Cityvision

THE ASSOCIATION OF WASHINGTON CITIES MAGAZINE

BRIGHT FUTURE

Setting your city up for long-term success

AWC ASSOCIATION OF WASHINGTON CITIES

FALL 2025
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FROM THE PRESIDENT

All across Washington, local leaders are working hard to build communities that will thrive—not just today, but for generations to come. We've each chosen to make our lives in our corner of this beautiful state because of the quality of life, economy, natural beauty, and so much more. And we all share a commitment to ensuring future generations can continue to grow and thrive here.

In this issue of *Cityvision* magazine, we explore what it means to be built to last—from engaging residents in local governance to navigating tough budget decisions and investing in public safety.

You'll read about how Yakima is building community support during a challenging financial moment, and how cities are creating space for youth voices and civic education. Economist Chris Mefford offers insights on where to focus your city's economic development efforts, and we highlight new funding options that can help cities of all sizes move forward. We also introduce AWC Board member and Lake Stevens Mayor Brett Gailey, whose city earned accreditation from the American Public Works Association—bringing positive changes citywide and a boost to their bond rating.

These stories show that building for long-term success depends on more than infrastructure—it's also about people. When we listen, invite our residents to engage with their government, and stay focused on what matters most to our communities, we create a lasting impact.

As you read, I hope you'll find inspiration in the stories of these cities and towns, and perhaps a few ideas to bring home to your own community. Every municipality faces its own unique challenges, but as we share strategies and learn from one another, we strengthen the foundation of local government throughout our state. By fostering participation, cultivating trust, and investing in people, we not only build strong cities but also enrich the lives of everyone who calls Washington home.

Fred Brink
Mayor pro tem, West Richland

Cityvision

Fall 2025

Lake Stevens Mayor Brett Gailey leverages a military and law enforcement career to streamline local government.
CALL OF DUTY
P. 11

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHONA KASINGER

A STRONGER ALLY FOR WASHINGTON'S CITIES

Since 2010, Lighthouse Law Group has stood beside Washington's municipalities. Now, with the addition of veteran municipal attorney, DAN LLOYD, our team's ability to protect and advise cities has never been stronger.

Dan brings more than two decades of experience representing local governments in high-profile litigation and day-to-day municipal challenges. His record speaks for itself:

- Former law clerk for the Washington Supreme Court
- Successfully defended cities in complex federal and state cases involving civil rights, employment disputes, public records, personal injury, and more
- Legal advisor to Washington's fourth largest city on issues from open government to finance and risk management
- Past president of the Washington State Association of Municipal Attorneys and chair of its Amicus Committee
- Briefed 30+ appeals to Washington appellate courts, the Ninth Circuit, and the United States Supreme Court
- Frequent presenter on municipal law topics affecting cities statewide

Dan's depth of knowledge, proven advocacy, and commitment to public service strengthen our mission: helping Washington cities navigate risk, stay compliant, and thrive.

Lighthouse Law Group PLLC

www.lighthouselawgroup.com

Citybeat

Class Action

Citizen academies help demystify city operations—and inspire residents to embrace the work of local government.

BY KAYA WILLIAMS

TO THOSE WHO DON'T happen to work at city hall and only visit to pay a utility bill or a parking ticket, local government can seem like a "black box."

"Tax money comes in, sometimes a project comes out—you don't know the people behind it," says Jeff Niten, the city manager of Mountlake Terrace. "You don't know the 'why.'"

To remedy that situation, in February, Niten and Deputy City Manager Carolyn Hope launched MLT Community Academy, a six-week civic engagement program designed to lift the veil on the inner workings of their city. For two hours every Wednesday evening, more than a dozen students of local government participated in interactive experiences and behind-the-scenes tours at city hall and **CONTINUED ON P.10** ▶

TOOLKIT ▶ FORECASTING SUSTAINABLE GROWTH **GROWTH CHART** ▶ WASHINGTON'S FASTING GROWING CITIES **FRESH IDEA** ▶ CONNECTING STUDENTS WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT

TOOLKIT

Data Driven

Economic development guru Chris Mefford on forecasting sustainable growth.

BY KAYA WILLIAMS

WHEN IT COMES TO community development, the conversation among residents, business owners, and local government might sound something like this: "'We're growing too quickly,' or 'We're growing too slowly,'" says regional economist Chris Mefford, the founder, president, and CEO of Community Attributes Inc.

His Seattle-based community and economic development consulting firm works with cities around Washington state (and around the country) to ground those conversations in data. Mefford also helps local leaders interpret information to achieve their community's vision and goals for the future.

"It's a story every time," says Mefford, noting that one city might be focused on downtown vitality while another prioritizes high-density housing. Here, he answers a few questions that should be top of mind for growth-oriented local leaders.

When cities are trying to boost their economic development, is there a hierarchy of what they should focus on?

We have a pyramid: The foundation of that is to be a good place. Are your neighborhoods safe? Are there good schools? Is the environment well taken care of? The second tier of that pyramid is for cities to take stock of their local economy and help businesses and workers thrive. Business climate, local tax policies, and access to training and education all come into play. When you get into business attraction [the third tier], we view that as a rather long-odds game. I do think it is a useful area to invest in. Cities should go after what they want. But the sure bet is to work with the businesses that are already there.

If a city official wants to get a better understanding of how the economy is impacting their revenue sources, what's your recommended approach?

I want cities to always boil it down to the source of their revenues, and in Washington state, the two greatest fiscal drivers are property values and sales transactions. To a lesser extent, there's also business income taxes. So, how do the businesses thrive? How are sales playing out in my community, and what's the value of the land and the property in my city?

We're in an interesting time for the economy. What's the snapshot right now for the state of Washington?

Washington has something going for it that many states across the country just don't have, which is that people want to move here all the time. With that comes a lot of sustainable growth. Washington [also] has a very well-diversified economy, and that will serve the state very well, even while the nation goes through some turmoil when it comes to tariffs and trade. Those are super important to the overall economy and the individual industries, but when you blend it all together across the state, we would expect Washington to fare far better than most.

When it comes to economic forecasts, what data should decision-makers pay attention to?

I think city leaders have to start by understanding their region and the city's role. There are also other metrics [like] jobs-to-housing-unit ratio, and benchmarking that against the region as a whole. You can then understand the degree to which you're a bedroom community versus an employment center. The regional economy will rise and fall on its own volition, and cities need to understand how to participate in that [and understand] their local strengths.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

For more information:
communityattributes.com

CHARTING GROWTH

According to the latest estimates from the Washington State Office of Financial Management, Washington added nearly 80,000 new residents in 2024, boosting the state's population to over 8.1 million.

However, the rate of growth is slower than the growth experienced over the past decade and continues to be driven by migration rather than birth rates. Of the 79,400 Washington newcomers, nearly 80% (62,348) moved into an incorporated city or town. Despite a majority of the growth taking place in cities, 36 cities saw a decrease in population growth and 61 saw no growth at all.

Top 10 cities by
POPULATION INCREASE

1. **SEATTLE** = 18,900
2. **TACOMA** = 3,300
3. **BELLEVUE** = 3,000
4. **VANCOUVER** = 2,500
5. **REDMOND** = 2,340
6. **SHORELINE** = 1,830
7. **SPOKANE** = 1,700
8. **SPOKANE VALLEY** = 1,400
9. **AUBURN** = 1,370
10. **MARYSVILLE** = 1,250

Top 10 cities by
POPULATION GROWTH RATE

1. **ENTIAT** = 10.55%
2. **NOOKSACK** = 9.28%
3. **CUSICK** = 9.09%
4. **YACOLT** = 6.89%
5. **INDEX** = 6.25%
6. **LA CENTER** = 5.56%
7. **PORT ORCHARD** = 5.25%
8. **BURLINGTON** = 4.80%
9. **MALDEN** = 4.00%
10. **NORTH BEND** = 4.00%

Source: State Office of Financial Management

FRESH IDEA

POLICY OF YOUTH

Connecting students with local government helps cities plan for the future.

BY KAYA WILLIAMS

IF YOU PUT A bunch of fourth graders in city hall, you might as well expect a bit of chaos. "Delightful chaos," says Amy Howard, the deputy mayor of Port Townsend.

Kids' questions range from the practical—"What's your job? How much do you get paid?"—to the silly and absurd. Like, "Can I have your teeth?"

"Kids are weird," Howard jokes. But they're also prime targets for engagement and outreach programs—like the mock city council meetings that Howard helps organize in collaboration with local teachers. Students choose topics to debate and get to fulfill roles like mayor, councilmember, and public commenter.

Howard wants students to take home a "feeling of power" and a knowledge of how their local government works, because that "leads to the ability to work within it." Community members, even at the youngest age, are less likely to feel angry and disenfranchised "if somebody teaches you how to have your voice heard."

Youth engagement efforts can help the community understand that city employees are people, too, says Port Orchard Mayor Rob Putaansuu.

"Part of it, for me, is humanizing who I am," Putaansuu says. He has organized mock council meetings in the past and now goes into a leadership class to talk with secondary school students about his job.

Like Howard, Putaansuu has fielded some lighthearted questions: Tweens and teens ask about his favorite band and favorite foods. But he also sees it as an opportunity to bust misconceptions and empower youth with "accurate, firsthand information" about their community. That's especially relevant at a time when misinformation spreads over social media, Putaansuu notes.

LEADERSHIP PIPELINE

THE EDUCATION DOESN'T STOP when students go home. Spokane City Council President Betsy Wilkerson says kids often share their experiences from city hall tours and mock council meetings with the adults in their lives. Spokane also distributes booklets about the structure of city government—translated into multiple languages—that are designed for kids, but are also helpful for adults, Wilkerson says.

Wilkerson wants these future voters to build and model pride in their community by participating in the civic process. She recently met with high school students and asked, "What do you want to see in our city?" reminding them of the power of the pen and the power of their voice.

Spokane also offers a youth seat on many of its volunteer boards and commissions. So does the city of Bothell, which hosts city hall tours, classroom outreach, and a Law Day where students can learn about different branches of government. Youth were also involved in the visioning process for what Bothell should look like in 2040.

Bothell City Manager Kyle Stannert credits a "millennial city council"—and other leaders on staff—for guiding the city's long-range planning goals.

"We hear all the time that people are looking for professions where they get to do something for the greater good," says Stannert, who understands that young people who are given an opportunity to shape a city's future while in high school are more likely to step up as leaders when their time comes.

For more information:
cityofpt.us, portorchardwa.gov, myspokanecity.org, bothellwa.gov

NOTED

HOUSE BILL 2015

CHAPTER 350, LAWS OF 2025 | PUBLIC SAFETY FUNDING

CHAPTER 4.101 RCW

To qualify for grant funding, cities must either authorize the new sales tax in this bill (section 201), which is councilmanic for cities, or receive funding from the sales taxes authorized by 82.14.340 or 82.14.450.

The maximum state share of $125,000 is over the three-year duration of the grant that may be spent toward each job position.

There is no definition provided in the bill or in state law about what "community" entails and thus may be interpreted broadly.

This councilmanic sales tax may be used for "criminal justice purposes," which is defined broadly to also include city services related to civil justice and behavioral health services including things like homelessness, public defense, diversion, outreach, and more.

The councils of both a city and a county can authorize a new 0.1% sales tax and are not required to share a portion with the other.

While the sales tax is permanent once passed, cities wanting to pass the tax by a vote of their councils need to do so before June 30, 2028, after which point it becomes a voter-approved tax.

There are specific policy and training requirements that the Criminal Justice Training Commission (CJTC) is tasked with verifying. Cities need to meet the same requirements to access both the grant and/or sales tax.

Cities can move to pass the sales tax as soon as they would like, and do not have to wait for CJTC to finalize its process for verifying that requirements are met, so long as they send documentation to CJTC.

PART I
Local Law Enforcement Grant Program

NEW SECTION. **Sec.** A new section is added to chapter 43.101 RCW to read as follows:

GRANT PROGRAM. (1) Subject to the availability of amounts appropriated for this specific purpose … the [criminal justice training] commission shall develop and implement a local law enforcement grant program for the purpose of providing direct support to local and tribal law enforcement agencies in hiring, retaining, and training law enforcement officers, peer counselors, and behavioral health personnel working in co-response to increase community policing and public safety.

……

(7) Grant funding awarded to local and tribal law enforcement agencies may only be used for the purposes of:

(a) Recruiting, funding, and retaining new law enforcement officers from the community in which the officer will be working, and recruiting, funding, and retaining new county corrections officers, peer counselors, and behavioral health personnel working in co-response in Washington state. Grants may provide up to 75 percent of the entry-level salaries and fringe benefits of full-time local or tribal law enforcement officers for a maximum of 36 months, with a minimum 25 percent local cash match requirement and a maximum state share of $125,000 per position. Any additional costs for salaries and benefits higher than entry level are the responsibility of the grant recipient agency. Recruiting lateral hires is not a permissible use of funds under this section;

……

PART I
Local Sales and Use Tax

NEW SECTION. **Sec.** A new section is added to chapter 82.14 RCW to read as follows:

LOCAL SALES AND USE TAX. (1)(a) By June 30, 2028, the legislative authority of a qualified city or county may authorize, by resolution or ordinance, a sales and use tax in accordance with the terms of this chapter. The resolution or ordinance must include a finding that the city or county has met the requirements under (c) of this subsection.

(b) If a city or county legislative authority has not adopted a resolution or ordinance to impose the tax under (a) of this subsection by June 30, 2028, the city or county may submit an authorizing proposition to the city or county voters at a primary or general election, and if the proposition is approved by the majority of persons voting, impose the sales and use tax under this section.

(c) A qualified city or county may impose the tax authorized under this section only if the city or county meets the requirements to receive a grant under section 101 of this act. A city or county that has not issued and implemented policies and practices as required under section 101(3)
and (4) of this act may not impose the tax authorized under this section.

(d) To establish that the city or county qualifies under (c) of this subsection, the city or county must submit documentation, in a form and manner prescribed by the criminal justice training commission, demonstrating the city or county meets the requirements of section 101 of this act. A city or county that wishes to impose the tax authorized under this section may submit documentation to the commission before the commission finalizes the form and manner of such submittals and may not be penalized for doing so. However, once the commission has established the form and manner of the submission, all cities and counties must make submissions as prescribed.

For more information:
wacities.org

THE QUESTION

WHAT'S ONE INVESTMENT YOUR CITY IS MAKING TODAY TO ENSURE IT REMAINS A GREAT PLACE TO LIVE, WORK, AND THRIVE FAR INTO THE FUTURE?

Like many cities, we face tight budgets. Yet we made a calculated, forward-looking investment: building our own fiber optic network as a new public utility. This ensures all residents have affordable, reliable internet—essential for work, education, and healthcare. The risk is paying off. It's actively enhancing quality of life while generating a sustainable revenue stream, strengthening our city's finances for the long term.

TJ FANTINI
Councilmember, Anacortes

Redmond is investing in transit-oriented development to create more accessible, sustainable neighborhoods. Through building vibrant, walkable housing communities around light rail stations, we can connect residents to jobs, services, and each other, ensuring our city remains livable and inclusive for generations to come.

ANGELA BIRNEY
Mayor, Redmond

Our focus for 2025 is economic development and expanded parks and trail activities. Using our Healing Waters Strategic Plan as our guide, we sought to purchase the 67-acre Waterfront Park and Trail system, leased from the state for more than 50 years. To our amazement, we were gifted the entire system and awarded funding for the closing costs. Being engaged, building relationships, and having the plan secured a key component of our economic development plan.

TERRI COOPER
Mayor, Medical Lake

AWC TRAININGS

AWC MEMBER EXPO
OCTOBER 8-9 | CHELAN

Members of AWC's Member Pooling Programs come together to network and learn about the power of pooling and the value of investing in employees. Explore topics such as trends and best practices in health, risk management, safety, impacts of drugs and alcohol in the workplace, and more.

Elected Officials Essentials Workshop

DECEMBER 6 | MULTIPLE LOCATIONS AND ONLINE

Following municipal elections every other year, AWC offers its signature Elected Officials Essentials Workshop. New and seasoned elected and appointed officials alike will benefit from this training event, which explores the most critical legal and functional responsibilities for officeholders. The workshop will take place live at AWC's office in Olympia, with a live stream to each satellite location in the morning and on-site legal counsel at each location in the afternoon.

Elected Officials Essentials webinar series

- **COMPREHENDING QUASI-JUDICIAL HEARINGS**
  NOVEMBER 12 | ONLINE

AWC EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT FORUM
OCTOBER 2 | WENATCHEE

MAYORS EXCHANGE
OCTOBER 3 | WENATCHEE

AWC ANNUAL CONFERENCE
JUNE 23–26, 2026 | SPOKANE

AWC ELEARNINGS
ANYTIME | ONLINE
wacities.org/events-education/elearning-by-category

For more information:
wacities.org

Class Action continued from page 5

the police, public works, and parks and recreation departments. They learn about everything from budgeting and finances to zoning compliance and economic development, to law enforcement's community outreach efforts and sewage treatment and stormwater management.

"This was a great opportunity for people to learn about what our city does directly from our staff and to visit various city facilities and ask questions," Niten says. "We hope it improves people's connection to the city and instills a desire to influence city policy or to serve the city as a volunteer."

Niten notes that MLT Community Academy, which will reprise in early 2026, was also an opportunity for city staff and leadership to meet and get direct feedback from the public they serve, and a chance for citizens to put faces to those who do the work of local government and make sometimes controversial decisions on their behalf.

"If you know someone as a person, and you have interacted with them in less stressful situations, [then] when there comes a time when we might disagree, people still understand that we listen and we heard them," he adds. "The more citizen participation we have in government decision-making, the better the decisions are going to be for the community."

That sentiment is echoed by local leaders offering similar citizen academies in cities across the state.

Dana Ralph, the mayor of Kent and a host of her city's Kent 101 education program, says a big benefit of the initiative is "the ability to have an entire conversation," rather than just a three-minute statement at a council meeting.

Some people sign up "because they're just curious" about government operations, Ralph says. Others do it "because they have that one issue that's really making them crazy."

"The good news is, by the time we're done, we generally have fans," Ralph says, noting that those fans—who graduate in groups of about 30 at a time—can help quell misinformation and share what they've learned with even more people in the community, serving as goodwill ambassadors. "It's a way to show our residents that every single day, we're working to make this a better place. I don't know any other format that allows for that, right? In council meetings, you don't have that time with people to build a relationship and get to talk about the good stuff. So I think it's worth it, if nothing else, just to be able to celebrate the great things that are happening in our cities."

Ralph says Kent 101 also serves as a pipeline for volunteer boards and commissions, inspiring participants to get even more involved. Exhibit A: One recent graduate of Kent 101 joined the city's comprehensive plan community advisory board, then secured a seat on the land use and planning board. Earlier this year, he announced a run for city council.

The city of Puyallup has had similar success with its Puyallup 101 citizen academy program, recruiting graduates to run volunteer programs and even hiring some as city staff.

"Hands-on tours" and "experiences" are a big hit with participants in the series, says Pam Lacipierre, an executive assistant in the Puyallup city manager's office. "Our wastewater treatment plant is a favorite," and "people love public works, because they can see and touch the things that they see out on the streets."

Puyallup even makes city budgeting fun, with its finance manager dealing out Monopoly money and asking participants to set their funding priorities accordingly.

"Doing [the city's work] in a fun, gamified way gets them thinking more critically about these tough decisions," Johnson explains. "If people are more engaged and they know what's going on, they also hold us to account. It creates this nice symbiotic relationship."

"THE GOOD NEWS IS, BY THE TIME WE'RE DONE, WE GENERALLY HAVE FANS. IT'S A WAY TO SHOW OUR RESIDENTS THAT EVERY SINGLE DAY, WE'RE WORKING TO MAKE THIS A BETTER PLACE."

—Dana Ralph, Mayor of Kent

For more information: cityofmlt.com, kentwa.gov, cityofpuyallup.org

Cityscope

Lake Stevens Mayor Brett Gailey

Q&A

Call of Duty

Lake Stevens Mayor and AWC Board Member Brett Gailey leverages a career in military service and law enforcement to bring efficiency and accountability to local governments.

INTERVIEW BY JEN KRAZIT

What brought you to Lake Stevens?
I've lived in the Lake Stevens area since 2004, when I moved from Idaho with my family. My wife, Micah, is a CPA for a hospital. I have what I call two "batches" of children: my five older kids, ages 20 to 31, and my two youngest, who are 3 and 4 years old.

What did you do before you became an elected official?
I joined the Army early in life and later served a church mission in the Dominican Republic. When I returned, I attended Boise State University and earned a degree in Spanish literature. I began my law enforcement career in 1998 with the Boise Police Department, and in 2004 I joined the Everett Police Department.

CONTINUED ON P.12 ▶

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHONA KASINGER

Q&A

Mayor Gailey in his office at Lake Stevens City Hall

Alongside my police work, I served in the Idaho National Guard until about 2014, completing two tours in Iraq. I then transferred to the U.S. Army Reserve as a military intelligence officer, serving in assignments that took me to Japan and Florida. My final posting was commanding a small unit at Joint Base Lewis-McChord. I retired from the Army Reserve in June 2025.

You became mayor in 2020 and were on city council before that. Why did you decide to run for public office?
I like to joke that the "gateway drug" to politics is serving as your neighborhood HOA president—and that's where it started for me. My career has always been about building community solutions, and the military taught me leadership. When progress stalled on a park project in my neighborhood, I decided to get involved. I joined the city's planning commission, then ran for and won a seat on the city council. In 2020, after 21 years in law enforcement, I retired from the police department. When the previous mayor chose not to seek re-election, I ran for the office and won. The city council later made the role a full-time position.

You joined the AWC Board of Directors last year. What made you decide to get involved with AWC?
Being a full-time mayor made me want to engage with organizations larger than my own city. AWC was a natural fit—every city in Washington is a member, from the biggest metro to the smallest town. I wanted to be part of a group that represents all of them.

"WE CHANGED THE CULTURE WITHIN OUR CITY, BECAUSE NOW THERE'S A PROCESS OF ACCOUNTABILITY WITH OUR SYSTEMS."

What do you hope to achieve as AWC Board member?
One of my ongoing focuses is AI and technology—specifically how they can improve organizational efficiency. Larger cities often have the resources to research and implement new systems, but smaller cities don't. I want to help AWC identify and share innovations that can make local government more efficient statewide, particularly for those smaller cities that need the tools but lack the bandwidth to find and deploy them.

Last year Lake Stevens won accreditation with the American Public Works Association. How did that come about?
As a retired police officer, I realized I didn't fully understand city operations from an administrative perspective. At an APWA conference, I learned about their accreditation program—a detailed set of best practices for municipal operations. At first, we weren't even ready to begin. Our policies and procedures were scattered across various shared drives—or sitting in dusty binders. It took a year just to organize ourselves enough to start the accreditation process, and two years to complete it. It may not be glamorous, but I consider it one of my proudest accomplishments.

What does the APWA accreditation mean for the city?
Lake Stevens is one of only seven cities in Washington—and 214 nationwide—with this accreditation. It required us to get our policies and procedures in order not just in public works, but in all the supporting departments like HR, finance, and administration.
The results have been tangible: improved customer service, a culture of accountability, and, unexpectedly, a bond rating upgrade from Aa2 to Aa1 by Moody's. They recognized the improvement and standardization in our policies, which ultimately saved the city money by lowering borrowing costs.

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHONA KASINGER

BY THE NUMBERS

Lake Stevens

Tracking growth and other metrics in Lake Stevens.

POPULATION

POPULATION DATA FROM THE US CENSUS BUREAU

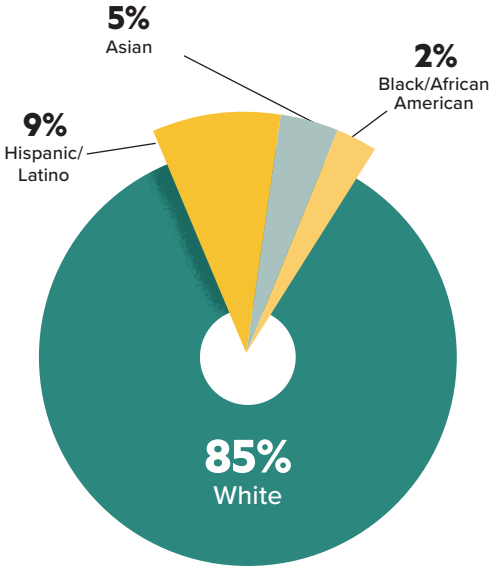
2000 **6,631**

2025 **42,180**

563% INCREASE

SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU

DEMOGRAPHICS



INCOME & POVERTY

$118,290
Lake Stevens median household income (2023)

5%
of population living in poverty

$94,600
Statewide median income (2023)

10.3%
of statewide population living in poverty

A1 OKAY

7 Number of Washington cities with Aa1 rating

2024
Year Moody's Investor Service upgraded the city's bond rating from Aa2 to Aa1

$10.2M
Limited Tax General Obligation bonds issued to finance new city hall complex

GROWTH SPURT

48,565
2044 projected population

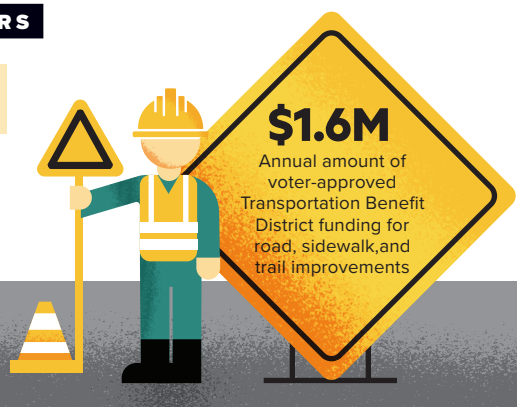
15.1%
Percent increase from 2025

MONEY MATTERS

$52.6M
2024 year-end revenue

$62.6M
2025 projected revenue

19% INCREASE



CREDIT SCORE

12 Number of APWA-accredited cities in Washington (including Lake Stevens)

2 Years it took Lake Stevens to achieve accreditation

214
APWA-accredited cities nationwide

99.7%
Compliance rating achieved

ECONOMY

#1 Rank of Lake Stevens School District as largest employer

6,800
Total number of local jobs

110%
Percent increase since 2009

HOUSING

75.3%
Home ownership rate

14,704
Number of housing units

$720,907
Average sales price

SOURCES: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, CITY OF LAKE STEVENS

Yakima City Manager
Vicki Baker

PHOTO BY CHONA KASINGER

Building a Better Budget

Facing a multimillion-dollar shortfall, **Yakima** revamps its budget process to engender public trust and establish a solid financial foundation for its future.

STORY BY JENNIFER KRAZIT

HOPING TO ADDRESS a long-simmering budget shortfall, the Yakima city council agreed in July to ask voters to approve a $6 million tax increase, with $3 million in targeted cuts. It's a bold ask, but one that could work based on data gleaned from a yearlong outreach effort to educate the public about the city's budget woes and get their input on prioritizing what services to cut or preserve.

The decision to put the proposed levy on the November ballot—and the sustainable budget it's designed to support—followed a marked change in the way the city creates its biennial budgets. This budget cycle, the city has embraced a priority-based budgeting process and solicited a great deal of public input. The move is an effort to build public trust and establish a more sustainable budget for the future as the city works to resolve a $9 million deficit.

Building a sustainable budget

At the center of this effort are Yakima City Manager Vicki Baker and financial services consultant Mike Bailey. Baker was hired as city manager in August 2024 to help the city navigate the thorny process of righting a budget that had been problematic for years. Together they're working to implement significant changes to the way Yakima's budget is drafted.

Last summer, Yakima's city council members went on a daylong retreat at the Yakima Convention Center to develop the broad community goals that would guide the upcoming budget process. Foremost among the strategic priorities they identified was a desire to build a resilient community. That meant streamlining city processes, adopting new budgeting processes, and building a sustainable budget—and the matter was urgent.

The budget the city council had adopted in December 2024 included a $9 million shortfall that meant the city would need to tap into its reserves by the second year of the budget cycle. And this wasn't an anomaly. Yakima's previous budget had been in the red by a similar margin, which the city addressed by making cuts and using funds from the American Rescue Plan Act.

This summer, as it prepared for the 2026 budget cycle, with economic conditions worsening and no easy way to raise new funds, the city knew it needed to make some changes.

"We have structural problems with the 1% cap on property tax," says Baker, referring to the statewide law that limits tax

"WE HAVE A STRUCTURAL PROBLEM WITH THE 1% CAP ON PROPERTY TAX … THE CITY HAS BEEN CUTTING FOR 24 YEARS AND THERE'S NOT A LOT OF FAT."

Downtown Yakima

PHOTO COURTESY SHUTTERSTOCK

increases by taxing districts to 1% annually. “We also have inflation hitting at the same time that federal money is drying up. The city has been cutting for 24 years, and there’s not a lot of fat, so this is going to be really rough.”

Setting priorities

One way the city council decided to approach the issue is by implementing priority-based budgeting, a process that’s growing in popularity among Washington municipalities. To help pull off the transition, they relied on Mike Bailey. As a consultant specializing in priority-based budgeting, Bailey has decades of experience helping cities across the state streamline budgets and solve other problems, most recently as director of finance and IT for the city of Redmond, with previous stints in similar roles in Renton, Lynnwood, Everett, Wenatchee, and Tacoma.

With a traditional budgeting process, governments start by rolling forward

7 TIPS FOR BETTER BUDGETING

Finance experts share their advice for ways cities of all sizes can improve their budget processes and build public trust.

David Goldman (left) is deputy city administrator and finance director for the City of Oak Harbor, serves on numerous committees with the Government Finance Officers Association, and is a member of the Government Accounting Standards Advisory Council. He has worked for more than 25 years in municipal finance roles from Florida and California to Washington.

Mike Bailey (right) spent several decades working as finance director for cities throughout Washington and now serves as an independent consultant helping cities in Washington and Colorado implement priority-based budgeting strategies.

Here are some ways they say cities can effectively implement new methods for budgeting that incorporate innovative approaches and increase collaboration.

1. BREAK THE BAD NEWS. Nobody wants to be the bearer of bad news. But when city staff waits until the last minute to share bad news with superiors or elected officials, it can lead to finger-pointing and create an emergency that robs leaders of valuable time to plan for a solution. “If there’s bad news, just show it,” says Goldman. “And make sure that the people who need to make the decisions—whether it’s other departments, a city manager, or elected officials—are aware of what the issue is, what the research and background are, and some scenarios that can mitigate the situation before it gets out of hand.”

2. PARTNER WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS. It’s important to build trusting relationships between city staff and elected officials with open communication and information sharing. “Staff tends to come from a technical perspective, whereas elected officials are the ones closest to the people,” says Goldman. When staff shares data, background, and subject-matter expertise, elected officials can apply that to their decision-making and come to solutions that address issues in a way that is most palatable for the community. ⟶

“TO ME, THE WORST THING I COULD DO WAS NOT COMMUNICATE THE MAGNITUDE OF THE SITUATION. … I WANT PEOPLE TO GO IN WITH THEIR EYES OPEN AND MAKE AN INFORMED DECISION.”

—Vicki Baker

PHOTO BY CHONA KASINGER

the current budget, estimating the next year's revenues, and comparing the two to see how the math looks. "Increasingly, it looks dismal," says Bailey. "So cities cut the budget, try to find efficiencies and leverage partnerships, which they should always be doing. But all those sorts of things have been done over the years and now the things left to cut are actual people who provide services."

By contrast, priority-based budgeting begins by setting strategic priorities, ranking individual programs and services by how they align with those priorities and how well they perform, then allocating funding accordingly.

In other words, according to Bailey, "It's not about asking 'What are we doing today, and what does that cost?' Priority-based budgeting puts off that question and starts with 'What should we be doing?'" And, notes Bailey, it can be particularly useful in times of scarcity, when revenues are flat or declining but costs are on the rise—conditions that Yakima and many other Washington cities face today.

The process begins by identifying high-level, essential services a city provides, such as public safety, infrastructure, and economic development, and also might include nonessential services that nevertheless are deemed mission critical, such as parks and recreation. The city then lists assets, programs, services, and amenities offered under each category, along with costs for every item.

For example, under the category of public safety, a city might list all its

3. MEET PEOPLE WHERE THEY'RE AT. These days, city business is being discussed far beyond the occasional city council meeting. Find out where your community tends to be actively talking about issues—whether that's Reddit, Facebook, or other social media websites—and look for ways to engage with them there.

4. CLEAR UP MISCONCEPTIONS. Miscommunication and misinformation can spread quickly on social media. Simple misunderstandings or half-truths about complex financial topics posted by one community member can be assumed to be true by many others. That can lead to large groups of people getting upset, voicing anger toward councilmembers, and even confusing their own understanding of an issue. "You might think you've explained everything to the city council, given your city manager and mayor all the background they need, and all of a sudden people show up making comments that can confuse the situation," says Goldman. By being proactive and jumping into online forums to clear up those details, cities can address misinformation early, before it snowballs.

5. SIMPLIFY COMPLEXITY. Don't rely on a budget book that is hundreds of pages thick and hard to understand. Instead, focus on breaking down complex concepts and putting things in bite-sized pieces so people—both elected officials and the general public—can better understand how the complexities of municipal finance can be worked through. "People like to talk about how city finance is just like running a household, but that doesn't always make sense," says Goldman, who's working to create dozens of short videos explaining all aspects of municipal finance for his city, ranging from Oak Harbor's budget process and annual financial statements to revenues and resources, bonds and loans, and how property taxes work in Washington state.

6. GET THE PUBLIC ENGAGED. "A lot of times, public involvement is limited to the public hearing, but by that time, the budget is pretty cooked and not a lot is going to change," says Bailey. "Public involvement needs to be done right up front and effectively." That can come in the form of nominating formal budget committees, distributing public surveys, holding neighborhood meetings with listening sessions, conducting interactive workshops using software tools, visioning exercises, or simple quadratic voting activities (a voting method that reflects the strength of people's preferences in collective decisions).

7. TRY SOMETHING NEW AND ITERATE. If you don't know where to start, just start somewhere. "Don't let the fact that you've never done it and you're uncertain about how much time it'll take stop you from trying or taking that first step," says Goldman. Although smaller cities have fewer resources than larger ones, he says there are ways to figure out how to redefine processes and do things more efficiently with technology. Also, because many city workers in smaller cities are forced to wear multiple hats, they often have more direct access to seeing how things run and being able to to talk directly to the people doing the work.

police precincts then, for each, list the staff and specialty services provided at that location, such as a narcotics unit, a property crimes unit, a canine unit, or a jail. Ditto for firehouses. For parks and recreation, the list might include every swimming pool, gymnasium, municipal park, and field house, along with specific programs and services offered at each of those facilities.

The result is a grid, with service categories at the top, followed by a list of all associated programs that can be ranked from top to bottom according to priority.

40% OF RESIDENTS DEEMED POLICE SPENDING TO BE THEIR TOP PRIORITY, FOLLOWED BY STREET MAINTENANCE AND INFRASTRUCTURE (26%), PARKS AND RECREATION AMENITIES (25%), AND FIRE PROTECTION (9%).

Inventorying the type and cost of every service a city provides might seem like a simple exercise, but once the grid is built, prioritizing the items in the grid requires a great deal of work, collaboration, and sometimes painful decisions.

"One of the challenges is that it forces you to say that not everything's equally important, and you have to get your head around the fact that the city can't do everything," says Bailey. "If everything can't be equally important, we have to stratify these programs as they relate to what our strategic plan said was important when

we developed it, and then allocate dollars against those priorities, starting at the top, across the spectrum, and working our way down."

As they work their way down the grid, most cities will run out of money before they run out of programs. At that point, a decision must be made, cutting one program in order to fund another, or possibly eliminating a category altogether. Another option: adjusting the revenue side of the equation by levying taxes or raising user fees.

"The question of how much money should be put to work—in other words, how high should taxes be, how high should fees be—is intrinsic to this process," says Bailey. "Once you've allocated what you expect to have and you see where that leaves you in terms of funding programs at one level or another, then you can go back and ask the question of whether your resources are adequate to meet the needs of the community."

Public education

Critical to implementing priority-based budgeting successfully, according to Bailey, is getting input from all stakeholders. That means department heads, employee committees, elected officials, and community members.

In Yakima, getting that public input took many forms, including conducting public surveys, holding town halls and community meetings, forming a community-led budget committee—all intended to get the word out to as many people across the community as possible.

"To me, the worst thing I could do is not communicate the magnitude of the situation," says City Manager Baker, adding that instead, she opted to "tell people with honesty about the situation we're in so they understand what's at stake and what will happen." For her, the public meetings were as much about getting people properly informed ahead of November's levy vote as they were about resetting expectations of the programs and services Yakima can afford to provide.

"I want people to go in with their eyes open and make an informed decision, and if they say no [to the levy], we'll implement their decision," says Baker. "If we're going to reduce the city's services by $9 million, expectations are going to need to change."

Despite the fact that the budget had been problematic for several years, the issue seemed to fly under most people's radar. So Baker put together a presentation informing people about the budget gap, sharing the history and structure of the budget, and explaining what types of programs are included in the general fund and therefore could potentially be affected by budget cuts. Then she took that presentation on the road, speaking in front of Rotary and Kiwanis clubs and other organizations. "I did every public meeting I could get a hold of for months, wherever there was a group who wanted to hear it," she says.

That also included three town halls, each one paired up with a couple of councilmembers and held in the neighborhoods they represent. At each meeting, Baker spoke for about 30 minutes, then took questions from the audience—residents who showed up in droves to advocate for maintaining a popular senior community center, public safety, youth programs, and economic development. At one session, questions went on for more than two hours.

Meanwhile, Mike Bailey spent three months working directly with a community budget committee consisting of seven finance-minded residents who'd been nominated by city council members. Bailey quickly schooled the group about the basics of government budgeting and facilitated exercises so they could make their own set of recommendations to the city council about how programs should be ranked and what potential tax increases might look like.

Surveying the city

Another key facet of the city's public outreach effort was a three-question survey. The survey asked for people's top priority for the city budget and whether they would support increasing property taxes to pay for police, fire, and court services. It also included a tool people could use to see the actual cost of about 35 programs that come out of the general fund and could potentially be on a cut list in the future. Individuals could select what they thought should be cut, and the tool updated their total in real time as they ticked different boxes and tried to reach $9 million in cuts.

The survey was posted to the city's website and social media accounts, where it got strong engagement. Baker encouraged people at all of those public meetings to fill out the survey. She also took it to grocery stores, sporting events, and festivals—wherever large groups of people could be found—sharing a QR code linked to the survey and soliciting people's input. In the end, more than 2,000 residents, mostly from the city's west side, completed the survey. The results: 40% deemed police spending to be their top priority, followed by street maintenance and infrastructure (26%), parks and recreation amenities (25%), and fire protection (9%).

Direct feedback like this gave Baker important insight into the programs community members valued most. Topping the list of priorities to fund were police programs like a gang unit and a narcotics unit, a fire station and firefighters, and a senior center. The top items to cut included city council travel and lobbying, and economic development-related programs like summer flower baskets that hang downtown and Fourth of July fireworks.

Results also indicated that simply knowing what's at stake (i.e., what programs might be lost if the city can't increase revenue) might sway some people's opinions come November. Yakima residents tend to be politically conservative and anti-tax, according to Baker. In response to the survey's second question ("Would you support increasing property taxes to specifically pay for police, fire, and court services?"), about 40% of respondents said yes. When a similar question was asked after people participated in the city's priority-based budgeting exercise ("If property taxes were raised by about $20 a month for the average homeowner, public safety services would be fully funded. Knowing that, how do you feel about increasing taxes to support police, fire, and court services?"), 57% of respondents answered "yes."

All of this information helped shape the final recommendations Baker gave to the city council about how to address the city's looming $9 million budget shortfall. And because of the work she and Bailey did upfront, those recommendations came with data, not just a few people's opinions. This gave the council the courage (backed by information) it needed to decide, by a vote of 4 to 3, to place a $6 million tax increase referendum on the November ballot to

fund the services residents—who would on average pay an additional $178 per year—deemed a priority. And to cut the $3 million needed to balance the budget from services the community deemed expendable, which included reducing operational hours at the city's indoor swimming pool, and mothballing one of its outdoor swimming pools during the summer of 2026.

A more transparent budget

Both Bailey and Baker will tell you priority-based budgeting doesn't make things easier. But it does make a city's budget more transparent to the public, and it can give communities insight into the tightrope act of balancing a city's budget. All of that hopefully leads to more informed decisions as cities make tough budgeting choices and as residents evaluate ballot initiatives.

"One of the criticisms I have heard is that priority-based budgeting is a lot of work, and I won't argue that," says Bailey. "That's because it's more than just creating a budget. As a finance director, I could go in the back room with the mayor and create a budget, and that would be easy to do, but that's not meeting the best needs of my community."

For striving to do the opposite, Vicki Baker credits the city council.

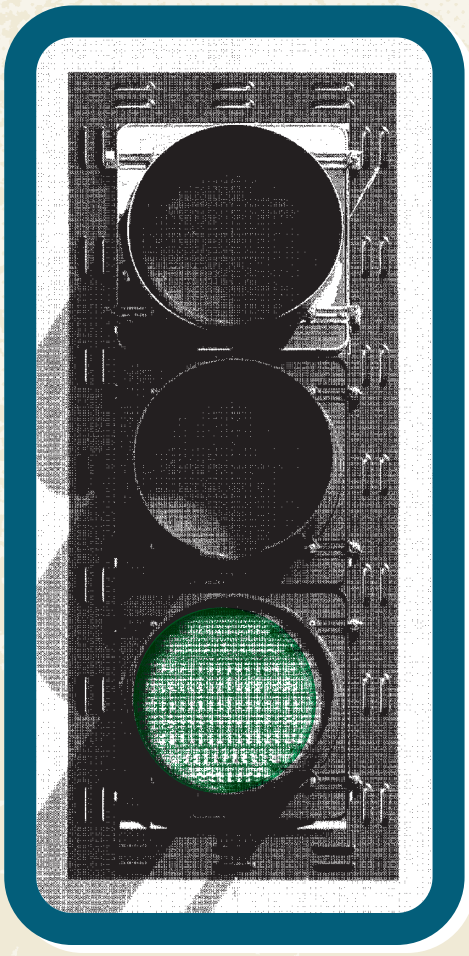
"I am so proud of them for having the courage to dive into a challenging budget issue," she says, "And to do so with transparency."

As for Yakima, the benefits of this new budget process will bear out over the coming months and years.

"I really don't know where we're going to end up," says Baker. "Three years from now—after we've become more mature in priority-based budgeting and everything that we care about is funded and we've reduced the things that we couldn't afford—we'll see if we really did get to that goal of having a more sustainable budget."

In the meantime, she says she feels good about the process Yakima has gone through and grown through. "I feel very confident that we have done our best to have our community be aware of the situation that we're in."

Citywise



“AI analyzes driving trends, smartphone maps, and model traffic patterns to make recommendations for traffic signal timing changes...resulting in improved traffic flow and reduced idling.”

—CITY 101 P.28 ▶

Help Desk

Several resources are available to address challenges faced by smaller communities, including:

- **AWC provides training and resources to be successful.** All 281 cities and towns in Washington can benefit from AWC's in-person and online trainings, advocacy efforts in both Olympia and DC, as well as high-quality services and programs.
- **The Municipal Research and Services Center (MRSC) is a unique resource in Washington state.** For more than 90 years, cities and towns in Washington have benefited from the research, training, and legal services provided by the staff at MRSC. Whether it is looking for an example ordinance or getting advice on how to approach a ballot measure, MRSC is a trusted resource for both elected officials and city staff.
- **Peers and neighboring communities are a source of support.** It's important to remember that small cities and towns are not alone. If you need advice or just someone to talk to, reaching out to your neighboring small communities can help you get ideas for engaging your community, solving challenges and issues, or connecting you with other leaders in a similar situation. AWC's Small City Connectors, held annually in locations across the state, are a great opportunity to meet with peers and AWC staff.

PILOT PROJECT

A big step in helping small communities find long-term success

AWC STAFF

WASHINGTON IS home to 160 cities and towns with populations under 5,000, including 76 with fewer than 1,000 residents. These communities range from Krupp in Grant County, the smallest with just 45 people, to Omak in Okanogan County, which has 4,985 residents. While cities and towns with populations under 5,000 make up about 57% of all incorporated communities in the state, together they (236,010 people) account for just under 4% of Washington's population.

Despite their small size, these communities are still responsible for providing many of the same essential services as their larger peers, including maintaining roads, operating water systems, and providing public safety services. Smaller communities face these obligations with fewer resources, relying on a smaller tax base and a limited pool of staff candidates.

In spring 2025, AWC partnered with the University of Washington's Evans School of Public Policy and Governance to better understand the unique needs of small cities and towns, and what they need to be successful in the long term. A team of five graduate students met with leaders from 10 cities and towns across the state to hear firsthand about the challenges faced by elected officials and staff in smaller communities.

From these interviews, several common issues emerged:

STAFFING: Small cities may have just one or two employees who fill multiple roles—such as acting as both clerk and treasurer or backing up public works. It's difficult to find and keep qualified staff willing to manage so many responsibilities. Training is also a challenge, as sending staff off-site can be costly and may leave city offices understaffed. Once employees gain experience or credentials, they're often recruited to larger cities offering better pay and benefits, creating frequent turnover.

FUNDING PROJECTS: The cost of infrastructure projects—like upgrading water treatment plants, building parks, or resurfacing roads—is high regardless of community size. Smaller communities have a smaller tax base to draw from locally and often lack the resources to hire lobbyists or manage complex funding applications and compliance requirements.

REGULATORY COMPLIANCE: New state and federal rules are created each year. While these impact all cities, smaller ones often struggle the most to comply due to limited staff and budgets. They rarely have the funds to hire consultants or additional help.

For more information: *wacities.org*

■ **SUPPORTING ELECTED OFFICIALS:** Helping newly elected officials understand their role and responsibilities can be difficult. New mayors or councilmembers may arrive with little training or guidance, and small cities may lack the capacity to onboard them effectively.

Guided by the study's conclusions, AWC is assessing new programs and services aimed at addressing the specific needs of small cities and towns. In the upcoming year, AWC will pilot these new services for small cities, with a comprehensive rollout planned following the initial phase.

Smaller cities and towns play a vital role in the lives of Washington residents and add enormously to the character of Washington state. It is critical they receive the support and funding they need to allow their residents to live, work, and thrive.

SMALL CITIES MAY HAVE JUST ONE OR TWO EMPLOYEES WHO FILL MULTIPLE ROLES—SUCH AS ACTING AS BOTH CLERK AND TREASURER OR BACKING UP PUBLIC WORKS.

HB 2015 101

What you need to know about the state's new public safety funding mechanisms.

BY AWC STAFF

After years of city elected leaders advocating for increased public safety funding, the long-held priority bore fruit in 2025 with House Bill 2015.

Cities provide public safety services as a critical function to keep communities thriving. However, the last few decades have left many cities struggling to keep up with the costs and staffing needed to provide these vital services. Cities employ the majority (62%) of all the state's commissioned police officers, and showed up to the legislature repeatedly to warn that financial obligations for public safety were becoming unsustainable.

City budgets are constrained by a property tax revenue cap artificially restricted to 1%, which is less than population growth and inflation. Departments have also seen record levels of police officer retirements; evolving conversations about the scope and scale of what police departments are responsible for; recruiting and retainment challenges due to the unique and specific skills required for the work; shortages of critically needed training; fluctuations in crime trends; and an increasing challenge of community members suffering through a lack of housing, behavioral health issues, and substance use disorders.

In 2024 then-Attorney General Bob Ferguson, citing reports and data that showed Washington state last in the country in officers per capita, pledged during his campaign for governor that he would deliver $100 million to local governments to hire and retain police officers. At his inaugural address in January 2025, Governor Ferguson further reiterated that he wouldn't sign a state budget without the $100 million investment.

The legislature offered up a variety of bills aimed toward this goal, proposing a range of public safety funding mechanisms for local governments. AWC strongly supported options that provided the lowest barriers to access funding, citing the varying needs, diversity, and size of the state's 281 cities and towns. Several public safety proposals included options for direct, ongoing, and sustainable sources of revenue for cities to fund their public safety needs.

Then in late February 2025 came HB 2015, which sought to provide two new funding sources for public safety while also aiming to improve margin-

CITY BUDGETS ARE CONSTRAINED BY A PROPERTY TAX REVENUE CAP ARTIFICIALLY RESTRICTED TO 1%, WHICH IS LESS THAN POPULATION GROWTH AND INFLATION.

Tax Facts

HB 2015 allows the legislative body of a city and/or county to establish a new local option sales and use tax. To be eligible, cities must meet the same requirements laid out for grant eligibility.

Quick facts about the sales tax:

- **LOCAL LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY:** The tax can be imposed by councilmanic action through June 2028.
- **STACKABLE:** The taxes can stack with other sales taxes, and revenues are not shared with other jurisdictions.
- **BROAD USE:** A city and/or county can impose the new 0.1% sales tax for broadly defined criminal justice purposes, including:
  - Domestic violence services
  - Public defenders
  - Diversion program
  - Reentry work for inmates
  - Reducing homelessness or improving behavioral health
  - Community placements for juvenile offenders
  - Community outreach, alternative response, mental health crisis response
- **REQUIREMENTS:** The tax can only be collected if the city or county meets all the requirements to apply for the Criminal Justice Training Commission (CJTC) grant program in this bill (but no requirement to *apply* for the grant).
  - Note: Cities may submit their documentation *before* CJTC completes their grant application process and website.
- **CAVEAT:** The jurisdiction's voters must not have rejected or repealed a public safety tax within 12 months.

For more information: *wacities.org*

HB 2015: TWO NEW FUNDING MECHANISMS

alized community outcomes through targeted officer trainings, hiring, and retention strategies.

AWC supported the bill and engaged in conversations early and often to ensure that city perspectives were factored into the legislative process. The bill moved swiftly through the legislature, with several amendments attaching ideas from the earlier bills, as it whirled towards the governor's desk. Following a pause in momentum deep into the session, the bill passed and the governor kept his $100 million promise and signed HB 2015 and its budget funding into law in late May; it took effect in late July.

The new law ultimately creates two public safety funding pathways for funding local public safety: A three-year $100 million grant program for hiring, retaining, and training new police officers and co-responders; and a councilmanic 0.1% local sales tax authority for broad public safety and criminal justice needs.

The two new funding streams function separately for cities. However, there is a deep connection in the law. There are policy and training requirements that cities and their police departments must meet to be eligible for the grant, and grant eligibility is required to impose the sales tax.

A council can implement the sales tax without applying for or receiving grant money.

And, in order to receive grant money, a city or county needs to have received funds from or authorized at least one of three public safety sales taxes (the two existing ones or the new one created by HB 2015).

The Criminal Justice Training Commission (CJTC) must verify that a city's police department meets the specific policy and training requirements outlined within the law. Cities that want their councils to pass the sales tax can do so as soon as they would like, but after June 30, 2028, it will become a voter-approved tax instead.

Per the new law, cities do not need to wait for CJTC to finalize its process for verifying that requirements are met, so long as they send compliance documentation to CJTC.

As of press time, CJTC's guidance on HB 2015 is rapidly evolving, and AWC is sharing information as it becomes available. The most updated information about the law and next steps can be found at wacities.org, including more details on policy, timelines, tax comparison charts, and important things your city or town will want to know to pass the sales tax and access those critical revenues as soon as possible.

IS AI A-OK?

These pilot programs suggest AI can support good government.

LEAH LACIVITA, MUNICIPAL RESEARCH & SERVICES CENTER

ACROSS THE U.S., local and state governments are getting a feel for how artificial intelligence (AI) can help them in analytics, surveillance, operations, modeling, and more. A June 2025 report by MissionSquare Research Institute found that almost half of state and local government employees in the U.S. have used AI for work—although some reported concerns such as data privacy, security, reliability, and the possibility that AI might displace their jobs. Given the limited resources local governments have to draw from, more will be exploring the potential for AI to make services more efficient and sustainable for the long-term—and not just with writing administrative tasks. Here's a snapshot of how governments in Washington state and elsewhere are using AI to accomplish a variety of ends.

Managing traffic control

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, each gallon of gasoline burned produces about 20 pounds of carbon dioxide, which can build up at stoplights and cause pollution hot spots. Seattle has an ambitious goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions 58% by 2030, and tackling congestion hot spots can play a role in this effort. It has become the first U.S.-based city to use Google's Green Light technology to manage traffic signal timing. Green Light's AI analyzes driving trends, smartphone maps, and model traffic patterns to make recommendations for traffic signal timing changes. In 2024, Seattle identified and made changes to three major intersections in largely residential neighborhoods, resulting in improved traffic flow and reduced idling. The city plans to extend the program in 2025 to an industrial area that houses several sports stadiums and transportation hubs.

Improving emergency response

Multi Agency Communications Center (MACC) 911 in Grant County launched an AI system in May 2024 to free up dispatchers to address emergency calls, speed up the response time for non-emergency calls, and offer bilingual (English and Spanish) call support. Because 911 call volumes spike during emergency events, call centers need to quickly determine which callers are experiencing actual emergencies and which are reporting on or seeking information about the event. AI-powered call diversion can filter out non-emergency calls before they reach a dispatcher, as well as aggregate geographic data of callers to help pinpoint the location generating the most calls.

When an individual calls MACC's 911 line with a nonemergency, the AI asks the caller a series of questions and creates a report that is sent to a MACC dispatcher, who can then determine what type of follow-up is needed. If the report is unclear, dispatchers can consult the call transcript and recording. The system also allows callers with cell phones to share their location and stream live video to dispatchers.

Preventing homelessness

Family Promise of Pierce County (Family Promise) implemented a new AI-based system that combines intake assessment, resource application, occupational service assistance, inter-system communications, and remote client support to help individuals quickly access a variety of social services available to them. Pierce County has a countywide intake system, but bottlenecks develop when there are more people applying for services than social workers able to process incoming applications.

Applicants can complete Family Promise's electronic intake assessment, which uses AI to generate a report detailing the individual's needs and suggesting referral services, simplifying the process for the social worker. The system also stored frequently needed client paperwork, such as consent forms, and digital e-signatures.

Final thought

While there is considerable hype around AI adoption, a public agency should conduct the same thoughtful analysis of the potential risks and rewards that it would before adopting any new technology. Topics local governments should think about before employing AI include public records considerations as well as privacy, transparency, and cybersecurity concerns.

MRSC Communications Coordinator **Leah LaCivita**, *who serves as the editor and manager for MRSC's blog and biannual print newsletter, writes on a variety of topics and develops website content.*

For more information: mrsc.org

Cityscape

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

Ted Price and Bob Rodgers outside the Squirrel Tree.

Bavarian Dream

Takeaways from Leavenworth's fantastical rebirth.

PERHAPS NO OTHER CITY in Washington better embodies the spirit of rebirth than the city of Leavenworth.

In 1960, after lumber mill closures left Leavenworth in the economic doldrums and sent its population and property values plummeting, Ted Price and Bob Rodgers bought a run-down café and opened the Squirrel Tree. The Bavarian-themed restaurant featured authentic cuisine served by a costume-clad waitstaff in Black Forest cuckoo-clock ambience.

The business was so popular that the entrepreneurs opened a motel, which became the anchor and inspiration for Leavenworth's economic revival. Price and Rodgers enlisted the help of the University of Washington, which orchestrated a community-wide visioning exercise called Leavenworth Improvement for Everyone (Project LIFE).

Envisioning Leavenworth reborn as a Bavarian village in the Cascades, the city hired architect Earl Peterson, who oversaw the transformation of Solvang, California, into a Danish-themed tourist destination. With the help of German-born Seattle architect Heinz Ulbrecht guiding design standards, the transformation of several downtown blocks began in 1964.

Three years later, *Look* magazine and the National Civic League honored Leavenworth, and its faux-Bavarian charm, with an All-America City Award.

Fast forward five years: In 2023, Leavenworth, population 2,778, attracted 3.6 million visitors. That year, Leavenworth received a Governor's Smart Communities Award from the Washington State Department of Commerce for "the vision, planning, and project implementation it took to create the Washington State landmark and top tourist destination Leavenworth is today."

But with success come growing pains. In 2022, median home values in Leavenworth rocketed to $494,600, with median income at just $66,000. Last summer, Mayor Carl Florea announced that the city would embark on a new visioning initiative in the spirit of Project LIFE. "We are no longer a town in decline," he said. "Instead, we attract millions of visitors and potential residents. The popularity has brought unintended consequences … Ironically, what saved us then endangers us now."

Throughout 2025, a steering committee led by Mayor Florea, along with Chelan Mayor Erin McCardle, Chelan County leaders, and local businesses, will convene a series of community engagement exercises, surveys, and economic and tourism impact analyses, with a final report and recommendations expected by December.

Then the next work of rebirth begins anew.

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