

August 28, 2020

AN OPEN LETTER TO OUR COMMUNITY
FROM COUNCILMEMBERS SCOTT MURPHY AND BRENDA STONECIPHER


Dear Residents and Taxpayers of the City of Everett:


At the City Council meeting on August 19th, the Council was asked to approve a grant with the Department of Justice (i.e., COPS grant) to hire 16 additional police officers at a cost of over \$8 million over the new few years. The Council did not approve the grant. Recent communication from the Everett Police Officers Association asserts that the City Council's unwillingness to enter into the grant agreement is evidence of a lack of support for the department. We reject this assertion and put forth the following for consideration.

As two Councilmembers who have served on the City Council for a combined tenure of more than a quarter-century, and who serve as the chairperson of the Budget and Public Safety Committees of the Council (we both serve on the Budget Committee), we believe we have always supported and prioritized public safety in our community. A review of a few facts that we have compiled from past and present City of Everett budget publications emphasize this point:

- The City's combined **spending on public safety (Police, Fire, and EMS) increased by 35%** over the period from 2010-2020, led by a 36% increase in Police funding – the highest in the City. At the same time, all other City departments grew by only 7%.
- The percentage of the City budget that was spent on public safety **increased** from 40% of the 2010 budget to 45% of the 2020 budget.
- Staffing levels in Fire and Police Departments have been unchanged over the past decade, while the rest of the City departments combined sustained a 30% **reduction** in staffing.
- Everett's **public safety spending per capita increased by 23%** from 2010-2020, while all other General Fund spending per capita increased by only 1%.

City Council

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- A benchmarking study conducted by Berk and Associates in 2018 reported that the “City of Everett’s spending on police is second to only the City of Auburn’s on a per modified capita basis.”
- Most importantly, the Council approved budgets for Police staffing that **exceeded the departmental goal of employing two Police employees per 1,000 population** in EVERY year over the past decade. *While hiring did not always achieve the budgeted staffing, that failure is no fault of the City Council.*

As is evidenced by these facts, the City Council and City taxpayers have been very generous in supporting public safety services, even when this spending has come at the expense of other City departments and services.

At present, the City is facing what City Administration has described as a financial catastrophe. Our budget outlook for 2021 was showing a nearly \$13 million deficit even before the pandemic, and the Mayor now tells us that the deficit has grown to more than \$18 million. If we do not act prudently, in just a few years the City could be facing insolvency. That is why we have recently reduced our workforce by approximately 100 employees through layoffs, furloughs, and incentives for retirements. We have closed, reduced, and cancelled our parks, recreation, swimming pool, events, parades, fireworks, senior center, libraries, and other services that our citizens depend on and enjoy. We have curtailed essential contributions to our police and fire pension obligations. Along with spending cuts, in February of this year, the Mayor and City Council scheduled a special meeting focused solely in response to the looming deficit in 2021 (estimated at \$12.8 million at that time, before Covid-19). At this retreat, the Mayor presented several options for new taxes and fees that would generate revenue to fill the City’s budget gap.

In the midst of these unprecedented actions to curtail the deficit, Administration brought forward the COPS grant. While it is true that \$6 million is available from the Federal government under the grant, the majority of the funding must come from local taxpayers. In our case, the City of Everett would be obligated to pay \$8.5 million over the coming six years. Inquiries of the Mayor and her administration about the funding sources for this commitment went unanswered. We believe this financial commitment is one that we simply cannot make at this time without making further drastic cutbacks in the other City departments, making additional layoffs, and/or by implementing new taxes or fees on our taxpayers. While a property tax increase seems to be preferred solution proposed by the Mayor, with the current economic downturn, it seems unlikely that our taxpayers would consent to any additional taxes that would relieve the looming deficit.

Thus, our current Mayor and City Administration has ‘backed the Council up to a wall’. As Councilmembers, we are more than willing to support public safety spending, but we had no information about how this grant would be paid for or how we would balance our gaping



budgets for the next six years while we fulfilled this spending commitment. We were not given any information from the Administration about what cuts to other departments would be necessary to fund this grant obligation, or any acknowledgement that this commitment would put strain on the resources available for other priorities. This is no time for the City Council to behave as a 'rubber stamp' for unrealistic budgeting notions – residents and taxpayers in Everett depend on us to act in their long-term interest and accepting a grant that puts our financial future in jeopardy would be a breach of our fiduciary duty. Thus, facing these many unknowns and uncertainties, the Council's unwillingness to approve the grant was the only responsible option available to us. We believe most citizens in our position would have acted in the same way.

We hope to assure our residents that the City Council has not and will not waver in our support for the Police department and the trusted men and women who serve at risk to protect our citizens. We have always been there to support our Police Department and will always do so, but we cannot be asked to consent to financial obligations that we do not think there is any way we can fulfill.

Your sincerely,



Brenda Stonecipher
Everett City Council Position 6
Chair, Council Public Safety Subcommittee



Scott Murphy
Everett City Council Position 3
Chair, Council Budget Subcommittee

cc: Mayor Cassie Franklin
Deputy Mayor Nick Harper
Council President Judy Tuohy
Councilmember Scott Bader
Councilmember Jeff Moore
Councilmember Paul Roberts
Councilmember Liz Vogeli