
LOCAL SERVICES FOR
UNINCORPORATED KING COUNTY

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King County government provides a set of local services to residents in unincorporated King County. The services provided are similar to those of cities in King County: police protection, road maintenance, parks, surface water management, permitting and environmental reviews of buildings, criminal prosecution and indigent defense, courts, and jails. The Local Services to Unincorporated King County section of the budget book compiles these services and estimates the amount expended to provide them to unincorporated King County residents. Note that some other local services, including fire protection, emergency medical services, and libraries, are provided by separate districts that are not part of King County.

DESCRIPTION OF UNINCORPORATED KING COUNTY

King County's unincorporated area is home to about 252,000 residents, nearly as many as the combined populations of Bellevue and Kent, the County's second and third-largest cities. The unincorporated population has decreased over the last two decades as areas have been annexed into cities or incorporated as new cities.

King County is different from the state's other large counties because it has more fully complied with the concepts of the Growth Management Act that call for urban areas to be included within cities. King County's unincorporated population represents only 12.5 percent of the total county population. In contrast, the other eight counties with total populations over 200,000¹ have an average of 45.3 percent of their residents in the unincorporated area.

Even more significantly, there is almost no commercial tax base in unincorporated King County. In 2013, only 3.6 percent of the total taxable sales within King County occurred in the unincorporated area. This figure averaged 21.4 percent for the other eight counties. This absence of commercial activity in unincorporated King County means the tax base is almost entirely residential and agricultural.

The rural nature of unincorporated King County is reflected in the assessed property values of the area. The latest forecast by the Office of Economic and Financial Analysis estimates this assessed value to be \$35.1 billion for 2015, which is only 9.2 percent of the countywide total. The 2015 assessed value in unincorporated areas is projected to increase by 10.0 percent above the 2014 figure, while the countywide assessed value increase is estimated to be 11.7 percent. The assessed value in the unincorporated area fell by 42.9 percent between 2009 and 2013 due to a combination of annexations and declining property values.

Unincorporated King County thus has a fairly large population scattered over a broad geographic area with a very limited tax base. This creates significant financial challenges in providing services, as are described in the agency-specific sections below.

¹ These are Pierce, Snohomish, Spokane, Clark, Thurston, Kitsap, Yakima, and Whatcom counties, in descending order of population.

SUMMARY OF SERVICES

King County provides an array of services that can be categorized into regional services, contract services, and local services for unincorporated residents.

- Regional services are those services which exist to serve the entire county, such as the King County Council, the County Executive, the County Assessor, Superior Court, Transit and Elections.
- Contract services are provided to cities or other entities that pay for the specific service the County provides. For example, multiple cities contract with the County for local police services through the Sheriff’s Office and for court services through District Court.
- Local services are those in which the County is the local service provider for residents in unincorporated King County. These services include road maintenance, parks in unincorporated areas, police protection and other services detailed below.

The Local Services section focuses on the agencies that provide local services to unincorporated area King County residents. The table below lists the primary local service providers as well as estimated expenditures, revenues, FTEs, and capital program investments in unincorporated King County. In addition to the agencies listed here, other agencies provide local services to unincorporated residents but the costs are difficult to disaggregate from their overall budgets.

Unincorporated King County 2015/2016 Proposed Budget				
(\$ in millions. Expenditures include direct, indirect, and overhead costs.)				
	Expenditures	Revenues	FTE	Capital Expenditures
Sheriff’s Office ¹	\$90	-	258	-
Parks Division ²	\$10	\$1	22	\$4
Dept. of Permitting and Environmental Review	\$30	\$27	86	-
Roads Services Division	\$138	\$206	336	\$40
Surface Water Management	\$59	\$54	114	\$23
Footnotes:				
¹ Because the Sheriff’s Office is a General Fund agency, it does not collect revenues from unincorporated residents to support patrol services				
² The 2014-2019 Parks property tax levy is considered a regional funding source. The unincorporated King County revenues shown here are business revenues generated in local King County parks in unincorporated King County, which partially off-set operating costs.				

AGENCY SUMMARIES

The following agencies provide direct services to unincorporated area residents. More information for each individual agency can be found in their respective sections in the budget book.

Sheriff's Office

The Sheriff is elected by county voters as King County's Chief Law Enforcement Officer and is responsible to all residents, regardless of their local jurisdiction. The King County Sheriff's Office (KCSO) serves as the local police department for the more than 250,000 residents of unincorporated King County and operates numerous regional specialty services including an air support unit, marine unit, SWAT, major crime investigations, bomb disposal, major accident response and reconstruction, and arson investigations. The Sheriff's Office also provides comprehensive police services under contract to 16 partner cities and agencies within King County.

Patrolling unincorporated King County is a challenge for the Sheriff's Office because it covers varied demographic, socioeconomic, and geographic areas. Annexation activity in the last ten years has resulted in two large islands of urban unincorporated area nestled between cities. The North Highline area is located between Burien and Seattle and the West Hill area is bordered by Renton, Seattle, and Tukwila. North Highline and West Hill are both relatively small geographically, but have urban levels of population density. In contrast, KCSO patrols suburban developments and large expanses of undeveloped land in eastern King County.

The financial constraints brought about by the Great Recession have impacted Sheriff's Office patrol in unincorporated King County. Between 2008 and 2013, the Sheriff's Office reduced 175 FTE unrelated to annexations, contract modifications, or technical changes. Many of these cuts happened in unincorporated patrol. For example, the Sheriff's Office disbanded the Selective Traffic Enforcement Program (STEP) unit in October 2012 at the request of the Road Services Division (RSD). With annexations in the last 10 years, the RSD services area has changed significantly and the services provided by the STEP Unit are less needed and a lower priority for RSD.

KCSO's 2014 Adopted Budget took modest steps to reverse some of the reductions the agency has recently endured by adding six deputies and two sergeants to unincorporated patrol and re-opening the Maple Valley Precinct. The 2015/2016 Proposed Budget maintains these changes and does not make any further cuts to unincorporated patrol despite continued fiscal pressure. A detailed description of proposed changes to the Sheriff's Office budget for 2015/2016 can be found in the Sheriff's Office subsection located in the Justice and Safety section of this document.

Other Criminal Justice Agencies

In addition to the Sheriff's Office, other criminal justice agencies provide critical services for unincorporated residents that are not easily disaggregated from services provided to all King County residents or to residents of contract cities. Specifically, the Prosecuting Attorney's Office provides prosecution for misdemeanors committed in unincorporated King County and the King County District Court adjudicates these cases. If the accused are deemed indigent, the Department of Public Defense

represents the defendants in these cases. The Department of Adult and Juvenile Detention serves as the local jail for people who are waiting to stand trial or who are sentenced to less than one year of jail time and Jail Health Services provides health services for misdemeanants from unincorporated areas held in County jails.

Department of Natural Resources and Parks – Parks Division

There are two kinds of King County Parks – regional and local. Regional facilities include resource and ecological lands, the regional trail system, regional passive parks, and regional active recreation facilities such as Tolt-MacDonald Park and Cougar Mountain Regional Wildland Park. Parks' regional facilities are located within cities as well as the unincorporated area.

Local parks, on the other hand, are the neighborhood parks in unincorporated King County, such as Cottage Lake Park and Lakewood Park. This includes the remaining local parks located within the Urban Growth Area (UGA). King County Parks operates and maintains 58 local parks in unincorporated King County which offer ballfields, picnic shelters, play structures, and community gathering spaces. Operations and maintenance staff are assigned to geographic areas, and work in both regional and local parks.

The 2015/2016 Proposed Operating Budget includes support to the WhiteWater Aquatics management to ensure continued operations of the Evergreen Community Aquatic Center, a pool within the urban unincorporated area which the county transferred to the Highline School District in 2009 due to a General Fund crisis.

The 2015/2016 Proposed Capital Budget includes major investments in facilities within local rural and UGA parks, including but not limited to upgrading the play structures at Five Mile Lake Park, Maplewood Park, Lakewood Park, and Skyway Park. Additional examples include the replacement of restrooms at Coalfield Park, resurfacing the tennis courts and adding ADA accessibility at Lakewood Park, and improving the lighting and asphalt pathway around Maplewood Park.

A more detailed description of the King County Parks budget can be found in the Department of Natural Resources and Parks section, Parks and Recreation Division subsection.

Department of Permitting and Environmental Review

The King County Department of Permitting and Environmental Review (DPER) is responsible for regulating and permitting all building and land use activity in unincorporated King County. DPER receives authority and policy direction primarily from the Washington State Building Code (RCW 19.27) and Growth Management Act (RCW 36.70A). With the transfer of two regional planning positions to the Office of Performance, Strategy and Budget in the 2015/2016 Proposed Budget, the entire budget for DPER is dedicated to providing services to the unincorporated areas of King County.

The primary mission of DPER is to enforce the building and land use codes that keep people safe in their homes and communities. Enforcement includes both approval of permitted development and investigation and correction of un-permitted development. Land use regulations applied by DPER promote desirable environmental practices. In addition, streamlined and subsidized agricultural permitting helps support more sustainable farm and forestry practices.

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DPER expenses associated with processing building and land use application permits are primarily paid for by revenues derived from permit fees. With the crash of the housing market in late 2007, new development applications and permit fee revenue dropped precipitously, and are recovering slowly.

Permit workload has been reduced by significant annexations in the last few years. Therefore, DPER is shifting focus to providing permitting services to the rural areas and the few urban areas unlikely to be annexed. This included a move of DPER offices in late 2012 to Snoqualmie Ridge, to locate closer to the majority of the department's future customer base and to realize significant annual operating savings. It also has included departmental reorganization along product lines.

The 2015/2016 Proposed Budget continues DPER's efforts to ensure that permit fees accurately reflect the average staff time spent on processing each type of permit. Other changes in the 2015/2016 Proposed Budget include:

- Customer service improvements that leverage the County's investment in the Accela permitting system;
- The transfer of regional planning staff to the Office of Performance, Strategy and Budget; and
- The addition of a subarea planner who will work to update the strategic plan for Skyway, Vashon Island, and other local subareas.

A more detailed description these and other changes in DPER's 2015/2016 Proposed Budget can be found in the Department of Permitting and Environmental Review subsection of the Economic Growth and Built Environment section of this document.

Department of Transportation – Road Services Division

The Road Services Division (RSD) is responsible for maintaining, preserving, and operating all assets within the unincorporated King County right-of-way. These include traveled roadways; roadside assets such as pedestrian and bicycle pathways, drainage systems and shoulders; and traffic control and management features such as signs, striping, and signals. Emergency response activities that keep key components of the road systems safe and operational during severe weather or other emergencies are an important area of service.

The road system in unincorporated King County is critically important to people who live and travel in the county, but it is aged and deteriorating. Substantial investments are needed to restore roads and bridges, maintain them in good condition, and meet new transportation demands. The Road Services Division's available funding falls far short of this need, despite the division's efforts in recent years to gain further efficiencies, streamline its organizational structure, adjust business practices, and collaborate with labor union partners.

The revenue challenges King County faces result in serious impacts on service levels. The County Road Fund is supported mostly by the local property tax, through a separate Roads levy limited to \$2.25 per \$1,000 of assessed value. Under the state Growth Management Act, the annexation of urban unincorporated areas into cities has left a dramatically reduced property tax base to support County roads in the unincorporated areas. Yet the County has not seen a proportional drop in its responsibility for repairing, maintaining, and replacing roads, bridges, and culverts, and is still responsible for nearly 1,500 miles of roadway.

Over the past several years, a combination of annexations, lower property valuations, and declines in gas tax revenues has led to an approximately 20 percent decline in the Road Fund, from \$122 million to \$100 million per year. As a result, the Road Services Division has eliminated over 250 positions since 2010, or about 40 percent of its entire workforce.

The reduced ability to care for infrastructure assets will lead to further deterioration of unincorporated County roadways. Eventually the lack of preservation and maintenance will force speed and weight limitations, bridge and road closures, detours, and longer travel times. Roads in the County's rural area are some of the oldest in the system, and are the most vulnerable to falling trees and debris, floods, and snow storms, as roads run alongside rivers and streams, through heavily wooded areas and at higher elevations.

Surface Water Management

The King County Surface Water Management (SWM) program provides a range of services to unincorporated county residents. These include:

- Design and construction of capital projects to improve drainage and water quality, stabilize ravines, and restore fish and wildlife habitat;
- Inspection and maintenance of more than 2,000 flow control and water quality facilities;
- Response to customer service calls regarding flooding, water quality and erosion problems;
- Promotion of volunteer stewardship through planting events, habitat restoration and property tax incentive programs;
- Outreach for drainage assistance efforts to individual property owners and neighborhoods, as well as working with commercial business owners, farmers, livestock owners and forest land owners on "best management practices"; and
- Support for King County's share of the Water Resource Inventory Area (WRIA) Forums, which are multijurisdictional efforts to promote healthy watersheds.

A key driver for the 2015/2016 biennium for the SWM program is a new five-year National Pollution Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) municipal storm water permit, spanning 2013-2018. Mandated by Congress under the Clean Water Act, the NPDES permit process requires local jurisdictions to implement certain activities to protect local water bodies from pollution and other harmful effects caused by storm water runoff from developed lands. The permit has new and enhanced requirements that include increased GIS-compatible mapping of the municipal storm water system, updated regulations to implement new storm water low impact development standards, detecting and eliminating illicit discharges, increased inspection and enforcement of private facilities, addressing total maximum daily load (TMDL) water quality problems, basin-scale planning, and increased monitoring and education.

The 2015/2016 Proposed Budget includes a \$2.5 million dollar increase in the SWM fund to meet the expanded permit requirements. The budget also includes a transfer of \$1 million to the Roads Services Division for a data collection effort to identify the location, type, size and condition of drainage facilities in the RSD right-of-way and \$390,000 for RSD's maintenance costs required for NPDES permit compliance.

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The SWM program is primarily supported by the King County Surface Water Management Fee which is collected from developed parcels in unincorporated King County. Residential property owners pay a flat per parcel fee. Non-residential property owners pay on an incremental scale based on impervious surface. No changes in SWM fees are proposed for 2015/2016. The SWM program also receives revenues from grants and intergovernmental agreements with other jurisdictions.