

Date: May 13, 2012; Section: Opinion; Page: A4

Editorial

To thrive as a county, we must work together

Skagit County is a big place with many little fiefdoms, but it's been increasingly clear that working together is the best and possibly only way to rebuild and thrive after what our economy has experienced.

It isn't just the economy, however, that makes this so necessary. We share common issues ranging from the rising costs of health care and education to the risk of flooding and the use of natural resources in a fragile environment.

Unity can be painful, but ultimately worthwhile to achieve common goals.

It's clear Skagit County needs unity on many fronts, and we're pleased to see alliances forming and conversations starting in several important areas for the good of us all.

Skagit County is complicated. Its population of 118,000 is spread mostly west to east over 1,731 square miles. It has eight municipalities — some with their own police departments and libraries — many more unincorporated communities, seven school districts, three hospital districts, three Native American tribal communities, a handful of dike districts and a strong sense of identity in every single subgroup that makes up this county. As of this year, we have two congressional districts instead of one. Besides all of that, the occasional collision of interests involving such issues as fish, water, flooding and farming adds a volatile dynamic that can make governance even more difficult.

When times are good, it seems easier to build walls and dig moats to protect our individual interests. But there are times when it makes no sense to stand alone, and there are examples of collaboration happening all over this county now.

Examples:

The need for small hospital districts (we have three) to form alliances with bigger hospitals or with each other to survive in the fast-changing world of health care. All three hospitals have recognized the need and are working on alliances, though sadly not all with one another. Two of them have formed an alliance with a neighboring district in Snohomish County, and the third has reached out to a hospital in Whatcom.

The seven school districts act as individual units, but the superintendents of each one have regular meetings to discuss common issues, and they're increasingly finding ways to help one another.

The libraries aren't interested in becoming a single system either, but they've worked out sharing agreements that give residents across the county a wider range of resources.

The county has stepped away from the legal wrangling over water issues between the state and Swinomish tribe, which could pave the way for better cooperation among local entities.

The Skagit Council of Governments is meeting and talking again about issues affecting all of our communities. SCOG, which has representatives from across the county, is crucial to forming the cooperation the area needs to succeed.

Conversations are taking place all over the valley that simply weren't necessary a few years ago — or at least not necessary enough. Some of the credit for getting those talks going must go to the citizens involved in the Envision Skagit 2060 initiative and the county commissioners who set it up. That initiative included asking a variety of area residents to think about how they want this place to look in 50 years with the likely addition of 100,000 more people.

They took the job seriously and offered up a series of recommendations that uncovered some of the challenges we will face over time as the population grows and puts pressure on our natural and fiscal resources. Not everyone agrees with all of the recommendations, but the plan has been a conduit to draw everyone to the table to talk.

Fifty years is not a long time, and we will answer to our children and grandchildren for the decisions we make

today.

Planning starts with talking about what we want, and then it requires collaborative discussion among the parties with the power to effect change.

It's difficult work, but it is so important that the citizens of Skagit County should demand it. As individuals, we get a chance to do that soon with upcoming elections. Our leaders — from the neighborhood to the national stage — need to know that our expectation is that they work toward the greater good of this place in which we live.

Times are tough, and our best option — maybe our only option — is to band together, as difficult as it may be.

Editorials reflect the consensus opinion of Publisher Heather Hernandez and Editor Colette Weeks. Signed columns reflect the author's viewpoint.