



City of Seattle

Mayor Durkan's 2021 Budget Address: Rebuilding a More Just and Equitable City

Mayor Jenny A. Durkan, September 29, 2020

Every September, I have the responsibility to propose a budget for Seattle for the upcoming year.

Every year I spend a lot of time outside City Hall, in the community to hear your priorities and what you want your City budget and investments to do.

And each year the budget is based in large part on what I hear from people outside City Hall, throughout Seattle.

Because I believe strongly that your Mayor and elected representatives work for you and we need to listen to you.

This time last year, our budget reflected our city: vibrant, rooted in equity and focused on the future.

Everything seemed possible.

But 2020 had other plans.

This has been a brutal year for everyone in Seattle.

We are still in the grips of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our national public health crisis is fueling an economic downturn with historic unemployment.

And our president and the federal government continue to fail us with their lack of leadership.

Many of us have lost loved ones.

Others have lost jobs, income, or businesses we put our hopes and dreams in.

We have been isolated from the people we love.

As parents, we're managing kids at home from school.

It's been the challenge of our lifetimes.

In just a few months, Seattle went from enjoying one of the strongest economies in our country, to record numbers of Seattleites out of work, worried about paying rent or putting food on the table.

This crisis and this summer have also magnified racial disparities that exist across our nation and here at home.

Since George Floyd was murdered by police officers, we have seen protests that have challenged us to do better.

That have challenged us to fix the disparities in health care, education, housing, policing and the criminal legal system.

That have demanded solutions to the systemic discrimination that undermines the safety, health, and economic strength of BIPOC communities.

We are living through one of the most consequential years of our lives.

It has impacted every one of us, and every American.

It has touched our City government, too.

Many of our workers remained on the frontlines, providing the City services you needed.

Our work and community needs have grown.

But our revenue is shrinking.

This year, we saw hundreds of millions of dollars in lost revenues to the City.

And we face similar losses next year.

The revenue that funds things like shelters, transportation, and food banks was decimated.

And we have no promise of additional federal support.

Early in this crisis, I knew it could be bad and took immediate steps to cut costs and protect vital city services.

I froze hiring and cut tens of millions in spending across city departments.

With the pandemic and unexpected new emergencies, like the West Seattle Bridge, wildfire smoke and collapsing piers we can't avoid hard choices in this budget.

But even in a time of tough decisions, history demands that we meet the challenges of this moment and strive for the kind of city we want to be when we come out of these crisis:

Stronger, more just, and more equitable.

Not just in policing and the criminal legal system, but in every institution.

So amid historic challenges, our task with this budget is to preserve critical City services while doing four key things:

Continuing to invest in our response to the COVID-19 pandemic;

Making the City's largest-ever investment in racial equity and justice;

Addressing our homelessness and housing crisis;

And building true community safety while also re-imagining policing.

Together, we can face these challenges and show the nation what progressive leadership can accomplish.

The global pandemic is a once in a lifetime challenge.

Seattle leads the nation in our COVID-19 response and recovery strategy, and we cannot let up.

We have one of the lowest number of cases and the highest levels of testing in any major American city.

Our Seattle Fire Department pioneered nationally recognized testing programs.

Our free, accessible, city-wide testing, has facilitated 200,000 tests at our city sites.

We collected and distributed more than a million face masks and PPE to first responders and our community.

We provided monthly grocery vouchers and food assistance to tens of thousands of families, so they can have healthy meals.

I signed one of the nation's first eviction moratoriums for residents, small businesses and nonprofits.

But we know the rent is still due, so we are also helping struggling Seattle households with rent payments.

We created a first in the nation small business support program to provide \$10,000 to hundreds of struggling small businesses including many right here at Pike Place Market.

Emergency child care for frontline workers....

Discounts on households' utility bills....

Immigrant and refugee cash assistance....

These programs were the right response to an emergency that is not over.

And this budget invests in continuing to lead the nation in a just and compassionate COVID response.

The communities hardest hit during this pandemic have been our BIPOC communities.

For too long we have allowed our systems to perpetuate inequity – particularly against our Black neighbors.

That is why this budget also begins to address the historic disparities brought forward by the COVID-19 pandemic and since the murder of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor:

I signed my first Executive Order the day I was sworn into office, focusing our efforts around Race and Social Justice.

Since then, as a city we have made record investments to advance equity and justice.

Things like \$1.5 billion in new affordable housing to build thousands of new units.

Nearly \$100 million on quality preschool and child care.

More than \$30 million in our Equitable Development Initiative to invest in community-based organizations that are working to combat displacement, like Africatown, Ethiopian village, the Filipino Community Center, Chief Seattle Club, and Byrd Barr.

We've spent \$40 million for youth safety.

And a seven year commitment for free college and a program to get those students jobs so they could be part of our innovative economy.

Our budget makes a lot of hard decisions. But if we want a more equitable City when we recover from this crisis, we must make real our promises to our BIPOC communities.

We need deep and lasting investments, and we must empower community to guide those investments.

That is why my budget commits an additional \$100 million in new spending for Black communities, Indigenous communities, and communities of color.

It will invest in building Opportunity and an Inclusive Economy.

Community Wealth Building and Preserving Cultural Spaces.

Community Wellness and Safety.

Environmental justice and a Green New Deal.

Building on our current investments in equity, this \$100 million investment allows us to invest in more young people, community safety programs, and next generation of affordable housing in our community.

We need to do more of what we have done in the past three years.

But these decisions must be driven by community needs and priorities, and community voices – not by City Hall.

It must be community itself that crafts an investment plan to build the health of community.

Community members will guide us to direct these resources where they are needed the most.

Investing in community wealth, wellness and strength is also the path to true community safety.

By investing in equitable, healthy and resilient communities we reduce the need for emergency 911 responses.

Here in Seattle and in cities across the nation, people have spoken out and demanded that we re-imagine policing.

As US Attorney, I led the investigation of the Seattle Police Department that resulted in the consent decree.

That work created some of the nation's leading policies on policing.

It also allowed the Seattle Police Department to hire the best officers and train them in crisis intervention and de-escalation.

And it created robust civilian-led accountability systems so we could hold officers accountable.

But re-imagining policing is more than just training and policies.

We need to rethink how the Seattle Police Department serves our city and address the continued racial disparities in policing.

And we need to make further changes to our criminal legal system like reforming probation and breaking the cycle of incarceration.

We need more programs to prevent violence, alternatives to incarceration and a community court.

We also need to shift many of the 800,000 calls for help from armed police officers to other community-based programs.

Too often, our officers are responding to other failures: the failures of our foster care system, our behavioral health system, our homelessness system, and our education system.

Those aren't problems officers should have to address

Often 9-1-1 calls require a fast police response, and Seattle needs a strong, well-trained, and community based department for those calls.

There is a need and strong support for our officers in this City.

But non-violent calls don't always need an officer with a gun.

Someone in crisis may need a social worker. A nurse. A crisis counselor. Or an unarmed Community Service Officer.

So reimagining policing will mean fundamentally changing the role of traditional police in our community and their interactions with our community, especially communities of color.

It will mean growing existing programs like nurses in our schools and in our homeless shelters.

Mental health professionals at our police precincts.

Trusted messengers for our youth in communities.

And our successful Health One program, where we respond to non-emergency calls for people in crisis with specially trained social workers and fire fighters.

We're already doing it here downtown, and in this budget we'll expand it to both South Seattle and communities in North Seattle, including Ballard and the University District.

These programs ultimately must be part of a new model for community safety throughout Seattle.

And if we get this right, we will not only reduce the 9-1-1 calls that require an armed Seattle Police officer, we can increase health and reduce harm.

But these decisions can't be decided by bumper stickers and slogans or arbitrary numbers.

They must be founded on facts and a real plan.

They must parallel building better community wellness and health.

They must parallel the investments we need to make in community.

We must continue to act urgently to address our homelessness and housing crisis.

This crisis is decades in the making, but we had begun to see progress on key fronts: housing, shelter and services.

We invested more than \$1.5 billion to create nearly 4,500 units of affordable housing, including permanent supportive housing.

Places like Mercy Housing Gardner House and Allen Family Center, that provides 95 units of affordable and supportive housing and resources for childcare, immigrant and refugee services, and homelessness prevention.

We nearly doubled 24/7 shelter - including tiny home villages - to move people out of homelessness and into permanent places.

We created a new Regional Homelessness Authority to break down siloes in our response.

But the pandemic has created new challenges for our homelessness response.

There are more individuals without access to hygiene services with libraries and businesses closed.

Many vulnerable individuals at the highest risk for COVID-19 live at our shelters, permanent supportive housing or are living unsheltered.

There are more tents and encampments across our City.

There are more people at risk of going hungry.

In the initial weeks of the pandemic, we worked quickly to bring new shelter capacity online.

We created hygiene resources, converted crowded overnight shelters to 24/7 shelters with social distancing measures to slow the spread of COVID-19, and we expanded COVID-19 testing.

Our actions have limited outbreaks among individuals experiencing homelessness compared to other major cities.

My budget continues to increase our shelter capacity to bring more of our neighbors out of encampments and into permanent housing.

It supports more than 2,300 shelter units and adds another 300 new units of short-term shelter.

In addition to more than a thousand permanent supportive housing units coming online and thousands of affordable homes, we are also increasing investments in strategies we know work: diversion and rapid rehousing.

Seattle cannot and will never solve our affordability, homelessness and housing crisis if we continue to act alone.

These challenges do not know any city boundaries.

If we want to truly address housing and homelessness, we must act as a region.

So what's next for Seattle and our budget?

As happens every year, the members of the City Council will consider this plan.

In recent months, we have had policy disagreements about their pledge to cut the police by 50%, the best approach to address encampments, spending of the City's emergency funds and raising taxes only on Seattle businesses.

We may still have policy disagreements in the future – but you expect and deserve your government to work together on the toughest challenges.

In this unprecedented moment, you deserve leaders that will work hard to bridge our divides.

Listen, there is no greater City.

Look around us.

This is a time to come together and ensure our city rebuilds from this pandemic a better and more equitable City.

We can make big bold changes together and get through this moment.

Because over the last three years our City has led on progressive change:

A Domestic Workers Bill of Rights for 30,000 domestic workers.

Vacating marijuana convictions.

A minimum wage for rideshare drivers.

Sending thousands of Seattle kids to free college.

Eliminating late fines for libraries.

A safe storage law to keep firearms off our streets.

A new arena, the Seattle Kraken, and no public funds used.

Seattle should be proud of our accomplishments and our determination.

We are compassionate.

We are resilient.

And despite a year of challenges and setbacks, we will do big things and lead the nation.

We will get through this together.

And I have no doubt that we can meet this unprecedented moment for our City.

We will make generational change.