

Association of Washington Cities

Statement of Policy

As adopted June 20, 2024



About AWC

AWC's mission is to serve our members through advocacy, education, and services. AWC is a highly respected voice of cities and towns before the Legislature, Congress, government agencies, and others. We are the leader in providing valuable services and continuing education for our membership. We are the catalyst for promoting communication between cities and towns and for developing a broad public understanding of the important roles of cities and towns across the state. AWC stands out among our peers nationwide for its innovation, robust array of member programs, and longstanding ability to retain 100% membership. The Statement of Policy was adopted by the full AWC membership at the June 20, 2024, AWC Annual Business Meeting.

This Statement of Policy document serves as a touchstone and framework for developing AWC's annual legislative priorities and positions. It articulates our core principles, the positions AWC and its members hold on fundamental municipal issues and offers representative examples of policies that are consistent with the policy statements in each topical issue area. AWC's Statement of Policy is reviewed and updated at least every four years by the Statement of Policy Committee, which consists of city officials, appointed by AWC's President, who represent all AWC board districts. The Statement of Policy is adopted by the AWC membership.

Preamble

Washington's 281 cities and towns, regardless of size or geography, are united by the shared values of accountability, equity, civility, and collaboration in all aspects of governance.

As the government closest to the people, cities and towns are most connected to the needs of our community members and strive to meet those needs to the best of our ability. Cities and towns believe in the importance of community-based decision-making while committing to a collaborative partnership with the state and other local governments.

AWC's advocacy is guided by the following core principles:

Community-based decision-making

The most effective, responsible, and responsive government is the one closest to the people. City government is frequently the first-place community members turn to advance their community vision or seek help for a problem. AWC works to empower city community members to govern their own community and help shape how it grows and responds to challenges. AWC strives to preserve the autonomy of cities and towns and empower them to use their authority to govern their communities in the best interest of their community members. AWC recognizes that there are instances when statewide approaches may be necessary and pledges to work towards statewide solutions that still empower and support local decision-makers.

Strong collaborative partnerships

In Washington's system of shared governance, cities and towns, counties, and the state all play essential roles. AWC is invested in building and maintaining collaborative working relationships among municipalities, other local governments, tribes, and state government. AWC will always advocate for the vital role cities play in local, regional, and statewide alliances and support and protect their ability to initiate, proactively lead, and participate in strategic collaborations for mutual benefit. AWC commits to actively and constructively engage with stakeholders to discuss and develop policies addressing matters of regional and statewide concern. AWC will work to ensure that all cities and towns, regardless of size, resources, or geography, are treated as equal partners in formulating policy and funding decisions that impact them.

Resources for resilience and sustainability

Cities and towns are on the frontlines of protecting and building our communities, meeting their core needs, and ensuring quality of life for all community members. Resilient and sustainable cities and towns are in the best interest of the state so that they can carry out this mission. However, cities and towns face a myriad of challenges and opportunities in their mission to serve their community members. AWC is committed to ensuring cities and towns are empowered with the necessary tools and resources, regardless of their size and geography, to meet the needs of their community. Cities and towns support one another's ability to make local decisions about the appropriate revenue and regulatory tools that best reflect the needs of their community. AWC advocates for broad empowerment and robust state support for tools and resources for all cities and towns.

Equity and opportunity

AWC supports broad opportunities for and the inclusion of individuals from all backgrounds, cultures, and walks of life. As municipal leaders we seek to build healthy, welcoming communities, and believe in building a culture of belonging in our communities. We acknowledge that racism and inequities exist in our communities, governments, and institutions; and that prejudice and unequal treatment undermine opportunities and exclude people from chances to contribute, lead, and succeed. Cities and towns commit to approaches that eliminate systemic inequities so that each member of a community can thrive.

Nonpartisan analysis and decision-making

To advance and protect Washington's cities and towns, we must be guided by objective and informed analysis, and thoughtful, balanced decision-making. AWC seeks to fully discover and understand relevant facts and data, consider all points of view, and act in ways that are free from political agendas and influences.

AWC will seek to embody these core principles through our work on the specific issue areas. When this Statement of Policy is silent on a public policy issue affecting municipal government, AWC will support the provision of authority, autonomy, and resources to cities and towns.

Issue area policy statements

Municipal finance, transparency, and governance

AWC supports transparent, accountable government and the ability for cities to have the authority, flexibility, and capacity to meet their community members' needs, with balanced and diversified funding options that best fit their community's unique needs and characteristics. Cities and towns may have very different capacity and resources so require a range of tools and resources that can effectively meet their unique circumstances. Cities value open government that encourages and thrives on engagement by all community members. City officials rely on community-based decision-making authority and are empowered by flexibility to work with their community members on appropriate policies and solutions that fit their specific community. Cities and towns must not be burdened by state and federal mandates that are not accompanied by sufficient funding or other necessary resources. Washington cities and towns are key service providers and entrusted with serving their community members and enabling their local and the state economy, so they need ongoing reliable funding including direct revenue from the state to succeed is imperative. AWC supports cities' ability to maintain existing funding sources as well as the ability and authority to use new funding sources that fit the needs of their communities.

Examples of policies consistent with this approach include:

Funding options and revenue diversification

- Providing greater councilmanic authority and flexibility for local revenue decisions.
- Creating new and expanding existing local revenue options to meet the diverse needs and characteristics of cities and towns.
- Preserving and expanding state-shared revenue streams.
- Providing appropriate funding support for cities and towns with limited tax bases to ensure their community members have equitable local services.
- Streamlining requirements that impact revenue sources including some election requirements, sunset provisions, and restrictions such as non-supplant provisions.
- Supporting opportunities to update state and local tax structure with a focus on less regressive, equitable, balanced, and diverse revenue options that provide adequate funding for state and local governments.

Open government

- Updating the Public Records Act so that it is efficient for cities to administer and still preserves timely access for community members, while protecting against costly, abusive, or fraudulent requests and litigation that tax limited resources.
- Adopting efficient, cost-effective, and innovative solutions that ensure open and accessible government, while reducing the administrative burden.

Governance

- Reviewing election requirements and the impact of ballot measures and initiatives on city government to provide greater input and information that enables efficient governance and full recognition of any impacts.
- Seeking tort reform that provides relief from and rejects expansion of undue and excessive liability exposure that creates inefficient governance and unnecessarily uses scarce resources.

Technology & cybersecurity

- Providing support and resources to allow cities and towns to adopt innovative technology to enhance the ability to provide and access services and assisting municipalities protect against cyber-attacks while proactively addressing emerging technology as well as emerging threats.

Issue area policy statements

Infrastructure

AWC supports cities' ability to construct, manage, operate, maintain, and provide equitable access to essential infrastructure that delivers a high quality of life to all community members, builds community resilience, and provides economic opportunity. AWC supports policies that will build safe, climate resilient infrastructure and invest in sustainable technologies that will serve cities and towns into the future. In addition, cities and towns support ongoing, predictable state and federal investments to help meet essential infrastructure needs and allow cities to maintain authority over public infrastructure, ensuring that high-quality services are delivered in the most efficient manner possible.

Examples of policies consistent with this approach include:

Broadband

- Recognizing and prioritizing broadband as an "essential service" and ensuring, affordable, reliable, high-speed access in every municipality for all community members.
- Expanding options for ownership to municipalities, nonprofits, and public-private partnerships, including pricing mechanisms (e.g., govt-to-govt 'e-rates').
- Providing open access networks that provide choice to community members.
- Supporting policies and funding that increase digital literacy, equity, and adoption.

Technology

- Providing support and resources to allow all cities and towns to access innovative technology to enhance government services and protect critical infrastructure from threats.

Utilities

- Minimizing regulatory and mandated costs on city-owned utilities that directly impact ratepayers and continuing efforts to ensure that rates remain affordable for local communities.
- Continuing to advance the use of technology in managing city utilities, including the use of smart grid technologies.

Parks and open space

- Increasing funding opportunities and tools that support municipalities in addressing the maintenance backlogs, preserve quality open spaces, and expand and improve athletic fields, parks, and aquatic centers to accommodate population growth.

Transportation

- Supporting policies that reduce and eliminate all traffic fatalities and injuries, while increasing safe, healthy, and equitable mobility for all.
- Supporting funding for safe and accessible transportation options for pedestrians, cyclists, wheelchair users, and other healthy and active forms of transportation.
- Identifying and securing additional sustainable revenue sources for local, regional, and statewide transportation needs that include connectivity to existing infrastructure and supports multimodal needs.
- Protecting cities and towns from discriminatory cost-sharing for state-owned routes that run through local jurisdictions.
- Supporting public transit, regional corridor, and connector projects that enhance community mobility and quality of life.

Public works

- Developing policies and resources to help maintain and modernize climate resilient water, sewer, and other public works.
- Ensuring that requirements and regulations are technically feasible and affordable.
- Enabling cities and towns to manage public works needs in the most efficient manner possible, including flexible and reasonable contracting and procurement requirements.

Municipal buildings

- Expanding funding to maintain and upgrade municipal buildings such as libraries, fire and police stations, and community centers.

Issue area policy statements

Economic development

Cities drive the state's economy as home to the majority of the state's economic activity. AWC supports the ability of cities and towns to have the economic development tools they need to build and sustain robust and diverse local economies, encourage global competitiveness for our state, and provide economic opportunity for city community members. These tools must include appropriate state infrastructure investment programs and flexible local options, and each city needs equitable access to tools that will be meaningful for their unique characteristics.

Examples of policies consistent with this approach include:

Funding

- Preserving equity of access to infrastructure funding, including the Public Works Assistance Account (PWAA) and Community Economic Revitalization Board (CERB), and increasing the availability of low- cost loans and grants to fund infrastructure that support economic activity.
- Strengthening, expanding, and making less restrictive tax increment financing as a tool to fund public infrastructure that supports economic development.
- Encouraging state investment in economic development projects for which the increased revenue generation and return to the state is significant.
- Supporting and encouraging opportunities and funding for workforce development.

Public/private partnerships

- Establishing more public and private sector collaboration, partnerships, and joint ventures to help regions innovate and realize their unique potential.
- Creating more programs to help small businesses start, grow, and thrive.

Tourism

- Increasing marketing and other efforts to bolster tourism throughout the state.
- Preserving and enhancing local options to impose and use funds to promote tourism.
- Continuing to support policies that recognize that tourism of all kinds benefits our communities.

Health & human services

AWC supports a robust and coordinated effort of all levels of government to support all social determinants of health, particularly the mental and behavioral health needs of every resident. To produce better outcomes for vulnerable populations, our community members need increased capacity for mental health treatment, behavioral health treatment, and substance use disorder treatment and prevention. AWC supports creation of additional capacity at all levels of the behavioral health continuum, including community-based treatment, crisis first response and crisis stabilization, inpatient and outpatient treatment options that are timely accessible to all, and substance use prevention.

AWC supports the state empowering cities' and towns' authority and resources to build community capacity and provide additional services tailored to address the existing local resource gaps and expand on the existing treatment capacity. To address increasing demands on the human services and behavioral health systems, cities must have flexibility to pursue additional local and private resources, as well as state and federal funding.

Examples of policies consistent with this approach include:

Behavioral health

- Supporting increases in the workforce pipeline for mental and behavioral health professionals.
- Expanding substance use disorder education, prevention, and treatment programs and services that are accessible for all – including culturally, financially, geographically, and with immediate capacity. This includes an emphasis on substance use disorder treatment services particularly opioids and fentanyl.
- Expanding funding and securing dedicated revenue streams to offset the costs of providing co-responder programs, therapeutic courts, and other mental and behavioral health services.

Human services

- Expanding funding and securing dedicated revenue streams to support human service programs that are directly provided by cities or have significant city input and oversight.
- Enhancing the role of cities and towns in the policymaking and funding decisions processes.

Childcare

- Supporting efforts to expand access to affordable childcare statewide. This includes additional state investments in capital construction of childcare facilities, expanding ECEAP, Head Start, and Transitional Kindergarten programs, and supporting expansion of childcare programs in rural and underserved areas.

Issue area policy statements

Public safety and criminal justice

AWC supports cities' authority and ability to respond to evolving societal demands to protect public safety and ensure that sufficient emergency preparedness and criminal justice resources are available for their communities. Cities and towns cannot meet the expanding need for public safety, criminal justice, and behavioral health services with dwindling fiscal resources, and therefore cities and towns support establishing additional tools for municipal revenue and eliminating existing restrictions on local revenue sources.

AWC recognizes the critical role cities and towns play as first responders, and the need for continued state, county, and local coordination. City officials need local decision-making authority and flexibility to work with their community members on appropriate policies and solutions that meet the needs of their communities. We support cities' and towns' ability to affect statewide public safety (including law enforcement, fire, and emergency medical services) and criminal justice policy decisions that impact their communities.

Examples of policies consistent with this approach include:

Public safety

- Continuing full funding for the Basic Law Enforcement Academy and all state-mandated law enforcement training.
- Securing funding to support for co-responder programs.
- Encouraging programs that build positive community relationships with police, particularly in diverse communities.
- Providing funding for necessary upgrades and replacements for inadequate essential public safety infrastructure, including 911 and interoperability.
- Exploring options to efficiently and cost-effectively provide fire and emergency medical services to communities, including through the use of technology and interlocal cooperation.
- Investing in prevention and intervention programs to reduce criminal activity.
- Pursuing expansion of mental health outreach services outside of the criminal justice system.

Criminal justice

- Providing ongoing funding for therapeutic courts, diversion programs, community courts, and alternative court models.
- Providing additional state financial support to ensure access to justice and indigent defense services.

Emergency management

- Providing resources and technical support to build local emergency preparedness and response capacity.
- Streamlining and increasing the flow of funding and resources during emergencies.
- Supporting cities' and towns' ability to continue broad-based planning and training for response to emergencies of all types.

Issue area policy statements

Human resources

AWC recognizes the vital role of public sector employees in serving our communities. AWC supports cities' and towns' efforts to be responsible employers that provide a quality work environment, and that can attract and maintain a robust, diverse, highly-qualified, and fairly compensated workforce throughout all economic cycles. Given that human resource-related expenses account for a substantial portion of municipal budgets, AWC supports cities and towns having broad discretion to manage their workforces and establish sustainable approaches to managing related costs.

Examples of policies consistent with this approach include:

Workforce

- Ensuring pay and benefit equity for public sector employees, while balancing city fiscal conditions.
- Ensuring that cities and towns have the flexibility to make appropriate staffing decisions to respond to fiscal realities and the needs of their communities.
- Providing meaningful participation for cities in decisions regarding human resources policies and regulations including the adoption of new state benefit programs that impact city budgets and workforces.
- Empowering cities and towns to develop diverse and inclusive workforces to serve our communities.
- Supporting cities' efforts to promote employee health and well-being with additional tools and resources to help reduce and better manage workers compensation claims and costs.

Pensions

- Maintaining reasonable and predictable pension contribution rates and costs.
- Minimizing financial impacts of pension benefit and pension system changes.
- Providing cities with meaningful input in the decision-making process for the pension system.

Labor relations

- Ensuring that fiscal sustainability and city priorities are considered as part of funding and policy decisions regarding labor relations and collective bargaining requirements.
- Ensuring cities and towns are provided broad authority to manage their personnel and personnel-related costs, including health care and other benefits.

Issue area policy statements

Land use

Management of land use within a city is a core function of community self-governance. It is one of the most fundamental means by which community members see and feel their communities grow and change around them. The ability of community members to shape that growth is a key feature of city governance. The preservation of community-based decision-making remains a crucial underpinning of effective local land use policies. However, AWC recognizes that there are issues of regional and statewide significance that sometimes necessitate collaboration and policy consistency among multiple levels of government.

AWC supports clearly defined state goals that guide local land use, housing, economic development, transportation, and public facility planning – to successfully accommodate growth requires careful alignment across all of these sectors and more. Policies that place the state in a role of determining “how” cities and towns are to meet statewide or regional goals should only advance in rare cases and after substantive engagement with cities. All such policies must have a clear and compelling case that a statewide approach will be most effective, be narrowly tailored, maintain significant local discretion on implementation, and recognize the differing financial needs and capacity of cities and towns and their community members. Policies must recognize that not all cities have the same challenges or opportunities. To the extent statewide mandates drive local costs, those costs must be provided for by the state.

AWC supports policies that encourage the growth of cities and towns in ways that more efficiently provide and maintain necessary infrastructure and services, and that are achieved through state growth and annexation policies, and financing. AWC supports a shared and equitable responsibility for all cities to accept and accommodate a growing population and supports the authority of cities to determine how best to manage that growth as appropriate for the growth rate, size, resources, and character of each community.

Examples of policies consistent with this approach include:

Growth Management Act (GMA)

- Supporting approaches that preserve community-based decision-making and plan for balanced growth as determined by each region consistent with statewide goals.
- Maintaining and increase state and local resources that are directed towards providing necessary infrastructure to support population growth.
- Supporting tools for growth management and densification that are appropriate for various sizes of communities.
- Supporting expectations that all communities will do their part within their available resources to accommodate future growth.

Issue area policy statements

Affordable housing and homelessness

Washington cities and towns of every size are grappling with the lack of available affordable housing for their community members. Cities believe that all of our community members deserve a safe roof over their head. Cities and towns are struggling with limited resources while they seek to increase available housing for their current and future community members to live and thrive. Cities and towns play different roles in promoting affordable housing, from development authority, zoning, and building regulations, to funding partnerships. One role that they rarely play, however, is to build and operate housing. Instead, cities and towns are largely dependent on others to choose to build in our cities. However, cities are on the front lines to encourage housing development and also face the reverberating implications of limited housing availability. In particular, the challenges with ensuring enough access to housing in our communities is a direct contributor to the challenges facing our community members experiencing homelessness.

AWC supports policies that recognize all cities need to participate in accommodating the state's projected growth and need the planning support to do so effectively. AWC seeks to educate policymakers that housing development in any community involves a complex mix of factors, including not just the unique role that city governments play in facilitating housing development, but also the roles of other parties, and circumstances outside of a city government's control. AWC supports statewide housing policies that acknowledge the differing real estate markets, financial needs and capacity of cities and towns and their community members, and that not all cities have the same challenges or opportunities. AWC recognizes that while some cities may need greater stock of affordable housing, others may have gaps in other market sectors.

Because cities and towns cannot solve the problem alone, AWC strongly supports new revenue and policy tools to promote the construction of housing – especially for our lower income community members. Increasing affordable housing requires a sustained, innovative approach and a working partnership with the private sector, nonprofit organizations, and county, state, and federal agencies.

Examples of policies consistent with this approach include:

Affordable housing

- Supporting policies and resources that create sufficient, quality, and affordable housing for diverse constituents (e.g., workforce, low income, seniors, disabled, and homeless) and remove barriers to creating an adequate and diverse housing supply.
- Ensuring sufficient resources for cities and towns to meet the housing needs estimates the state requires cities to plan for.
- Supporting policies that increase home ownership opportunities.
- Maintaining and increasing local resources to address unmet housing needs, including funds for shelters, transitional and permanent housing for moderate- and low-income, homeless, farm worker, and special needs populations.
- Increasing funding for statewide programs that support the development of affordable housing for cities of all sizes and circumstances.

Homelessness

- Increasing available resources to support additional short term emergency shelters.
- Ensuring cities and towns opting to provide city services or to complement state and regional efforts have resources to provide compassionate solutions for the unhoused in our communities - including rent subsidies, safe parking, emergency shelter, transitional shelter, and behavioral health beds.
- Ensuring resources are provided to address unsanctioned and unsafe encampments and provide access to safe housing for their community members.

Issue area policy statements

Environment

AWC supports a commitment to environmental stewardship, which includes the regulation and protection of our air, water quality, water quantity, climate, ecosystems, stormwater, and solid waste systems. We recognize that a balanced but bold approach is essential if we are to simultaneously protect the environment, allow for expanding populations, and provide necessary economic and social opportunities. Ecological improvements are coming too slowly for species vital to Washington State. Bold leadership and vision are needed to improve ecological functions as part of our future.

AWC supports reforms to the state environmental regulatory system that adhere to the principles of effectiveness, simplicity, fairness, equity, and balance. All reforms and policies must also recognize the financial needs and capacity of cities and their community members, and not infringe upon cities' and towns' ability to reflect local priorities and economies. Federal, state, and county agencies that rely on new and existing city and town actions to protect the environment must adequately support cities with funding and technical assistance that is tailored to fit local needs and circumstances.

Examples of policies consistent with this approach include:

Climate change

- Supporting statewide carbon reduction efforts that meet the principles described above.
- Encouraging and providing resources for community sustainability and resilience planning and implementation.
- Enabling and supporting locally based carbon emission reduction efforts.
- Investing in efforts to build a green economy.

Solid and hazardous waste

- Increasing recycling/reuse programs.
- Supporting product stewardship programs.

Regulatory reform

- Streamlining outdated regulatory systems to reduce administrative costs and barriers while maintaining environmental protections.

Water and air quality

- Enhancing water and air quality programs, which must include cost and technical support considerations for implementation by individual communities and be tailored to meet local needs.
- Developing and utilize best available science in regulatory initiatives.
- Supporting water conservation and management tools that enhance flexibility and enable cities to continue to grow while making the best use of limited resources, including developing long-term regional water supply plans.
- Developing and fund a comprehensive approach to fish habitat restoration.
- Recognizing that regulations must acknowledge when city utilities are passive receivers of contaminants that a city or town has no control over.



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