

State of the County Address

April 22, 2014

Jack Louws, County Executive

Good evening, members of Council, staff and citizens. It's my pleasure to be before you again to talk about the state of our county.

First, let's review the last twelve months and identify some tasks we've accomplished. Then we will look at challenges and opportunities for this year, concentrating on where we are focusing our staff and financial resources. In closing, we need to plan for the future. This is an important year as we will produce another biennial budget for 2015-2016, allowing us the opportunity to incorporate our vision for the county into the document. I'll identify some opportunities that I believe will be important for us to discuss as we adopt this biennial work plan in November.

First, our accomplishments:

We completed the final EIS for the proposed jail site, and after review Council approved the purchase of the Ferndale LaBounty Road property in December of 2013.

Contracts from all parties for Emergency Medical Services were finalized, keeping the system together as a county-wide operation. The Executive Oversight Board and Technical Advisory Board have begun regular meetings.

The Port of Bellingham, City of Bellingham and your county government forged a partnership to lease the building (owned by the Port) that was used during the Olympics for a unified Whatcom County Emergency Operations Center. This will be a state-of-the-art emergency response building for major events and training.

LEAN training was conducted in Planning and Development Services Department last year, resulting in remarkable time and energy savings in the issuance of residential building permits.

A new records management system was installed in the Sheriff's office and upwards of 500 computers within county government were replaced due to the retirement of the Windows XP operating system. Our email system was upgraded to Microsoft Outlook/ Exchange, and the replacement of the county-wide telephone system is underway.

Parks and Recreation Department projects in 2013 included updating the Comprehensive Parks, Recreation and Open Space Plan, and receiving final approval from WA Department of Natural Resources and County Council for the re-conveyance of the Lake Whatcom lands transfer, effective January 20, 2014.

The Health Department, along with several community agencies, was successful in nearly ending homelessness for our honorably discharged Veterans, with just under 100% of known homeless veterans being housed. Also, in collaboration with Peace Health, and others, a community health

improvement plan was completed for the county. The health department sponsored training throughout the year for EMS and law enforcement First Responders, to help intervene with residents suffering from acute symptoms of mental illness; and worked with nursing programs at Whatcom Community College and Bellingham Technical College to provide immunization opportunities in the community for low-income adults.

Whatcom County is developing a Mental Health Court with the goal of implementation before year's end. We are sending a team to the National Conference on Specialty Courts to assist them in design and operations planning. Local behavioral health dollars along with State monies will fund this learning opportunity. Representatives from several departments will attend, and then bring their newfound expertise to the collaborative planning table.

Our Public Works Department highlights include enhanced credit card acceptance for ferry passes via the internet, in their office, and on the ferry. We also accomplished the adoption of the Environmental Impact Statement for the Swift Creek Sediment Management Action Plan.

The Coronado-Fremont Stormwater Phase I improvements in the Geneva neighborhood were completed, and the Lake Samish Comprehensive Stormwater Plan was adopted.

River and Flood staff developed a System-wide Improvement Framework (SWIF) for our levees and convened an interagency stakeholder group of federal, state and local resources agencies, tribes and diking district and subzone representatives in 2013.

Natural Resources implemented the Aquatic Invasive Species program for motorized boats on Lakes Whatcom and Samish, along with the City of Bellingham, which was recently expanded to include non-motorized craft for the 2014 boating season. There is now an online course that provides information and incentives for those who successfully complete the program through discounts on their boating inspection fees.

The new Lake Whatcom Watershed Phosphorus Ordinance was adopted by Council in July 2013. Working with many stakeholders, public works staff authored the "Permanent stormwater management systems" section of the ordinance and conceived the phosphorus-neutral small residential lot stormwater design option. Additionally, our important work continues on the task list for the 2010-2014 Lake Whatcom Management Plan.

In Planning and Development Services, Long Range Planning staff coordinated with the cities on the 2016 Growth Management Act Comprehensive Plan Updates and facilitated an advisory team to rewrite the Zoning Code to use "plain language" to improve readability, consistency and understanding of zoning regulations. PDS continues to facilitate the Gateway Pacific Terminal Environmental Impact Statement in coordination with the Washington Dept. of Ecology and the US Army Corps of Engineers.

Our Criminal Justice system in Whatcom County is a very well-run operation. The cooperation exhibited between the Superior Court, District Court, Prosecuting Attorney, Public Defender, and Sheriff's office continues to impress me. Each has a specific responsibility and mandate, but all realize that working cooperatively with balanced workloads ultimately leads to efficient

productivity. I'll cede this opportunity for a detailed report to them for a presentation at a future date.

Our financial status is best described as stable. General Fund revenue received was at 99.3% of our budget expectation for 2013; while general fund expense was at 92.88% of what was anticipated. Through the end of 2014 the financial health of Whatcom County Government will follow this trend.

The current State budget does not appear to be of additional help to county government as liquor tax and marijuana tax are not adequately distributed; mental health and criminal justice monies remains tight; and there is very little capital project money for road improvements. Revised procedures for the collection of property taxes may have a substantial negative impact on our property tax collection rates.

The 2015-2016 budget will have little capacity for discretionary spending as we anticipate that expenses such as cost of goods, labor step increases and benefits may outpace revenue. We have designated new expenses in the budget, including the 4th Superior court judge with staff, and the lease cost for the Joint Operations Center Building at the airport.

I remain committed to treating all of our employees fairly within and outside of our labor contracts. I'm pleased that all of our contracts are approved by labor and management through the end of 2014. Our workforce is stable, outside of the ongoing need for succession planning in light of the retirement potential in our present workforce.

There is a need to continue the funding balance between the criminal justice cost centers and the departments that support them. There is a need to continue to streamline government to provide as many services as possible, as efficiently as possible. To accomplish this it will take a long-term commitment to training and improved technology to give our great workforce the best opportunity for success.

Future Focus

My priorities for the near future in addition to the preparation and presentation to the council of the biennial budget for 2015/2016 include the successful completion of the courtroom for the 4th superior court judge; the installation of a new county-wide phone system by early 2015; and advancing the ongoing work of our other major projects throughout the organization.

All county departments will continue to implement projects previously approved by Council, and will continue the planning necessary to help us create the vision for the future of Whatcom County.

Specific items I believe we absolutely need to address in the next budget include enhanced Natural Resource planning and project implementation, increased code enforcement capabilities and a long-term commitment to the Mental Health Court.

Some projects I will be considering in the development of the next biennial work plan include a new records management system for PDS and Public Works, renovation of the Courthouse exterior, a renewed focus on Economic Development opportunities, a new Whatcom County website platform, and the upgrading of the audio/visual capabilities in the council chambers. Our IT team has developed an extensive list of tech-related projects that will be considered as part of my commitment to efficiencies in operations.

Summary

I have the privilege to work with quality elected officials, a superb staff, and many engaged citizens. Obviously I, along with the Assessor, Auditor, Treasurer, Prosecuting Attorney and Sheriff, have the management responsibility for staff and operations, and Council has the legislative responsibility for code and budget approval, but our roles and responsibilities are ever entwined. I can tell you after 27 months on the job that it is more challenging and more rewarding than I anticipated.

We have moved forward over the last two years on completion, or at least made forward progress, on some very large initiatives. That work will continue, with the support and cooperation of this Council and community, as we work together to build an excellent quality of life for everyone in Whatcom County.

Thank you for allowing me to present the State of the County to you this evening.

Jack Louws
County Executive