

County Council

14 August 2008

Mike Cooper
Dave Gossett
John Koster
Dave Somers
Brian Sullivan

County Council Approves Countywide Hiring Freeze

The Snohomish County Council has unanimously approved a county-government-wide hiring freeze effective immediately.

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The action came in response to declining revenue projections that, according to the ordinance, “suggest that Snohomish County is likely to face budget constraints like those experienced by the State of Washington and other Washington counties.”

The emergency ordinance was also prompted by a recent order issued by County Executive Aaron Reardon that sought to impose an across-the-board hiring freeze on offices run by elected officials, in addition to departments managed by the county executive. Applying that executive order to elected offices raised serious “separation of powers” issues and violated the county charter and code, said the council.

Councilmembers uniformly said they had no argument with imposing a countywide hiring freeze, but noted the executive does not have the authority to unilaterally order elected official offices to take such an action. Only the county council can do that, they said.

“We have a little bit of a constitutional crisis,” said Councilmember Brian Sullivan, “but more importantly we are taking an action that gets to the root of the issue ... we feel a hiring freeze is necessary and I applaud the council and I applaud the executive because at [on] this issue we all agree.”

The council said that county officials and agencies not subject to the supervisory authority of the county executive include the offices of the assessor, auditor, clerk, prosecuting attorney, sheriff, treasurer, district and superior courts, and the county council. None of these elected officials spoke in opposition to the hiring freeze imposed on them by the council.

“With the revenue projections we’ve been given by the finance department,” said Council Chair Dave Somers, “it is very important that the council take this action now, proactively, in order to lesson the impact at the end of the year” ... and as the council reviews and produces the county’s 2009-2010 biennial budget beginning in September.

“I ask the executive to cooperate fully with the council to provide up-to-date information about our revenue situation,” Somers said.

We don’t actually know how dire the situation is,” said Councilmember Dave Gossett, “because until we get the executive’s budget in September, we won’t know the actual [numbers], but we do know we can anticipate a difficult budget.”

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Councilmember Mike Cooper said that while the council and executive may disagree in interpreting the county charter and code, it is important to note that the council's action "adds to what the county executive has done."

"I want everyone to understand we are doing a hiring freeze here in our own office, just like we expect the countywide elected officials and the county executive to do in their respective offices." The council, he said, will not be filling vacant positions for a transportation analyst and a deputy hearing examiner.

And while the council ordinance does allow for limited exemptions to the hiring freeze Cooper said, "I don't want to see very many departments coming to the council and saying 'oh, we have a crisis and we need to hire more people'."

"I believe there is an issue of separation of powers ...," said Councilmember John Koster, "and this ordinance clarifies that separation and where those powers rightfully belong [and] these are difficult economic times, not just for this county but also for the citizens of this county. We need to be cognizant of how we spend money."

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