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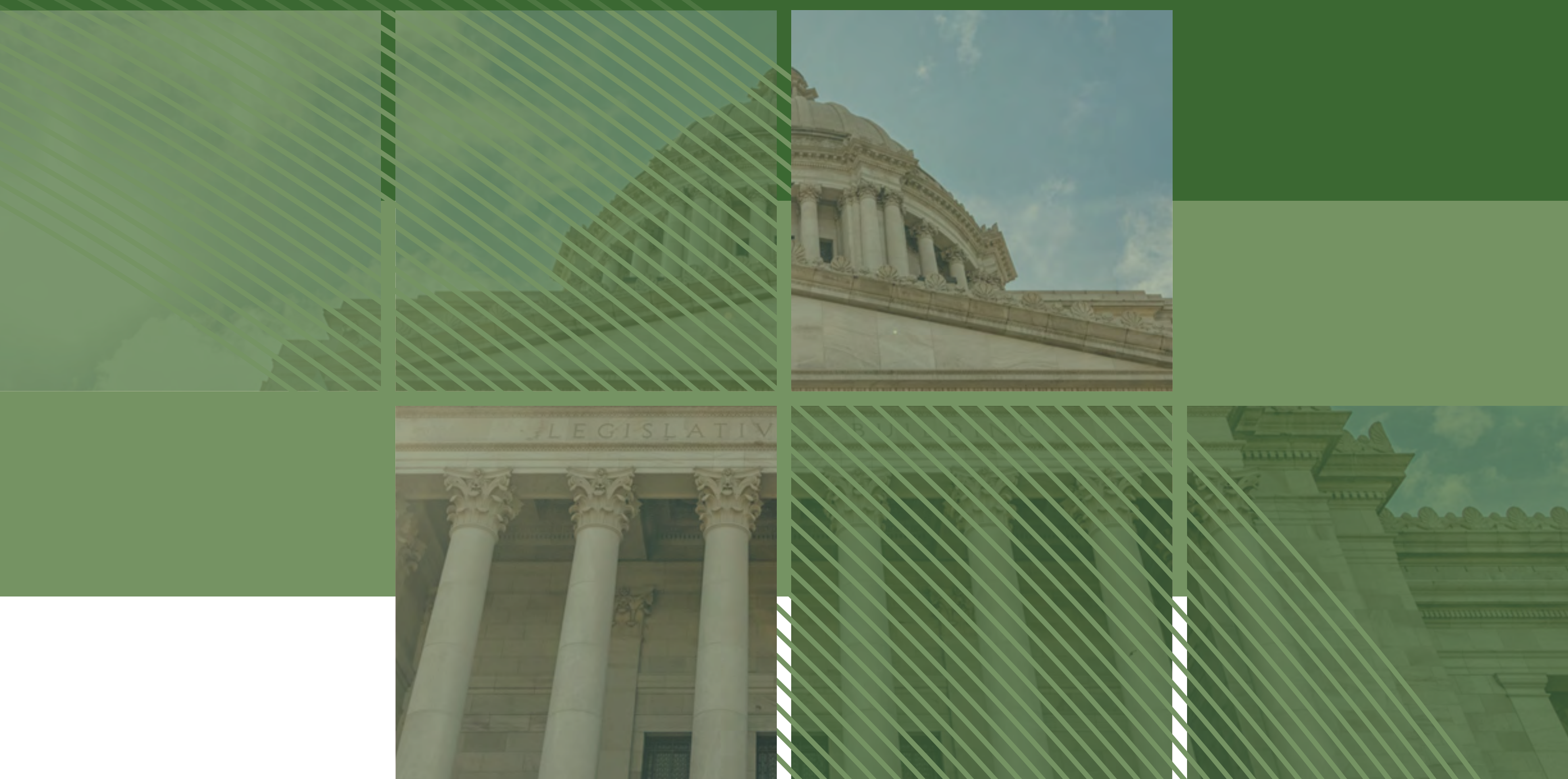
WASHINGTON STATE ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES

Statement of Policy & Core Principles



WSAC WASHINGTON STATE ASSOCIATION of COUNTIES

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Statement of Policy and Core Principles

The Washington State Association of Counties (WSAC) represents elected county commissioners, council members, councilors, and executives from all 39 counties in Washington. WSAC collaborates with statewide elected officials, federal and state agencies, and members of the Washington State Legislature and Congress to promote positions that help counties serve their residents. This Policy Statement guides WSAC's actions as it advocates for the common good of counties.

This Policy Statement is a document that members can consult to understand WSAC's stance and interest on particular policy proposals. The WSAC Legislative Steering Committee (LSC) may, by vote, choose to modify or depart from this policy statement when adopting a position on a specific legislative proposal.

This Policy Statement is meant as an internal document. It should not be used as a public-facing advocacy tool. While members and staff have tried to make it as inclusive as possible regarding policy issues important to counties, some topics not covered in this document might also be relevant for advocacy that the LSC could be required to debate when presented.

Finally, this document focuses only on issues that directly relate to the specific responsibilities of the county legislative and administrative authority. There may be many other issues that WSAC members are interested in or actively working on, but they may not be relevant to the specific powers of the county legislative and administrative body and are not covered here. Generally, WSAC does not involve itself in matters outside the direct scope of the county legislative and administrative body's authority.

Core Principles

The following core principles form the foundation for WSAC positions:

1. Agents of the State

As outlined in the Washington State Constitution, counties are legal subdivisions of the state. Counties serve as the agents of the state on the local level and provide many services on behalf of the state, including, but not limited to:

- felony prosecution,
- public defense,
- criminal and civil court,
- elections,
- property tax assessment and collection,
- public health,
- human services, and
- transportation.

Counties deliver these services to all state residents, whether in cities, towns, or unincorporated areas. Counties must be regarded as equal partners with the state to collaboratively decide on the services provided and the methods of delivery to ensure they are seamless, cost-effective, and responsive to our shared communities. Without a strong and effective county government, the state's success in reaching its policy goals will be compromised.

2. Local Control

County government is the government closest to the people. Counties believe that locally elected officials best understand their communities' needs. To be responsive to the people and appropriately reflect the diversity of our communities, counties support:

- the principle of local control,
- the ongoing ability to manage local affairs in a way that maximizes local input, and
- policies that respect local needs and values at the state and federal levels,
- policies that ensure counties are free to adopt various local policies that may not be acceptable to other counties.

In general, counties will strongly oppose policies that:

- ignore the reality of statewide diversity,
- that undercut local determination,
- don't recognize that each county is unique, and this diversity calls for a flexible approach to statewide policymaking.
- don't guarantee flexibility to set acceptable taxing and spending levels for their communities,
- attempt to preempt local control.

Local control also reflects the idea that the people should choose their forms of government. Therefore, counties believe that:

- Any change to a citizen's form of government must be approved by a public vote.
- Policy, taxing, and regulatory authority should not be given to individuals who are not directly accountable to the people through an election.

Counties also recognize the importance of balancing local control with other levels of government. While strongly supporting local control in most cases, counties agree that some policy decisions should be made at a broader level—such as state or federal—to maintain the right balance, prevent fragmented or unfair results, and meet practical enforcement needs. For example, counties favor broader policymaking by state or federal authorities for issues that naturally cross jurisdictional lines and require oversight beyond local governments.

3. Unfunded Mandates

In adopting Initiative 601 (RCW 43.135.060), Washington voters required the Legislature to provide sufficient funding to local governments when it imposes new or expanded local responsibilities. The state must keep local responsibilities within current revenue sources or provide additional funding or funding authority when it introduces new mandates.

Counties will:

- Secure appropriate and stable funding for all legislative and agency mandates on local governments to prevent systemic and significant funding shortages.
- Oppose new or expanded local responsibilities that are not fully funded and lack ongoing funding for increased costs or caseloads.

State funding must guarantee equal access to essential county services such as public safety, law and justice, public health, human services, transportation, property tax assessment and collection, elections, and treasury services, regardless of size, location, or local taxing capacity.

4. Provide Sufficient State-Shared Revenue

Revenue distributions from the state and federal governments are the counties' third-largest source of income. State-shared revenues include items like:

- municipal criminal justice assistance,
- flexible funding for public health,
- streamlined sales tax mitigation,
- distressed city-county assistance funding,
- liquor profit and tax revenue,
- rural economic development funding,
- motor vehicle fuel tax,
- local solid waste financial assistance,
- cannabis excise taxes, and others.

These revenues are extremely important to counties because the only other revenue sources provided by law are property taxes and sales taxes.

The loss of county revenue due to previous state cuts makes state-shared revenues more vital to counties than ever. Counties support the following policies:

- The state must allocate new funding for the requirements it imposes on counties.
- It must also restore funding cuts from vital programs and continue providing existing financing.
- The state must fulfill its promises by delivering the revenue as planned because counties must be able to rely on the state's commitments.

5. Presenting a Unified Front

To be effective with the Legislature and state agencies, counties must communicate a clear and consistent message. WSAC will engage in policy issues:

- that have the potential to impact or set a precedent for many counties, or
- when the Legislative Steering Committee approves our collective involvement.

For issues that do not impact many counties, WSAC will defer to the affected counties individually.

When the LSC approves a collective position, members are:

- expected to respect the position and act in a manner that does not undermine WSAC's advocacy efforts, and

- encouraged to coordinate county-specific messaging with WSAC on issues affecting the counties where WSAC is involved.

On issues where the LSC does not approve a collective position, members are encouraged but not required to participate in any way they choose.

6. Cooperation with Other Locally Elected Officials and WSAC Affiliates

WSAC and the Association of Washington Cities (AWC) represent elected officials in county and city legislative and executive branches, respectively. Separately elected county officials (i.e., assessor, auditor, clerk, prosecutor, sheriff, and treasurer) are represented by the Washington Association of County Officials (WACO). WSAC also represents several affiliate organizations composed of professional county staff who manage and operate county departments under the supervision of county-elected legislative officials and County Executives. Although the associations and various affiliates must represent their members on individual issues, those members ultimately report to a joint constituency—the public. Public interest must come first, and whenever possible, WSAC will seek to cooperate with organizations representing locally elected officials, including AWC, WACO, and WSAC affiliate organizations.

7. Commitment to Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

The American ideals of equity, opportunity, and justice were established by our nation's founders in the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights. However, they also protected slavery, ignored Native American culture and sovereignty, and denied women equal rights. The American story continues with efforts to address these flaws, including civil war, military actions, peaceful protests, riots, and significant legislative reforms. Sadly, many of these reforms have often remained goals rather than realized changes. Throughout history and still today, there is a recurring tendency for discrimination based on race, gender, socioeconomic status, religion, sexual orientation, national origin, or disability.

Collectively, Washington's counties gain strength from their diversity. However, not all residents have equal access to the services provided by state and county governments. As the government level closest to the people, counties are especially vulnerable to local prejudices and biases. Inequities are present in county employment demographics, land use and housing, elections and districting, public safety, public health, environmental justice, and tribal relations.

Counties need to identify where inequalities exist in their communities and decide what role they should play in addressing them, including providing opportunities for marginalized residents. Counties welcome reform tools and support from the state to help us continue striving for more equity, equality, justice, and inclusion.

WSAC Policies

General Administration

Pension and Labor

Counties appreciate and value the dedication and professionalism of county staff. County staff provide direct services that, in most cases, improve the lives of county residents. Most county staff members regularly make personal sacrifices to continue in public service to their communities. Some, especially law enforcement and other emergency responders, may even risk their lives to serve others.

Staff salaries and benefits make up the largest portion of county budget expenses. Unemployment insurance, workers' compensation, minimum wage, prevailing wage, pension plans, and labor relations are policies set by the state but directly affect county personnel costs, which can account for up to eighty percent of county budgets. Often, these policies are not applied to the state because it lacks the time and resources to comply. All public employees are required to join one of the state pension plans, with the state determining the contribution rates and benefit levels.

Union groups are powerful voices in the legislative process, consistently advocating for benefit improvements and more employer requirements. Counties may agree with some of the requested changes, but in most cases, such changes raise costs.

Some issues that union advocacy groups have been focusing on for new or better employee rights or influence include technology adoption, expanded interest arbitration, presumptive occupational diseases, dispute settlements, and rights during labor strikes.

WSAC Policy

While the state sets most labor policies and all pension policies for counties, counties support:

- Legislation that minimizes fiscal impacts on limited local resources and provides maximum flexibility to direct the workforce.
- Pension funding requirements at a level that ensures government pension obligations are met.
- Maintaining management rights in all areas where they currently exist.
- Requirements for good faith bargaining practices by all parties in contract negotiations.
- Presumptive occupational disease rights for workers when verifiable, objective, based on sound methodology, and peer-reviewed scientific evidence showing a direct link is provided.
- Maintaining the ability to enter into settlement agreements to avoid extra costs for the county and employees related to claims.

In general, counties oppose:

- Stricter labor standards for local government than they are for the state.
- Pension funding that exceeds the level needed to meet pension obligations.
- Expanding interest arbitration rights to additional bargaining units.
- Changes that alter or undermine the existing legal prohibition on government employee strikes.
- Legal prohibitions limiting the ability of employers to require a signed release of further claims by the claimant as a condition of settlement.

Any new labor and pension policy passed by the legislature that raises county costs should include additional revenue offsets.

Elections

The right to vote in secure, transparent, and accurate elections is the foundation of a healthy democracy. In Washington State, more than five million[1] registered voters entrust the election process that enables them to exercise this right to their locally elected county officials. While the Washington Secretary of State has general authority over elections (for example, elections may only be conducted using voting systems that the Secretary of State has approved), the actual day-to-day oversight of the elections process falls primarily on the Counties.[2] County officials must apply election law without personal or partisan bias and ensure equal opportunity and treatment to every voter according to the law.

The provisions of Title 29A RCW govern local and state elections. With few

1 Voter registration numbers are from the Washington Secretary of State website.

2 Lundin, Steve, The Closest Governments to the People (Seattle: Board of Regents of Washington State University, 2007), 949.

exceptions (such as Charter counties and very small counties), Washington law assigns the elected County Auditor the responsibility of managing voter registration and overseeing local, state, and federal elections. Counties are tasked with ensuring that all eligible registered voters receive a ballot and with opening voting centers for each general, primary, and special election.[3]

Counties are also responsible for managing the local Canvassing Board, which is chaired by the County Auditor and includes the elected Prosecuting Attorney and Chair of the County Legislative Authority. This impartial three-member board is charged with, among other important duties, determining the official results and preparing the certification of elections. The Board may also be called upon to rule on the validity of disputed ballots, interpret voter intent, and oversee recounts.

The County legislative authority is responsible for establishing election precincts throughout the county, with each precinct containing no more than 1,500 voters. These precincts are vital for properly dividing different taxing districts and voters into manageable units for voting, and they continue to play an important role for political parties and candidates involved in campaign activities.

Per RCW 29A.04.410 and .420, each local jurisdiction and the state are responsible for their respective shares of election costs, with the County's General Fund mainly funded by property tax revenue. Since 2001, property tax increases in Washington State have been capped at 1% annually, plus revenue from new construction related to growth. Year after year, inflation exceeding 1% means this revenue cannot keep up with current and future service demands. As costs rise, Washington's election system faces escalating challenges with staffing, training, aging infrastructure, rapidly evolving technology, and increasing cybersecurity threats.

To address these issues, counties need the state to be a committed partner by providing dedicated funding and resources to support our aligned federal, state, and local elections goals.

WSAC Policy

WSAC members support:

- Legislation that allocates adequate resources to cover the full costs of elections, including maintaining election integrity, improving worker safety, ensuring voter access, and preparing for evolving technology and cybersecurity threats.
- State investments for election staff, training, infrastructure, technology, and the coordination of election goals.

3 MRSC Local Elections Administration webpage.

- Ongoing inclusion of locally elected decision-makers throughout the election process, as these individuals hold government positions closest to the people they represent and to which they are accountable.

Any legislation that directs counties to implement new state election laws, goals, or policies within their jurisdictions should include the following:

- Funding to cover the full cost of implementation, including training.
- Coordinate and align with other election policies when consistency makes sense.
- Flexibility, when possible, in how counties address new strategies based on local circumstances.

Any legislation requiring counties to enforce the new state elections law should not include any of the following:

- New obligations without adequate funding, including no funding for training staff and volunteers.
- Increased liability for counties.

Economic Development

As regional governments, all counties play a vital role in local economic development by providing membership and public funds for economic development councils. Additionally, counties hold positions on the Public Works Board, Community Economic Revitalization Board, Washington Economic Revitalization Team, and local Workforce Investment Boards, all of which allocate public funds to support economic growth in local communities.

Counties also recognize that economic development is closely connected to the overall economic conditions in any community. Without improvements, counties will find it difficult to attract business investment due to problems in providing enough affordable housing for new workers and reliable energy at reasonable rates to support commercial or industrial activities. Successful economic development also depends on a well-trained workforce and sufficient, accessible childcare.

In recent years, legislation has directed counties to play a crucial role in community economic development by granting additional sales tax authority to rural counties. The Legislature has also encouraged the state's universities and colleges to develop technologies and services that new businesses can implement.

Counties understand that successful economic development depends on strong partnerships—not only with economic development councils and boards but also with the Department of Commerce, research universities, extension programs, and other colleges that promote the creation of new technology and businesses.

WSAC Policy

Counties, in collaboration with cities, ports, and other local governments, will continue to lead local economic development efforts. These efforts will rely on strong, cooperative, and innovative partnerships with the state to overcome barriers affecting every county across Washington, including ensuring adequate, affordable housing and energy supply. The state must establish policies to support local communities, whether rural or urban, as they compete for new businesses and work to retain and expand existing businesses that already call Washington home.

Economic development projects should benefit all public stakeholders without placing excessive burdens on any individual entity responsible for providing essential public services. WSAC supports using approaches like Tax Increment Financing (TIF), when appropriate, or similar tools that encourage partnerships and ensure that no public entity is left with service responsibilities that do not match their funding expectations.

County Finance

Budget, Finance & Taxes

Counties encounter three main challenges with the revenue sources used to fund essential state services locally.

- lack of revenue diversification
- lack of flexibility in how locally generated revenues and state funds are used, and
- revenue streams do not keep pace with a changing population, rising inflation, residents' needs, increasing costs from various factors, the ongoing housing crisis and cost of living, new regulations from state and federal governments, and other drivers.

City and state governments have a broader variety of revenue sources, including:

- property taxes,
- sales and use taxes,
- business taxes and fees,
- utility taxes, and
- shared revenues.

Counties' revenue sources mainly include:

- property taxes,
- sales and use taxes, and
- state and federal shared revenues.

Counties do not have the authority to levy utility taxes or any business taxes or fees.

Since 2001, property tax revenue has been limited by law to a 1% annual increase plus new construction. Because most services provided by county government are unrelated or inversely related to economic development (e.g., additional demands on the criminal justice system), and with inflation rising above 1% each year, county budgets must depend on other sources of revenue for growth. Counties can only raise property taxes by more than 1% annually with voter approval, which has been very difficult or politically impossible in most counties.

Counties also receive sales tax revenue, but the largest revenue sources—big box retailers, home improvement stores, and auto dealerships—are mostly located within city-incorporated areas. This results in counties getting a much smaller share of sales tax revenue compared to the state and cities. Under the Growth Management Act, it is hard for counties to develop new commercial and retail zones that generate sales tax. Additionally, major sales tax generators often become targets for city annexation, which further diminishes county revenue.

Updated statutes such as the Streamlined Sales and Use Tax Agreement of 2007 and, more recently, the 2018 US Supreme Court decision in South Dakota v. Wayfair and the resulting Marketplace Fairness Act of 2019 have increased sales tax revenue for counties by assigning the sales tax collection to the purchaser for remote sellers. However, compared to city and state governments, counties remain the smaller collectors.

The Legislature has traditionally granted counties the authority to impose local option sales taxes. However, these revenues are often very restricted in their use and diminish local decision-making power. Sometimes, voter approval requirements also create significant challenges, especially for many counties in rural areas. Most local option sales taxes are designated for specific purposes (e.g., emergency communication systems, mental health, juvenile justice, etc.), may include non-supplant requirements, and cannot be used broadly for other essential programs.

Another challenge with local optional sales taxes is that the revenue potential is not distributed fairly across the state. Some counties have large metropolitan areas with many sales tax generators and benefit further as destinations for shoppers. Others have fewer services and fewer sales tax generators because of limited market potential. This means some counties can generate significant revenue from sales taxes, while others are more limited. Therefore, new sales tax authority affects counties in different ways.

The Legislature authorized tax increment financing (TIF) areas designated by local governments in Washington in 2021, with certain conditions and limitations. Generally, TIF is a tool used to fund public infrastructure improvements in a specific area if those improvements are aimed at encouraging or attracting private investment and increasing the assessed value of real property. The designation must also include a finding that private investment would likely not occur in the designated area without the proposed public improvements for the foreseeable future.

TIF designations fund infrastructure improvements by allocating future increases in property taxes from all taxing districts in the designated areas, except state and local schools and capital levies, to debt service for the new infrastructure. While counties can designate TIF areas, other entities like cities and port districts, which may include unincorporated areas, can also do so, affecting county revenues.

State-shared revenues are becoming an increasingly significant source of county funding. These revenues include, but are not limited to:

- municipal criminal justice assistance;
- flexible funding for public health;
- streamlined sales tax mitigation;
- distressed city-county assistance funding;
- liquor profit and tax revenue;
- cannabis excise tax revenue;
- payments in lieu of taxes (PILT);
- local solid waste financial assistance;
- rural economic development funding;
- an array of human service funds for mental health, chemical dependency, and developmental disabilities;
- and others.

The Legislature has previously cut these funds or limited their increase due to state budget issues. It has required the full effort of the counties to lessen these effects and recover funding.

County revenue is inherently unable to meet current and future service needs. Heavy reliance on property tax, combined with a smaller share of sales and use tax and limited flexibility in using other revenue sources, means economic growth benefits the state and cities more than counties. County revenue streams cannot keep up with the growing demands on county government. The regressive nature of local taxes restricts support for new taxes with similar designs and for increases in existing tax rates needed to secure funding.

In 2007, a study commissioned by the Washington State Legislature revealed that “county revenue authority has been eroded from 2001 to 2007 to such an extent that in many counties, funding is not adequate to sustain equal access to basic services.” (County Financial Health and Governance Alternatives; Department of Community, Trade, and Economic Development (now Department of Commerce)). The Great Recession further worsened this situation. Without change, counties will fail to deliver the services constitutionally and statutorily mandated by the state.

Data shows that the collection of sales and use taxes differs significantly from one county to another. In fact, annually, a 1/10 of one percent sales and use tax collection can vary by 400% per capita across counties. It is unfair that Washington’s residents receive unequal service levels for core programs because of the disparity in a jurisdiction’s ability to generate sales and use taxes.

Nearly twenty years later, the Legislature still has not effectively dealt with the continuous decline of county finances.

WSAC Policy

Over the long run, the county financial system must support the needs of modern county governments. The Legislature must help counties by:

- limiting actions that add costs,
- providing flexibility with existing revenues,
- giving them the authority to control their cost drivers,
- providing them with revenue sources that keep pace with costs, and
- increasing revenue diversity to ensure sustainability.

The fiscal structure for counties should reflect actual needs instead of encouraging counties to manipulate resident needs to fit within current revenue limits. Sound budget policies must also account for the demand for county services by city residents. These residents use county roads, justice systems, courthouses, public health, and more. However, in some counties, most of the funding responsibility for these services disproportionately falls on unincorporated residents and property. When a rise in city population causes higher costs for county services, incorporated communities should shoulder a fairer share of those increased costs.

WSAC will work to:

- Maintain awareness among state policymakers that state mandates impose costs on local governments.
- Make sure the state allocates sufficient funding to fulfill requirements.
- Ensure that any new requirements, unless paired with the removal of other comparable existing requirements, include new funding that is sustainable and sufficient to cover all related county expenses.
- Maintain awareness among state policymakers that counties need adequate authority to raise revenues to fulfill their obligations, including the flexibility to consider increasing revenues over time at rates sufficient to cover the rising costs of ongoing commitments.
- Ensure that any new local option sales tax authority includes a councilmanic option.
- Pursue county fiscal sustainability proposals.
- Support the development of a diverse range of local taxing authorities to ensure they have the fiscal sustainability needed to deliver the statutory and constitutional programs and services they are responsible for.

The finances of both state and county governments are interconnected and should be considered together. State and local governments often compete for revenue from the same tax base. The effects of state taxing decisions on local government revenues need to be analyzed.

At the same time, caution is advised regarding legislation that grants counties the authority to levy taxes, especially sales and use tax, to fund programs and services that should be consistent statewide, such as:

- public health,
- homelessness,
- affordable housing,
- behavioral health services,
- the trial court system (including public defense),
- elections,
- and so on.

Counties support:

- Statewide revenue solutions for statewide issues.
- Revenue to pay for statewide issues should be distributed equitably across the state based on program and service needs and not on the ability to raise the funds locally.
- Distributing funds to address statewide needs in a manner that provides flexibility to allow local governments to use the funds to tailor solutions specific to their communities' needs.
- County approval requirements for the designation of new TIF areas negatively impacting county revenues and where county services are provided, regardless of the size of the area or financial impact.
- Tax policy that minimizes the use of earmarking.
- Tax policy that minimizes the use of non-supplant language.
- Tax policy that creates and maintains consistency and predictability for taxpayers.
- Tax policy that facilitates taxpayer compliance. It should be easy to understand and minimize compliance costs.
- A fair tax system.
- A tax system that is efficient and straightforward to administer.
- Taxes that are transparent – all should know that a tax is in effect, how and when it is imposed, what and when taxes must be paid.
- Eliminating tax burdens hidden in complex structures.
- Equitable treatment of taxpayers, imposing a similar burden on people in similar circumstances, minimizes regressivity and minimizes taxes on low-income residents.
- Tax policy that is responsive to competing in a global economy and is responsive to inter-county, inter-state, and international economic competition.

Counties do not support:

- Tax policy that provides disproportionate benefits, or creates

disproportionate financial, social, or other pressures on any of class of residents.
- Tax policy that imposes arbitrary limits that hamstring counties from delivering services residents need.
- Tax policy that reduces economic productivity.
- Tax policy that places any county or counties at a distinct disadvantage relative to other counties, states, or international borders.

Tax Exemptions

The Legislature and counties have valid policy reasons for offering tax exemptions, and economic development often depends on targeted exemptions. The state, in particular, has used tax exemptions as a strategy to attract growth and provide incentives for specific industries to stay or expand in Washington. Usually, tax exemptions are authorized by the State Legislature for sales and property taxes.

Property tax is the most important revenue source for counties. While property tax exemptions do not directly reduce revenue, they usually shift the tax burden from the exempted property owner to other property owners in the district, who then face higher taxes. Over time, these shifts can become substantial. They may also lead to problems such as excessive tax burdens on those who are not eligible for exemptions, and limited or no ability for government service providers to receive support for other property tax increases needed to fund better services and new facilities.

Sales taxes are often the second most important source of revenue for counties. While a sales tax exemption can be a valuable incentive for private industry, most of the benefit comes from the state's portion (6.5%) rather than the local portion (1%-4%). Historically, the State Legislature has granted sales tax exemptions from both the state and local portions. These exemptions can be very costly for local governments, especially counties, which could benefit significantly from the small local share of the sales tax generated by a major project.

Additionally, many counties receive a remittance of the state portion of the sales tax to fund critical services or make essential investments. Examples include the .09 % sales tax for public facilities and the .007 % sales tax for homeless services. For many counties, these funds are vital to maintaining their services and making necessary capital improvements. Sales tax exemptions authorized by the legislature decrease the funds available for counties through such remittances.

Once authorized, property and sales tax exemptions are seldom repealed. Most lack a sunset clause or other provisions for reconsideration by the legislature or the public.

Because the existing county revenue sources are limited and inelastic, counties must preserve their current revenue streams. These competing considerations are often at odds.

WSAC Policy

In general, WSAC will advocate for:

- Tax exemptions to be limited to the state’s portion of revenue.
- Sunset clauses for new tax exemptions.
- New exemptions to not include the remittances that counties received from the state portion of the sales tax, or that remittances by paid for with other state funding.

In general, WSAC will oppose:

- Tax exemptions impacting the county portion of revenue.

The Legislative Steering Committee may examine individual tax exemptions and take a different position than stated in this policy. WSAC staff will present all tax exemption proposals to the LSC for review every legislative session.

Local Fiscal Data

Providing legislators and state agencies with dependable, trustworthy fiscal data on county costs is essential in the legislative and policy-making process. Counties are increasingly asked to deliver state-mandated services, often without matching financial support. Without accurate cost data and local fiscal context, state policies risk worsening unfunded mandates and weakening county capacity.

Gathering and maintaining accurate data on county revenues, expenditures, and service needs is difficult. Counties face limited revenue authority and often lack the staffing, systems, and funding for in-depth fiscal analysis. This results in a data gap between state agencies and local governments, putting counties at a disadvantage in fiscal note creation, cost negotiations, and policy planning.

WSAC Policy

An informed Legislature benefits both the state and its counties. Transparency, data accuracy, and mutual understanding are crucial for fair and effective fiscal policy between the state and local governments.

Counties will:

- Aim to be precise and dependable sources of data.
- Involve county officials and WSAC staff to actively aid in developing reliable data for the Legislature and state agencies, whether individually, through WSAC, or in the local fiscal note process.
- Assist WSAC in building internal capacity to track, analyze, and report on county costs and revenue in key policy areas such as law and justice, transportation, public health, and human services.
- Support the Legislature's efforts to play a stronger role in requesting local government fiscal notes and ensuring a well-supported, efficient, and accurate process for developing these fiscal notes.
- Support legislative efforts to modernize and standardize data collection across counties when these efforts do not significantly burden county staff and when funding is available for additional costs.
- Pledge to be a dependable and cooperative partner in building essential information infrastructure.

County Legal

Tort Reform & Risk Management

Washington's counties are essentially self-insured for tort liability, whether participating in a risk pool with other counties or self-insuring individually (as King, Pierce, Snohomish, and Clark Counties do). Claims are paid through funds allocated and invested in a pool or self-insurance account. It is common to have "secondary" policies that reinsure to cover claims exceeding a certain amount or under specific circumstances. These reinsurance policies are highly specialized and available only in a limited market. If the risk is considered too high, private companies offering these policies limit coverage or exit the market entirely (such as with California wildfire liability policies).

Over the years, WSAC has partnered with legislators and stakeholders on policies that encourage sustainable and fair risk management practices, ensure accounts stay solvent, and reduce litigation. WSAC has also worked closely with risk managers to make reinsurance policies accessible and affordable. Traditionally, our focus has been on preventing torts in the first place, fixing problems when they occur (such as changing practices to prevent future accidents), and reducing litigation, which often involves high costs and fees beyond the claims themselves.

In recent years, the biggest cost to counties from torts has not been paying damages directly, but soaring litigation and court costs, interest, and liability apportionment. Counties can be held liable for an entire judgment even if they were only partly at fault, and shifting fees and interest penalties can discourage settlements. Counties have always supported covering any injuries or damages they may have caused and compensating those who suffered. However, counties have opposed changes that encourage more litigation and increase costs and fees instead of focusing on compensating victims.

Recent legislative changes to tort law include well-meaning proposals that tend to increase litigation costs. These include liability for misconduct regardless of supervision, modifications to statutes of limitations, and major changes to prejudgment interest calculations, all proposed in recent biennia. Several bills also consider assessing litigation costs and fees against counties, sometimes regardless of court action. Whatever the policy goals behind these bills, they could significantly threaten the stability of risk pools and potentially drive insurers away from an already limited reinsurance market.

WSAC Policy

WSAC fully supports compensating anyone harmed by the county's tortious action or inaction. WSAC advocates for keeping awards fair, reducing litigation, and encouraging corrective measures that can prevent future harm. Counties must fulfill their tort obligations, ensuring that those harmed by county actions are treated justly, acting as responsible stewards of public funds, and protecting taxpayers from increasing lawsuit costs. Since counties operate with limited budgets, rising litigation expenses divert resources from essential services that residents depend on. WSAC favors policies and legislation that:

- Highlight preventative, remedial, and corrective measures to avoid future harm.
- Promote settlement and discourage litigation, costs, and fees.
- Maintain the solvency of self-insurance and risk pool funds.
- Maximize the availability of reinsurance policies by maintaining Washington's competitiveness as a market for tort reinsurance.
- Allocate tort liability according to each party's relative fault.
- Award fees and costs based on culpability and make payment reciprocal, such as counties being able to recover costs if they prevail.
- Prevent “double compensation” through mandatory interest schemes that depend on timing outside the parties’ control.

Avoid holding counties responsible for actors they do not directly supervise or control.

Public Safety

Public Safety & Criminal Justice

County governments staff and maintain facilities for most of the state's civil and criminal trial courts. Arrests by tribal, federal, state, and city authorities affect county jails. As a result, counties typically allocate about 75% of their general fund dollars to public safety programs and services for:

- Law enforcement and first responder services within the unincorporated area;
- Superior, district, and juvenile courts, including facilities, personnel salaries and benefits, and a portion of judges' salaries;
- Providing cities with regional criminal justice services that are too expensive for each small city to duplicate;
- Prosecution, public defense, victim services, and ancillary services such as interpreters and investigators;
- Jails and juvenile detention facilities;
- Inmate health services, such as physical health, behavioral health, substance use dependency (including opioid addiction), medication-assisted treatment (MAT), and smoking cessation services;
- Behavioral health interventions, including youth and adult diversion, co-response teams, crisis stabilization facilities (23hr, detox, etc.), and other community need-driven services;
- Involuntary Treatment Act court costs;
- Probation;
- Domestic and intimate partner violence;
- E-911 and emergency management; and
- Medical examiner or coroner services.

Counties believe the purpose of the criminal justice system is to reduce the overall personal, social, and economic impacts of crime on society. For this reason, counties take their criminal justice responsibilities very seriously. Over many years, as state funding has declined, counties have implemented numerous efficiencies and, where authorized by law, developed innovative law and justice programs. Despite efforts to improve efficiency and accessibility, counties lack sufficient funding for essential criminal justice services, resulting in geographic disparities in access to justice.

Amplifying the voices of those affected by crime is an essential part of the county's criminal justice system. Counties understand that healing from crime takes time and sometimes requires guidance from an experienced team of victim advocates. They believe that victims and witnesses deserve to be treated with dignity and respect.

The State's JR to 25 statute has not only increased the number of people entering the already overcrowded JR facilities but also led to more dangerous individuals being processed in the juvenile court system, which has caused non-compliance and assaults on staff. Counties request that the state provide the necessary funding to expand and modernize JR facilities while also maintaining the existing law that prevents the state from shifting the cost of funding and administration of JR services to counties.

Washington State falls behind most other states in adequately funding law and justice services. The recent state Supreme Court decision regarding case load standards will only worsen existing judicial funding and workforce issues.

WSAC Policy

Counties support:

- Adequately funding all essential law and justice services.
- Removing unnecessary or overly burdensome state requirements on the law and justice system.
- Increased state funding for law and justice activities at the county level, including costs related to arrest, prosecution, defense, and detention of individuals charged with crimes or held for involuntary commitment.
- Proposals that promote or improve policies and allocate resources for behavioral health treatment, as insufficient behavioral health resources are one of the key criminal justice issues facing counties and their jails.
- Increased capital funding to renovate, refurbish, and modernize jails to address the current needs of inmates and corrections staff.
- Adequate state funding for important and effective local judicial services, such as drug and mental health courts that decrease impacts on state prisons and juvenile facilities, jail diversion programs, and other costly state initiatives.
- State agencies assuming financial responsibility for costs related to their portion of arrests, medical care, and prosecutions.
- State funding for victim services.
- Engaging victims and witnesses to develop more effective crime prevention strategies and lower recidivism.
- Allocate "extraordinary funds" assistance to counties with unsustainably high service and maintenance costs.
- Adequately fund the purchase and distribution of medications to inmates.
- Employment of specialized mental health and substance abuse treatment providers.
- A liability shield for contracted jail medical providers.
- Dedicated and appropriate exam and treatment rooms.

- Preparing pre-release documentation to ensure inmates continue receiving necessary medications and care after release from jail.
- Full state funding for managing costs related to mandated laws like "Becca" and the Hope Act for serving at-risk youth, including supplying necessary county-administered human services.
- Expanded flexibility of state and federal juvenile justice funds through consolidation and ongoing use of block grant approaches.
- Flexibility and integration of early intervention, prevention, supervision, and treatment services within the law and justice system to address local needs.
- Adequate funding for the Juvenile Rehabilitation (JR) program focused on serving young people with high-acuity mental health needs, local juvenile diversion programs, youth violence prevention strategies, and expanding JR's continuum of care to include less restrictive (minimum/medium capacity) facilities for young people with mental health diagnoses.
- Establish contracts with counties for facility space as needed.
- A JR per capita to replace the current marginal rate funding the forecasted caseload provided by the Caseload Forecast Council.
- Maintaining federal and state-provided health benefits for incarcerated individuals until a person is proven guilty.

Emergency Management

Besides public safety duties, counties have specific legal responsibilities to provide emergency management, both on their own and in cooperation with state and federal agencies. Mutual aid agreements between and within counties are becoming more important to ensure smooth services and responses when an emergency crosses jurisdictional boundaries or exceeds a jurisdiction's capacity. Counties participate in planning and preparedness efforts and are often the first responders for response and recovery efforts. These duties involve natural and human-made disasters such as wildfires, terrorist attacks, and biological threats.

WSAC Policy

To ensure seamless responses to emergencies, counties support:

- Local and regional mutual aid agreements and continued partnerships with:
  - the State Emergency Management Division,
  - the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA),
  - the Office of Homeland Security,
  - tribal governments, and
  - other relevant agencies and private industry.
- Policies to ensure that addressing larger threats and events, such as

terrorism, do not weaken counties' traditional emergency management focus on natural disasters.

- An "all-hazards" approach for emergency management planning, preparation, training, and mitigation activities.
- Increased state and federal funding to support local emergency response.
- A new stable revenue source to strengthen local emergency management programs nationwide and fund technology upgrades like communications systems.
- Flexibility in the receipt and use of state and federal funding to meet unique local needs.

Counties oppose:

- Requirements to receive new funding and federal funding conditioned upon a local government's ability to match funding.
- Linking state funding to federal FEMA standards because state aid is needed before counties reach the federal assistance threshold.

Community Recovery and Resiliency

Community resilience is essential for overcoming a catastrophic event's impact on a community's economic, social, and political factors that influence health and well-being. Just like an individual, a community can face long-term effects from persistent threats and disasters. Major traumatic events and threats can serve as ongoing stressors for individuals, families, businesses, employers, organizations, institutions, and communities. These events may also reveal disparities in healthcare and social and economic opportunities. Additionally, such events can lead to mistrust of organizations, institutions, and government, similar to post-traumatic stress disorder. Resilience enables communities to confront all problems, disasters, and emergencies directly, facilitating a faster and more flexible recovery.

Counties are vital in supporting communities during emergencies, stress, and trauma. They oversee many programs and services that form the backbone of local government, including but not limited to:

- behavioral health,
- housing,
- infrastructure,
- economic development, and
- community health.

These roles and responsibilities uniquely position counties to take on a larger part in community recovery efforts.

WSAC Policy

Counties support:

- Federal and state efforts to address the long-lasting impacts of significant catastrophic and traumatic events and threats.
- Allocating adequate resources and funding to help local governments build community resilience, as they are best suited to identify where investments should be made in our communities.
- Active collaboration between state and federal agencies with local governments on response, recovery, and resiliency.
- Transitioning long-term recovery control and decision-making years after an event, such as the Mount St. Helens eruption, back to local government.

County governments play a crucial leadership role in strengthening community resilience through comprehensive readiness, response planning, disaster preparedness, and recovery efforts. To effectively address local needs, counties must be given the flexibility to develop and implement customized strategies while collaborating with state and federal agencies to ensure coordinated communication and efficient resource deployment. A locally led, locally informed approach is vital to building systems that can withstand and recover from emergencies and disasters.

As emergencies become more complex and diverse, local governments need access to state and federal funding that can be quickly deployed and used to ensure counties can meet the basic health, economic, and safety needs of residents. The Legislature must also invest in local government and community-based programs, services, and support networks. This includes investments in strengthening local tools and resources that support infrastructure, housing, chronic disease and behavioral health, financial resilience, and economic development. State investments in local governments, organizations, institutions, and community programs and services should be as flexible as possible to address local needs and concerns.

Public Works

Transportation

One of the earliest and most important roles of counties was to help set up and maintain the transportation system.

Today, transportation in Washington State is a multimodal system supported by several key partners.

- counties,
- cities,
- transit districts,
- tribes, and
- the State of Washington.

Counties recognize that, for many communities, ferry service is a critical extension of the statewide transportation network. Reliable ferries ensure access to jobs, healthcare, education, and recreation, and are essential to sustaining local and regional economies.

This transportation system is crucial for ensuring public safety, promoting economic growth, and enhancing quality of life. For decades, the need for adequate funding across all transportation modes, including roads, ferries, and transit, has become increasingly urgent for counties.

Washington's county road system includes over 78,000 lane miles, which is more than half of the total road network managed by counties, cities, and the Washington State Department of Transportation. In rural areas, counties oversee more than 25,000 lane miles of gravel and dirt roads. statewide, the transportation system operated by counties provides "first mile" connectivity to key sectors like agribusiness, recreation, natural resources, and inter-regional destinations. This allows counties to offer various transportation services that connect rural areas, farms to markets, ports, cities, and towns, but maintaining this extensive road network requires a lot of effort.

While counties are responsible for roughly half of Washington's roads and bridges, property tax, our largest revenue source, is limited by state law to a growth factor of 1%, restricting its increase to well below the rise in costs that counties currently face. Not only do counties depend on fewer revenue sources than the state to fund their roads, but our second-largest revenue source, the gas tax, is also declining.

While the state gas tax has more than doubled over the past twenty years, the county portion has remained fairly stable during that time, resulting in a significant loss of purchasing power for this important state-shared revenue. Making things worse, vehicle fuel efficiency has been improving for years, and access to and demand for electric vehicles have been increasing across the country and in our state. Since much of our transportation funding depends on the gas tax, higher vehicle fuel efficiency leads to lower gas tax collections and weakens our long-term ability to maintain transportation infrastructure. Without changes, this trend is expected to cause a steady decline in one of the most adaptable and vital sources of county Road Fund revenue.

When discussing county transportation revenue and potential options, it is important to remember that individual counties rely on specific revenue sources to different extents. Therefore, a “one size fits all” solution is unlikely, and a mix of revenue options will be necessary to meet the diverse needs of each county. For most counties, property tax remains the main revenue source for the Road Fund, followed by Gas Tax and federal funding. Beyond that, revenue generation and dependence vary among jurisdictions.

Local options are a crucial part of transportation funding for counties, especially larger urban areas. However, they are often not included in the primary funding mechanisms that support the entire system and should not be seen as complete solutions to the broader maintenance and preservation needs of counties. These options are useful tools for funding specific projects and programs within the transportation network, and they continue to offer significant value. Because these options do not always help address county-wide system improvements and can create revenue disparities across different parts of the state, WSAC prioritizes statewide revenue solutions first and local options second.

In 2020, BERK conducted a study on transportation funding across Washington’s 39 counties for WSAC. The study:

- assessed the gap between revenues and expenses,
- identified emerging issues and trends, and
- provided recommendations for potential funding options.

At that time, the estimated annual gap between county transportation needs and actual spending on county roads was between $719 million and $1.23 billion. A 2025 update to the study confirmed that this trend continues, further harming the county transportation system. Specifically, the ongoing overreliance on property tax, along with declining gas tax revenue and record-high increases in project costs, has caused county roads to lag behind each year, ranging from $826 million to $1.53 billion. This threatens not only routine services but also essential functions such as responding to accidents that damage guardrails and signs, storms that bring down trees and pile up snow, and slides that wash roads away completely.

Key findings from the 2025 study include:

- The funding gap has grown larger than what was estimated in the 2020 study, with the low-end estimate being 15% higher and the high-end estimate 24% higher than the 2020 estimates.
- In this study, we estimate that the annual funding gap will have increased to between $826 million and $1.53 billion in 2024 dollars.
- Separately, we estimate that the total cost of deferred road maintenance ranges from $3.4 billion to $4.3 billion.

WSAC Policy

Policymakers at all levels face the challenge of finding new sustainable revenue sources to cover rising infrastructure maintenance costs. Washington's transportation system has developed over many years through the Legislature's guidance by allocating responsibilities and resources to meet changing needs. While state resources have been vital in providing service, the decline in state shared revenue for local systems weakens public investment and undermines the reliability of the transportation network across jurisdictions. Current county transportation revenues are inadequate to sustain a quality transportation system or to fund necessary improvements to enhance safety, remove fish passage barriers, improve local freight mobility, and reduce congestion.

Counties support:

- Prioritizing statewide funding solutions to help address the structural deficit between revenues and expenditures that counties face in their daily efforts to maintain a safe and reliable transportation network.
- Prioritizing statewide investments in maintenance and preservation of our transportation system to safeguard the investment in our existing infrastructure.
- Equitable distribution of all transportation resources to prevent weakening any part of the system.
- Expanding resources to improve local transportation safety and prioritizing funding to help reduce lane departure accidents, supporting Target Zero goals.
- Any increase in the State Motor Vehicle Fuel Tax, a Road Usage Charge, or similar transportation funding system should be shared proportionally with counties—at least 50%—of the increase realized, if not more.
- Exploring new revenue streams provided that any additional revenues are shared equally and proportionally with counties, and protected by the 18th Amendment, just as gas tax revenue is now.
- Full funding for the County Road Advisory Board (CRAB), including the Rural Arterial Program (RAP), the County Arterial Preservation Program (CAPP), and a new program for local roads.

- Revenue collected should be fairly distributed to satisfy the mobility needs and desires of everyone in the state, while also recognizing the unique limitations in each area.
- Simplifying redundant processes for public works permits and procurement.
- New policies to improve the environment; however, when policy changes affect or alter the transportation system, these legislative strategies must include funding mechanisms to keep counties financially stable. Environmental objectives may include, but are not limited to, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, salmon recovery, lowering vehicle miles traveled, and transitioning to electric vehicles.
- Funding approaches that recognize the unique operational, workforce, and infrastructure challenges associated with ferry systems and the need for timely and adaptable revenue to maintain dependable service.
- Support strengthened coordination among state, county, and local ferry and transportation agencies to improve efficiency, ensure seamless travel connections, and reduce disruptions.
- Investment in technical capacity and workforce development for ferry operations that are vital to preserve this indispensable link for rural and island communities and to ensure ferries remain a safe, reliable, and resilient transportation option.

Federal and state funds for construction, maintenance, preservation, and safety purposes should, whenever possible, be allocated directly to operational levels without involving any intermediate level of government. Pass-through and block grant funding ideas are timely, cost-effective, and highly desirable. An example of a successful program that should be maintained and enhanced is the recently established Federal Fund Exchange Pilot Program.

Public Works

Public infrastructure is essential for sustained economic recovery, growth, and job creation. It is also vital for the environment, public health, and safety. Counties are responsible for funding, constructing, operating, and maintaining various public infrastructure projects and facilities. Investments in water and wastewater systems, electric transmission lines, broadband, road and bridge preservation, and criminal justice facilities, among others, are crucial for every community in Washington State.

Regrettably, population growth, aging infrastructure, limited revenues, and advancing technologies are key factors increasing the deficit in county infrastructure. As traditional local funding sources like special levies have not kept pace with the need to maintain local capital facilities, counties now rely more than ever on low-interest financing and grants that are simple to access and manage. The Public Works Board (PWB) has played a valuable role in this effort.

The Public Works Assistance Account (PWAA) is an essential funding source for these projects. Unfortunately, the Legislature's pattern of diverting funds from the PWAA remains a major concern for local governments each legislative session. WSAC understands that if the revenue for these projects is taken for other state priorities and projects are delayed, the issue won't simply disappear. Costs will keep rising, and Washingtonians will face higher expenses in the future for the same projects.

WSAC Policy

State and local governments share the duty of funding infrastructure for Washington's businesses and residents. As we deal with the pressures of rapid growth, state and local policymakers must find funding solutions to support the implementation of state and local capital facilities plans while also safeguarding the environment.

WSAC opposes revenue diversion from the PWAA. Further, the Legislature should avoid future revenue diversions that put the PWAA in jeopardy by requiring the Public Works Board to compete for appropriations in the State Capital Budget. The legislature should recognize that taking away a dedicated account and its supporting revenue streams will result in a different and more challenging legislative process for critical local projects.

Counties support:

- The expanded use of the PWAA for county courthouse facilities and adult or juvenile detention centers.
- State capital and grant funding for constructing and maintaining county law and justice facilities.

Public Works Procurement

Every day, counties use public funds to provide essential regional services and fulfill state-mandated responsibilities. To ensure these expenses are fair and transparent, and to prevent waste, fraud, and unjust enrichment, counties adhere to numerous state and federal laws and implement locally adopted purchasing policies.

The procurement law for public works in Washington state is quite complex. That said, much of its core policy is based on two main objectives:

1. To ensure that public contracts are generally awarded at the lowest cost to taxpayers. This is mainly achieved by introducing competitive bidding into public spending whenever possible.
2. To provide a fair and transparent process for those interested in bidding on public work, helping to prevent fraud and favoritism in contract awards.

In recent years, bills have been introduced concerning apprenticeship utilization, modifications to the small works roster, payment of prevailing wages, and prompt payments to contractors and subcontractors. While each of these proposals aims for well-intentioned policy outcomes, counties often lack the resources to implement new requirements, recover additional project costs, and accommodate longer timelines.

WSAC Policy

WSAC members support strategies like expanding alternative public works methods, using county forces for construction, and design-build contracting when sufficient funding is provided to pay the full cost for implementation. Counties value the legislature's continued support of locally adopted procurement policies.

Any legislation requiring counties to adopt new procurement laws, goals, or policies within their jurisdiction should include the following:

- Funding to cover the entire implementation cost, including training and technical support on best practices.
- Coordinate and align local government and state agency procurement policies when they promote consistency.
- Flexibility to implement new bidding criteria aimed at increasing the use of local contractors and the workforce more consistently.
- Pilot programs, exemptions based on available resources, and good faith waivers when appropriate; for example, policies must be scalable to ensure small and rural counties with limited staff and smaller project volumes are not burdened with administrative requirements meant for large urban counties. Streamlined processes for smaller contracts to prevent unnecessary delays for infrastructure in small and rural communities.
- Maximize flexibility that ensures compliance with state laws while allowing practical local functionality.
- Recognize that complex procurement laws raise the costs of projects and operations across all levels of government.

Any legislation directing counties to implement new procurement laws should not include any of the following:

- Impractical procurement requirements that raise costs and bureaucratic paperwork without enhancing accountability or results for taxpayers.
- New obligations without adequate funding, including the absence of funding for training staff and contractors.
- Increased liability for counties.

One-size-fits-all procurement requirements that unfairly burden small and rural counties.

Broadband Access

Broadband is essential infrastructure. It forms the foundation of the modern economy, is crucial for education, and plays a key role in promoting health equity. Increasingly, broadband is necessary for many daily activities and affects the overall quality of life. However, too many residents in Washington—because of geographic, economic, and systemic barriers—still lack access to affordable, high-speed broadband. This inadequate or unaffordable service exists across every county, limiting access to telehealth, remote work, education, and government services. Expanding broadband access in unserved and underserved areas is vital to improving public health and safety, supporting remote learning, emergency management, and economic resilience. Still, solutions must respect local communities' rights to select the technologies and approaches that work best for them—without unfunded mandates or one-size-fits-all state requirements.

Counties encounter various obstacles to broadband deployment and affordability, including:

- Rural deployment delays: infrastructure rollout remains slow in rural areas due to high costs and limited financial incentives for private providers.
- System vulnerability: Lacking redundancy in system architecture increases susceptibility to outages.
- Affordability gaps: even in areas with infrastructure, services may still be too expensive, leaving many households disconnected.
- Infrastructure deficiency: inadequate fiber-optic infrastructure hampers the deployment of advanced services and causes some communities to fall behind for years.

Many initiatives are underway at both state and federal levels, involving efforts by the Public Works Board, State Broadband Office, Community Economic Revitalization Board, and others. However, fragmented efforts alone are insufficient. Providing affordable, high-quality broadband access for all Washington residents requires ongoing public investment and coordinated efforts among public, private, and nonprofit partners.

WSAC Policy

Counties support:

- Affordable and sustainable broadband investment by state and federal governments.
  - The state and federal governments must remain dedicated to expanding and sustaining affordable, high-quality broadband access by providing long-term and reliable funding to broadband deployment partners. Funding should prioritize rural, unserved, and underserved areas first and

  be designed to prevent ongoing costs for maintenance and replacement from falling on county residents.
  - Affordability should be considered a fundamental part of broadband access, not an afterthought or secondary concern.
- Coordinated statewide leadership.
  - Streamlined coordination of public-benefit broadband initiatives among state agencies, local governments, non-profits, and private industry partners to align authority, accountability, and resources. To enhance coordination, we recommend establishing an advisory body, similar to the state's Affordable Housing Advisory Board.
  - Programs should focus on fair and linked cost structures, making sure that price does not hinder broadband adoption.
- Flexible, locally-focused solutions.
  - Solutions need to be flexible to meet various regional and geographic requirements.
  - Local governments are well-suited to identify cost-efficient, context-specific, and accountable strategies that enhance affordability and access.
  - The state and federal roles should concentrate on removing barriers, backing locally led projects, and ensuring that funding is targeted, transparent, and free of unnecessary regulations.
- Inclusive and equitable funding initiatives.
  - Funding formulas should focus on unserved areas where private investment is unlikely and give local authorities discretion to determine the best way to handle affordability, whether through targeted subsidies, competition incentives, or infrastructure cost-sharing.
  - Grant programs must address gaps not only in infrastructure but also provide options for local solutions that promote household affordability, including mid-density counties often overlooked in state and federal funding formulas.
  - These services must be affordable, competitive, transparent, and sustainable across all income levels.
  - Include broadband affordability subsidies for low-income households, tribal, and multi-ethnic communities, which are often disproportionately affected by the digital divide.
- Technology-neutral and cost-effective approaches.
  - The government should not require a single kind of technology. Instead, all practical, affordable choices should be evaluated.
  - However, fiber infrastructure needs to be broadly deployed to guarantee long-term affordability and capacity.
  - Systems should include built-in redundancy to enhance reliability and cost-efficiency.

- Affordable last-mile connectivity.
  - Washington must promote technology-neutral, cost-effective last-mile solutions to connect homes and businesses.
- Leveraging local assets and authorities.
  - County buildings and other assets, like towers, should function as anchor institutions when feasible, offering public access and helping with affordability initiatives.
  - All governments, including counties, cities, ports, and PUDs, should be authorized to collaborate in public-private partnerships to improve retail network services that will support the large public investment in infrastructure and promote long-term sustainability.
- Land use and development integration.
  - Broadband should be promoted during development via incentives and partnerships instead of mandates to reduce costs and safeguard property rights, with options like open-access fiber or master agreements.
  - Broadband deployment should be carried out through franchise agreements and in compliance with county codes and design standards.
  - Land-use and permitting policies, where feasible, should lower the deployment costs and promote cost-sharing models with private and public developers.
  - Broadband infrastructure should be incorporated into emergency preparedness to ensure access and affordability during crises.
- Support for local Broadband Action Teams (BAT).
  - Local BATs should be supported as advisors, and any state involvement should aim to eliminate barriers.

The state should provide financial support and staffing for local BATs, enabling them to identify affordability barriers, implement inclusive strategies, and coordinate regional solutions.

Healthcare & Human Services

Public Health

County public health jurisdictions have safeguarded the health of Washington State residents since before statehood. Public health professionals are on the front lines in:

- defending against threats to public health, including controlling disease outbreaks,
- preventing chronic illness,
- reducing harmful environmental exposures,
- responding to climate threats against health and well-being,
- and human-made or natural disasters.

Other local public health responsibilities include:

- assuring safe food and water,
- management of hazardous materials,
- solid waste, and
- safe sewage treatment.

These responsibilities and authorities rest with the local health board and health officer.

Washington's governmental public health system faces new challenges from emerging diseases and threats like bioterrorism and COVID-19, while still responding to longstanding diseases like tuberculosis and measles. Local health agencies are also expected to respond effectively to natural disasters and meet the health needs of their communities, as these issues are locally driven.

The complexity and severity of today's public health threats demand a strong public health system that is research- and data-driven, accountable, accessible, and properly funded. Without stable, predictable, and ongoing funding for local public health, our communities will be at risk of immediate harm.

While counties are required to fund and ensure the delivery of public health services locally, their ability to support public health has been dangerously weakened due to limited local revenue and decreasing federal investment. The state has recently provided new funding, which is crucial for ensuring that public health services and programs are delivered consistently and effectively across the state. Strong public health departments receive financial and infrastructure support, such as data systems, from federal, state, and local governments.

WSAC Policy

WSAC supports Washington's Foundational Public Health Services (FPHS) initiative and public health transformation, which aims to create a responsive and sustainable public health system to ensure healthy and economically vital communities across the state. FPHS efforts include defining a core set of public health programs and services, developing service delivery models that provide highly specialized expertise to all communities, and increasing and stabilizing funding sources. WSAC supports FPHS's work in maximizing the efficiency and effectiveness of public health services and empowering local revenue to be spent on locally prioritized services.

Additional resources are required at every level to tackle public health issues, including the integration and coordination of multi-county efforts. WSAC supports:

- Maximizing the flexibility of existing funding sources while improving both efficiency and effectiveness in service delivery.
- Local health board authority in enforcing state laws and establishing local rules and regulations.
- Local health officer authority in declaring public health emergencies and interpreting administrative rules.

These powers and responsibilities are crucial for maintaining local control, understanding the nuances of local contexts in safeguarding the public from health hazards, disease spread, and public health threats.

Access to Care & Medicaid

County governments play a vital role in ensuring access to care by:

- operating health and social services,
- operating public health departments and clinics, and
- operating behavioral health services
- coordinating safety-net programs,
- connecting residents to Medicaid and other resources,
- addressing local health needs—especially for underserved populations,
- improving community health, and
- reducing disparities in care access.

Medicaid funding is a vital source for many county government human services, often directly supporting essential public services and protecting community health and well-being. Counties serve as the frontline providers of safety-net services, also known as "providers of last resort," and Medicaid allows them to deliver necessary care to vulnerable populations.

One important area is behavioral health. Medicaid funds a large part of local and community mental health and substance use disorder programs. This enables counties, behavioral health administrative service organizations, and community partners to provide crisis intervention, outpatient treatment, and supportive housing. Without this funding, many individuals would lack access to essential services, which would increase the burden on emergency rooms and law enforcement.

In county jails, Medicaid is essential for providing jail health services. Counties depend on Medicaid to support mental health evaluations, medication-assisted treatment for opioid use disorder, and ongoing care after release, which helps reduce recidivism and enhances public safety.

Medicaid also increases access to care through county-run clinics and public health departments, funding preventive services, maternal health, and the management of chronic diseases. This reduces uncompensated care costs and enhances overall health outcomes.

WSAC Policy

Counties support policies that ensure access to care and safeguard Medicaid funding as a key tool for providing essential health and social services. As frontline providers, counties often manage behavioral health systems, public health departments, districts, and safety-net clinics that serve low-income and vulnerable populations. Medicaid funding allows counties to deliver critical services such as mental health treatment, crisis intervention, substance use disorder care, maternal and child health programs, and jail health services. Counties play a crucial role in keeping healthcare costs down, as early detection and prevention of health and social issues help reduce expenses for individuals, families, and communities.

Counties further support:

- Preserving federal Medicaid funding and advancing improvements through state and federal policies that give local governments the flexibility and authority to administer these programs effectively.
- Streamlining enrollment, supporting integrated care models, ensuring adequate reimbursement rates, and addressing provider and workforce shortages.
- Empowering counties with the tools to leverage Medicaid funding for more efficient, equitable, and community-based care delivery.
- Sustained investment in Medicaid is essential to improving health outcomes, reducing disparities, and strengthening the overall well-being of our communities.

Counties should champion rural health care, hospitals, and urban direct service clinics because they are vital lifelines for local communities, often serving as the only accessible providers for urgent, preventive, and chronic care. Supporting these institutions not only protects public health but also sustains the local economy through jobs and essential services. Conversely, policies that increase the uncompensated care burden on these already-strained facilities reduce services, lead to closures, and worsen resident outcomes. Prioritizing support means prioritizing people—ensuring everyone, regardless of zip code, has a fair shot at a healthy life. This includes partnering with other local, state, and tribal governments to build infrastructure and programs to fill access and service gaps.

Human Services

Counties are tasked with offering a range of human services, including:

- Behavioral health;
  - Mental Health
  - Substance Use
- Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities
- Veteran's Services
- Other state-mandated or locally determined human services priorities.

Counties believe that human services are best delivered locally. Many clients of these services use more than one type. Often, service systems are highly specialized, and funding sources are too narrowly focused to maximize efficiency. Individual program rules and regulations create complex challenges for local delivery, sometimes reducing effectiveness.

WSAC Policy

Counties support removing obstacles to better serve multi-need individuals and families. Counties support:

- The Governor's office, state agencies, and the Legislature actively partnering with counties to remove programmatic, administrative, and regulatory barriers that hinder counties' ability to provide important programs and services.
- Allowing local service providers to collaborate in designing and implementing comprehensive service packages that address all the needs of serving clients with multiple needs.
- Adequate funding to address the complex needs of individuals and families with multiple medical diagnoses and financial challenges.
- Full state funding for all behavioral health services the state mandates counties to provide, including any additional state requirements and shifts in

priority populations.

- A statewide Medicaid reprocurement on a regular schedule, at least every 10 years, guided by meaningful engagement with local governments, behavioral health administrative services organizations (BHASO), and community providers.
- As the primary administrators of local and regional behavioral health crisis services, support a Medicaid crisis carveout to enhance crisis services accessed by individuals covered by Medicaid.
- Sound policy decisions regarding providing appropriate care to those with behavioral health issues are based on the best judgment of county and regional administrators.
- The ongoing rights of first refusal regarding leadership and oversight of their BHASOs, as well as the option for a county to regain control of its BHASO through an affirmative vote by the county legislative authority.
- Allocate state funding to maintain and expand community programs for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, including special services and employment opportunities, as part of ongoing efforts to decrease institutionalization and segregation.
- Keeping human services funding as flexible as possible.
- Full funding for the ongoing replacement of civil commitment beds at state hospitals.
- Full funding for regional intensive Behavioral Health Treatment Facilities, 23-hour Crisis Relief Centers, and other essential crisis stabilization facilities, especially those designated or constructed at the state's direction.
- Meaningful engagement with counties, other relevant local governments, and community providers, including direct and timely notification and consultation regarding the siting and construction of facilities.
- Funding to sustain staffing and program support for facilities over time.
- State or local government ownership of facilities used for publicly funded programs to enhance flexibility in provider selection.

Counties oppose

- State mandates for BHASO regional consolidation.
- Any reduction in funding for human services programs unless the reduction results from administrative efficiencies that maintain or improve service levels.

The ongoing reduction of inpatient resources at the state level until necessary resources are provided upfront to expand local residential capacity and establish programs to serve individuals appropriately.

Growth Management

Housing

Counties support and fulfill housing needs in various ways. They have a direct and indirect influence on housing availability, location, and cost because of their role in land-use and development regulations. Housing is also a required part of growth management plans.

Furthermore, counties must develop local plans to combat homelessness in unincorporated areas and cities, as required by RCW 43.185C.080. They are or may be responsible for:

- implementing local homeless housing funds collected via the document recording surcharge,
- implementing hundreds of millions of dollars in homeless housing funding on behalf of the State via the Consolidated Homeless Grant,
- directly administering a residential program for those with special needs,
- running local housing authorities, which manage federally subsidized programs such as Section 8, and
- providing housing services for individuals undergoing treatment for behavioral health and/or substance use disorder issues.

Significant increases in housing costs in Washington State are putting intense pressure on existing private market affordable and workforce housing. Despite record levels of funding and system expansions from 2015 to 2025, homelessness, housing access, and affordability remain major problems for counties and their residents. The Legislature is increasingly involved in tackling what it sees as some of the causes behind reduced housing availability and higher prices. Consequently, counties face more mandates related to land use and permitting reforms aimed at lowering barriers to housing development and restricting local control.

Infrastructure is a key element of housing development, directly influencing the feasibility of new housing projects. Adequate infrastructure—including water and sewer systems, roads, stormwater management, and utility access—is crucial for supporting increased housing capacity. However, counties across Washington often face significant challenges in funding and upgrading this infrastructure, especially in unincorporated or rural areas where tax bases are smaller and costs per unit are higher. The gap between infrastructure planning and housing policy can cause misaligned investments, leaving shovel-ready projects stalled due to a lack of basic services. Without enough support from state and federal levels, counties often cannot make the initial investments needed to unlock new housing supply, making infrastructure development a critical bottleneck in solving the broader housing crisis.

WSAC Policy

Legislative reforms to regulatory requirements should be based on data, have a neutral or positive effect on county staff capacity, and include funding when they incur additional costs. Counties further support:

- Eliminating redundant planning and regulatory burdens.
- Reducing other regulatory requirements that greatly affect housing affordability without corresponding benefits for the environment or community welfare.
- Additional sources of revenue from both state and federal levels to help fund housing for low-income, workforce, and other specific populations.
- Increasing funding allocated to:
  - Construction, purchase, or preservation of affordable housing.
  - Construction of infrastructure that supports the development of various types of housing, including moderate market-rate housing, affordable housing, and supportive housing.
  - Operational funding to expand local homeless housing support systems for disadvantaged populations and communities, including low-income residents, homeless youth, and other special groups.
- Increased administrative flexibility in developing housing programs and reducing state organizational barriers, such as multiple licensing requirements and overlapping directives.
- Additional protective measures to preserve housing options for low-income and workforce groups, as the continued displacement of these groups directly threatens the housing of thousands of members of our communities.
- Efforts to bolster home ownership as an equal strategy to increasing rental housing for expanding the state's overall housing supply.
- Legislative efforts to strengthen homeownership programs for low-income populations and encourage the building of affordable and workforce housing.
- Legislative efforts to reduce financial and regulatory barriers for creating, upgrading, and maintaining infrastructure related to all housing types, including market-rate, affordable, and supportive housing.
- Flexible state funding support for housing.

Counties oppose:

- One-size-fits-all mandates that limit local control over housing policy or neglect regional differences in market conditions, land availability, and infrastructure constraints.

- Shifting new obligations to counties without providing enough resources.

Housing is a shared statewide obligation, and solutions must acknowledge this fact.

Land Use Planning

Washington's Growth Management Act (GMA) serves as a set of guiding principles for how Washington plans for and manages population growth. Twenty-eight counties are required or have chosen to develop and enforce comprehensive plans and development regulations that meet the GMA's standards. These counties allocate significant local resources not only to creating and implementing these comprehensive plans but also to defending their legislative decisions in appeals to the Growth Management Hearings Board (Hearing Board) and the courts.

Conflicting or inconsistent state and federal regulations and environmental programs have increased the cost of implementing the GMA.

Changes to the GMA can substantially impact:

- county revenues,
- affordable housing,
- the provision of urban services and infrastructure concurrent with growth,
- the siting of essential public facilities, and
- the direction of growth into designated urban growth areas.

Addressing these complex impacts must be a core part of any discussion about changes to the GMA.

One goal of the GMA is to reduce urban sprawl and protect rural character. The GMA has effectively guided new development, which demands urban-level services in urban areas, mainly by designating urban growth areas (UGAs) and restricting services outside those UGAs.

Apart from UGAs, counties have few tools to meet the housing and infrastructure needs of growing populations. One of these tools is Local Areas of More Intense Rural Development (LAMIRDs). However, LAMIRDs face strict limitations on further development due to rigid boundaries, land use rules based on historical development, and, in some cases, distance from other developed areas.

Along with the goal of reducing sprawl and preserving rural character, the GMA mandates protection strategies for rural areas to preserve them and provide opportunities to maintain their communities, culture, and economies. The GMA requires counties to safeguard resource lands and restrict incompatible development in these areas.

Through resource protection strategies and requirements, rural communities and unincorporated lands provide ecosystem services that benefit all residents of Washington State. Despite the significant costs to counties and rural citizens for providing these services, they are neither monetized nor officially recognized for their true value. These costs can include the loss of property tax revenue and economic opportunities. Ecosystem services offered by rural lands often generate revenue benefits for urban areas, which do not bear any responsibility for related costs.

Annexations have also been a challenge under the GMA. Legally, cities planning under the GMA can annex areas within their designated UGAs, which serve as the city's 20-year growth boundary. However, state law provides methods for residents in those areas to oppose or even overturn annexations by cities, even though the area was previously designated and may have been developed to urban standards. Additionally, some cities have only annexed areas within the UGA that contain industrial and commercial development. These areas usually generate substantial revenue that exceeds the costs of providing services. Meanwhile, urban housing neighborhoods tend to produce less revenue than the cost of their service demands.

The outcome of these circumstances has left large, urban neighborhoods as unincorporated areas within UGAs, sometimes even enclosed by city boundaries. The costs of maintaining these areas continue to fall on the county, which is not well-equipped to provide such services. This situation can also cause confusion among residents about who their service provider is and what level of services they should expect.

Eleven counties do not plan under the GMA and are exempt from most requirements. However, counties that are not required or have not chosen to plan under the GMA still need to comply with specific GMA mandates, including regulating critical areas, designating and protecting resource lands, and fulfilling the requirements of the Shoreline Management Act.

WSAC Policy

Each of Washington’s 39 counties faces its own challenges and responsibilities. “One-size-fits-all” approaches are therefore generally inadequate to meet the needs of each community. WSAC acknowledges that elected leaders in each county are best positioned to make decisions based on their local knowledge and expertise. WSAC opposes state pre-emption of local land use policies and plans, which are determined by local planning processes and adopted by county legislative authorities. The Washington State Supreme Court has recognized, and the Legislature and

Hearing Boards must confirm, that counties are best suited to decide on adopting or updating comprehensive plans and implementing development regulations that address their specific needs. Control and accountability for local Comprehensive Land Use Planning should remain with local legislative bodies.

Counties support:

- Maintaining sound, comprehensive land use planning as a primary responsibility of local government because, when done well, it protects the environment while promoting a strong economy.
- Sufficient ongoing state funding support for planning, updates, implementation, compliance, and evaluation activities.
- State agency assistance and coordination with local governments during the planning process by providing technical assistance and expertise.
- Requiring State agencies to respect and comply with local planning regulations when siting state facilities and issuing permits for other land uses and facilities.
- Suspending specific GMA requirements when funding support is unavailable, until funding can be restored.
- Incentivizing the continued development of UGAs, including infill encouragement.
- Policies that encourage and assist with appropriate infrastructure investment and growth in existing UGAs.
- Policies that allow counties to utilize and develop LAMIRDs best suited to their local needs and conditions.
- Ecosystem services provided by rural lands should be monetized, and counties should be reasonably compensated for the value provided.
- Providing incentives for residents appealing local comprehensive land use planning decisions to utilize alternative dispute resolution processes outside the Hearing Board and the courts. Legal challenges to local action should be used only as a last resort.
- Policies to ensure that the Hearing Board and the courts provide greater deference to local county comprehensive plans and implementing regulations during appeals.
- Funding to offset county costs in defending legal challenges.
- Policies to ensure counties do not continue to be burdened with the cost or debt of capital infrastructure, facilities, or other real property following the revenue loss brought about by the annexation or incorporation of an area.

Counties oppose:

- Additional GMA requirements without sufficient ongoing funding.

The state, in partnership with counties and other interested parties, must review land use statutes to meet regulatory objectives while avoiding duplication and minimizing planning and regulatory burdens on both county government and citizens. WSAC will continue to support efforts to monitor the impacts of the GMA and related state statutes. Several new regulations have been added in recent years, and it is necessary to understand the impact of those changes before enacting any additional planning, development, or environmental law or regulation.

Natural Resources

Columbia River

In 2006, the state Legislature established the Columbia River Basin Water Supply Development Program (Program). The Program initially had an authorized bonding capacity of up to $200 million, which was reached several years ago. It now competes annually with other projects for appropriations from the State Capital Budget. The Program aims to implement projects to increase water supply in the Columbia River basin.

Eastern Washington counties have participated in the program, holding four seats on Ecology's Policy Advisory Group (PAG), which includes various stakeholders.

While the Columbia River flows through Washington State and forms much of the state's southern border with Oregon, its sources originate in British Columbia, Canada. In 1961, the United States and Canada signed an international agreement called the Columbia River Treaty. Its goal is to coordinate flood control, electricity generation, and the development and management of the Columbia River Basin. The US Department of State is currently leading efforts to negotiate with Canada to update the treaty framework.

WSAC Policy:

Counties support the Program to boost water supply in eastern Washington, which is vital for sustaining salmon recovery efforts and meeting water needs for people, industry, and agriculture. They also back the Program because it provides a forum for diverse interests to discuss water supply development, despite differing perspectives. Counties believe the program is making steady progress in a region with great need, especially in making decisions and advancing efforts to improve water supplies in Eastern Washington.

Counties further support the following regarding the Columbia River program:

- Ongoing efforts to continue funding and implementing the program.
- The US Department of State's efforts to negotiate a modernized Columbia River Treaty.
- Maintaining flood control and the production of hydropower as the primary purposes of the treaty.
- A new treaty that ensures adequate water supplies are provided for current and future out-of-stream needs, including municipal, industrial, and irrigation.

- Including provisions for surface water supplies adequate for irrigation projects dependent on the Columbia River and Grand Coulee sources.
- Maintaining enough flexibility within the treaty to allow other implementation agreements between the United States and Canada.

Counties oppose:

- Including domestic water issues in a modernized Columbia River Treaty.

Water

Counties have a distinct perspective on water resources because of their extensive authority and responsibilities in:

- watershed planning,
- land use,
- health and sanitation,
- transportation, and
- parks and recreation.

Counties are involved in nearly all aspects of water resource management, except for issuing water rights. Even in the field of water rights, recent court decisions have expanded counties' responsibilities to include determining water availability, though these duties remain undefined. Some counties are actively developing water banks and other mitigation strategies to ensure sufficient water for residential use.

Access to a safe, sufficient, and sustainable water supply is essential for counties. Without enough water, all economic activity and value come to a halt. This includes enough water for out-of-stream uses and instream flows to maintain healthy aquatic ecosystems.

One of the most difficult parts of county water resource management is the state's changing interpretations of existing laws and policies. Sometimes, the same state agency might interpret legal requirements, allowances, and obligations differently in different regions. Other times, two or more partner state agencies may have conflicting policies. This inconsistent and unreliable understanding and enforcement of statewide water resource management policy causes unnecessary problems and conflicts between state agencies and counties.

Water right adjudications are becoming more frequent in the state. In some areas, it might be necessary to establish certainty for determining the long-term water supply. The state carries out adjudications through County Superior Courts or, when needed, federal courts. Adjudications can be time-consuming and expensive to complete.

WSAC Policy

Counties support:

- Changes in state law and budgeting to ensure efficient water rights administration, consistent with collaborative, locally-based watershed planning.
- Policies to ensure that water law, financial resources, and administration are flexible enough to recognize regional differences in water sources, uses, and demands.
- Addressing urban and rural water needs by providing adequate resources, establishing priorities, and resolving conflicting state and local roles and responsibilities.
- Ensuring rural areas have a reliable and cost-effective water supply for current and future needs, which could include exempt wells and other sources.
- Requiring that decisions regarding water supply questions are promptly addressed.
- Maintaining the legal right to water as a requirement of new development.
- Maintaining and enhancing water storage for various instream and out-of-stream uses, including human, industrial, and agricultural.
- Reasonable protections to maintain healthy watersheds.
- State funding to support county responsibilities that ensure safe drinking water supply, stormwater management, flood damage reduction plans, and watershed planning and implementation.
- State funding to support all county costs of state water rights adjudications.

Counties Oppose:

- A “one-size-fits-all” approach to water resource management policies.
- Eliminating or minimizing the requirement to show a legal right to adequate water for development.
- Disincentives to water conservation.

Water resources are essential for agricultural use, new development, in-stream flows, and fulfilling treaty obligations for tribal rights. Whether determined through a regional planning process or by the state, these decisions must be timely, consistent, and aligned with growth management, sustainability, and economic development goals.

The Department of Ecology, Department of Health, State Board of Health, Department of Natural Resources, and Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife must interpret and implement water rules consistently across the state. State agencies should collaborate with counties on local water decisions instead of shifting all risks and liabilities solely onto counties.

Forest Resources

All counties have an interest in how management practices affect our state's forestlands.

- forest health,
- watershed health,
- public health and safety,
- recreation,
- the environment,
- listings of threatened and endangered species,
- and the economic health and culture of forest communities.

Resource-based communities, including timber communities, have a long and proud history of self-reliance and stewardship, while gaining strength, health, wealth, and recreational benefits from the land. Policies created by federal and state governments regarding the multiple uses of these lands significantly influence county land use and economic growth policies.

Washington's forests might see major changes in how tree species establish, grow, and spread due to rising temperatures, less snowpack, and changes in soil moisture. An increase in threats to forest health could come from more wildfires, insect outbreaks, and diseases. These projected changes could impact where many key Pacific Northwest tree species are found and their overall productivity, affecting both ecology and the economy.

Many counties and their junior taxing districts rely on forest lands and commercial timber harvesting as a source of revenue. Thirty-seven counties benefit financially from federally owned lands, including forestlands, through payments in lieu of taxes (PILT). Thirty-five counties consistently receive timber harvest excise tax revenue from commercial timber activities on both private and public forestlands. Twenty-six counties receive federal Secure Rural Schools (SRS) funding due to federal forest land ownership. Twenty-one counties are direct beneficiaries of the State Forest Transfer trust lands and State Forest Purchase trust lands, which generate revenue for county taxing districts from timber harvests. Additionally, counties receive timber harvest excise tax revenue from timber activities on public forest lands.

WSAC, along with other stakeholders, expected that implementing the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) State Trust Lands Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) would cause some negative financial effects on counties and junior taxing districts. However, they believed that adopting the HCP would ultimately boost the stability of timber harvests, which would improve economic stability for beneficiaries. The HCP enables the DNR to legally carry out activities that might otherwise lead to the illegal take of a listed species under the Endangered

Species Act, while also ensuring sufficient minimization and mitigation of the effects of incidental takes. Unfortunately, the impact of the HCP and other policy decisions has led to a greater decline in timber harvest levels than originally expected.

The Sustainable Harvest Calculation (SHC) is the Board of Natural Resources' (BNR) 10-year plan for timber harvest volumes on forested state trust lands in western and eastern Washington. Key decisions made by the BNR directly influence the amount of timber available for harvest. These policy decisions include, but are not limited to, changes to the HCP, harvest prescriptions in riparian zones, assumptions about forest inventory and growth rates, and accounting for harvest arrearages from previous years.

Private forest lands are also a vital resource for counties. Thirty-five counties regularly receive timber harvest excise tax revenue from commercial timber harvesting on private forestlands. Along with public forest lands, commercial timber harvesting on private timberlands creates jobs and provides other economic benefits for counties. Thirty-six percent of forest land in Washington State is privately owned.

Unfortunately, an increasing population and expanding urbanization put more development pressure on private forestlands. As a result, privately owned forests are being converted into residential and commercial developments. This can lead to a decline in the available and sustainable timber supply and high-quality forest lands, weakening the timber products industry, county revenues, and ecological benefits that forest lands offer.

Outstanding Resource Water (ORW) designations by the state Department of Ecology can affect how forestlands are managed within a county. For example, Tier III(A) designations ban all future degradation. ORW designations may significantly restrict or prevent resource extraction and other economically beneficial activities on lands near the water resource.

WSAC Policy

In many parts of Washington, working and living in the outdoors is a cultural cornerstone and way of life that should be cherished, protected, celebrated, and promoted. Counties must continue to have a voice in management decisions on federal and state lands, especially when those decisions affect county land use, environmental policies, county revenues, and socio-economic conditions. WSAC members support:

- Protecting the rights of all counties to advocate for and take positions on the management of forestlands within their jurisdiction that they believe are in the best interest of their county, regardless of whether such advocacy or statements conflict with the beliefs and viewpoints of other member counties or with other WSAC policies in general.

- Policy changes in state and federal law that promote sustainable management of forest resources and enhance forest resilience while maximizing benefits to the state and local economy.
- Active and responsible forest management.
- Balancing the harvest of forest products with the protection and restoration of natural systems, conserving habitat, improving air and water quality, promoting biodiversity, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and air pollutants, and addressing potential climate change impacts.
- Natural systems to reduce carbon in the atmosphere by establishing programs and policies that ensure the health and productivity of forest resources while delivering ongoing economic and cultural benefits to local residents.
- Alternative management models that promote local participation, such as community forestry and forest collaboratives.
- Protecting, maintaining, and enhancing the reliable and predictable revenues that are essential to the critical services counties and their junior taxing districts provide, such as law enforcement, public health, behavioral health, planning and permitting, fire, libraries, EMS, and more.
- Compensating counties for the loss of productive land caused by restrictive regulations from threatened or endangered species policies.

As beneficiaries of the State Forest Transfer trust and the State Forest Purchase trust lands, individual counties benefit directly from the commercial timber harvested from lands managed by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) within their borders. As regulations have changed over time, the acreage available for commercial timber harvest has decreased significantly. The reduction in timber harvest levels has led to economic impacts that should be thoroughly assessed. Concerning State Forestlands and other trust land management, counties support the following:

- An accurate, field-validated inventory of forest trust lands categorized by forest stand type (acreage, volume, species, and age). This data is essential for input into the Forest Estate Model used by the DNR to determine sustainable harvest levels.
- The DNR adhering to the sustainable harvest commitment and additional harvests in specific forest trusts where arrearages have occurred in the decadal sustainable harvest calculations. The impacts of these declines have not been applied proportionally, resulting in significant disparities between counties and their chances of receiving timber harvest revenues.
- Assessing options to strengthen the trust structure.
- Developing and evaluating strategies that include increased sustainable timber harvest on other public lands.
- Replacing encumbered State Forest Transfer and State Forest Purchase trust lands with other commercially viable timber lands.
- Swapping unencumbered federal forest lands that permit commercial timber harvest for encumbered state forest lands.

- Expanding county-owned and managed timber lands for commercial timber harvesting.
- Harvest strategies on existing DNR-managed timber lands that will sustain or increase overall revenue.

The goal of these strategies is to ensure no net loss to counties concerning financial impacts on county taxing districts and overall economic effects. WSAC will insist that county trust beneficiaries receive early and meaningful participation in any process to approve further amendments to the DNR HCP.

WSAC further supports:

- The forest product industry and the related employment opportunities for county residents, as well as the direct, indirect, and induced economic benefits it offers.
- Strategies that help maintain and grow those county benefits.
- Ensure beneficiaries regularly monitor the sustainable harvest calculations for all state trust lands managed by the DNR and conduct third-party reviews periodically to verify proper methodology and data credibility.
- Promoting sustainable timber harvesting and safeguarding long-term protection of commercial timber lands, both public and private, from improper conversion to alternative uses.
- Polices that help maintain private working forest lands, including tax benefits.
- Penalizing timberlands classified and taxed as current use that are not managed for commercial timber harvest or have not been harvested, resulting in tax benefits at the expense of other taxpayers.
- Evaluating and implementing strategies to develop alternative markets for commercial timber products, including marketable ecosystem services.
- Additional investments in forest health treatments on private, state, and federal lands.
- Prioritizing funding and streamlining permitting for forest health treatments, including, but not limited to:
  - Active logging,
  - Thinning,
  - Community-wide firebreaks,
  - Prescribed burning, and
  - Other fuel reduction strategies.
- Additional funding to improve the wildland fire suppression and response capabilities of DNR and local fire districts.

Counties support the designation and protection of Outstanding Resource Waters (ORW) on forestlands when the water body clearly meets the designation criteria in state law, and the public and affected governments support it. WSAC will support each county's right to decide whether it agrees with a specific ORW designation on the forestlands within its county. WSAC will advocate that ORW designations should not be approved on forestlands if the county determines that an imminent social or economic impact on the local community will occur.

WSAC generally opposes:

- Actions that harm commercial forestry without providing offsets in other areas, such as jobs and economic benefits.

Puget Sound Partnership

The Puget Sound Partnership is a state agency that acts as the main organization for Puget Sound recovery. It brings together citizens, governments, tribes, scientists, businesses, and nonprofits to set priorities, carry out a regional recovery plan, and hold itself accountable for results.

The Puget Sound Partnership's boards support and guide the agency in mobilizing and speeding up the science-based efforts to protect and restore Puget Sound. These boards include the Leadership Council, Ecosystem Coordination Board, Salmon Recovery Council, and Science Panel. The Leadership Council is also the statutorily designated regional salmon recovery organization for Puget Sound. The Puget Sound Salmon Recovery Council advises it on matters related to salmon recovery. WSAC members serve as designated representatives on the Ecosystem Coordination Board and Salmon Recovery Council. This involvement demonstrates counties' ongoing commitment to salmon recovery across the state.

The Partnership is responsible for implementing the Action Agenda, a detailed plan that guides the recovery of our nation's largest estuary. It builds on and includes the efforts of many partners around Puget Sound to outline regional strategies and specific actions necessary for recovery. These strategies and actions create opportunities for federal, state, local, tribal, and private entities to invest resources and coordinate their efforts more effectively.

The Action Agenda is reviewed and revised every four years. The Legislature set six recovery goals to help partners define a healthy Puget Sound. The following goals guide each Action Agenda:

- Healthy human population;
- Vibrant quality of life;
- Thriving species and food web;
- Protected and restored habitat;
- Abundant water quantity; and
- Healthy water quality.

In 2025, the Partnership is evaluating progress on its 2022-2026 Action Agenda to help inform the initial draft of the 2026-2030 Action Agenda.

WSAC Policy

Counties support efforts to clean and restore Puget Sound and take many steps through individual plans, regulations, programs, and projects to help achieve that goal. Due to their statutory responsibilities, counties play a vital role in implementing the Action Agenda. WSAC wants to ensure the Action Agenda recognizes and supports current county responsibilities, as well as ongoing and future needs that may prevent counties from reaching the Action Agenda's goals. For the Action Agenda to be effective, it must:

- Coordinate with other state mandates, such as updating Shoreline Master Programs, Growth Management Act comprehensive plans, development regulations, and NPDES permits; and
- Ensure substantial and continuous financial and technical support is provided to counties to help them implement the Action Agenda.
- Outline strategies for providing administrative leadership when needed to ensure all integrating organizations can effectively implement the agenda.

Salmon and Steelhead Recovery

Salmon is one of the most iconic species of the Pacific Northwest. Washington State is home to five distinct species:

- chinook (a.k.a. king),
- coho (a.k.a. silver),
- chum (a.k.a. dog),
- sockeye (a.k.a. red), and
- pink (a.k.a. humpy).

Salmon are anadromous fish. They spend most of their lives at sea but are born in freshwater and return to freshwater to spawn. Washington's salmon migrate long distances, only to come back from the ocean to our rivers to spawn in their original waters.

Salmon hold tremendous value for Washington and its residents. They are a traditional food for Native tribal communities, carrying significant cultural and spiritual importance. Washington's treaty tribes retain the right to fish for salmon on reservations and in usual and accustomed places. Tribal treaty rights impose an obligation on the state to protect and preserve salmon habitat to ensure the species' continuation.

Salmon are a vital part of both commercial and recreational fishing. As a food source, they are highly valued and sought after. Salmon also play a crucial role in ecological diversity and health. They supply nutrients to other plants and animals along coastlines, rivers, and forests. They serve as the primary food source for many marine and land species. Additionally, they transfer large quantities of marine nutrients from the oceans to river headwaters, nourishing our forests.

Many organisms depend on salmon as a vital food source. Salmon play a crucial role in supporting the health and productivity of both marine and freshwater ecosystems. They are also key in maintaining healthy biodiversity and are regarded as a keystone species.

Washington is also home to steelhead. Like salmon, steelhead are anadromous. Unlike most salmon, steelhead can survive spawning and can spawn for multiple years. Steelhead are highly regarded as game fish. Like salmon, they hold significant cultural and spiritual value for Tribes. The steelhead is the state fish of Washington.

Unfortunately, many of Washington's salmon runs are declining. Salmon are extinct in nearly 40 percent of the rivers where they previously thrived along the West Coast. Historical over-harvesting, development, and dam construction on salmon rivers have deeply affected their populations. Over the years, Washington has taken steps to address these issues, but more actions are needed to repair historical damage and improve access past dams and other barriers to vital spawning grounds.

Fourteen separate salmon runs are listed as threatened or endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act. According to the State of Salmon in Watersheds report, warming trends that raise water temperatures and habitat degradation are causing serious problems for salmon runs. Poor ocean conditions and predators also pose significant threats. Eight of the fourteen threatened or endangered salmon and steelhead runs in the state are not showing consistent signs of recovery. Of these, five are considered to be in crisis.

Washington State invests in a variety of programs and projects that help salmon recovery. The state funds capital projects such as wastewater treatment plants, stormwater retrofits, fish passage barrier removal, and nearshore habitat protection and restoration. It also covers the operating budgets for several agencies that manage and protect natural resources. The following agencies and related state programs play vital roles in salmon recovery.

- Puget Sound Partnership: Leadership Council, Ecosystem Coordination Board, Salmon Recovery Council, and Science Panel.
- Recreation and Conservation Office: Puget Sound Acquisition and Restoration Fund, Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program, Salmon Recovery Funding Board grant programs, and the Governor's Office of Salmon

Recovery.

- Conservation Commission: Voluntary Stewardship Program, Riparian Habitat Program, and the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program.
- Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife: Habitat Recovery and Protection Programs, including Estuary and Salmon Restoration Program, Brian Abbott Fish Barrier Removal Board, Priority Habitat & Species Program, and law enforcement.
- Department of Natural Resources: Forest practices and the Forest Riparian Easement Program.
- Department of Ecology: water quality grants and loan programs, including the Centennial Clean Water Fund, Financial Assistance Program, Floodplains by Design, and the Columbia River Water Supply Program.

The Puget Sound Partnership is responsible for developing and implementing the EPA's Puget Sound National Estuary Program's (NEP) Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan. Part of that Plan is the Action Agenda, which charts the course for Puget Sound recovery as the community's shared plan for advancing protection and restoration efforts across the region (See Policy on Puget Sound Partnership).

Established by the Legislature through the Salmon Recovery Planning Act, the Office of Salmon Recovery is responsible for creating the statewide strategy for salmon recovery and monitoring its progress. It facilitates a coordinated effort among organizations, lead entities, regional fisheries enhancement groups, conservation districts, nonprofits, and state, federal, and tribal governments to restore and maintain salmon and steelhead populations and their habitats. The office works to achieve salmon recovery goals through the following:

- Helps develop and implement regional recovery plans.
- Secures funding for local, regional, and state recovery efforts.
- Prepares the biennial State of Salmon in Watersheds report and website for the Legislature.
- Advises the Salmon Recovery Funding Board.

The first Statewide Strategy to Recover Salmon, Extinction is Not an Option, was written in 1999 and brought stakeholders together to save this iconic species. The plan was updated in 2006 and again in 2021. This updated salmon strategy calls for the following actions:

- Protect and restore vital salmon habitat.
- Invest in clean water infrastructure for salmon and people.
- Correct fish passage barriers and restore salmon access to historical habitat.
- Build climate resiliency.
- Align harvest, hatcheries, and hydropower with salmon recovery.
- Address predation and food web issues for salmon.

- Enhance commitments and coordination across agencies and programs.
- Strengthen science, monitoring, and accountability.

In 2006, the Legislature established the Estuary and Salmon Restoration Program (ESRP), which allocated capital funds for habitat restoration and protection projects in Puget Sound. ESRP provides funding and technical support to organizations working to restore shoreline and nearshore habitats vital for salmon and other species in Puget Sound. The program was created to promote projects based on the scientific foundation developed by the Puget Sound Nearshore Ecosystem Restoration Project. ESRP manages its grant programs by creating biennial investment plans that include a prioritized list of projects and funding recommendations. As a key part of a comprehensive near-shore ecosystem recovery strategy, ESRP helps advance near-shore science, the Puget Sound Partnership's Action Agenda, salmon recovery, and WDFW's conservation efforts.

Counties have dedicated efforts to support salmon recovery in various ways:

- All counties are required to protect critical areas and designated shorelines of statewide importance.
- Under these regulations, counties are required to give special consideration to fish and other aquatic species.
- Counties are involved in watershed planning and implementation, including recent updates related to water supply and fish habitat, as outlined in the Streamflow Restoration Act (also known as the Hirst fix).
- Counties have also been vital supporters and implementers of the Voluntary Stewardship Act, an alternative approach to protect and improve environmentally critical areas on agricultural lands that are otherwise exempt from most other protective regulations.
- Since establishing the Puget Sound Partnership, counties have appointed representatives to the Puget Sound Salmon Recovery Council, Ecosystem Coordination Board, and the Leadership Council. Many individual counties are also represented through their designated watersheds.

Counties are primarily responsible for more than half of Washington’s roadways. Often, culverts built to pass water under roads do not allow fish to move upstream. This means that counties, working with other public and private partners, must replace and repair thousands of fish passage barriers across the state. WSAC has been collaborating with WDFW to develop an approach to assess and inventory county-owned fish barriers and add them to the Fish Passage Diversion and Screening Inventory database (FPDSI). This will support the eventual statewide prioritization of barriers that need correction. The initial work created detailed inventories of county-owned obstacles in Kitsap and Snohomish. Additionally, King, Pierce, Island, Mason, and Clallam counties have submitted fish passage data that are now entered into FPDSI.

Today, WSAC continues to help counties complete their inventories. We now have full county-owned inventories for Jefferson, Kitsap, Thurston, Snohomish, King, Lewis, and Pierce counties in FPDSI. Crews are working in Grays Harbor County, and we are aiming to better connect upcoming activities with the process of establishing a statewide Fish Passage Prioritization Strategy.

Unfortunately, most salmon recovery programs passed by the State Legislature are slow to implement, not closely monitored or assessed, and underfunded. The Voluntary Stewardship Program remains underfunded, as few resources have been allocated for on-farm voluntary restoration projects outlined in the watershed plans. The state matching funds for the federal Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, which offers incentives to restore and improve salmon and steelhead habitats on private land, have never received full funding to meet the state's obligation and maximize potential federal investments. The Forest Riparian Easement Program, a voluntary effort through DNR that reimburses landowners for the value of trees they are required to leave to protect fish habitat and ensure riparian protections, has also historically been underfunded. The salmon recovery grant programs managed by the Recreation Conservation Office, including the Brian Abbott Fish Barrier Removal Board, consistently lack adequate funding to cover all projects on the list.

WSAC Policy

WSAC members advocate for policies that effectively and efficiently aid salmon recovery and protect their habitats. We back state investments in habitat restoration and emphasize the importance of regularly updating, implementing, and coordinating salmon recovery plans based on the best available science. WSAC members support involving local decision-makers in developing and executing salmon recovery plans. We also endorse full state funding for their implementation.

To further assist in salmon recovery efforts, counties support the following strategies:

- Coordinate local comprehensive land use plans and development regulations with the adopted watershed-based salmon recovery plans.
- Full funding and implementation of the Voluntary Stewardship Program, including voluntary, incentive-based, on-farm restoration plans, with comprehensive program monitoring.
- Substantial statewide investment in removing and replacing fish passage barriers to ensure access to vital upland spawning habitat.
- Requirements for coordinating fish passage barrier replacement efforts, resources, and salmon habitat restoration projects between state, local, and tribal governments to prioritize watersheds and barrier removal, maximize benefits, and respect tribal treaty rights.

- Establish a well-funded system to monitor adaptive management programs, enabling state and local governments to evaluate the overall effectiveness of policies, incentives, and regulations.
- Resources to strengthen counties' ability to enforce regulations and require restoration due to illegal and unpermitted activity. Additional efforts should also be made to ensure judicial and other system support is provided promptly when counties undertake enforcement actions.
- Efforts to restore marine habitats and ecosystems to support salmon lifecycles.
- Efforts to bring non-ESA-listed salmon species into the upper Columbia and Canada without altering dam operations on the Columbia River system.
- Efforts to reduce predation when deemed scientifically appropriate.
- Incentive programs that offer funding and other benefits to private landowners for restoring and protecting key habitats and removing fish passage barriers.
- Full state funding to support programs that improve salmon habitat and leverage the maximum federal investment.
- Incentive programs for local governments and other agencies to improve and restore salmon habitat.
- Additional funding to meet current stormwater management requirements.
- Remove local match requirements for salmon recovery projects in priority watersheds.

Any legislation that mandates counties to work on salmon recovery within their areas should include the following:

- Full funding support for all new requirements imposed on counties.
- Flexibility for counties to tailor salmon recovery strategies based on local conditions and coordinate with tribes and WDFW.
- A comprehensive understanding of the counties' current obligations to balance the goals of the Growth Management Act and to implement the requirements of the Shoreline Management Act.

Any legislation requiring counties to address salmon recovery should exclude the following:

- Any unfunded mandates.
- Any requirements that hold counties responsible for ensuring specific salmon recovery levels or investments.
- Counties enforce requirements for private lands to restore salmon habitat.
- Subject counties to liabilities under the Endangered Species Act.

Environment

Stormwater

Counties are facing more frequent and severe storm events, making stormwater control and treatment an increasingly important issue. Effective stormwater management requires actions both at the basin level and at the site-specific level. This includes retrofitting existing facilities, such as roads, and managing land use development.

Some counties are impacted by Ecology's issuance of the National Pollution Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) Phase I and II permits. NPDES Phase I permits include:

- stormwater discharges from specific industries,
- construction sites involving five or more acres, and
- municipalities with a population of more than 100,000.

NPDES Phase II regulations broaden the requirement for stormwater permits to:

- all municipalities in urbanized areas, and
- construction sites between one and five acres.

Two distinct NPDES Phase II general permits cover communities in eastern and western Washington.

These permits, issued under Ecology's Clean Water Act authority, require jurisdictions to implement a stormwater management program to:

- reduce the discharge of pollutants,
- protect water quality, and
- meet the requirements of the Clean Water Act.

The permits require counties to develop stormwater management programs that must include new ordinances to:

- control stormwater runoff,
- integrate public involvement,
- provide public education,
- a program to detect and eliminate illicit discharges, and
- other requirements.

Adding new requirements for stormwater mitigation and design standards to address emerging concerns, such as 6PPDq tire chemicals that recently proved harmful to salmon, beyond the scope of the current permitting system, results in extra costs for county projects.

WSAC Policy

Counties support:

- Enhancing stormwater controls to safeguard water quality and aquatic resources.
- Ensuring that federal and state requirements acknowledge that success relies on implementing these controls effectively and sustainably.
- Coordinating stormwater regulations with other water quality initiatives, such as the Puget Sound Partnership.
- Providing counties with flexibility to choose the most cost-effective actions to meet stormwater management goals.
- Funding from the state to help cover the costs of implementing new stormwater regulations and programs is essential for their success and sustainability.
- If funding is unavailable, counties' liability under the new permit requirements should be proportionally reduced until funding is secured.

Approaches to managing stormwater differ across the state, but all rely on steady investment and effective partnerships. WSAC also endorses:

- Protecting existing stormwater management funding and increasing available funding or funding authorities to adapt to changing conditions.
- Ensuring that newly identified requirements for pollutants are incorporated into the current stormwater permitting system to improve permitting efficiency, minimize conflicting decisions by state or federal agencies, and promote consistent and predictable project requirements across the state.

Climate Change

Washington has implemented a series of new policies aiming to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 95% from 1990 levels by 2050. These initiatives cover many county services and include regulations on energy production, cap-and-invest schemes, climate justice efforts, controlling harmful emissions, transportation, waste management, and standards for development and construction.

Washington’s counties acknowledge the need to address the challenges of climate change, plan for future impacts, and realistically assess the effects on their operations and residents. They also recognize the global scope of climate change and the shared responsibility of governments to prepare for its harmful impacts. Counties have started taking actions to adapt their own business practices to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Some are examining their planning and environmental review processes. Additionally, they are integrating climate-focused initiatives and responses into their operations and emergency preparedness plans to ensure communities remain safe, sustainable, and vibrant. WSAC recognizes that:

- The primary and secondary effects of climate change differ greatly from one county to another—both in severity and type. For instance, sea level rise and coastal erosion may have a major impact on one county, while drought and prolonged high temperatures might be more significant in another.
- Climate-related impacts like drought, wildfires and smoke, extreme weather, prolonged heat, and shoreline erosion can make it harder for counties to maintain critical infrastructure (such as transportation and stormwater systems), harm local economies like agriculture and tourism, and pose additional threats to human health and livelihoods.
- Washington's counties hold diverse opinions on climate change and vary in their abilities and resources to tackle its causes and respond to potential impacts.
- Several counties in Washington State lead the nation on climate change issues.
- Several counties are taking steps to incorporate greenhouse gas reductions into their land use planning and environmental review processes.
- Several counties are implementing public health programs and services in direct response to climate emergencies, such as cooling shelters and wildfire smoke response, and using climate-related data to guide emergency planning.
- All counties are implementing relevant and measurable measures to lower greenhouse gas emissions resulting from their organizational business practices.
- Existing elements of the Growth Management Act support efforts to reduce and mitigate increases in greenhouse gas emissions, such as compact urban development, improving transportation options including non-motorized facilities, trip reduction programs, lowering emissions from public buildings, transit-oriented development, replacing vehicles with low-emission and zero-emission options, reducing methane emissions from landfills, and protecting critical areas and natural resource lands from conversion.

WSAC Policy

Counties will actively collaborate with the executive and legislative branches and the workgroups formed from these branches to develop climate change policies and legislation that:

- reduce greenhouse gas emissions,
- mitigate and adapt to climate impacts, and
- ensure residents can thrive in their work, recreation, and community life.

Counties support legislation that:

- Encourages, authorizes, and provides resources for counties to adopt programs, services, policies, and/or regulations to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions of their capital assets, organizational, and business practices.
- Encourages, authorizes, and supplies resources for counties to tackle climate change impacts and causes through their comprehensive planning and environmental review processes.

Counties support the following efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions:

- Offer incentives, resources, and education to help counties lower greenhouse gas emissions.
- Focus on performance-based outcomes instead of prescriptive requirements.
- Provide tools, resources, funds, and expertise to help counties address the environmental and health impacts of climate change in their communities.
- Investments in alternative fueling infrastructure.
- Incentives to switch heating and cooling systems in public buildings to cleaner, more efficient options that lower greenhouse gas emissions;
- Investments in broadband connectivity for rural and underserved areas to cut down on residents' need to travel long distances for work and essential services.
- State support for reducing methane emissions from landfills.
- Recognize evolving science and the necessity for adaptive management;
- Fund incentive grants for counties to incorporate climate change into the Comprehensive Plan and Development Regulations.
- Provide funding to counties for a series of pilot programs that will demonstrate how counties plan to incorporate climate change into the Comprehensive Plan and Development Regulations.

Any legislation requiring counties to address climate change and greenhouse gas emissions must include sustainable state funding to support local efforts to plan, implement, monitor, and evaluate the requirements. It must also be applied fairly, reducing any cost burden for low-income communities and individuals. It should also incorporate the following:

- Requirements to lower greenhouse gas emissions should include giving local decision-makers the power to choose the strategies and measures that are most suitable for their counties.
- Requirements for reducing greenhouse gases should target areas where the biggest reductions are possible and should avoid placing unfair new burdens on residents or communities.
- All counties should be mandated to plan for and reduce the environmental and health effects of climate change, coordinating these efforts with other hazard planning requirements to prevent unnecessary overlap and duplication of costs.
- Provisions for ongoing monitoring, reporting, and opportunities for adaptive

management of policies that are ineffective or where less burdensome alternatives can be developed.
- All new planning requirements or any other requirements must be fully funded.
- An established method for accurately assessing the effectiveness of strategies aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions.
- Support and recognize that counties are responsible for responding to emergencies, operating critical public service facilities and programs 24/7, preparing and planning for energy source redundancy, and ensuring the availability of equipment and facilities that must function continuously during power outages caused by manmade and natural disasters.

Any legislation requiring counties to tackle climate change and greenhouse gas emissions should exclude the following elements:

- Any unfunded mandates.
- Requirements to impose new local taxes to cover planning and implementation costs.
- Any “one-size-fits-all” prescriptive mandates that do not consider local conditions.

Lastly, counties will support policies that ensure they are not held responsible for emissions generated by activities at facilities outside their jurisdiction, including those operated by cities, ports, federal agencies (such as military and naval installations), and state agencies and facilities, including transportation facilities and ferries.

Solid Waste Management

Counties have a crucial role in Washington's solid waste management system. They are responsible for:

- Providing or ensuring the availability of essential services, including collection, transportation, and environmentally sound management of garbage, recycling, organic waste, hazardous waste, and other materials.
- Safeguarding human and environmental health by adhering to state and federal environmental standards.
- Developing and implementing state-mandated comprehensive solid waste and hazardous waste management plans.

Solid waste programs differ greatly across the state. Some counties own and run transfer stations, landfills (both active and closed), and composting facilities, while others mainly manage contracts with private service providers.

Washington’s solid waste management system faces longstanding and increasing challenges, including:

- population growth,
- aging and undersized infrastructure,
- expanding environmental regulations, and
- increasingly complex, hazardous, and changing waste streams.

Many counties—especially small and rural areas—also face:

- higher costs,
- long distances to markets or processors,
- limited revenue options,
- smaller waste volumes, and
- staffing constraints.

Counties must balance environmental protection goals with fiscal sustainability while ensuring equitable access to services across diverse communities. A major barrier is the current funding model, which relies heavily on disposal revenue. Counties are primarily funded by landfill disposal fees, which conflicts with waste reduction goals by unintentionally incentivizing disposal. As disposal volumes decline, revenues decrease even though many fixed costs for infrastructure, personnel, and services remain constant or increase.

These challenges can result in improper public disposal, strained relationships between enforcement and operations, and a shift from education and prevention to penalty-based enforcement and cleanup.

To address these challenges, counties need a comprehensive and sustainable waste management system for solid and hazardous waste, supported by diverse funding sources aligned with local and state environmental objectives. Recently, the Legislature has adopted Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) programs to manage materials that are not recyclable in current systems or are costly, hazardous, or difficult to handle—such as paint, mercury-containing light bulbs, electronics, batteries, and prescription medications—by shifting responsibility and funding to producers through statewide programs.

WSAC Policy

At their core, county solid waste systems deliver essential environmental services that protect human health, conserve natural resources, and promote responsible waste management. Counties design and run these systems based on direct experience with local needs, infrastructure, and markets, making them uniquely capable of implementing effective and efficient solutions. Therefore, counties support the following strategies to reach shared environmental and operational goals:

- Any revised or new requirements or statewide programs related to managing solid waste, solid waste handling facilities, or any other aspect of these systems must be backed by sustainable funding or demonstrate clear cost savings to ensure successful implementation without risking existing services.

- Long-term materials management strategies should emphasize waste reduction, reuse, and recycling instead of disposal, with diversion programs that are environmentally and financially sustainable, responsive to local needs, and ensure equitable access to services across Washington's diverse communities.
- Efforts to lower greenhouse gas emissions from solid waste operations can take various forms and should be customized to local conditions. Programs that achieve measurable reductions in greenhouse gases should not produce secondary impacts that outweigh the environmental benefits.
- The state should take proactive steps to preserve and fully restore current funding sources, such as Local Solid Waste Financial Assistance (LSWFA), and develop diverse, sustainable, and flexible funding mechanisms that support waste reduction, reuse, and recycling while advancing environmental goals.
- New or updated solid waste management initiatives and policies should:
  - deliver measurable environmental benefits,
  - leverage existing infrastructure where feasible,
  - foster new or expanded markets for recovered materials,
  - include provisions to offset county revenue losses and related costs, and
  - be developed and implemented in collaboration with local governments to ensure they are workable, effective, and responsive to local needs.
- The state should prioritize funding and programs to handle dangerous or difficult-to-manage materials, such as mattresses, carpeting, hazardous waste, medical sharps, and construction and demolition debris, using targeted strategies that lower costs and risks to local solid waste systems.
- Counties support Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) programs as one of several strategies to improve waste reduction and diversion, as long as any new programs meet the following characteristics:
  - Increase producer accountability, improve existing systems and service to residents statewide, and expand waste reduction services at similar or reduced costs.
  - Provide verifiable environmental benefits, avoid overly complicated or ineffective systems, and do not create unreasonable costs or negative impacts on other services.
  - Producers or their authorized organizations bear all EPR program and compliance costs associated with implementation, including infrastructure, operations, transportation, and full cost recovery for county services.
  - Preserve county authority for local planning and service provider selection, utilize existing infrastructure where feasible, maintain flexibility to address local conditions, and be developed and implemented in partnership with counties to ensure they are workable, equitable, and effective statewide.

Public Lands

Of the state’s 43.3 million upland acres, 40% are owned by federal, state, or local governments, and Native Americans own 6%. State and federal forestland and parkland offer many benefits to the state's residents, including:

- recreation access,
- maintaining open spaces,
- providing habitat for wildlife, and
- environmental benefits.

Public lands also offer numerous benefits to the communities where they are found, including:

- cultural benefits,
- recreation opportunities,
- economic benefits from activities conducted, and
- environmental benefits like watershed protection and water supply, flood control, slope stabilization, etc.

In many rural counties, only a small amount of land is available for private use and development because the area is mostly owned by the public. There is increasing controversy over land purchases by state agencies for wildlife habitat and related purposes. Additionally, some agencies fail to properly manage public land, leading to negative effects on neighbors from noxious weeds, fire, and other safety concerns.

Publicly owned lands are generally exempt from most types of development activities. However, some activities that support rural economies may still occur on certain public lands, including:

- commercial timber harvest and the harvest of other commercially viable forest resources,
- site leases for commercial activities, including communications infrastructure and recreation,
- grazing and farming opportunities for residents, and
- other commercial and industrial resource extraction, like minerals and aggregate.

Publicly owned lands are exempt from property taxes. The state and federal governments recognize that while public lands can benefit counties in different ways, their lack of potential for large-scale development and their tax-exempt status can create challenges. Especially in areas where a large percentage of the land is publicly owned, counties and unincorporated residents may be disproportionately impacted. In such cases, a small portion of the land might be the primary source of revenue to support access, law enforcement, and emergency services on public lands enjoyed by all residents of the state and country. To help address some of this imbalance, the state and federal governments have established systems of payments in lieu of taxes for counties with public lands.

Some policymakers emphasize recreational activities on public lands as a key benefit to local communities. Recreation demand has increased in recent years, and studies show that recreationists spend money to support local economies when they participate in outdoor activities. However, in most rural counties in Washington, there are few places for recreationists to spend that money. Washington State's land use and development framework requires most services to be concentrated in urban areas. Typically, these urban areas are incorporated cities. In these cities, the cities and the state benefit the most financially from recreation, while the county is responsible for providing government services. Often, these costs far exceed the economic benefits for the county.

Energy

Washington's energy system and supply depend on abundant, low-cost hydroelectric power. Recently, Washington State has taken significant steps to transform its energy supply. In 2006, Washington's voters approved Initiative 937, which required utilities with more than 25,0000 customers to gradually increase the share of "renewable energy resources" in their electric supply to fifteen percent by 2020. In 2019, the legislature approved, and the Governor signed, the Clean Energy Transformation Act (CETA) (SB 5116, 2019). The CETA commits Washington to an electricity supply that produces no greenhouse gas emissions by 2045.

Since these measures were enacted, the state has seen a sharp increase in electricity demand, mainly due to advances in computing, the electrification of vehicles and other systems, and the rapidly growing use of artificial intelligence (AI). CETA requires this demand to be met with clean energy sources, which calls for a significant increase in renewable energy capacity. Many clean energy projects are underway in rural counties, often to supply power to the state's urban areas. This geographic imbalance is also creating a need for more transmission capacity.

Project siting is challenging at both the state and local levels, and the legislature has struggled with ways to simplify the development of essential infrastructure. A developer of any size working on wind, solar, landfill gas, wave or tidal, or biomass projects can choose to go through the local land use process or apply to the State Energy Facility Siting Evaluation Council (EFSEC) for approval to locate such a facility. The use of the EFSEC process has been contentious in several counties because it bypasses the local approval process and is not governed by local regulations.

Wind turbines and solar panel arrays are currently taxed as personal property despite being directly attached to the land and having a long useful life. Since they are considered personal property, their value depreciates over time. As depreciation reduces the asset's value, the personal property tax based on that value also decreases, shifting the tax burden from construction companies to other property owners. Over time, the tax benefits that a county gains from construction are diminished, and existing property owners end up bearing a higher tax burden.

WSAC has created a white paper explaining the issue in more detail. Essentially, this structure is unfair and not sustainable.

WSAC Policy

Counties support:

- Continuing to utilize existing, carbon-free hydroelectric resources, along with renewable energy and cost-effective conservation efforts, to meet our growing energy needs.
- Emphasizing technology-neutral strategies that promote innovation and economic growth. Fuels such as biomass, biofuels, and agricultural and landfill methane are examples of promising technologies that require further research and investment, which could greatly benefit rural counties.
- Any development project that generates revenue and increases the market value of property should be taxed as real property, including renewable energy generation.
- Newly installed energy facilities should deliver local and state financial benefits, following the model already specified in state law, such as hydroelectric and geothermal facilities.
- The community benefits of renewable generation development must be visible, proportional to the impact, and lasting over time.

Counties are concerned about any decision-making process that ignores locally adopted land use plans as required under the Growth Management Act. Local leaders understand their communities and are best equipped to anticipate and respond to the challenges involved in developing complex projects. Counties are dedicated to making sure that the communities hosting energy projects receive benefits that match their contributions to statewide energy goals and grid resilience.

Counties understand the importance of switching public vehicle and equipment fleets to alternative fuels. Implementation needs to consider the depreciation of current assets and provide incentives for the transition. Counties are responsible for delivering essential services to residents—

they can only replace vehicles when suitable markets and infrastructure for alternative fuels are established.

Appendix: Comprehensive Index of Terms

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