

EDITORIALS JANUARY 1, 2016 9:09 AM

Our civic agenda for 2016

HIGHLIGHTS

News Tribune editorial board has published agenda for action for 28 years

Education funding will be a top legislative priority

Pierce County's mentally ill, transportation challenges and marijuana shops also need attention



FROM THE EDITORIAL BOARD

The health of the South Sound's communities and the state at large have always been the chief concern of The News Tribune editorial board. We are thrilled by the region's successes and disappointed by its setbacks.

For 28 years, we've published an annual civic agenda that outlines our priorities for editorial comment. The agenda changes from year to year as circumstances change. A few of our concerns, such as education and open government, have long been on this list and won't be coming off anytime soon. We put considerable discussion and research into all of them.

Reform Washington's school levies

Three years ago, in its landmark McCleary decision, the Washington Supreme Court ordered lawmakers to fully fund the state's public schools by 2018. The Legislature has never met this constitutional mandate, leaving much of the burden to local school districts and chancy levy elections.

One result is that wealthy school districts have illegally used local levy money to fatten the paychecks of their teachers. Poorer school districts can't compete, which often puts their students at an educational disadvantage.

Washington must shift from a privilege-oriented to an equity-oriented funding system. All teacher salaries should be paid directly by the Legislature. Shifting some local levy taxing capacity to the state will allow lawmakers to assume more responsibility for funding schools – as the Washington Constitution demands – while distributing revenues fairly to both wealthy and poor districts.

Protect college opportunity and early learning

The term “K-12” is an anachronism. Disadvantaged children frequently start kindergarten with limited math and literacy skills. They need high-quality preschool.

Nearly everyone will need some form of higher education, whether it be vocational training, baccalaureate degrees or graduate degrees.

In the Legislature, the K-12 system has two crucial advantages: powerful lobbies and a constitutional mandate for full funding. The state's public colleges aren't so fortunate. When tax revenues dip, lawmakers typically treat higher education as a

piggy bank, cannibalizing college budgets to fund other priorities. The long-term solution is a permanent funding stream to preserve college opportunity, ideally guaranteed by constitutional amendment.

In the short term, the Legislature should find a way to fully fund need grants, the state's chief financial aid program. It should also ensure that recent tuition cuts aren't financed by sacrificing course offerings and college operations.

Treat the mentally ill

Pierce County and the state share a problem: too few psychiatric beds, and a resulting epidemic of untreated psychoses.

As a result, thousands of sick people wind up in places they don't belong: emergency rooms, jails and the streets. Some have committed acts of violence they wouldn't have committed with proper treatment.

The situation may be most dire in Pierce County. The county has the lowest number of psychiatric beds per capita of any urban area in the state. The right number, under state guidelines, would be 160 beds for a county this size. There are only 23.

Pierce County needs a new, specialized psychiatric facility to replace the old Puget Sound Hospital, which closed long ago. Two competing groups propose to build one: the California-based Signature Healthcare Services, and a Tacoma partnership formed by MultiCare and Franciscan Health System. The state Department of Health will pick a winner – soon, we hope.

The lack of beds statewide has led to the appalling practice of “psychiatric boarding,” in which patients have been warehoused for days or weeks in ordinary hospitals – sometimes in restraints – while getting care from harried nonspecialists.

To end the warehousing and provide more treatment, the 2015 Legislature allocated money to expand Western State Hospital in Lakewood. But that institution is plagued by episodic violence, as well as shortages of psychiatrists, nurses and other critical staff. It has now been forced by the federal government to try to fix those problems with money that had been earmarked for additional patients.

Western State needs radical therapy. And more beds.

The Pierce County Council must step up, too. The county – which has more than its share of people with psychiatric disorders – should not be the only major urban area in the state that hasn't adopted a mental health tax to address the problem.

Unplug traffic

A new year, a new fight for better transportation.

The South Sound scored a stunning success in 2015 with the Legislature's approval of a statewide transportation package. Among other breakthroughs, it secured funding to finally extend state Route 167 from Puyallup to the Port of Tacoma and add more capacity to Interstate 5 in the Joint Base Lewis-McChord corridor.

This year offers the opportunity for another critical infrastructure improvement: the long-awaited buildout of Sound Transit's light rail line to Tacoma.

Two earlier phases of construction have run high-capacity electric rail through much of King County. Phase 3 – to be on the November 2016 ballot – would bring the tracks down to Tacoma and up to the Everett area. The region's major urban areas would then be tied together with a commuter rail system that would bypass all traffic jams.

Approval of Phase 3 is of utmost importance for Pierce County. If approved by voters in November, it would bring light rail from Seattle and Sea-Tac Airport to the Tacoma Dome. It could also extend the line to the Tacoma Mall. It could extend the Tacoma Link rail line from the Hilltop to Tacoma Community College. East Pierce County could get major improvements to Sounder stations and faster bus service.

This is a must-pass measure for the South Sound.

Fix the marijuana mess

Tacoma and Pierce County have well over 100 unlicensed and illegal pot shops, AKA "medical" dispensaries. This is more than three years after voters approved an initiative designed to replace the black market with legal, licensed, supervised marijuana retail outlets.

Operating outside the law, the dispensaries can undercut the stores that play by the rules. Some of them aren't particular about whom they sell to. A 2013 survey by the Seattle School District found that 39 percent of the Seattle students who use marijuana were getting it from dispensaries.

It's long past time for the Tacoma City Council and the Pierce County Council to shut down the unlicensed operations.

Welcome veterans

The United States is withdrawing from a 14-year conflict in Afghanistan that overlapped six years of intense combat in Iraq. The burden was borne by the minuscule percentage of Americans who served in the armed forces during the 9/11 era. To paraphrase Churchill, rarely have so many civilians owed so much to so few men and women in uniform.

Many of the nation's veterans are leaving the military by means of JBLM. An estimated 30 percent of them like the Puget Sound region and plan to stay. They deserve the community's help as they transition into civilian life and look for jobs.

JBLM's ancestor, Camp Lewis, was established in 1917 after Pierce County voters purchased the site and donated it to the U.S. government for a military base. Successive waves of Army and Air Force veterans have since settled here and strengthened our communities.

This latest generation also deserves a warm welcome – and, yes, careers.

Keep government accountable

Let government officials write the rules, and most of their business would be done in secret.

There's an eternal tug of war between advocates of open government and people in power who want to keep information hidden. Too often, the public winds up losing.

In theory, Washington has a strong Public Records Act. In practice, the law is regularly weakened as local and state officials press the Legislature for exemptions that let them withhold sensitive documents or make them too expensive to obtain. When faced with new proposals for secrecy in 2016, lawmakers ought to side with the public's right to know.

Some exceptions are valid – discussions of bargaining strategy or real estate purchases, for example. Even those should be electronically recorded and accessible to the public once the need for secrecy has passed. And government officials should not automatically close a meeting or deny a record simply because a legal exemption allows them to; openness should be the default setting.

Digital technology has been both a blessing and a curse.

Public officials can bypass the Public Records Act by conducting public business on personal cell phones and other devices. All cities, counties and agencies should require that official business either be done on government equipment or archived in an accessible database.

But digital technology can also make transparency easier. Officials who welcome accountability will maintain citizen-friendly websites and digital archives that allow do-it-yourself searches for all public documents.



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