



17 November 2008

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Council Chairman Dave Somers' - 2009 Budget Comments

I present to the citizens of Snohomish County, my fellow Councilmembers, the County Executive, elected officials county wide and county employees my recommended budget for 2009. This budget has been crafted to respond to the unprecedented economic crisis that has engulfed our county, state, nation, and even world. It is reflective of the recommendations the Council has received from the County Executive and the elected officials who lead many of our county departments, comments provided by the public at the Council's open budget forums, more than 300 suggestions from employees, and the Council's deliberations in our budget panels and committee meetings.

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I want to first express on behalf of the Council our sympathy and heartfelt best wishes to all the employees who have been negatively affected by the financial crisis. Each and every one of you made an admirable decision to enter public service, and it is painful for all of us to eliminate jobs that provide invaluable service to the residents of our county. We have endeavored to find creative ways to reduce the number of positions that must be eliminated, find programs to keep our employees within the county family, and provide assistance to all. I thank you for your patience during the development of our budget. We have been well served by being thorough, deliberative and inclusive which has allowed us to find new ways of minimizing the reduction in force almost every day.

I also want to thank all the employees who have submitted valuable suggestions to the Council. I assure you we have read and considered each and every one of these comments and that many of them are incorporated into my recommended budget. We ask you to continue to look for ways to reduce spending during the economic downturn. We are not through the woods yet and must constantly scrutinize our operations and search for new efficiencies and savings.

On September 4th, the County Executive presented the Council with his recommended budget. Following a brief review, it became evident to me that the revenue projections supporting the Executive's budget were not realistic especially given the worsening financial crisis.

[2009 Budget Revenue Details](#)
[2009 Budget Expenditure Details](#)

Following consultation with the County Executive and our Finance Department, it was collectively determined that our budget shortfall for 2009 is approximately \$21 million, or 10% of the amount needed to carry forward all of our 2008 programs. It is important to stress that this is an estimate based on what we believe to be reasonable revenue forecasts for 2009. If the economy improves or worsens, we may be called upon to make further adjustments in the coming year.

The Council consulted with all county departments and independently elected officials to craft a new budget reflective of the severity of the economic situation. This process eventually resulted in each department coming forward with nine-percent expenditure reduction proposals.

I want to thank and commend the departments, and my fellow elected officials for their cooperation and hard work. While this process has not been an easy or comfortable one, it certainly was made easier by the positive attitudes and collaborative approach of the independently elected officials and county staff. I believe there has never been an instance in the history of Snohomish County when they have been called upon to work together in such a team manner and they responded admirably.

I want to particularly commend our criminal justice system departments who pulled together as a team to identify strategies for cutting costs and increasing revenues, while ensuring our residents are safe and justice is served. They have clearly taken to heart the message that they are all part of a criminal justice system, and must work together as a team. With criminal justice related costs consuming over 71% of the general fund budget in 2008, it has become clear to all of us that we cannot continue to conduct business as we have in the past, we simply cannot afford it. Their commitment to work together to free up bed space in the county jail will result in an additional \$2.5 million in revenue to the county. These resources will mitigate reductions across the entire law and justice system. I thank them for their hard work and positive attitudes.

The budget I propose today is built upon recommendations made in the Executive's budget, the nine-percent expenditure reduction packages proposed by the departments, targeted program adjustments discussed by the Council, and the revenue forecasts jointly agreed to by the Council and the Executive.

In addition to these measures, I have assigned "Department Directed Savings" to each department that must be achieved over the coming year in order to balance our budget. All departments are directed to participate in this program, including the Council and Executive offices. The Council will closely monitor each department's progress toward their respective goal and will be forced to take whatever actions necessary in order to ensure this target is met – including additional cuts as an absolute last resort.

There are some bright notes to the story.

My proposed budget also:

- Continues support for Project Self Sufficiency;
- Maintains support for Senior Centers and Family Support Centers;
- Increases support of the Health District over Executive's proposal;
- Initiates within our Parks Department recreational programs for children with special needs;
- Supports the proposed Human Rights Commission with existing staff;
- Adds a new waste stream program in the Sheriffs office;
- Funds the development of a county-wide TDR / PDR program;
- Funds the newly hired deputies who have already received academy training;
- Establishes a new initiative for the renovation and modernization of the fairgrounds;
- Identifies new efficiencies in the criminal justice system that are anticipated to result in increased revenue from our county jail while simultaneously reducing expenses;

- Maintains our existing commitment to early childhood education through the ECEAP program;
- Accelerates design and construction of critical road projects;
- Continues the Drug Court Program;
- Restores two animal control positions;
- Restores the inmate labor program;
- Institutes a program to utilize PDS employees for Public Works projects which had previously been contracted out;
- Preserves the Fairgrounds manager; and
- Does not increase the general property tax levy.

The end of the economic downturn is not yet in sight. I ask all employees and departments to continue to find ways to reduce spending in order to preserve jobs. Just as in business, our most valuable resource is our employees. Whether it is a deputy patrolling our streets, a judge dispensing justice, a corrections officer making our jail safe and secure, a health officer dispensing vaccinations to children, a public works employee helping to make our roads and streets safer, or elections staff working to assure fair and efficient elections, our county employees are dedicated, hard working, effective and provide extremely valuable services to our county residents. They are well trained and not easily replaced. The county will feel the ill effects of our current necessary staff reductions for many years beyond the current fiscal crisis.

We often hear about government needing to “do more with less”. I think it is time we told the public the truth – we will be doing less with less. It is no longer possible to just find “fat” in our programs. Further reductions in our programs will mean vital needs will go unmet. The basic roles of government – public health, safety and welfare are suffering. It will no longer be possible to continue absorbing new programs created by the state legislature or federal government and then dumped on local governments to fund and implement. We will be doing the best that we can, but we will not be doing all we should.

I look forward to working together over the next week to make further adjustments to this budget.

Thank you.