



Snohomish County Council

## **NEWS RELEASE**

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The Snohomish County Council today unanimously passed a balanced 2005 budget making key investments in public safety, transportation, community ball fields, and tightening financial controls on government. The total budget for all funds is approximately \$550 million. The county's general fund budget, which includes basic services such as the sheriff, courts, elections, parks, and planning is approximately \$173 million and was passed without an increase to the general property tax.

The council restored several proposed cuts in the law and justice area including prosecutors, money for operating Sheriff's vehicles, and funding for the court system including drug court. The Sheriff's budget also includes enough to fund all commissioned officers during the year. The council pared the executive's requested budget in several areas to fund those improvements. About \$193-thousand was saved by holding the early childhood education program at its current level and another \$98,000 was holding back a position designated for an economic development officer. The council has asked the Executive to prepare a plan and job description for that position before considering it.

Community investments included keeping the Master Gardener program in the budget, but asking program participants to help fund it with \$5,000 to be raised through a plant sale or similar event. The council decided to keep \$37,500 in the budget for small senior centers in the form of five \$7,500 grants. Several new ball fields are included in the budget. They are Whitehorse Park in Darrington, Martha Lake Park, Lake Stevens Community Park, and Paine Field Park.

The council voted four-to-one to increase the county portion of the roads property tax levy, raising over \$400,000 this year for roads projects in the six year capital improvement plan. Continuing that investments through the six-year CIP could add \$9 million for roads through the end of the decade. Council members noted the public's concern over transportation and the need for roads improvements in raising the tax. Councilmember Koster voted against the increase saying he favored a user fee rather than the property tax for roads.

In addition, the council rejected a request by the Executive to raise the tipping fee in the solid waste system. The council has also requested a study on the concept of privatizing the transfer stations.

Council Chair John Koster said, "The priorities of government process was new to this county and provided us with a good first draft of the budget. We would like to commend all of the staff members involved in the budget process for their hard work."

Council member Dave Gossett noted, "It was a difficult budget with real cuts to real people. We were able to reconfigure the personnel cuts so that most of them were in positions that are currently vacant. We will ask the Executive to share with us after the first of the year potential ways to transition other employees into vacancies in the county so they do not lose their jobs."

Councilmember Jeff Sax added, "The POG (priorities of government) approach is a great idea, but it wasn't followed in Snohomish County this year. I do think that the Executive needs to invite the Council to the table next year and allow us to work with him on priorities, focusing on those that we are mandated to provide, like law and justice." Sax also added his thanks to the elected officials and department heads in the law and justice system for working together through a difficult budget year.

Councilman Gary Nelson stated, "The County Council held three hearings in the community and four hearings at the courthouse, where citizens expressed their priorities for the county budget. The Council listened to citizen concerns about the executive's recommended budget and modified the spending program to be more in line with how people in the county felt about county operations."

The Council received almost 300 pieces of oral and written testimony on the budget. For the first time, the Council utilized the county's web site to receive official budget testimony from individuals via the county's home page.

The Council also made several key decisions to provide added financial control on government costs. It rescinded a policy that allowed transfers of personnel between departments. The personnel authorization is included in the budget ordinance, making it more difficult to add or transfer staff later in the year. And in a companion ordinance, set up a new method for approving budget transfers during the year.

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