



## BENTON COUNTY

# 2026 STATE LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

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### **FUNDING REQUESTS**

Benton County submits the following capital project assistance requests:

- **Community Agricultural Center:** The Ag Center at the Benton County Fairgrounds in Finley is in dire need of substantial renovations, including a complete HVAC overhaul, lighting upgrades, accessibility considerations, and other improvements to make it properly suitable for livestock uses and social gatherings (**District 8 – \$1,000,000**).
- **Elevator Replacement:** The three-floor elevator in the Benton County Courthouse in Prosser is beyond antiquated and requires replacement. The elevator project is being completed in 2026 as a part of the 100th anniversary of the Courthouse (**District 15 – \$250,000**).

### **PRIORITY BILLS**

#### **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.

#### **ELECTIONS**

Benton County supports two priority bills that have been advanced by both WSACA and WACO:

- **SB 5069**, which will require the Secretary of State to *print and distribute voters' pamphlets* for the primary election in each even-numbered year and for the general election every year.
- **SB 6130 / HB 2341**, which formalizes State support for *National Voter Registration Day*.

#### **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.

- **HB 1345 / SB 5470** would authorize detached accessory dwelling units on rural lots where there is an allowance for single-family homes.

#### **ENERGY**

Benton County is at the epicenter of both the State's energy challenges and opportunities.

- **HB 2090 / SB 5821** integrates nuclear energy into the Washington State Energy Strategy.
- **HB 1960** addresses the problems created by the rapid depreciation of renewable energy projects so local communities receive value from these projects.

#### **FINANCIAL EDUCATION PREREQUISITES**

Benton County will work with the Legislature and the State Treasurer in support of **HB 1285** and **SB 5849** which would make basic financial education a required component of public education.

#### **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.

## **PRIORITY ISSUES**

### **PUBLIC DEFENSE**

Counties are responsible for indigent defense as an agent of the state. However, despite being a state-mandated function, the state funds only 3% of public defense costs. Workforce and training shortages have placed additional pressure on the already underfunded system. Before the Supreme Court considers adopting revisions to statewide caseload standards, the Legislature should convene a workgroup of all stakeholders to study the many issues weighing down the criminal justice system in Washington, including the full cost of adopting the proposed new caseload standards statewide. Counties do not have the financial means to fund these changes. **Public defense and its associated costs remains Benton County's top priority issue for the foreseeable future.**

### **INDEPENDENT JUDICIARIES**

Benton and Franklin counties have had a combined superior court judiciary for decades. The two counties have grown such that not only is each fully capable of operating its own superior court as is done elsewhere in the state, but that having a combined judiciary is increasingly inefficient and administratively burdensome. We support dismantling the combined Benton/Franklin Superior Court into two independent judiciaries for each county.

### **STATE VETERANS CEMETERY**

Benton County supports the Department of Veterans Affairs' 2026 capital budget request for **\$8,500,000** to acquire land for the development of a new state veterans cemetery in the Tri-Cities area.

### **ENVIRONMENT**

Benton County calls the Legislature's attention to four important environmental items:

- **Wildfire Resilience:** HB 1168 passed in 2021 committed \$500 million over four biennia to wildfire resilience resources. We have seen the benefits. Please continue to fund this program.
- **Water Stargrass:** A native plant that has become the number one threat to salmon migration through the lower Yakima River and that has displaced spawning areas (information only).
- **Invasive Species:** Benton County continues to urge vigilance regarding freshwater mussels and Northern Pike, and necessary funding and policy action to deal with invasive Japanese Beetles.
- **Badger Canyon:** Benton County has submitted an application to the State's Land Trust Transfer program for transfer of 270 acres of DNR property for recreation and conservation purposes.

### **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), and our local cities and port districts. Of note:

- **Benton-Franklin Regional Transportation Priorities:** Benton County supports the list of 6 priority transportation capital improvement projects developed by the BFCOG.
  - **Tri-Cities Legislative Council Priorities:** Benton County supports the list of 7 priorities developed by the Legislative Council, which is organized by the Regional Chamber of Commerce.
  - **State Conservation Commission Supplemental Request:** Benton County supports restoration of Technical Assistance funding for all districts across the state.
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