

## Department of Conservation & Natural Resources

### 2024 Supplemental Department Questions

*Please answer the following questions in a word document and return to Council. The answers to these questions will be provided to council as supplemental information. While not part of the physical budget presentation to Council, departments should be prepared to answer questions Council may have on these supplemental questions. If you feel that you have provided an answer in a previous question, please don't repeat your answer, simply refer to the earlier question/answer.*

#### **Strategic Goals**

1. Provide your 2024 strategic goals; how are they different from 2023? In what way, if at all, are your strategic changes demonstrated in your budget request?

DCNR's mission is to partner with Snohomish County communities to steward resources and manage infrastructure for the purpose of protection, enhancement, use, and enjoyment of our land, air, and water now and into the future. Below are some examples of the higher priority strategic goals that are included in the 2024 budget request.

#### 2024 DCNR Strategic Goals:

- *Land Conservation Initiative (LCI)* – The 2024 proposed budget will continue this initiative that is focused on land conservation and enhancement of critical resource lands in the county. Forterra was selected to work with a county leadership group in developing a strategic plan for land conservation, including criteria for priority funding, mapping of priority conservation targets, analysis of tools and mechanisms to accelerate land conservation, and resource needs for implementation. The LCI also includes funding to seed a Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) bank and hire a third-party program administrator, as well as to continue the Healthy Forest Project. Collectively, these elements represent Phase 1 of a multi-phase effort.
- *Snohomish County Food and Farming Center (SCFFC)* – After receiving initial funding in the 2022 budget, the SCFFC is currently in progress. Throughout 2023, work on progressive design build validation continued as well as approval by the Project Review Committee to move forward with the Progressive Design Build process. Currently, the RFQ process is underway to select the design/build team to move the project forward. Through 2024, this process will continue.
- *Kayak Point Park* – Construction of Phase 1 Renovation of Kayak Point Park started in 2023 and will continue into 2024. This project will address aging infrastructure at this popular regional park and also provide environmental enhancements through incorporation of stormwater system improvements, partial removal of a shoreline sheet pile wall and replacement with soft shore armoring, replacement of an at-grade boat launch with an elevated structure and adjustments to address anticipated sea-level rise. Overall, this project will

ensure continued enjoyment of this popular facility while also making improvements for overall sustainability. An opportunity was identified in 2023 to expedite the second phase of the Kayak Point project by securing bond funds and releasing the second phase bid, so that construction could overlap with Phase 1, resulting in savings in mobilization and escalation costs, as well as reducing impacts to park visitors. This second Phase bid will be released in late 2023.

- *Regional Trails* – 2024 will continue Snohomish County’s emphasis on Regional Trail provision through continued design of the Snohomish River Trail and submittal of a federal grant to complete first phase design for the Centennial Trail South project. Anticipated funding for Centennial Trail South will be used to develop an interim approach to trail opening, while progressing full design to 90%. This work will align with anticipated settlement of property issues, which will allow trail planning to move forward.
- *Fair Park Improvements* – 2024 will continue efforts started in 2023 to address long-term sustainability of this important facility. This will include efforts to expand a sponsorship program, hire a consultant to review and update the 2014 Master Plan into a flexible Preferred Plan, efforts to enhance the role of the facility for emergency response and continuation of capital improvements aimed at addressing deferred maintenance and also expanded revenue generation.
- *Communitywide Climate Action & Environmental Stewardship Plan* – This plan is intended to recommend actions and goals across the county that would help to address the causes and impacts of climate change and promote environmental stewardship. This plan will involve input from the community and stakeholders and will be coordinated with the new Climate Action Element that is being developed as part of the County’s update to its Comprehensive Plan. A consultant will be selected to assist the County in plan development in late 2023 with planning work beginning in early 2024.
- *Healthy Forest Program* – This OES program is launching two new initiatives in 2024, including a Species Conservation / Monarch Butterfly project and a Youth Work Force Development and Engagement project. Both grant funded initiatives will add resources and program expansion that will engage the community, improve county owned urban forested areas and meet the goals of the 20-year Healthy Forest Plan.
- *Expansion of Fish Passage Culvert Program* – The SWM capital program has increased its focus on designing and constructing projects that eliminate fish passage barriers under county roads. The program expansion to replace an increased number of barrier culverts began in 2021 and will continue into 2024. Based on culvert inventories, hundreds of existing county road culverts act as partial or complete barriers for fish passage. SWM is currently in the process of designing over 30 culvert barriers for replacement with larger, fish passable culverts to be constructed in the coming years. Multiple revenue sources have been used to fund this expanded program, including SWM utility revenues, REET

II, proceeds from the sale of County property, and grants, including successful grant partnerships with the Tulalip Tribes and others. Public Works also addresses fish passage barriers as part of their road improvement projects.

- *Chinook Marsh Restoration Project* – The SWM capital program will continue to make progress on this large (~445 acre) estuary restoration project that was originally begun by SWM in the mid-90's and then recently reinitiated. SWM completed key property acquisitions in 2022-2023 and anticipates purchase of the last remaining 34 acres in the restoration footprint by early 2024. The next steps in 2024 involve the completion of design and funding options and the beginning of the design process. Intertidal restoration is integral to the success of salmon recovery in the Snohomish watershed, as these areas provide essential refuge and rearing habitat to out-migrating juvenile salmon.
- *Integrated Floodplain Management* – Working with Lower Skykomish River landowners, Snohomish County Surface Water Management (SWM) and Sustainable Lands Strategy partners have developed an innovative new program called Community Floodplain Solutions (CFS). The goal of CFS is to keep local farms viable, reduce flood impacts for residents, and restore habitat for threatened salmon. In 2024, the program will continue to work on integrated floodplain actions with partners, including the Tulalip Tribes, Snohomish Conservation District, Washington Farmland Trust, and other SLS partners. Partners are trying to mobilize the capacity needed to secure funding from the large pots of infrastructure money available over the next five years. In addition, the program will continue to advance project designs for four large integrated projects to implement actions that reduce risk, restore habitat, and maintain or enhance agricultural viability. As part of that design process, the program will also host two to three community events to gather input from community members.
- *Commitment to Work in Partnership with Boards, Commissions, the Public and Other Partners* – DCNR is committed to working in close partnership with the unprecedented number of boards and commissions that are facilitated by our staff. DCNR is also committed to working transparently and in partnership with the public and our numerous partners that help us to accomplish our mission.
- *Commitment to Racial and Social Equity* –The department's leadership is committed to addressing racial and social equity. In 2023, DCNR combined two justice, equity, diversity and inclusion (JEDI) committees into one focused on DCNR priorities. This committee will continue in 2024, focused around a recently completed Charter and needs identified by the group.

### **National, state and local landscape:**

1. What are the federal, state and local issues facing your work? What risks or opportunities does that create for you in 2024 and beyond? What is your plan to leverage the opportunity or mitigate the risk? What support do you need?

- *Fish Blockage Culverts in County ROW* – Together with Public Works, SWM continues to design and construct fish passage culverts within county right-of-way. Of the culverts inventoried to date, over 200 existing county road culverts are complete barriers to fish passage and over 300 more are partial barriers, so the need is very high. Starting in 2021, SWM has expanded efforts to increase the number of culverts that are replaced by SWM in the coming years. Funding for this expanded effort comes from a combination of SWM utility revenues, REET II, grants, and proceeds from the recent sale of county property.
- *Electrification of DCNR Fleet / Charging stations* – In anticipation of the 2030 law eliminating the sale of vehicles with combustion engines, DCNR is exploring options for expanding the electrification of Department vehicles and has identified specific units that could go electric. DCNR is working with Fleet to determine how these vehicles could be transitioned. In addition, DCNR is researching the cost and availability of theft and vandal resistant Electric Vehicle Charging Stations for public use in County parks. This would expand the number of existing charging stations available at County parks and would increase public access in non-urban areas.
- *Permitting Issues for Projects* – Some required permits for project construction, such as permits issued by the Army Corps of Engineers, can be particularly long and/or unpredictable in their timing, which can sometimes cause project delays. Several County departments, including DCNR, have an agreement with the Corps that is intended to decrease permit timelines, which has helped some, though the timelines can still be somewhat unpredictable. In addition, DCNR coordinates with tribes in the early stages of projects that they will review in order that they have input and familiarity with projects prior to the permit review stage. Increased federal funding is expected to increase the demand on federal and state agencies to deliver permits, which has the potential to slow permit timelines.
- *Emergency Use of Fair Park* – In 2020/2021 and again in 2022, the Evergreen State Fair Park was utilized for emergency response support. In 2020/2021, the Fair Park was utilized for COVID testing, vaccinations, PPE storage/distribution and quarantine housing. In 2022, the Fair Park was again used as the command center and base camp for response agencies responding to the Bolt Creek Fire. In 2023, Parks coordinated with DEM and Human Services to submit a proposal to improve HVAC and air quality in two buildings, for the purpose of community resiliency in case of air quality or high temperature needs. The proposal received favorable feedback and the group will be preparing a federal submission for funding to complete the identified improvements. Funding opportunities through Federal, State, and other agencies for Climate Resiliency and Conservation could create substantial funding support for DCNR staffing resources toward those efforts. Collaboration with other Snohomish County departments, regional MSA's and others can help improve scoring for potential

grants. Temporary staffing can provide the bandwidth to apply for and secure available funding opportunities in 2024.

- *NPDES Permit* – A new NPDES permit for Snohomish County and other phase 1 communities will take effect in August of 2024. The new permit has the potential to increase the resources needed by the County to stay in compliance. The draft permit is currently under review and the County is in the process of formulating a consolidated set of comments.
2. What, if any, new mandates do you have impacting your work? Are they funded or unfunded? What is the plan for accomplishing the work?

The next NPDES permit for the County is expected to be issued in August of 2024. County staff are currently reviewing the draft permit and evaluating any potential impacts to workload and/or funding.

## Programs

1. List programs, projects and services within your department funded through federal COVID/ARPA funds. What, if any, of those programs are you recommending ongoing funding for and what is the source of ongoing funding?

Parks received funding in 2023 for a project position to support STEM education through the Glacier Peak Institute. This position was filled, then vacated, and expenditure of the remaining funding through refilling of this position is recommended into 2024.

In 2022, \$1.5 million was provided to support development of the McCollum Food and Farming Center. This funding will be used for early design efforts.

In 2022, \$600,000 in ARPA funds was allocated to SWM's capital program for salmon recovery purposes. This one-time funding was utilized in 2022 and 2023 for the acquisition of property at the future salmon restoration site known as Chinook Marsh. Once the restoration project is completed, the Chinook Marsh property will provide critical rearing habitat for juvenile salmon in an area where it is needed most. Historic loss of estuary habitat is a significant factor limiting salmon recovery, since restoring estuary habitat provides young salmon with important places to feed, rest, and grow before entering Puget Sound.

For 2024, SWM requested \$500,000 to cover part of the one-time cost to excavate the 8-acre stormwater pond at the Smith Island Restoration site, which has filled with sediment and marsh vegetation to such an extent the county is required to excavate it. This maintenance of the stormwater pond is required prior to transferring the long-term responsibility for the maintenance of this pond to the local Diking District 5.

2. For programs funded by COVID/ARPA funds, detail the plan to close out and/or transition those programs to an ongoing funding source in 2025 and beyond.



Once funding is expended in 2024 for the Glacier Peak project position, the position will either be closed out or assumed by WSU.

Funding for the Food and Farming Center will be expended for development and ongoing funding will not be required.

Funds used for the Chinook Marsh and Smith Island projects are for one-time needs and do not represent ongoing program needs.

3. What new programs are you launching for 2024? What need or efficiency is that new program addressing? How is that program funded for sustainability? What metrics are in place to determine effectiveness?

*Integrated Floodplain Management (IFM) Program* – This proposed new program, funded primarily by grant funds in 2024 and 2025, proposes to better coordinate floodplain management activities across all county departments. This would involve the creation of an IFM Coordinator position to facilitate IFM implementation across County departments. The program would also establish an internal Floodplain Management Advisory Committee (FMAC) to develop a Snohomish County IFM program. In addition, this program would establish an internal staff-level IFM Advisory Group to meet regularly to discuss upcoming plans, projects, Capital Improvement Program (CIP) and Transportation Improvement Plan (TIP) efforts, and studies in the floodplain.

4. If different than #3, what are your areas of significant investment? What are you not doing because of that investment?

- *Surface water capital projects* – The proposed 2024 budget for SWM’s capital program is roughly \$19 million, which represents roughly 35% of SWM’s total proposed budget. The larger categories of projects within SWM’s capital program include fish passage culverts, habitat restoration projects, drainage/water quality improvement projects, and community floodplain solutions acquisitions and easements.
- *Parks Capital Projects* - Parks’ proposed capital budget includes a range of projects that address park renovation, development and property acquisition projects. In total, this program for 2024 includes \$over 10 million in projects. Funding for this program is primarily provided through park impact mitigation fees, REET 2 and grants, all of which are focused on park capital work.
- *Snohomish County Food and Farming Center (SCFFC)* – While the scope and design of the SCFFC is still being refined, this facility represents a significant investment that will support the agriculture sector of Snohomish County for many years to come. This project has garnered the support of at least one State elected official to propose a multi-million dollar appropriation of State funds toward this project.
- *Land Conservation Initiative (LCI)* – The LCI will develop a comprehensive Land Conservation Strategy for Snohomish County. This strategy will be used to focus acquisition efforts into the future and preserve important park, habitat,

agricultural, forest and general open space lands. This first phase of the project involves a total investment of \$4 million, and future phases are intended to build upon this investment.

## Internal Operations

1. What is your department doing to streamline processes or deliver services in a new way? How do your budget allocation requests play into these innovations? Are there ways which a different budget approach, e.g., several departments sharing a resource, could achieve the same or better results in a more cost-effective way?
  - *SWM Utility Billing Database Updates* – SWM is in the process of updating the database used to calculate surface water utility charges and provide billing information to the Assessor's Office. Utility billing drives a revenue stream for SWM and four contract cities that presently totals over \$30M annually, and is essential to the financial functioning of the division. The current billing database was built in Microsoft Access, and work is underway in 2022-2023 to update the backend database to SQL. Working with IT, this update will make the system more robust, with much faster processing times. In 2023, SWM has budgeted \$250,000 to also update the frontend user interface to the database. Currently, there are 76 distinct surface water levies, serving over 168,000 county and city ratepayers, and those numbers change with every annexation or change of property ownership. SWM must be able to make frequent and rapid adjustments to the billing database to ensure charges are accurate. Updating the billing database and interface will simplify the process for making billing adjustments for improved accuracy, ensure that the system remains functional as support for Access is phased out, and also expand the number of users with knowledge of the database functionality, providing redundancy and backup support for this critical role.
  - *Shared Staffing* – Shared 2024 project staffing between Parks and OES will ensure that collaboration on projects, programs and grant funding will expand programs like the Healthy Forest Program and the Land Conservation Initiative.
  - *Continuous Improvement* – A number of Continuous Improvement projects are being pursued with, and without, assistance from the OPEX team. This includes a fair management system, use of cartegraph for ADA evaluations, implementation of Daily Readiness Reporting, workers needed analysis and standardization of Parks' planning process. This is a continuing effort and staff regularly identify initiatives that will help improve efficiency of operations.
2. What, if any, hiring challenges are you experiencing? How is that affecting your level of service or internal operations? How are you mitigating those operational challenges and/or what is your plan for recruitment?

DCNR is experiencing hiring challenges across all areas of the Department. Fewer applications are being received for vacant positions and the Department is also

seeing significant turn over as staff leave for other jobs. While there are hiring challenges across all positions, DCNR is especially challenged to fill higher level engineer positions.

- *Hiring of Higher Level Engineering Positions* – DCNR has experienced continued difficulties with recruiting higher level engineer positions that require a Professional Engineers license. This challenge has limited SWM's ability to deliver as many capital projects as we would be able to do if these vacant positions were all filled. SWM has used a variety of approaches to address this challenge, such as changing the engineering requirements for a supervisor position, reclassifying some engineer positions to non-engineer project management positions, and underfilling some higher level engineer positions at a lower level (and then promoting in the future when skills and experience have increased sufficiently).
  - *OES Weatherization program technical staff (Energy Conservation and Repair Analyst) positions* – these continue to pose challenges in the current market, where there is a high demand for construction / energy conservation related skillsets.
  - *Ranger Staff* –Parks has experienced challenges in hiring and retaining Ranger staff in recent years due to higher salaries being offered elsewhere. We have made progress recently in filling vacancies and filled four positions within the last year. We are hopeful that recent increases in salaries will help with retention.
3. To help inform Council on experiences around hiring and retention, please provide a list of all vacant position titles, position codes, FTE amount (1.0, 0.5, etc.), date vacated, and date first posted. Template spreadsheet attached for convenience and conformity; if already tracking information in another format, that is acceptable as well. Please list each vacancy separately.
  4. What effect has the increase of inflation and/or supply chain issues had on your department? What, if any, services, or projects have you had to adjust to accommodate for this? (i.e., moving to outside contracted services, delaying of project starts and/or purchasing, redistribution of workload, etc.)

The escalation of construction costs has been significant in recent years. As an example, replacement of individual playgrounds was previously budgeted at approximately \$90,000 but are now estimated to be at least \$200,000 for a basic play area.

SWM typically relies on engineering consultants to supplement our in-house staff in order to deliver high priority Capital projects. The cost of using these outside consultants has increased significantly over the last few years. Those increased consultant costs, along with substantial increases to the cost of construction materials and construction personnel has greatly increased the overall cost of



project delivery. The impact of these increased costs is fewer total projects being completed and the delay of several projects by a year or more.

OES Weatherization has also had substantial supply cost increases alongside increased time for contractor completion which substantially impacts overall residential weatherization efficiency project costs. Time delays for contractor scheduling secondary to contractor shortage can impact meeting funding expenditure deadlines.

5. When was the last time your department implemented a fee increase? Do you have any plans to increase fees?

- *SWM Utility Charges* – In 2019, the County Council adopted code changes to Title 25 that established the current surface water management (SWM) service charges. The new charges took effect in 2020, and an annual cost adjustment for the service charges of 2.8% first took effect in 2021. At the time, a requirement was added to SCC 25.20.020 that the SWM Director would provide a recommendation to the County Council about these service charges by the end of the second quarter of 2024. The specific code language says, “On or before the end of the second quarter of 2024 and at least every five years thereafter, the director shall provide to the county council a recommendation for future annual service charges with supporting analyses and documentation.” As a result of this requirement, SWM is currently reviewing its service charges, and the SWM Director is planning to present a recommendation, together with supporting analyses and documentation, to the County Council by June of 2024.
- *C-PACER Fees* – Commercial Property Assessed Clean Energy and Resiliency (C-PACER) Program fees were increased to cover the cost of the program, including lien recording fees in 2023 after a program cost analysis.
- *Park User Fees* – Parks annually reviews fees charged by other jurisdictions/entities for services such as parking, camping, fair entrance, etc. and recommends increases to align with other providers. Park fee adjustments are reviewed and recommended by the Park Advisory Board and approved by the County Executive. Fair fee adjustments are reviewed and recommended by the Fair Advisory Board and approved by the Fair Manager.

6. Do you have any plans to do a rate/fee study? Are your current fees established based on a full cost recovery model?

- *SWM Utility Charges* – As described in the above response to question 5, SWM plans to fulfill the requirement in County code (SCC 25.20.020) by reviewing its service charges and presenting a recommendation to Council by June of 2024. SWM’s financial structure is based on a full cost recovery model that accounts for all of its expenditures. While SWM service charges make up the largest revenue source to fund SWM programs, additional funding comes from grants, REET II, Road Fund and other sources.

- Adjustment of Park/Fair Park fees are based upon competitive rates determined through staff research and the method of review and approval noted above. A formal rate/fee study is not typically conducted for these annual adjustments.
- Park Impact Mitigation Fees may, by code, be adjusted every two years and a review is planned to be completed in 2024. This will consist of an evaluation of improvements necessary to maintain park level-of-service standards, and evaluation of the cost of those improvements and assignment of those costs based upon anticipated housing growth. This process will include public outreach and adoption as part of the 2024 budget process.

## **Successes**

1. Take this opportunity to share one significant success in your department over this past year. What made it a success?

Given the wide range of projects in DCNR, it is challenging to highlight just one success over the past year, so we have provided summaries below of two high profile success stories.

*Meadowdale Beach Park and Estuary Restoration Project* – This monumental project completed the final phase of construction in 2023. This project helped to significantly improve public access to a Puget Sound beach, restore 1.3 acres of nearshore habitat for salmon, and resolve a long-standing erosion and flooding problem within the park. This pioneering project was the first in the region to fully restore natural stream functions through the railroad that runs along many miles of Puget Sound shoreline. As a result, the project was the lone recipient across the entire country for the NRPA Innovation and Conservation Award, which is a significant honor. In addition, there are also hopeful signs that this pilot project could lead to other similar projects being implemented in other locations.

*Community Floodplain Solutions* – The CFS program has had multiple successful accomplishments over the past year: (1) Partners worked to preserve Bob's Corn and Pumpkin Farm under a 207 acre farmland preservation easement; (2) 217 acres of land along the Lower Skykomish River has been secured for habitat restoration, farmland preservation, and flood risk reduction; (3) the program provided relocation assistance to a low income family that moved them out of the home located in the floodway into safe and sanitary housing; (4) an additional \$9.9M of state FbD grant funding was recently secured, resulting in over \$26M of Federal, State, and local funding secured since 2019; (5) advancements in the project designs and stakeholder engagement for four large scale integrated, multi-benefit projects located along the Lower Skykomish River and the Snohomish River and Estuary.