



CITY OF BLAINE

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To: City Council
From: Michael Jones, City Manager
Date: April 27, 2020

Subject: Whatcom County Emergency Response Coordination and Structure

I thought it would be useful to give you an update on some of the steps in implementing an organizational structure to respond to the COVID 19 pandemic emergency. Thankfully we do not need to engage in emergency response very often. As a result most of us are not very familiar with the plans and processes established for emergency response. Generally, emergency response is handled at the County level because emergencies are not often limited to a smaller unit such as a city. It is not uncommon for an emergency to impact multiple counties or an entire state. This is the first time in U.S. history that an emergency has been declared in all 50 states.

The City is a party to an Interlocal Agreement (ILA) for emergency response that all cities in Whatcom County (except Bellingham), the Port of Bellingham and Whatcom County are party to. The ILA funds the regular operation and existence of the Emergency Operations Center (EOC). The EOC is operated by the County Sherriff as per the ILA. It is cooperatively funded by all jurisdictions in the County. The EOC is located near Bellingham Airport. Bellingham runs its own EOC, but has combined forced with Whatcom County in this instance. There is a skeleton crew that keeps the EOC in a ready state in case it is needed. The EOC was activated when the emergency occurred. Staffing was initially provided by Whatcom County. Bellingham personnel were quickly added in and other jurisdictions have also provided some staffing. Blaine has assigned one staff person (Community Planner II, Stacy Clauson), and we are currently in conversations with Teamsters about reassigning another employee.ⁱ

Activities during an emergency response are generally guided by the County Emergency Response Plan. Usually, when a smaller emergency (like a flood) occurs an Incident Command structure is used, made up of the Sherriff's Office, alone. The Sherriff's emergency response staff provide the leadership for the emergency response. Early in the pandemic it became clear that a larger, more inclusive, command structure was appropriate.ⁱⁱ Whatcom Unified Command (WUC) is a command structure that includes multiple jurisdictions. WUC was initiated for the pandemic response. WUC is a multi-jurisdictional organizational structure, but the County Sherriff is still in charge of response. The pandemic is unique in that the County Health Department also has jurisdictional authority. Dr. Stern, the Whatcom County Health Officer holds joint authority with the Sherriff.

Because we are party to the ILA, and because emergency management is a specialty requiring staff expertise and resources that a small city does not typically have, we do not have our own EOC or our own individualized response. The emergency response in Blaine is occurring as part of the countywide response. We are participating in the County's response and we are participating in their coordination meetings. Since my initial proclamation of emergency, I have held frequent meetings with senior staff regarding the COVID 19 response (at first daily, now three times a week). We discuss impacts to our operations, city policies, and information coming to us from WUC.

The following is a list of meetings that City staff are participating in, sometimes at each meeting, sometimes less frequently. The Mayor is also participating because many meetings/groups include the highest level elected official for each jurisdiction. The city representative attending is shown in parentheses.

WUC Policy Group (Mayor Onyon/City Manager Jones)

Unified Command asked for a policy group to give countywide representation from all the jurisdictions to help guide decisions being made by Unified Command. Bellingham Mayor Fleetwood or County Executive Sidhu chairs this meeting. The group meets weekly.

Mayor's Meeting (Mayor Onyon/City Manager Jones)

This weekly meeting sprang up immediately after the County's declaration of emergency. It is modeled after the Small Cities Group, with the addition of Bellingham's Mayor Fleetwood. The meeting is chaired by Lynden Mayor Korthius. Like the small cities group, it is staffed by the Port of Bellingham. The meeting generally revolves around how different cities are addressing challenges. Mostly, it is an opportunity to share knowledge and experiences.

Whatcom Unified Command Small Cities Update (Mayor Onyon/City Manager Jones/Police Chief Tanksley)

This is a weekly meeting for the small cities hosted by the Emergency Operations Center, and it is generally focused on providing a status update and coordinating activities that are occurring, or may occur, in the small cities. An example is planning for the establishment of isolation/quarantine locations in the small cities. It is chaired by John Gargett from the Sheriff's EOC staff.

Whatcom Unified Command Daily

This is an operational meeting at the EOC. Blaine is invited, but we typically do not attend.

Border Task Force

This is a specific group working on solving problems that result from border restrictions primarily related to essential employees traveling across the border, and goods being imported/exported. Blaine has been invited, and we are monitoring the activity to determine if/when we may need to become involved.

Economic Recovery Group

This group is in the formation stages being led by the economic development group at the Port of Bellingham

Law Enforcement Branch (Police Chief Tanksley & Lt. King)

This group is an email only distribution group that consists of law enforcement command personnel within the county. The primary purpose of the group is to maintain 911 response to emergencies and to coordinate strategic needs of law enforcement agencies.

Occasionally there have been meetings with Governor Inslee or Rep DelBene which are attended by Mayor Onyon and/or City Manager Jones depending on availability and the nature of the meeting.

The Whatcom County Public Health Advisory Committee is forming a task force from local business sectors to assist them in developing uniform and manageable guidelines to protect customer and employee health during and after reopening of currently closed businesses.

ⁱ Assignments to EOC are a one-month commitment by the jurisdiction. Staff are deployed in a positions where there is need, and their skills match. It is not usually their “regular” job. Staff costs for the EOC are likely to be reimbursed by FEMA. This can reduce the City’s costs during the emergency.

ⁱⁱ As of 4/23/20 the EOC is switching back to the Incident Command model.