

LWV-Kitsap Bremerton/CK Special Unit Meeting Notes--Thursday, April 28, 2022

Guest Karen Goon, Kitsap County Administrator

Attending our Zoom Webinar: Maureen Cervinsky, Denise Justice, Janice McLemore, Linda Streissguth, Robin Muir, Connie Marchant, Debbie Klabo, Raejean Bridges-Avalos, Candy Rankin, Pat Troxell, Amanda Rodgers, Debi Barner, Mary Earl, Carol Larsen (NK), Marty Bishop (SK)

Maureen opened the webinar by sharing with guest Karen Goon that the Kitsap League of Women Voters was founded in 1966-67 and our Bremerton/CK unit was formed in December, 2018. We decided as a unit we wanted to learn more about our city and county and have been inviting representatives of different organizations, governmental entities and schools to come speak with us these last three years. Currently we are working on updating a League booklet entitled *Know Your County*, for which understanding how our local government works will be a great help.

Maureen introduced Karen Goon, Kitsap County Administrator for the last eight years. An attorney by training, she did an internship with Pierce County Public Works while she was waiting for her bar exam results, which subsequently led to a 35-year career in county government. She earned her Bachelor's degree, J.D. degree and Master's degree in Public Administration from Seattle University. She brought her years of experience and what she had learned in her positions with Pierce County to her new position with Kitsap County as County Administrator. She said it has been a deeply rewarding experience, one in which she has grown as an individual and has seen some great talent come through their offices.

Karen screen shared a chart of the duties of the County Administrator:

Board of Equalization
Volunteer Services
Noxious Weed
Cooperative Extension Services

Emergency Management	Administrative Services	Human Resources	Information Services	Facilities Maintenance
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She explained that the county's external-facing departments (including Community Development, Human Services, Pubic Works & Parks) report to the three County Commissioners, while the internal-facing departments are part of her responsibilities. She assists with Emergency Management, an intergovernmental agency, which receives most of its funding from the county. Karen interfaces with all the other county electeds. Apart from the Coroner, whose position is being retired in 2023 to be replaced by a Medical Examiner (the current pathologist on staff), the other electeds are all up for re-election in 2022. Additionally, the District 3 County Commissioner office is also up for re-election; current Commissioner Ed Wolfe has chosen not to run again.

Each day is different for Karen, with a little bit of everything coming before her. She monitors the Commissioners' calendars and usually sits in on Commissioner meetings and briefings. Today included a briefing with the Information Services manager. As well, she drafted ordinances and assisted with inquiries from various departments on where to find specific information. Departments have regular updates with the

Board. Karen said all these different aspects of her job afford her the opportunity to understand more about government and its budgeting process.

Karen was then happy to receive questions from our 5-person panel for the duration of our meeting time, made up of Maureen, Robin, Linda, Denise & Janice.

Maureen asked Karen what have been the greatest changes she has seen in the eight years she has served as Kitsap County Administrator? One thing that came to mind right away for Karen is the fact that she has not seen a change in the County Commissioners she has served under in her time with Kitsap County--she has become very comfortable working with all of them. From a broader societal standpoint, the speed with which information travels has changed tremendously. On social media, a tweet can become widespread before anyone has a chance to debunk the myth. Karen said they're never going to spin an issue; they are constantly seeking to improve how they can put out correct information if they hear or see something that is inaccurate.

Robin asked what Karen sees as the one or two most important issues the county faces?

Karen said, without a doubt, it is the labor shortage of skilled workers: engineers, planning staff, commercial licensed drivers, as examples. The county currently has 129 unfilled positions. In April alone 22 hires were made, and in that same time frame, 16 employees ended employment, many of them retiring. Their largest cost center is people. Being a small county bordered by King & Pierce counties, Kitsap can train new employees, only to have them poached by larger jurisdictions, or to adjoining cities within Kitsap County, where they can make more money potentially. As well, private companies sometimes hire away their skilled laborers and engineers. The pandemic allowed many employees to work from anywhere, so they could choose to remain in Kitsap, but work for an employer outside the county. Kitsap County wants to be looked at as an employer of choice, and they have had to get creative in order to stay competitive. The county relies on property tax (a relatively stable revenue stream) and sales tax, upon which it is largely dependent. An unexpected substantial increase in sales tax occurred during the last two years, when people did a lot of shopping on-line. "Destination sales tax" (calculated based on the location where the buyer receives the product or service) produced a good amount of revenue, some of which is being applied to their new retention and recruitment incentive plan. They are going to do a deep dive & analysis in order to refresh their compensation structure of 38 pay bands, each with 15 steps. For the meantime, they are offering incentives for many of their mid-level employees who may be considering leaving their county positions, especially law enforcement and corrections officers, who will be given \$10,000 to stay for another two years, hoping those officers will in many cases choose to put off retirement. A new deputy who has already gone through academy training could be offered a signing bonus. The signing bonus is applied to hard-to-fill positions: juvenile detention officers, human services professionals who focus on child psychology or drug and alcohol addiction, court reporters.

Karen also talked about the ripple effect of rising gasoline prices on petroleum products they use when paving roads. Infrastructure maintenance and the "mega projects" now being done by Public Works have become more expensive and are increasing in number, requiring the county to stretch those allotted dollars pretty far. Decisions about dispersal of American Rescue Plan dollars received by the county are being discussed. That money comes with responsibility, to put it to use wisely and effectively: social services, mental health, homeless crisis are all areas of great need. Maintaining thorough records is also critical, to be able to justify in future audits where the dollars were spent.

Linda, who was a County Commissioner on the interview panel when Karen was hired as County Administrator, asked how Karen's responsibilities have changed over these eight years?

Karen said those years have gone by in a flash. They pivoted in March, 2020 to one-third of their workforce going online, learning how to maintain connectivity via MS Teams and Zoom. In the middle of the pandemic they instituted a new financial system. She had to figure out how to get hold of real-time data and keep up with what was going on in each department. The county went all virtual with their board meetings and worked hard to maintain transparency with the public in that format. Sometimes she would be working with two computer screens, while using her phone and another device all at the same time. These substantial changes actually gave her greater insight into the workings of the county, and she realized you have to be comfortable with and embrace technology and all that it will bring to the job.

Denise asked what Karen most enjoyed about what she does as County Administrator?

Without hesitation, Karen responded, it has to be the variety. After a full day, if she needs to stay later, she will do so to avoid working on weekends. She has been involved in the hiring of all department directors under her reporting structure, and she has a tremendous amount of trust in all of them. They are all exceptional employees, efficient and effective in their jobs, giving her the ability to relax, because she knows they have her back. They chat on MS Teams and via emails. She is most proud of the recruitment of valuable people she has worked with, as well as being able to encourage and be a cheerleader for those who departed, who were moving on to new opportunities.

Janice asked Karen to speak about broadband development in Kitsap County.

Karen said the county partners with Kitsap Public Utilities District (KPUD). KPUD is engaged in increasing broadband access to unserved and underserved areas. Some of the funding for that expansion will come from American Rescue Plan dollars the county received, as well as from grants and other sources. Tech entrepreneurs in our county also depend on reliable broadband. As a telecommunications utility, KPUD provides the infrastructure, while local cable providers are the retail supplier of broadband connections. KPUD's service map covers most of the county. New KPUD Executive Director Angela Bennink would be a good contact for learning more about plans for expansion.

Janice also asked about Kitsap1 phone line. 360-337-5777, open Monday-Friday 8am to 4:30pm.

Karen said the phone line is staffed by customer service employees and serves as the county's front line for all non-emergency services and questions. The public can also email help@kitsap1.com

Through the county's GovDelivery system, people can sign up to get email or text updates for the topics they're interested in, such as inclement weather, emergency alerts, road reports, recycling & garbage news:

<https://public.govdelivery.com/accounts/WAKITSAP/subscriber/new>

GovDelivery now has 70,000 subscribers, and notifications are sent to all the social media pages.

Karen's concern is the generation that is not fluent with technology, those persons who want to call and talk to a person. Kitsap1 provides that capability.

Kitsap County is in the process of changing their domain, from co.kitsap.wa.us to kitsap.gov

They are rolling it out in phases: first, with outbound emails. All the departments will be changing their webpage and stationery. Karen said the county's webpage when she came to work there in 2014 was very dense and text heavy; they are now streamlining the front page to highlight the information they receive the most inquiries about. They expect to have the domain change completed by the end of this year.

Carol Larsen asked, via chat, if the county is considering raising the number of county commissioners to reflect the increasing population?

Karen responded, in order to do that, the county may need to enact a new charter. As the commissioners act as the executive and policy arm of the county government, Karen feels it's important to have professional staff guiding them. The County Administrator position in Kitsap dates back to 1998 and the position has evolved through the years, with no Administrator during the recession. Commissioner Rob Gelder told Karen that before she was hired, the Chair of the Board took on the administrative responsibilities, in addition to the executive and policy duties. The Chair position rotates among the three commissioners each year. With Karen acting as the internal face of county government, the Commissioners are freed up to interact with the public & their constituents, and policy programs proceed much more smoothly. Other considerations if looking to change the number of Commissioners: Move from an appointed County Administrator to an elected County Executive? Look at other positions to see if there is redundancy: do we need both an Assessor and a Treasurer?

Maureen asked if there have been changes made as a result of the pandemic that Karen thinks will continue? When they pivoted in March, 2020 to a partly virtual workforce, everyone learned to accept telecommuting and stay engaged in their work. As restrictions ease, the county will look at possibly remaining in a hybrid mode and also consider if it needs to maintain the same square footage of building space. In June of 2021 when the Auditor's office opened up for a few hours/week, a line of 91 people formed who wanted to come inside the building and see someone face to face. Certainly the county will continue to do its best to serve the public with its robust information system, ability to upload permits, live chats, and video appointments, but will need to maintain some face-to-face option.

Thinking about what to include in our *Know Your County* booklet, Linda asked what might be the top areas that are least understood or that people are not aware of. Karen spoke about the tsunami of phone calls the county received when Waste Management (with whom the county contracts for garbage removal) missed several pickup dates due to a labor shortage. People count on their regular curbside pickup. When Olympic View transfer station had to recently close because of a garbage compactor failure, people were very unhappy. The county hears about lots of discontent when snow and ice removal does not occur as quickly as people think it should. Karen said there's a real shortage of snowplow CDL drivers; their labor force is depleted as other entities hire away their employees.

Karen said, when we're not there to do the expected work, people are not happy. It's the truism, you don't miss us until we're gone. People do not realize that Law and Justice make up 70% of the general fund. The county works hard to maintain the other core services, but it is a continual challenge.

Janice wanted Karen to know that she hears from her neighbors in Holly that they are very appreciative of the county workers who come out their way to collect garbage and waste, plow roads, clear fallen debris after a storm. Karen was happy to hear that and said she would pass along those kudos.

Maureen asked Karen if she had a wish, something she'd like to see happen. Karen answered that her hope for today is peace in Ukraine. She worries about the conflict broadening out, an increased impact on Kitsap, affecting the supply chain, the global economy, food resources.

Karen shared with us at the beginning of our meeting that our invitation to speak is the first time in her eight years as County Administrator to do this kind of presentation. She has always worked with elected officials who are in front of the public, while she usually stays in the background. We are very appreciative that Karen agreed to share with us. She is emblematic of the high quality of people who are the county and city officials we have spoken with, and we all benefit from the dedication, knowledge, and professionalism she brings to her position. Many thanks to you, Karen, for taking the time to sit down with us after a full day on the job, answering our questions, and for all you do each day for our community.

MARK YOUR CALENDAR:

LWV-K Annual Meeting via Zoom

Tuesday, May 17 5PM-8PM

5PM-6:30PM Business Meeting

7PM-8PM Keynote Webinar: Guest Speaker WA State Sen. Christine Rolfes

Register at <https://tinyurl.com/lwvk-keynote>

Bremerton/CK Unit Meeting

Saturday, May 21 10AM

@ United Way in downtown Bremerton & via Zoom

Guest: David Nelson, Kitsap Sun editor, re state of local news

Note: Armed Forces Parade also begins at 10AM downtown

Submitted by Candy Rankin