

Cityvision

THE ASSOCIATION OF WASHINGTON CITIES MAGAZINE

SMALL TALK BIG IDEAS

Cities drive statewide change by sharing local concerns in Olympia



WINTER 2025
wacities.org





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CITYVISION MAGAZINE VOL. 17 / NO. 3

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FROM THE
PRESIDENT

As we turn our calendars to 2026 and wrap up another election season, I want to extend my sincere gratitude to all who have served their communities and also offer a warm welcome to the hundreds of newly elected city and town officials stepping into their new leadership roles.

Beginning your journey in public service is both exciting and impactful. The Association of Washington Cities (AWC) is here to support you every step of the way with the tools, resources, and connections you need to make a difference. Through nonpartisan advocacy, data-driven education and training, and nationally recognized member pooling programs, AWC works to build strong cities and a great state.

As AWC president, I am proud of the work of our association and encourage you to explore all of the resources and networking opportunities available to you. Don't hesitate to reach out to me or your board representatives. We're happy to connect—whether over coffee or online.

This issue of *Cityvision* focuses on engaging with the Legislature—a timely topic as we prepare for the upcoming session. Inside, you'll find practical tips to elevate your advocacy, learn how a challenge in Rockford led to greater contracting flexibility for small towns, and read about a Grandview councilmember

dedicated to spreading civic education to youth and curious adults alike.

You'll also get to know Amy Howard, Port Townsend's deputy mayor and AWC board member. Her journey—from experiencing homelessness to leading community initiatives—is a powerful reminder of the importance of diverse perspectives in local government.

As we look ahead, I encourage you to build relationships with legislators, share your community's challenges and successes, and champion the local decision-making that shapes our state's future. Together, we can ensure our cities remain vibrant, responsive, and ready to meet the needs of all residents.

Thank you for your service and leadership. Here's to a productive and inspiring 2026.



Fred Brink
Mayor, West Richland

Cityvision

Winter 2025

1 WELCOME NOTE

5 CITYBEAT

How proactively seeking help from state lawmakers translates into legislative wins for cities and towns; Lakewood leads the way in expanding childcare statewide; an innovative way to inspire the next generation of local leaders.

11 CITYSCOPE

Amy Howard fosters empathy and compassion in government as a local elected official and an AWC Board member.

14 feature FLEXIBLE SPENDING

How Oak Harbor and Everett led the charge for legislation that makes a subtle—but impactful—change to how real estate excise tax revenues can be spent.

23 CITYWISE

Five strategies for making your city's needs known in Olympia; navigating the journey from bill to law; rules of engagement for face time with legislators.

29 CITYSCOPE

Revisiting AWC's Prohibition-era beginnings.

▶
Port Townsend Deputy Mayor Amy Howard pays it forward by serving the city that saved her life.

HOME RUN
P. 11



CityActionDays



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wacities.org/CAD

There's no better way to engage with legislators and state agency experts than at AWC's City Action Days!



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Providing members with federally mandated random drug & alcohol testing, supervisory training, and compliance.

Learn more about these AWC Member Pooling Programs and other excellent services AWC provides for municipal entities.



wacities.org/services

Citybeat



Legislative Aid

Cities partner with legislators to meet specific needs.

BY KAYA WILLIAMS

ROCKFORD'S DEPUTY town clerk, Jennie Hagen, remembers the exact moment that inspired local leaders to pitch a bill that would change state law.

It was mid-August 2022. A burst of hail and wind had whipped through Rockford, a community of about 600 residents in Spokane County, so hard and so fast that it left a trail of downed trees and debris in its wake.

“The town looked like a hurricane had come through it,” Hagen recalls.

Local contractors were hired to help Rockford crews clean it all up. That created a conundrum when winter arrived because one of the town’s snow removal contractors who had responded to the emergency also served on the Rockford Town Council. As a municipal officer, **CONTINUED ON P.10** ▶



FRESH
IDEA

An Easy Fix

Lakewood leads the way in expanding childcare access statewide.

BY KAYA WILLIAMS

TRICKY PROBLEMS DON'T always require complicated solutions.

Consider what the City of Lakewood did to increase access to childcare. A straightforward update to the city's comprehensive plan allowed daycare centers to expand to more parts of town, spurring an influx of new businesses and inspiring the state Legislature to require the same approach across Washington.

Prior to the change, Lakewood's land use code limited commercial childcare centers to just 4% of the city's total acreage. A city-led analysis of the region conducted in coordination with the South Sound Military and Communities Partnership (SSMCP) affirmed what some residents knew from experience: Lakewood has "childcare deserts," or census

tracts with three times as many children as there are available childcare slots.

"The areas where the city has the most stark deserts are also the areas that are historically disadvantaged," says City of Lakewood Planning Division Manager Tiffany Speir.

Another analysis by the state and other partners found that a dearth of childcare availability can exacerbate existing economic disparities, influencing where people open businesses, where they go to work, and even whether they can go to work at all.

A 2024 report by the Municipal Research and Services Center noted that 63% of Washington's population lived in a childcare desert. The report cited a 2019 study by the Washington State De-


partment of Commerce that determined employee turnover and missed work due to childcare access issues cost employers an estimated \$2.08 billion annually. The study also found that 27% of parents quit their job or left school or training due to childcare issues.

"This is not just a touchy-feely issue," Speir says. "It's actually an economic issue."

The Lakewood City Council amended the city's comprehensive plan in 2023 to allow childcare facilities in most commercial zones, which make up more than half of the city's total acreage. Previously, establishing a new center outside the allowed zones required obtaining a conditional use permit, which can be a lengthy and complicated process.

Lakewood is now serving as a model for other communities across Washington. **SB 5509**, which the Legislature adopted in 2025, requires cities to update zoning codes to allow childcare facilities as an "outright permitted use" in every area except industrial zones, light industrial zones, and open space—reducing the barriers providers might otherwise face in establishing a new facility. The new law allows municipalities to set "reasonable restrictions" on childcare center permits, such as requiring designated pick-up and drop-off areas.

Lakewood itself will do another code update in 2026, Speir says, allowing facilities in even more locations to get a head start on the legislation's implementation deadlines, which she believes will be an easy sell to most municipalities.

"People often think, 'If the government's talking to me, it's going to be bad news,'" Speir says. "However, this message is a positive one for everyone." 

CAPITAL NUMBERS

As lawmakers prepare to descend on Olympia for the 2026 legislative session, here's a statistical flashback of some of the highlights for cities from 2025.

612

Bills tracked by AWC staff in 2025

304

City Action Days attendees

\$100 million

Secured for public safety grants

\$2.7 million

In increased funding for city public defense grants

2.5

Percent of new 6-cent gas tax dedicated for direct distributions to fund city transportation needs

\$100 million

Preserved for funding competitive awards for local infrastructure through the Public Works Board

\$32.5 million

Secured for local fish barrier removal projects

Source: Association of Washington Cities

GRAND TOUR

A local elected official introduces young people to the statehouse and the art of governing.

BY KAYA WILLIAMS

"IN MY HEART of hearts," Grandview Councilmember Joan Souders says, "I always followed politics."

As a high schooler in Vancouver, Washington, in the mid-1960s, Souders and students from across the region met to practice government and diplomacy firsthand by participating in a regional international studies and exchange program. After being ordained in 1969, she served as an officer in the Salvation Army for 34 years, earning a National Award for Excellence in Social Work from the organization in 2001. Two years later, for her next act in life, Souders entered public service when she was elected to the Grandview City Council.

Now she's sharing that enthusiasm with students and lifelong learners in her community. A Rotary Club fundraiser sparked the idea more than five years ago, as local leaders offered unique experiences to the highest bidder.

By then, Souders was well acquainted with the state Legislature from her role on the Grandview City Council. She figured an all-expenses-paid trip to Olympia could be a unique opportunity for teens to explore the intersection of local and state government. So she auctioned herself off, as she likes to joke, and brought a group of four local high schoolers on the inaugural trip in February 2020.

The students toured the Senate and House galleries and met their local representatives. They interviewed lobbyists, too, and connected with AWC government relations staff to learn how an idea becomes a bill—and how a bill becomes a law.

But it was a visit to a live hearing that turned this one-time event into a tradition. By luck, the legislators were talking about Running Start, the college preparation program that all the visiting students happened to be participating in. The students were thrilled to discover that their experiences were part of legislative conversation.

"All those boys talked about on the way home was, 'Hey, they were talking about us in that last meeting,'" Souders recalls.

It was also an 'aha' moment for Souders, who asked herself, "Why am I just doing one trip?"

Except for during the pandemic, Souders has led these tours to Olympia at least once a year—and usually more often, with as many as four visits last year. Again and again, students happen upon meetings that show them the value of their experiences in government decisions. Some have picked up an interest in politics and public service themselves.

What started as an effort to educate young students has expanded to the greater community to also include inquisitive adults. Her most recent trip included two constituents—a local business owner and a nonprofit staffer—who told Souders, "You're always taking the kids, but we've never been over there."

These tours are expanding in scope, too: After Gov. Bob Ferguson was sworn in, Souders says her groups have been welcomed into the offices of the governor, lieutenant governor, and state treasurer, in addition to representative meet-and-greets.

"The Capitol building is the people's house," Souders says. "These tours are exposing young people to something that they never would experience otherwise."

What they're learning is that the people's house belongs to young people, too. **C**



For more information:
grandview.wa.us

NOTED

AWC 2026 LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

The AWC Board of Directors adopted the 2026 legislative agenda based on the recommendations put forward by the 29-member Legislative Priorities Committee. The committee started work in late spring

and met through the summer to vet issues and develop recommendations based on input from the AWC membership.

To implement the new caseload standards, local jurisdictions will need at least three times the number of public defense attorneys—amid a nationwide shortage—as well as additional support staff, social workers, and investigators.

Since 2019, the state has passed 32 local permitting and land use bills.

In some previous challenging budget cycles, some state-shared revenue funds have been capped or reduced, causing hardship in many communities. According to the 2025

City Conditions Survey, 88% of cities support an increase to state-shared revenues.

Washington's 281 cities and towns ask the Legislature to partner with us and act on the following priorities:

Indigent defense

Increase state support and funding for indigent defense services to meet existing needs as well as the new lower caseload mandates ordered by the Washington Supreme Court. Enhance state support for increasing the indigent defense workforce with incentives and programs to encourage more public defenders.

Transportation

Increase sustainable revenue that supports local transportation preservation, maintenance, and operations and includes direct distributions to cities and towns. Continue to support efforts to improve traffic safety. Explore revenue tools such as a highway usage fee, a retail delivery fee, expanded transportation benefit district (TBD) authority, or a "sidewalk utility."

Housing supply

Provide time to implement recent state housing legislation. Increase housing investments to meet needs across the housing continuum, including construction and preservation of affordable housing, home ownership, and senior housing. Support tools to better coordinate urban growth area (UGA) development and funding options such as a local option real estate excise tax, short-term rental tax, and expanded use of lodging taxes for housing.

Shared revenues

Continue the historical revenue-sharing partnership between the state and its cities and towns, which provides stability and continuity for local budgets. Preservation of these resources, such as liquor revenues and criminal justice assistance funds, are indispensable to local fiscal sustainability and predictability.

All but four other states fund public defense wholly or significantly from the state level. In Washington, 90% of the state's small public defense allocation goes to counties. Office of

Public Defense grants cover less than 5% of cities' estimated \$40 million in annual costs.

Washington's cities maintain 26% of all statewide travel lanes, as well as 750 bridges, 43 airports, six transit systems, and one railroad.

Approximately 70% of city transportation expenditures are sourced from cities' general funds.

Public funding is needed to build 650,000 low-income rental housing units over the next 20 years. Providing this housing will require new revenue options sized to fit the substantial scale of need.

Cities are where most of the state's tax revenue is generated. In fact, 94% of gross state product is generated in cities.

THE QUESTION

WHAT IS ONE CONCRETE STEP YOU'RE GOING TO TAKE THIS LEGISLATIVE SESSION TO ADVANCE YOUR CITY'S ADVOCACY AGENDA?



We're focusing on proactive relationship-building with our legislative delegation through regular briefings, district visits, and project tours. By connecting lawmakers directly with examples of city needs and successes, we're creating a more personal, informed advocacy process. This consistent engagement builds trust and helps align legislative priorities with real community outcomes.

KATRINA KNUTSON
City Administrator, Gig Harbor



The city council and our legislators met in November to discuss the upcoming legislative session and our legislative agenda. Prior to that, city staff and I gave our legislators a tour that was focused on our most important issues. I will meet with our legislators via Zoom twice a month during the session to stay up to date on legislative issues and advance our priorities.

FRANCIS BENJAMIN
Mayor, Pullman



We hold a meeting with our legislative delegation once a year at a council meeting and have dinner with them during AWC's City Action Days. We develop relationships throughout the year by inviting them to attend our State of the City address and to tour our projects and facilities. This legislative session we will be focused on sustainable funding for preservation and maintenance of our streets and sidewalks and capital funding to ensure our parks are accessible to all.

CHRIS ROBERTS
Mayor, Shoreline

AWC TRAININGS

CITY ACTION DAYS
JANUARY 21-22 | LACEY

Held annually during the legislative session, this popular event for city officials includes updates on city legislative priorities, insider panels, and news about the latest legislative hot topics. Attendees can participate in the "hill climb" to meet with their statewide decision-makers about their legislative priorities at the state Capitol in Olympia.

MAYOR AS CEO
FEBRUARY 11 | OLYMPIA

This back-to-basics training is designed to help new and newer mayors serving in mayor-council forms of government navigate their role as the city's chief executive officer.

MAYORS EXCHANGE
FEBRUARY 12 | OLYMPIA

Mayors, don't miss this chance to connect with your peers from across the state. Get the latest on legislation impacting cities and share updates from home.

LABOR RELATIONS INSTITUTE
MAY 6-8 | WENATCHEE

The Labor Relations Institute is the premier training event for public sector human resources (HR) professionals in Washington. The institute offers important legal updates, practical guidance, labor relations strategies, and networking opportunities to help attendees navigate the complex and ever-changing world of HR.

HEALTHY WORKSITE SUMMIT
MARCH 4-5 | LYNNWOOD

SMALL CITY CONNECTORS
SPRING | MULTIPLE LOCATIONS

AWC ANNUAL CONFERENCE
JUNE 23-26 | SPOKANE

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

Legislative Aid *continued from page 5*

he was subject to state regulations limiting how much money he could earn contracting with the town.

“When November came around and snow started to fall, we could hardly have him work because he had already worked so much in August and September helping clean up after the storm,” Hagen says.

The state’s earnings limit of \$1,500 per month or \$18,000 per year hadn’t been updated since 1999 and didn’t reflect the cost of inflation (in 1999, \$1,500 had the buying power of \$2,917 today). Given the modest salary of a Rockford councilmember (\$34,173 per year), most elected officials rely on outside work to augment their incomes. In a small town like Rockford, it’s hard enough to find locals who are willing to serve on the town council, much less those who are qualified to operate a front-end loader.

The town reached out to its legislators for help. Rep. Joe Schmick, R-Colfax, agreed to sponsor the bill, which Hagen drafted. Councilmember Micki Harnois testified in support of the bill. The resulting legislation (**HB 1577**), which was unanimously passed by the state House and Senate later that spring, doubled the allowance for beneficial contracts with a municipal officer to \$3,000 a month or \$36,000 a year, limited to cities and towns of 5,000 people or less.

While the change was a response to a very specific set of circumstances in Rockford, Hagen says the legislation will help small cities and towns across the state facing similar challenges. She encourages other cities to be proactive and submit comments on a bill if it might impact them—positively or negatively.

When pitching an idea to legislators, it helps to start the conversation early, says David Vorse, the City of Castle Rock’s public works director.

“Engage them and take time to educate them,” Vorse says. “Make sure they understand what the problem is.”

That’s exactly what Castle Rock did with **SB 5365**. The community was looking for different ways to fund public libraries outside of an excise tax that’s hard to pass by voters or a tight general fund that’s focused on other priorities. One alternative Castle Rock considered: including space for a library inside a community center, supported with money from a parks and recreation district—provided state law would allow it.

Existing legislation permitted funding to support recreation facilities like a community or senior center, but it didn’t specify whether libraries could be part of those plans. Considering today’s libraries have expanded beyond centers for reading and peaceful study to become hubs for gathering and play, their inclusion seemed like a natural fit.



WHEN SOMEONE USED TO SAY THE WORD ‘LIBRARY,’ ALL THEY’D THINK OF IS IT BEING VERY QUIET AND ONLY HAVING BOOKS. LIBRARIES ARE FAR, FAR FROM THAT NOW. THEY’RE VERY, VERY MUCH A COMMUNITY CENTER.

**—David Vorse,
City of Castle Rock Public
Works Director**

“When someone used to say the word ‘library,’ all they’d think of is it being very quiet and only having books,” Vorse says. “Libraries are far, far from that now. They’re very, very much a community center.”

Partnering with bill sponsor Sen. Jeff Wilson, R-Longview, Vorse drafted the clarifying language and testified in support of the bill, which passed unanimously through both chambers in April and was signed into law in May. State law now allows parks and recreation districts to fund community centers that include space for a public library so long as the library takes up less than half of the center’s usable space. Castle Rock is still weighing its options for library funding going forward, but Vorse is counting this as a win—and not just for his city.

“I heard legislators say, ‘Oh man, this would be a great thing for communities in our area, too,’” he says. **C**



Cityscope

Port Townsend
Deputy Mayor Amy
Howard

Q&A

Home Run

Port Townsend Deputy Mayor and AWC Board Member Amy Howard brings empathy to public office, addressing homelessness in the city that got her back on her feet.

INTERVIEW BY JENNIFER KRAZIT

PORT
TOWNSE

How did you end up in Port Townsend?

I had a really rough childhood. I was homeless on the streets of Seattle at the age of 18 and ended up in Port Townsend. As I was trying to get clean, I began working at a nonprofit, youth-run coffee shop. I ended up working at that agency for 18 years, starting as a volunteer and ending as the executive director.

Now you're the volunteer engagement manager at Habitat for Humanity of East Jefferson County. How did you get involved in that organization?

I do this work because it makes me feel like I'm doing something good for my community. After my experience

overcoming homelessness and substance abuse, I feel a debt of gratitude toward Port Townsend because it sort of saved my life. I feel like I should do the best I can to make sure that Habitat has a successful future here.

What inspired you to run for public office?

When I was asked to run for city council, I had to fight a serious bout of imposter syndrome. I thought "Why me?" Then I figured out that there were a lot of good reasons why it should be me. I was already engaged in the community. And I was part of a demographic that needed to be represented at city council: I was working, not retired; I was a renter; I was previously homeless. There were some

CONTINUED ON P.12 ►



perspectives that I felt I could bring.

How has your background influenced your role on city council?

I felt like bringing empathy to government was really important, and making it known that city council members are community members. We live and work in the community with you. We are not a separate, elite body. I have to live with all of the decisions that city council makes. They impact me personally and directly.

When did you first get involved with AWC?

I went to a conference in 2018 because I was feeling under-informed in my role. People were so welcoming and engaging that I thought, “OK, this is a fire hose of information that I can handle.” The main thing was the camaraderie with other people in the same position—learning how they’re dealing with things in their city and seeing the issues we share. You realize you’re not alone in trying to figure it out.

You’ve been an AWC board member for about five years. What are your priorities in that role?

In the same way that I want to bring empathy to government, I want to foster empathy and compassion within AWC. For newly elected officials, this can be a lonely road. The only people who really understand the position are the people who are sitting at that bench with you, and there are things you can’t talk to them about because of quorum and open public meetings regulations. So being able to have connections in the elected community—and



Mayor Howard on the steps of the Jefferson Museum of Art & History, housed in Port Townsend's original 1892 City Hall.

with people from across the state—is important. We build stronger coalitions that way, and it makes the whole state of Washington better when our nonpartisan elected officials can talk to each other.

Given your personal experience and your day job, homelessness is an important issue for you. How is Port Townsend working to address that problem?

Affordable housing is a huge problem in Port Townsend, and it was before I joined city council. Moving at the speed of government is always a

factor. But even when you make what you think is going to be the perfect code change or the perfect zoning update, it takes a while for those things to gain traction, which is very frustrating for everybody. One important thing is listening to your community about the kinds of changes that are needed.

For example, several years ago, we put in place a multi-family tax exemption that is now allowed by the state of Washington, and literally nobody has taken advantage of it in Port Townsend. It wasn’t the right tool for *our*

community, but we made changes to our cottage development code and to our design review process, and those changes were used almost immediately by builders in our community.

You are active on social media. How has that helped you as a leader?

It’s where people are talking about things. If we don’t meet people where they’re talking about things, that lets the rumor mill run wild. As an elected official, I do have to be mindful of when something I post is going to be a public record, which means I take a lot of screenshots. But people don’t always trust the city, and I find that they are more likely to trust me as a person than the city as an entity. Social media is a good place to clear up misconceptions and explain to people the why behind things the city is doing.

How can other elected officials do better with social media?

People are scared of social media because of the onerous records requirements. But being afraid of it isn’t doing anybody any good. Just be clear about the parameters of who’s posting and make sure they have the correct information. You’re going to get people who don’t agree with you, and they’re going to be loud. Your job is not to convince them of anything. It is just to reply with facts. But keep in mind that you’re also speaking to the person who’s reading the post and not engaging in the conversation.

C

BY THE NUMBERS

Port Townsend

A statistical snapshot of Port Townsend.

POPULATION

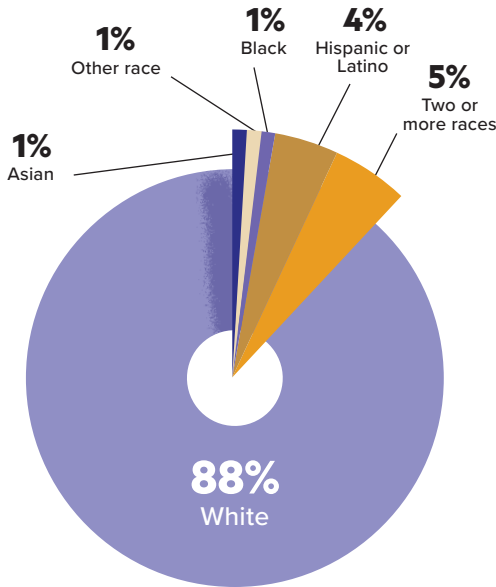
POPULATION DATA FROM THE U.S. CENSUS BUREAU

2020 **9,117** 

2025* **10,580**  **16% INCREASE**

*ESTIMATE

DEMOGRAPHICS



FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY SAVINGS

2022

Year Port Townsend established its Financial Sustainability Task Force

\$1.6M

Amount the city owed in limited tax general obligation bonds that year

2023

Year the city council voted to use reserve funds to pay off its bond debt

\$100K

Amount the city saved in interest payments



2024

Year the city won the ICMA Award for Local Government Excellence in Community Sustainability for its financial sustainability initiative

AFFORDABLE HOUSING FUNDING

\$91,000

Revenue generated via implementation of sales and use tax for affordable housing (authorized by HB 1406) since 2020

\$813,610

Value of waived permit fees and other charges for affordable housing providers, 2011–2024

\$50K

Amount city invested in a tactical infill housing code update to allow tiny houses on wheels to be used as accessory dwelling units

\$1.37M

Value of state Department of Commerce grant to purchase 14 acres of land earmarked for affordable housing

\$1.7M

Value of state Department of Commerce grant to build utility infrastructure for this project



INCOME & POVERTY

\$60,015

Local median household income



14.2%

of population living in poverty

\$94,952

Statewide median income



10%

of statewide population living in poverty

CITY BALANCE SHEET



\$16M
2025 general fund revenues

3.3%
Percent increase from 2024 budget

\$17M
2025 general fund expenditures

5.5%
Percent decrease from 2024 budget



HOME RULES

5,481

Number of households

6,068

Number of housing units

\$502,500

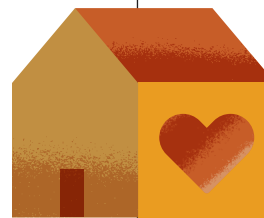
Median value of owner-occupied housing unit

\$519,800

Washington state median value

1,044

Number of Jefferson County residents who experienced homelessness or unstable housing in 2024



HABITAT HELP

300+

Number of individuals Habitat for Humanity of East Jefferson County (Habitat EJC) has assisted since 1998

8

Number of families housed in 2024


3

Number of affordable housing neighborhoods Habitat EJC plans to build in two years

158

Number of families those neighborhoods will house

FLEXIBLE FLEXIBLE SPENDING



LOOKING FOR A BOOST IN AGILITY AS THEY WORK TO FUND AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND ADDRESS LOCAL NEEDS, WASHINGTON CITIES LED THE CHARGE FOR LEGISLATION THAT MAKES A SUBTLE—BUT IMPACTFUL—CHANGE TO HOW REAL ESTATE EXCISE TAX REVENUES CAN BE SPENT.

STORY BY
JENNIFER KRAZIT

PHOTOS BY
CHONA KASINGER

Bellingham Councilmember Hannah Stone testified in support of HB 1791, which originated with the City of Oak Harbor and gives cities more flexibility in allocating revenue raised by real estate excise taxes (REET) to help fund high-priority initiatives.

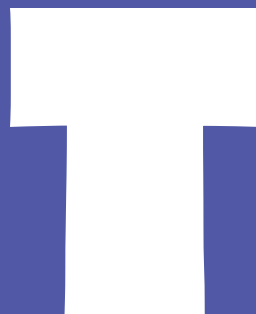


Story Time in the Northwest
by members of White Mountain





Oak Harbor Police Chief Tony Slowik, Mayor Ronnie Wright, and Deputy City Administrator and Finance Director David Goldman outside the city's police station, a priority capital project that is outdated and undersized and needs to be replaced.



The police station in Oak Harbor needs some work. In fact, it probably just needs to be replaced altogether. Finding the funding for such a big capital project isn't easy, but thanks to **HB 1791**—a bill that originated in Oak Harbor and passed both legislative chambers with bipartisan support in 2025—city leaders now have more options.

The new law gives cities of all sizes the flexibility to direct revenue raised by the real estate excise tax (REET) to fund high-priority initiatives, from capital campaigns and affordable housing to operational and maintenance costs.

The bill essentially makes permanent some temporary provisions in state law regarding the use of REET revenues that were put in place at the height of the COVID pandemic.

The state levies a tax on property sales, and cities and counties can opt to impose a local tax as well. These local taxes, known as REET 1 and REET 2, each represent an additional 0.25% tax on property sales, and the funds generated from them come with restrictions on what local governments can spend the money on.

Prior to the COVID-era rule changes, “REET 1 was decently broad,” says David Goldman, Oak Harbor’s deputy city administrator and finance director, who drafted HB 1791 and worked to get it passed. “The projects had to be in the capital facilities plan, and REET 1 funds could be used for streets or parks, but also for general government stuff, public safety, infrastructure, and the like. REET 2 was more restrictive and really focused on utilizing the money for streets and parks.”

In addition, a set percentage of REET revenue could be used for ongoing maintenance of capital projects in the same category. Local governments did have some flexibility in how funds could be divvied up between projects, with the ability to use a certain percentage of REET 2 funds for projects that technically fell under the REET 1 umbrella. However, the two buckets of funding were largely separate.

And then there was the mandatory report. In order to apply REET 2 funds to a REET 1 project, a detailed report had to be filed with the state.

“You had to figure out what total projects were eligible for REET 1, what total projects were eligible for REET 2, and what percentage of funds you were spending for REET 1 that was coming from REET 2,” says Goldman. “It would take a couple of days of staff time every year to put the report together. Then, once we published it, we never got a comment on it from our elected body, the state Legislature never saw it, and the state auditor never asked about it.”

For larger cities with dedicated finance teams on staff, the report was just another layer of bureaucratic red tape that consumed staff bandwidth. But for smaller cities, the report could be overly

burdensome, preventing some jurisdictions from using the allowed flexibility.

“It was a convoluted report, and a lot of cities said they had trouble figuring out exactly what the Legislature wanted from it,” adds Goldman. “I talked to some cities that said they would never use the flexibility provisions because they didn’t understand exactly what was required; they were afraid to run afoul of the report requirements.”

Financing flex

That all began to change in 2021, when temporary changes were put into place as a result of the pandemic. Predicting that local governments would take a hit on revenue from sales taxes as COVID lockdowns kept people from traveling, shopping locally, and going out to eat, the Legislature eased what local governments could do with their REET funds. The temporary provisions not only allowed local governments to use more REET 2 revenue for projects that typically fell under REET 1, but also expanded the types of projects that were covered to include affordable housing and public safety initiatives. In addition, the percentage of REET revenue that could be put toward maintenance costs was bumped up from

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IF YOU SEE SOMETHING THAT NEEDS IMPROVEMENT, DON'T PROCRASTINATE OR HOPE THAT SOMEBODY ELSE WILL GET TO IT. IF YOU HAVE A GOOD IDEA ... GO AHEAD AND RUN WITH IT.

—**DAVID GOLDMAN** DEPUTY CITY ADMINISTRATOR AND FINANCE DIRECTOR, OAK HARBOR



25% to 35% (with operational costs also permitted)—and the state stopped requiring that pesky report.

These changes gave cities valuable flexibility in how they used some of the tax revenue they had coming in, making it easier to keep maintaining streets and operating parks even as sales tax revenue was dropping. It also gave them the chance to put some of that revenue toward affordable housing and homelessness services, which hadn't been allowed before. Even better, this new flexibility came without having to increase taxes since it was revenue that was already being collected.

The REET rule changes were initially

intended to be a temporary solution to the financial strains created by the pandemic. As such, they were set to automatically expire in 2023. In an attempt to raise new revenues for affordable housing investments and preserve the temporary provisions, **HB 1628** was introduced in the 2023 legislative session. That bill carried forward the more relaxed REET rules. But it also increased the maximum amount of tax that could be collected by the state, raised the rate charged by the state on high-value properties that sold for more than \$3 million, and introduced a third REET category that could be charged by cities and counties. The bill stalled in the House.

Righting REET

By the time the temporary provisions expired, many cities across the state had seen the benefit of this added financial agility. Back in Oak Harbor, Goldman knew the city would soon need to find new ways to fund public safety. Despite the failure of HB 1628, he saw value in trying to revive the now-expired REET changes.

Decades prior, in another city, he'd worked with a human resources director who had a philosophy for business and life: Don't walk by something that's wrong without attempting to fix it. That lesson gave Goldman some inspiration.

"The idea was basically that if you see



Goldman inside the city's police station and jail. More flexible use of REET revenue could allow the city to bank funds to help pay for construction of a new facility.

something that needs improvement, don't procrastinate or hope that somebody else will get to it," he says. "If you have a good idea, run it past some people who might be affected, see what they say, and, if they agree it's a good idea, go ahead and run with it."

So he did.

Goldman floated his idea past a group of city clerks and finance directors from other cities. The mayor and city council in Oak Harbor adopted it as one of their legislative priorities for 2025, and AWC supported it.

From the start, Goldman wanted to get support not only from across the state, but also from both sides of the aisle. "I wanted

it to be bipartisan because our district is bipartisan," he says. "Our senator is a Republican, and our representatives are Democrats, and they all said they would support it."

He found an advocate in Rep. Dave Paul, D-Oak Harbor, who agreed to sponsor the bill. After passing the House and the Senate, the bill was signed by the governor on April 24.

Prioritizing local needs

HB 1791 officially went into effect in July. Because many cities and towns operate

with biennial budgets, it might take some time before they can start taking advantage of the changes. But with the relaxed rules now made permanent, local jurisdictions can plan for the future with more flexible finances in mind.

That means Oak Harbor can start thinking about what to do with its police station. The building is more than 70 years old and was last renovated in 1989. One-off upgrades, like a new roof and a new HVAC system, have been made in recent years.

But a larger issue looms: The structure has reached the end of its projected design life.

"It comes to a point where you ask, 'Is it cheaper to continue doing that, or is it cheaper to build a new building?'" says



Councilmember Stone at Bellingham's Central Library; in 2026, the city will use REET revenue flexibility to fund a \$2 million library renovation.

Supporting the community

Bellingham is one city that took advantage of the temporary provision allowing use of REET revenue to address homelessness during the pandemic. In October 2021, the city opened the doors to the Gardenview Village tiny house project. The 35 tiny homes in the complex provide stable housing for vulnerable residents—primarily elderly people and adults who are medically fragile—as they transition from homelessness to more permanent housing. The project was funded in part by the city's general fund, American Rescue Plan Act funding, and revenue from the affordable housing sales and use tax (which went into effect in 2020 and which Bellingham opted to adopt). In addition, REET funds were instrumental to the project, with about half a million dollars of REET revenue supporting the initiative.

“The ability of local jurisdictions to make decisions on how funds are allocated to best meet the needs of their community is a huge win,” says Bellingham Councilmember Hannah Stone, who testified in support of HB 1791. “The fact that the bill eliminates the confusing and burdensome differences between the allowed uses for REET 1 and REET 2 is helpful, and it provides certainty that we can continue to allocate certain funding for operations and maintenance.”

In Bellingham's 2026 budget, REET revenue will help the city in a different way. Of the roughly \$4 million →

Goldman, who points out that a new building with the latest technology and design specifications would both fix what isn't working and save money by reaping other benefits, such as improved energy efficiency and reductions in ongoing maintenance costs.

Approaching the problem through incremental improvements also does nothing to address a fundamental problem with the building: It's too small. As Oak Harbor's population has grown, so has its police force. Five new positions were added last year with no additional space to accommodate them. At its current size, says Goldman, “the building is not optimally functional.”

Even with more flexible use of REET funds, Oak Harbor wouldn't raise enough revenue in a year to pay for a new building. But the flexibility could enable the city to bank some REET revenue for the project each year in a targeted savings fund, should the city council decide to do that. The important thing, according to Goldman, is that this new law gives decision-makers another potential option to consider when the time comes to find a solution.

Another way Oak Harbor might use its REET revenue came as a surprise. The city is designing a universal playground,

creating a fun and safe space for children of all abilities. It was expecting to use grant money to fund that project, but in October, city leaders received an email from the Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office informing them that, due to the shutdown of the federal government, its grant program would likely be put on hold. Without that grant money, construction of the playground would need to be delayed. REET flexibility gives Oak Harbor, and other cities facing similar circumstances, the potential to keep projects on track when confronting unpredictable events.

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THE ABILITY OF LOCAL JURISDICTIONS TO MAKE DECISIONS ON HOW FUNDS ARE ALLOCATED TO BEST MEET THE NEEDS OF THEIR COMMUNITY IS A HUGE WIN.

—HANNAH STONE COUNCILMEMBER, BELLINGHAM

In 2021, the City of Bellingham partnered with a nonprofit and used a temporary provision allowing use of REET revenue to address homelessness to open Gardenview Village, providing emergency shelter in 35 tiny homes for residents experiencing homelessness, on land adjacent to the city's community garden.





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Bellingham receives from the tax each year, about \$2 million will be earmarked for a library renovation project.

“It’s a big capital project that has needed to be completed for many years,” says Stone.

The library hasn’t been renovated since the 1980s, and the city has struggled to come up with the money to fund the project. Once complete, Stone says, the benefits will be far-reaching.

“The library really is a hub for the community,” she says. “It serves as sort of a quasi-day shelter for unhoused community members who don’t have places to go during the day. It helps bridge the digital divide for members of the community who do not have internet access at home. The library does so much more than just provide access to physical books or digital books.”

For her part, Stone hopes even more changes will come to the REET structure in the future. Although she appreciates the flexibility cities now have in how they spend REET funds, it doesn’t increase the amount of money cities have access to, even as the costs to run municipal services continue to rise and the affordable housing crisis worsens.

“Bellingham continues to top the list of unaffordable places to live, which isn’t the place where you want to be excelling,” she says. “The need for us to grow the affordable housing pool far exceeds what we’re able to do financially, and we’re going to come up short.”

She’s hopeful that one day, cities will have more flexibility in the REET taxes they are able to levy.

“The ongoing struggle is related to how those REET dollars are collected,” says Stone. “The state can fluctuate its collection of REET dollars based on a more graduated rate system so it’s more of a progressive tax with higher-end properties paying a higher REET tax, but that hasn’t ever been passed on to the local authority.”

Whether or not that ever happens, the updated law is a clear win for cities throughout Washington, empowering local leaders to decide what the most pressing needs are in their communities in a given year and then put available funds toward addressing them. And its origin story is a reminder that local elected officials and city staff collectively have the power to effect positive change that impacts the entire state.

Oak Harbor’s Goldman hopes this bill—and the process it took to get it passed—will inspire peers around the state to take action in similar circumstances.

“If you see something that you think needs to be fixed, and other people in your area feel the same way, don’t let the fact that you haven’t done it before stop you from asking questions and working with other groups that could benefit from it, too,” he says. “An idea is a pretty amazing thing. It can go far, and it can really make changes to benefit everybody.”

Citywise



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To understand what is happening during the legislative session, you have to get through a lot of alphabet soup.”

— CITY 101 P.26 ▶

24 HOW TO BE A BETTER ADVOCATE FOR YOUR COMMUNITY **26** TRACKING THE LEGISLATIVE JOURNEY FROM BILL TO LAW **28** TIPS FOR MAXIMIZING ONE-ON-ONE TIME WITH LEGISLATORS



Stay in the Know

Keeping up with all the bills, rules, and regulations coming out of Olympia can be a herculean task. Luckily, AWC's Government Relations team tracks the issues most important to cities and provides regular updates to members.

Here's how you can stay informed:

- **Read the *Legislative Bulletin*.** Published weekly during the legislative session and monthly the rest of the year, the *Legislative Bulletin* e-newsletter summarizes the latest developments on key issues and ways you can take action.
- **Attend City Action Days.** There's no better way to engage in the legislative process than attending this popular event, which pairs critical advocacy education with valuable networking opportunities. This year's event is coming up January 21-22 in Lacey.
- **Join City Action Calls.** AWC hosts a City Action Call each Friday during the legislative session. Hear the latest updates from the Capitol, give your feedback, and get answers to your questions.

For more details on these and other advocacy resources from AWC, go to wacities.org/advocacy.

ADVOCACY IN ACTION

Make your voice heard this legislative session.

BY AWC STAFF

PART OF YOUR ROLE as a city official is to advocate for your community and make sure legislators understand how their decisions in Olympia impact your city. By engaging directly with the Legislature, you can provide local examples of how a bill will impact your shared constituents—positively or negatively.

Legislators need—and want—to hear from local elected officials on the issues that matter to them. Just like you, they entered public service because they want to make a difference, but they need your local knowledge and expertise to make the most informed decisions.

As the 2026 legislative session gets underway, here are a few ways you can engage with the legislative process.

Testify on a Bill

One of the most effective ways to advocate for your city is to testify on bills before legislative committees. By sharing the potential real-world impact on your city, you can help legislators better understand the implications of a bill.

You can testify in person or remotely. Either way, make sure you are prepared. Your testimony is generally limited to just a few minutes and in some cases may only be one minute. Be sure to have a short version of your testimony—and a shorter version. Don't forget to thank the committee members for their time.

Providing facts and figures in your testimony can be especially powerful, as they provide concrete data legislators can use when deciding how to act on a bill.

Write an Op-ed

Op-eds may seem like a thing of the past in today's social media-driven age, but they remain an effective advocacy tool. Legislators rely on op-eds to stay informed on how their constituents feel about important issues.

In addition to reaching legislators who read their hometown newspapers, op-eds can be shared with legislators across the state, providing an easy way to amplify key messaging.

Keep in mind that op-eds are just one piece of the media puzzle. Reach out to your local reporters to talk about how your legislative agenda is faring and how the Legislature's actions are impacting your community. Build your reputation as a trusted source of information by regularly updating your city's website and actively sharing posts on social media.

Work Together

There's power in numbers. If an issue will have an impact on not just your city but the entire region, joining forces with neighboring cities to speak with one voice and share unified messaging can be particularly impactful.

For example, you could partner with cities in your region to draft a letter to the sponsor of a bill explaining the widespread impact of the proposed legislation. You could also collaborate with other cities by signing your name to letters and position statements AWC drafts on hot issues. Legislators pay attention to the number of individuals


engaged on a particular matter, and by adding your voice to the chorus, you can help express the importance of that issue for cities across the state.

Remember, even if you think legislators have already heard your position on an issue from someone else, it's important to speak up. If legislators don't hear from you, they may incorrectly assume you don't care about the issue or it has no impact on your community.

Keep in Touch

While the legislative session is often the most visible aspect of advocacy work, vital work happens during the interim period between legislative sessions, too. By cultivating relationships with your local lawmakers year-round, you can become a trusted resource for them.

The interim is a great opportunity to meet with your legislators for more relaxed conversations or in-depth discussions. Take them on a tour of your city, including local infrastructure, housing, or parks projects. Discuss your budget and show them the direct impact of state funds and policies.

Don't forget that AWC is here to help you every step of the way. Please reach out to the Government Relations team if you need assistance connecting with your legislators or have questions about a legislative issue. And when you're in Olympia this session, feel free to stop by the AWC office to grab a cup of coffee, make a call, or simply take a break. 

Save the dates in 2026

City Action Days

January 21-22 | Lacey

Healthy Worksite Summit

March 4-5 | Lynnwood

Labor Relations Institute

May 6-8 | Wenatchee

AWC Annual Conference

June 23-26 | Spokane

Member Expo

October 7-8 | Chelan

For a full list of AWC's trainings and events, go to wacities.org.





Say what?

To understand what is happening during the legislative session, you have to get through a lot of alphabet soup. Here are some of the more common abbreviations you'll encounter.

SB: Senate Bill. These bills are introduced in the Senate and are assigned a bill number between 5000 and 7999.

SSB: Substitute Senate Bill. These bills have been amended in a Senate committee.

ESB: Engrossed Senate Bill. These bills have been amended on the Senate floor.

ESSB: Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill. These bills contain all amendments and are the official versions approved on the Senate floor.

HB: House Bill. These bills are introduced in the House of Representatives and are assigned a bill number between 1000 and 3999. Similar to Senate bills, these may become engrossed House bills (EHBs), substitute House bills (SHBs), or engrossed substitute House bills (ESHBs).

RCW: Revised Code of Washington. This is the compilation of all laws currently in force in the state.

WAC: Washington Administrative Code. WACs are rules and regulations created by various state agencies to implement and enforce state laws.

TWV: Washington's public affairs television network. It provides live and recorded coverage of committee meetings, court hearings, and other events.

A WINDING ROAD

The journey from bill to law involves multiple steps, several complex procedures, and plenty of potential setbacks.

BY AWC STAFF

WASHINGTON LAWMAKERS introduce hundreds of bills during a typical legislative session; only about 20% make it through the hearings, debates, votes, and governor's office to become law. While the legislative process may appear complicated, each of the following stages plays a critical role in ensuring bills are thoroughly examined and carefully considered.

1

INTRODUCTION

Bills can be introduced by legislators in either the Senate or the House of Representatives and are assigned to a policy committee based on their subject matter.

3

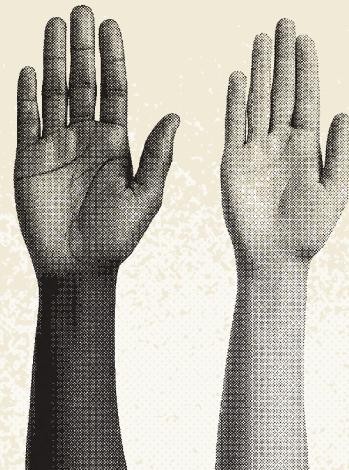
FISCAL COMMITTEE REVIEW

If the bill has an impact on taxes or spending, it must also go through the same process of hearing and approval in a fiscal committee.

2

POLICY COMMITTEE REVIEW

Many bills don't progress out of the committee they are assigned to. To move forward, a bill must first be granted a public hearing and then scheduled for action at an executive session, where it may be amended and approved or rejected by the committee. Committee chairs play an important role—they have the power to decide if a bill is brought before the full committee.



4

RULES COMMITTEE REVIEW

Bills that advance to this point are sent to the powerful Rules Committee, where legislative leadership chooses which bills move ahead to the full legislative body for floor action.

5

FLOOR ACTION

Once a bill is moved to the floor by the Rules Committee, the full body may debate and amend the bill before voting on its final passage.

6

OPPOSITE CHAMBER REVIEW

Few bills make it to this point, and those that do must clear all the same hurdles again in the opposite chamber. In addition, both chambers must pass identical bills, which may mean approving amendments made by the other chamber or negotiating differences between bills in a conference committee.



7

GOVERNOR REVIEW

Finally, bills approved by both chambers of the Legislature advance to the governor. The governor has the option to sign the bill into law, veto it, or allow it to become law without their signature. **C**



Stay current on the city-related bills moving through the Legislature with AWC's bill tracker; scan this QR code, or go to wacities.org/advocacy/bill-tracker.



No Excuses

Legislators may offer several excuses for not acting on issues important to your city. Here's a list of common refrains, along with actions you can take to counter them.

- **"I'm not on the committee."**
Your legislator's job is to fight for your district. They need to advocate for your interests with colleagues who are on the committee. Offer to help by arming them with stories and data.
- **"I had to follow my caucus."**
The only way for your community to get what you need is for your legislators to fight within their caucus to support you. Suggest they join with other local government champions to gain allies who will help advance bills that support cities' objectives and block those that do not. Offer to help identify those stakeholders.
- **"City funding is not our problem."** It is the Legislature's responsibility to ensure cities have the tools and funding to remain strong. Remind legislators that cities drive the state's economic health, population growth, and commercial activity. The state and businesses thrive when we have vibrant communities, smooth and accessible transportation, and dependable services.

Excerpted from AWC's Strong Cities Advocacy Guide

MEMORABLE MESSAGING

How to get the most out of your meetings with legislators.

BY AWC STAFF

MANY CITY OFFICIALS don't realize just how much influence they can have at the state level. You are one of your legislators' constituents, and the information and stories you share during one-on-one meetings can yield positive results. Building strong relationships and communicating consistently and effectively with your legislators is key to being a good advocate for your city.

Meeting with a legislator can be daunting. However, preparing in advance can help you feel more confident and be more effective. Ensure your meeting is a success by following these guidelines.

■ DO share stories.

Providing facts and figures is important, but sharing stories and experiences can be more compelling. Frame your city's "ask" with a local example of the impact on your shared constituents. Impacts on people will resonate more than impacts on governmental operations.

■ DO be concise.

One-on-one time with a legislator is a precious commodity—you will be lucky to have 15 minutes—so it's important to use it strategically. Plan what you want to say and write out your talking points. Offer to provide more details to your legislator or their staff before or after the meeting.

■ DO ask for clear commitments to work on your issues.

You want your legislator to not only understand your position on a particular issue or bill but also support it. Ask them to commit to voting a certain way or to working with other parties to find compromises.

■ DON'T try to cover too much.

Given your legislator's busy schedule, especially during the legislative session, you probably won't have time to discuss your city's entire legislative agenda. Identify your top three to five issues and stick to them.

■ DON'T complain or blame.

It's easy to focus on the negative, especially if you're worried about the impact of a bill on your city. Instead, offer constructive alternatives. If your solution involves money, be prepared for your legislator to ask how the state should pay for it and have suggestions in mind.

■ DON'T forget to follow up.

Being respectful goes a long way toward building goodwill with your legislator. After your meeting, send a follow-up email expressing your gratitude for their time. Include a summary of the issues you talked about and offer to meet again in the near future. **C**

Cityscape



AWC members gather in Colfax for a regional meeting on October 19, 1937.

Ties That Bind

AWC's history is inextricably linked to the Washington Legislature.

WASHINGTON CITIES HAVE a long history of working together to strengthen their communities. But it was the need to secure a share of liquor revenues following the end of Prohibition that really brought them together and demonstrated the need to present a united front on legislative issues.

After Washington ratified the 21st Amendment repealing Prohibition on October 3, 1933, liquor sales in the state were unregulated and uncontrolled. Gov. Clarence Martin was expected to call a special session of the Legislature to address the issue. Acting quickly, Yakima Mayor W. W. Stratton invited his peers from across the state to gather and discuss how they might ensure cities were included in the conversation. Just a few weeks later on October 26, elected officials convened in Yakima and created a new organization to represent cities before the Legislature.

Thus, AWC was born.

Stratton, who was elected AWC's first president, appointed a six-member committee that included three city officials from the eastern side of the state and three

city officials from the western side. The committee met one month later and drafted the bill that became the Washington State Liquor Act with its passage in January 1934. The new law established the Washington State Liquor Control Board to regulate how alcohol was manufactured, distributed, and sold within the state. It also divided the revenue between the state, counties, and cities.

"[I]t was probably more of a successful lobbying effort than anything else," remembered former Speaker of the House Charles Hodde, who was a lobbyist for the Washington State Grange when the act was passed in 1934. "Actually, that was one of the inducements to get the act passed was that local government would share in the revenues."

That early success soon led to many more. In 1935, AWC helped cities secure a share of the gas tax, and in 1937, cities were given the right to establish recreation facilities and control the planning and subdivision of land. Today, AWC is stronger than ever—and continues to advocate on behalf of the state's 281 cities and towns. **C**

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