

Performance Audit of the Structure and Staffing of the Executive Office and Council Office

November 2024

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RESULTS

This audit found that the staffing structure of the Office of the County Council has remained consistent over the past decade, can be considered lean relative to other similarly-formed county governments in Washington, and that it was neither overstaffed nor understaffed to carry out the primary responsibilities of the County Council. At the same time, the Office of the County Executive has grown substantially over the past several years, primarily related to three key programs funded primarily through special revenue funds within the offices of Economic Development, Recovery and Resilience, and Social Justice. The creation of these programs within the Office of the County Executive poses a risk to the sustainability of the programs themselves; what can be created within the Office of one Executive can be dismantled by a future Executive. The County Council, through ordinance, can make permanent the existence of departments and the responsibilities and powers of those departments.

KEY FINDINGS

- The structure of the Snohomish County Council aligns with other similarly-formed Washington county governments, and has remained stable over time. However, peer County Councils have taken an alternative approach in one key respect: they have established internal policy and legal counsel resources dedicated to proactive policy and legal research that is driven by the needs of the council members.
- The programs within the offices of Economic Development, Recovery and Resilience, and Social Justice as programs administered within the County Executive's Office have been funded by County Council, but continued placement within the Executive's Office poses a risk to the long-term sustainability of the programs. None of the peer counties reviewed as part of this audit administered similar programs in this manner, and each assigned such responsibilities to already existing county departments or created new departments or offices in county code to perform the work.
- Position creation and compensation adjustments within the Executive's Office did not always follow Human Resources standard protocols, often resulting in the movement of positions between programs and reallocation of existing positions to substantively different classifications, often without position descriptions. This audit revealed that the practice of processing these position changes through the annual budget, instead of Human Resources established procedures, has been somewhat common among other County departments, offices, and courts over the past decade. Further, while Human Resources generally limits salary (or "step") increases to two per year, some positions within the Executive Office received multiple step increases in a given year.
- The Executive Office could do more to measure the impact of expanding programs and activities, as well as develop key performance indicators for all executive departments, similar to peer counties.
- Both the County Council and the County Executive have permitted dual employment in non-partisan positions within their offices, something that is permitted in state statute and county code. There are risks to such a practice, as cited in statute, particularly when an employee in a non-partisan County position is elected to a partisan office of state or local government. We recommend that the County Council and County Executive establish a policy regarding dual employment in both offices.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Consider adding staff to create capacity for proactive policy analysis and in-house legal counsel within the Council Office.
- Transfer the tourism and economic development programs to the Department of Economic Development.
- Transfer the COVID recovery activities housed within the Office of Recovery and Resilience to the Department of Finance.
- Transfer the human resources and grant-related activities performed by the Office of Social Justice to existing County department, such as Human Resources or Human Services; at the same time, continue to champion Social Justice and DEI efforts throughout the County through the Executive Office.
- Follow Human Resources' protocols for creating and changing positions and compensation.
- Develop and report on performance metrics relevant to economic development and social justice, and consider developing performance dashboards for all County departments.
- Consider establishing a dual employment policy that applies to both the Council and Executive offices.

A. Introduction and Background

The Washington State Constitution establishes the commission form of county government as the standard for all counties within the state, unless a county elects to adopt a “home rule” charter, which allows counties to establish an alternative form of government. Snohomish County adopted the home rule charter in 1980, amended it in 1986, and has conducted a Charter Review Commission every ten years since.¹ As of March 2024, Snohomish County is one of seven charter counties in Washington state, and one of only four to have adopted the “Council-Elected Executive” form of local government.

Whereas the commission form is a “plural” form of government, in that it places responsibility for both legislative and executive duties in the hands of elected members of a county’s Board of Commissioners, “Home Rule” charters allow for the addition of county officers deemed necessary to carry out county functions, so long as these officers do not interfere with mandated elected county officials, such as the prosecuting attorney. Home rule charters may establish council and executive offices as partisan or non-partisan. To carry out this vision, counties generally choose between two forms of home rule, the “Commission/Council-Appointed Administrator” form, or the “Council-Elected Executive” form.

In the former, a county commission or council preserves the power to set policy, adopt budgets, and fulfill all legislative functions of a commission government, while delegating some portion of the county’s administrative and executive authority to an appointed executive with clearly defined managerial responsibilities. This individual is usually called the County Administrator, as in Kitsap County, or the County Manager, as in Thurston County.

In the Council-Elected Executive form, as adopted by Snohomish County, the role of the County Executive is typically more robust and independent than in the Commission/Council-Appointed form because voters elect this official to lead an executive branch of government. While the County Council preserves legislative authority, continues to approve the county budget, and maintains general oversight of the executive office, the Executive exercises significant power by having veto authority, preparing the proposed county budget, supervising non-elected departments, recommending policies, enforcing ordinances, and implementing adopted county policies. Other Washington counties that have adopted this form of government are King (1969), Pierce (1981), and Whatcom (1979).

Report Overview

The remainder of this report is organized into three (3) sections. Section B focuses on the objectives and scope of this audit and provides an overview of the methodological approach employed by the audit team to conduct this audit. Section C presents our findings, conclusions, and recommendations related to the County Council, and Section D presents our findings, conclusions, and recommendations related to the County Executive. We also provide, in Appendix A, a the County Council’s response to this audit and, in Appendix B, the County Executive’s response to this audit.

¹ Snohomish County Charter, Section 8.20

B. Scope and Methodology

On January 23, 2024, the Snohomish County Council adopted Motion No. 24-028 directing Council staff to issue a notice to proceed to the Office of the Performance Auditor to complete a performance audit of the Structure and Staffing of the Executive Office and Council Office. The scope of this audit included existing and past staffing structures of both offices, including historical trends over the past ten calendar years. The objective of this audit was to determine the efficiency and effectiveness of the staffing structures of the Executive Office and Council Office. To meet this objective, we performed the following procedures:

- B.1 Conducted interviews with key personnel of both offices to gain an understanding of the organizational structure of each office, the functional responsibilities of key personnel and organizational units, and the allocation of workload to such units and personnel.
- B.2 Reviewed relevant background documents, such as strategic plans, mission and goals, budget information, performance metrics, annual reports, relevant statutes, and other general information regarding the role, responsibilities, functions, performance, and initiatives of the two offices.
- B.3 Reviewed job descriptions for key personnel to gain an understanding of the contemporary roles and responsibilities of staff and management with both offices.
- B.4 Evaluated the organizational structures of each office, including reporting relationships, span of control, and the allocation of staffing resources.
- B.5 Conducted benchmark research to gain an understanding of the structures of Executive and Council offices in other similarly situated counties, including King, Pierce, and Whatcom counties—all home rule Council-Executive forms of government.
- B.6 Obtained and analyzed historical budget and staffing data for both offices.
- B.7 Reviewed the availability of workload indicators, output or outcome indicators, and performance metrics related to key program units.
- B.8 Assessed, given the responsibilities of both offices, what work is and is not accomplished with the positions currently allocated to each office.

Audit analyses were designed to evaluate the organizational and staffing structures of both offices. We did not evaluate business processes or systems of internal control related to the procedures of either office in carrying out their daily duties and functions. This audit also did not include time-task studies or workload analyses required to determine the precise number of staffing needed to carry out every function or responsibility of each office. Rather, this audit focused on the structure and organization of staffing resources, and how allocated positions were managed and controlled over time.

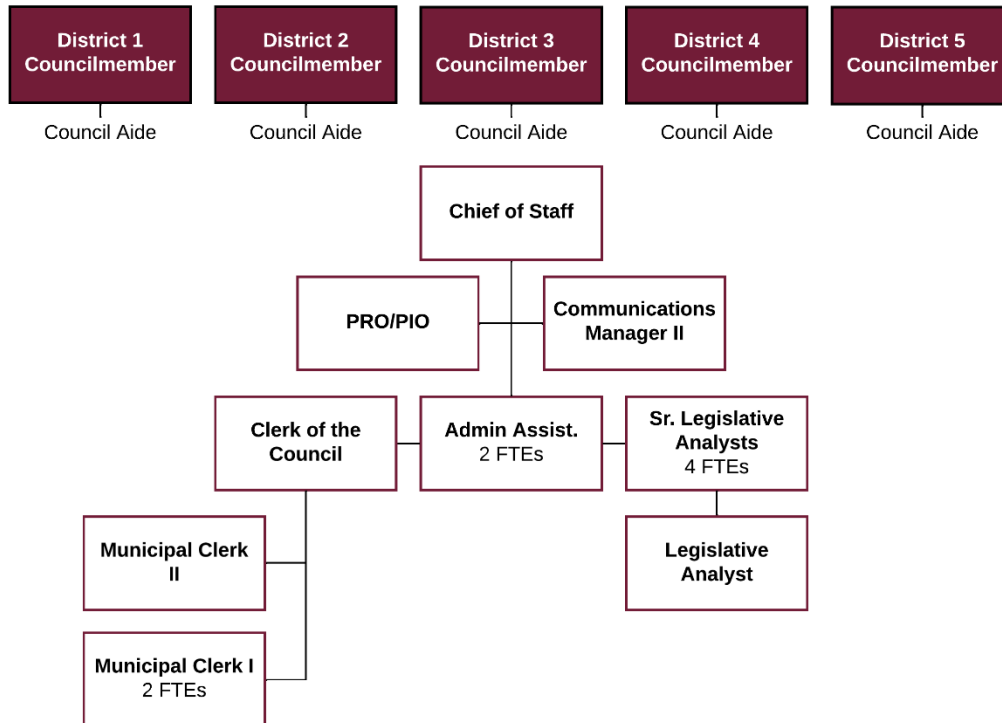
Audit fieldwork was performed between March and October 2024. On October 24, 2024, the Office of the County Performance Auditor provided the County Council and Executive Office with a draft of this report. Responses and input provided by representatives of both offices were considered and incorporated where applicable in the final report. The County Council's formal response to the findings and recommendations contained in this report is included in Appendix A. The County Executive's formal response to the findings and recommendations contained in this report is included in Appendix B.

We conducted this performance audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

C. Office of the County Council

The Office of the Snohomish County Council consists of the five elected Councilmembers, a legislative aide assigned to each Councilmember, the Chief of Staff, a public records officer, a communications manager, two administrative support staff, and the branches of clerks and legislative analysts. This organizational structure is shown in Exhibit 1.

EXHIBIT 1. SNOHOMISH COUNTY COUNCIL OFFICE ORGANIZATIONAL CHART, JANUARY 2024



Source: Organization chart provided by the Office of the County Council and interviews with Office leadership.

The primary responsibilities of each unit within the Council Office are as follows:

- Aides to Councilmembers:** Each Councilmember hires their own aide based on a standard job description. However, individual duties may vary depending on how a given Councilmember wishes to receive support in their role. The functions of Council Aides ranges from providing executive assistant support, such as managing schedules and emails, to work closely with councilmembers on policy issues or appearing on councilmembers' behalf at meetings or functions. Councilmembers supervise and evaluate Council Aide performance.
- Legislative Analysts:** Legislative Analysts staff the five standing legislative committees and provide policy support in their areas of expertise, with each committee assigned a designated analyst. Legislative Analysts receive, review, and manage all legislative items that will appear on their assigned committee's agenda—through Executive Council Approval Forms (ECAAF) submissions—and therefore much of their workload is driven by the County's offices, departments, and courts. Legislative Analysis also draft policy and legislation, track state and federal legislation

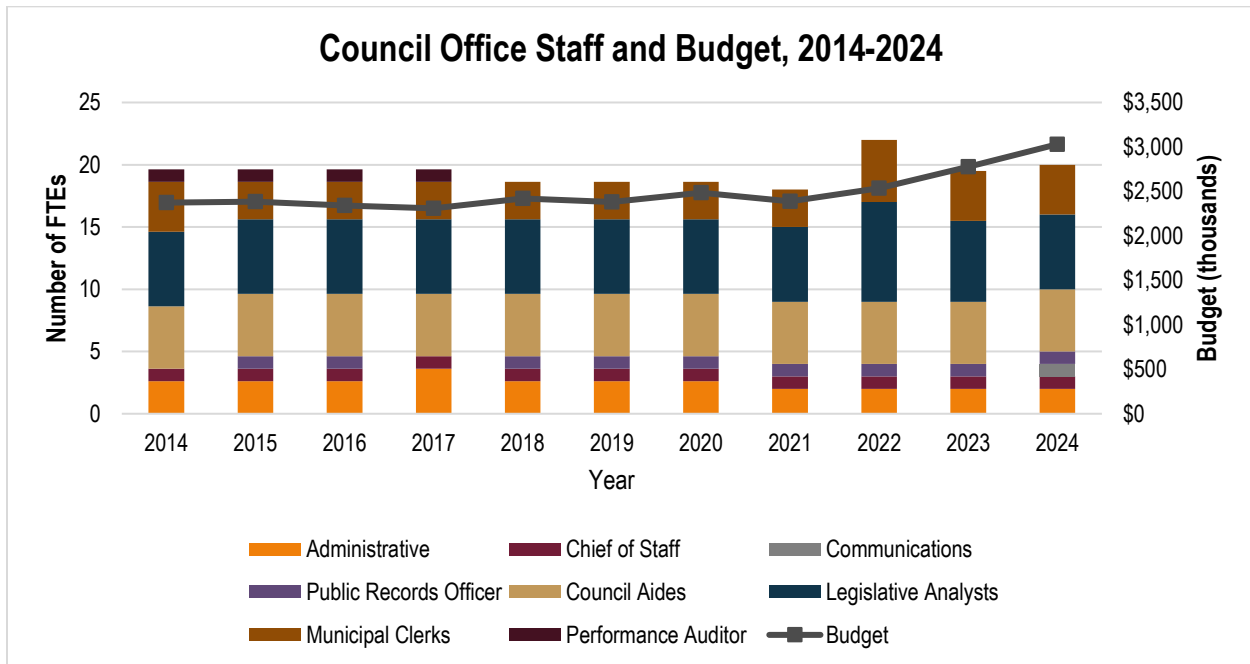
and impacts, and participate in various outside committees. Legislative Analysts may also assist one another, beyond their designated areas, when workload warrants it. For example, for a period of time every year, committees are suspended and all analysts work on the budget and implementing budgetary requests; analysts continue to process priority legislation during this time.

- **Municipal Clerks:** The team of Municipal Clerks staff all council and committee meetings, as well as joint meetings or hearings with other city and county councils, and assist with meeting during which a legislator or judge is appointed. They manage all appeals from Council that go through hearing examiners, the Council inbox, ethics violation filings, and all county interlocal agreements for public viewing. Municipal Clerks also keep formal records of all official County documents, process legislation, reports, letters and other submissions as they come to Council for consideration, and receive and process all ECAFs before forwarding to the appropriate analyst for staffing. Municipal Clerks are the main contact for County staff for Legistar support. The Clerk of the Council is the Code Reviser and manages County Code by compiling ordinances as enacted by the Council, editing and revising ordinances as necessary for Code conformity, and works closely with Code Publishing and County Departments, including the Prosecutors Office to manage all Snohomish County Code.
- **Administrative Assistants:** The Council Office currently employs two administrative assistants. The first is the assistant to the Chief of Staff and to the Council, who organizes all in-district meetings and organizes offices that are Council-wide. The second assistant manages the front desk and does all fiscal management for the Council Office.
- **Public Records Officer:** The responsibility of this position is to handle all public records requests for the Council, and to respond more generally to all requests for information.
- **Communications Manager:** The Communications Manager handles all external communications, as with the press, including by drafting newsletters, resolutions, and managing social media.

The Structure of the Snohomish County Council Aligns with Other Similarly-Formed Washington County Governments, and Has Remained Stable Over Time

This staffing structure has been stable over the past decade, with the number of employees being nearly identical in 2024 (25 full-time staff) to what it was in 2014 (24.625 full-time staff)—an increase of 0.375 FTE and \$657,261 in salary costs—or 1.5 percent and 21.69 percent, respectively—between 2014 and 2024. Exhibit 2, below, illustrates that many of the individual positions remained constant over the past decade, while others—namely legislative analysts and municipal clerks—varied some.

EXHIBIT 2. CHANGE IN COUNCIL OFFICE POSITIONS FROM FY 2014 TO FY 2024



Source: Auditor-created graph based on data provided by County Council staff and County adopted budgets.

In addition to the staffing structure of the Office of the County Council, the County Council also administratively oversees two independent offices housed within the legislative branch of county government. Specifically:

- **The Ombuds / Public Advocate:** Staffed by 1.5 FTE positions, the Ombuds Office receives, responds, and assists in finding resolutions to public complaints and concerns involving Snohomish County government, including making recommendations, as appropriate, to improve the efficiencies and systems of the departments, and conducting independent investigations into complaints.
- **The County Performance Auditor:** The County Council has not allocated any FTE positions to the performance audit function, but rather outsources this function to a third-party contractor, Sjoberg Evashenk Consulting. The office completes performance audits in accordance with Generally Accepted Government Auditing Standards, and reviews county departments, offices, programs, and functions to help ensure they are effective, efficient, and economical.

This Organizational and Staffing Structure of the Council Office Is Consistent with Other Similarly-Formed County Governments

The structure of the Snohomish County Council Office is very similar in composition to the other three Washington Council-Elected Executive counties. Importantly, Snohomish County similarly staffs the essential functions, namely legislative analysts and county clerks, at a level that generally corresponds to the County’s size when compared to the three comparators. Considered in the context of the populations the counties serve, Snohomish County’s Council Office has the fewest staff members per capita of the four counties: In the Snohomish County Council Office, there are nearly 60,000 citizens for every staff member,

in Pierce there are only approximately 46,000, more than 42,000 in King, and a much lower number of 28,356 people per staff member in Whatcom County.

As shown in Exhibit 3, the Office of the Snohomish County Council allocates staffing resources in a manner consistent with its peers, with the bulk of resources dedicated to legislative analysts and clerks. Where the counties tend to vary is in the allocation of a typically small number of positions dedicated to handling specialized responsibilities deemed a priority by each council. For instance, two counties, including Snohomish, established Public Records Officer positions, and two counties established Government Relations positions; while one established a position dedicated to Equity & Social Justice and another created established in-house counsel to address the needs of the respective councils. Each County Council also established independent offices within the legislative branches to carry out key functions related to administrative hearings, performance audits, and ombuds/public advocate responsibilities.

EXHIBIT 3. COUNCIL OFFICE POSITIONS BY COUNTY, BY FUNCTION

	King County	Pierce County	Snohomish County	Whatcom County
Population	2,269,675	921,130	827,957	226,847
Councilmembers	9	7	5	7
Council Aides	35	7	5	0
Chief of Staff	1	1	1	0
Directors	7	2	1	1
Legislative Analysts & Coordinators	19	8	5	5
Legislative/Committee Clerks	9	3	3	2
Communications	3	1	1	—
Administration & Support	12.5	1	2	—
Public Records Officer	—	1	1	—
Equity & Social Justice	1	—	—	—
Gov. Relations + Local & Reg. Affairs	2	1	—	—
Legal Counsel	—	3	—	—
Total Staff	98.5	35	24	15

Source: Organization charts obtained from each county and interviews with each office’s Chief of Staff

All of this suggests that the Office of the County Council is and has remained relatively lean over the past decade. It employs fewer staff than peer counties, both in actual FTE positions and on a per-resident basis. The Council Office has remained so consistent that it has not kept pace with the growth of the county as a whole. Snohomish county estimates that the population grew by 118,800 residents over the last decade, from 741,000 in April 2014 to 859,800 in April 2023, a 16 percent total population increase. Between 2014 and 2024 the County government also increased the number of employees by 25 percent, and doubled its operating budget.² Part of this growth stemmed from the County’s incorporation of the Snohomish Health

² Number of countywide FTE positions increased from 2735.325 in the 2014 budget to 3423.875 in the 2024 budget; the total adopted County budget expenditures increased from \$822,731,028 in 2014 to \$1,666,195,083 in 2024.

District in January 2023, which added nearly 196 FTE positions, or 5.7 percent of the county's total 3424 FTE positions, and a budget of nearly \$37 million or 2 percent of the County's \$1.7 billion budget. By contrast, as noted earlier, the Council Office increased FTE positions and staffing costs by 1.5 and 21.69 percent between 2014 and 2024. According to the County Council's Chief of Staff, the need to effectively integrate the Health Department into the committee structure, and the related increase in workload, led the Office to engage in a workload distribution assessment two years ago; no additional resources were allocated to the Council Office, but workloads and assignments were shifted to manage the growing workload.

Overall, this study found neither that the Office was overstaffed nor understaffed to carry out the primary responsibilities of the County Council.

Peer Counties Have Taken Alternative Approaches to Certain Functions that the County Council Could Consider

This audit identified alternative approaches employed by peer counties, which would require the County Council to increase its staffing resources but which could yield benefits currently unavailable to the Council. Specifically:

- **Increased FTE Resources for Policy Analysis Work.** Although Legislative Analysts perform the important role of receiving and evaluating ECAFs, staffing Council committees, and evaluating the policy and budgetary implications of the items submitted for review by County offices, departments, and courts, this work is largely reactive and driven by parties external to the County Council.

Peer counties employ staff with the intent to dedicate analyst resources to proactive, independent policy analysis designed to drive policy solutions, legislative proposals, and informed decision-making. Whatcom County facilitates this type of policy analysis by developing a process to review policy questions as they arise; triage inquiries based on priority, including council vote in some cases; and assigning staff to conduct the policy analysis. Pierce County hired a data analyst to independently obtain and analyze significant data sets housed within different county departments and offices for the purpose of conducting research and informing policy questions—such as homelessness.

Currently, this type of proactive policy analysis is being completed only when there is time left after core responsibilities are satisfied. Generally, however, staff spend time on County Code review and clean-up efforts, review sunset and repeal dates established in code, and assist with other tasks. Because of this, the Council Office is not as well positioned to conduct the type of in-depth policy analysis envisioned by peer County Councils.

- **In-House Legal Counsel.** Snohomish County, like all counties in Washington, has an elected prosecuting attorney with duties set forth in statutes.³ The Prosecuting Attorney advises the County Counsel, the County Executive, and the county as a whole on a variety of matters. The Snohomish County Charter further provides the County Council the power to employ legal counsel, as allowed

³ Revised Code of Washington (RCW) 36.27.020.

by the laws of the state of Washington.⁴ Pierce County has found it quite beneficial to employ attorneys in the capacity of in-house counsel to provide advice on legal matters and policy questions, and to be at the table when working with the Prosecuting Attorney's Office. The purpose of these legal experts is not to replace the role of the Prosecuting Attorney in providing counsel to the County Council or to the Executive; instead, it is to ensure that the County Council's perspective is appropriately represented in consultation with the Prosecuting Attorney. According to Pierce County, this access to in-house counsel has been incredibly valuable as the County navigates complex legal and policy questions.

The County Council Should Consider a Dual Employment Policy Regarding Staff and Management Positions for Which Independence, Objectivity, and the Appearance of Non-Partisanship are Essential to the Position

Neither Washington State nor Snohomish County restrict the practice of "dual employment," which refers to the practice of one individual simultaneously holding a paid position as an employee of a government organization while also holding an elected office. The Revised Code of Washington does, however, caution that dual employment should not cause financial conflicts of interest, impairment of independence, incompatible duties, or otherwise interfere with the ability of the individual to perform their primary job.

Some positions, such as analyst roles or those positions from whom stakeholders or members of the public rely for non-partisan services, require that the incumbent be viewed, both in fact and appearance, to be objective, independent, and non-partisan. Both the Council Office and the County Executive have employed individuals in non-elected county positions that, at the same time, held elected office with other government entities such as the state legislature, city councils and mayors, or special district governing boards. Dual-employed personnel tended to occupy non-partisan positions and non-partisan elected offices or occupied partisan positions (such as Council Aides). Nevertheless, when considering objectivity in a county position, potential conflicts of interest are not limited to dual-employed personnel who hold partisan positions outside of their county role. A dual employment policy should address the potential for conflicts related to dual employment regardless of the partisan, or non-partisan, nature of elected offices held where there could be potential or perceived conflicts of interest in specific areas of county business.

Given the potential that there could be instances in which County employees within positions for which independence, objectivity, and non-partisanship is considered essential, could hold elected office, and given the risks cited in statute, we believe it is prudent to consider a policy regarding the matter. This policy could be memorialized in Council policies, Human Resources policies, position descriptions, or County Code. Such a policy, while ensuring that the rights of employees are not infringed upon, could consider the potential that the duties of each position may at times be incompatible with one another, that the individual responsible for carrying out objective and unbiased analyses could be viewed as biased because of their work in a partisan position, and that dual employment itself may impede the ability of the individual to perform the work required by the County because of portions of the work day are spent on other non-county responsibilities.

⁴ Snohomish County Charter, Article 2 Section 2.20(5)

Recommendations

Based on these observations, we recommend that the County Council:

1. Consider augmenting existing Council Office personnel resources by adding positions that create capacity for proactive policy analysis and in-house legal counsel.
2. Consider establishing a policy that addresses dual employment for staff and management positions for which independence, objectivity, and the appearance of non-partisanship are essential to the position.

D. Office of the County Executive

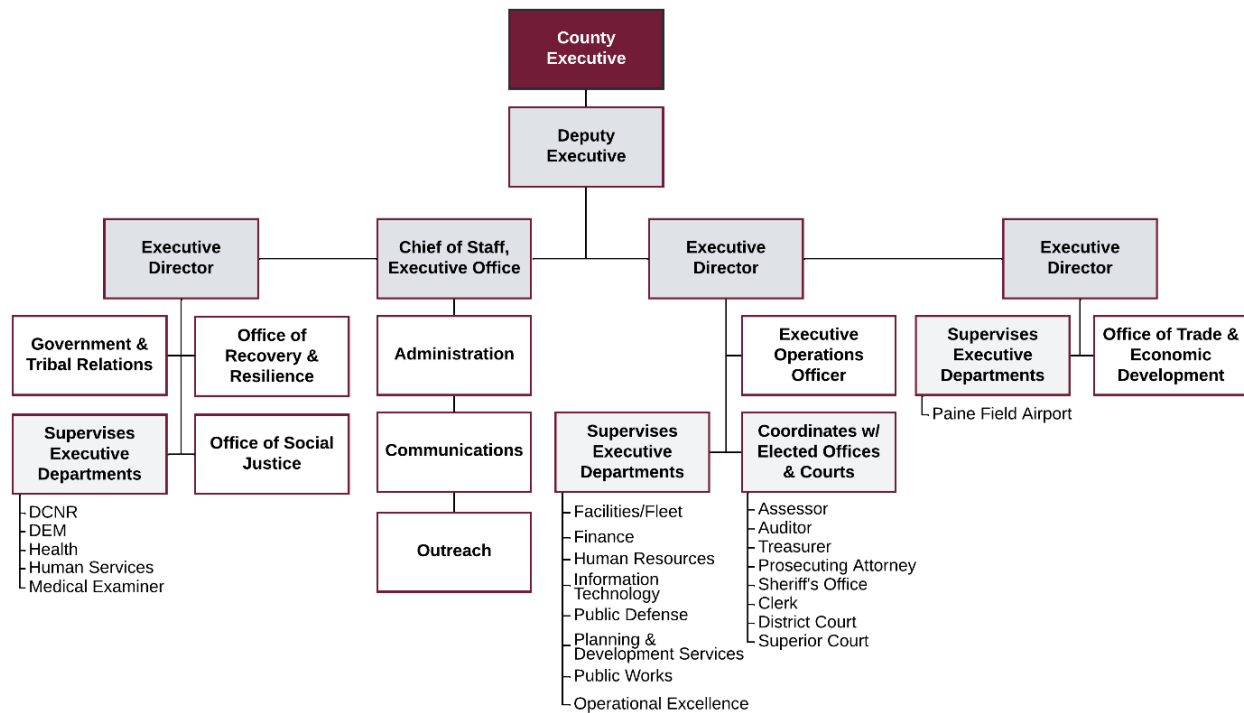
Per the Snohomish County Charter, the County Executive is responsible to supervise all appointed executive branch departments, including those established by the Snohomish County Charter and those established by the County Council; enforce all ordinances and state statutes within the County; prepare and present to the County Council a proposed budget, comprehensive plans, and capital improvement plans; execute on behalf of the County all claims, deeds, contracts, and other instruments; nominate members of all County boards and commissions; conduct collective bargaining on behalf of the County; and assign duties to appointed executive departments not specifically assigned by the County Charter or by ordinance.⁵ Further, the Executive Office has many regional responsibilities that are integral to the County's long-term success. This includes leadership roles with regional authorities for transit, transportation, land use, and economic and workforce development. The Executive also has state-mandated responsibilities, including but not limited to economic development and workforce development. These regional and state responsibilities benefit Snohomish County and ensure the Executive has platforms to advocate for the county's interests.

As shown in Exhibit 4, the County executive established an organizational structure that is largely centered on the core responsibility of the County Executive to supervise appointed executive branch departments. The County Executive employs a Deputy Executive, who is responsible for managing and overseeing the daily operations of the County Executive's Office;⁶ a Chief of Staff, who is responsible for managing administrative operations, and staff that are responsible for communications, customer service and outreach, policy analysis and development, and external affairs; and three Executive Directors, who collectively supervise all appointed executive departments, coordinate with all other elected executive offices (e.g., Assessor, Auditor, Clerk, Prosecuting Attorney, Sheriff, and Treasurer) and the courts, as well as manage specialized programs developed and implemented by the County Executive (e.g., Operational Excellence/STEP, Recovery & Resiliency, Social Justice, Outreach, and Economic Development). This structure is depicted below.

⁵ Snohomish County Charter, Section 3.20

⁶ Snohomish County Charter, Section 3.50 also states that "the deputy county executive shall be the acting county executive and shall perform the duties of the county executive during the latter's temporary inability to perform by reason of absence from the county or disability. If a vacancy occurs in the office of the county executive, the acting county executive shall serve until the vacancy is filled pursuant to this charter."

EXHIBIT 4. ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE COUNTY EXECUTIVE’S OFFICE



Source: Organization chart provided by the Office of the County Executive and interviews with Office management.

Prior to 2020, the operations of the Executive Office centered around the following core responsibilities and activities:

- Supervision of, and Coordination with, County Departments, Offices, and Courts**—The Executive Office works closely with the heads of County departments, offices, and courts to coordinate communications, policy and budget, and to provide support and problem-solving assistance. The Executive Office’s primary role in this capacity relates to providing oversight of appointed executive departments and performance reviews of appointed executive directors. The County Executive also provides support to all departments, offices, and courts with respect to budgeting, developing policy proposals and initiatives, preparing and submitting ECAFs for County Council consideration, strategic planning, project management, and managing relationships with internal and external stakeholders. The Executive Office also has a significant role in coordinating work for external public entities, such as the regional entities for economic development, transportation, and land use planning—all of which affects the work of Executive Departments.
- Administration**—The Chief of Staff manages a small team of administrative staff that perform essential office duties, including running payroll, managing calendars, and providing support services to the leadership team. The Chief of staff also supervises staff that are responsible for communications, customer service and outreach, policy analysis and development, and external affairs.
- Government Relations**—The Executive Office dedicates resources to build and maintain relationships with local, tribal, state, and federal governments. Historically, the County contracted

with third-party lobbyists to advocate for the County regarding state and federal legislation, while personnel within the Executive Office, such as Executive Directors and the Chief of Staff, worked closely with local and tribal governments in an effort to maintain strong working relationships. The County continues to contract with these external lobbying firms. In 2023, the Executive Office reclassified an existing vacant position to be dedicated to state-level legislative advocacy and, in 2024, repurposed a second position to be dedicated to legislative advocacy at the federal level, along with other work related to strategic communications, special initiatives, and policy development.

A key purpose of government relations staff is to garner state and federal funding to support programs and projects in alignment with County goals as set by the Council and Executive. They also review proposed federal and state policies to identify potential impacts to Snohomish County and work closely with county departments and offices to communicate any significant changes to policy. The position of the Executive Office is that the County is most effective in Government Affairs by having Executive Office staff to coordinate as well as contracted lobbyists doing work on the state and federal level, since staff cannot always be present in Olympia and Washington, D.C.

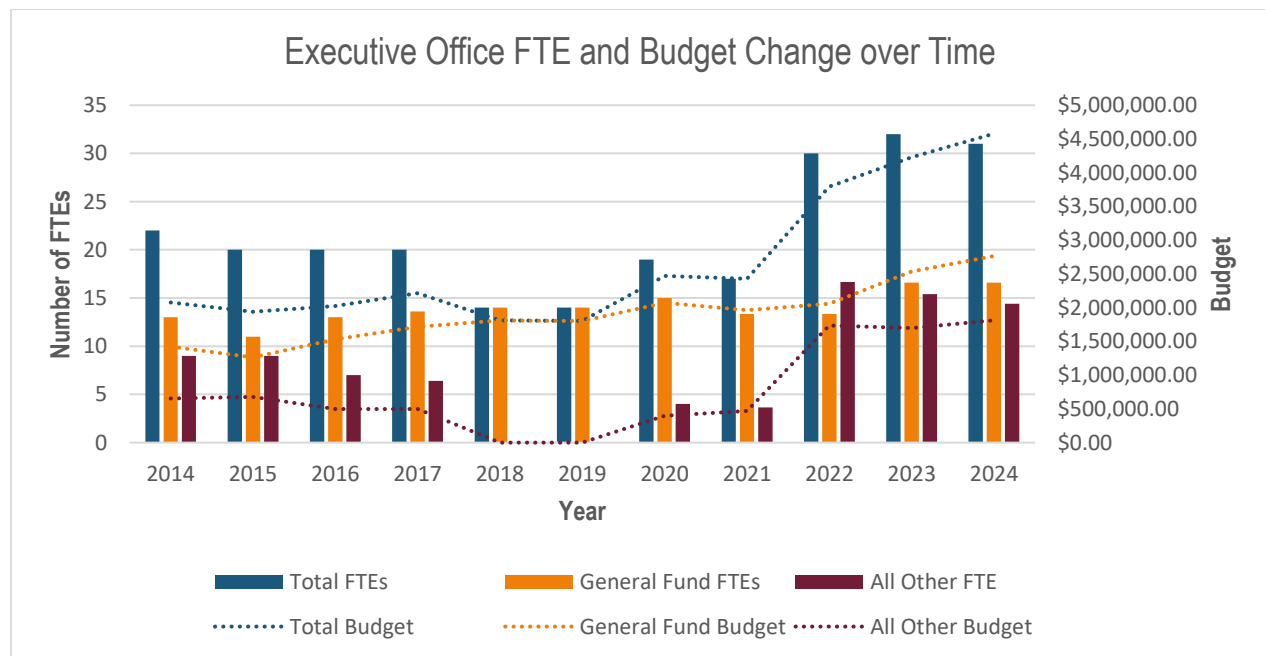
- **Communications**—The Executive Office employs one individual to serve as the Communications Director, who serves as the Office’s public information officer; manages all communications of the Executive Office; coordinates communications across other executive departments; assists other departments, offices or courts in communication activities; and manages communications planning, media relations, event and program promotion, including Snohomish County TV, press releases, media proclamations, the promotion of special events, among other related activities, and digital and print publications produced by or in collaboration with the Executive Office. The Communications Director also acts as a senior advisor on communications strategy to the Executive Leadership Team and cabinet.
- **Community Outreach**—This role serves as the lead contact for residents or community groups to facilitate equitable access to county government, including programs and services beyond the Executive Office. The position also works with county staff to ensure their outreach efforts are reaching as many communities as possible.
- **Operational Excellence**—The Operational Excellence team provides leadership, training, and coaching to County departments, offices, and courts on a voluntary basis. STEP, a continuous improvement framework, encourages standardization, process improvements, and data-driven decision-making throughout the County. This program is distinct from the other core functions of the Executive in that it is not a component of the Executive’s Office. Rather, it and its eight (8) FTE positions, is funded through enterprise information technology rates and is considered “non-departmental” within the County budget, which means it is not housed within any County department, office, or court. It reports directly, however, to the Executive Office as a process improvement initiative spearheaded by the Executive.

Between 2016 and 2020, the County Executive found that certain needs were not being met by the County, particularly those relating to economic development, social justice, and pandemic-related recovery and resilience efforts. In response, the County Executive sought funding from the County Council to develop and grow capacity and expertise to meet each of these needs. This growth led to a 41 percent increase in

staffing resources allocated to the Office of the County Executive between 2014 and 2024, as shown in Exhibit 5. Specifically, the Executive Office had 22 positions in 2014, 14 positions in 2018, and 31 in 2024. The 31 FTE positions consist of a core group of 13 Executive Office positions, as reflected in Exhibit 6, and positions assigned to special offices within the Executive Office. This core group of 13 FTEs has remained relatively stable since 2014. As shown in Exhibit 5, this growth in staffing resources is largely reflective of grant-funded positions assigned to certain special offices or programs administered by the Executive Office, as described below Exhibit 5.

In 2014, the Executive Office had 22 positions total, 13 of which were funded through the general fund and 9 through special funding sources, such as grants and dedicated revenue streams for specific purposes including economic development and emergency services. In 2024, the Executive Office began the year with 31 total positions, with 16.6 funded through the general fund and 14.4 funded through special revenue funds, the largest of which is ARPA. According to the Executive Office, in 2025-26, FTE positions allocated to the Office decline to 27, with 16.35 funded through the general fund and 10.65 funded through other funding sources.

EXHIBIT 5. GENERAL FUND VS. ALL OTHER FUNDS: FTEs AND BUDGET TRENDS



Source: Auditor-created graph based on data provided by County Council staff and County adopted budgets.

Note: The reduction of FTE positions in 2018 and 2019 reflected the transfer of special revenue funding and related positions from the Executive Office to the Department of Emergency Management and Department of Parks and Recreation. In 2022, positions that were moved to the Department of Parks and Recreation, which were funded through the Tourism Promotion Area Fund, were transferred back to the Executive Office following the County’s creation of the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation. These special funded positions are represented in the “All Other” FTE and Budget categories.

The bulk of these new positions were dedicated to three new programs, two of which were primarily funded through special revenue funds, created and administered by the County Executive within the Executive Office. Specifically:

- **Trade and Economic Development**—The Economic Development program was created at least by 2004 and possibly earlier and, as described later in this report, the current Executive had established a robust Economic Development Initiative that was launched in 2016. The Executive Office is engaged in the planning, implementation, and management of economic development initiatives within the County. These initiatives include retaining existing businesses, attracting new businesses and industries, supporting and growing a robust workforce, and attracting tourism to the County.
- **Social Justice**—The Office of Social Justice was created in 2020 in response to specific precipitating events, namely the greatest social unrest in the U.S. in decades and requests from community members and county staff for improved efforts. The Executive Office created the Office of Social Justice as a way to initiate and prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives within County government, and to support those values within the Snohomish County community.
- **Recovery and Resilience**—The Office of Recovery and Resilience was established in 2020 to ensure a coordinated and strategic use of the influx of federal funding during the COVID-19 pandemic. The impetus behind the creation of this office was to provide the centralized administration of federal funds stemming from the American Rescue Plan Act. This unit is a temporary office funded through ARPA funding, which makes it unique when compared to other offices or departments in the County. As of January 2024, the unit was budgeted seven (7) FTE positions, which will be reduced to three (3) FTE positions by 2025 and zero (0) by March 2027.

Other Counties Addressed Similar Needs in Different Ways

Similarly situated county executive offices experienced similar needs—e.g., economic development, COVID recovery and response, social justice—but addressed them in different ways. Below, in Exhibit 6, we show that Pierce County assigned COVID response to the Finance Department because it determined that Finance was the most logical choice for administering and accounting for federal recovery dollars. Further, the Pierce County Executive prioritized matters related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives county-wide, and the Executive’s Office has taken a leadership role in championing DEI efforts county-wide, but program activities and the administrative work related to DEI is housed within Human Resources.

Unlike both Pierce and Snohomish counties, the King County Council created in county code several offices within the County Executive’s Office to administer these types of programs. Specifically, county code states that the county executive shall manage and be fiscally accountable for the office of performance, strategy, and budget; the office of labor relations; the office of climate; the office of economic opportunity and creative economy; and the office of equity and racial and social justice. In King County, the types of economic development, COVID recovery and response, and social justice programs administered within the Snohomish County Executive’s Office are managed within these formally established offices—COVID recovery activities are housed within the Office of Economic Opportunity and Creative Economy.

Whatcom’s County Executive’s Office is much smaller than those of King, Pierce, and Snohomish counties, and does not directly manage these types of programs. All of this is illustrated in Exhibit 6.

Also included in Exhibit 6 is the row “Direct Executive Office Staff,” which represents the number of FTE positions that work directly within the Executive Office performing “core” functions of the Office and that are not part of a special office or program within the Executive Office. This count depicts the differences between county structures, as well as how the represented counties chose to outsource duties to code-established departments or offices. The FTEs in Exhibit 6 reflect the approximate counts of persons dedicated to certain functions or programs and do not reflect funding sources.

EXHIBIT 6. STAFFING OF THE EXECUTIVE OFFICE ACROSS PEER COUNTIES FOR JANUARY 2024, BY FUNCTION

Position	King County	Pierce County	Snohomish County	Whatcom County
Appointed Executive Departments or Offices	17	12	13	13
Direct Executive Office Staff	24	12	13 ^d	8
Executive & Management	4	3	6	3
Government & External Relations	3	2	1	.25 ^b
Communications	4	In Communications Department	1	.25 ^b
Outreach & Customer Service	4	—	1	.25 ^b
Administration & Support	4	3	2	3
Operations, Policy, Legislation	4	1	2	1.25 ^b
Operational Excellence / Performance, Strategy & Budget Office	63.2	—	8 (non-departmental)	—
General Counsel	1	3	—	—
Economic Development Office	3	—	8 ^a	—
Equity & Social Justice Office	17	In Human Resources	2.7	—
COVID Recovery Office	In Economic Development	In Finance Department	7 ^c	—
Labor Relations Office	16.6	—	In Human Resources	—
Climate Office	6	—	In DCNR	—

Source: Organization charts obtained from each county and interviews with each office’s executive leadership

Note: ^{a)} The 8 FTE does not include the Executive Director who heads the Office of Economic Development. In 2024, a total of 1 FTE in Economic Development was funded by the general fund, and that represents five positions with partial GF allocations. In 2025-26, that will drop to 3 positions with partial GF allocations for a total of .75 FTE.

^{b)} FTE fractions represent various duties of a single FTE position.

^{c)} The Office of Recovery and Resilience (COVID Recovery Office in this table) had 7 positions budgeted in 2024; this was reduced to three (3) positions by the end of 2024 and moving forward into 2025.

^{d)} This total does not include the 8 FTE positions in Operational Excellence. Operational Excellence is not contracted as stated in the draft report. It is embedded in IT, with 8 FTEs paid for through IT interfund rates. OpEx is a core program that provides support enterprise-wide and reports to the Executive Office.

It is important to note that Exhibit 6 illustrates different approaches taken by peer counties. For instance, this exhibit notes instances where certain functions are carried out by departments external to the Executive Offices, for which resources in those departments carry out these respective responsibilities. This audit did not evaluate staffing levels for functions or activities carried out by departments external to

the Executive Office of any peer county, but focused solely on the structure of each peer office. Differences between the structures of peer county executive offices does not mean that one is inherently superior to another. It does reveal, however, alternative approaches for consideration.

One such difference—similar to our discussion of the Office of the County Council—is that both King County and Pierce County executive offices include in their core staffing in-house counsel to provide advice on legal matters and policy questions, and to be at the table when working with their respective Prosecuting Attorney’s Office. The purpose of these legal experts is not to replace the role of the Prosecuting Attorney in providing counsel to the County Council or to the Executive; instead, it is to ensure that the Executive’s perspective is appropriately represented in consultation with the Prosecuting Attorney. Similar to our recommendation related to the Office of the County Council, we propose this as a matter for the Executive’s and Council’s consideration.

The Snohomish County Charter and County Code Suggest that the Work of these Offices Should Be Performed by Appointed Executive Departments

As mentioned previously, the County Executive is responsible to supervise all appointed executive branch departments and enforce all ordinances and state statutes within the County. The County Executive is further empowered to assign duties to appointed executive departments which are not specifically assigned by the County Charter or by ordinance.⁷ The County Charter is silent on whether the County Executive has the power to establish offices, stating that “the specific statement of particular executive powers shall not be construed as limiting the executive powers of the county executive,” and that, “as chief executive officer, the county executive shall have all the executive powers of the county which are not expressly vested in other elective office by this charter.” At the same time, the County Charter provides the County Council with the power to establish executive departments and to define their powers and responsibilities,⁸ and states that “all powers of the county, not reserved by the people or vested in specific offices by this charter, shall be vested in the [C]ounty [C]ouncil”⁹This is important because, while the Executive Office has the authority to establish a dedicated unit to carry out a body of work administered by the Executive Office and funded by the Council, both the permanence and the authority of component units of county government are established in legislation.

The Executive Office established and the County Council funded the positions that administered the programs within the offices of Social Justice, Recovery & Resilience, and Trade & Economic Development as programs administered within the Executive Office because doing so sent a clear message to County leadership and employees that these initiatives were a high priority, and its placement within the Executive Office enabled the programs to coordinate between multiple County departments in a way that they may

⁷ Snohomish County Charter, Section 3.20

⁸ It does not appear that the County Charter explicitly differentiates between offices and departments; that is, there is no evidence to suggest the Council’s power to create component units of County government is limited to “departments” while the Executive reserves the power to create “offices.” In fact, the County Charter refers to elected executive departments as both departments (Section 3.90) and offices (Section 3.100) in different places. It also directs the County Council to establish offices by ordinance, such as the Office of County Performance Auditor and the Office of the Public Advocate (Section 2.150 and Section 2.160, respectively).

⁹ Snohomish County Charter, Section 2.20

not have been able to accomplish if each were placed in appointed executive branch departments. However, administering such programs within the Executive Office jeopardizes the long-term sustainability of the programs because the continued work or even existence of these units will be subject to the discretion of future County Executives.

Below, we describe the creation and current status of each of the three offices.

✓ **Office of Trade & Economic Development**

Economic development has been a consistent function within the Executive Office since the beginning of our review period in 2014. However, the magnitude and extent of the activities of this Office has evolved over time. While a single Executive Director within the Executive Office has consistently led some economic development duties, the volume of the economic development support staff has fluctuated. This is due, in large part, to changes in the source funding, including special revenue funds such as the Lodging Tax, Convention & Performing Arts, Historic Preservation and Tourism Promotion Area, and Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act Grant funds. With the exception of two years between 2014 and 2024, the Office of Trade and Economic Development generally had between 2.5 and 8 FTE positions. The Office of Economic Development has a dedicated staff of one Executive Director managing eight full-time employees. In recent years, the Office of Economic Development has pursued an aggressive course to meet its objective of attracting new businesses, retaining existing businesses, developing and advancing the workforce, and attracting new and returning visitors to Snohomish County. This effort has included redirecting functions previously outsourced to contractors to internal roles, as well as investing in analytics and tools for measuring the County's return-on-investment in economic development spending. This is a divergent course from 10 years ago, when the economic development presence within the Executive Office related largely to tourism.

The growth and strategic importance of the Office of Trade and Economic Development led the County Council, in August 2022, to create an appointed executive department for the purpose of managing economic development programs. Specifically, Chapter 2.750 of county code creates a Department of Economic Development for the purpose of ensuring “the economic prosperity of our region through facilitation of collaborative public-private partnerships, promotion of a thriving economic climate, and encouraging the workforce to meet industry needs.” This ordinance was effective January 1, 2023. As written in code, the Department has the “authority to implement administrative policies and procedures that promote economic prosperity in Snohomish County through economic growth and job creation,” and the director of the Department must be “appointed by the executive subject to confirmation by the council.”

The Executive Office has not assigned the activities of the Office of Trade and Economic Development to the Department of Economic Development because it believes the function can be more successful if housed within the Executive Office. Economic Development routinely accesses constrained funding sources and works across County departments to build high-priority strategic partnerships—something the Executive Office believe can be more successfully achieved with the Executive Office rather than a County department. While the Council assigned this responsibility to a specific department, and has the authority to confirm the appointment of a director of the

department, the Executive Office reported that it made the decision not to move forward with a separate department after consultation with the County Council. Indeed, the Council has continued to fund Economic Development as a program within the Executive Office well after establishing the Economic Development Department. However, while there may be benefits to the existing placement of Economic Development within the Executive Office, sustainability risks remain.

✓ **Office of Recovery and Resilience**

The Executive Office established the Office of Recovery and Resilience to manage funds received from Congress' American Rescue Plan Act after Snohomish County became the site of the first confirmed COVID-19 case in the United States. The decision was made to place Recovery and Resilience within the Executive Office due to the grant having both programmatic and financial impacts, because Snohomish County did not have a department that centralized grant administration activities, and because the Office was intended to be temporary in nature. The Office of Recovery and Resilience was placed within in the Executive Office because ARPA represented a significant and highly constrained funding source and the work of coordinating this funding required visibility and prioritization in order to access community partners to make timely, strategic, effective, and equitable use of those funds. As of October 2024, the Office was allocated five FTE positions, two of which will end at the close of calendar year 2024.¹⁰ The remaining three positions—the Director, project manager, and communications director—will continue through the closing period of the grant, in April 2027. The American Rescue Plan Act requires that all funds be obligated by the calendar year end of 2024, be fully spent by the close of calendar year 2026, and reported at the end of the first quarter, 2027. Administrative costs are eligible for funding through spring 2027 so long as they meet established criteria. According to the Chief Recovery and Resilience Officer, the planned remaining three positions responsible for administering, tracking, and reporting fund expenditure qualify, and so the Office and its functions remain fully funded for its planned duration.

However, despite the final formal activity of the American Rescue Plan Act in Spring 2027, it is possible work related to the administration of the grants could continue beyond 2027, including the potential need to respond to federal and state audits. Given the certainty that the purpose of the Office of Recovery and Resilience will end, and its activity will wind down, The Executive Office plans to transfer the administration of remaining ARPA-funded programs to the Finance Department when the Office of Recovery and Resilience is phased out. Given that the work of this Office will not continue, we find no reason for the Council to consider formally establishing a department to carry out its work, and a transfer to Finance is appropriate.

✓ **Office of Social Justice**

The Snohomish County Executive created the Office of Social Justice in June 2020 to “transform institutional racism by identifying areas for change,” and specifically by engaging the community through outreach efforts and working to improve employee understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Consultation with community leaders and County employees prior to establishing the

¹⁰ The 2024 budget allocated seven positions to the Office of Recovery and Resilience.

Office revealed the desire of key stakeholders to prioritize the work of the Office and to do so within the Executive Office rather than Human Resources.

However, as the program launched, it operated with a budget of \$250,000 and without any full-time employees until January 2022. Instead, two otherwise engaged Executive Office employees took on the work in addition to their existing roles; the Executive Office characterized this as a 1.3 FTE allocation to the Office of Social Justice. At the end of 2022, as part of an overall restructuring effort within the Executive Office, the Executive's 2023 Recommended Budget proposed moving \$1 million of Social Justice funding from non-departmental to the Office of Social Justice program, and allocating 2.7 FTE positions, including a Chief Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Officer, a Senior Policy Analyst, and a .5 FTE position of Administrative Assistant. In addition to these FTE positions, at least five (5) other Executive Office employees took on work for the Office of Social Justice in addition to their primary responsibilities and roles. At this point, the Office of Social Justice reported administratively to an Executive Director within the Executive Office, similar to other appointed executive departments such as the departments of Conservation & Natural Resources, Emergency Management, Health, Human Services, and the Medical Examiner.

Throughout this period, the powers and responsibilities of this office have not been clearly defined, though its broad purpose has been memorialized through proclamation, news releases, and an independent assessment issued in January 2024. In June 2022, the office hired a consultant to assess the state of DEI within Snohomish County government, and to better understand the County's relationship with the communities it serves. It received the results of this assessment in January 2024, along with a DEI Action Plan. The assessment focused on two primary areas within the County government, an evaluation of central human resources policies through a DEI lens, and an assessment of the opinions and perspectives of County employees and select community partners.

As of mid-2024, the Executive Office conducted a nationwide search for a new Chief DEI Officer and commissioned a new "visual identity" and logo design. While this indicates a long-term vision for the Office of Social Justice, our analysis revealed two problems with the current structure of the office. First, as mentioned previously, while these efforts suggest that the role and work of the Office of Social Justice is intended to be sustained well into the future, the resources, structure, purpose, and powers are subject to Executive discretion and Council funding, and could be in jeopardy in future administrations.

Second, the Office's activities—which relate to human resources, grant administration, and hearing employee or community complaints relating to social justice—overlap with other County departments:

- Its explicit focus on matters relating to human resources suggests that at least a material portion of the work of the Office overlaps with the current responsibilities of the Department of Human Resources. The third-party Assessment placed heavy focus on Human Resources policies and procedures, illuminating the importance of this County Department in executing the Office of Social Justice's mission. In fact, the Assessment provided many

recommendations for improving the overall DEI performance of the County, and all scoring metrics and opportunities for improvement related to human resources responsibilities, such as concerning hiring and development, pay and promotional transparency, anti-discrimination, benefits, and policies concerning harassment and retaliation. This emphasis on human resources, for which Snohomish County has an independent department, raises the question of what role the Office of Social Justice plays with regards to human resources, and why such a function exists externally to the department it concerns.

- Likewise, the Office of Social Justice manages a grant program whereby it issues micro-grants on a quarterly basis to community groups working to further DEI goals throughout the county. While these grants are unique in the County, and we are not aware of another County department that administers a similar program, there are other departments with substantial infrastructure to issue grants of all sizes to community-based organizations. Absent legislation establishing a formal Department of Social Justice, this type of grant administration could be assigned to the departments of Human Services, Economic Development, or another County department.
- Finally, members of the Executive Office, County employees, and stakeholders expressed a need for an independent voice in hearing employee or community complaints relating to social justice.¹¹ Again, absent legislation establishing a formal Department of Social Justice, this work and responsibility could be assigned to another County department, such as the Office of the Public Advocate, the sole purpose of which is to be “an independent and fair intermediary” between County government and the residents and businesses of the Snohomish County community.

There are also other departments or offices where diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts already exist and may need support, but not replacement, such as the Court Appointed Special Advocate and the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources’ Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Committee.

We understand that the Office of Social Justice is not intended to be a replacement for existing equity efforts in other areas of the County, but rather to provide cross-enterprise connectivity and leadership for more concerted DEI efforts. However, overlap and redundancies should be minimized. The transferring of the administrative and program work of the Office of Social Justice—particularly human resources and grant administration work—to already-established appointed executive departments could reduce potential redundancies while preserving the role of the County Executive in championing DEI efforts within the County or taking a leadership role in coordinating such efforts on a countywide basis—similar to what Pierce County has done.

¹¹ Snohomish County Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Assessment, January 2024

Position Creation and Compensation Adjustments Did Not Always Follow Human Resources Standard Protocols

As illustrated in Exhibit 5 above, the Executive Office observed significant growth in positions between 2019 and 2024. This resulted in the creation of several positions, and the reassignment of existing positions to new functions. The creation and assignment of positions within an organization is referred to as position management.

Human Resources has created procedures for departments to use when establishing new positions or modifying existing ones—including repurposing positions. This process includes completing and submitting a form—such as the Snohomish County HR Classification Request form or the Personnel Record Change – Rate or Position Changes form—to Human Resources for review and evaluation. Often, this evaluation would include a review of the position descriptions associated with the position in question because a position description is the basis upon which Human Resources staff can determine the position’s responsibilities, duties, and minimum qualifications, and this is essential to determining the proper classification to which the position should be allocated and the corresponding salary scale. Upon approval, Human Resources would initiate the changes, which could have budgetary implications.

This is a common approach to position control. For employers the size of the County, it is not efficient or practical to manage positions or administer compensation on a position-by-position basis. Instead, grouping similar positions based on common characteristics into classifications has numerous benefits. It facilitates the creation of common pay ranges and a corresponding pay structure that helps set financial limits on compensation, promotes pay equity by ensuring similar pay for positions performing similar work, allows for market-based benchmarks and analyses to ensure competitive compensation plans, and facilitates the allocation of staffing resources to divisions and programs through transparent budgetary processes.

At its most basic level, position management requires documenting the status of every position within an organization, including whether the position is authorized and funded, the location of the position within the organization, the specific duties and responsibilities of the position, and the classification to which the position has been allocated. Based on this information, the position should be incorporated into the organizational chart and position control document, and assigned a position control number. With the position authorized and established, human resources may fill the position with an employee.

However, our review of County positions by account code included in the annual budget revealed that the Executive Office, and other county departments, often used an alternative approach through the annual budget to establish and modify positions. In these instances, positions were created or modified without undergoing the standard review process employed by Human Resources. This meant that, in some cases, position descriptions were not drafted prior to the creation of the position, something that is necessary for determining exactly what the position is intended to accomplish and, consequently, market compensation for the position. The Office would then develop job description for the roles, but in some cases, did not have job descriptions until October 2024. According to the Executive Office, there were at least 73 management exempt reclassifications/range adjustments were completed through the budget process for multiple departments over the last 10 years, including Executive Office, County Council, Human Services, Planning and Development Services, Public Works, Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Assessor,

Auditor, Finance, HR, IT, Facilities, Airport, Treasurer, District Court, Sheriff, Medical Examiner, Prosecuting Attorney, Office of Public Defense, Superior Court, Clerk, and Emergency Management.

While the creation or modification of these positions were authorized by Council during the budget process, the role of Human Resources is critical to ensuring staffing efficiency, pay equity, and transparency in position control. Examples of this include:

- Between 2021 and 2023, one position with the job title “Executive Management Analyst Senior” was changed to “Process Improvement Special Project Director” and then to “Policy Advisor-Executive.” A new “Executive Management Analyst Senior” position was created to replace the one that was reclassified. While the reallocation of this position was authorized through the budget process, it was not requested or reviewed through Human Resources.
- The “Human Resources Policy Advisor” position, created in 2021, was later converted to a “Policy Advisor-Executive” to lead the Office of Social Justice without a job description. A job description was created for this position in 2024.
- The Office reallocated an “Administrative Assistant” position to the position of “Division Manager—Emergency Management” as a placeholder classification in 2021 through the annual budget. The position operated as the “Communication and Outreach Manager” using this placeholder classification through September 2024. A job description was created for this position when the reclassification was completed in October 2024.

According to the Executive Office, placeholder job titles were used at least 37 times by at least 12 departments over the last 10 years. Often, these placeholders were for a new position that would require a new job title and/or paygrade to be set up and rated by Human Resources because the budget software system would not allow creation of new job titles; instead departments and offices used existing titles that would be close in paygrade to the new one. Ultimately, while the Executive Office followed similar practices as other departments, which over the years has evolved away from the procedures formally established by the Human Resources Department, these practices create the potential for increased salary costs and ineffective position control. The County’s new budget software has the capability to allow new job titles, and Human Resources has been working to eliminate the use of these types of placeholder positions.

Similarly, the Executive Office adjusted compensation for employees through the annual budget process. According to Human Resources, County position classifications are typically structured with 15 steps, and employees may receive raises (an increase of one step) up to twice per year. County Code permits additional step increases in certain circumstances, such as through the Special Merit Award process.¹² Below are examples of employees receiving salary increases equal to multiple steps in a given year; these additional step increases were processed through the annual budget and did not undergo the Special Merit Award review process.

- In 2020, the Executive Office adjusted a position salary through the Budget process, not the special merit award process established in County Code and administered by Human Resources.

¹² County Code Section 3.69.040 allows, depending upon the availability of funds, employees who have exceeded expectations to be considered for a special merit award of additional step(s) advancement in September of each year.

In this case, the salary for the position increased from Scale 111, Step 15 to Scale 113, Step 10 in a single year, resulting in a salary increase of 13.4 percent.

- In 2021, the salary for one position increased by three (3) steps, resulting in a salary increase of 7.7 percent.
- In 2023, the salary for one position 8916R increased by six (6) steps (once in April and once in October—the typical step increases administered by Human Resources—and a four (4)-step increase on January 1 processed through the annual budget), all of which resulted in a salary increase of 19.5 percent.
- In 2023, the salary for one position increased by four (4) steps (once in April and once in October—the typical step increases administered by Human Resources—and a two (2)-step increase on January 1 processed through the annual budget), which resulted in a salary increase of 13.7 percent.

Our analysis revealed additional instances of pay increases being executed through the budget process—both among Executive and Council office staff—only after which would Human Resources be made aware of changes to employee compensation. In some instances, we found the overall intent of these changes to be appropriate from a personnel management perspective (e.g., to address matters of pay equity or compression between levels of management or staff). These changes could have the effect of changing employees pay grades and salary ranges. But, the practice of leaving Human Resources out of the process until after the fact could have negative consequences.

Specifically, while the County Council authorized step increases through the annual budget, this practice is problematic because such salary increases are, in effect, an affirmation by the employer that the employee has performed above and beyond the normal expectations of performance. Providing such records to Human Resources, and maintaining a record of management's authorization of a merit award in the personnel file, is necessary to ensure a complete personnel file for each employee. It is also a necessary step to ensuring Human Resources is aware of management's perspective on an employee's performance, particularly because Human Resources may have knowledge relating to an employee's performance that the Executive Office or another county department may not yet have. To be clear, this audit did not find any such instance in which these salary increases would not have been approved by Human Resources had they gone through the Special Merit Award process. It is, nevertheless, a sound business practice to include Human Resources in decisions relating to changes to employee compensation, and that the rationale for special increases to be included in the employee file.

The Human Resources Department has been actively working to improve protocols countywide, and improvements that are already in the works include separating position reallocations from the budget process, better defining the type of reallocation being requested, and moving away from using "placeholder" positions in the budget.

The Executive Office Could Do More to Measure the Impact of Expanding Programs and Activities

The growth of the Executive Office has allowed more resources to be dedicated to important programs and activities. It has also underscored the importance of measuring the impact those additional resources have had on behalf of the County, both to promote transparency and to demonstrate the value of the County's investment. Below, we describe some of the areas where performance measurement would be beneficial.

✓ **Economic Development**

The Executive Director for the Office of Economic Development reported that data is central to decision making, and recently hired a full-time data analyst to support this value. The Office reported that efforts supported by data include encouraging expansion of existing businesses; attracting new businesses; growing more, higher-paying jobs; increasing training for jobs in the robust aviation sector; and tracking dollars invested into tourism marketing versus the actual revenue brought to the County via tourism. While the Office appears to have solid foundation in performance metrics, which are communicated via in-person quarterly reports to the County Council. However, as discussed below, we recommend developing program dashboards to facilitate broader communication of the results of the Economic Development program and to highlight its successes.

✓ **Government Relations**

For years, the Executive Office contracted for government relations firms to lobby on the County's behalf for legislation at the federal and state level. Government affairs work has evolved over time and in coordination with the County Council. The decision was made that the Executive Office would administer contracts and associated government relations work, and in 2019, Council collaborated with the Executive to designate an Executive Office employee as the single point of contact for the state and local government affairs contracts. The Executive Office reports legislative successes that included significant funding for broadband, sustainable aviation fuel center, refugee and immigrant resources, and transportation projects, among others. The County has also gained ownership over a significant portion of land at Paine Field because of our government relations work at the federal level.

As the Executive Office considered crucial projects and goals for Snohomish County in the coming years, it was determined that government relations would be key to achieving those goals, and existing FTE resources were repurposed and designated for that purpose. Specifically, in 2023, the County Executive repurposed a vacant position and hired an in-house employee to engage full-time in state-level government relations and, in 2024, repurposed a a second full-time government relations position to engage in government relations at the federal level, along with other work related to strategic communications, special initiatives, and policy development. Neither of these two roles have yet to work through a full legislative session; when they do, it is expected that the County will see an increase in funding opportunities and favorable policy for County priorities as a result of filling these positions. Developing performance metrics designed to demonstrate the

outcomes observed, or those expected to be achieved over time, will be important to show the return on investment over time.

✓ **Office of Social Justice**

The Office of Social Justice is committed to “undoing institutional, and structural racism that exists in the County.” The strategic priorities of the Office include:

- **Community Impact:** Supporting organizations in Snohomish County that support vulnerable and under-served populations.
- **Community Outreach:** Convening meetings and panel discussions to listen, learn, and seek community input to inform our thinking and guide our work.
- **Fostering Diversity and Inclusion:** Leading efforts to review and improve the state of diversity, equity, and inclusion within agencies and offices of the Snohomish County government.

The Executive Office reported that DEI work in the County is seeing success, and that a recent independent national report on advancing equity through ARPA funding found that Snohomish County was in the top 20 nationally for equitable use of those resources. Overall, we found that the Office of Social Justice has established some performance metrics—e.g., the number of community organizations supported through microgrants and the number of partnerships with organizations representing systematically excluded community members—but has not developed performance metrics that demonstrate broad progress toward its mission or goals. This includes measuring the impact of the microgrants on community organizations, and measuring the improvements made to the state of DEI in County government. Rather, the Office generally reports certain outputs of its efforts—such as completing the independent assessment report, branding the Office, holding a community event, conducting monthly leadership meetings, providing DEI-related training for County leadership and others, providing consultation services for departments and offices requesting assistance, and administering a community investment program (e.g., issuing of microgrants or “sponsorships” to 85 community organizations) to support community organizations working to advance efforts related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. In carrying out this work, the Office has relied largely on external consultants, particularly for conducting the independent assessment, which was intended to provide a roadmap for the Office, branding the Office, and facilitating monthly leadership meetings.

As noted previously, the Executive Office supervises the Service Technology Excellence Program (STEP) (otherwise known as Operational Excellence), which empowers County management and employees to identify challenges and opportunities in County government, and to identify and implement solutions to make government work better. The program routinely tracks and reports the results of its efforts, the improvements implemented in departments across the County, and the impacts these have had on various programs. This is an effective way to promote and demonstrate continuous improvement in local government.

At the same time, however, we recommend that the County Executive implement key performance indicators for all departments, on a proactive basis. In our review of other similarly situated counties, we found that the performance dashboard promoted by the Pierce County Executive is an excellent example of how the Executive can tout the accomplishments of county government while identifying opportunities for improvement. This dashboard provides key performance indicators and goals for key programs throughout the county, and similar indicators can be developed for Snohomish County departments and offices, including programs like those administered in the offices of Economic Development, Recovery and Resilience, and Social Justice.

The County Council and Executive Should Consider a Dual Employment Policy Regarding Staff and Management Positions for Which Independence, Objectivity, and the Appearance of Non-Partisanship are Essential to the Position

As discussed in the section of this report relating to the Office of the County Council, the Revised Code of Washington cautions that dual employment should not cause financial conflicts of interest, impairment of independence, incompatible duties, or otherwise interfere with the ability of individuals to perform their primary job. With the exception of elected officials and their direct aides, expectations regarding staff and management positions in both offices have not been defined.

With the exception of one case, dual-employed personnel tended to occupy non-partisan positions and non-partisan elected offices, or occupied partisan positions (such as Council Aides), generally avoiding the types of risks described in statute. In this case, the Executive Office implemented measures as safeguards against possible conflicts regarding incompatible duties, which we find appropriate. Such measures, however, are subject to the discretion of the County Executive, and there is no policy guiding the discretion of future County Executives or County Councils. While this audit focused solely on the Offices of the County Executive and County Council, the Executive Office reported that other employees without County government also hold dual roles, which is understandable, but for whom it is not clear whether the same types of measures taken by the Executive Office have or can be applied to other County employees that are employed in positions for which independence, objectivity, and non-partisanship is essential. Because of this, we believe it is prudent to consider a policy that applies to both offices regarding the matter, and whether such a policy should be considered more broadly by the Department of Human Resources.

Recommendations

1. Transfer the tourism and economic development programs housed and administered in the Executive office to the Department of Economic Development.
2. Transfer the COVID recovery activities house within the Office of Recovery and Resilience to the Department of Finance.
3. Transfer the human resources-related activities performed by staff within Office of Social Justice—or the human resources-related work recommended by the external assessment—to the Department of Human Resources.

4. Transfer the grant administration work currently performed in the Office of Social Justice to a County department with expertise in grant administration, such as Human Services.
5. Continue to champion Social Justice and DEI efforts throughout the County through the Executive Office and, consistent with the role of the Executive to supervise departments, utilize the Executive Office to prioritize, coordinate, and report on DEI practices countywide.
6. Follow Human Resources' standard protocols for creating and changing positions and compensation within both the Executive and Council Offices.
7. Develop and report on performance metrics relevant to the work of economic development and social justice, and consider developing performance dashboards for all County departments and programs in an effort to enhance transparency and to demonstrate the accomplishments of County government.
8. Consider developing a policy that addresses dual employment for non-partisan positions, including working with the County Council on a policy that would apply to both the Council and Executive offices.
9. Consider augmenting Executive core staffing by incorporating a role for in-house legal counsel.

Appendix A. Response of the Office of the County Council

The Office of the County Council provided its response to this audit on November 8, 2024. The response is included on the following page.



Snohomish County

County Council

Chief of Staff

October 31, 2024

3000 Rockefeller Avenue, M/S #609
Everett, WA 98201-4046
425-388-3494
TTY/TDD 425-388-3700

George Skiles
Sjoberg Evashenk Consulting
455 Capitol Mall, Suite #700
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Mr. Skiles,

Thank you for your engagement in the Performance Audit authorized by the Snohomish County Council by Motion 24-028 on January 23, 2024 to study the Structure and Staffing of the Executive and Council Offices.

The Audit Report includes two recommendations for consideration by the County Council:

- 1) Consider augmenting existing Council Office personnel resources by adding positions that create capacity for proactive policy analysis and in-house legal counsel and
- 2) Consider establishing a policy that applies to the Council Office, or to both the Council and the Executive offices that addresses dual employment for non-partisan positions.

I appreciate the analysis and thought that went into these two recommendations and will work with the County Council to consider your recommendations for possible implementation.

Sincerely,

Heidi Beazizo, Chief of Staff

Appendix B. Response of the Office of the County Executive

The Office of the County Executive provided its response to this audit on November 8, 2024. The response is included on the following pages.



Snohomish County

Dave Somers
County Executive

3000 Rockefeller Ave., M/S 407
Everett, WA 98201-4046
(425) 388-3460
www.snoco.org

Memorandum

To: George Skiles, Sjoberg Evashenk Consulting, Inc.
From: Eric Parks, Deputy Executive
Date: November 8, 2024

Re: Executive Office response to updated draft audit report

Please consider this letter our formal response to your draft audit report, and any previous written communications from us as working documents.

I would like to thank you for your time, attention, and patience as you prepared the audit report. We have appreciated your willingness to sift through a significant amount of information and data. We know that Snohomish County's government is large, complex, and full of nuance. Your ability to take this complexity and distill it down to specific recommendations is impressive.

On reviewing your latest draft of the audit report, while there are recommendations that we are not in agreement on, we believe several of your recommendations are very much worth considering and give us significant food for thought. Our goal is always to serve the residents of Snohomish County as well and efficiently as possible. We are grateful you have provided ideas intended to make our operations even better.

Should you need any additional information, please don't hesitate to reach out. We look forward to continuing our engagement.

And, again, thank you for your kind consideration.