



STATE OF THE COUNTY 2018 TO COUNCIL AND CITIZENS OF WHATCOM COUNTY

April 24, 2018 Council Meeting

Good evening council members, fellow elected officials and citizens. I'm pleased this evening to present this year's State of the County.

I'm focusing most of my remarks tonight on our plan for service integration. Over the last few years I have been asking our county leadership to look for ways to streamline services for our citizens, as it is evident that we must keep abreast of the efficiencies that are available by utilizing technology, since funding is always limited for the addition of staff members. In line with this we have seen robust information technology projects proposed, funded, and implemented. I'll talk about how they, and other initiatives in progress, have begun to move us to many online opportunities for county citizens. With the integration of these toolkits to enhance our employees' efficiencies, it is evident that we need to also improve our soft skills as customer relation experts as our codes and rules increasingly become more difficult and onerous to understand and comply with.

I have encouraged the land use divisions of our government to design and implement a customer service initiative. I'm pleased to announce tonight that Public Works, Health, Planning and Development Services, and Parks have stepped up to the challenge to develop the plan. The plan's mission is to achieve solutions that work for our community with a commitment of accurate, timely and consistent information, excellent service, integrity and respect. Our customers will benefit by feeling valued and respected from engaging in a positive experience with staff even within the constraints mandated by legislative direction. Our staff will benefit from increased workflow efficiencies which should result in greater job satisfaction and less stress.

John Ruskin, a 19th century critic and reformer said "Quality (Customer Service) is never an accident. It is always the result of intelligent effort." I'm pleased that these Departments have taken up the challenge to take the many customer service oriented staff members we have, and develop a cohesive organizational strategic plan that ties them all together. Kudos to everyone! I will be involved and supportive as we roll this out in coordination with the installation of the new land records and permit system software in the next year. I intend to keep you abreast of our progress in the coming months and years.

Now for some highlights for 2018 regarding the tools we have, or are, putting in place for the benefit of our citizens and staff. I find the list quite remarkable and impressive,

and I'd like to thank the Council and all staff members for being supportive of these major projects:

- We continue to invest in cybersecurity projects and take steps to enhance our protection of citizen data and improve our recovery capabilities. A new network firewall has been installed, and replacement of our three year old network storage system is being planned.
- A new case management system was implemented in Superior Court this past year streamlining the overall process for both the staff and customers.
- Upgrades to the audio visual systems in our Superior and District courtrooms are being planned to accommodate remote access for pre-trial work when inmates are in Yakima due to limited space in our jail.
- A new audio visual system for Council chambers has been installed.
- A significant project in the Assessor's Office is underway converting maps to digital records to provide online interactive mapping applications to quickly access parcel based information.
- As already mentioned, our largest active project is a new permit system for land management activities involving Planning, Public Works, Health, Assessor's Office and Auditor's Office. Our first piece of the new permit system is electronic plan review software which will allow staff, business partners and citizens to use electronic mark-up to add efficiencies to the review process.
- A new regional Electronic Patient Care Record (ePCR) software system for Emergency Medical Services (EMS) is currently being deployed. The software will allow EMS responders across the county to integrate services with each other and hospitals.
- The county website continues to be a key interface with citizens and we plan to advance this platform with additional information and applications. A few notable enhancements include:
 - Health Department's Food Safety Inspection Reports are now online;
 - A new Public Records Request form is online; and
 - Planning and Development Services is using Microsoft Skype to perform virtual inspections for routine types of permits.
- The Auditor's Office installed a new ballot tabulation system, and is currently installing a new ballot verification system. The new systems streamline ballot

design, scanning, verification and tabulation processes. Ballot processing time is already reduced by one-half to two-thirds. The reduction of staff time will have a direct impact on the election costs borne by districts and taxpayers.

- District Court Probation now has a text message reminder program that has significantly increased attendance at required hearings by participants. Also, a cloud-based case management system has allowed probation officers to meet clients throughout the county closer to where they live and work, resulting in more positive outcomes.

Throughout the organization each of these projects has either increased efficiencies internally or externally. I'm excited that we are taking on the challenge of working smarter for our citizens. I'd like to especially thank our technology team led by Perry Rice for their dedication and commitment to bring each of these challenging projects to fruition.

I'd be remiss if I didn't take some time to acknowledge some other accomplishments throughout the organization, and to comment on our financial health.

First, we are financially healthy. Revenues are stable, and operational expenses are well within appropriations approved by Council. All labor contracts are settled, our workforce is stable, even while we are experiencing an increase in turnover due to a healthy economy and many retirements.

The one primary outstanding challenge is the major capital replacement program, most significantly our deteriorating jail, and the challenges related to the exterior of the courthouse. I commend the council for being financially supportive of increasing our facility staff and providing space for our operational needs. They will have projects on line this year to commence the multi-year program of improvement for these buildings, while also building a new 32-bed triage facility funded primarily by state dollars!

Speaking of our obligation and desire to attend to the social issues that many are struggling with, I'm pleased we have implemented a drug take back program, have increased funding of about \$700,000 per year for homeless issues, and have an increased focus on the opiate addiction crisis. Our Health Department is doing a great job in providing for management of services to our citizens.

As mentioned, Parks and Public Works are incorporating their customer service initiative while striving to complete their capitol plans and projects. From Glacier to Point Roberts, we are improving parks and roads and bridges and trails. We have a commitment for the full maintenance of our existing inventory of assets, and these departments are taking their responsibilities seriously.

PDS and Environmental Health are implementing their customer service initiatives while issuing permits for wells (thank you State Legislature), septic systems, and critical area delineations and building permits. We are in an active building cycle, and these departments are doing well.

The criminal justice departments work together well. As our soon to be retired longstanding Prosecutor Dave McEachran says, "We seem to never be lacking for business". I would like to publically thank the Prosecutor for his 46 years of service, and for his role in the spirit of cooperation our county experiences among the offices of the Prosecutor, Sheriff, Public Defender and the Courts. We have big issues to deal with, including incarceration prevention, and I'm confident we will make continued progress this year.

The Sheriff's Office in cooperation with the Health Department, has trained all deputies to intervene in situations where people are undergoing a mental health and/or a substance abuse crisis. A specialist position has been established to deal with the most difficult cases to leverage planned improvements in the availability and quality of mental health and substance abuse services. Additionally, all deputies are issued and trained in the use of Naloxone which can reverse the effects of an opioid overdose and save lives. Other service integration highlights from law enforcement include:

- Engagement in the planning for the triage centers to ensure to the extent feasible, they comport with the needs of law enforcement and are viable for diverting persons in appropriate cases from the criminal justice to mental health/substance abuse treatment.
- Streamlining the process for offenders into out-of-custody jail work crews, where appropriate. As an alternative to a jail bed day, offenders may report to the Jail Work Center and are assigned to work crews that perform valuable services for the Parks Department.
- Over the next year, the Sheriff's Office will work with other county departments (Public Works/Parks) and the fire departments and districts on joint solutions, as well as models for cost sharing, for better radio communications systems in the County following a consultant's report that confirmed the inadequacies in the County's current system.
- Working cooperatively with other county departments on emergency preparedness including planning, exercises and public education to help ensure effective response and timely mitigation of natural and man-made disasters that might threaten our community.

In closing, I'd like to thank our engaged staff, citizens and council for ongoing enthusiasm, intelligence and support while we negotiate our programs and make decisions about our collective future for Whatcom County.

Thank you allowing me to present the State of the County remarks today. We look forward to a year of growth and continuing momentum on many fronts.

Jack Louws
County Executive

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