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*Written by Jack Louws, County Executive*

I recently gave my annual State of the County presentation to the Whatcom County Council. That presentation included my concerns regarding our financial challenges over the next several years, and my thoughts on how and when to resolve the Jail, Emergency Medical Services and the Courthouse exterior issues. Those challenges were reported in the Herald on Saturday, April 16. Today I'd like to elaborate on items that we accomplished in the last year, and on projects we have underway to better serve you in future years, as articulated in the complete State of the County speech.

For the first time in many years, all labor agreements are settled through the end of this year. Human Resources reports that net employee turnover was 8.7% in 2015, reflecting the stable movement of our workforce, and key leadership roles have been filled.

The Health Department recently received national accreditation status from the Public Health Accreditation Board. We are one of only three counties in Washington State that has achieved accreditation. The work undertaken during the extensive process has resulted in increased efficiencies in departmental operations and significant improvements to services and programs. I congratulate this great team of professionals on this well-deserved national recognition.

Mental Health Court is now commencing its second year. There are 23 people in the program with the goal of reaching 35 by the end of 2016. A reduction in jail stays has been accomplished by several of the participants. One individual, in the year prior to mental health court, spent 194 days in jail – in 2015, he spent only five days in jail. Participants challenged by barriers to housing because of their history of criminal and mental instability are stabilizing; others with a record of poor treatment compliance are now engaged in ongoing services.

Other areas of achievement in 2015 include our continued investment in technology. This has helped with productivity and efficiencies in serving our County citizens. Such as:

- The new telecommunications system has been installed and we continue to enhance the new website.
- The Auditor's office has a new system which enables streamlined processes for recording land records and marriage license applications.
- The Assessor Treasurer system infrastructure has been completely upgraded, and the Assessor has made it a high priority to enhance our GIS land records capabilities to facilitate integration into the Land Records Management software initiative.
- Evening council meetings are now being live streamed over the County's YouTube channel, WhatcomCountyGov.
- Superior Court can now remotely access the main jail courtroom to conduct in-custody hearings from the 5<sup>th</sup> floor courtrooms.

A number of significant technology projects are slated for the next two years, including new stormwater asset management software in Public Works; replacement of our permit system in Planning and Development Services; and modernizing case management systems for the Prosecuting Attorney's Office, Juvenile Court and District Court Probation.

## DISTRICT COURT

District Court has been given the resources necessary to implement a number of new services enhancing public access. These enhancements include a "phone call court hearing reminder program" for defendants, credit and debit cards acceptance at the front counter, and staffing to stay open during the lunch hour. In addition, the Court has expanded the use of community service as a method for defendants to pay off court ordered fines and fees.

## PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT SERVICES

The Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan amendments are on track for finalization by June 30, 2016 as required by the Growth Management Act. The Critical Areas Ordinance update is also proceeding for a June 2016 adoption deadline. A new Code Enforcement Ordinance is being drafted for review by Council that consolidates land use, critical areas (excluding shorelines) and life safety codes.

## PUBLIC WORKS

Our Public Works Department will once again be on an aggressive maintenance program to preserve the condition of our County's road system. Crews will chip seal some 80 miles of pavement, service many of our 160 bridges, and manage numerous drainage issues. Delivering this work brings challenges such as integrating new stormwater quality practices into our basic maintenance services. I am especially proud to report that our crews are working diligently to assure compliance with state stormwater permit requirements.

We are in the full implementation phase of the Lake Whatcom Management Plan adopted by the Council in 2015, and I'm pleased with the work being completed. I compliment the staff in making this plan a reality. I'm committed to continuing our pledge of funding in the next years as we work to maintain and improve the water quality in the lake. To that end, new stormwater facilities will be constructed in Geneva's Cedar Hills neighborhood and in the Agate Bay area of Lake Whatcom. These projects have garnered over \$1.6M of financial support from our state partners, which has allowed us to expand them beyond what could be done with local funding alone.

## SHERIFF'S OFFICE

To reduce risks and liabilities associated with overcrowding and unreliable infrastructure, measures were implemented to reduce and maintain a lower jail population. Available space has been prioritized to meet the County's statutory responsibilities. Cities and tribes are using both our County jail and other jails to keep jail capacity within reasonable limits.

Preparation for the multi-state/multi-national "Cascadia Rising" exercise (June 7-10<sup>th</sup>), simulating a catastrophic earthquake and tsunami, is underway. The exercise will train and test government in coordinated approaches to major disasters.

## FINANCIAL STATUS:

Operationally, County revenue is stable, even with the Canadian dollar decline, and expenses are well within budget. Over the last four years, due to our improving economy and our own fiscal restraint the general fund reserves have risen from \$9M to approximately \$16M. I will recommend using some of the fund balance to address the jail infrastructure repair issues we face in the next biennial budget.

Other than the direction and resolution of the capital challenges before us, I believe we will be able to prepare and adopt another biennial budget at the end of this year that serves our community well.

#### SUMMARY:

In summary, we have made progress on some very large initiatives. Our superb staff is busy and engaged, along with committed community members on all of our boards and commissions. Although the challenges related to funding of a jail and EMS take center stage in the community dialogue, we are making a difference in many areas of county government. Please call me or email me if you have concerns or comments.

Jack Louws,  
County Executive