



STATE OF THE COUNTY, APRIL 23, 2019

Good evening Council, County employees, other elected officials and citizens. I'm pleased to be here this evening to provide you with the State of the County.

With this being my last year in office, I'm going to break from the tradition of a yearly scorecard of accomplishments. The scorecard often carries much information already provided to you in various staff reports and through the budget process. So, instead I will include some of that information and then focus on the successes and disappointments of my almost 8 years as County Executive, and highlight some future challenges that I believe will need to be solved.

Let's start with our accomplishments:

Customer Service:

Our largest departments Public Works, Health, Planning and Development Services and Parks are implementing our customer service initiative. I am pleased to report that they are now actively involved in training and emphasizing what good customer service means, and we are seeing the results of that renewed emphasis.

Clear communication between departments results in consistent citizen messages – vital to the success of our CS initiative. We are streamlining services for our county citizens by keeping abreast of the efficiencies that are available from updated technology. In line with this we have seen robust technology projects proposed, funded, and implemented.

Public Works

Over the past eight years, Public Works has focused its attention on strengthening and improving delivery of its core services. The most important of these are:

- (1) The equipment, people and training needed to keep pace with growing maintenance demands of our transportation infrastructure – roads, bridges, and the Lummi Island ferry,
- (2) Designing, financing and constructing engineered transportation, water quality and flood control improvement projects, and
- (3) Increasing capacity to address changing stormwater, drainage and environmental expectations and mandates.

There are several highlights. First, our Maintenance and Operations team developed a more aggressive pavement preservation program, and equipped and trained a stand-alone stormwater maintenance crew. The engineering department replaced and/or added eight bridges, constructed seven major road rehabilitation projects, accomplished four ferry terminal projects, built 12 stormwater facilities, and completed 13 substantial levee repairs and improvements.

Finally, Public Works water resource professionals, in cooperation with tribal governments, agricultural interests, area homeowners, and the Whatcom Conservation District delivered substantial water quality improvements in fresh and marine waters leading to regulatory relief in key shellfish growing areas at Drayton Harbor, Birch Bay and Portage Bay.

Parks and Recreation

Our Parks and Recreation Department, from Glacier to Point Roberts, has improved many roads, bridges and trails. Major projects include the dedication of Southfork Park; finalization of the Lake Whatcom land reconveyance; the upgrade and repair of Chuckanut trails, and the improvements of restrooms and playgrounds at Silver Lake, Semiahmoo, Lily Point, Samish, and Hovander Homestead parks. I am very pleased that we are well underway with the major renovation of Silver Lake Park. The work we are doing is a long-lasting improvement for future generations.

Health Department:

The Health Department received the 2014 National Health Department of the Year award for expanding veteran services and for exemplary efforts in housing our homeless Veterans. Then in 2016 they achieved National Public Health Accreditation, becoming the second Health Department in Washington to meet the rigorous accreditation standards.

Their accomplishments have been substantial in many areas in the last seven years including the implementation of a Secure Medicine Return Program, the expansion of the Needle Exchange program, the establishment of the Whatcom GRACE (ground level response and coordinated engagement) program which collaborates with many service agencies including EMS to serve the most vulnerable in our community.

Also, permanent supportive housing has been increased by 42 units for previously homeless individuals through support of Francis Place and 22 North.

Health has fully implemented their On-site Sewage Operation and Maintenance program contributing to shellfish classification upgrades for over 1600 acres in Drayton Harbor and Portage Bay.

A project that will be completed in the next year will be the new Crisis Stabilization Facility with expanded services for individuals with both mental health and substance abuse challenges. Other noteworthy accomplishments include the establishment of Mental Health Court and the expansion of the School-to-Work program.

Sheriff's Office

The Sheriff's Office accomplishments are also substantial. They include a new record management system which was the first major piece of an integrated approach for data management in the Criminal Justice divisions of County government.

The Sheriff's Office has implemented specific training for deputies to be able to intervene with people undergoing mental health and/or substance abuse crises. They are also working with agency partners to provide successful re-entry of inmates into the community and are implementing alternative programs for offenders to avoid incarceration.

Work is beginning on the Whatcom County Integrated Public Safety Radio System Project which will result in an upgrade to our public safety communications systems for law enforcement, fire and emergency medical services responders throughout Whatcom County.

Our ongoing work towards achieving a new Public Safety facility continues to be a struggle. It is a disappointment to me that we were not able to move this forward during my tenure as County Executive. The bottom line is that having a state-of-the-art facility is the most humane course of action for us to pursue. I encourage the Council and future Administration to be bold in your approach to solving this problem. Inaction, at its best, will mean continued sub-standard care and a lack of rehabilitation opportunities for inmates in our existing facility, along with ever escalating cost increases for the solutions. At worst it may result in a catastrophic event beyond our imagination.

Planning and Development Services

Thanks to the efforts of Planning and Development Services, Whatcom County is now GMA compliant for the first time in over a decade. Staff members for the fire marshal and code compliance divisions have been added. Staff is able to perform virtual inspections for routine types of permits now, and I'm pleased that a new permitting system will be in place by early next year, benefiting our citizens and improving productivity in PDS, Public Works and Health Departments.

Emergency Medical Services

Whatcom County Emergency Medical Services integration has been a significant accomplishment for all of Whatcom County. Seven years ago, we were on schedule to part ways with Bellingham, effectively creating two systems within our County. Today, all of the Fire Districts/Departments are unified, creating strong relationships serving all of the citizens of Whatcom County. Stabilized funding allows for the highest level of EMS services, regardless of socio-economic status or geographical location. Major EMS improvements include the establishment of centralized administration through the leadership of a new manager and the implementation of ImageTrend, an electronic patient care reporting system. This system will be used to make data-driven decisions and predictive modeling to sustain a more efficient system.

Information Technology

We have come a long way in our pursuit of improved electronic access and information to County citizens in the last 8 years. The culture of transparent government is now an accepted best practice in our County. Much of what the public wants to know is easily accessed on our robust website and this has made it simpler to manage our public records requests.

Highlights include:

- County computer, phone and email system upgrades
- A new website platform and social media platforms
- The county-wide electronic agenda management system implemented late last year.
- A new election system
- Computer replacement and software upgrade standardization
- New auditor recording system
- Assessor/treasurer system infrastructure upgrade

We continue to work on state-of-the-art permitting, GIS /land records systems (which will be in place before I leave office) and a robust case management integrated approach is helping Juvenile Court, Public Defender's and Prosecutor's Offices.

We have prioritized cybersecurity in line with these improvements to ensure that our overall network is safe. A new network firewall and enterprise backup to disk system is in place as well as an employee security awareness campaign along with tools to perform vulnerability testing.

Financial Stability

I can report that the County's financial condition is sound. Revenues have increased modestly with slight upticks in economic activity. All departments and funds are within their approved budgets. General Fund reserves at the end of 2018 were approximately \$17 million.

Our labor force is stable in spite of increased turnover due to retirements while the County is actively recruiting for many positions. The County leadership continues to prepare for a smooth transition as more key leaders plan to retire over the next couple of years.

We have a significant amount of financial capacity available for future needs. We have virtually no debt, our bonding rating is strong, and we have a large sum of banked property tax available for use. My desire would be that this money be used for the decisions necessary to meaningfully address our criminal justice and general government building infrastructure.

Infrastructure Maintenance

In spite of my disappointment in not accomplishing more building infrastructure projects in the last years, we were able to complete the exterior work to the Civic building. We have moved Facilities to a more expanded space and we are finally able to complete the rebuilding of the courthouse exterior -- and start Phase 1 of the existing jail maintenance project -- both contracts are in process of being awarded.

Summary

Finally, as you know, this is the last year you will be hearing from me with our State of the County address. In my 7 years and 4 months (but who's counting) as County Executive, I believe that we have worked very hard to build a culture of transparent and efficient government. However, there is always more work to do.

The key to our success is continued communication, strategic planning, and a willingness to take action. I've enjoyed my weekly meetings with the Mayor of Bellingham; monthly meetings with small city mayors; regular meetings with the Port of Bellingham administrators and continued participation with the Whatcom Council of Governments. I've thoroughly enjoyed working with all of our managers, Directors and staff members throughout the organization. I've also enjoyed the pre-Council meetings with Chair of the Council. I'd like to thank everybody for providing me their time and expertise while working on issues of mutual benefit. Those collective efforts have resulted in many accomplishments, several of which have been identified here.

In closing, I'd like to thank our engaged staff, citizens and council for their ongoing enthusiasm, intelligence and support while we negotiate our programs and make decisions about our collective future. We are blessed to have in our County many people who volunteer to be on boards and commissions that provide direct advice and assistance to us in County government. I applaud their public service. It is so important to us and I encourage others to get involved.

It has been my honor to be your County Executive. The job is not without challenges and frustrations, but every time I receive an email from a constituent telling me a county employee helped them achieve a goal, or when I see service improvements, or view our robust website, or witness our customer service focus, I'm encouraged. When I see agencies come together to solve an issue that impacts the lives of the underserved in our communities, I'm hopeful. I, of course, will continue to focus on our goals for 2019 and am fully committed to ensuring a smooth transition for a new County administration next January. My years of service are short in the long history of Whatcom County and I feel thankful to have been a part of it.

Good evening.

Jack Louws
County Executive

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