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## **Washington State Legislature Fails to Protect Public Safety** *Operating Budget Does Not Address Financial Crisis Facing Counties and Cities*

**Olympia, WA** – The Washington State Legislature released its operating budget, which disappointingly did not address the financial crisis facing communities across Washington. The budget failed to replace the arbitrary 1% cap on property revenue—the major funding source for counties and cities—with a cap actually tied to the factors that drive costs like inflation and the rate of population growth.

“We are frustrated,” says Eric Johnson, Executive Director of Washington State Association of Counties (WSAC). “By not giving counties local control over their funding stream, the Legislature has essentially put the public safety of thousands of Washington residents at risk.”

Put into place ten years ago, an arbitrary 1% property revenue cap has made it nearly insurmountable for many Washington counties and cities to fund public safety and other critical services. Meanwhile the cost to provide these essential government services has outpaced revenue by 3-5% year over year.

Meanwhile, the Legislature’s operating budget implements a new state property tax levy for education that is completely exempt from the 1% limit. Yet, it does not allow cities and counties the same opportunity.

“It’s hypocrisy,” says Josh Weiss, General Counsel at WSAC. “The Legislature has accepted the reality that the existing cap is an unworkable limit, but they are still holding local governments to the 1% cap.”

Law enforcement, public safety personnel, and county elected leaders from across the state—including prosecutors, sheriffs, executives and commissioner—testified before both the Senate and the House, sharing the impacts to residents in the communities they serve, including:

- Reduced deputies on the road
- Delayed criminal justice proceedings
- Delayed public safety response times
- Massive prosecution case backlogs
- Arbitrary caps on the number of inmates booked into county jails and fewer inmates completing their sentences
- Cuts to law enforcement training
- Structurally deficient or functionally obsolete city and county bridges

Newspaper outlets, including *The Olympian*, *The Spokesman-Review*, and *The Tri-City Herald*, published editorials in support of lifting the 1% property revenue cap.

“Disappointed is an understatement,” said Cowlitz County Sheriff Mark Nelson. “I’ve been speaking with legislators both at home and in Olympia, sharing the same message of the pending public safety crisis. The current cap structure will be the downfall of county government across this state. We offered sensible solutions which appear to have been ignored.”

“The Legislature didn’t even give the public a chance to weigh in on the budget,” says Kittitas County Commissioner Obie O’Brien. “Currently, Kittitas County has two unfunded sheriff deputy positions and seven unfunded correctional officer positions. The Legislature’s refusal to help our communities is shameful.”

The Legislature developed the budget during multiple overtime sessions—even risking government shutdown—but conducted final budget negotiations behind closed doors only hours before deadline. The timeline didn’t allow for public input before the budget is finalized into law.

In addition to ignoring the calls of support from local governments, the Legislature actually is pushing additional costs on counties through unfunded mandates that will only further impact the safety of Washington residents. The budget did not provide a means for local governments to pay for these additional costs or other ways to bring in revenue.

“The problem is not going away—the public safety issues facing our communities are not going away—just because the Legislature did not act on it,” says Weiss. “Perhaps the Legislature will only respond to the courts, which is a course of action we will definitely consider.”

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