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Civic Agenda: Whatcom County plans improvements in customer service, efficiency, criminal justice areas

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By JACK LOUWS — THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

Whatcom County government's budget cycle is biennial, and we are just starting the review and adjustment process for the second and final year 2014.

The budget is the work plan for your government, so it is very important to reflect on where we have been and analyze what we are currently undertaking, so that our direction forward is focused and productive.

On Sept. 6, I met with department heads and elected officials at our regular monthly staff meeting. We scheduled time to discuss the impacts of the recent state budget as it relates to the county, assessed the status of our traditional revenues, and took the opportunity to discuss the major opportunities we would like to accomplish in 2014. It was an informative meeting, and I believe it may be of interest to you to have a brief synopsis of the discussion.

The generalized statement is that Whatcom County fared reasonably well after the dust settled as it relates to the state budget. The county was not funded at traditional levels for infrastructure projects in the Public Works Department. The Health Department experienced shifts in what was funded, but the overall net budget decrease is less than \$100,000. The state committed to a fourth Superior Court judge starting in 2015, absorbing one-half of the judge's salary as per state law.

The best news we received was that the state will take over our contracts for Parents Representation, saving the county approximately \$360,000 per year starting in mid-2014 and then ongoing. Achieving this was a combined effort of our lobbyists, our state County Association, and the work of a few other counties lobbying on their and our behalf.

Criminal justice is a large part of the county's costs as it relates to our budget, and we have ongoing concerns about shifting sentencing guidelines that relieve state responsibility, burdening the county with additional prisoners without compensation. This impacts all criminal justice departments, because it is one pool of money that these essential services are drawn from.

Our revenue outlook is cautiously optimistic. Our primary revenue sources (sales tax, property tax, real estate taxes) are projected to be above budget by over \$300,000 by year end. Licenses and permits will be up approximately \$275,000. Inter-governmental revenues, including a one-time assessor grant of \$334,000, will be up \$540,000.

Charges for services are up, but fines and forfeitures are down. Interest income continues its downward slide with our estimated year-end return to be about \$100,000 less than expected.

The totality of these revenue increases account for less than a 2 percent increase in our general fund balance over what we expected, but it is positive news nonetheless.

The Whatcom County Council and administration, when setting our budget goals and guidelines, stated that the budget needed to be sustainable, without drawing down our reserves below prudent levels. I'm pleased to say that this has been accomplished, due to these slight revenue increases but most profoundly due to the great job your employees are doing spending less than the full measure of their budget allocation.

Our "budget lapse" is projected to be close to 2 percent larger than anticipated, which will give us the money and resources necessary to make strategic investments during the next budget biennium.

We have some lofty goals to accomplish in the next few years. Our need for a new correctional facility is not diminishing, therefore the sheriff and I will continue to spearhead the effort to make this a reality. We are actively designing the courthouse to accommodate the fourth Superior Court judge. We are actively analyzing the space needs for all county employees, and are close to engaging the council and public on some options we will propose to consolidate space, combine services and save money. We are on track to have the new Sheriff's Record Management System functional by year end, including the deployment of new computers to support the new software.

I'm a believer that giving people proper tools results in efficiency and productivity in getting the job done, so we are actively upgrading our technology to support our staff and citizens. I'm pleased to say we've accomplished a system-wide upgrade of our email system, and along with that is planned replacement of outdated computers department by department.

It has been difficult for local governments to integrate seamless credit card transactions while ensuring the proper checks and balances required in maintaining the public trust. I'm pleased that our county treasurer has worked diligently to contract with a vendor that will give the county the ability to expand our credit card services throughout our operations in the months and years to come. Another need is a new telephone system, which is included in the 2014 budget.

Of course we will pay special attention to the needs of our cities and other governmental partners in Whatcom County. We are productively engaged in the 2016 Comprehensive Plan update process. The Emergency Medical System contracts need to be inked, and we have a great opportunity to pursue with the city of Bellingham and the Port of Bellingham a combined Department of Emergency Management at the former Olympic Coordination Center that may also house our countywide 911 dispatch centers.

As stated earlier, I'm cautiously optimistic as to the fiscal state of Whatcom County government. I know from both private and public experience that we need to continue our investment into the future, through the good and bad times. I'm committed to tackling the tasks of the day, while reserving some energy planning for the future. I'm surrounded by a quality staff that is making this possible.

Thanks for allowing me to be your County Executive.

This is one of a series of monthly Civic Agenda reports The Bellingham Herald invited Whatcom County Executive Jack Louws to provide to share updates about Whatcom County issues and projects. He invites citizens to contact him at 360-676-6717 or jlouws@co.whatcom.wa.us.

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