



A n n u a l R e p o r t

**Whatcom County
Auditor's Office**



2020

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The 2020 Annual Report
is published by the
Whatcom County
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Message from the Auditor

Public service during a pandemic—a challenge by any definition. Recording, licensing, elections—all essential services. So how to provide those services while keeping staff and the public safe? It took a team to make it work. From the county IT, Facilities and Executive offices to the other 38 county auditors and the Secretary of State, everyone pulled together, shared ideas and resources, and got the job done. Our business partners assisted by being flexible. We coordinated hours and services with the Treasurer and Assessor. Our goal was to provide service while protecting all of those involved.



The initial challenge was getting equipment set up so staff could work from home. The office of 16 was divided into two teams, alternating between working from home and the Auditor's Office, on a weekly basis. We acquired PPE, had plexiglass shields manufactured for customer service counters, added a doorbell, and established appointments for in-person services. We installed webcams in the election center so observers could stay safe at home, set up the council chambers for elections during election week to promote social distancing and accommodate the over 600 voters who came in election day. Messaging, signage, a secure drop box for recording and licensing transactions and a forms/literature kiosk were all part of the effort. We also managed five grants, installed new drop boxes for elections, procured and installed new elections equipment, set up self-help kiosks for elections, and reorganized the public search area for Recording.

In January, we said goodbye to retiring Auditor, Debbie Adelstein. She returned in October to help verify signatures on general election ballot envelopes.

In the following pages you will see many highlights of the achievements in 2020—work that continued despite the pandemic. Increased recordings, four county-wide elections, licensing transactions, and historical records projects were all accomplished even with a frozen vacant position and some staff on extended leaves due to COVID.

We hope you enjoy this look at our accomplishments in 2020.

Sincerely,

Diana Bradrick
Whatcom County Auditor





4

Countywide elections, Page 10

44

Temporary election workers hired for general election, Page 14

72

Manufactured home applications, Page 26

75%

Average documents e-Recorded, Page 17

63,080

Documents recorded, Page 16

87.9%

General election voter turnout hit a record high, Page 12

70,724

Total records indexed, Page 21

370,198

Ballots ACCEPTED in 2020, Page 10

291,186

Countywide licensing transactions, Page 25

\$31,000,000+

Whatcom County licensing revenue, Page 23

Administrative Overview

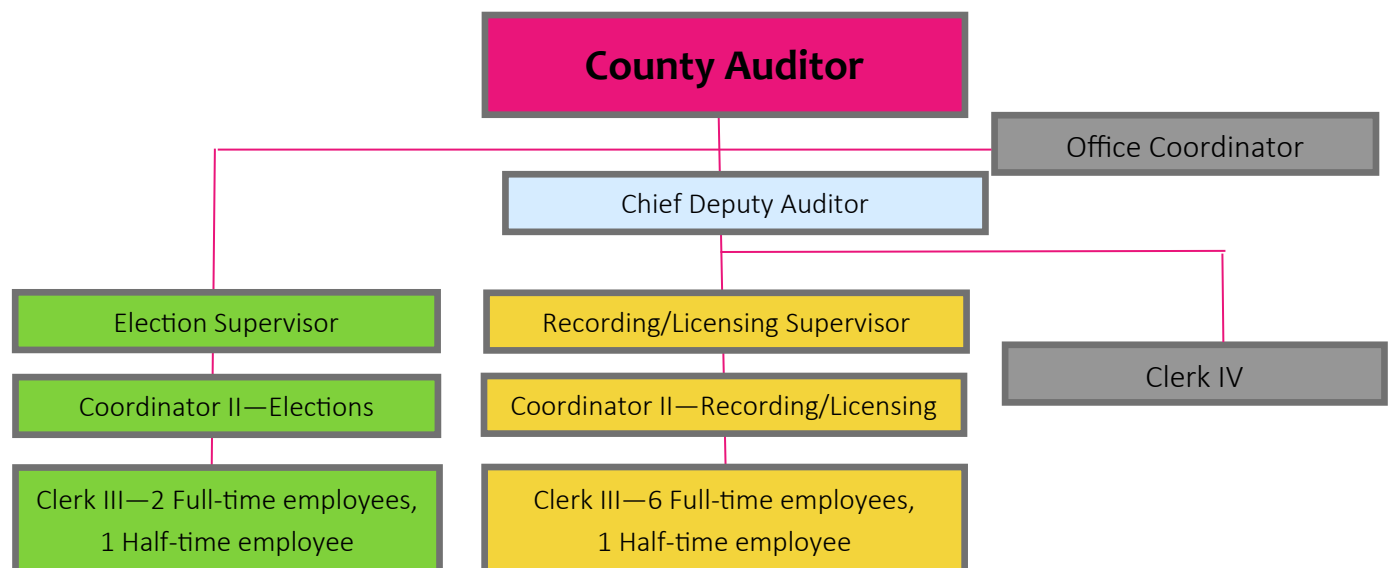
Auditor's Office administration, namely the Auditor, Chief Deputy, Office Coordinator, and Clerk IV, provide support for office-wide operations.

Highlights in 2020

- ◆ Processed 4 resolutions for ballot measures
- ◆ Calculated and mailed out 69 bills for election and registration costs
- ◆ Managed 50 contracts
- ◆ Developed and issued 2 requests for proposal
- ◆ Managed 5 grants
- ◆ Updated the Candidate Filing Guide, the Initiative/Referenda Handbook and the Policies and Procedures Manual
- ◆ Processed 127 oaths of office and created certificates of election/appointment
- ◆ Worked with county IT department on cybersecurity initiatives and coordinated installation of new equipment to meet same day registration requirements
- ◆ Managed budgets in the amount of \$2,957,391
- ◆ Developed and implemented COVID procedures

Core Services

- ◆ Administration
- ◆ Oversight of three divisions: Recording, Elections & Licensing
- ◆ Budget
- ◆ Payroll
- ◆ Purchasing/accounts payable
- ◆ Initiatives, referenda, district creation
- ◆ Requests for proposals
- ◆ Contract management
- ◆ Legal notices and press releases



Statewide Involvement

In addition to the oversight of three divisions under the Auditor's purview, the Auditor and the Chief Deputy participate in the Washington State Association of County Auditors (WSACA) and the Washington Association of County Officials (WACO). These statewide advocacy groups provide opportunities to interact with other counties and statewide officials, and to learn and share best practices.

Washington State Association of County Auditors (WSACA)

Auditor Diana Bradrick chaired the Legislative Committee until May, 2020. Starting in June she co-chaired the Elections Committee. Diana and Chief Deputy Stacy Henthorn both participated in the Recording Committee and Stacy was also a member of the Licensing Committee.

Secretary of State's Office Committees

Auditor Bradrick served on the Executive Steering Committee for the VoteWA project—the new statewide voter registration database that went live June, 2019.

National Involvement

Auditor Bradrick has been a long-time member of the International Association of Government Officials (IGO) and the Property Records Industry Association (PRIA). Her participation in these associations keep the office current on emerging technology as well as up-to-date on national trends in the recording, elections, records management and marriage licensing areas.

Highlights:

- ◆ Legislative Committee
- ◆ Recording Committee
- ◆ Licensing Committee
- ◆ Executive Steering Committee for a new statewide voter registration system
- ◆ Property Records Industry Association (PRIA)
- ◆ International Association of Government Officials (IGO)



What's New in Elections

New Ballot Sorter

A Runbeck Agilis ballot sorter was purchased through a Help America Vote Act (HAVA) grant and implemented in time for the 2020 August Primary Election. The sorter is able to scan 18,000 envelopes per hour and introduces the ability to run a second pass on the envelopes. On the first pass, the return envelope is scanned, photographed, and marked as returned. The photographs are sent to verifiers who check signatures. Once the signature is approved or rejected, all of the return envelopes are run through the sorter for a second pass. On the second pass, the sorter removes the rejected ballots and creates batches of accepted ballots, ready for the next step in processing.



COVID-19

In March, Auditor Bradrick was quick to form a plan for her staff to work remotely during the pandemic. With help from the county IT department, staff were soon able to work safely and securely at home. Most of the work could be completed remotely.

Citizens wishing to register or update were still able to do so, either online or by mail. COVID did not disrupt processing the election—the Auditor's Office was open 18 days before each election to serve the public for three elections during the pandemic. For more information, see page 8.

Ballot Processing Livestream

In September, with help from county IT and Facilities, five webcams were installed in the election center. Throughout the election, there were over 2,000 public users viewing activities in the election center from the comfort of their own home!

Drop Boxes

Two larger ballot drop boxes were purchased to replace the existing medium boxes at Ferndale City Hall & Sehome Village. The boxes are able to hold more ballots than the medium boxes, but still maintain a secure location for returned ballots.



Student Engagement HUB

A voting center was open on Election Day, November 3 from 8:30 am—8:00 pm in the Viking Union Center at Western Washington University to assist voters in registering, updating, and ballot replacement. For more information on the HUB, see page 8.

Faster Ballot Scanner

A Fujitsu fi-7900 scanner was purchased and implemented in time for the 2020 November General Election. It replaced an existing Fujitsu fi-6400 scanner, increasing the speed at which ballots are scanned (7900 pieces per hour versus 6400).



Customer Service & COVID

In 2020, we were presented with the challenge of providing customer service during the COVID pandemic. Due to the ability of staff to work from home, and the ability of voters to register or update without coming into the office, the Election Division continued to serve voters without delay.

Information on our website, in our automated phone menu, and outside of our office was updated regularly to keep voters informed. Staff were available in the Auditor's Office to answer phone calls if a voter needed further assistance.

Many voters were not going to be home to receive their regular, mailed ballot. Election staff were able to refer the voters to VoteWA.gov so they could print a replacement ballot and return it to us by Election Day. Approximately 6,000 voters utilized this option in the November 2020 General Election.

Voting Center

The Auditor's Office was open for in-person registration and ballot replacement starting October 14th. A greeter was stationed at the front door to assist voters without having them enter the office unless necessary.

On October 30th, the voting center was moved to the County Council Chambers. A larger space was needed to accommodate the higher volume of people while meeting the requirements for social distancing.

In order to assist those voters who were unable to come in during the week, the voting center was open Saturday October 31 from 9:00—3:00.

Volunteers from the League of Women Voters' helped by directing and assisting voters, sanitizing supplies and voting areas, and anything else the Election Division needed. We couldn't have done it without them!

Election Day Statistics in Voting Center:

- 133 voters added (newly registered)
- 194 voters updated
- 658 ballots issued

Student Engagement HUB

The Washington State Legislature passed Engrossed Substitute Bill 6313 related to establishing Student Engagement Hubs. It requires counties with a university (defined in RCW 28B.10.016) to provide voter registration and ballot access services to all voters in Washington State. Grant funding was provided by the state for operating costs in 2020.

In preparation, student workers at WWU were trained by staff at the Auditor's Office, and a location was selected on campus to be open on November 3rd from 8:30 am through 8:00 pm. In total, 34 registrations were updated and 71 replacement ballots were issued at the HUB on Election Day.



Assisting by Phone & Email

The Election Division experienced an increase in correspondence by phone and email. From October 5th through November 6th, the Election Division:

- ◆ Answered 4,300 phone calls, averaging 175 calls per day. 403 calls were handled on October 19th alone.
- ◆ Sent more than 3,000 emails, averaging 111 per day.

Voter Registration in 2020

Implementation of the statewide voter registration system, VoteWA, made same day registration possible. Counties have the ability to search, register, update, and issue ballots for any voter in Washington State through 8:00 pm Election Day (within 8 days, any updates need to be done in-person at a voting center). The 2020 General Election was the first presidential election with access to same day registration.

Due to legislation passed in 2020, universal registration was implemented in June. The change now permits a voter to register and receive a ballot in any Washington county. Updates to VoteWA made it possible for us to register a voter in any Washington county and give them a ballot for their current address, even if it was outside of Whatcom County. Whatcom processed 20-30 out of county registrations in 2020 without issue.

Military & Overseas Voters (UOCAVA)

Registrations for military and overseas (UOCAVA) voters increased, with over 500 registrations coming after September. Currently, 3,481 UOCAVA citizens are registered to vote, an increase of 1,210 over 2019. Of those, 1,029 prefer to receive ballots by mail and the remaining 2,452 request their ballots by email. The email contains instructions on how to access their ballot via VoteWA.gov and how to return it by mail, email, or fax.

Whatcom County took extra steps to ensure our military and overseas (UOCAVA) voters were able to access and return their ballots in 2020. These steps included additional communication on accessing their ballot and follow-up communication when we received their ballot. With 2,729 returning a ballot for the general election, that is a 78% turnout for UOCAVA voters' in Whatcom County.

Core Services

- ◆ Register citizens residing in Washington State to vote, including those living overseas and in the military
- ◆ Update and maintain the voter registration database
- ◆ Promote voter education
- ◆ Verify signatures for initiatives, referenda, petitions and every returned ballot
- ◆ Maintain and update district and precinct boundaries

Future Voters

In July 2019, legislation passed permitting 16-year-olds to pre-register, as well as 17-year-olds. As of December 2020, almost 1,000 future voters have registered in Whatcom County. These voters are pended in VoteWA until they turn 18.

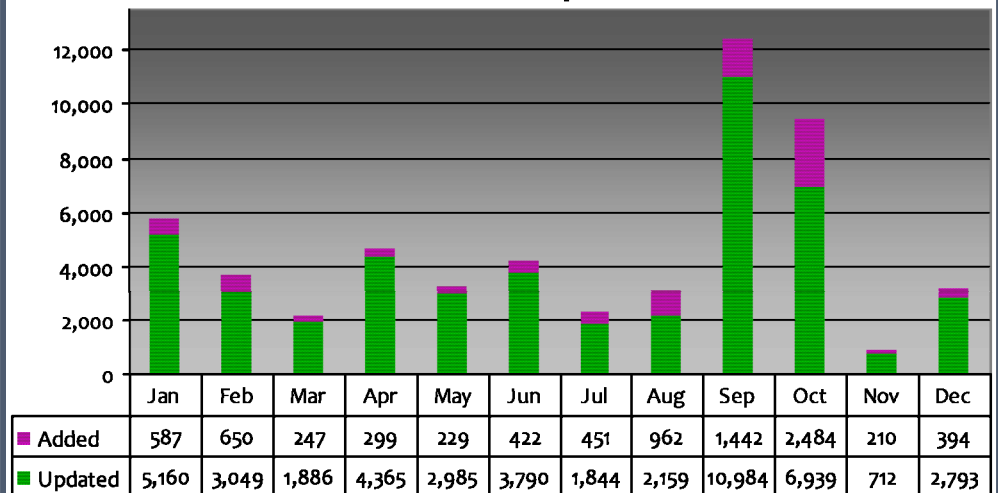
If the future voter will be 18 years old by Election Day, their registration is activated. They are also issued and mailed a ballot for that election. At the end of the year, there were 312 16-year-olds and 668 17-year-olds pre-registered to vote in Whatcom County.

Added & Updated

Voters added to the system were first time voters in Washington State. Voters updated were already registered to vote in Washington.

A total of 8,377 voters were added, and over 46,000 voters were updated. The graph to the right details the total added and updated by month.

Voters Added & Updated in 2020



Elections in 2020

There were 628,752 ballots issued over the four countywide elections conducted in 2020—February, March, August and November. Of the total ballots returned, 370,198 were accepted and 4,576 were rejected, equating to a 60.7% average voter turnout over the course of the year.

More ballots were returned and accepted this year than ever before, as noted in the chart below. Voter turnout in the Primary and general elections were higher than normal as well.

For more information on ballots returned, see page 11.

For a detailed review of rejected ballots, see page 14.

On the ballot in 2020:

- President/Vice President
- 9 State Offices, including Governor
- Congressional/Legislative Representatives
- Superior/Supreme Court Judges
- PUD District 1 Commissioner
- 4 Local Ballot Measures
- All School Districts in February Special

The presidential primary election was held in March. This election occurs every four years and, for the first time in state history, both major political parties used the results of the presidential primary to allocate their delegates to the national conventions in 2020!

Visit the Past Elections tab on our website for information about results, sample ballots, and more.

Four Elections in 2020			
	Active Voters	Accepted Ballots	Turnout
February 11 Special Election	146,342	54,939	37.66%
March 10 Presidential Primary	149,176	82,851	55.54%
August 4 Primary Election	150,515	92,780	61.64%
November 3 General Election	158,780	139,628	87.94%

Record Turnout!

The average turnout for an August Primary is

35%

The average turnout for a November General is

66%

Comparison of Ballots Accepted Each Year

- 2020: 370,198 ballots accepted, four elections conducted
- 2019: 153,109 ballots accepted, three elections conducted
- 2018: 204,800 ballots accepted, four elections conducted
- 2017: 98,430 ballots accepted, three elections conducted
- 2016: 268,252 ballots accepted, five elections conducted
- 2015: 104,842 ballots accepted, four elections conducted

Early Ballot Return in November

A new concern this year was timely delivery of ballots by the USPS. Ballot packets were mailed October 14th for the general election. By October 17th, over 90% had been delivered to voters across Whatcom County, showing no delay of service.

The graph below compares the 2016 & 2020 General Election ballot return by date. The Auditor's Office saw a higher than average EARLY return in 2020. The rate of return in 2016 is typical, where 5,000-6,000 are returned daily, and then a huge percentage are returned election week. This was not the case in 2020, where 66% of ballots were returned by October 27th. That's seven days before Election Day (by comparison, only 39% had been received in 2016 for the same time period.)

Ballots were collected every day from all official drop box locations in the county (with the exception of Point Roberts). Ballots were picked up at the post office daily as well, but only 18% of voters chose to put their ballot in the mail, even with pre paid postage. A breakdown of each return location is listed in the chart to the right.

The early return allowed election workers to process more ballots for election night results. The first results reported included just over 80% of the ballots returned.



Returned to an official ballot drop box:

80.1%

Returned in the mail, postage paid:

18.7%

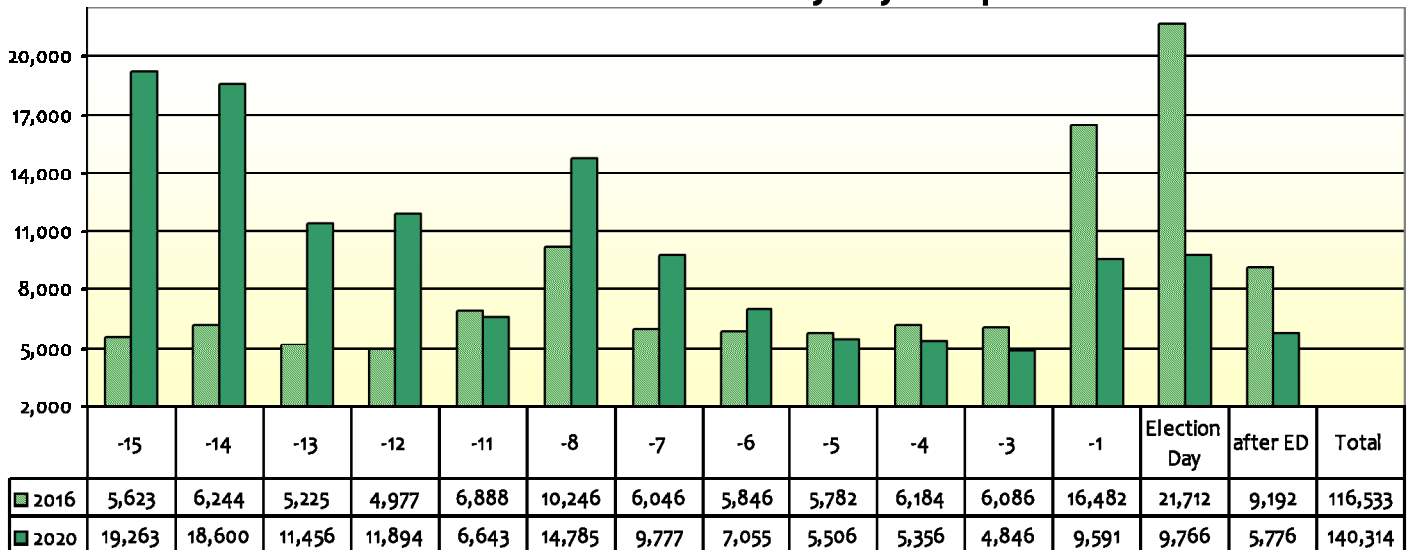


Total Ballots Collected at Each Return Location:

DB Courthouse	37,937
Mail	26,234
DB Sehome	14,536
DB Lynden	13,588
DB Ferndale	13,256
DB WCC	4,779
DB Blaine	4,689
DB Birch Bay	4,206
DB Everson	4,125
DB Sudden Valley	2,875
DB WWU-Wade King	2,123
DB Deming	2,058
DB Laurel	1,730
DB Kendall	1,509
Email	1,470
DB Custer	1,230
DB Lummi	1,226
DB Sumas	1,056
DB Pt Roberts	620
DB WWU-Red Square	603
DB Acme	351
WWU-HUB	65
Fax	41
Lummi Portable	25
Nooksack Market	21
TOTAL	140,353

DB=Drop Box location

2016 & 2020 Ballot Return by Day Comparison



Election Security

Election security continued to be a high priority in 2020. Here are a few measures taken for each election in Whatcom County:

- Five cameras monitoring the election center 24 hours a day, available to view online.
- Ballots batched, tracked, and audited.
- Security prox locks on all doors with access restrictions and monitoring reports.
- Use of seals and seal logs, formal chain of custody supports all movements of ballots.
- Logic & accuracy test to ensure accuracy of tabulation system.
- Tabulation system on a closed network (no internet access).
- Two designated election workers required around ballots at all times.
- Access to voter registration system requires two factor authentication.

Whatcom County Votes!



Voter turnout in Whatcom County is typically higher than the average for the entire state, as noted in the chart below.

	Whatcom County	Washington State
2020	87.94%	84.14%
2019	56.20%	44.82%
2018	77.13%	71.83%
2017	45.88%	37.10%
2016	82.70%	78.76%
2015	47.24%	38.45%
2014	59.81%	54.16%
2013	54.89%	45.27%
2012	83.46%	81.25%
2011	59.02%	52.95%
2010	74.62%	71.24%
Avg	66.26%	60.00%

General Election - A Historical Perspective

As you can see in the chart below, the turnout in 2020 is the highest voter turnout in the last 30 years, slightly surpassing the turnout in the 2008 General Election.

The chart to the right compares the turnout percentage of Whatcom County and Washington State as a whole.

General Election Turnout in Whatcom County (* indicates Presidential Election year)											
1990-1999	1990	1991	1992*	1993	1994	1995	1996*	1997	1998	1999	
Ballots Accepted	39,660	39,660	64,463	44,911	45,192	45,511	65,565	50,593	57,090	53,038	
Turnout %	64%	64%	81%	56%	53%	51%	69%	59%	63%	58%	
2000-2010	2000*	2001	2002	2003	2004*	2005	2006	2007	2008*	2009	
Ballots Accepted	74,671	44,163	55,066	45,786	91,497	63,716	69,782	55,059	101,399	61,288	
Turnout %	76%	45%	60%	48%	86.24%	62%	68%	53%	87.93%	53%	
2010-2020	2010	2011	2012*	2013	2014	2015	2016*	2017	2018	2019	2020*
Ballots Accepted	86,993	69,147	104,727	69,709	76,123	61,136	114,920	63,626	110,504	82,537	139,628
Turnout %	74%	59%	83.46%	54%	59%	47%	82.7%	45%	77%	56%	87.94%

November General Election Cost Analysis, 2010-2020

	Election Cost	Registered Voters	Number of Ballots Cast	Cost per Registered Voter	Cost per Ballot Cast
2020	\$527,704	158,780	139,628	\$3.32	\$3.78
2019	\$430,451	146,851	82,537	\$2.93	\$5.22
2018	\$407,002	143,265	110,504	\$2.84	\$3.68
2017	\$503,000	138,688	63,626	\$3.63	\$7.91
2016	\$505,413	138,962	114,920	\$3.64	\$4.40
2015	\$424,543	129,345	61,136	\$3.28	\$6.94
2014	\$399,789	127,280	76,123	\$3.14	\$5.25
2013	\$421,691	127,002	69,709	\$3.32	\$6.05
2012	\$468,529	125,485	104,727	\$3.73	\$4.47
2011	\$398,255	117,162	69,147	\$3.40	\$5.76
2010	\$353,525	116,581	86,993	\$3.03	\$4.06

Cost Per Ballot & Voter

The cost per ballot cast was the lowest it's been in ten years for a primary election (lower left chart). It was the 2nd lowest for a general (upper left chart). The high voter turnout in 2020 resulted in a significantly decreased cost per ballot cast compared to other years.

The cost per registered voter remains close to the average.

General Election—10 Year Average:

- Cost per Registered Voter \$3.30
- Cost per Ballot Cast \$5.23
- Election Cost \$439,991

Primary Election—10 Year Average:

- Cost per Registered Voter \$2.59
- Cost per Ballot Cast \$7.46
- Election Cost \$308,084

August Primary Election Cost Analysis, 2010-2020

	Election Cost	Registered Voters	Number of Ballots Cast	Cost per Registered Voter	Cost per Ballot Cast
2020*	\$372,793	150,440*	92,780	\$2.48	\$4.02
2019*	\$359,044	147,256*	58,184	\$2.44	\$6.17
2018*	\$349,565	139,813*	62,717	\$2.50	\$5.57
2017	\$323,155	105,045	32,681	\$3.08	\$9.89
2016*	\$303,463	132,362*	49,088	\$2.29	\$6.18
2015	\$279,259	102,161	25,861	\$2.73	\$10.80
2014*	\$320,465	126,961*	42,736	\$2.52	\$7.50
2013	\$184,976	65,994	14,325	\$2.80	\$12.91
2012*	\$317,225	118,654*	47,234	\$2.67	\$6.72
2011*	\$284,726	118,678*	44,270	\$2.40	\$6.43
2010*	\$294,259	114,312*	50,015	\$2.57	\$5.88

Election Costs

Election costs are calculated based on all expenses related to that specific election. Major costs include salaries, printing, postage, vendor services to mail the ballots, and allocated costs such as election hardware and software maintenance, facilities costs and administrative overhead.

Specifically for the general, 40% of the entire election cost was for employee salaries/wages. In the primary, 30% of the election cost was for employee salaries/wages.

*indicates county-wide election (not all August Primaries are county-wide)

Rejected Ballot Overview

Upon receiving a ballot/return envelope, the staff at the Auditor's Office determines whether to accept or reject by verifying timeliness and signatures. Accepted return envelopes that are on time and have a valid signature move along in the process to be counted/tabulated. Rejected return envelopes are removed and held for further review.

The staff at the Auditor's Office are trained by the Washington State Patrol and have years of experience verifying signatures. Rejected signatures are reviewed by multiple staff. When the signature on the return envelope has been rejected, a letter is generated to notify the voter. The voter has the opportunity to cure their signature issue for up to three weeks after the election. The most common signature issues are unsigned and signature no match, as noted in the chart below.

All rejected return envelopes are presented to the canvassing board prior to election certification for final review. In 2020, there were fewer ballots rejected overall when compared to the total ballots returned.

Overall, as the chart below displays, less than 1% of ballots returned get rejected. In 2020, there was a large decrease in the number of ballots rejected for being returned late due in large part to the small number of mailed ballots.

General Election Rejected Ballot Totals, 2014-2020

	Unsigned	Signature No Match	Returned LATE	Other	Total Rejected	Total Returned	Rejected %
2020	173	463	66	22	724	140,352	0.52%
2019	61	229	387	12	689	83,226	0.83%
2018	27	252	192	107	578	111,082	0.52%
2017	56	188	271	40	555	64,181	0.86%
2016	85	521	90	155	851	115,771	0.74%
2015	26	176	234	68	504	61,640	0.82%
2014	55	263	293	108	719	76,842	0.94%

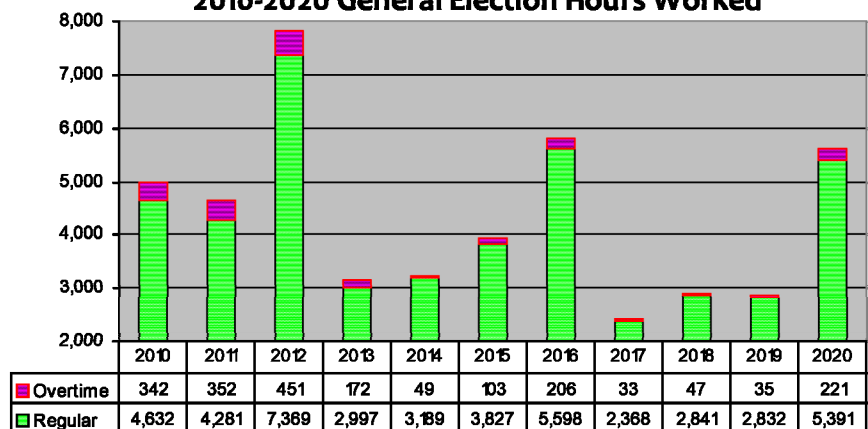
Administering Elections

- ◆ File candidates for local elected offices
- ◆ File and process all local ballot measures
- ◆ Design and print a local voters' pamphlet for each election
- ◆ Layout, proof, and print ballots and various election materials
- ◆ Ensure that all eligible voters are mailed a ballot 20 days prior to an election
- ◆ Hire, train, and supervise opening board workers, ballot collection teams, and ballot drop box closers
- ◆ Ensure ballot secrecy and security is maintained
- ◆ Receive, process, and count returned ballots
- ◆ Certify and publish election results
- ◆ Conduct observer training

Hours Worked

The chart to the right shows total hours worked during the general election over the past 10 years. Presidential election years continue to require more hours than non-presidential election years. In 2020, there were 14 full time Auditor's Office staff and 44 temporary staff included in the 5,391 hours worked!

2010-2020 General Election Hours Worked





A Special THANKS to all that helped this year during the general election:

- ◆ Whatcom County IT Department; Perry Rice Department Head & staff
- ◆ Whatcom County Facilities Management: Robert Ney manager & staff
- ◆ 44 temporary workers, hired to assist in the election & voting center
- ◆ 41 drop box closers, who ensured the drop boxes were closed and secure at 8:00 PM on election night
- ◆ The League of Women Voters Bellingham for volunteering to help at the voting center and drop box locations
- ◆ The Assessor, Public Works & Health Departments for loaning us vehicles for ballot collection
- ◆ Executive & Council for collaborative efforts to open the chambers and utilize the rotunda as extensions of the Auditors Office

The small army of workers who made the elections possible in 2020 are unsung heroes. Despite COVID, they came to work every day and worked with honesty and integrity in difficult conditions—particularly during the general election. Although we made best efforts to keep everyone safe, there was a risk that they were willing to take in order to ensure the election took place on time, and with accuracy. It took every one of the people involved to get us to certification, and we applaud their dedication.

Document Recording

The Auditor's Office is the only place to record land records and other miscellaneous documents. The deed to your home or property is recorded in our office if it's located in Whatcom County. Four document types listed below represent 83.5% of the 63,080 documents recorded in 2020. Other types of documents recorded are liens, restrictive covenants, community property agreements, survey maps, powers of attorney, leases, and many more.

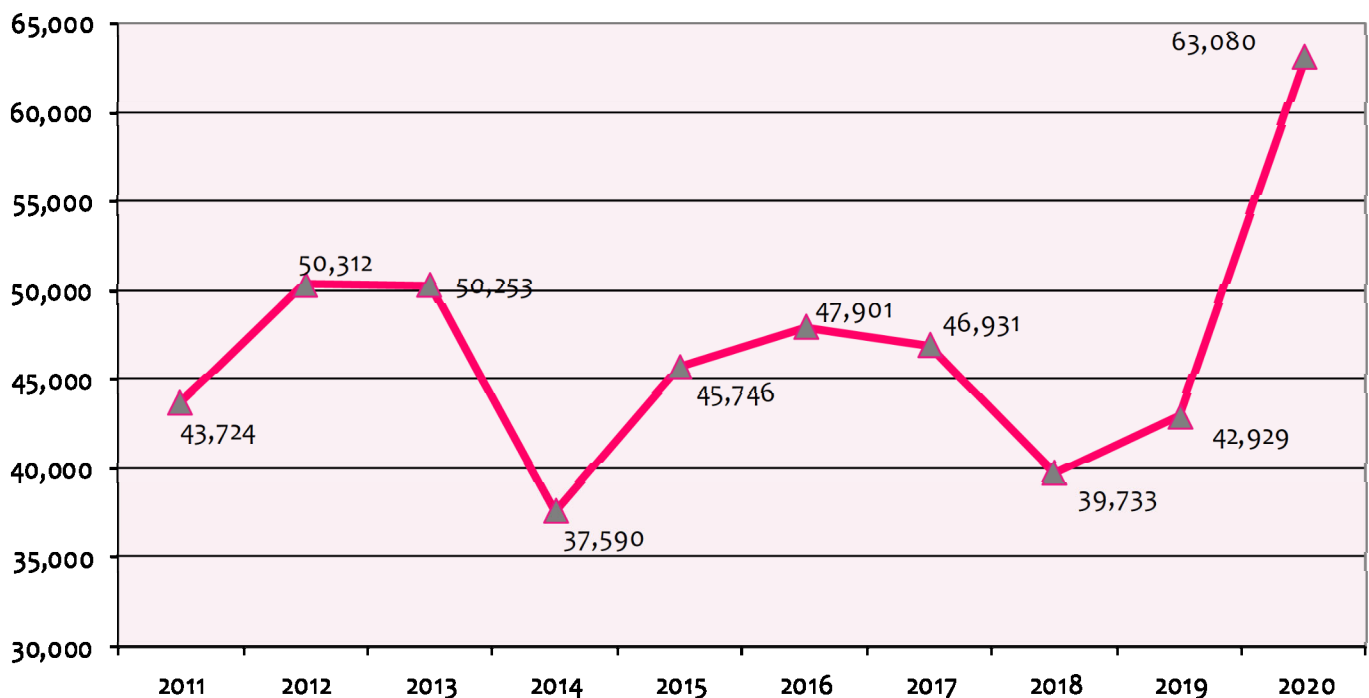
Top Recorded Documents:

1. Reconveyance—15,525 (24.61%)
2. Deed of Trust—15,028 (23.82%)
3. Appointment of Trustee—13,634 (21.61%)
4. Deed—8,498 (13.47%)

Core Services

- ◆ Record paper and electronically submitted documents
- ◆ Index recorded documents to make them searchable by grantor/grantee names, Assessor's parcel number, map name, and reference number for ease of access by staff and public
- ◆ Make recorded documents publicly available through an in-person customer service center and online access
- ◆ Help customers search recorded documents
- ◆ Provide certified copies of recorded documents
- ◆ Register and reserve plat and condominium names
- ◆ Register process servers
- ◆ Preserve and protect historically significant permanent archival documents

Total Recorded Documents



Document Submission

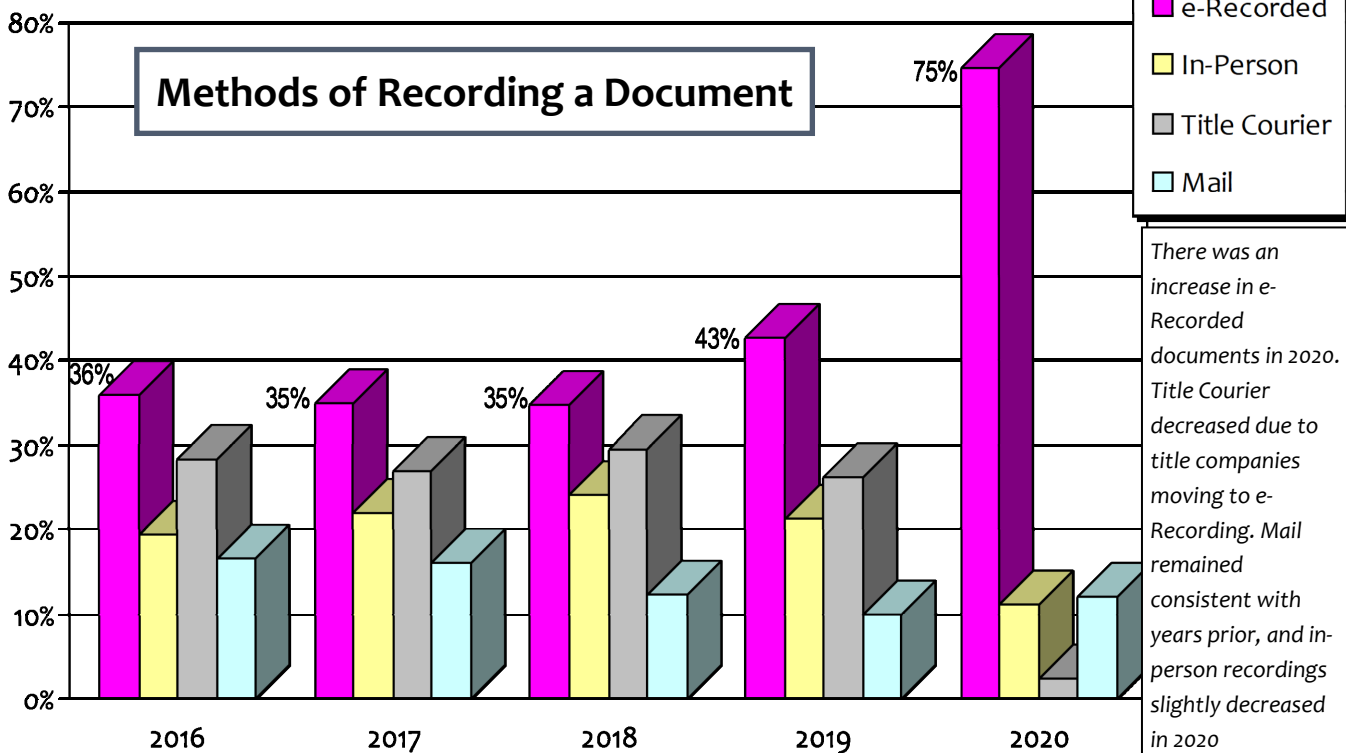
Documents can be submitted in person, by mail, via title company courier, or electronically. The chart below shows how documents were submitted to the office in the past five years.

Due to the pandemic, in early March we closed the office doors asking the public to place documents in a secure drop box outside our office doors, or to mail documents to the office. In addition, the Treasurer's office encouraged companies to submit the real estate excise tax documents electronically increasing e-recorded documents from 43% in 2019 to 75% this past year.

Four e-Recording Submitters:



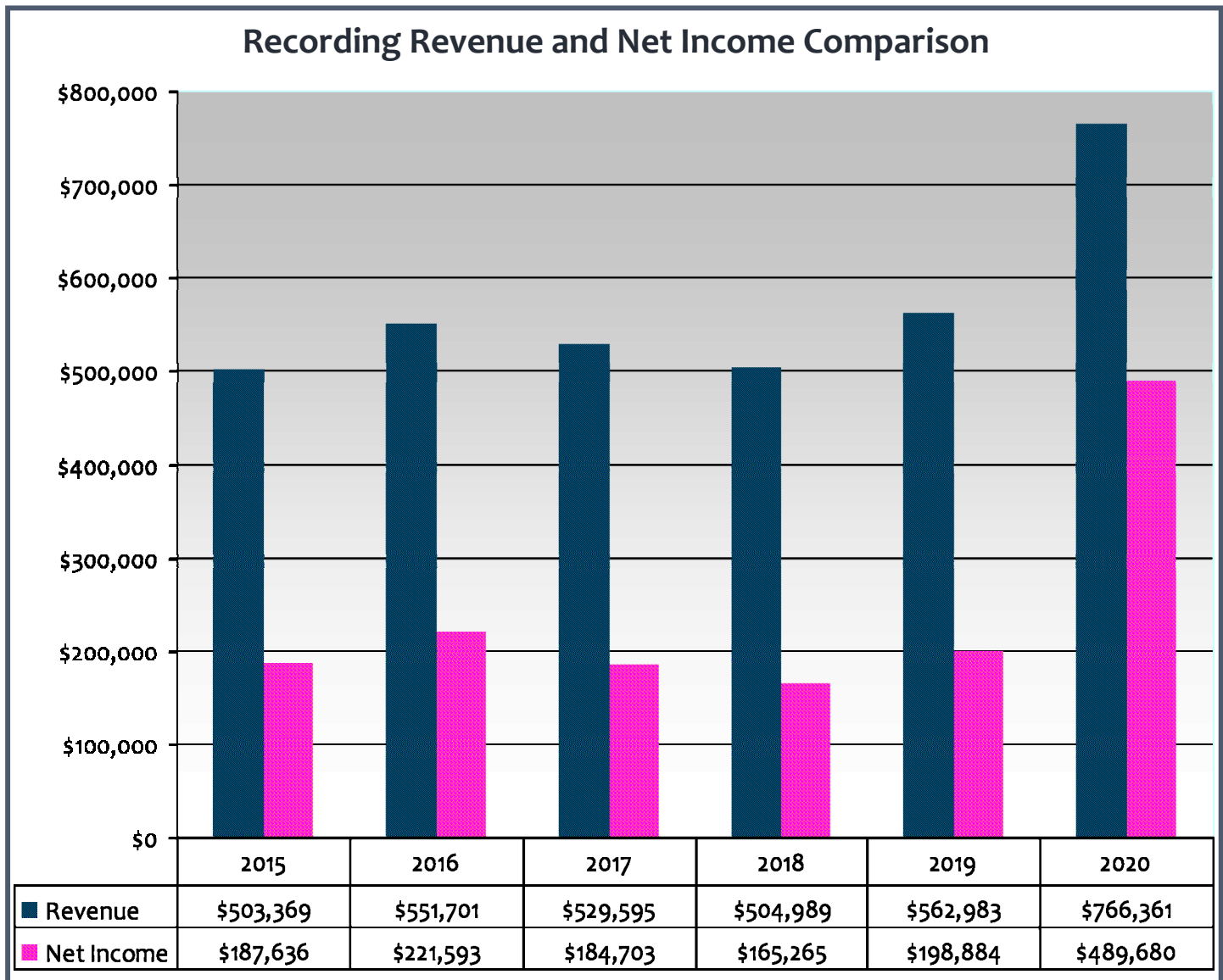
Three Local Title Companies:



Recording Revenue

The number of documents recorded increased 26% from the previous year primarily due to historically low interest rates in 2020. Lower interest rates tend to influence consumers to refinance an existing home loan or consider buying a home. On average, staff recorded 1500 more documents each month compared to the previous month and year, all in the middle of this pandemic.

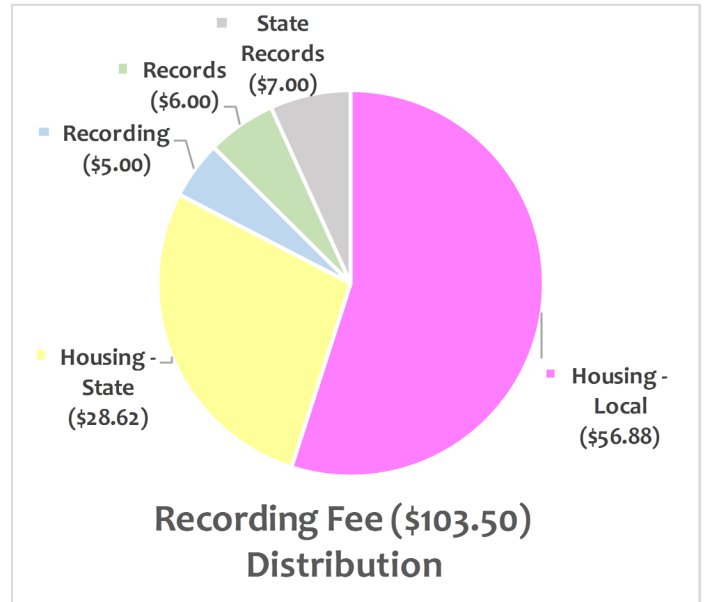
With an increase in the volume of recorded documents, there was a corresponding increase in overall revenue. Total *General Fund* revenue collected in the recording division was \$766,361.48. Of that, \$621,620.00 was collected for recording documents. The remainder of \$144,741.48 was collected from marriage license fees, subscription fees, copy and certified copy fees, administrative fees, search fees and other minor fees.



Recording Fees

Recording fees are charged for each document and page. Monies collected go to the county general fund and a number of special purpose funds. While there are exemptions to the recording fee, most documents are charged the base rate of \$103.50 for a one page document and \$1 for each additional page. Of the \$103.50, only \$5.00 goes to the Whatcom County General Fund. The other \$98.50 are special purpose fees including historical preservation, state archives, affordable housing, homeless housing, and urban housing.

Of the fees collected for affordable and homeless housing, a portion remains locally for county use, and a portion is distributed to the state for statewide programs. The amount collected is shown below.



Where does the money collected from recording fees go?

(after 2% Admin fee)

40% to the State of Washington
60% to Whatcom County

\$ Collected for Homeless Housing

Total

\$3,281,406

Goes to County: \$2,288,776

Goes to State: \$992,630

\$ Collected for Affordable Housing

Total \$557,455

Goes to County: \$378,844

Goes to State: \$178,611



Recording answered 10,558 calls last year.

July through September had the highest call volumes averaging over 1,200 calls a month.

Did you know?

- ◆ The Auditor's Office redacts social security numbers after the document has been recorded so that the number is not viewable through the online Digital Research Room. However, the documents recorded are public unless exempt from state law and an unredacted document can be requested.
- ◆ If a certified copy is altered, it is no longer a true certified copy. Once it is recorded it cannot be determined how the original document was altered. Therefore, prior to recording an altered certified document the submitter needs to indicate the document was altered.
- ◆ The Recording Division is the custodian of Whatcom County's recorded documents dating back to 1853 in multiple formats including bound books, original linen maps, mylar maps, microfilm and microfiche, and online images.
- ◆ All recorded documents are permanent and archival. Original documents not available at the Whatcom County Auditor's Office are stored at the Northwest Regional Archives facility in Bellingham or in the county records center. Copies of the electronic records are stored at the Digital Archives in Cheney.

What's New in Recording

Recording System Enhancements

With the assistance of our Information Technology department, the Auditor's Office changed the way subscribers obtain our daily recorded document images. On February 3rd, 2020 subscribers began obtaining these images by a Secure File Transfer Protocol (SFTP). The change was a security enhancement and time saver as a staff person no longer had to upload these daily Auditor recorded images to the Whatcom County FTP site and then send an email—the overall process takes minimal time now.

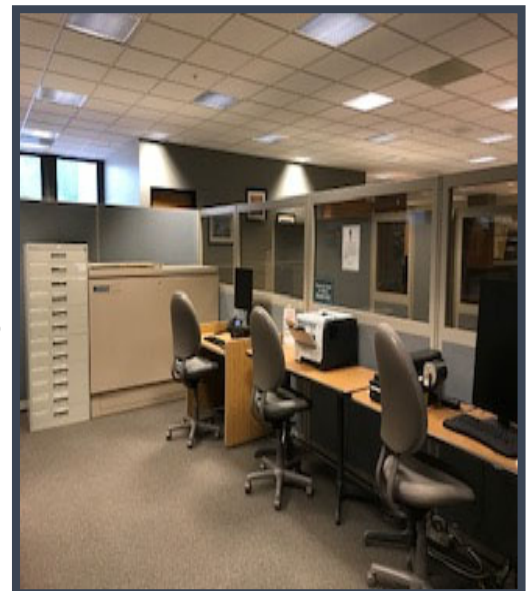
New Server in Recording

The server for the automated indexing and redaction processes—Mentis—was updated in December 2019. The upgrade was needed to implement configuration changes on the existing ai-indexing post-processing rules. Testing occurred during this time and continued into January and February 2020.

The configuration changes allowed us to clean up indexing rules and name abbreviations carried over from an old recording system. The upgrade allowed us to move to a software platform compatible with Windows 10 and in addition to integrate rules based on the “key as you see” protocol used when indexing.

Public Research Area

The public research area was reorganized by transferring records to the Northwest Regional Archives and county off-site storage center. Additionally we sent duplicate records for destruction following Washington State retention guidelines. We also moved and consolidated microfilm into one cabinet. These changes allowed us to move the cabinet of original linen plat maps from the basement and consolidate all the map records in one area.

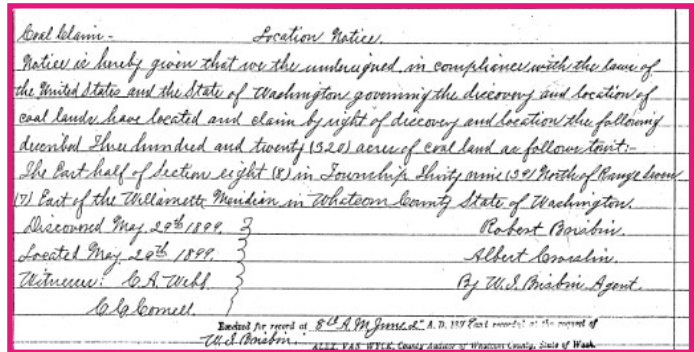


Historical Records Project

Historic Deed Books:

In 2019, a two year imaging project started in an effort to image the rest of the Auditor's office historical records dating back to 1853. The project vendor scanned 357,883 pages from original historical records in bound books at the Northwest Regional Branch Archives in Bellingham. These images, once scanned, need to then be enhanced and named before they are imported into the county recording system. We were expecting this part to be completed in 2020. Due to the pandemic, only 22,911 images were received in 2020.

This project continues into 2021 and once the images are imported, staff will index and verify providing multiple ways to search these records by staff and citizens. This project not only provides improved customer access but also an electronic back-up of the original documents. Additionally an improved archival copy of microfilm will be created and stored.



Indexing of Historical Documents:

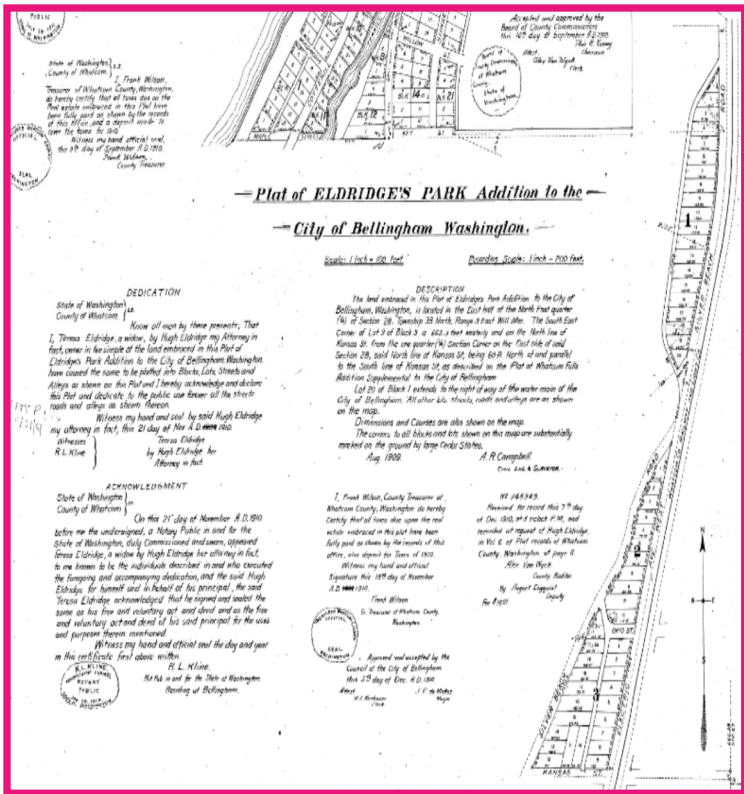
The staff is continuously indexing and verifying current and historical records. Information from each document is found and Indexed so records can be queried by date, type of document, party names (grantor and grantee), legal description including plat name if available and reference number to other documents recorded.

Dec. 2019 & 2020 Recorded Documents
 Indexed 64,375
 Verified 54,206

Over the past year, we added 150 historical records missing from 1941 to 1981. During indexing we occasionally come across records needing further research. This research helps us find, correct, and add other historical records to our digital document repository ensuring accuracy of the records.

Full-time Recording, Licensing, Election, and 1 temporary staff devote available hours to indexing historical records. This multi-year project continues into the future until we have all the recorded records digitized and searchable.

In addition to staff indexing 2020 recorded documents, 6,349 were indexed from 1915—1996 and 126,254 were verified from 1884-1996.



Marriage Licensing

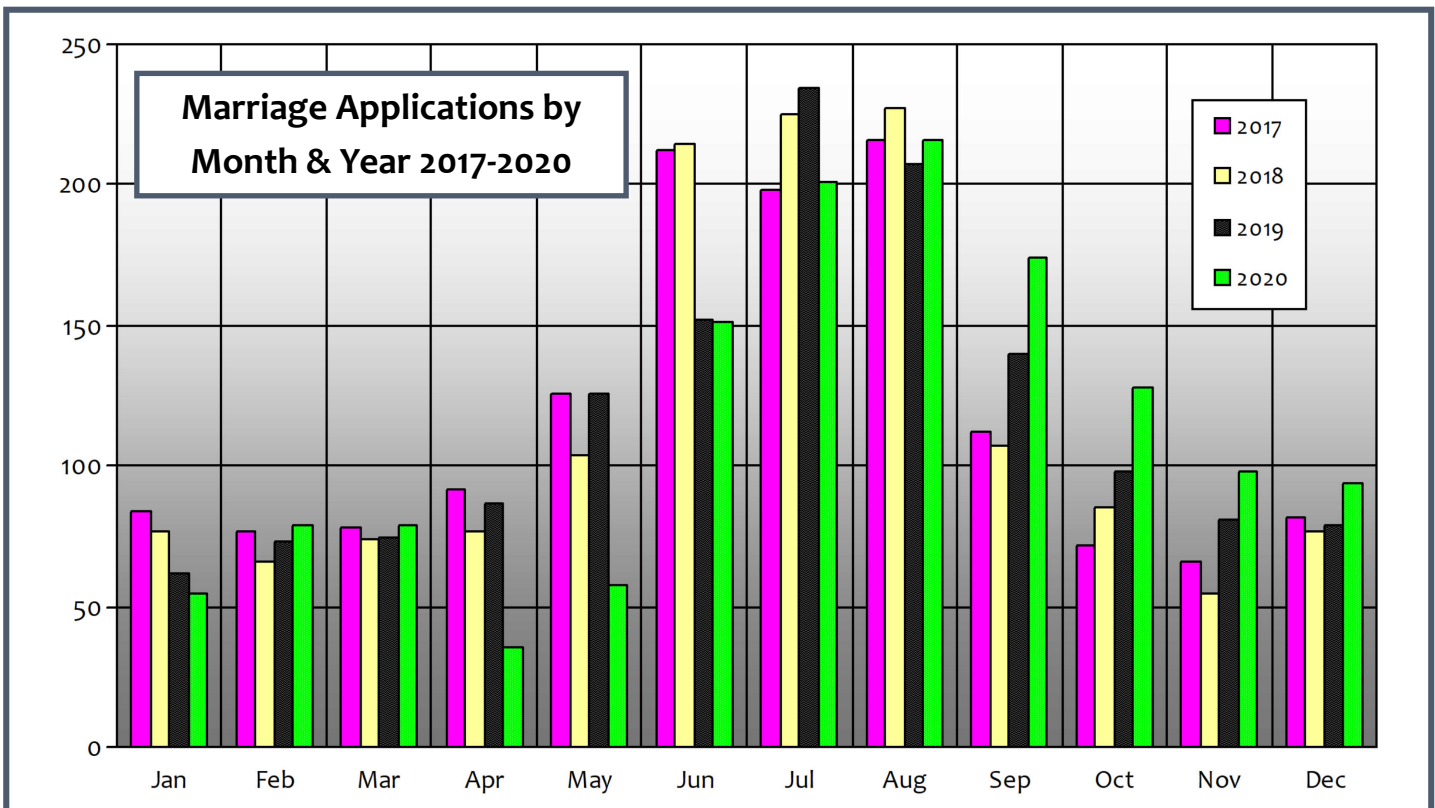
Core Services

- ◆ Issue marriage applications
- ◆ Record and index marriage licenses
- ◆ Provide certified copies of marriage records
- ◆ Preserve and provide access to marriage records in Whatcom County dating back to 1854



Due to COVID restrictions and the governor's orders first prohibiting marriages, and then gatherings over a certain size, the recording staff issued 49 fewer marriage licenses in 2020, 1,365 as compared to 1414 in 2019. What this number does not indicate is the number of marriage licenses issued to non Whatcom County residents applying in our office. During the pandemic, we have been one of the few Washington counties scheduling in-office appointments. Of interest, several licenses were issued to couples separated by the Washington/Canadian border wanting to get married at o Avenue, a road in British Columbia that divides the two countries.

Having an online marriage application form available on the Auditor's website has helped couples navigate the application process. Couples inquiring about a marriage license are directed to our website to begin the online marriage application form. Once completed, they contact our office to schedule an appointment to obtain the license to get married. Those not able to schedule an appointment receive the application form in the mail. The couple then has to make arrangements to sign the marriage application before a notary and return it to our office with full payment. The 3-day waiting period begins upon payment the same time the marriage license is issued.



Licensing Revenue

Whatcom County licensing transactions totaled over \$31 million in state and local vehicle/vessel licensing fees in 2020. Of the total fees collected, 86% were allocated to the Department of Licensing to support the state's transportation system. The remaining funds were divided between the Whatcom County General Fund and the county's licensing subagents as shown in the chart below.

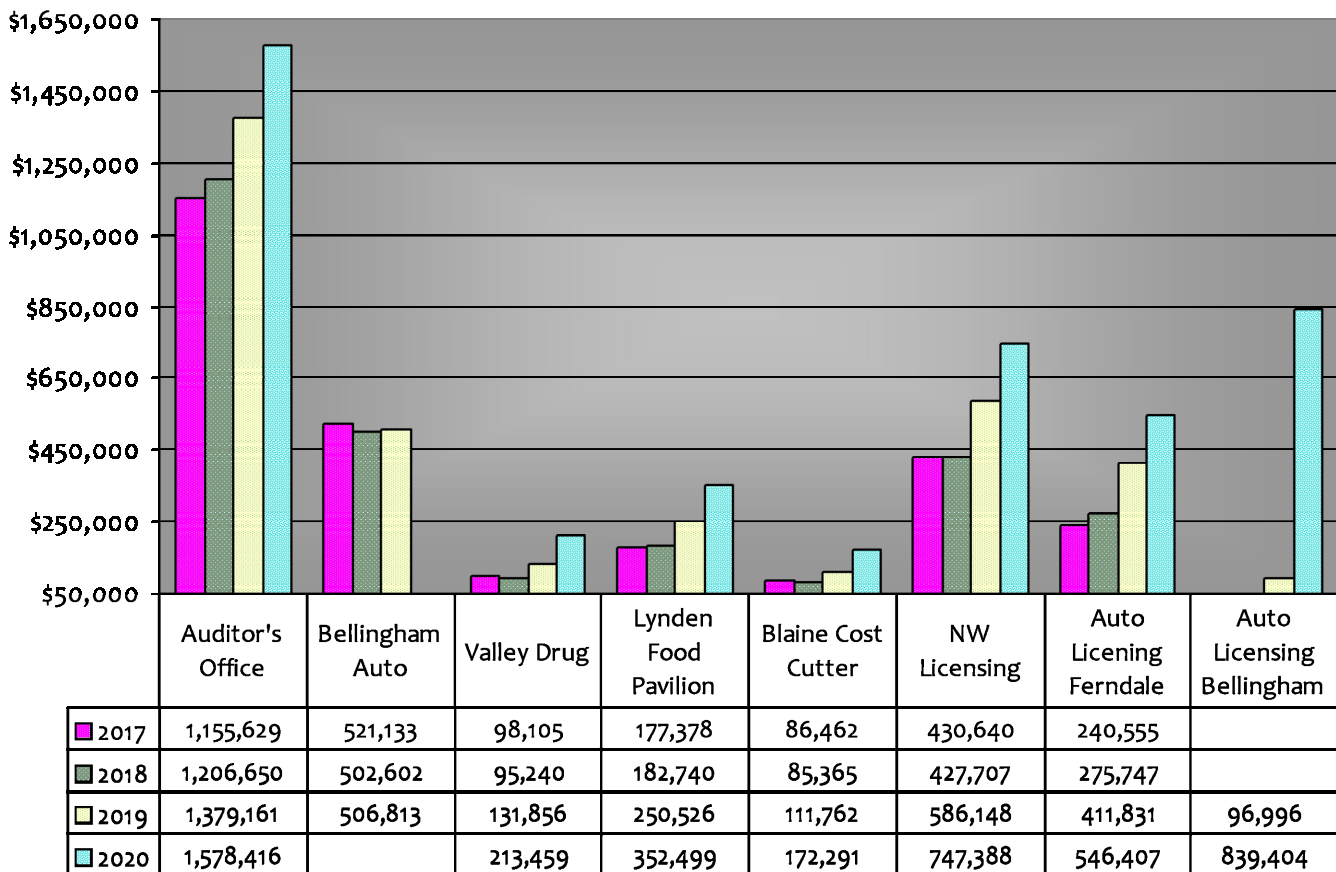
Out of the \$31 million collected in 2020, Whatcom County licensing offices submitted \$26,656,620 to the Department of Licensing, \$1,578,416 to the Whatcom County General Fund, and \$2,871,448 kept for subagent offices.

Quarterly, Department of Licensing remits a portion of their fees back to the counties per RCW 46.68.400. In 2020, Whatcom County received \$141,961 from DOL. These funds support the contractual obligations required to perform licensing activities.

Core Services

- ◆ Title and license vehicles and vessels in partnership with the Washington State Department of Licensing
- ◆ Train, oversee, and audit six local vehicle and vessel licensing subagents
- ◆ Collect tax on behalf of the Department of Revenue for private party sales and out of state sales
- ◆ Issue disabled parking placards

Yearly Revenue By Licensing Office



(Bellingham Auto Closed due to retirement in 2019. Auto Licensing of Bellingham opened in 2019)

Did you know?

Licensing fees for transferring ownership of your vehicle or renewing your registration are the same whether you visit the County Courthouse or one of the local licensing offices. The \$5 service fee for renewing registration and the \$12 title transfer fee support a local licensing office or the state ferries depending on where the transaction is processed. The fee change became effective January 1, 2015.

The \$15 title service fee and the \$8 registration service fee collected at subagent offices fund their local small business office. Service fees collected by county auditors fund the ferry vessel replacement account. The fees and distribution are set by RCW 46.17.040.

Promotions and COVID Fiscal Impact

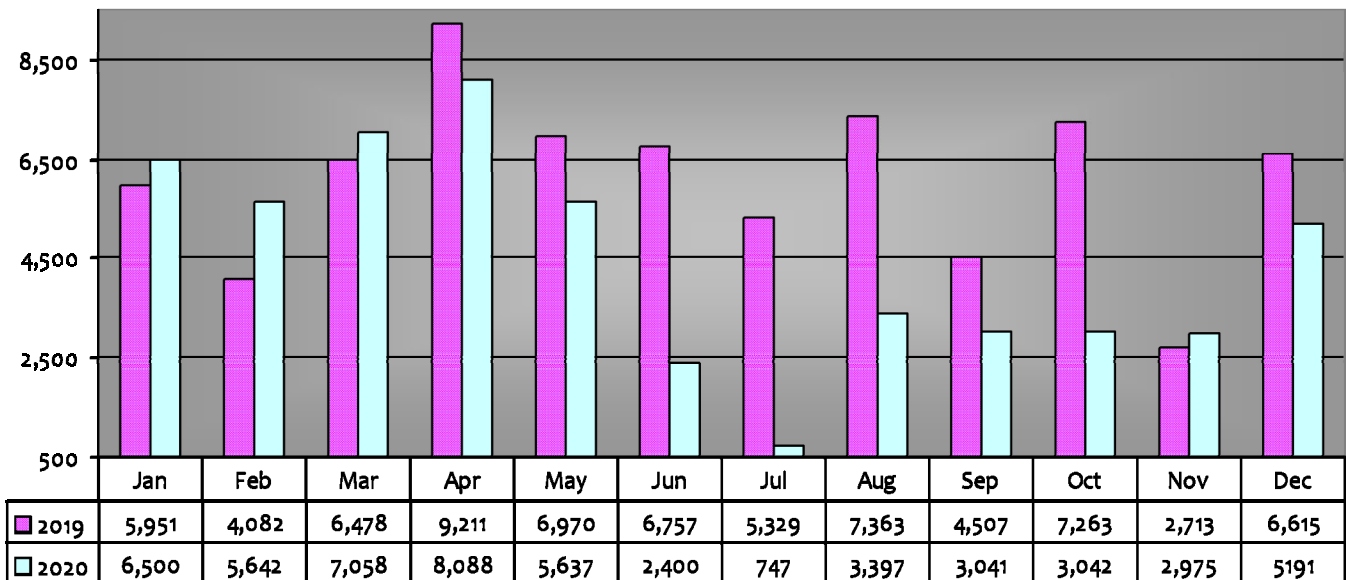
2020 started off with a lot of change in the licensing division. Stacy Henthorn was promoted to Chief Deputy Auditor at the beginning of 2020 from Recording/Licensing Supervisor. Morgan Kalkwarf was then promoted to Stacy's position and Nic Covell was promoted to Morgan's position as Coordinator II, leaving a Clerk III position unfilled. All of these positions are vital to the division's day to day operations.

Due to the overall budget impact of the pandemic, the vacant Clerk III position was frozen and is still unfilled. We were able to maintain our statutory responsibilities because DOL temporarily lifted some of the contractual auditing responsibilities of our subagents. We also moved all online vehicle/vessel tab renewals to our subagent offices only. The subagent offices remained open for in-person services and mailed out registrations renewed online.

Transaction History

In 2020, Licensing staff processed 53,718 vehicle and/or vessel title and tab transactions. This is a decrease of 19,521 transactions compared to 2019. Much of the in-person licensing work transitioned to subagent offices when the courthouse closed to in-person services in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The Auditor's office continued to assist customers through the mail, by drop box, and appointments for limited services.

2019 vs 2020 Auditor's Monthly Transactions



Subagents in Whatcom County:

- ◆ Auto Licensing of Bellingham
1738 Iowa Street
Bellingham
- ◆ Valley Drug Licensing
208 East Main Street
Everson
- ◆ Auto Licensing of Ferndale
1740 La Bounty Drive
Ferndale
- ◆ Lynden Food Pavilion Licensing
8130 Guide Meridian
Lynden
- ◆ Blaine Cost Cutter Licensing
1733 H Street
Blaine
- ◆ Northwest Licensing
2502 Cedarwood Avenue
Bellingham

Subagents

All subagent offices saw an increase in total transactions in 2020. The Auditor's office stopped processing internet renewals in May while working with only half the staff in the office at a time.

The subagent offices continued processing internet renewals contributing to their overall transaction increase, averaging a 22% increase for 2020.

Utilizing this partnership with subagents, there was minimal interruption in customer service for licensing. The Auditor's office continued their support by managing inventory levels and providing technical assistance to subagent offices.

A subagent is a private business that enters into a contract with a County Auditor and is appointed by the Department of Licensing Director to perform vehicle and vessel title and licensing services.

As part of the oversight of the six subagents, the Licensing Staff:

- Held one in-person training (pre-pandemic) and one virtual training
- Administered 8 100-question certification tests
- Verified that two clerks completed 1800 hours to become Certified Licensing Operators

Yearly Licensing Transactions by Office, 2015-2020

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Auditor's Office	94,530	85,604	81,732	80,748	73,239	53,718
Bellingham Auto	64,772	62,037	66,219	64,576	54,531	Closed Oct 2019
Valley Drug	14,280	13,978	14,788	14,398	15,584	20,743
Lynden Food Pavilion	25,537	24,577	26,193	27,018	28,474	34,085
Blaine Cost Cutter	14,021	12,799	13,112	13,304	13,766	18,056
NW Licensing	50,567	45,719	53,434	53,249	56,713	64,156
Auto Licensing Ferndale	17,750	27,180	32,991	36,356	41,488	47,170
Auto Licensing Bellingham				Opened Oct 2019	7,391	73,371

By the Numbers

2020

**Whatcom County
Licensing Offices**

- ◆ Issued 3770 Discover Passes and collected \$89,117 in donations to Washington State parks
- ◆ Collected \$4,717 for organ and tissue donation awareness

- ◆ Issued 1,413 applications for disabled parking and renewed 1,776 disabled parking placards

- ◆ Filed 3,002 Seller's Reports of Sale
- ◆ Renewed 312 electric vehicles

- ◆ Processed 34 Western Washington University license plates, 24 Washington State Lighthouse license plates, 95 Endangered Wildlife Orca license plates

Mobile Homes

Mobile homes can be titled like a vehicle or have their title eliminated so the home is tied to the land. To process a title elimination homeowners have to complete a Manufactured Home Application (example below).

Processing a Manufactured Home Application requires coordination between the planning department, the assessor's office, the treasurer's office, the recording division, and the licensing division. The offices adopted an appointment system to help customers navigate this process during the limited in-office services due to the pandemic.

WASHINGTON STATE DEPARTMENT OF LICENSING **Manufactured Home Application**

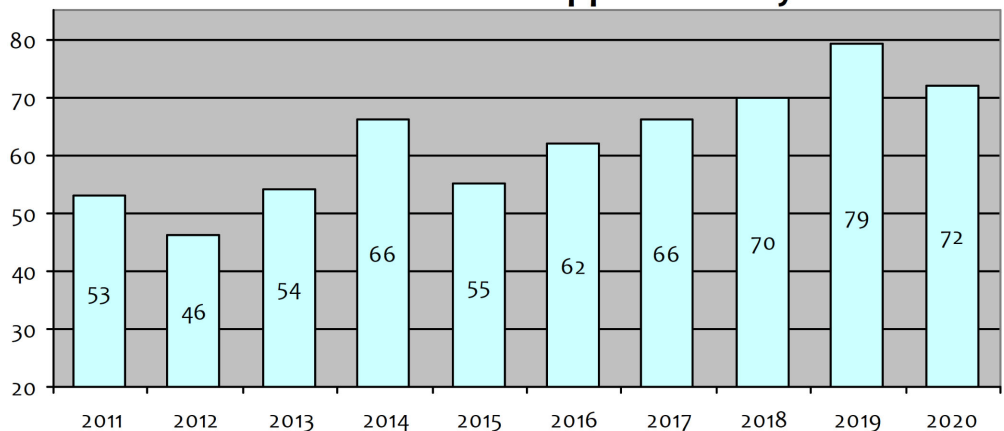
Please check one:
 Title Elimination
 Transfer in Location
 Removal from Real Property

For full instructions on completing this form, see [Manufactured Home Application Instructions](#), form TD-420-730.

1 Manufactured Home				
Title purpose only (TPO)/ Plate no.	Year	Make	Length/Width (feet)	Vehicle identification no. (VIN)
			X	
2 Land				
Manufactured home will be		Real property		
<input type="checkbox"/> Affixed <input type="checkbox"/> Removed		Tax parcel no. _____ Legal description on page _____		
Lot	Block	Plat name or Section/Township/Range		Quarter/Quarter section
Manufactured home physical location (Street address, City, State, ZIP code)				Is location mobile home park? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
3 Grantor(s) Registered/Legal Owner(s) – Additional names on page _____				
County no.	No. registered owners	No. legal owners	Grantee name (if applicable)	
Name of registered owner				Washington driver license or UBI no.
Name of additional registered owner				Washington driver license or UBI no.
Address (Address, City, State, ZIP code)				Ownership – Joint tenants w/right of survivorship (JTWROS) <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Name of legal owner				Washington driver license or UBI no.
Name of additional legal owner				Washington driver license or UBI no.
Address (Address, City, State, ZIP code)				

We processed 72 Manufactured Home Applications in 2020, only seven less than in 2019. The chart below shows the trend over the last ten years.

Manufactured Home Applications By Year



New Plates

Apple license plates became available July 1, 2020 with proceeds from plate sales helping to support Washington Apple Education Foundation scholarship.



Electric Vehicles

- ◆ Electric vehicles come in different types - battery electric vehicles and plug-in hybrid electric vehicles
- ◆ Some electric vehicles and clean alternative fuel vehicles qualify for sales/use tax exemption through 2025
- ◆ The chart to the right breaks down where in Whatcom County electric vehicles are registered
- ◆ In addition to regular registration fees, electric vehicles and plug-in hybrid vehicles also pay a \$75 Electric Vehicle Transportation Fee and a \$150 Electric Vehicle Fee.
- ◆ Whatcom County collected \$46,200 in Electric Vehicle Registrational Renewal fees

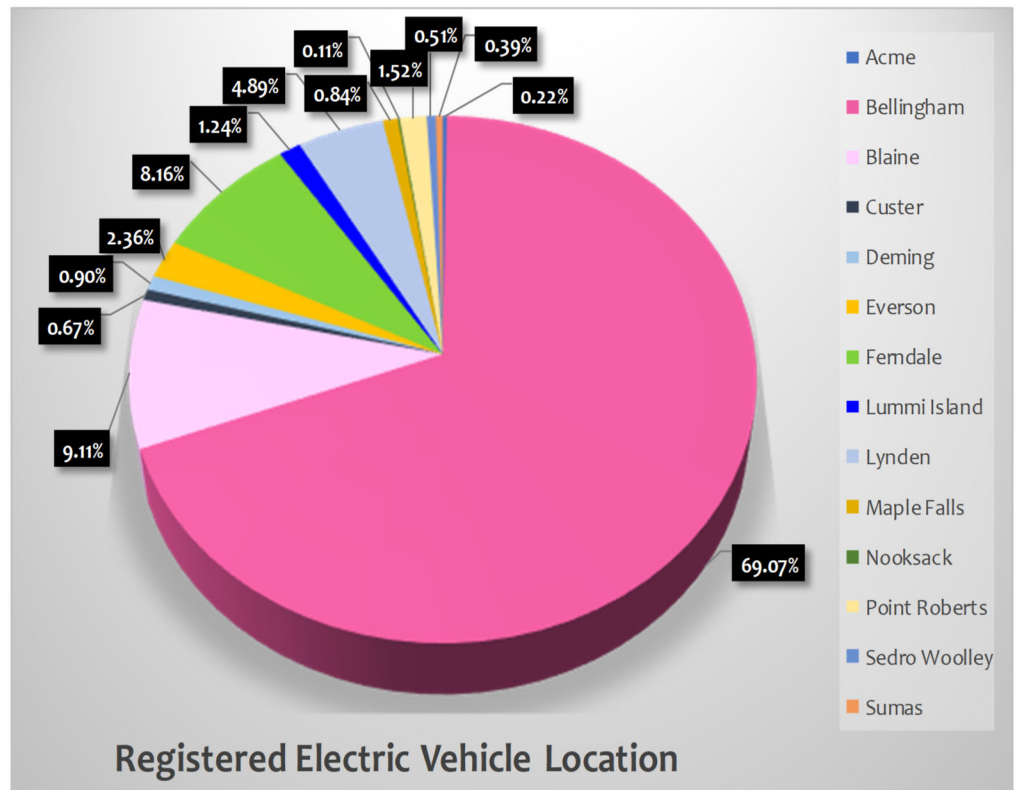
I-976 \$30 Car Tabs

Approved by voters in 2019, Initiative-976 set most car tabs at \$30, ended transportation benefit districts, retired Sound Transit bonds early, and required Kelley Blue Book be used to value vehicles.

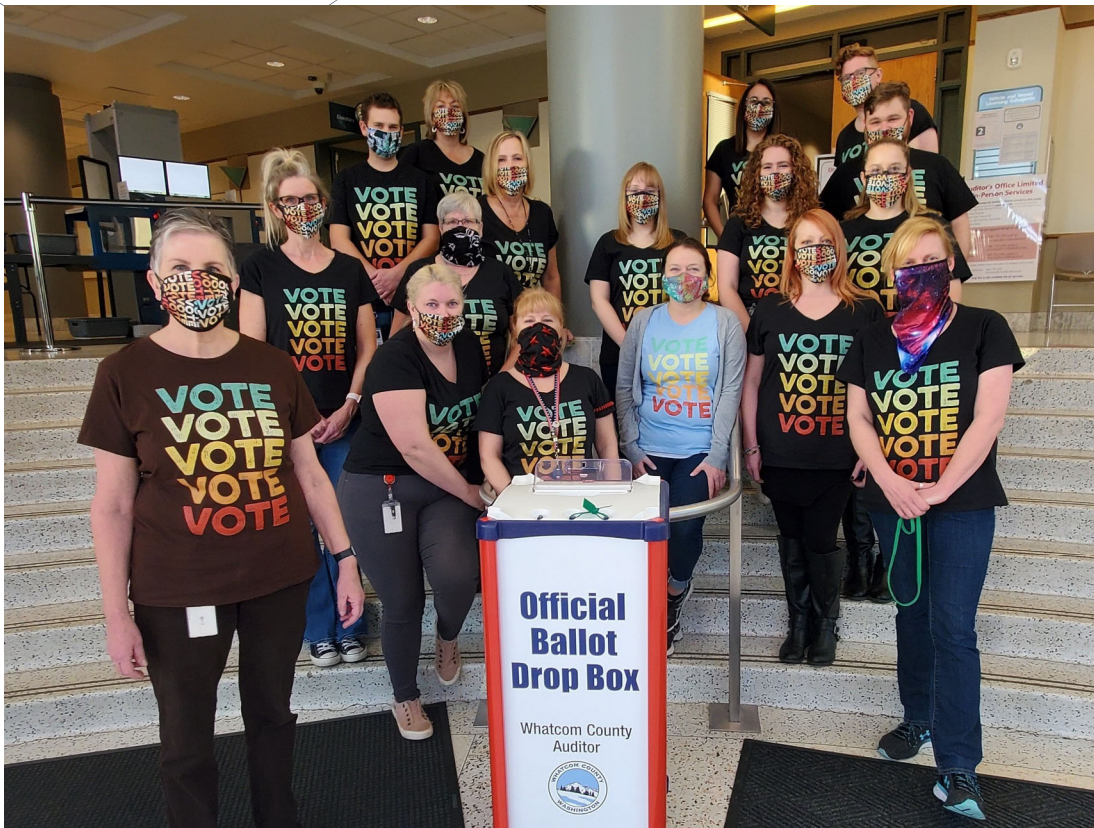
I-976 was put on hold by a temporary injunction filed in King County by the city of Seattle, King County, Port of Seattle, and other groups across the state. The injunction disputed the ballot measure language as being misleading.

Licensing offices continued to collect all required fees and taxes while I-976 moved through several legal hearings. Auditor's office staff received many phone calls and letters from customers wanting to know what was happening with I-976 throughout the year as it was reviewed by different courts.

In October 2020, the Washington State Supreme Court ruled that I-976 was unconstitutional because it contained more than one subject and its subject is not accurately expressed in its title.



A u d i t o r ' s O f f i c e



Front Row (from left to right): Diana, Kellye, Nicolle, Jessie, Kimberly & Amy

Middle Row: Susan, Kehli, Morgan, Laura & Krystal

Back Row: Dan, Stacy, Kathleen, Agy, Nic & Paul

Published by the Whatcom County Auditor's Office

2021