

EXECUTIVE GIRMAY ZAHILAY

STATE OF THE COUNTY ADDRESS – JUNE 10, 2026

Thank you, Mayor Ralph.

Thank you Mayor Ferrell for hosting us in Federal Way at this beautiful venue.

Chair Perry, members of the County Council, leaders of our sovereign tribes, labor partners, elected officials, King County employees, and residents: Good evening.

I'm Girmay Zahilay and I want to welcome you to my first ever State of the County address.

Right here in Federal Way, within just a few blocks, you can see what it looks like when our region invests in connection.

Next to us is the Downtown Federal Way light rail station, which we opened recently to connect thousands of residents to more opportunity.

And just across Pacific Highway is Booker House, which we opened in December, providing 86 units of housing and services to keep people rooted in their communities.

Finally, we are gathered on a street named after Councilmember Pete von Reichbauer, who has spent over five decades fighting for South King County.

Pete, thank you for your leadership, your mentorship, and your continued service.

This is the vision of our administration: a connected region where every community is safe, housed, healthy, and empowered to succeed.

Connection is the idea at the center of everything I want to talk about today.

This region means so much to me.

I arrived here at the age of three as the child of refugees. King County opened its doors to my family and gave us a chance to rebuild our lives.

That is the story of King County. A place that welcomes you and gives you opportunities no matter your starting point. But for too many, those opportunities are slipping away.

In 2026, we are seeing both progress and pressure.

We have made real progress on some of the worst impacts of the pandemic. We're turning the page on peak levels of gun violence and overdose deaths.

But other challenges are getting worse. Affordable housing remains out of reach for too many.

Too many people are living outside and too many are just trying to hold on to the homes they have.

Childcare costs are forcing families to make impossible choices.

Thousands of people are losing their jobs due to a changing economy.

If I had to describe the state of King County in one sentence, it would be this:

We are living through a period of tremendous change.

Not only because we have a new administration for the first time in 16 years.

But because this year we are making generational decisions about our future.

Pivotal decisions about our regional transit system that will shape opportunity and connection for decades.

Pivotal decisions about our regional homelessness system.

Pivotal decisions about how we adapt to a technological revolution already reshaping jobs and industries.

And pivotal decisions about how we respond to a changing federal landscape that threatens equitable services and the civil rights of our residents.

In just a few days, we will welcome visitors from around the globe for FIFA World Cup. There will be more eyes on King County than ever before.

My friends, these are not ordinary times. These are consequential times.

And people in every corner of our region, especially those in this room, will define what comes next.

The choices we make together will determine whether this region becomes more connected or more divided, more affordable or more out of reach, more inclusive or more unequal.

To meet this moment, we have to usher in a new era of deeper connections and stronger collaboration.

And in my first six months as your County Executive, I have already seen what this new era can look like.

When I took the oath of office last winter, we expected a quiet December, focused on building a team and setting up a new administration.

But a week after I was sworn in, Mother Nature had other plans. A once-in-a-generation flood swept across Western Washington. Overnight, our transition became a full-scale emergency response.

At one point, I was in a hospital room at Swedish. My wife Joyce had just given birth to our second baby, Zoe.

At the same time, Governor Ferguson was in our King County offices with our teams, along with just about every journalist in the region, sharing critical updates about the floods.

With Joyce's blessing, I raced down the hill to address the public and share resources for our communities in need.

It's possible that Zoe became the first baby ever whose birth was announced at a press conference with FEMA.

I want to thank the rock of my family, Joyce, who makes it possible for me to do this demanding job with a toddler and a newborn at home.

The December floods showed what's possible in a new era of deeper connections and stronger collaboration.

Multiple times a day, we coordinated with federal and state agencies, local cities, and community partners.

Our King County teams led from the Emergency Operations Center in Renton.

Nicole Johnson from the Office of Emergency Management led messaging to the public during levee breaches, alerting people in harm's way and saving lives.

Our Department of Local Services protected residents in rural and unincorporated communities.

Gerard Green and the entire maintenance team worked round the clock to keep communities safe.

Ryan Kaluza and his team responded to the Pacific Levee breach at all hours.

Our King County Sheriff's Office went door-to-door to evacuate people at risk.

Deputy Nathan Greiert, a member of the Marine Rescue team, piloted a drone that dropped a lifejacket to a man stranded on top of his car in the raging Snoqualmie River.

Sergeant Eric Kim provided calm, compassionate leadership while staffing the EOC, strengthening our community response.

Our Department of Natural Resources and Parks implemented 24/7 flood patrols.

Seth Oakes, a Flood Patrol Lead, worked with his team day and night to coordinate effective recovery and response efforts.

Wastewater operator Tyler Stiltner was at the Carnation Treatment Plant for days keeping critical systems running before he could be relieved.

Experts at King County's IT department like Dennis Higgins, Adam Cabrera and Rhonda Parrish provided round-the-clock updates through a new flood warning app that helped over 100,000 people safely navigate dangerous conditions.

Emergency managers like Evan McKittrick at DCHS coordinated shelter and basic needs for evacuated populations.

Public Health also helped—sharing emergency messages in 26 languages across the community. I want to acknowledge Ken Anderson, Sili Kalepo, and Justin Jeffrey who worked with Community Navigators including Thyda Chhom to create and distribute safety information that truly made a difference.

Our Department of Human Resources stood up an employee giving campaign to donate to local organizations helping with flood relief.

If you had any role in flood response and recovery at any level of government, could you please stand?

Everyone please join me in thanking these amazing people for their heroic efforts.

In the face of a crisis like this, we can't lose sight of what we are working to protect.

We live in one of the most special and remarkable regions in the world.

Many of the pressures we feel today exist precisely because so many people want to live here.

Over the past 16 years, King County has grown by more than 400,000 people and our infrastructure has not kept pace.

People choose this region because few places in the world have what we have.

Breath-taking natural beauty, incredible arts and culture, innovative companies and research institutions, and diverse communities.

We have to ensure that the next generation, leaders like our youth speaker Sam, can inherit all that this place has to offer.

That responsibility is more urgent than ever.

We are in a moment where the demands on King County government are growing faster than our resources.

We're facing budget pressures that jeopardize our services.

We're navigating hostility from the federal administration that cuts our funding and threatens the civil rights of our residents.

Public trust in government has been strained by headlines about audit findings, and the perception that problems keep getting worse despite more money being spent on them.

Too many people are asking an important question.

Is government actually working?

It's a question I hear more and more in 2026. And based on the excellent services our employees provide every day, I firmly believe the answer is "Yes."

Government is working, but it must work better.

That is the mission that led me to organize our work around four priorities we call the 4 Bs for a better future.

Breaking the cycle.

Building for affordability.

Being in community.

And building a better government

All four matter.

And **Better Government** is foundational to all of them.

Because without trust, without transparency and accountability, and without effective systems, none of the rest is possible.

So we begin there.

In the first six months of this administration, we have spent significant time confronting the challenges that have tested public confidence.

From the \$35 billion funding gap at Sound Transit, to the challenges at the Regional Homelessness Authority, to the audit findings within county departments, these issues have built up over years and required us to re-establish excellence as the standard.

That's why one of our first initiatives was the Better Government Executive Order.

My direction was to fix these issues immediately, protect taxpayer dollars, and improve performance across county government.

We created an Internal Audit Director position inside the Executive Office.

That director is now working with departments to resolve audit findings, strengthen internal controls, improve grantmaking, and identify risks before they become failures.

We are developing a stronger countywide conflict of interest policy.

We are doing base budget reviews for the first time in King County's modern history to make sure we hold every dollar accountable to the highest standards.

And we are working with the King County Council to create a centralized function to investigate fraud, waste, and abuse.

I support that effort. And I want to thank Councilmember Dembowski, Councilmember Dunn, Chair Perry, and their colleagues for leading it.

The bottom line is that we have to do better, and we will hold people accountable for any act of fraud or abuse.

Additionally, we are advancing our hybrid work policy and making significant progress toward all employees returning to the office in person and in the field, at least three days a week.

This approach leads to better customer service, more opportunities for face-to-face collaboration, and a government that is more accessible.

One example is in our permitting operations.

Because more staff are available in person, residents and businesses can now access walk-in permitting services four days a week, up from just one day a week in 2025.

And by the end of this year, the public will be able to walk in and get help five days a week.

This is **Better Government** in action.

I want to sincerely thank our labor partners for their collaboration and good faith bargaining on what has been a significant change for some of our employees.

Better Government is the foundation everything else rests on.

Nowhere has this work been more visible than in the Department of Community and Human Services.

DCHS has faced significant scrutiny.

But under the leadership of our Interim Director, Dr. Susan McLaughlin, the department has made tremendous progress.

In April, DCHS launched enhanced fraud prevention training for all employees, which will now expand countywide.

That same month, the independent Auditor's Office found that the department is on track to meet all ten audit recommendations. That is accountability in practice and I am proud of our DCHS teams.

This is just one example of how we will become the best-run regional government in the country.

I have confidence that we have the right leadership in our departments at the right time to make this happen.

At the same time, I need to address the challenges facing the Regional Homelessness Authority.

In the near term, I am laser focused on strengthening financial oversight, maintaining services, protecting taxpayers, and putting our region in the strongest position for federal funds.

In the long term, the status quo is not an option. This year's Point in Time count will be announced in a couple weeks and will likely reignite conversations around the effectiveness of our current approach.

We need a regional reset.

That is why I will continue working with Mayor Katie Wilson, the Seattle City Council, and the King County Council to bring regional leaders and providers together to shape the future of our homelessness response system.

Our neighbors are counting on us, and we must do better.

This leads me to **Breaking the Cycle** and **Building for Affordability**. These are my other two core priorities that will help us build a more effective system.

Let me start with **Breaking the Cycle**.

Our top policy priority is to solve the distinct but overlapping crises of homelessness, behavioral health, and incarceration that harm too many communities, especially our Black, Native American, LGBTQIA+, and disability communities.

That is why one of the first actions we took was to launch a new Breaking the Cycle Workgroup, bringing together service providers, housing organizations, behavioral health experts, public safety leaders, and elected officials.

In addition to coordination, we need to increase the supply of life saving housing and services, like we did here in Federal Way with Booker House.

Booker House is now part of a network of 15 Health Through Housing sites opened by the County across seven cities providing stable housing and support to more than a thousand people.

We are also increasing behavioral health care through the Crisis Care Centers Levy that I led on as a Councilmember.

I recently visited the Kirkland Crisis Care Center, which is already open and serving youth and adults in North King County.

The Seattle Crisis Care Center will open on Capitol Hill next year. Soon we will have providers for our future sites in South and East King County, and for a fifth youth-focused location.

For the first time in history, we will have centers for mental health and addiction in every corner of the region for anyone to use 24 hours a day, seven days a week regardless of insurance status.

Thank you to DCHS, the Department of Executive Services, and other departments for working together on these important projects that will change the lives of so many people.

Breaking the Cycle is about improving every aspect of our region's health care system.

Our new director of Public Health, Doctor Sandra Valenciano, and her team enrolled 13,000 clients into health care over the past year.

We are also now on track to deliver the long-overdue update to Harborview Medical Center.

Shovels are expected to be in the ground in January to begin building incredible new facilities at the only Level 1 Trauma Center in Washington.

Breaking the Cycle also means taking a more coordinated approach to public safety.

I'm proud to share that Jail Health Services and the Department of Adult and Juvenile Detention are building new programs to better connect people leaving detention to behavioral health care, housing, and other services before they are released.

And our Sheriff's Office provides critical services in unincorporated King County, our contract cities, and the Muckleshoot tribe.

We know that public safety is broader than policing alone.

That is why I am announcing a new Public Safety Coordinator position within the Executive Office.

This role will help align public safety efforts across county government and convene partners to drive regional policies for communities experiencing the highest levels of crime and violence.

We will continue building a Sheriff's Office that is effective and trusted while advancing a broader public safety strategy that addresses the root causes of crime.

Nowhere is that work more urgent than our fight against gun violence.

Every person in King County deserves to feel and be safe. Everyone should be able to commute to work safely, enjoy our public spaces, or go to school without fear.

While shootings in King County have declined by more than 50 percent since 2023, too many families, young people, and neighborhoods continue to experience the devastating impacts of gun violence.

That is why I'll be proposing nearly five million dollars to sustain and strengthen the Regional Office of Gun Violence Prevention, building on its work to prevent violence, intervene with those most at risk, respond when violence occurs, and support safer communities across our region.

But just sustaining this work is not enough. We must strengthen how violence prevention is coordinated across county government and the region.

We will make changes to bring that coordination closer to the Executive Office to deliver a more unified approach to community safety.

But breaking the cycle is only part of the equation.

We also have to: **Build for Affordability.**

Housing costs continue to be the greatest pressure facing our communities.

That is why we are committed to opening 500 units of supportive and affordable housing in 500 days.

Today, I am pleased to announce another step towards that goal.

King County will move forward with a new supportive tiny house village with 80 units on county property in Seattle. I look forward to sharing more about this as our community outreach continues.

We are also growing long-term housing solutions.

In April, we opened CopperLeaf, our largest affordable housing investment ever, with 235 homes near Northgate light rail, built on Metro land.

We also invested in Prisma, breaking ground on 328 units of affordable housing in partnership with the city of Redmond and many others.

But we know we cannot solve a housing crisis one project at a time. We need a strategy that matches the scale of the challenge.

That is why in March I announced the exploration of the first-ever countywide housing levy. This effort could create a generational investment in housing across King County.

From emergency shelter and permanent supportive housing, to affordable rentals and homeownership, we will help people stay in their communities.

At the same time, building for affordability is more than subsidizing housing. We also have to make it faster, and less expensive to build.

That's why I directed our permitting team to improve outcomes with urgency.

They have already made significant progress, reducing residential permitting timelines by 25 percent, clearing backlogs, and doubling in-person customer service hours for residents and businesses.

But we need to go further.

That is why today I am announcing a new Permitting Advisory Panel that will propose additional reforms to cut red tape, speed up approvals, and make it easier to build housing and open businesses.

And affordability does not stop with housing. We have to make it more affordable to raise children in King County.

Childcare costs are astronomical. As the dad of a toddler and a newborn, I can speak from experience on this one.

We have to do better.

That is why I am announcing today that when voters consider the renewal of the Best Starts for Kids Levy next year, I will propose at least doubling our investment in childcare for kids ages zero to three, AND increase our total investment for childcare to more than half a billion dollars.

This would be the largest investment in childcare in King County history.

But we know this challenge cannot be solved by King County alone, and I look forward to partnering with every level of government and key community leaders to find solutions for childcare.

Building for Affordability also includes building a fast, reliable and safe transit system.

Today, I am proud to announce Metro's Next Stop, our transit roadmap through 2038, when King County is expected to have almost 244,000 new residents.

Metro's Next Stop:

- would deliver nine new bus routes
- four new RapidRide routes,
- improve speed and reliability,
- increase the number of routes running every fifteen minutes,
- And maintain increased security and behavioral health staff on buses and at transit centers that we need.

This year we also modernized the transit experience by introducing Tap-to-Pay, allowing direct payments for fares using credit cards, debit cards, and smart devices.

Thank you Metro and especially our bus and transit operators for all you do to keep our county connected.

Earlier, I mentioned the expansion of light rail here in Federal Way.

As a member of the Sound Transit Board, it was an honor to celebrate the 2 Line crossing Lake Washington.

Thank you Councilmember Balducci for your decades of work on that project.

And thank you to former Executive Dow Constantine for your leadership as CEO.

The last few months have been difficult as we wrestled with a 35 billion dollar deficit.

But we dug in, fought for King County's priorities, and delivered on projects across the region.

We're building the West Seattle Link Extension.

We're building the Graham Street infill station in South Seattle.

We're advancing the four line to connect South Kirkland and Issaquah.

We're advancing the Boeing Access Road station to full design and we secured 10 million dollars in transit mitigation funds.

We're building a long-promised parking garage at the Renton Transit Center that will serve the new Stride One Bus Rapid Transit Line.

I want to thank Councilmember Fain for her work on both of these important projects in Tukwila and Renton.

And we will deliver on the spine, connecting King County residents to Pierce and Snohomish counties, including a new station in South Federal Way.

And the fight for Ballard continues.

We secured the resources to advance the Ballard link extension to 100 percent design.

We passed critical amendments, so that the work will stay on track for at least four years while we find cost savings and financing to deliver the full extension.

I have also called for an independent oversight program accountable directly to the Sound Transit Board, so that we receive the best information on design and engineering decisions.

We will work together and deliver what voters approved. Anything less is unacceptable.

I know what our transit system can achieve when we get it right.

And just this week, we received amazing news: after the 2 line connected Seattle and the Eastside, ridership surged 44 percent.

Our system now has the highest ridership of any light rail system in the entire nation.

Thank you Sound Transit and King County Metro. This is what it looks like when we invest in connection.

One issue that encompasses all of the 4 B's is an existential one: the future of our climate.

Let's reflect on what we've seen these past few years. The hottest recorded days in county history. Wildfire smoke choking our air. Ice coating our streets. A Bomb Cyclone. Destructive floods that upended lives.

These used to be anomalies and are now regular occurrences.

They demand urgent action. I'm proud to say King County has been a national leader on climate for years, and will continue to be.

Climate action happens in every department, and the Department of Natural Resources and Parks are once again driving implementation of the Strategic Climate Action Plan and embedding climate action across everything we do.

From expanding clean energy and EV infrastructure, to protecting forests and farmland, reducing waste, improving clean water, and helping communities prepare for extreme weather, we are taking practical action to build a more resilient future for the next generation.

This is about protecting our home. It is also about protecting our people.

And none of our work will succeed unless we build strong relationships with the people we serve across all 39 cities and unincorporated areas.

The most effective policy-makers design solutions with their residents. We have to listen before acting, show up before speaking, and partner with communities.

That is why **Be In Community** is the soul of our administration, the fourth of the 4 Bs.

To reflect this focus, we restructured the Executive office from the ground up.

I implemented a plan to have more community ambassadors out in the field than ever before.

For the first time ever, the Executive Office has embedded regional managers across South, East, North, and Central King County.

This team serves as our eyes and ears, deepening collaboration with local elected officials, businesses, nonprofits, and residents.

With their help, I am proud to share that since taking office, my team and I have already visited and continue to build relationships in all 39 cities and unincorporated areas.

In the past six months, that team has successfully resolved over 150 cases, helping our residents solve problems and access services.

Last month, I was excited to spend time in Fall City, meeting with local leaders and small business owners.

I've spent significant time all over the map from Covington to Bothell, and from North Bend to Pacific.

I also held the first stop in my Be In Community Listening Tour - a town hall in Skyway where I heard directly from residents.

Connecting residents to community service opportunities is also a top priority. I want to multiply our impact by enlisting residents for help.

On my first full day in office, we launched our Regional Days of Service, with the first focused on supporting food banks.

And today I'm excited to announce we are launching a King County Volunteer Corps.

In the coming weeks, a website will go live for residents to sign up to join the volunteer corps and for organizations to submit their service opportunities.

We are also engaging our region's young people.

Last month, we launched YouthWorks, which provides hundreds of paid internships and volunteer opportunities for young people, helping them build skills, explore career paths, and strengthen their communities.

This summer the Department of Public Defense will also kick off their Summer Youth Employment Initiative.

We are also investing in the places that bring communities together.

And a few weeks ago, King County Parks closed on a property in Skyway that will become the neighborhood's first ever community center, a project that I've been working on for five years.

I want to thank Councilmember Rhonda Lewis for your leadership on this and many other issues in my former council district.

We are also being in community by strengthening our relationships with Tribes.

For the first time, we have created a Tribal Relations lead within the Executive Office.

In partnership with Tribal leaders, our teams are developing the first Tribal consultation policy in King County history.

We're doing this to ensure Tribal sovereignty is respected and incorporated into county decision-making.

This is not simply about consultation. It is about building lasting relationships rooted in respect, partnership, and a recognition of our shared responsibility to future generations.

Being in Community also means showing up when people are under threat.

Earlier this year, I issued an Executive Order to strengthen protections for immigrant and refugee communities impacted by increased ICE activity.

Before issuing that order, I held multiple immigration roundtables in every part of the county.

We allocated two million dollars in emergency funding for rental assistance, food vouchers, and legal aid.

The Sheriff's Office issued new guidance in 16 languages clarifying how it will respond to immigration enforcement actions.

We increased transparency at King County International Airport so community members can monitor ICE activities, including deportation flights.

We restricted immigration enforcement activities in all non-public parts of county property.

Thank you to Councilmembers Mosqueda and Barón for your leadership.

At a time when the federal administration is pouring billions more into mass deportation, I'm committed to upholding our values as a Welcoming County.

Finally, Being in Community also means strengthening our relationships with partners beyond King County's borders.

The reality is that many of the most significant challenges we face cannot be solved by county government alone.

Both state and federal governments must give us the tools we need to meet this moment.

We have stepped into a national leadership role in opposing federal abuses of power, including leading a coalition of more than 70 governments to challenge harmful conditions on federal funding, and standing with local abortion providers to defend reproductive freedom.

Thank you former Executive Braddock for leading this fight last year.

There are also harmful initiatives on the statewide ballot this year.

June is Pride Month. But no matter the month, I will say clearly: I oppose these anti-trans initiatives, and I stand in solidarity with our LGBTQIA+ community.

Next week we will also celebrate Juneteenth.

For me, it is a reminder that the fight for freedom, dignity, opportunity, and justice for African Americans did not end in 1865.

We see it in the disparities that persist today in housing, economic mobility, safety, and health.

That is why we will begin working to disaggregate data for descendants of U.S. chattel slavery, create a dedicated policy lead in the Executive Office, and establish an advisory body focused on African American communities.

Whether it's immigration, civil rights, or racial equity, we know the decisions made beyond our region have real consequences here at home.

What happens in Washington, D.C. and Olympia affects families here in King County. That is why our response cannot be fragmented.

We need to usher in a new era of deeper collaboration and stronger connections.

Earlier tonight, I said that if I had to describe the state of King County in one sentence, it would be:

We are living through a period of tremendous change.

Moments like this define generations.

Years from now, people will look back and ask whether we rose to meet this moment.

Whether we expanded opportunity or allowed it to slip away. Whether we built a region that became more connected or more disconnected. Whether we as people became more connected or more divided.

The answer to those questions is being written right now. And it is being written by the people in this room and across the county.

So let us meet this moment together.

Let us be bold enough to solve big problems. Let us be disciplined enough to earn the public's trust.

And let us build a King County that is more affordable, more connected, more just, more effective and full of opportunity.

Because the future of this region is not something that happens to us. It is something we create together.

Before I close, I want to say one more thing about the people who make this county work. Whether they are:

- Records and Licensing staff helping married couples begin new chapters
- the Medical Examiner's Office supporting families who have lost a loved one
- Regional Animal Services caring for our furry friends
- Parks and Recreation staff maintaining our public spaces
- Judicial branch staff protecting children and domestic violence survivors
- and all other teams serving residents in countless ways,

King County employees are a force for good. They deserve our gratitude and respect.

I want to thank the city of Federal Way and the staff at the Federal Way Performing Arts Center for making this event possible.

Thank you to all of our speakers, guests, and members of our Transition Committee, and especially our county workforce who make all of this work possible.

And thank you to all the people of King County.

Goodnight.