

Senator Don Benton

2016 Legislative Report

Dear Friends,

This year, it took a special session to get there, but the 2016 legislative year has finally come to an end. We were able to make some real progress in addressing emergencies like forest fires and the court-ordered support for mental health services, while also taking steps to protect charter schools, bring accountability to the executive branch and help our veterans.

As many of you know, this is my last year as your State Senator. In this newsletter I reflect on what we've been able to accomplish together.

Serving the people of the 17th District in the Washington Legislature for the last 22 years has been one of the greatest honors and privileges in my life. I am truly humbled by the faith you – my friends and neighbors – have shown in me, and I appreciate the opportunity you have given me to make our state better and be your voice in Olympia.

Thank you!

Sincerely,



Senator Don Benton
17th Legislative District



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Senate Committees

Financial Institutions & Insurance (Chair)

Government Operations & Security (Vice Chair)

Transportation (Vice Chair)

Rules



Team Benton: Special Thanks to My Staff



My 2016 Session Staffers Collin Silvernail (Intern) and Robyn Whitney (Aide).

I could not have accomplished as much as I have throughout my career if it were not for the hard work and dedication of my superstar staff. That has been especially true this year.

Over the course of this session my staff has done an excellent job of keeping me organized and tuned in to the concerns of my bosses – YOU, the citizens of the 17th District. I want to send a special thank-you to my Legislative Assistant, Alexander Bohler; Session Aide, Robyn Whitney and our Intern, Collin Silvernail.

I am fortunate to have your help and the citizens of Southwest Washington benefit greatly from your service!

Senator Don Benton

FAREWELL

Colleagues Recognize 22 Years of Service with Moving Speeches and Award



Majority Coalition Caucus Chair Linda Evans Parlette presenting me with an award of appreciation on behalf of the caucus.

It was with great sadness that I decided to step down from the Senate after my current term ends Dec. 31. Given my love for public service, I made this decision with a heavy heart.

I have served the citizens in elective office for 30 years with the last 22 years serving in the Legislature. As I reflect back, I must say that I am pleased with our legislative achievements during that time. In Olympia I have worked in a bipartisan fashion to find solutions that help small businesses grow jobs; I have vigorously fought against tax increases; and I have stood up for our seniors. I also helped to broker a bipartisan agreement to maintain needed funds for our successful programs to reduce homelessness.

I fought intensely against the Columbia River Crossing (CRC) project from its infancy. I did so, because I knew from the beginning that light rail and more tolls were not what Vancouver, Clark County, and our state needed.

As a “tough on crime” legislator, I worked to pass the much-needed Chelsea Harrison Act that closed loopholes in the “Three Strikes, You’re Out” law. And no one has been a more passionate defender of property rights, working to stop the abuse of eminent domain.

My colleagues in the Senate recognized my years of service by taking time on the Senate floor to speak about my record and legacy in the Legislature. It was a great honor, and the speeches were filled with humor, love and a bit of sadness.

One of my many friends across the Capitol, Democrat Senator Maralyn Chase, nearly brought us all to tears as she talked about how a progressive like her could be such good friends with a conservative like me.

“Well, it’s easy,” she said. “Don always exemplified the Golden Rule as a way of life.”

“I want to tell you, a lot of ... people don’t realize he’s an environmentalist,” Chase said. “He really is. He just showed a lot of people in Clark County what kind of an environmentalist he is. He is also a great manager. ... He saved them a lot of money.”

I will miss seeing my good friends in Olympia, but I look forward to this new chapter in my life. That said, I owe it to all of you, the people of the 17th District, to complete my current term. I will continue working on a number of important issues during this interim, and will remain a vocal advocate for our district up until my last day in office.

If there is any way I can be a help to you, please don’t hesitate to be in touch. As it always has been, it will continue to be my honor to serve you.

Senator Don Benton

BUDGET & TAX UPDATE



Protecting Your Wallet from Olympia Tax Increases

During short, or 60-day, sessions like the one this year, the Legislature reopens the two-year state budgets to see if anything needs changing – small tweaks necessitated by changes in revenue, unexpected emergencies or other small corrections to the budgets that we pass during the long-session.

In the regular session, House Democrats fought for a budget that increased new policy spending, raised taxes, raided the state rainy day fund, and left a significant budget hole for the next two-year budget. The House clearly wanted to spend as much as they could and leave a big hole that would need to be backfilled with a tax increase in the 2017 session.

The Senate rejected that approach and that disagreement led to a special session. My Republican colleagues and I stood firm against the House Democrats' attempt to raise taxes and grow government. Our position prevailed and, in the end, the House reached a compromise with our Senate majority, allowing the special session to end with no new taxes.

Senate Republicans Fight to Restore Taxpayer Protection Act

This year the Senate voted once again on a measure aimed at restoring the Taxpayer Protection Act, by enshrining it in the state's constitution.

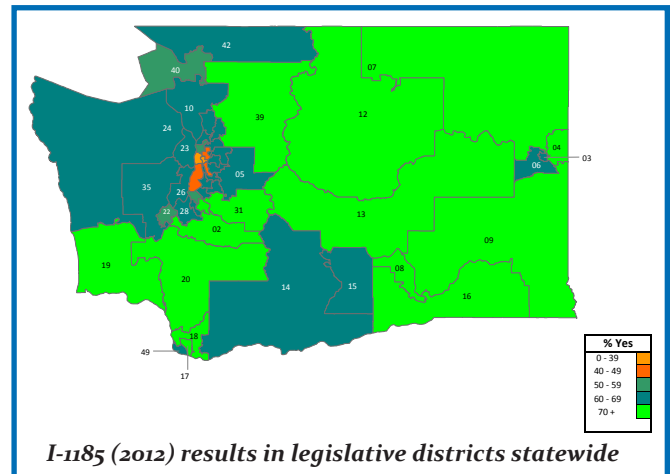
The Initiative 1185 law required a two-thirds vote by the Legislature to approve tax increases, rather than a simple-majority vote. The higher standard dates to 1993 and also was endorsed by voters in 2007 and 2010. In February 2013, the Washington Supreme Court struck down the two-thirds majority requirement to pass tax increases, and pointed to a constitutional amendment as the voters' only means of maintaining the popular taxpayer protection.

Washington's constitution invests ultimate political authority in the people, and the people of Washington have been clear in their desire for additional protection against tax hikes.

Six times now, in ballot measures stretching over 22 years, the people have said 'yes' to requiring a two-thirds vote in Olympia on tax increases. I-1185, the last initiative dealing solely with the two-thirds vote requirement, received a 64 percent "yes" vote statewide and received majority support in all 39 counties.

It's safe to say the two-thirds tax-vote rule has become a non-partisan issue at this point. There's support for it throughout our state, not just in areas such as our district, where I-1185 passed overwhelmingly. The people are asking for – no demanding – that lawmakers work together in a bipartisan manner to get things done. They want to make sure that if we do raise taxes it is a last resort and one that has broad bipartisan agreement in order to pass.

Every member of our bipartisan coalition voted to adopt SJR 8211, but it failed to receive even a single vote from the Democrat caucus, meaning it didn't get the constitutionally-required 33 votes necessary for passage.



17th Legislative District

SERVING OUR HEROES

Honoring and Supporting Our Veterans Has Been One of My Top Priorities in Olympia



As a freshman legislator, I secured passage of my bill creating a World War II memorial on the State Capitol campus. Every year since, I have sponsored multiple bills that help our veterans and their families.

Perhaps more than any other issue, my heart has been heaviest when it comes to supporting our veterans. Our members of the military and veterans do so much for us and deserve our recognition and appreciation. That's why I am pleased that I have been able to join my colleagues over the years in approving a number of bills aimed at honoring our heroes and improving the delivery of services to veterans.

Here are just a few of the measures passed in recent years:

- **House Bill 2130** helps veterans to access benefits they are entitled to receive under the Veterans' Innovations Program (VIP). This program provides crisis and emergency relief as well as education, training, and employment assistance to veterans and their families.
- **House Bill 2744** clarified which businesses are entitled to claim veteran-related benefits and helps guarantee that limited resources are used to create jobs here in Washington.
- The **Pension Poacher Prevention Act** is a consumer-protection measure aimed at defending veterans from fraudulent or misleading schemes that charge veterans for what should be free services. I am so pleased I was able to support this law that provides critical protection for our veterans and their spouses.
- Last year the Legislature passed **Senate Bill 5355** to help our veterans use their G.I. Bill benefits at state-run colleges and universities. Washington's veterans finally can rest assured that their education benefits will be protected in our state.
- **Senate Bill 5318** removes a mandatory one-year waiting period for veterans to qualify for in-state tuition.
- **Senate Bill 5691** authorizes the state Department of Veterans Affairs to establish a veterans' home in southeast Washington – Walla Walla, specifically – which would serve as a skilled-nursing facility providing long-term care for honorably discharged veterans, families and Gold Star Parents (those whose children died while serving in the armed forces).
- Veterans in Washington will soon have a more convenient way to prove their identity and verify their military service: a driver's license or identicaid with a "**veteran**" designation. Once this measure goes in to effect in 2017, our veterans will enjoy being able to simply show a license or ID card rather than having to produce their military-discharge papers.
- **Senate Bill 6150** allows Medal of Honor recipients to receive special license plates without additional fees or taxes.

Governor Signs My Bill to Help Vets Find Health Insurance

I am happy to report that the Legislature voted unanimously to approve my legislation to help veterans acquire supplemental health insurance for their families.

My legislation will benefit veterans enrolled in the Civilian Health and Medical Program. The program provides 80 percent coverage for the veteran's family. Washington is one of only nine states where supplemental insurance is not available to offset the remaining 20 percent.

Last year the Legislature approved a bill I sponsored to review barriers to attracting supplemental plans. This year's bill now acts on the results of the review. It would create an exemption in state law for the CHAMPVA program. This change will remove the only remaining statutory barrier to the availability of supplemental insurance in Washington.

I'm thrilled that this bill moved through the Legislature with unanimous support in both the House and Senate.



2016 Legislative Report

FIGHTING FOR THE PEOPLE OF CLARK COUNTY

Securing Funding for Key Clark County Project

This year, I was able to secure support from budget writers for \$1 million for preservation repairs to Mother Joseph Academy in Vancouver.

The million dollars we were able to secure for Mother Joseph Academy in the supplemental capital budget is a recognition of the importance of this historic treasure and the urgent need to provide funding for immediate repairs to the Academy. I worked on this last year and it would have been funded then, except that it was a casualty of the mad dash to pass the budget and adjourn.

Funding I secured for the Clark County Heritage Farm in the senate operating budget that passed was unfortunately lost in the final budget negotiations with the House as the Democrats raised spending by more than \$200 million. This important budget proviso would have been used to complete work on vital upgrades to the farm's irrigation system. Our new Senator will have to work hard to try once again to secure this funding next year.



\$1 Million for Mother Joseph Academy in capital budget.

GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY

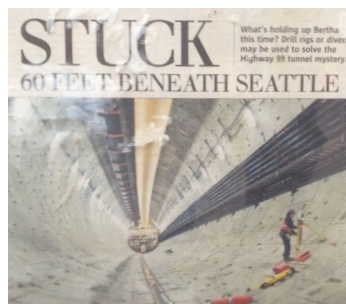
Accountability has been a central theme during this legislative session for our Majority Coalition Caucus, which leads the Senate. State government has been a mess – from disastrous errors at the Department of Corrections that resulted in the premature release of 3,700 dangerous felons and loss of at least two lives, to deficit-causing cost-overruns at the Health Care Authority, to wasteful spending, mismanagement and ineptness at the Department of Transportation.

Providing oversight is one of the key functions of the Senate, and it is our duty to hold the executive branch accountable to the people for its failure to operate in an effective and efficient manner.

Senate Fires Transportation Secretary

This session we voted against confirming Lynn Peterson to lead the state Department of Transportation. This is a step that was not pleasant to take, but was necessary, and some would say long overdue.

We've seen no indication from DOT that the agency can complete major projects in a timely and competent manner, and more disturbingly, we've seen no signs that the agency has a plan to address the systemic problems that have led to this situation.



Peterson, who I liked personally, had been in the job for three years. During that time, not only did the problems at DOT continue, but they actually got worse. The public, as well as lawmakers, simply did not have faith that Peterson could bring the changes the agency needs.

Senate Investigates DOC Scandal

The Senate Law and Justice Committee hired an investigator and issued legislative subpoenas for emails, reports and data from the Department of Corrections and the governor's office, in its investigation of the early release of up to 3,700 violent felons.

Our investigation has been more independent and transparent than the governor's review, which amounts to the executive branch investigating itself. The subpoenas are allowing the Law and Justice Committee to call people in and ask questions on the record, under oath.

We have already learned that at least two people lost their lives due to this error, and we owe it to those victims to make sure nothing like this ever happens again. We have already learned that at least two people lost their lives due to this error, and we owe it to those victims to make sure nothing like this ever happens again.

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Don Benton (R)
17th Legislative District

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PROTECTING CONSUMERS

My Bill to Help Prosecute Mortgage Fraud Approved

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. This year the Legislature unanimously approved my measure to continue support for the prosecution of mortgage-related crimes.

As chair of the Senate Financial Institutions and Insurance Committee, I have been one of the Legislature's most vocal advocates for consumers, and this bill represents a continuation of those efforts. Senate Bill 6282 maintains the Mortgage Lending Fraud Prosecution Account for another five years, through June 2021.

Mortgage-fraud crimes remain a problem in our state. The Mortgage Lending Fraud Prosecution Account has provided resources necessary for the state to pursue aggressive prosecution of criminal mortgage fraud, and successfully protect homeowners from those who would prey on them.

My bill simply extends the account and keeps the current surcharge at \$1, as it has always been. While this is not a major surcharge, it is enough to make a major impact on the ability of police and prosecutors to continue undertaking these difficult, complex cases.

SB 6282 received the active support of the Department of Financial Institutions and the King County Prosecutor's Office.

