1997 Session Report

State Representative
Alex Wood

3rd District

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Committees:
- Transportation Policy & Budget
- Commerce & Labor
- Health Care

Dear Friends,

In the late 1990s, Washington's economy is sound. For this, we can thank both our thriving, world-renowned corporations and the thousands of small businesses and farms that dot our landscape. Combine this economic strength with the abundance of natural beauty that graces our state, and you find a quality of life here that is a national standard.

Still, all is not well. Just ask the working families of Washington who are trying to get by on diminishing average household wages... ask low-income families in search of affordable, accessible health-care insurance... ask the citizens of the rural heartland whose livelihoods have been snatched away, and whose communities fight against extinction... or ask any parent concerned about our schools, and whether their kids are getting the tools to compete in the global marketplace of the 21st century.

That's why I helped to draft a progressive, realistic legislative agenda this year that sought to improve K-12 and higher education, health care, economic development, the environment, campaign finance laws, welfare reform, crime control — the standards of a better society.

But instead of considering this agenda, the focus of this legislative session was cutting taxes. This resulted in more than $200 million in business tax cuts — a number that will double in the next four years. This comes on the heels of nearly $800 million in business tax cuts approved during the last two years, before you sent us to represent you in Olympia.

I support cutting taxes to spur the economy and to provide tax relief to homeowners and small businesses. But when Democrats sought to target tax cuts toward working families and small businesses, the majority in the Legislature said no.

Therefore, **missed opportunities** is the overriding theme of the 1997 session. The Legislature rejected our priorities for:

- **Meaningful property-tax cuts for homeowners.**
- **Greatly expanding health-care coverage for low-income families.**
- **A commitment to stay the course on education reform, and on growth management.**
- **Affordable higher education.**
- **Transportation infrastructure improvements for tomorrow's economy.**
- **And tolerance toward all of our citizens.**

It's fortunate that our new governor, Gary Locke, used his veto pen to affect compromise on some of the more radical proposals that emerged from the Legislature.

In the coming months, I hope to hear from you on your priorities for next year's legislative session. Your Third District representatives to the Legislature have opened a district office at **The Lindaman Center, located at 315 West Mission St., Room 4 in Spokane,** and we welcome you to drop in. Also, we'll be mailing out a questionnaire to gauge the issues that are on the minds of the Third District. We hope you'll take the time to fill it out.

Please do not hesitate to contact me whenever we I may be of service.

Sincerely,

Alex Wood
State Representative
3rd Legislative District

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PROTECTING EDUCATION REFORM

Education reform will go into effect statewide by the fall of 2000. Mandated by landmark 1993 legislation, it calls on the state to develop clear standards in core subject areas, and hold schools accountable for teaching and students accountable for learning.

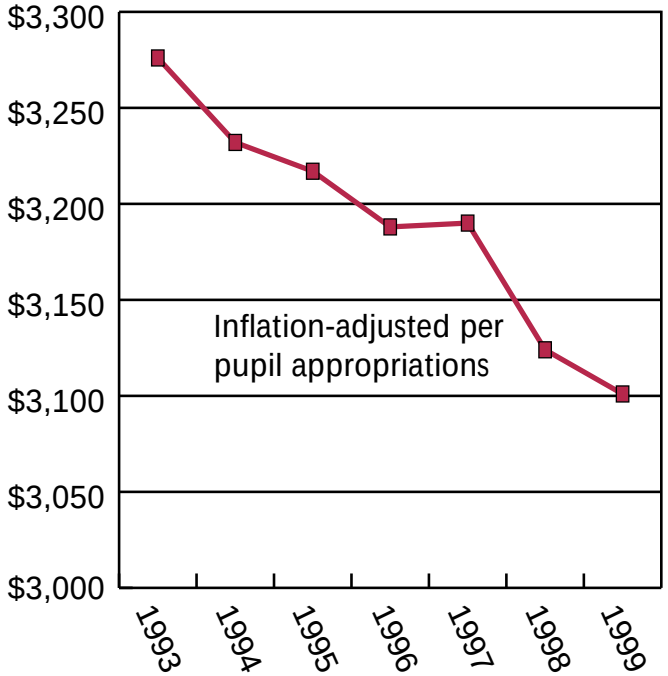
The law also mandates comprehensive testing; improved curriculum, teaching, and teacher preparation; and a phase-out of regulations that hinder the work of schools. Students will be required to earn a Certificate of Mastery for high school graduation, which will show that students have mastered academic skills and knowledge needed for success.

But without critical support funding, education reform is doomed to failure. That's why I opposed budget cuts proposed this year for planning grants, which give teachers the time and means for critical planning to help every child achieve the higher academic standards.

I also opposed proposals to:

- Eliminate the $2.9 million school-to-work program, despite the nearly universal call to teach children the importance of work and the critical role schooling plays in their future work lives. Schools will have to cut other student programs to maintain these vocational programs for middle- and high-school students.

School Funding has been Stagnant or Dropping since 1993



- Cut Complex Needs and Magnet Schools funding, which target schools with special needs such as multilingual populations, imbalanced racial mixes, and students of poverty.
- Cater to the bizarre insistence by some legislators that the state reject $16 million in federal grants — no-strings-attached money that nearly every state uses to implement locally defined school reforms. Acceptance of federal money, these legislators said, would lead to a federal takeover of our schools;
- Lower student-achievement standards for middle and high school students; and
- Refuse decent cost-of-living raises for teachers, including part-time community college instructors.

UNCERTAIN FUTURE FOR BASIC HEALTH PLAN

Affordable access to health insurance for low-income working families is an unrealized goal in Washington state. More than 600,000 people are completely uninsured, a need that the Basic Health Plan (BHP) was developed to fill. Seventy-thousand people are still waiting to get on the BHP.

In 1995, when the Legislature rolled back 1993 health-care reforms that would have provided coverage for every person in the state, legislative leaders promised instead to "fully fund" the BHP and expand its subsidized slots from 130,000 to 200,000. House Democrats this year introduced several measures designed to fund the BHP, including legislation that would:

- Require that all BHP enrollees who are eligible for Medicaid transfer to the Medicaid program;
- Expand access to the BHP;
- Establish an employer-purchasing insurance pilot project — to encourage small-business owners to purchase BHP coverage for their employees; and
- Give the state more leverage in purchasing insurance for the uninsured.

NONE OF THESE MEASURES WERE PASSED OR RECEIVED HEARINGS.

After Gov. Locke vetoed a budget bill that contained no new enrollment slots, the final budget funded 11,500 additional slots — 8,000 new enrollments and 3,500 slots in the DSHS Long Term Care budget for home-care workers. But the final budget increased sponsor payments from $10 to

$35 per month, jeopardizing coverage for some of our poorest families.

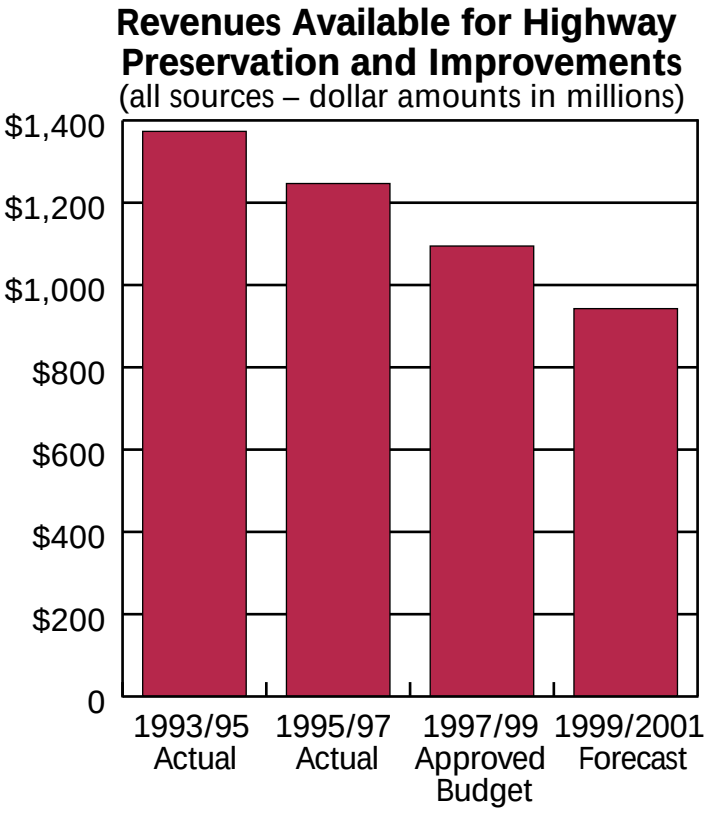
I will continue to work to honor the commitment made in 1995 to fully fund the Basic Health Plan. Access to health insurance is too important to the individual and cost-effective to the state to give up on expanding the BHP.

TRANSPORTATION FUNDING STILL LACKING

A bipartisan plan emerged from the Senate this year for a seven-cent per gallon increase in the state's fuel tax. The tax would have raised more than $1.3 billion in construction and maintenance funds over the next six years. This additional revenue could have funded more than 200 new highway projects and increased safety at railroad crossings throughout the state.

Sadly, Washington's transportation infrastructure is crumbling. Spokane residents know all about potholes, and this new revenue would have helped in that regard.

In rural areas, it is increasingly difficult to move the agriculture products that are so vital to our state's economy on an aging and inefficient farm-to-market road network. Our ports are losing business to other West Coast cities, a dangerous trend for a trade-dependent state like Washington.



A barrage of misinformation plagued the gas-tax proposal, and it never received a hearing. The transportation budget that eventually passed out of the Legislature was actually smaller than for the previous biennium — continuing a trend of shrinking revenues available for highway preservation and improvement (see chart below). Barely enough was allocated to allow for completion of construction projects that are currently underway.

Budgets for several vital programs, including ferry service, were cut pending results of a Department of Transportation audit. And despite bipartisan calls for an expansion of the State Patrol, the budget of this law enforcement agency was actually cut by $12 million.

We can't hide our heads in the sand when it comes to the need to maintain our transportation systems. We either pay now, or chances are good that we will pay much more later.

Given these problems, I was honored to be named by the speaker of the House to serve on the Legislative Transportation Committee. The panel serves a fact-finding role for the Legislature on transportation policy. With the growing transportation problems statewide, it gives me the perfect opportunity to make sure Spokane's needs are kept in focus.

PRINCIPLED WELFARE REFORM PASSES

This year, I supported a tough new proposal by Gov. Locke to change welfare as we know it. After the smoke cleared, the Locke proposal was largely intact. The new law requires work, yet provides the training, child care and health care needed to keep families whole.

Passage of the federal welfare reform last year overhauled 60 years of welfare law and dictated hundreds of policy changes by the states. The guidelines mandated by the federal law posed major challenges as we attempted to reform welfare in Washington. First, we were required to change welfare to temporary assistance, implement a five-year lifetime benefit limit and move large numbers of welfare recipients into "employment related" activities. Second, severe limits were placed on the use of block-grant funds to assist legal immigrants.

House Democrats decided upon several welfare-reform principles to judge various proposals this year:

- Does it make work pay?
- Does it provide adequate and affordable child care?
- Does it provide access to health care?
- Does its labor standards protect workers?
- And does it include legal immigrants?

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Early versions of welfare-reform legislation this year were not paired with a commitment to raising the minimum wage; did not include realistic labor standards; did not include common-sense exemptions from work requirements, such as for grandparents caring for disabled children; and violated America's traditions of equal treatment and equal justice for legal immigrants.

A later version was even worse in terms of job supports, making work pay, labor standards and fairness. Finally, a compromise measure moderated the legislation, and a separate bill was passed to ensure equal treatment for legal immigrants.

But many challenges remain: Family-wage jobs for working adults remain essential to welfare reform, and Democrats are committed to better job training, job opportunities and job supports to make family-wage jobs a reality for Washington's working families. The Legislature must remain vigilant to ensure that people who work hard and play by the rules can earn an honest living and not be forced into poverty.

JUVENILE JUSTICE REFORM PUTS TEETH IN LAW

Should all 16- and 17-year-olds who commit serious crimes be punished as adults?

Our state already requires all 16- and 17-year-olds charged with a serious violent offense to be tried under statutes affecting adults, as well as those charged with violent offenses who have extensive criminal histories. For less serious offenses, a hearing is held to determine if the juvenile should be tried as an adult.

This issue was the only stumbling block for the Legislature in our quest to reform the juvenile-justice system this year, and to put teeth in our laws governing the criminal action of minors. Finally, a compromise was reached to add such serious crimes as robbery in the first degree and drive-by shooting to the list of crimes for which juveniles would be referred to adult court.

The final bill:

- Sends the most violent 16- and 17-year-olds to adult court;
- Adds more detention time for crimes committed with a firearm;
- Extends sentences for some crimes to allow time for appropriate rehabilitation services;
- Simplifies the juvenile-sentencing grid; and
- Involves parents in the court process.

It also will provide drug-abuse treatment options to counties and the state, require hearings on sending teens who escape from detention facilities to adult court, increase community involvement and send state dollars to the counties to fund state mandates.

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