

Open letter to the County Council and the public on behalf of county employees

More than four months have gone by since 87 county employees jointly submitted a letter to the Whatcom County Council requesting a meaningful response to revelations by Cascade PBS of charges of sexual harassment in the County Public Works Department, disclosure of a letter of recommendation on behalf of the accused signed by the County Executive and Deputy Executive, and a payout of \$225,000 that was neither disclosed to the County Council nor to the public, as required by law.

Although County Council formed a subcommittee in early May to investigate, *Cascadia Daily News* [reported in late July](#) that “Three months into a high-profile investigation of Whatcom County administration’s role in a sexual harassment settlement, county council members have no meaningful or substantial updates for the public.” Another month and a half has gone by with no significant updates.

In their [May 7 letter to County Council](#), county employees wrote, “we feel that our trust in the process has been compromised and the victims did not receive the support and justice they deserved. Moreover, the accused was recommended for employment elsewhere in a similar position of power, posing a potential risk of recurrence. This constitutes a failure on the part of our organization. The actions taken by the administration have had far-reaching consequences, impacting both our organization and the broader community.”

The letter continued, “The mishandling of this case has eroded the trust and confidence we have in the County Administration’s commitment to addressing sexual harassment cases effectively. We do not feel safe or supported. It is disheartening to witness a lack of accountability and transparency, which are essential in creating a workplace free from harassment, discrimination and bullying.”

The employees requested “Regular communication and updates on the progress made in addressing this issue, to regain our trust and confidence in the County’s commitment to its employees.” As signaled by CDN above, this has not happened.

Last April the Whatcom Democrats Executive Board issued a public statement based on *verifiable facts*: [The letter of recommendation](#) for the accused jointly signed by the County Executive and Deputy Executive, the County Executive’s own words in an official email to the County Council following the disclosure by Cascade PBS, and the fact that the Executive broke the law ([County Code 3.05.020](#)) by not informing the County Council of the payout. *None of this has changed.*

We have since learned from CDN that Mr. Hutchings [wrote his own draft letter of recommendation](#), that former Deputy Executive Tyler Schroeder – now employed by the

Port of Bellingham – brought the letter to the County Executive, and “Together, they tweaked the wording before signing it.” Final responsibility rests with the Executive, who reaffirmed his decision in an official April 23 email to County Council: “Ultimately, we do not believe that a person is solely defined by their mistakes, and Mr. Hutchings had faced the very real consequence of losing his job. We agreed to sign a letter of introduction which highlighted the good work which he accomplished for the County but was silent on the circumstances of his departure. We understand that not everyone will agree with our decision.”

We also now know that the County Executive and the County Prosecutor jointly *failed to notify the public* of the payout, as required by [County Code 3.05.030](#), which states, “No settlements of any lawsuit to which the county is a party shall be made except with full public disclosure of the total settlement amount either paid by the county directly *or paid on the county’s behalf.*” The settlement was paid on the county’s behalf by the risk pool to which it belongs, which means this legal requirement is unambiguous. The obligation is to *inform the public directly and immediately.*

That means the Prosecutor and County Executive jointly sidestepped requirements of the law, giving the appearance that embarrassing disclosures were being withheld from the press and the public. *We hope the County Council’s report will explicitly document that disclosure laws as well as procedures were broken, explore why this happened, and by whom.*

One possible outcome of such a report could be a public acknowledgement of wrongdoing.

Our public employees deserve a safe workplace free from harassment. This requires prompt investigation and meaningful accountability.