



Mayor's Message for the 2022 Budget

To: City of White Salmon City Council and Residents of White Salmon

It is with great appreciation, as well as introspection, that I submit the 2022 budget. We are spending the people's money, and I don't take that responsibility lightly.

The tumult that 2021 brought to civic engagement and governance forced a reckoning for me, as an American and a public servant, about the roles of government and its residents. For our community, the hope at the outset of 2021 felt challenged by forces well beyond our boundaries: an insurrection at the United States Capitol, a challenge to the integrity of our democratic processes, our collective inability to unite against the shared enemy of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, and growing pessimism and distrust for anything associated with government.

These forces combined felt like a direct juxtaposition to the hard work and achievements happening on the ground in our community throughout the year. Among the many highlights were:

- A Comprehensive Plan that envisions a diverse, inclusive and prosperous White Salmon;
- Staff and elected official education on implicit biases and training to serve in a way that counteracts them;
- A resolution acknowledging the effects of climate change and creation of a citizen-led board to review proposed policies and City Hall operations to ensure climate-conscious and community-centered approaches (including the purchase of our first hybrid vehicle for BWSPD);
- White Salmon's first selection for a statewide AWC scholarship, awarded to 2021 CHS graduate Jacob Lockman, reinforcing the the importance of supporting our youth's academic aspirations;
- Implementing a form-based system for residents to submit street and litter complaints;
- Continued broad-scale compliance with pandemic restrictions, confirming our community's commitment to the health and safety of our most vulnerable members and the ability of our businesses to maintain operations;
- The noticeable beautification of our parks and downtown areas by our Public Works team, as well as their continued creativity and resilience in maintaining an aging water delivery system that brought its fair share of challenges;
- Community members eager to man cooling stations during rolling heat waves this summer;
- The coordinated, quick, and effective response to a wildfire in city limits among multiple agencies;
- And hiring a land-use planner after an extensive nationwide search that attracted applicants who saw the promise and possibility of our community.

With these milestones and so many others, the negative generalizations were challenged by individuals who consciously and intentionally worked for positive change. As Mayor, I seek to answer this question with our 2022 budget:

How do we continue to face our challenges with an innovative approach that is guided not only by our community's needs and limitations, but also our aspirations?

Finding the best answer to that question isn't a dream, it's a necessity. The reality of municipal budgets in Washington State is that there is only so much revenue we can grow into, while also balancing the core obligations of being an employer and provider of essential services. We must find ways to do both.

I strongly believe that at our city's level we have an advantage that is usually absent in the higher levels of government: the imagination, creativity, and vision that elected officials bring to the table when they are focused on serving their community in a non-partisan, minimally compensated fashion. Balancing that imagination with the realities of our operations is the challenge for a city like White Salmon.

Therefore, the recognition that White Salmon as an entity is a significant employer is front and center in this budget. In a year that brought sharp increases in the cost of living, we responded appropriately with compensation adjusted to be reflective of that dynamic, as well as support long-term growth possibilities for the individuals working on behalf of our community. We also want to set individuals up for success, and this budget accounts for overlap in the transition to a new Clerk/Treasurer as Jan Brending retires after more than 30 years of public service. On spreadsheets that means increased personnel costs. In reality, these are intentional investments in the people that keep this city running.



This budget also reinforces that the administration expects the roles and focus of our employees to be driven by the vision and direction of the elected leadership. The direction given by this council for 2022 focuses on these key areas:

- Public safety and hazard preparedness
- Ensuring residents receive quality, cost-effective services that maintain a sense of community
- Developing and implementing effective communication and outreach
- Reducing food waste at landfills and improving collection of recyclables
- Investing in and strengthening efforts on supporting attainable housing development

I believe this proposed budget emphasizes these areas.

It's important to call out that the dynamic housing market this year meant yet another stressor to the ongoing struggle of achieving affordable housing. However, it also created a significant increase in the real estate excise tax, which is appropriated towards investments in municipal capital improvements. Translating that abundance into investments that are felt by many community members is guided by the council's desire to "invest in existing parks to improve amenities and increase citizen use." Therefore an allocation is directed specifically towards improvements to our playground equipment in Rheingarten, on which this council has been passionately focused for years.

Housing for all continues to be a priority focus for my staff and me, and we are aware of the council's and community's expectations that the planning and discussions translate into action. While a specific housing project is not in this budget, I am confident we will deliver further on this issue in 2022. That means a focus on code updates, stronger alliances with organizations and developers in the affordable housing sector, and city investment, when applicable, to deliver on the needs of the community.

Last year, our budget asked the council to invest in a vision by our police department for a more community-centered approach to policing, especially regarding calls that required assistance for mental health crises. That visionary investment by the council resulted in commitments from other organizations to invest in further supporting this approach, showing how leadership can serve as a lighthouse leading other organizations to follow its ray of possibility, and continues to build into 2022. In addition, as we prepare to implement body cameras on all officers as part of House Bill 1223, the budget reflects a new part-time position for the police department to manage that data.

It must also be acknowledged there are visionary ideas currently before the council that aren't reflected in this budget. Namely the purchase of what is known as the Walker House (originally Rudolf Lauterbach's home) as a community gathering and event space, as well as the city's acquisition of Hwy 141. Both propositions were spurred by a desire to envision what will sustain White Salmon as a viable village-like community in the future and seeing the potential of these local investments to realize broader gains for local businesses. Whether these proposed investments are endorsed by elected leadership remains to be seen, but the mere fact that the council is exploring such forward-thinking ideas reinforces the leadership style I aspire to achieve: one where passion flows into policymaking, challenging the notion that things are pre-determined, in a rut, or settled.

We are but a small piece of the larger pie that constitutes the United States of America, but in many ways our strong civic government and civic engagement feels like a statement against the hyperbole at higher levels. As we work together for the common good, we are proving the experiment of a democratic republic can succeed in benefitting its people.

It is with honor that I continue to humbly accept the charge of running the city responsibly and with purpose. I also graciously ask to be held accountable and challenged to see issues from other viewpoints.

In closing, I would like to express my respect and gratitude to my Department Heads: City Administrator Pat Munyan, Clerk/Treasurer Jan Brending, Public Works Manager Russ Avery, Land Use Planner Brendan Conboy, Police Chief Mike Hepner, and Building Inspector and Fire Chief Bill Hunsaker. Their continued patience in navigating the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, as well as their daily leadership and ingenuity in serving the city has been greatly appreciated.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Marla Keethler".

Mayor Marla Keethler