



BENTON COUNTY

2025 STATE LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

FUNDING REQUESTS

- **Columbia Valley Center for Recovery:** The much needed and long-awaited CVCR will open at the end of 2025. Benton County wants to add a transitional housing component to the CVRC, and seeks a State investment of **(\$7,500,000)** to launch this program.
- **Public Safety Communication System Infrastructure Upgrades:** This project will replace failing analog VHF radios and infrastructure in Benton and Franklin counties with a single, digital, P25 compliant, 800mhz platform for first responding agencies. The region seeks assistance with this \$29.6 million project, to otherwise be paid for by the cities and counties.
- **Law Enforcement Body Cameras:** The State required the use of body-worn cameras by law enforcement and provided for initial procurement. Benton County requests assistance with the continued maintenance, operation, and replacement of State-mandated body-worn cameras.

PUBLIC DEFENSE

The provision of indigent defense services has become the crucible through which all other County services and obligations will be prioritized and funded. It is now the defining issue facing state and local governments in Washington. Costs of providing and the demand for indigent defense have skyrocketed in recent years, all while the workforce supply of attorneys has remained stagnant. Benton County currently spends about \$4.5 million per year on public defense while the State only reimburses approximately \$184,000 per year or 3.7% for these services, placing a heavy burden on the County's discretionary budget. If the new caseload standards recommended by the Washington State Bar Association are adopted by the Supreme Court, the County will press Olympia relentlessly for additional funding for these services. The criminal justice system in this state is already on the brink of collapse, and this caseload action will break that system. With urgency, the Legislature should take the lead on this issue and convene a working group of all stakeholders to address the many issues weighing down the criminal justice system. **This is our top priority for 2025.**

HOUSING

Benton County supports legislation that encourages and facilitates access to housing through policies leading to increases in inventory and preservation of the current housing supply to serve a wide range of incomes and needs. This is a regional and statewide issue that requires collaboration on all levels. Specifically, the County supports all of WSAC's legislative housing priorities including but not limited to:

- Authorization of detached accessory dwelling units on rural lots allowing single-family homes.
- Allowance for inclusionary zoning on all residential lots in existing urban growth areas, local areas of more intense rural development, and all new planned unit developments, up to triplexes.
- Expansion of the Multi-Family Tax Exemption to all urban growth areas.

TARGETED URBAN AREAS

Authorized by the Legislature in 2022, TUAs are being utilized in Benton County. The timeline provided by RCW 84.25 for the construction of new businesses does not accommodate heavily-regulated industries such as nuclear, hydrogen, and others which can take years to permit. The County supports amending the statute via **HB 1210** to add time to the construction window for these types of projects.

STATE VETERANS CEMETERY

Benton County supports the Department of Veterans Affairs efforts to build a second state veterans cemetery somewhere in the Tri-Cities area. This includes DVA's requested Capital Budget funding for pre-design **(\$500,000)** and land acquisition **(\$5,500,000)** needed to begin the project.

ENERGY FACILITY SITING & PROTECTION OF LAND USE AND WATER SUPPLY

The State's process for permitting large energy projects has taken a high profile in the public discourse throughout Eastern Washington and in Benton County in particular. Maintaining adequate water supply and ensuring the continuity of the agricultural industry are essential to the economic and cultural vitality of the Yakima Basin and Tri-Cities areas. Our region continues to attract interest for large energy projects. As these projects are considered, the County asks that the Legislature provide adequate protections to ensure that potential projects do not impede public safety, quality of life, and existing land and water uses. Specifically, the County supports the following actions addressing the siting of new energy projects:

- **Requirement for Secured Water Rights before Approval:** Currently, renewable energy projects may be approved by EFSEC without needed water rights having been secured. Benton County supports amending RCW 80.50.060 to require evidence of adequate water rights to support a project before it is approved.
- **Personal Property Tax Depreciation:** Support for WSAC's efforts to address personal property implications of siting renewable energy projects.
- **County Approval of EFSEC Recommendations:** Support for Representative Dye's proposed legislation requiring County approval of EFSEC recommendations to the governor (**HB 1188**).
- Support for a legislative fix to address the inconsistency between the GMA and EFSEC legislation regarding the protection and inappropriate conversion of agricultural lands.

FINANCIAL EDUCATION PREREQUISITES

Benton County supports **HB 1285** which would make basic financial education a required component of public education with tiered instruction curricula for elementary, middle, and high school.

DESIGNATION OF A STATE CACTUS

Benton County supports **SB 5325** that would designate the **Columbia Basin Hedgehog** (*Pediocactus nigrispinus*) as the official cactus of the state of Washington.

YAKIMA RIVER

Benton County calls the Legislature's attention to the dire situation in the lower Yakima River. Well over a billion dollars have been invested in fisheries enhancement projects in the Yakima Basin over the past quarter-century, most of those investments occurring in the upper watershed. These taxpayer investments will be eroded and our salmon runs further imperiled if the critical conditions afflicting the lower 50 miles of the River are not urgently addressed. Lower Yakima River priority topics include:

- **Water Stargrass**, a native plant that is literally choking the lower Yakima River.
- **Invasive predatory species** such as bass and walleye which are decimating migrating smolts.
- **Wanawish Dam** which creates a salmon buffet and has also killed 4 people in the last 25 years.
- The **Bateman Island causeway** traps and kills juvenile salmonids in the Yakima Delta.

SUPPORT OF PARTNER PRIORITIES

Benton County supports the legislative priorities of partner organizations on issues consistent with County positions. These include efforts of the Yakima Basin Integrated Plan Workgroup (YBIP), Salmon Recovery Funding Board (SRF Board), the Washington Invasive Species Council (WISC), the Washington State Association of Counties (WSAC), Washington Economic Development Association (WEDA), the Tri-City Development Council (TRIDEC), the Benton-Franklin Council of Governments (BFCOG), and our Tri-Cities area cities and port districts. Of particular note:

- **Benton-Franklin Regional Transportation Priorities:** Benton County supports the list of 6 priority transportation capital improvement projects developed by the BFCOG.
 - **Yakima Delta Habitat Restoration Project:** Benton County supports the provision of adequate funding (**\$3,200,000**) to complete this WDFW project to breach the Bateman Island causeway.
 - **Quagga/Zebra Mussel Prevention:** We cannot have quagga or zebra mussels in Washington state, period. Benton County fully supports WDFW's FY26/27 mussel proviso of **\$7,240,000**.
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