

Cowlitz-Wahkiakum Area City Priorities 2017 Legislative Session

New economic activity is on the horizon in the Cowlitz-Wahkiakum County area. However, in order for our communities and Washington State to fully realize the benefits of these opportunities, we need the Legislature to help local municipalities in addressing regional priorities. Specifically, legislators can help by reducing the impediments to affordable housing such as: onerous storm water compliance requirements, expanding our transportation capacity and facilitating our infrastructure needs through more dynamic financing opportunities. If these issues are not addressed, our regional economic momentum will suffer.

Affordable Housing



We lack an adequate supply of affordable housing. Low wage earners and those on fixed income are the hardest hit. To meet our housing requirements, we need more multi- and single-family housing to ensure available stock for individuals at all income levels.

We need:

- Increased access to use the multifamily housing tax exemption for all cities that may choose to offer this program created under RCW 84.14 to include smaller more rural counties and the cities within those counties.
- New local tools to stimulate housing development including resources to assist with storm water management and infrastructure funding to buy down city and developer risks by allowing local control on storm water related regulations.
- Enhanced Investments in the Housing Trust Fund, the preeminent tool in the state to fund affordable housing construction, and eliminate the option for the legislature to skim funds from this account.
- Cowlitz and Wahkiakum counties continue to produce a significant portion of the state timber cuts each year. The state should focus efforts to support a laminated timber production facility and pilot project for multifamily development in the region.

Quality Infrastructure



Quality infrastructure is important to our region and all of Washington's communities. Infrastructure is vital to support job creation, community health, and quality of life. Smaller communities, like ours, have smaller population bases to spread the fixed cost of infrastructure investment. This creates an acute financial burden for the members of smaller communities in complying with increasingly complex and costly regulation from the state.

We need:

- Full funding for the Public Works Trust Fund and the Centennial Clean Water Fund. These funds are critical to the viability of projects in communities across the state.
- Alignment of state funding programs to incentivize proactive maintenance, effective management and continuing investment in our utility systems. Reward municipalities who are achieving compliance with funding mechanisms designed to incentivize preventative maintenance and proactive management.
- Loan refinancing and bundling options of bond funding provided by the state to take advantage of low interest rates for smaller communities which do not have internal capacity to issue bonds regularly, if at all.

Transportation

Our region depends on a transportation network that includes more than just I-5, city streets, and county roads. The Columbia River is the lifeblood of communities in the region. We need to ensure strong freight mobility connections that move people and goods into the region on I-5, through our communities and to the ports and marine activity on the Columbia River. The region also needs additional support and financing to address the on-going concerns of at-grade rails crossings inhibiting safety and mobility within our communities.



We need:

- Increased funding for freight mobility, access to ports, and at-grade rail crossings with heavy freight traffic.
- Larger project size limits for state funding programs, as well as additional state funding options.

Developed by the Cities of
Cathlamet, Castle Rock, Kalama, Kelso, Longview, and Woodland
in conjunction with the Association of Washington Cities
and the Cowlitz-Wahkiakum Council of Governments

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Cowlitz-Wahkiakum Area City Priorities

2017 Legislative Session

Supporting resources

Affordable Housing

RCW 84.14 created a tool for a limited number of Washington cities and has excluded most smaller communities from using housing incentives to assist them with the revitalization of their central business districts. The legislatively created, local option tool provides local government the option of creating a property tax incentive in urban centers to support housing development in efforts to enhance overall density and improve economic viability of existing mixed use structures. Communities including Cathlamet and Kalama have a number of buildings in the business district that could benefit from this tool.

There are over 13,600 jobs in the region that are directly tied to our working forests. The region is over 75% forestland. The region is among the most timber dependent and timber rich communities in the state and it appears evident that the region should be included in any possible pilot project for multifamily housing development using laminated timber projects developed in our region.

Rental housing availability is extremely tight in the region. The major leasing firms in the region are showing minimal rental inventory with rising rent rates. This, combined with the pressures from the growing economy and people moving from the Vancouver area seeking more affordable housing is creating real challenges for the lower end wage earners. Development is starting to pick up, but the major developers are focusing on the Vancouver area where they can cater to the higher end market.

Quality Infrastructure

Since the most recent recession, the legislature has used dedicated infrastructure accounts to assist in meeting state needs outside of infrastructure. The captured funds have gone to other deserving needs, but at a great expense to our cities abilities to meet the existing and future needs of their residents.

The infrastructure elements of our cities are aging. Water, storm water, sewer systems as well as streets are aging and in need of significant investments to maintain the quality necessary to meet needs and expectations of our citizens. Investment in infrastructure is key to support job creation, ensure our health/safety, and increase the economic vitality of the area while maintaining a high quality of life.

A wide spectrum of assistance programs is crucial to local governments. State and federal assistance are necessary for cities to provide these services. The diversion of funds by the state jeopardizes the ability of cities to comply with state and federal requirements and to properly maintain systems.

Smaller communities are more stressed and challenged when trying to keep up with the growing demand for maintenance and compliance since they do not have the economies of scale of many larger communities. Rates are approaching levels of unaffordability in communities with lower wage scales like our region.

Transportation

State funding programs such as TIB are not increasing the dollar quantity limits to cover inflationary increases in the costs of projects. These programs, while appreciated, need to be scaled appropriately to provide adequate funding to complete an entire project when combined with local match funds. The current structure of many funding programs result in the need for cities to acquire funding from multiple sources. This often requires meeting criteria for each funding source, significantly expanding the administrative responsibilities driving up costs.

Cities are frequently using multiple outside funding sources to make projects viable.

As an example, in the City of Longview, the project to improve the safety and pavement quality of a short stretch of Columbia Heights road is anticipated to be broken down into several small projects in order to facilitate funding for the needed work over a few years. The cost and complexity of projects,

especially if federal funds are included, is increasing quickly and will continue to slow needed road maintenance and development.