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1997 Session in Review

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July 1997

Dear friends,

It is my pleasure to bring you this report on the recently completed legislative session. It was a historic session, marking the first time since 1957 that lawmakers have finished their work on time in a budget-writing year.

With the perspective provided by the few weeks since the end of the session, it's worthwhile to take a look back at what we really accomplished. Despite the dire predictions of social and environmental destruction offered by our critics, I believe we have taken some very reasonable steps to improve life for everyone in Washington state.

We enhanced our support for education by focusing dollars into the classrooms and fully funding school construction for the next two years.

We approved a property tax relief referendum that will be placed on the ballot to put property owners back in control of their taxes.

We made historic reforms to our welfare and juvenile justice systems.

We approved land acquisitions to complete the Cama Beach State Park project and to expand the Deception Pass State Park.

We authorized a land transfer that allowed Twin City Foods to rebuild its Stanwood plant and put people back to work.

While we've wrapped up our work in Olympia, I remain in your service throughout the year if you have questions or concerns, or if you need help in your dealings with state government.
I can always be contacted through my Olympia office at (360) 786-7914. I appreciate the opportunity to represent you.

Best regards,

Barry Sehlin

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Retired Whidbey squadron honored

Washington's House of Representatives adopted a resolution honoring retired Attack Squadron 196, known as the "Main Battery," and the A-6E Intruder bomber, which made their home at Naval Air Station Whidbey Island for more than 30 years.

Before becoming commanding officer of NAS Whidbey Island, I began my flight training at NAS Pensacola the same year the Intruder was employed in the U.S. Navy fleet. I was thrilled to have the opportunity to honor the people who flew this airplane and the people who worked on it.

The Intruder is gone, but the young, professional men and women are still on the base working on other airplanes, and they are the people who will make you proud of their generation.

Stanwood plant rises from the ashes

It seems like an eternity since fire decimated the Twin City Foods plant in Stanwood last year. But I was honored this session to put the final pieces in place that will allow the company to rebuild the facility on the existing site.

When the company set out to reconstruct the plant, it was learned that when the plant was built about 50 years ago a small corner of the facility extended onto about 3,000 square feet of land claimed by the Department of Natural Resources. The agency declined the company's offer to conduct a land swap, and instead insisted on negotiating a lease for the small parcel.

The Legislature approved a bill, which I sponsored, that transferred control of the property to the Department of Fish and Wildlife. Then, working with the Department of Fish and Wildlife, the owners of Twin City Foods, and other legislators, I was happy to devise a plan whereby the company would trade a beautiful piece of riverfront property on the Stilliguamish River for ownership of the disputed bit of slough bank. With the completion of this swap the people of Washington have gained a lovely piece of riverfront and allowed the reconstruction of a valuable agricultural business.

The plant will once again be employing 200 people year-round and more than 500 people during the peak harvest season.

Representatives from Naval Air Station Whidbey Island were on hand for the adoption of House Resolution 4637 in Olympia. The resolution was passed in honor of Attack Squadron 196 and the A-6E Intruder bomber which made their home at NAS Whidbey Island for more than 30 years. Pictured from left to right are Rep. Barry Sehlin, R-Oak Harbor; Capt. Terry Toms, commander of Pacific Fleet Attack Wing; Capt. Larry Munns, commander of NAS Whidbey Island; and Rep. David Anderson, D-Clinton.

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Changing the way government works

Perhaps the most significant and far reaching reform of many years is the restructuring of our welfare program and juvenile justice system, two of the largest and most complex areas of state government.

• Welfare reform

We approved legislation (HB 3901) to enact a major philosophical and structural shift in our welfare system. Welfare will no longer be treated as an entitlement. Henceforth, it will instead be administered as temporary assistance for families who need help getting back on their feet.

The new Washington welfare program will require recipients to work. It places a five-year time limit on benefits, thus ending the cycle of dependency that keeps families trapped on government assistance from one generation to the next. It provides child care for single parents and assistance for retraining that will help individuals become gainfully employed. This program will lead people to self-sufficiency, the original intention of those who developed welfare.

• Juvenile justice reforms

We enacted a historical juvenile justice reform act to allow authorities to restore respect for the law and deal appropriately with young offenders before they develop a pattern of serious criminal behavior. A recent study shows that the average juvenile offender who commits a crime with a deadly weapon has multiple prior convictions which have resulted in minimal consequences.

Our new system will treat the most violent 16- and 17-year-old offenders as adults. It will also ensure that there are consequences for every offense, beginning with the first. Our reforms give prosecutors and judges flexibility to issue alternative sentences, such as mandatory school attendance or drug treatment. But no crime will go unpunished.

These reforms will allow us to keep young, first-time offenders on the right track and ensure that our streets are safe from the growing number of violent, juvenile offenders who treat the criminal justice system as a game. Under our reforms, it is a game they will no longer be able to win.

Protecting natural resources

We adopted legislation that will allow commercial salmon fishermen to opt out of their annual licensing requirement without losing their commercial fishing status. This will reduce harvest levels and take pressure off dwindling salmon runs during lean years. It will also help struggling commercial fishermen by allowing them to skip a season without penalty when it might be economically difficult to fulfill their needed harvest levels.

Local land acquired for state parks

As chairman of the Capital Budget Committee, it was particularly gratifying to gain approval for the final acquisition for the Cama Beach State Park. The capital budget provides $45 million for the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program, including $1.4 million for the phase-three acquisition on Camano Island, as well as $800,000 for an additional acquisition at Deception Pass State Park.

Improving Growth Management

We were successful in adopting several much-needed adjustments to Washington's Growth Management Act. With any legislation as sweeping as this act it isn't too surprising that some corrections are needed as experience is gained in its application. The few relatively minor changes we have implemented will go a long way toward allowing the local implementation of land-use planning envisioned at the time GMA was passed.

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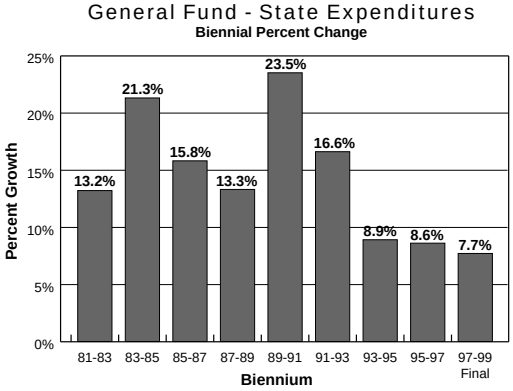
Budget boosts education spending, protects taxpayers

The Legislature approved a two-year operating budget that represents the smallest biennial increase in spending in the last 26 years. The operating budget of $19.07 billion allows us to provide $411 million in tax relief and leaves us with a responsible ending fund balance of nearly $366 million. It maintains spending $112 million below the Initiative 601 spending limit.

We allocated money to priority areas, such as education. We increased per-pupil spending in K-12 education by $168 per student, we added 6,390 enrollment slots in higher education and increased financial aid to students by $32 million. In addition to funding for basic learning, we have directed money into each classroom to support education reform measures aimed at one simple goal — making sure kids who attend public schools know how to read, write and master the basics of math and science. We provided $20 million for new materials and $39 million for new education technology in the classroom. Our budget is an outstanding budget for students.



Building new schools

Providing money from the state general fund and through the capital construction budget, the Legislature has fully funded the state's share of all local school construction projects for the next two years. We approved $540 million for improving and expanding higher education facilities to significantly increase access to our state's colleges and universities.

Legislature completes rollback of B&O taxes

In 1992, former Gov. Mike Lowry and then House Appropriations Chair Gary Locke declared a state "fiscal emergency," and with the help of majority Democrats, approved the second largest tax increase in state history. The greatest burden from these tax increases — $330 million in the 1993-95 budget period alone — fell on the shoulders of small employers in the state's service industries. In 1996 the Legislature rolled back half of the 1993 tax hike, saving employers nearly $132 million.

This year the Republican-controlled Legislature passed legislation to complete the tax rollback on July 1, 1998. HB 1821 will save businesses $94 million in fiscal year 1998. The reduction will benefit 50,000 small businesses in Washington. Sixty-eight percent of businesses benefitting from the rollback have annual sales of less than $200,000. Small-business owners benefitting from the legislation have an average annual income of about $30,000 per year.

Property tax referendum goes to taxpayers

In Republican's continuing effort to bring tax relief to property owners, the Legislature acted promptly this session to reduce the state tax levy and bring rising property taxes under control. We were able to quickly adopt a one-year extension of a 4.7 percent property tax cut in order to avoid an increase in the state tax levy in 1997. The governor vetoed both Republican proposals to offer permanent tax relief, so we decided to send a proposal to the voters.

The Legislature has approved a property tax referendum that will be on the ballot in November. It calls for a permanent 4.7 percent cut in the state property tax levy and would limit all non voter-approved property tax increases to the rate of inflation or 6 percent, whichever is lower. Under this plan, the owner of a $110,000 home which appreciates at 5 percent a year would save $23,000 over the life of a 30-year mortgage — an average of $760 per year.

The measure would also reduce homeowner taxes when property values jump drastically by phasing in increased assessments over a period of up to four years. As a result, homeowners have up to four years to absorb the total cost of value increases, cutting taxes in the short term and cushioning the shock of sudden property tax increases.