



State of the County Address March 15, 2017

As prepared for delivery by Pierce County Executive Bruce Dammeier

Mr. Chairman, members of the Council, the people of Pierce County:

I stand before you today as both a new Executive, and a new grandfather.

Last month my wife Lauren and I welcomed our first grandchild to the family.

I know many of you on the Council are grandparents and can relate to the incredible transformation that I felt when I first held my granddaughter, Blair.

You feel this greater sense of responsibility - understanding that what we do, or don't do, will impact generations to come.

And while change is inevitable, progress is not.

We must be willing to take on our toughest challenges, invest for the future, and try new things.

Even if we think the status quo is good enough for us, it isn't good enough for them - not for Blair, not for your grandchildren, and not for the people of Pierce County.

Over the first 10 weeks of our administration, you've seen that we are willing to do things a little differently to get the best results for our citizens.

Although I'm the first Republican to hold this office in 16 years, I picked a Democrat as our Chief Operating Officer.

That's because Dan Grimm is the right person to help manage our county government more efficiently and effectively.

We are reorganizing county departments to improve services and save money.

Last week we submitted an ordinance to consolidate the Planning and Land Services, and Public Works departments. One benefit of this change is that it makes it easier to get a permit.

Customers can go to one location for both building and sewer permits.
I urge the Council's speedy adoption of this ordinance.

As I visit our employees throughout the county, I continue to be impressed by their talent and commitment to public service.

It's critical that we empower them to get the job done - without extra headaches or red tape.

We have a skilled and professional workforce today, and we must ensure we have one in the future.

Another area where we took decisive action concerns the old Puget Sound Hospital.

Sadly, transients and drug abusers have occupied this abandoned facility in South Tacoma, and have endangered the local community for far too long.

But not for much longer.

Working with Councilmember Rick Talbert, we secured the building and expedited the contract to demolish it.

We have on-duty officers patrolling the site, the doors are welded shut, and the perimeter is fenced - and all in coordination with local residents.

Derelict and vacant properties act as magnets for criminal activity and can devastate a neighborhood.

I appreciate Councilmember Jim McCune's focus on this problem throughout our county.

These are just a few examples of the steps we have taken to improve county government.

But today is less about what we have already done and more about what we are going to do.

There are reasons for us to be optimistic about the future of Pierce County.

Our economy is improving.

Applications for building permits are increasing.

And, we expect modest job and income growth in 2017.

Thanks in large part to these better economic conditions, County finances are healthy, and we closed out 2016 with a surplus.

However, challenges still remain.

Our unemployment rate is far too high. At over 6%, it's still higher than before the recession, and is significantly higher than in King and Snohomish Counties.

Almost HALF of our workers commute out of Pierce County - wasting countless hours of their lives in traffic.

We must be more than a bedroom community for Seattle.

Our region also faces significant behavioral health challenges.

More than 29,000 people in Pierce County struggle with serious mental illness.

To put that in context, that's 6,000 more people than can fit in the Tacoma Dome.

Many of these people end up in jail or hospital emergency rooms - the most expensive and least effective ways for them to get care.

Last year, more than 1,000 kids in Pierce County experienced homelessness, where they are at greater risk of sex trafficking, drug abuse, and violence.

While we face significant challenges in Pierce County, with the right strategies and partnerships, we can make major progress over the next four years.

But we must start now.

This afternoon, I will submit to the Council a \$10.7 million dollar supplemental budget proposal.

This proposal focuses on increasing public safety, spurring economic growth, and taking specific steps to address homelessness and behavioral health issues.

This proposal is both fiscally and socially responsible.

It makes sustainable investments in services without increasing taxes, leverages key partnerships with other governments and non-profits, and takes immediate action to help the most vulnerable in Pierce County.

The top priority of county government is to keep the public safe.

While we all recognize this is important, I want to specifically thank Councilmember Dan Roach for his strong leadership on this issue.

In the 2017 budget, the Council took a key step to improve public safety by funding 5 more deputy sheriffs.

Today, I propose we take another step.

To improve law enforcement in underserved areas like the Key Peninsula, East Pierce County, and the waters of Lake Tapps, I am requesting the Council fund 2 additional deputies and provide more resources for marine patrols.

For a county our size, we don't have enough deputies patrolling our unincorporated areas.

Finding the right people to serve as our deputies, both in patrol and corrections, is critically important.

That's why we are including funding for the Human Resources department to provide recruiting support to the Sheriff.

As part of our supplemental budget, I'm also requesting a modest increase in funding for economic development.

These resources will help align economic development efforts throughout the county, lay the foundation for future partnerships, and speed up permit processing.

Of course, government doesn't create jobs - the private sector does.

But government can foster the conditions for innovators and entrepreneurs to create jobs.

I know economic development is something Councilmember Pam Roach is passionate about - and Pam, I look forward to working with you on this issue.

To encourage investment in Pierce County and our people, we are making it faster and easier to get permits, without compromising standards.

Just this week we moved sewer permit reviewers to the Annex where they can work side by side with reviewers for other permits.

Next, I hope that the Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department will accept our invitation to co-locate their septic permit reviewers with our staff.

We are also actively exploring ways to share our online permitting system with cities and towns across the county.

This kind of collaboration is good for taxpayers and permit applicants alike.

Job growth depends on smart economic development policies, for today and for the future.

First of all, we must ensure Joint Base Lewis-McChord is regionally recognized as the important economic center that it is.

JBLM provides thousands of jobs for our citizens, brings a highly-skilled workforce to our region, and even brought us our Council Chair - retired Brigadier General Doug Richardson!

Doug, thank you for your continuing public service and our partnership to move Pierce County forward.

More than 100 years ago, local leaders - including my great-grandfather, Beecher McKenzie - envisioned a bustling port as a way to connect Pierce County with the rest of the world.

That long-term, forward-thinking approach is why we have the Port of Tacoma today.

It's that same kind of vision that led to the founding of Frederickson as a key manufacturing center 50 years ago, and even the creation of the University of Washington-Tacoma 25 years ago.

But now we must think about the next 25, 50, and 100 years.

To grow business in our region, we must complete Highway 167 to the Port of Tacoma, and we must do it as soon as possible.

I will keep working with our state and local leaders to ensure this project is delivered as promised.

We also need land use policies that allow commerce to flourish and employment to thrive in Pierce County.

Our county is already home to local manufacturers like Alliance Steel Fabrication, Carlson Paving Products, and Commencement Bay Corrugated.

To allow for further growth of high-wage manufacturing jobs, we need to preserve places for them to do business and grow.

This means preserving important manufacturing land, just as we do for agriculture and open space.

We can - and must - have good jobs and a healthy environment. One without the other is not acceptable.

Recently I toured our sewer treatment plant, and as an engineer, I was impressed with the technology and the skilled staff.

With the recent upgrades, our plant is configured to meet the needs for Pierce County out to 2030 - protecting our environment, while accommodating responsible growth.

We have great places to play in Pierce County - from Mt. Rainier, to our local parks and trails, to Puget Sound.

This summer, we will complete the long-awaited connection of the Foothills Trail at South Prairie.

Soon folks will be able to walk, run and ride all the way from Puyallup to the White River in Buckley.

However, some of our neighbors deal with behavioral health challenges that don't allow them to hold a fulfilling job or experience the beauty of our surroundings.

For them, each day is a struggle.

I applaud the Council for the important work it has done to address this serious problem.

I particularly want to acknowledge Councilmembers Connie Ladenburg and Derek Young for their strong leadership on this issue.

We are fortunate to have the behavioral health study commissioned by the Council last year as a valuable roadmap.

It highlighted several weaknesses and gaps in care for our citizens.

But, it's time we take the next step.

I propose we create a dedicated behavioral health partnership fund with an initial contribution of \$4.7 million dollars.

This fund will be used to leverage public and private resources to help us build infrastructure and capacity in our behavioral health system, as well as provide direct services to those in need.

Let's be clear - Pierce County should not - and cannot - provide for the region's entire behavioral health care needs.

However, we can fill in key gaps in the system and promote partnerships to ensure our citizens have access to much needed care.

With these partnership funds, I propose we do the following:

First, we should take immediate action to establish mobile crisis intervention teams.

These teams of trained professionals would operate out of specially-equipped vans and would respond to calls from law enforcement and the general public.

Think of them like behavioral health first responders.

They will respond throughout the County and provide timely assessment, initial treatment, and transportation to other services - including crisis beds the county will contract for.

Experience elsewhere indicates these mobile crisis teams will be able to divert people in need from more expensive and less effective options - like the jail and the emergency room - to more appropriate services.

This critical need for such teams was brought home to me powerfully in 2011.

A friend of mine, Craig, was faced with having a seriously mentally ill son living in his home.

Despite exhaustive efforts, Craig could not find a facility to provide the care that his son needed.

He called me on the phone, frantic for his troubled son and fearful for his family's safety.

His anxiety was palpable, but there was little help I could offer him.

I look forward to the day when a family like Craig's will be able to call on the support of our mobile crisis teams.

But, mobile crisis teams are not enough.

Our second strategy proposes a place for extended assessment and stabilization because right now that work is happening in our jail.

Last year, nearly 3,600 people with mental health or substance abuse issues were jailed because there was no better treatment option for them.

To address this, we propose building a 16-bed, short stay diversion center.

This center would work in coordination with other care providers, transitioning clients to the most appropriate care setting.

While we aim to get this center serving our community as quickly as possible, it could take a year or more to get it up and running.

So we must get to work soon - hopefully in strong partnership with the state, and our local legislative delegation.

In the mean time, Pierce County should join the Coalition supporting the completion of the new 120-bed behavioral health hospital in Tacoma.

Remember, we have been without a hospital specializing in behavioral health since 2010.

This new hospital will be jointly operated by MultiCare and CHI Franciscan.

Pierce County should be a leader among other cities, businesses, and nonprofits rallying around this critical need for our community. It's time for us to step up.

Therefore, I propose we invest \$500,000 in the new behavioral health hospital to address this critical gap in care.

With that said, more resources demand more accountability. We simply can't afford to confuse efforts with results.

We will work closely with the Council and its proposed Behavioral Health Advisory Committee to clearly identify the outcomes we expect, how we will measure them, and then let the data drive our decision-making.

If we aren't seeing results, we will reform these programs, or we will eliminate them and put those resources to better use.

A related challenge is homelessness.

The causes of homelessness are varied, and so too must our strategies be to address them.

Sometimes a mother becomes ill, misses a few shifts at work, and she and her children end up sleeping in their car.

Sometimes a young adult is fleeing from domestic violence and has no place to go.

Sometimes a veteran returning from war with PTSD ends up on the streets.

Just as with behavioral health, the key to making progress here is coordination and partnerships.

This is a regional problem and it will take collaboration by all our local cities, non-profit organizations, and communities of faith.

I particularly appreciate the homelessness task force that Mayor Strickland has established, and you can expect Pierce County to continue being a strong partner.

However, I also see some specific actions we should take now that can be very powerful.

First, when it comes to homelessness, private sector landlords are critical partners.

Understandably, some landlords are worried about renting to someone with a limited rental history or past evictions.

We can help these people quickly get back into housing while assuring landlords aren't penalized for taking a chance on these potential tenants.

As part of our budget request, I ask the Council to set aside \$250,000 dollars to cover certain damages and expenses for higher risk renters who are currently homeless.

This type of fund has been used in other areas and would help many of our working poor get housed.

Second, Pierce County should seek partnerships to make sure every veteran has a place to call home.

I participated in the annual Point in Time homeless count a few weeks ago.

I specifically focused on the challenges facing our homeless veterans.

It is unconscionable to me that anyone who has served our country in the military would not have a clean, safe place to live.

During this year's count, we found 85 veterans living out on the street.

These men and women sacrificed for us, and it is high time we honor those sacrifices.

Therefore, I propose this Council make an appropriation of \$750,000 dollars to house and serve homeless veterans at the Washington Soldiers Home in Orting.

A portion of this money would go to operate a 12-room facility for women veterans in quarters recently refurbished as part of the Betsy Ross Project.

This project is an incredible partnership between the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs, Home Depot and the WestCare Foundation.

This building is move-in ready, so as soon as we act, we can get these women the support they deserve.

To serve male veterans, the remainder of the appropriation would be used as matching funds to renovate 40 rooms of the Roosevelt Barracks at the Soldiers Home. This would be done in partnership with the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs and WestCare.

I am very excited about the potential of these projects, and I look forward to sharing more details with you soon.

Third, another especially vulnerable population in our community are our homeless teens and young adults.

I'm eager to partner with the City of Tacoma, Community Youth Services, and the Tacoma Housing Authority.

They have two innovative programs planned for Arlington Drive in Salishan.

The first program will create a shelter serving youth aged 12 to 17, which should break ground this fall.

The second, a program providing Housing and support for young adults aged 18 to 24, will follow.

As with all of those proposals, it won't house all of the young people who need help, but it's a start.

These investments are in addition to the \$11 million dollars we place in the community to support those experiencing homelessness.

We are committed to increasing the transparency of county government and making it more accessible and accountable to our citizens.

To increase transparency for our residents, we will be launching a new and improved website in a few weeks. Not only will the site be easier to navigate, but it will also be mobile friendly, responding to the increased number of people accessing it from phones and tablets.

The new site will expand direct access to government data and documents for our citizens. It's their government, and they should know what we're doing.

We will be building on the successes in the Planning department, where they transformed their work and brought it all online so their customers could submit and monitor progress without ever having to visit the Annex.

Their website is convenient, intuitive, and easy to use. There is even live chat help for those with questions.

Those are just a couple of examples of how we intend to leverage technology to make government more accessible and convenient for our residents.

Technology also helps keep us safe. Our first responders rely heavily on technology.

In 2011, Pierce County voters agreed to tax themselves to build a single, integrated, county-wide emergency 9-1-1 system.

Back then, the community was still reeling from the tragic loss of Deputy Kent Mundell and the senseless killing of the Lakewood Four in 2009.

We owe those who wear a badge the highest level of support - both today and into the future.

A lot of work has been done over the past 5 years - all while ensuring reliable 9-1-1 coverage during the transitions.

But we still have a lot of work ahead before the promise of a fully integrated state-of-the-art system is realized.

Furthermore, some of these future decisions, if not made well, could significantly erode the long-term efficiency and effectiveness of the system.

To make sure we are getting the fully integrated system our law enforcement and firefighters deserve - and our citizens expect - I propose the Council appropriate \$200,000 dollars for a comprehensive, independent assessment of the current integration plan and its financial sustainability.

This study would include short and long-term cost projections of South Sound 9-1-1 dispatch centers and the two radio systems maintained by the county and the city of Tacoma.

I am thankful that this independent assessment will be done in partnership with South Sound 9-1-1.

Jointly, we have not wavered in our commitment to our first responders and our citizens who rely on them.

Here in Pierce County, we have important work ahead of us, but we are moving in the right direction.

I was heartened to learn that the Council and I share the same priorities for the upcoming year: increasing public safety, addressing behavioral health and homelessness, spurring economic development, and dealing with vacant properties.

This alignment in priorities, however, is no coincidence.

These are the priorities of our constituents.

In closing, I say to the Council, let us work together to solve these challenges.

Let us invite tribal leaders, business leaders, union leaders, community leaders, and leaders of faith to join us in these efforts.

And let us make progress for my granddaughter, Blair, for your grandchildren, and for the people of Pierce County.

They are all counting on us.

Thank you for the opportunity to address you today.

May God bless us in the work ahead.