The Skamania Dispatch · Prepared by Kate Bertash · skamaniadispatch@gmail.com

Nov. 17, 2026 · kate-rose.github.io/skamania-at-the-bone

Skamania at the bone

A briefing for Representatives-elect Ben Christly and Diana Perez, 17th Legislative District

$545,000

The gap still open in Skamania County's 2027 general fund when commissioners adopted the preliminary budget on Nov. 3, 2026. Meeting recording

The final budget and the 2027 property-tax levies are set at a public hearing on Dec. 15, 2026, at 5 p.m., Courthouse Room 18, Stevenson.

The one-minute version

1. The county's general property tax can grow 1% a year under state law, plus what new construction and a few other things add. Its general-fund operating costs, as filed with the State Auditor, grew 5 to 6% a year over the last decade. That gap widens every year on its own.
2. 88% of the county's land is exempt from property tax, most of it national forest. Secure Rural Schools, the federal payment that replaced the county's share of national-forest timber sales, is down 76% from its 2006 peak, before inflation.
3. One-time money helped hold the 2025 and 2026 budgets together, including $2.5 million of federal relief set aside for county insurance premiums. None of it is ongoing.
4. In October and November 2026, departments were asked to cut 8%, hiring was put on hold, and the Sheriff's Office offered to halve its overtime.
5. Several of the county's asks in Olympia were carried by Rep. Kevin Waters, whose House term ends in January 2027 and who also runs the Skamania County Economic Development Council. Some need a new carrier in the 2027 session. They're listed below.

“It will be 2 a.m., deputies go home, and then good luck calling 911.”

The Sheriff's Office, arguing against deeper cuts to its own budget at the county's budget workshop, Oct. 27, 2026. Meeting recording

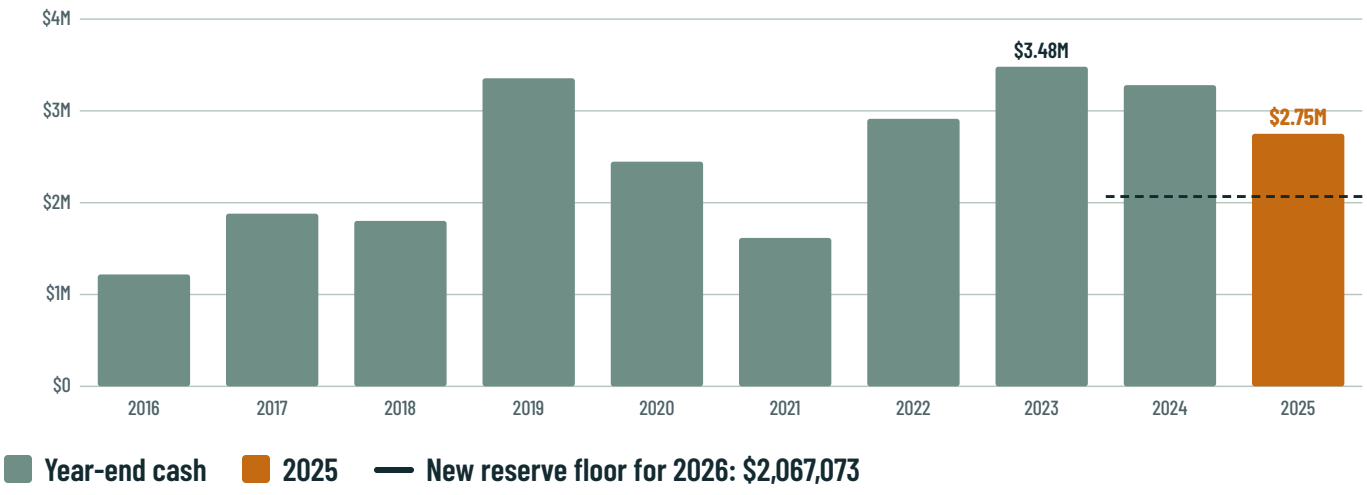
1 · How deep it is

The cushion is thinning while the gap stays open

The county keeps a cash cushion in its general fund for bad years. By its own reserve table, that cushion peaked at the end of 2023 and fell in each of the next two years. On Nov. 3, 2026 the board adopted a new rule: keep at least 12% of five-year average spending in reserve.

General fund cash at year's end, from the county's reserve table

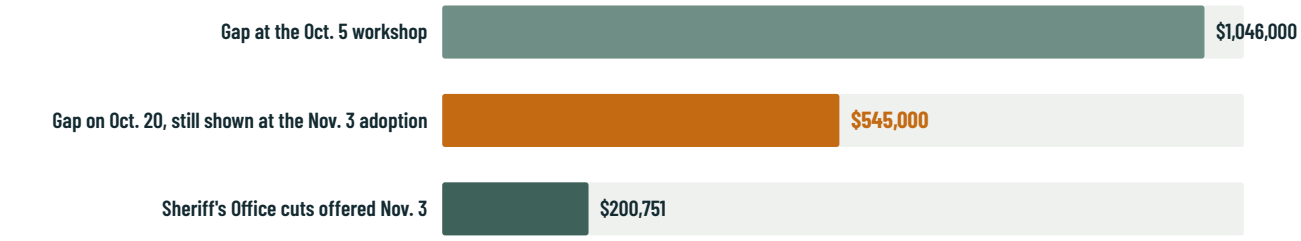
Down 21% from the 2023 peak. Measured against the new reserve rule, the cushion above the floor fell from $1.64 million to $683,435 in two years. Part of that drop comes from the 2024 spending spike raising the floor.



Resolution 2026-31 and its attached ten-year table, Skamania County Board of Commissioners packet, Nov. 3, 2026. The State Auditor reports a much larger ending balance for the same fund ($12.9 million for 2025) because its figure includes money already committed or restricted to other uses. Spending in the county's table spiked to $25.5 million in 2024; nothing on file explains it.

The 2027 gap, workshop by workshop

Finance staff opened the season about $1 million short on roughly $20.9 million in general-fund spending. After a first round of department cuts the figure stood at $545,000 on Oct. 20. On the morning of Nov. 3 the Sheriff's Office offered $200,751 in cuts. That evening the board adopted the preliminary budget still showing the $545,000 gap.



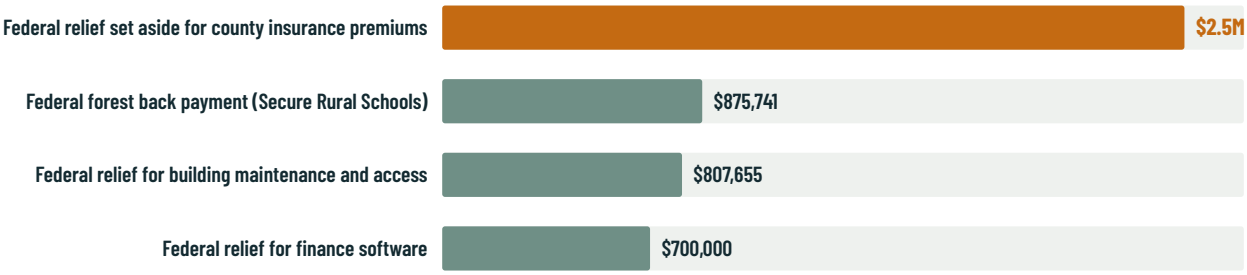
Meeting recording Figures as spoken at budget workshops on Oct. 5 and Oct. 20, 2026, and at the Nov. 3 meeting and hearing. The board has not said how much of the Sheriff's offer counts against the gap.

“The overtime, I kind of feel like it's a little bit of fool's gold.”

A commissioner, on the Sheriff's Office offer to halve overtime, Nov. 3, 2026. The commissioner later called the phrase "a little bit harsh." Search-and-rescue calls can't be scheduled away. On Oct. 27 the Sheriff's Office had called a 50% cut "not realistic based on just the numbers this year," adding, "I'll do it." Meeting recording

One-time money that helped hold 2025 and 2026 together

Federal relief money and a back payment of federal forest funds filled holes that ongoing revenue couldn't. None of it is ongoing.



Resolution 2025-23 (Oct. 14, 2025) re-obligating the county's remaining Local Assistance and Tribal Consistency Fund money; Resolution 2026-20 (July 14, 2026) distributing the Secure Rural Schools back payment to the general fund. "Insurance premiums" may include the liability risk pool as well as health coverage.

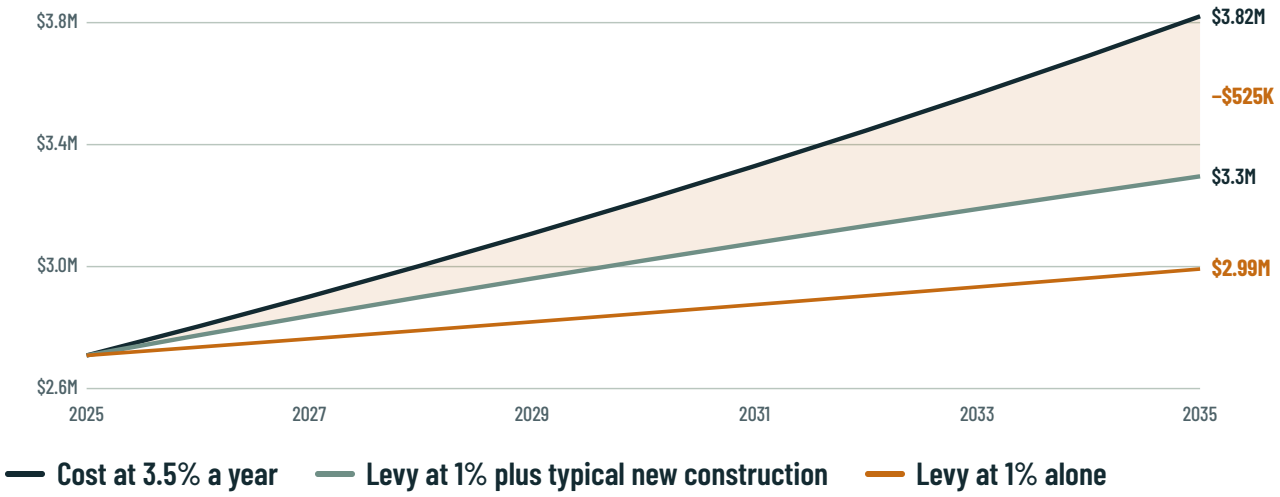
2 · Why this isn't one bad year

Two blades closing

One blade is state law: the county's regular property tax can grow 1% a year, plus what new construction and a few other things add. The other is cost: wages, insurance, fuel and state-set standards grow faster. Skamania also has very little to tax.

What the general levy can raise, against what it costs to stand still

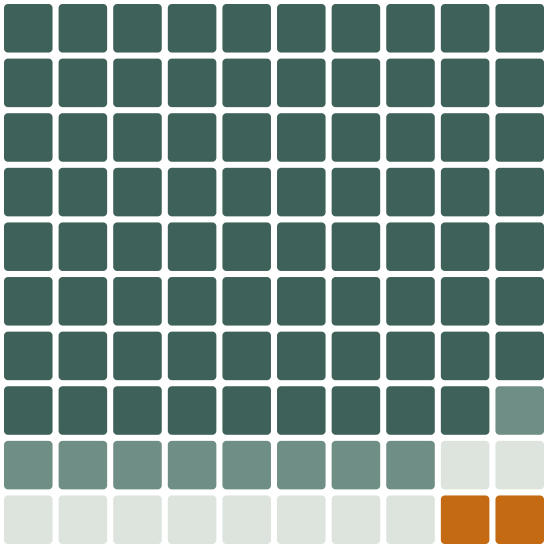
Starting from the 2025 levy of $2,708,677. Even with a typical year of new construction, the levy falls $525,000 a year behind by 2035 if costs grow at a cautious 3.5%. At the county's own pace (6.15% a year from 2015 to 2024 in its State Auditor filings), the gap reaches a third of cost.



Projection Levy Scissors model. Levy base and new construction (median $42.5 million of new value a year, 2023–2025) from Washington Department of Revenue levy detail files; cost growth from State Auditor filings. The cost line is the 2025 levy grown at 3.5% a year, a deliberately low assumption: 37 of 39 Washington counties' general-fund costs grew faster. The levy shown is the county general levy, about 14% of the 2026 general-fund budget, and the one general-fund revenue whose yearly growth state law caps. The vertical axis starts at $2.6 million.

What there is to tax

Each square is 1% of the county's 1,077,365 acres.



Federal forest and Gorge purchases 79.4%

State and other exempt land 8.9%

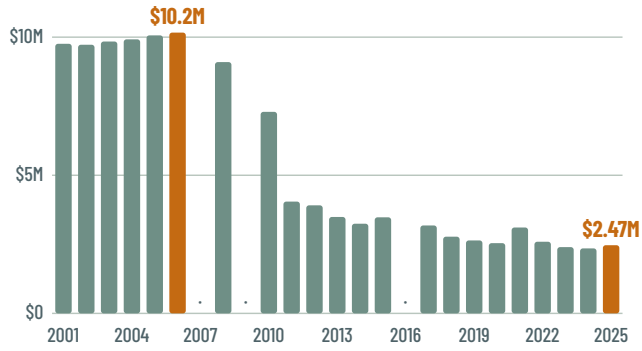
Taxable, in a reduced-value program 9.9%

Taxable at full market value 1.8%

Skamania County Assessor's acreage breakdown (the county's own estimate as of May 1, 2012). A reduced-value program is taxable land enrolled in a current-use program such as forest or farm.

Secure Rural Schools payments for Skamania County

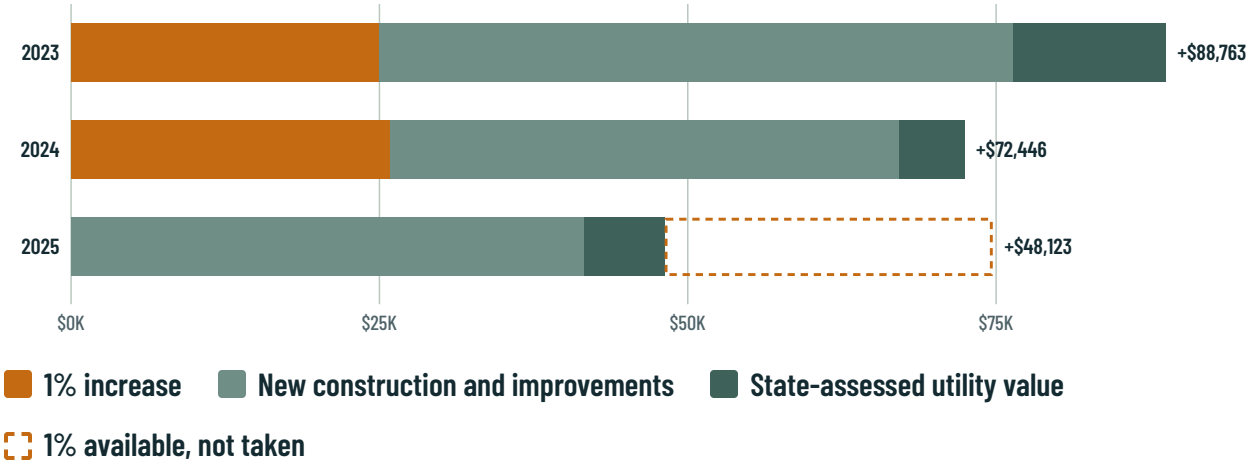
Title I, including the schools' half, plus Title III. Down 76% from the 2006 peak, before inflation.



U.S. Forest Service annual payment reports, 2001–2025, compiled in the Levy Scissors ledger. Gaps are years the reports can't be reconciled (2007, 2009) or the program lapsed (2016). State law (RCW 28A.520) sends half of Title I to school districts; the county's half can go to roads or other allowed uses, and federal law limits Title III to county projects such as wildfire and emergency services. The federal payment for untaxable federal land is a separate program (PILT), which has grown.

Where each year's levy growth actually came from

The cap allows 1% over the highest of the last three levies, plus new construction and improvements, plus growth in state-assessed utility property. In 2025 the board left its 1% on the table and banked it; the levy still grew 1.8%.



Department of Revenue county levy detail, tax years 2023–2025, County General levy. The parts add to DOR's maximum allowable levy to the dollar (Dispatch arithmetic). For 2026 the board took the 1% ($27,086.77 for the current-expense levy); the levy resolution passed unanimously.

What's also fair to say

- Skamania isn't poor on every measure. In 2022 it collected $1,210 per resident in its own revenue, about 1.46 times the national county median and seventh of 39 Washington counties. A small county carries fixed costs (a jail, a courthouse, a sheriff) over few people, so that number reads high.
- The board chose not to take its 1% for 2025. It banked the $26,605, which it can still claim in a later year.
- Some costs are local choices, such as the new finance software. In October 2026 the county reported its payroll module would not be ready before April 2027.

  Meeting recording
- Skamania counts as metro in federal statistics because it's in the Portland-Vancouver area. Programs keyed to "rural" may not see it that way.

3 · What the bone looks like

From the county's own meetings, October and November 2026

These come from the county's posted meeting recordings and typed records. Where the record doesn't name who spoke, neither do we.

“Four deputies for 24 hours. And two on, two off. So they're pulling 12-hour days and two of them for a 1,600-square-mile county.”

The Sheriff's Office, Oct. 27, 2026, describing a bad stretch. The office said it had gone from 17 positions to 15 about two years earlier. Meeting recording

Cut the vacant 15th deputy position, and the county loses $181,058 a year in patrol contracts.

The Sheriff's Office's warning on Oct. 27, 2026. That position staffs the Forest Service and PacifiCorp patrol contracts; PacifiCorp's covers Swift Reservoir. The contract amounts come from the Sheriff's Office's own 2025 funding application.

Meeting recording

In 2025 the Sheriff's Office said it couldn't afford drug take-back days or prevention talks at Wind River Middle School and Stevenson High.

Sheriff Summer Scheyer's application to the county's Opioid Abatement Council, Sept. 23, 2025. The council and the board approved $5,000 for that work in 2026.

“Commissioners pay their own cell phone bills … and I'm still $14,000 short, so we're dipping into employees.”

Laying out, at the Oct. 5, 2026 budget workshop, what an 8% cut to the commissioners' own office would take. It was an example, not a decision.

Meeting recording

“We've got $1,500 for office supplies. That's what you get. And we use what's in the cupboard.”

Said during the board's line-by-line pass through the commissioners' own office budget, Oct. 27, 2026. Staff also offered to drop a $500 postage line.

Meeting recording

Fuel, small tools, repairs, registrations, tuition. Line by line.

What the Sheriff's Office offered to trim from its patrol, jail and work-crew budgets on Nov. 3, 2026, on top of halving overtime. At an Oct. 6 workshop, Public Works listed a custodian's job, about $81,000, as a possible cut; the board left it in at that workshop. Meeting recording

285 people served. County support down from about $20,000 to $5,000.

The Skamania County Council on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault, presenting its request for $10,000 on Nov. 3, 2026. It also counted 2,562 shelter bed nights for women and children, and helps with rent, food and diapers. Meeting recording

“Community members reach out ... to see if we have volunteer opportunities to help them meet that 80 hour in a month volunteer requirement.”

Julie Hester, Washington Gorge Action Programs, Nov. 3, 2026, on residents volunteering at the Stevenson food bank to keep their federal benefits. On Oct. 20, state data cited to the board put the number of Skamania residents under the federal food-benefit work rule between 197 and almost 300. Meeting recording

“I'm not going to authorize hiring somebody and then turn around and ... potentially lay them off.”

A commissioner, Oct. 13, 2026, announcing a hold on hiring. There was no motion; staff held hiring requests pending the board's direction. Meeting recording

“At this time, we just don't have the resources to deliver meals.”

The North Bonneville senior center's board president, asked on Nov. 3, 2026 whether the center delivers meals. Meals served were up 11% in 2026, and food costs were up about $300 a month. Meeting recording

Up to $12,990 for a shower-card system, door locks and cameras at the fairgrounds, so homeless residents can shower free.

Approved Nov. 3, 2026 from the homeless housing fund. On Oct. 27 a commissioner relayed a Washington Gorge Action Programs worker's account that most people the worker had given showers to were getting ready for job interviews. Meeting recording

“Seeing no public in the chamber.”

Opening the hearing on the 2027 preliminary budget at 5 p.m. on Nov. 3, 2026. Nobody came, and no written testimony arrived. The board adopted the preliminary budget unanimously with the $545,000 gap in it; a preliminary budget doesn't have to balance. Meeting recording

Six levers in Olympia's hands

Most of what squeezes Skamania's general fund is set in state law, the state budget or a state court rule. Each of these has a real tradeoff; we've tried to state both sides.

The 1% levy limit

What it is

RCW 84.55 caps how much a county's regular property-tax revenue can grow each year: 1% over the highest of the last three levies, plus add-ons for new construction, improvements and state-assessed property. For a county of 10,000 people or more, the 1% drops to the inflation rate in a low-inflation year unless two of three commissioners find "substantial need," which restores up to 1% for that year. Going higher takes a voter-approved lid lift.

What Skamania sees

The 1% was worth $27,086.77 to the general fund for 2026; the levy resolution passed unanimously. No county lid lift is on record.

What's been tried

HB 1334 and SB 5798 (2025) would have tied the limit to inflation plus population. Neither passed. ESHB 2442 (2026) kept the 1% but allows lid lifts of up to 10 years (in effect since July 1, 2026), lets counties split off the veterans and mental-health levies, adds a small public-health-clinic levy, and lets rental-car tax pay for public defenders. Its property-tax sections apply to taxes collected in 2027, including the levy set Dec. 15, 2026, so 2027 levy figures won't line up with earlier years.

The tradeoff

A looser cap lets revenue keep pace with costs, and it raises property-tax bills for people already stretched. A tight cap keeps bills predictable, and it pushes counties toward cuts, fees, levy elections and dependence on transfers.

RCW 84.55.005 · RCW 84.55.0101 · ESHB 2442 · HB 1334 · SB 5798

Public defense

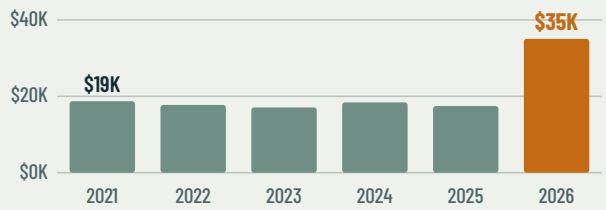
What it is

Counties pay for lawyers for people who can't afford one. In 2025 the state Supreme Court cut the felony caseload limit from 150 cases per lawyer a year to 47 weighted case credits, effective Jan. 1, 2026, with up to ten years to phase in. The state's grant helps; the rest is the county's.

What Skamania sees

On Nov. 10, 2026 the board approved advertising for a Superior Court defender for 2027 because one attorney can't return. Staff warned on Oct. 27 that the public-defense line "could probably go up."

Meeting recording



What's been tried

HB 1592 and SB 5404 (2025), as introduced, would have had the state pay half of trial-level costs and let counties under 50 people per square mile ask the state Office of Public Defense to take over the work; Skamania has about 7. Neither passed. SB 5914 (a phased state share) was introduced; ESSB 5912 (a task force) passed the Senate 48–0 and stalled.

The tradeoff

A state share eases the county's bill and costs the state general fund. Leaving it local keeps control local, and leaves small counties competing for scarce lawyers.

Chart: state Office of Public Defense grants to Skamania, 2021–2026. · OPD grant table · caseload standards · HB 1592

State forest land and DNR's share

What it is

DNR manages forest land the county gave the state, sells the timber and keeps a management share before paying the county. RCW 79.64.110 caps that share at 25%, with written authority for DNR's board to go to 27% that each biennial budget bill renews. The current authority runs through June 30, 2027, so extending it is a 2027-session decision. Separately, the capital budget pays Skamania for state forest land locked up under endangered-species rules.

What Skamania sees

DNR's board scheduled the 25% to 27% increase for its Nov. 3, 2026 meeting. A commissioner put the cost at $63,000 to $69,000 a year on a ten-year average. Commissioners describe the locked-up-land payment as about $1.8 million a biennium and worry it will move from the capital to the operating budget.

Meeting recording

From the record

"$60,000 for us is considerable considering that we're probably going to lose our veteran services officer." A commissioner, Oct. 20, 2026. No decision on that position is on record. Meeting recording

The tradeoff

Funding DNR's management account from the state general fund spares timber counties and competes with everything else. Raising the fee moves DNR's shortfall onto rural counties and their junior districts.

RCW 79.64.110 · State Forest Land Replacement

Forest money and school funding

What it is

Congress sets Secure Rural Schools. The state decides what happens next: under RCW 28A.520.020, federal forest money a school district receives is offset against its state basic-education funding, except that districts with 57% or more low-income students keep the first $70,000. The 2023–25 budget suspended the offset.

What Skamania sees

A payment that arrived after the June 30, 2025 window cost Stevenson-Carson School District roughly $250,000 to $300,000, by the account given to commissioners. Rep. Waters said on June 23, 2026 that he had a bill drafted to fix it. The state schools office has said the Legislature would need to restore the budget language or amend the statute.

Meeting recording

The tradeoff

Holding forest districts harmless costs the state school budget and gives those districts more per student than others. Not doing it means a federal payment meant for rural schools partly replaces state money instead of adding to it.

RCW 28A.520.020

Foundational public health

What it is

The state funds a core set of local public-health services through Foundational Public Health Services money (RCW 43.70.515).

What Skamania sees

The county received $1,076,000 against $1,369,000 expected, about $293,000 less, and held a position open while waiting on state decisions. Klickitat's health department reported losing about $380,000. Meeting recording

The tradeoff

Restoring the money competes in a tight state budget. Not restoring it shifts core work like disease investigation onto county general funds whose main tax grows about 1% a year plus new construction.

RCW 43.70.515

Mandates with deadlines

What it is

The Growth Management Act's periodic review names Skamania County and its cities for Dec. 31, 2026 (RCW 36.70A.130). Because Skamania doesn't fully plan under the act, its review covers critical areas and resource lands, and small, slow-growing counties and cities may take up to 24 more months. RCW 43.135.060 says the state must pay for new mandates; its text doesn't reach court rules, funding cuts or agency fees.

What Skamania sees

The county's critical-areas ordinance was on the Nov. 10, 2026 agenda for adoption, after state fish and ecology agencies objected to its stream buffers. Stevenson asked about a one-year extension. North Bonneville and Bingen have their own deadlines in the same cycle. Meeting recording

The tradeoff

Uniform state standards protect shared resources. Small jurisdictions carry the same paperwork as large ones with a fraction of the staff.

RCW 36.70A.130 · RCW 43.135.060

5 · What's waiting for someone to carry it

Asks already in motion

These are things local bodies in the district have already asked of the state. Several ran through the outgoing delegation. Sen. Paul Harris stays in office and is in the record on several of them. Klickitat County is split between the 14th and 17th districts, so its countywide asks reach both delegations; the White Salmon–Bingen end, where the bridge lands, is in the 17th.

The ask	Where it stands	Who's carrying it locally
Fix the school forest-money offset	Rep. Waters said on June 23, 2026 that he had a bill drafted, "as long as ... I come back." It needs a new sponsor for 2027. Meeting recording	Stevenson-Carson School District; Skamania commissioners
Stevenson's Commerce grant, about $147,000	The city's memo describes a potential legislative reauthorization in the 2027 session to move the money from the Courthouse Plaza to Walnut Park design, a route it says Waters' office confirmed. The council leaned toward Walnut Park on Oct. 15, 2026, without a vote. The grant expires in July 2027. Meeting recording	City of Stevenson
Payment for locked-up state forest land	Commissioners describe about $1.8 million a biennium through the capital budget and fear a move to the operating budget. Meeting recording	Skamania commissioners; the county's state lobbyist
DNR management share, 25% to 27%	DNR's board scheduled the increase for Nov. 3, 2026. The authority to go above 25% expires June 30, 2027 unless the Legislature renews it.	Skamania commissioners
Secure Rural Schools beyond 2026	Federal law runs through fiscal 2026. On Nov. 3, 2026 the commissioners voted 3–0 to have their chair sign a letter to Congress backing reauthorization.	Skamania commissioners; school districts

The ask	Where it stands	Who's carrying it locally
Hood River–White Salmon bridge, $30 million for 2027–29	The 2025–27 transportation budget says the Legislature intends $30 million in 2027–29 only if federal construction funding and an Oregon match are secured. The bridge authority plans an Olympia update day in late March or early April 2027.	Hood River–White Salmon Bridge Authority
White Salmon pool, $1 million capital ask	Asked for $1 million in 2026; $500,000 was awarded and applied to the parking area. All construction bids were rejected in July 2026, and no re-bid date is on record.	White Salmon Valley Pool District
Green-energy sales tax back to counties	The Washington State Association of Counties accepted Klickitat's proposal. As of Sept. 15, 2026 the county was looking for a sponsor. Meeting recording	Klickitat County commissioners
North Bonneville lift stations	Public Works Board grant application for Lift Stations 2 and 4; the city reported it submitted on Aug. 11, 2026.	City of North Bonneville

6 · Where to be, and who knows the file

Dates on the record

When	What
Dec. 1, 2026, 1:30 p.m.	Klickitat County 2027 preliminary budget and capital improvement plan hearings.
Dec. 3–5, 2026	Washington Association of Conservation Districts annual conference in Stevenson.
Dec. 15, 2026, 5 p.m.	Skamania County final 2027 budget and property-tax levies, Courthouse Room 18, Stevenson, in person or by Zoom. Written comments must reach the Clerk of the Board by noon on the Monday before (Dec. 14).

When	What
Dec. 31, 2026	Growth Management Act periodic review date named for Skamania County and its cities; small, slow-growing jurisdictions may take up to 24 more months.
Jan. 11, 2027	The 105-day 2027 session opens.
Feb. 2027	Conservation districts' Legislative Day in Olympia. Meeting recording
Mar. 4, 2027	Klickitat County's battery-storage moratorium and interim zoning expire.
Late Mar. or early Apr. 2027	Hood River–White Salmon Bridge Authority's Olympia update day.
June 30, 2027	DNR's authority to keep more than 25% of state forest timber revenue expires unless renewed.

People who already know the file

Sen. Paul Harris

17th District senator, staying in office. Credited with Rep. Waters for the $1.03 million Underwood water tank appropriation; Bingen's mayor met with him on the rail quiet zone.

Kevin Waters

Executive director of the Skamania County Economic Development Council; his House term ends in January 2027. He said he'd drafted the school forest-money fix, and his office advised Stevenson on its grant.

Brian Nichols, Asa Leckie, Rob Farris

Skamania County commissioners; Nichols chaired the board in 2026. Leckie is the county's member on the state Energy Facility Site Evaluation Council for the Cascade Renewable Transmission review.

Katie Whittier

CFM, Skamania County's state lobbyist. The board meets with her through the year.

Ron Ihrig, Todd Andrews, Lori Zoller

Klickitat County commissioners; Ihrig chaired the board in 2026. Their lobbyist is Zak Kennedy of Potts & Associates.

Julie Hester

Executive director, Washington Gorge Action Programs: food banks, shelter, rental assistance, and what federal food-benefit changes are doing on the ground.

About the sources. Items marked Meeting recording rest on the county's own posted audio, transcribed by machine; speakers aren't labeled and figures are as spoken. Everything unmarked comes from a typed public record (packets, resolutions, minutes, notices, state agency tables) or from the statute or bill linked beside it. Projection marks a model with its assumptions stated. Everything here comes from public records in the Open Gorge Public Meetings Archive, which holds the agendas, packets, minutes and recordings of 46 public bodies in Skamania and Klickitat counties and the Gorge. We can pull the full record on any item above. Prepared by Kate Bertash for the Skamania Dispatch, skamaniadispatch.com. For questions, corrections or the records behind any item, write to skamaniadispatch@gmail.com.