

[DRAFT] City of Mercer Island 2024 State Legislative Priorities

The City will advocate during the 2024 Legislative Session on the following issues and supports the priorities of the Association of Washington Cities and Washington Cities Insurance Authority.

Maximize Resources for Behavioral Health and Substance Use Disorder Treatment and Prevention

The City is a direct provider of mental health counseling services through school-based and community programs while also relying on regional public health infrastructure for specialized care and crisis response. Priorities include:

- Increased prevention and intervention resources targeting Fentanyl and other substances.
- Funding to expand community- and school-based mental health services for youth.
- Opportunities to integrate behavioral health and first responders for enhanced crisis response.

Support for Affordable Housing

The City champions a proactive stance, using novel tools and incentives to enhance housing supply and affordability. Priorities include:

- **Transit-oriented growth**, prioritizing housing, and infrastructure investments near major transit, tying it either to affordability mandates or to the City's housing targets under ESSHB 1220 (2021). This harnesses regional transportation investments to boost mobility, expand affordable housing, and protect the environment.
- **Enhancing current programs** and supporting mechanisms that bolster state and regional housing programs, like the Regional Coalition for Housing (ARCH).
- **Flexible and adaptable funding methods** including a local Real Estate Excise Tax (REET) ensuring revenues benefit low- to moderate-income households.
- **Local control** and acknowledgement of the work that cities are already doing to improve walkability and parking policies to support housing needs. The City opposes any blanket regulations that would overlook local nuances and needs. The City opposes housing density increases outside of the Town Center due to infrastructure constraints.

Capital and Grant Support for Essential Public Services

The City is seeking State funding for public safety programs and Climate Action plan implementation, including:

- **Funding for Seafair Water Safety Program:** The City of Mercer Island Marine Patrol coordinates Seafair safety operations on Lake Washington providing first responder and boating safety services. The City is seeking \$100,000 annually to support the funding needs for this critical public safety program.
- **Funding for Mercer Island Marine Patrol Boat Replacement:** The City of Mercer Island State-certified Marine Patrol Unit was founded in 1982 and provides marine patrol services to Medina, Bellevue, Renton, Yarrow Point, and Hunts Point for their water-based services with just three vessels. Two of the vessels are near the end of their useful life and the City is seeking \$1.2 million for the estimated replacement costs.
- **Funding for Electrical Vehicle Infrastructure Plan:** The City adopted a Climate Action Plan in 2023 and is seeking \$300,000 to fund development of an Island-wide Electrical Vehicle Charging Plan.
- **Funding for Compact Electric Sweeper:** The City is seeking \$310,000 to purchase a compact electric sweeper to clean sidewalks, paths, and park areas that are inaccessible to the large street sweeper. This specialized equipment will improve operations efficiency, reduce the use of gas-powered equipment, and aid in stormwater management.

Preserving and Protecting the Environment

The City encourages legislation, partnerships, and funding that incentivizes and supports the City's adopted Climate Action Plan.

Support Public Safety Measures on Auto Theft and Property Crime

The City supports law enforcement strategies that protect our community and businesses. Priorities include:

- Further expanding the list of eligible offenses for pursuits, to include auto theft and some property crimes allowing cities to develop policies tailored for their communities.
- Additional State resources to fund auto theft and property crime reduction programs.

Support for WCIA Municipal Tort Law Liability Reform

The City's liability insurance pool costs continue to rise due to costly verdicts, inflation, and expanded liabilities imposed by legislative actions and judicial interpretation of the law. In partnership with Washington Cities Insurance Authority (WCIA), the City opposes legislation that would expand tort law liability and/or the remedies available under tort law. If expansions are approved by the legislature, then special funds must be developed to cover these costs.

Revising the Arbitrary Property Tax Cap

With the recent and ongoing impacts of inflation, the City's ability to keep pace with growing costs is inhibited by the arbitrary 1% property tax cap that has been in place for more than 20 years. The City supports tying the tax to inflation and population growth factors with a new cap not to exceed 3%. This allows local elected officials to adjust the local property tax rate to better meet community needs and keep up with the costs of providing basic services like police, fire, transportation, and valued community amenities like parks. With the current 1% cap, the City's General Fund is projected to have a structural deficit in 2025-2026.