duties, procedures and expectations as to the delivery of services.
 - b. Develop policies and procedures that are clear, consistent and user-friendly.
 - c. Ensure general ongoing availability of up-to-date policies and procedures for the public and to staff.
 4. Refine organizational ethics standards.

Goal 2-B: Review current organization and operations to enhance efficiency.

- Objectives:
1. Support on-going strategic planning: County-wide, among work groups, and within departments including:
 - a. Implementation timelines
 - b. Accountability
 - c. Periodic review and revision to update goals, objectives, action plans
 - d. Best practice standards and performance measures (Goal 1-D)
 - e. Adequate expertise and resources to support planning efforts
 2. Maximize usability of County facilities (Goal 1-B).
 - a. Parking for employees, volunteers, and public
 - b. Civic Center building
 3. Encourage managers and employees to share ideas and network with professional colleagues to identify:

- a. Operational improvements for better service delivery.
- b. Alternatives to current methods of service delivery, including other providers.
- c. Unnecessary services or programs which could be eliminated.
- d. Standards and benchmarks for performance measurement.

Policy #3: Whatcom County shall improve public awareness and understanding of the roles and services of County government.

Goal 3-A: Develop improved interfaces between county government and its citizens to provide responsive and fair customer service.

Objectives: 1. Provide improved access for external agencies, other local governments and business partners.

Targeted Action:

- Provide scaled infrastructure to allow access.
- Allow appropriate system access with security protection; provide for electronic transfer of data.
- Prepare inventory of business partners; determine print capacity needed.
- Develop appropriate policies and procedures.

2. Expand the public's on-line access to conducting business with county operations 24/7, including payment of taxes, accessing assessor records, court records, recording of documents, voting, and other e-government uses.

Targeted Actions:

- Get on-line database infrastructure in place.
- Address issues of confidentiality and equipment needs.
- Pilot Treasurer's Office (EZgov).
- Add Auditor's Office; prioritize other departments.
- Replicate data and serve from Internet.
- Increase e-business staff.
- Lobby for credit cards to be accepted for all County transactions utilizing WSAC and WACO and other affiliate associations at State meeting.

3. Develop/coordinate electronic transfer policy and procedures, including interaction protocols with outside entities.

Targeted Action:

- Research and report other agencies transfer policies, public and private.
- Develop policy and procedures.
- Refer to Financial Management Working Group for review and recommendations.

4. Expand County information and activities posted on website providing additional method for public access and electronic response; expand e-commerce, field communication and internet capabilities.

Targeted Action:

- Provide additional methods for public access to information.
- Explore mechanisms for prompt electronic response to public.
- Expand information content on the County's website.
- Maintain up-to-date department mission statements on the website.

5. Optimize use of telephone system, including more responsive voicemail; translation services; 24-hour dialup access to info

Targeted Action:

- Identify user needs and provide resources to address.
- Evaluate other cities' use of Tele-Works.
- Increase dialup access system.
- Target human phone answering .
- Improve/monitor voice mail response timeliness.
- Provide at-will translation services.
- Accessing recorded documents, administrative and court records, voter information.

Policy #4: Whatcom County shall identify and fund essential and other appropriate County government services.

Goal 4-A: Determine essential and other appropriate County government services for which adequate and sustainable funding shall be provided.

- Objectives:
1. Continue to refine departmental Inventory of Services definitions.
 2. Define performance measures to show progress toward meeting County, department and Strategic Plan goals and objectives.
 3. Define and present future goals for County operations.
 4. Actively involve citizens in decision-making.
 5. Measure, define and prioritize:
 - a. Essential services;
 - b. Preferred services ;
 - c. Discretionary services; and
 - d. Transitional services.
 6. Define relationship and service levels with special purpose districts.
 7. Evaluate the relative cost basis and cost effectiveness of all services.
 8. Update services, definitions, and service levels periodically as required.
 9. Set minimum service levels and response times for emergencies.

Goal 4-B: Actively pursue adequate funding of services.

- Objectives:
1. Review and consider changes in taxes and fees.
 2. Pursue lobbying efforts at State Legislature.
 3. Develop a policy regarding the use of grant funding.

Policy #5: Whatcom County shall support a work environment that values productive employees and encourages progressive personnel practices and employee skill development.

Goal 5-A: Regularly assess and evaluate employees' work and workload.

- Objectives:
1. Use the performance management system to clearly define and communicate performance expectations.
 2. Administration survey:
 - a. public's perceptions of service delivery by County departments;
 - b. departments for potential internal efficiencies; and
 - c. departments identify areas of inefficiencies.(Surveys should be done in late 2000 and 2001 in time for budgeting for 2002.)
 3. Administration prioritizes need and makes recommendation to the County Council for funding and/or authority necessary to correct the problem.
 4. Assess impact of workload and changing regulations on employee performance.
 - a. Assess sick leave usage and other stress indicators.
 - b. Assess impact prior to implementing new requirements.

Goal 5-B: Retain a highly skilled workforce through employee skill development programs.

- Objectives:
1. Provide training for supervisors to maximize their effectiveness as leaders.
 2. Implement an employee exchange program.
 - a. Between governments
 - b. Within Whatcom County
 - c. With private sector
 3. Encourage learning among employees (continuing education).
 - a. Pay tuition
 - b. Encourage additional languages
 - c. Public Administration Program at university
 4. Have Administration create an HR advisory committee (elected officials, department heads, union).
 5. Consider bonus, premium or range increase based on skill enhancement.
 6. Negotiate changes to union agreement changing the basis of promotions and interdepartmental transfers to be based on merit.

Goal 5-C: Examine the County's mechanisms for paying and rewarding employees.

- Objectives:
1. Examine optional methods for fairly paying and retaining employees.
 2. Ensure paying competitive wages.

3. Strengthen internal equity; survey and compare wages with similar organizations.
4. Evaluate and develop career opportunities for employees.
5. Consider innovative alternatives to employee benefits.

Policy #6: Whatcom County shall, when appropriate, work in partnership with cities, tribes, special districts, other governmental entities, agencies, citizens, businesses and other stake holders to jointly facilitate the most effective and efficient governance and means of delivering services.

Goal 6-A: Serve in a leadership/facilitation role to address community issues.

- Objectives:
1. Continue cooperative intergovernmental efforts to provide for community needs.
 2. Evaluate the effect of privatization of certain County services.

Goal 6-B: Act as a catalyst for positive community-oriented change.

- Objectives:
1. Provide leadership in innovation of service delivery and operational procedures within County government.
 2. Encourage, support, and engage in efforts to represent local issues at the state and federal level.
 3. Explore additional direct lobby representation in Olympia.