

Good Morning-

Commissioner Ring-Erickson, Commissioner Sheldon, Elected Officials, Department Heads, staff and fellow citizens:

Last Sunday, March 13th, we commemorated the 151st anniversary of the formation of Mason County with a historic walking tour in the City of Shelton, our county seat. As we walked down Railroad Avenue, toured the historic Mason County Courthouse and listened to Mike Fredson elaborate on the founding of our county, I was amazed with the incredible sense of optimism which our forefathers displayed as they lay the foundations for a prosperous future for Mason County residents for generations to come. They were the empire builders- as T.K. Whipple once wrote “ All America lies at the end of the wilderness road. Our forefathers had civilization inside themselves, the world outside. We live in the civilization they created, but within us the wilderness still lingers. What they dreamed we live and what they lived we dream.”

The vision of a prosperous future lives on in the hopes and dreams of each of the new families who chose to make their home in Mason County; for some their first home, some their dream home and still others their retirement home. There is optimism in the faces of the 4,000 children who attend newly constructed or renovated schools in Mason County.. And there is hope in the faces of those newly immigrated to our country as they learn a new language and customs and eagerly seek to share in that dream of prosperity.

Fellow citizens, today, the state of Mason County is good.

This was not always so. In fact it wasn't until 2003 that Mason County began emerging from several decades of a downward spin which began as many of the companies which had for so many generations been the backbone of our local economy feeling the pressures from fluctuations in the global market place as well as new environmental regulations, began to leave Mason County taking with them a large piece of that vision of prosperity and hope. Those who remained, like Simpson Timber Company, downsized their operations to remain competitive. The cooperative sustained yield agreement between Simpson Logging Company and the U.S.F.S., which was to sustain this county for 100 years, was dissolved. Unemployment rates in Mason County soared as displaced loggers struggled to find new jobs .Our school systems began to feel the effects of this loss as children no longer had the security of graduating high school and going to work in the woods or sawmill as their fathers and grandfathers before them had done. Illegal drug use and alcoholism skyrocketed, as did other symptoms of a depressed society such as domestic violence and child abuse. Mason County spent the next few years in an identity crisis compounded by our struggle to come into compliance with the state growth management laws.

It was through the leadership of former Commissioners Johnson, Baze, and Holter that in the summer of 2003, Mason County would finally come into compliance with the growth management act setting in motion Mason County's ability to once again plan for a prosperous, sustainable future. This month with new commissioners we will begin the year -long effort to update our comprehensive plan.

In preparation for this update of the comprehensive plan we have worked to fill staffing vacancies in our community development department. Today we welcome Mr. Emmett Dobey, our new community development director, who will work with our planning director, Bob Fink to guide this effort.

We believe the best government is that which is closest to the people it serves. Our goal is to provide accessible accountable government, responsive to the needs of those we serve. To that end we will explore options to re-establish the receptionist/switchboard operator position to serve all county departments.

One of the best investments we can make right now is in the development of a highly skilled staff. We are proud of the work Mason County employees do every day. We will continue to encourage and appreciate our dedicated employees through supervisory training opportunities and by providing a high caliber work environment working towards equitable salaries comparable to our neighboring counties.

Today we take this opportunity to renew our commitment to work together to provide a safe, prosperous and sustainable future for all residents of Mason County; a future which recognizes the shared stewardship of our vast natural resources for the benefit of this present generation and those to come.

As part of this shared vision we propose the development and implementation of a long-range shared strategy for the economic development of Mason County. A plan which supports small business, encourages entrepreneurship and innovative technologies, acknowledges the importance of providing a safe secure and healthy community, creates an environment which is conducive to attracting more businesses while supporting the businesses we already have and supports the education of a local workforce prepared and inspired to become the pioneers of the 21st century.

Last June, after nearly a year of planning, Mason County joined with the Mason County Economic Dev. Council, numerous local businesses and community organizations, and the WA St. Department of Community, Trade, and Economic Development in sponsoring an economic 'Future Search' conference at the not quite completed Alderbrook Resort. We invited over eighty participants who spent three days with us hammering out our shared vision for the future strength of Mason County. We developed action steps in the nine areas in which we found common ground laying the foundation for an economic component for the Mason County Comprehensive Plan.

The nine areas of common ground which will provide the basis for developing a plan for our shared vision for the future strength of Mason County are: infrastructure, business development, tourism, health and safety, trust in govt., celebration of our heritage, culture, and history, education/workforce development, environment, and affordable housing.

There were many groups and citizens involved with this effort. Today I would like to recognize Don Melnick, President of the Mason County EDC, who worked tirelessly along with Bonnie Knight, executive director of the Port of Allyn, to secure the necessary funding, kept us all on task (no easy job) and who provided the organizational skills to see this project through. I asked Don to come today so we could publicly acknowledge his efforts. Please join me in thanking Don on behalf of all of us in Mason County who will reap the benefits of his labor for years to come. (applause).

We face many challenges as we plan for the future growth of the county. One of the main challenges is in providing the necessary infrastructure for a growing economy and population. Last week we received the long awaited report from Perteet Engineering outlining the steps we need to take to address the increasing traffic on SR3, sewerage the Belfair UGA, and for providing the amenities that an urban community requires. This report joins the recently approved Belfair Sub-Area plan and will be a useful tool as we chart not only the course for the North Mason area but the entire county as well.

Earlier this morning we approved modifications to our 6 year transportation plan to consolidate and include the commonly called 'Belfair By-pass' along with the SR3 improvements into one project now titled the North Mason Corridor Improvements Project. We believe that it is of the utmost importance to aggressively pursue funding for all of these projects. With more than 45% of our workforce daily traveling outside of Mason County, we will work to provide safer access to our major thoroughfares but more importantly to bring those jobs home!

To provide for the future strength of our economy Mason County will develop the policies necessary to create a business climate that attracts new industry and investment as well as supports the expansion of existing industry. One example of this is the industrial rezone Mason County approved for Taylor Shellfish last spring which allowed for the construction of a facility to expand their value added product capacity which will encourage the cultivation and marketability of Mason County grown shellfish on the global market not to mention the new jobs created by such an expansion. Bill and Paul Taylor, in recognition of their company's initiatives to adopt environmental codes of practice on their farms, were recently nominated by Senator Maria Cantwell and received the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration's Walter B. Jones award for business leadership in environmental excellence.

Last fall we witnessed the planting of the 75 millionth tree by the chairman of Green Diamond Resource Company as testimony to the continued stewardship they provide to the sustainability of our natural resources as well as the economic vitality of Mason County.

Recently, we welcomed Simpson Timber Company's announcement of a major capital improvement plan for its Shelton Lumber Operations. The company will invest more than \$20 million to make general infrastructure improvements, add two new dry kilns, and install a new high-speed planer line. In a letter received from General Manager, Mike Durga, the company announced that ' This investment is a clear indication of the confidence that the owners have in our employees. . . . This is a well-deserved boost for Simpson's Shelton Lumber Operations and the community.'

Last fall as part of our efforts to provide for the future strength of Mason County, we participated in the Economic Development Council's hiring of its new director, Mr. Matt Mataoshi, who will be working with our planning staff to develop the economic component of our comp plan. Matt will lead the effort to update and expand the council's marketing efforts as well.

In acknowledging the importance of the development of a dynamic tourism program to promote the future strength in Mason County today we approved the expenditure of up to \$156,525 in Lodging Tax Funds. We will work with the EDC, the Chambers of Commerce, local tribes, the Ports and the City of Shelton to develop an RFP to create a joint marketing plan for tourism of Mason County. Included in this amount are funds dedicated to hire a tourism support position and to support an additional Visitor Information Center at Hoodspoint.

To support and encourage these efforts we believe it is imperative we build a new fairgrounds and convention center to serve as a showcase facility for tourism promotion as well as community events. It is our hope to be able to answer once and for all where the home of our future fairgrounds will be within the next few months as we actively pursue the information necessary to make such a commitment of public funds.

For 151 years the citizens of this great county have been blessed with much natural beauty as well as abundant natural resources. To provide for the future economic strength for Mason County we recognize the importance of the shared stewardship of our abundant natural resources and the great natural treasures such as Hood Canal, the inland waters of Puget Sound and the forests and eco-systems of the Olympic National Forest and Park.

Last year the Mason County Commission approved the purchase of 85 acres on Oakland Bay in partnership with the Capitol Land Trust for the establishment of the county's first 'Nature Park' providing for the preservation of this valuable eco-system for future generations to enjoy. The county also affirmed our commitment to the youth of this county with the construction of the first ever skateboard park in Mason County, in partnership with the Shelton School District, the City of Shelton, and Wal-Mart.

Under the leadership of Steve Kutz and Debbie Riley, the Mason County Environmental Health Department completed the Operation and Maintenance project for the Lower Hood Canal Watershed including approximately 5,235 septic systems. Based on this success, the Commissioners authorized the program to go countywide. The surface water program continues intensive water quality investigations culminating in the recent reopening of 138 acres of shellfish beds in Lynch Cove and 150 acres in North Bay.

Working with the Hood Canal Coordinating Council and the Puget Sound Action Team, as well as the Skokomish Indian Tribe, Mason County continues to lead efforts to address the low dissolved oxygen problem on Hood Canal.

We will continue to provide for the future economic strength of Mason County through shared stewardship with the U.S.F.S., the Skokomish Tribe, local landowners, the Corps of Army Engineers, Mason County Conservation District and others of the vast natural resources in the watershed of the Skokomish River.

Together we will work for the restoration of this vital eco-system as well as for sustainability and economic prosperity of those communities within the watershed. We will seek best available science to allow for the lifting of the building moratorium in the Skokomish Valley and encourage sustainable and innovative agricultural practices to protect the environment and promote the sustainability of the farming community for generations to come.

We believe it is of the utmost importance to plan for and support a quality local health care sector for the future strength of Mason County. Last month Mason County was one of three counties nation-wide to receive a National Association of Counties "Rural Health Works" Technical Assistance grant. The purpose of the grant is to understand the economic impact of the local health care sector on the larger Mason County economy. As the fifth largest employer in the county, the sustainability of Mason General Hospital and our local service providers is vital. The results of this project will be used by the county to assist in the development of the economic component of our comp plan, a plan which we hope will begin to heal the many wounds of the past and provide safe and healthy communities of the future.

As commissioners for Mason County we believe in the shared stewardship of our most precious resource, our children. In acknowledgment of this shared stewardship we propose the establishment of a Commission on Children, Youth, and Families to provide a forum where the county, local school districts, service providers, communities members, members of the faith-based community, local non-profits and representatives of youth will work together to advise the county commission on issues relating to our children, youth and families; to facilitate the coordination of information among agencies and to advocate for an environment that fosters healthy, self-sufficient, responsible and productive children, youth and families.

We worked closely with Mason Matters, Mason Community Network, and Choice Regional Health Network to develop the Connexions project, a network referral project which will facilitate the coordination of our many service providers and streamline the process for addressing the needs of those most vulnerable in our communities.

Acknowledging the importance of the strengthening of the families and marriages of Mason County we salute the efforts of the Shelton Ministerial Assn. in the recent signing of the Community Family and Marriage Agreement. We also acknowledge the efforts of W.S.U. and the local school districts in their efforts to support families through the strengthening families program and after school 4-H clubs..

On Wednesday Mason County Drug Court will graduate its third and fourth participant of the program, a testimony to the value the investments a community have made in providing an alternative to incarceration and an opportunity for rehabilitation and a brighter future for offenders.

In a recovering economy we looked to the housing industry to provide much needed new jobs and sales tax revenue. In support of these efforts our building department performed record 8,123 inspections last year and completed plan reviews of 406 permits, and issued over 1,929 permits. All this while transiting from the uniform building codes to the International codes in July as required by the Washington State legislature.

Last year Mason County was able to help many families and individuals realize their dreams through the careful allocation of our HB2060 funds with the intent to provide emergency and transitional housing to those most needy of our community. Those projects receiving funds were the Mason County Housing Authority, Habitat for Humanity, the Cold and Hungry Coalition and Turning Pointe Domestic Violence Shelter Mason County to purchase land on which to construct an emergency shelter for victims of domestic violence.

We will continue to work together with the Mason County Masterbuilders Assn., the Mason County Board of Realtors, Habitat for Humanity and others as we work to develop policies to ensure that affordable housing remains a reality in Mason County

In the coming year we will support the development of a long-term parks plan and parks board to advise the commission on issues relating to the development and maintenance of our county parks.

The commission has recognized the importance of developing a countywide trail system which connects public facilities, parks, and communities as well as other regional trail efforts. Last fall the commission established a trails committee under the direction of our planning staff member, Barbara Atkins. We look forward to a report from the committee in the near future.

We wish to express our gratitude for the immense contributions of the many citizens who volunteer their time, energy, and skill in service to Mason County through participating on the many advisory groups. All of these initiatives and proposals are essential to grow and sustain our economy. To insure the successful realization of this vision we believe it is necessary to celebrate our successes and remember the contributions of past generations in providing a prosperous future for us to realize. To that end we propose the establishment of a Historical Preservation Taskforce to facilitate the county's certification as a certified local government and work with our planning staff to expand our historical lands survey as well as to explore the development of a community foundation to support the renovation and preservation of historical structures with Mason County. On that note we will seek funding to renovate and preserve the historic Mason County Courthouse.

Lastly we would like to invite the community to our first ever Mason County birthday and Heritage Celebration on Thursday, March 17th, at the Mason County Fairgrounds at 3 p.m. where we will be celebrating 151 years of Mason County.

I would like to close with a quote from the ancient philosopher, Thucydides "The bravest are surely those who have the clearest vision of what is before them, glory and danger alike, and yet not withstanding, go out to meet it." To day our vision is clear and we boldly go out to meet it.

Thank you, and may God bless Mason County with hope, clarity of vision, and the commitment of our citizenry to realize a prosperous, sustainable future.