

# Don Benton

## 2015 Legislative Report



Dear Friends and Neighbors,

As we enter the final months of the year, this is a good time for us to take a look back at actions taken by the Legislature during the historic 2015 legislative session, as well as look ahead at some issues we plan to tackle in the upcoming year.

Lawmakers faced many difficult challenges this year, with the Legislature finally adjourning after being in session for a record-breaking 176 days.

While it is deplorable that Governor Inslee and his allies in the Legislature took us into three special sessions for the sole purpose of trying to force new taxes, I believe the final result of this year's legislative action is, for the most part, one of which all citizens can be proud.

In the end the Legislature passed a new two-year operating budget that makes **historic investments in basic education, fully funds state-employee contracts, provides cost-of-living increases for teachers, gives tax relief to our seniors and disabled veterans, and actually reduces tuition** for our college students and their parents.

**What makes this year's accomplishments even more remarkable is that they were achieved WITH NO NEW TAXES.** As taxpayers and Republican lawmakers told Governor Inslee way back in January, with more than \$3 billion in additional revenue growth expected, there was simply no need for Olympia to stick its hands further into the pockets of hard-working Washingtonians.

As always, my work has been focused on protecting the taxpayers of Clark County and all of Washington, making it easier for our employers to create jobs, and providing the crucial support our veterans and seniors deserve. I have some great news on those fronts, which you can read more about in this newsletter.

Even though there are still several weeks before we return to Olympia, I want you to know that our office is always here to serve you. If you have any questions or suggestions about how we can improve state government, please don't hesitate to contact me by calling (360) 786-7632 or emailing [don.benton@leg.wa.gov](mailto:don.benton@leg.wa.gov).

When you do, **please let me know that you would like to receive my Benton Bulletin E-Newsletter.** It's a great way to stay up-to-date on what is going on in Olympia during the 2016 session and how it impacts you and your family.

Thank you for the continued opportunity to serve you in the state Senate.

Sincerely,

Senator Don Benton  
17th Legislative District

### Stay Connected!

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#### Senate Committees:

- Financial Institutions & Insurance (Chair)
- Government Operations & Security (Vice Chair)
- Transportation (Vice Chair)
- Rules



## BUDGET NEWS

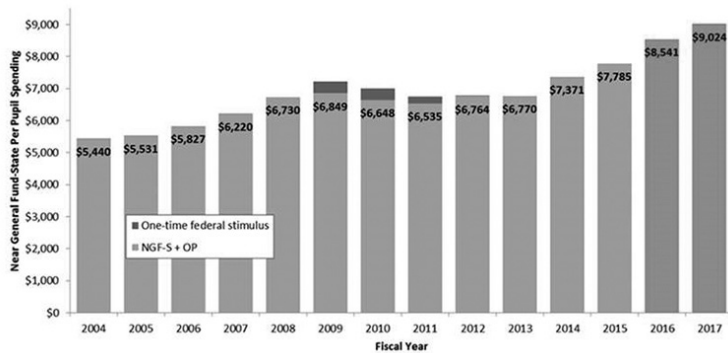
### The historic education budget

I'm very happy to report that despite the long road it took for us to reach agreement on the 2015-17 operating budget, the final outcome was well worth the wait. The new bipartisan state budget, which passed the Legislature with the highest margin of support in 65 years, is truly historic in its level of support for education. We've increased K-12 funding by 19 percent, which is the largest percentage increase in state history and the single largest dollar increase in basic education in state history as well.

The turnaround in education support since Republicans took control in the Senate is extraordinary. This is truly an education-first budget, with new spending going more than 3:1 in favor of education – in line with the state constitution, which makes providing for basic education our top priority.

#### Per Pupil State Spending for K-12 Public Schools

Enacted 2015-17 Operating Budget  
Includes one-time federal stimulus funds (ARRA)



### Senate Republicans win college affordability fight! Tuition cut!

As I am sure you have heard by now, this year's budget actually cuts tuition for the first time in state history as well. Over this year and next, students at WSU-Vancouver will see a \$2,016 reduction in tuition; stu-

#### Tuition rollbacks at Washington colleges

Under the new state budget, tuition will drop by 5 to 20 percent at Washington's public colleges and universities. These figures show only the tuition rate; students are also charged mandatory fees that can add several thousand dollars to the cost, depending on the school.

| INSTITUTION                      | Current tuition in 2014-15 | Tuition in 2015-16 | Tuition in 2016-17 | Total amount saved over two years |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------|
| University of Washington         | \$10,740                   | \$10,203           | \$9,183            | \$2,094                           |
| Washington State                 | 10,336                     | 9,819              | 8,837              | 2,016                             |
| Central Washington               | 6,954                      | 6,606              | 5,615              | 1,686                             |
| Eastern Washington               | 6,491                      | 6,166              | 5,241              | 1,574                             |
| Evergreen State                  | 6,968                      | 6,620              | 5,627              | 1,690                             |
| Western Washington               | 7,202                      | 6,842              | 5,816              | 1,746                             |
| Community and technical colleges | 3,217                      | 3,056              | 3,056              | 322                               |

Note: Some numbers are rounded to the nearest dollar.  
Source: Washington State Legislature  
STEPHANIE REDDING / THE SEATTLE TIMES

ents at UW will see a \$2,094 tuition cut. Our students at community and technical schools also saw a 5 percent reduction immediately when classes took up this fall. This type of relief is historic, and is being highlighted by state and national media as a model for other states to follow.

House Democrats fought us on our college-affordability plan all the way up until the end, but we stuck to our principles and prevailed. That's good for the more than 200,000 students who will benefit from this tuition relief, which is equivalent to a quarter-billion dollar tax cut for middle-income families.

## SENIOR TAX RELIEF

### Legislature passes my bill to provide tax relief to seniors and those with disabilities

A bill I was happy to sponsor for our seniors and disabled veterans is Senate Bill 5186. This measure assists veterans, disabled individuals and seniors by increasing the income limit for calculating property-tax exemption qualification.

This is valuable tax relief for those Clark County citizens who have difficulty paying their property taxes and have incomes of less than \$40,000. That's a \$5,000 increase in the income threshold and reflects the increased cost of health care, inflation and other expenses.

This property-tax relief is long overdue and will help more than 100,000 of our seniors and disabled veterans stay in their homes.



For assistance, additional information, or the address for mailing your completed application and supporting documents, please contact the Clark County Assessor's Office:

#### Senior Citizen & Disabled Tax Relief Division

Street Address: 1300 Franklin Street, 2nd Floor • Vancouver, WA 98660

Phone: (360) 397-2092 ext. 5689

Telecommunications Relay Service:

(800) 833-6388, then call (360) 397-2445

E-mail: TaxReduction@clark.wa.gov

### FIGHTING FOR THE PEOPLE OF CLARK COUNTY



#### Protecting taxpayers

Our Senate majority continued to protect taxpayers from needless and harmful attempts to raise taxes. This year, we successfully fended off some of the largest tax-increase proposals in state history (“cap-and-trade,” carbon tax, low-carbon fuel standards, capital-gains income tax and taxes on small businesses). As we told Governor Inslee way back in January, with state government expecting to collect more than \$3 billion in additional revenue during this budget cycle, there was simply no need for new taxes.

Since our side began leading the Senate in 2013 we have kept taxes in check, despite the attempts by our liberal friends to impose new taxes that leave families with less to spend and raise the cost of doing business. Balancing budgets within the available revenue year after year leads to the sort of tax stability that is good for Washington families and employers.

#### Defending your right to make laws through citizen initiatives

Every year brings proposals aimed at eliminating the initiative process, increasing filing fees, imposing ridiculous new burdens on signature collection or overall making it harder for citizens to participate in the process. This year the Government Operations and Security Committee on which I serve had to derail Democrat legislation that would have forced anyone who uses, or expects to use, paid signature-gatherers to register with the Secretary of State within five days and disclose their personal information.

I strongly support the constitutional right of the people to speak directly to issues at the ballot box and will continue to diligently defend the initiative process from legislative assault.

#### Helping the most vulnerable

As part of this year’s budget, lawmakers fully funded last year’s breakthrough legislation in support of individuals with developmental disabilities – we call it the VIP act, for Vulnerable Individuals Priority. It expands respite opportunities to 4,000 families and expands employment to more than 1,000 individuals with developmental disabilities.

#### A pay increase for teachers

The new budget also takes care of our local teachers and state employees who were forced to go through most of the recession without a state-funded pay raise. Teachers will receive their 3 percent cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) plus a one-biennium pay increase of 1.8 percent. The budget also fully funds state-employee contracts, and the pay increases for state workers included in them.

#### Looking out for consumers

Each session, it is important that we take a look at our laws pertaining to banking, investment, trusts and insurance to make sure that they are modernized to meet some of the challenges facing consumers.

As technology advances, there are criminals who aggressively work to find areas where they can either manipulate the system or take advantage of consumers. We have to work just as hard, if not harder, to make sure that we tighten our laws and give our enforcement agencies the tools they need to protect the public.

The Legislature unanimously backed Senate Bill 5299, my bill updating, clarifying, and strengthening the Department of Financial Institutions’ enforcement authority and enhancing the crime of mortgage fraud in the residential-mortgage lending process.

This new law does a lot of little things that add up to big protections for our consumers. For instance, it will help clarify and bring consistency to the rules governing companies that engage in mortgage activities in our state. It will also streamline the state’s approach to investigating and prosecuting mortgage fraud in order to better protect consumers and punish those who perpetrate these crimes.

I was also able to gain passage of several other measures focused on improving the operations and oversight of financial institutions, including credit unions and trusts:

- Senate Bill 5300 – Updating DFI’s regulatory-enforcement powers regarding credit unions and organizations providing services to credit unions;
- Senate Bill 5302 – Addressing the prudent-investor rule for Washington state trusts and updating standards for authorization and treatment of statutory-trust advisors; and
- Senate Bill 5757 – Revising the state Credit Union Act with regard to the duties and compensation of a board of directors.

### SUPPORTING OUR VETERANS



Clearly, this was the education-first session, with all of government focused on the need to meet our paramount duty to provide for basic education. But I, for one, am happy that the Legislature also had some major legislative

achievements in support of our veterans.

We often voice our appreciation for the dedication, service and sacrifices of our men and women in uniform. These heroes deserve so much more than just our words, however. They deserve our actions.

#### Supplemental medical insurance for veterans' families

One achievement this year is a new law aimed at helping disabled veterans and their dependents gain access to supplemental health coverage. Created by a bill I sponsored, it took effect July 24.

Senate Bill 5974 addressed an issue in the federal Department of Veterans Affairs program commonly called CHAMPVA, under which families of veterans receive 80 percent coverage. Washington is one of only nine states where supplemental insurance is not available to offset some or all of the remaining 20 percent – meaning those become out-of-pocket costs.

Our men and women in uniform do so much for us and deserve our full support when they return home. There are a

lot of military bases and veterans in Washington, but for some reason, our veterans do not have access to the supplemental insurance they and their families need. That is a travesty, and they deserve to know why this is happening and what we can do to change it.

SB 5974 directs the Office of the Insurance Commissioner to review barriers to attracting supplemental plans into the state and report on steps the state and the Department of Veterans Affairs can take to promote access to supplemental policies. The review and report must be submitted to the appropriate committees of the Legislature, the governor, and to DVA by November 11.



#### Educational opportunities for veterans

This year the Legislature also passed a bill to help our veterans use their G.I. Bill benefits at state-run colleges and universities.

This culminates several years of hard work by Senate Republicans to make sure veterans continue to have access to our state colleges and universities.

After years of effort, Washington's veterans finally can rest assured that their education benefits will be protected in our state.

## GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY & REFORM

#### Performance audits are valuable tools for improving government

As you might remember, I was a key supporter of Initiative 900, which was overwhelmingly passed by the people in 2005 and gave the state auditor's office the authority to audit the performance of public agencies. Since that time, these audits, which identify areas where government can be more effective,



economical and efficient, have saved taxpayers about \$1 billion.

I-900 also established an account to pay for these performance audits, using a dedicated portion (0.16%) of the state sales tax. As

is often the case, this fund makes a tempting target for budget writers, eager to use every available dollar to help balance the demands of various constituencies. Fortunately, I was able

to lead an effort to protect performance-audit funding from attempts to divert it. Performance audits are immensely useful tools, which have more than paid for themselves through the savings they have identified.

#### Streamlining State Government

This year the Legislature approved my bill aimed at the reorganizing and streamlining of central-service functions and duties of state government. The new law essentially cleans up state statutes tied to the 2011 creation of the state Department of Enterprise Services.

It is important that we continually examine our laws for incongruities and errors, and improve them to make government operate more efficiently and effectively.

The 2011 DES-restructuring bill did some good things to streamline state government and save taxpayers money, but left some loose ends that Senate Bill 5024 fixed.

### REDUCING LOCAL FEES FOR CLEAN WATER

#### My stormwater management bill signed by the governor

I was particularly pleased to attend the signing of Senate Bill 5314, my bill to give local governments more flexibility in how they use stormwater control funds. The measure is already being hailed by counties and cities as a crucial step toward holding the state Department of Transportation accountable for the environmental impact of stormwater runoff on state highways.



The Department of Transportation is the only customer of a county stormwater-billing system that receives a 70 percent discount and the only one that gets to say its fees are reserved for only its facilities. DOT should do its part to repair failing facilities and maintain the general clean-water system, just like everyone else. That's the fair thing to do.

While cities and counties would prefer full reimbursement from DOT for use of their stormwater facilities, many of those who testified on the measure called it a good first step toward making sure DOT is paying its fair share. The bill passed 48-0 in the Senate and 92-6 in the House of Representatives.

This new law will remove bureaucratic hurdles and **free up approximately \$90,000 per year in state stormwater dollars for Clark County.** Every state dollar we are able to use for stormwater management is a dollar county taxpayers don't have to pay in new fees to cover clean-water maintenance.

#### My bill would give agencies 90 days to make decisions

Senate Bill 5197 would have required state- and local-government decisions on permits, variances, licenses, determinations, and designations to be completed, with the applicant notified of the decision, within 90 days after the application is submitted. While my bill did not become law this year, I plan to continue pushing this common-sense reform next session.



### TRANSPORTATION

#### Governor signs costly, Seattle-centric transportation package

When it comes to the operating budget, our Senate majority insisted that the state should live within its means – and we won!

Unfortunately, taxpayers didn't fare as well this year when it came to the new transportation package approved by the Legislature. Signed by the governor on July 15, this set of bills will force drivers to pay nearly 12 cents more per gallon, while also hiking the passenger-vehicle weight fees and license fees on light trucks and heavy trucks. It also increases fees on vehicle sales, electric vehicles, studded tires, trailers, and CDL permits and requalification exams.



**I voted against this tax hike!** People are still struggling to recover from the Great Recession and many simply cannot afford to pay more of their hard-earned dollars to DOT – especially given that agency's dismal record of competently and efficiently completing major projects.

This transportation package includes the largest gas-tax hike in state history and gives Washington the second-largest gas tax in the country. Still, it does very little to reform the system, drive down costs or increase accountability. Nor does it reflect the needs of our region, with nearly 60 percent of the revenue going to Puget Sound projects.



While Clark County is used to being a “donor” county, meaning the tax revenue going out exceeds the value of the projects coming in, this is ridiculous. The failure of this package to address local priorities means that our county's transportation

needs will likely be neglected by the state for the next decade, while our growing population is forced to pay for projects in Seattle that may never be completed.

You can be sure I will be working to address this inequity when we return to Olympia in January.

Senator

# Don Benton

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# Sen. Don Benton

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### The Benton Bulletin

CLARK COUNTY  
17th Legislative District

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### Need help working with your government?

My Legislative Assistant, Alexander Bohler, is ready to help you get better service and results from your government.

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