

February 26 2024

To: King County Executive Dow Constantine  
Cc: King County Councilmembers  
Lauren Smith, PSB/KCEO Director, Regional Planning

From: Joint Rural Area Team—Enumclaw Plateau Community Association (EPCA), Friends of Sammamish Valley (FoSV), Greater Maple Valley Unincorporated Area Council (GMVUAC), Green River Coalition (GRC), Green Valley/Lake Holm Association (GV/LHA), Hollywood Hill Association (HHA), Soos Creek Area Response (SCAR), Upper Bear Creek Unincorporated Area Council (UBCUAC), and Rural Technical Consultants: Mike Birdsall—Transportation, Ken Konigsmark—Growth Mgmt., and Terry Lavender—Environment

## **Re: Time for Fundamental Changes at Department of Local Services**

The Joint Rural Area Team is comprised of many people with long experience and knowledge related to King County (KC) Rural issues. **We urge you to seize the current opportunity of appointing new leadership for the Department of Local Services (DLS) to accomplish a critically needed re-direction of the department.** We also request a short meeting with you to discuss the contents of this memo further.

Clean water, salmon, orcas, farmland, open green spaces, forests—these are more than just symbols. They are interconnected components of the life we seek to nourish and sustain in our Salish Sea region. We applaud KC under your leadership for many significant successes including parks, land conservation, environmental protection, climate initiatives, salmon recovery efforts and upholding and implementing the Growth Management Act (GMA). **However, these successes and the ability to meet your Strategic Climate Action Plan are being undermined by the ongoing, systemic failures within the DLS.**

**KC's well-considered policies and code—approved by you and the KC Council—are only as good as how effectively they are honored and enforced.** The reality we have experienced in Rural KC today demonstrates the Permitting Division's significant downward trend in upholding these policies and code. We are likewise convinced the degradation of road conditions in Rural KC stems from an inability of the Road Services Division to accomplish its mission given its limited funding and a lack of vision to change that situation.

Specifically, we believe major changes are needed in 3 priority areas:

1. **Permitting Division—Permitting:** Permitting section's budget is derived from permit fees. This has resulted in a "*get the permits out*" laser-focused mentality. **Permits are often issued that should not be**, including (a) to paper over violations on already-issued conditional permits; (b) on secondary issues for parcels containing an overlooked illegal land use; and (c) on parcels that do not qualify as building sites. The top-line, self-supporting revenue responsibility for the section has created significant unintended negative consequences.
2. **Permitting Division—Code Enforcement:** The code violators causing the most negative impacts to KC's built and natural environment are commercial businesses illegally operating in Rural lands, rather than private citizens. Yet these egregious commercial violators mostly remain unchecked and often have repeat violations. Two scenarios are common: (a) if a business with a conditional permit for operation violates the conditions, rather than corrective action (fines, abatement, etc.), the business is issued a new permit to paper over the illegal activities; and (b) if a business is operating with an illegal land use, rather than shutting down the illegal business, it is instead required to get permits for

secondary issues such as grading or building modifications. Both of these scenarios stem from a desire to issue more permits. **These actions result in existing code violators becoming even more entrenched, and they encourage new violators.** Furthermore, KC Code Title 23 provides an assortment of effective enforcement tools to encourage or force compliance and to recoup costs. Unfortunately, these tools are often used ineffectively or not at all.

Permitting's budget structure and the behaviors of Code Enforcement are fully intertwined. **Rectifying these issues will require significant change in culture and budget structure responsibilities.** Permitting exists to honor and enforce our Rural resource and community protection laws. The division needs to rediscover that mission, and the directive to do so must come from you. **Selection of fresh leadership with a clear directive would enable you to effectively turn the tide before it's too late.**

3. **Road Services Division:** New vision is needed for the Division, which has a long-standing problem of a dwindling tax base that cannot even maintain the *existing* road system, let alone respond to new challenges from continuing growth regionwide. If current revenue sources can only fund about 12% of the 20-year needs, drastic decisions cannot be far away. Your growth management policies have been eminently successful in channeling most new growth into the urban core, but the growth that does take place in small outlying cities at the fringe of the region is putting enormous traffic growth onto county arterials that cannot handle such loads. Furthermore, that *through traffic* has devastating impacts on the Rural lands it passes through.

Rural residents entirely fund the county road tax but have difficulty getting out of their own neighborhoods due to throngs of city-to-city commuters using the county's rural arterials. And those commuters pay nothing into the county road fund! Worse, there are no mechanisms in place between jurisdictions for mitigation of these impacts even though growth management was supposed to include such mitigation. Such growth issues and funding issues will reach a climax in the next few years.

**Your choice of DLS Director must understand these issues and be prepared to lead with bold imagination, if Rural KC is to survive the next decade of regional growth and if we are to serve the goals enumerated in your Climate Action Plan.**

Rural residents are feeling the brunt of the negative impacts from DLS dysfunction and are already extremely frustrated. DLS is essentially our local government, and it should serve us as well as you. Urban and Rural residents alike are becoming increasingly concerned about climate change impacts on our region. More and more, KC citizens recognize the need to preserve Rural resource lands and open spaces from sprawl and to reduce carbon emissions by creating dense cities with housing and jobs, with effective public transit between those cities. **Without an effectively functioning DLS it will be extremely difficult to meet citizens' expectations and reach your Climate Action Plan goals. We believe you have a perfect opportunity as you assign new leadership at DLS to task it with wholesale and necessary change. Time is of the essence. Thank you.**

Respectfully,

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