

Senator Phil Fortunato



Sen. Phil Fortunato

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Senate Committees:

- Environment, Energy & Technology (Asst. Ranking Member, Environment)
- Housing Stability & Affordability
- Transportation

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Greetings Friends and Neighbors,

It's been a busy 2020 legislative session and one that was marked by a number of missed opportunities. Not much of what cleared the Legislature will help address the pressing issues of homelessness, rising costs of health care, or public safety. In fact, a couple of notable pieces of legislation that passed along party lines would do the opposite. I'm concerned about finding solutions to real-world problems, not pandering to special interests.

Without doing anything, revenue collections are up \$1.5 billion more than expected. This is on top of the billion-dollar tax bill (the first bill signed into law from the 2020 session) on everything from nursing homes to health-care providers and mental-health facilities. The budget for this supplemental year unsurprisingly spent every penny you sent to Olympia to grow government.

I've argued for years that the continued growth in state spending is simply unsustainable and that with all the extra money coming to Olympia, we need to provide tax relief. The reality is that we can afford it. State spending has exploded, growing 80 percent since 2013. That is double the average growth of wages in Washington and almost triple that of wage growth outside of King County.

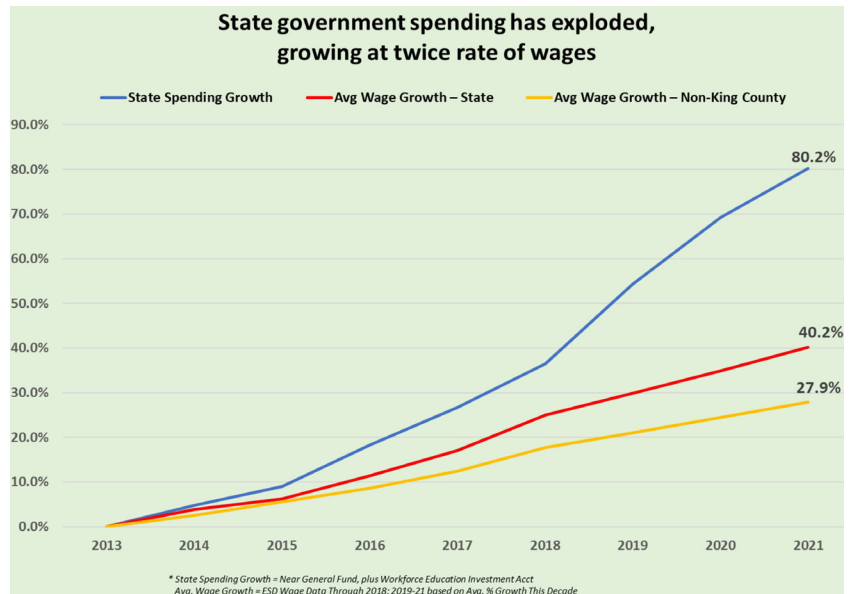
We had an opportunity to pass \$30 car tabs, but that wasn't a priority for those in charge. We had an opportunity to give homeowners property tax relief, but, again, it wasn't on the agenda. The theme for this session was to listen to the people, but it seems that our voices were drowned out.

I took every opportunity to point that out. I'm not afraid to ask the uncomfortable questions, to demand accountability and ensure that our district is heard.

It is an honor to serve you in the state Senate. Please don't hesitate to reach out to my office with any concerns you may have about your state government.

Sincerely,

Senator Phil Fortunato
31st Legislative District



The punishment, which the wise suffer, who refuse to take part in the government, is to live under the government of worse men.

-Plato

MORE THAN JUST MONEY – ADDRESSING HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

We all know that homelessness and affordable housing are a serious problem in our state. That is why I introduced a comprehensive plan to deal with it. The current majority has done little to move our state forward besides proposing that we take \$300 million from the state's rainy-day fund to 'fight' homelessness. The state spends \$625 million already and we aren't getting results you deserve. I don't think throwing more money at the problem will actually solve it. What do we need to do?

Fixing this starts with enforcing the law. Some refer to 'homeless crimes' like theft or public drug use. I introduced legislation to remove prosecutor's discretion after the first offence. There are too many instances where a criminal homeless element is allowed to offend 20 or 30 times only to be released back onto the streets. I say no more.

In addition, we need to allow law enforcement to do its job and remove homeless people who may need help from a dangerous environment. Similar to what they are doing in Florida, police can detain homeless individuals exhibiting problems with self-neglect and get them a mental-health evaluation.

The Supreme Court recently ruled that local jurisdictions can't remove homeless from public spaces if they don't have a place to go. I'm proposing we use money from the Housing Trust Fund



to provide immediate shelter for those on the streets. There they will be able to get mental-health treatment, job counseling, drug and alcohol treatment and more. We would have a police presence. I've termed this the "SHELTER Act." The majority wouldn't give the bill a hearing simply because it prohibited drug and alcohol use in those locations. The fact is we all want to help those struggling with homelessness, but I am not willing to take taxpayer dollars to subsidize their drug and alcohol addiction.

A missing part in this discussion is where people go once we are able to move them through these support systems out of homelessness. There aren't any affordable homes to buy! Growing regulations and permit costs are driving up the price of housing so that it's out of reach for too many working families. I sponsored a bill to spur private construction with the American Dream Homes bill. It would limit permit costs and provide a tax credit to local jurisdictions that permit them. In concept, they are

houses no more than 1,700 square feet that would be at an affordable price for new homeowners. I've spoken to a large national builder to see if it is a product it would build and it recognizes the demand. Artificial constraints on land and costly regulations force builders to construct pricier homes.

MORE PROTECTIONS FOR CRIMINALS?

Along the theme of listening to the people, some of the bills that the Legislature passed makes me wonder, just who are we representing? During the first week of the legislative session, one of the priorities of the majority was to expand protections for people in the country illegally. You may recall that last year Washington became a sanctuary state.

Since then, we've seen horrendous crimes committed by those who should have been deported, but because police cannot communicate with immigration officials, they are set free. Now, a bill set to become law prohibits arrests of those in the country illegally within a mile of a courthouse. We heard from prosecutors that this is a bad idea. While the state attorney general has charged that these arrests violate people's civil rights, the reality is that this policy will further make our communities unsafe by prohibiting the arrest of violent offenders who should be deported.

That's just the beginning. The Senate Republicans stood up for victims and sanity by defeating Senate Bill 6228, which would have prematurely restored voting rights for felons.

I'm not saying that once you've served your debt to society, you shouldn't vote. But that bill would have given voting rights to felons who have not fulfilled the terms of their sentences. It's a matter of fairness.

My colleagues highlighted the absurdity of restoring voting rights to someone who has murdered a child but is out on community custody. That child will never get to vote. I'm glad it failed, but the sponsor has already said she'll be fighting for it next year.



JUST SAY NO TO KINDERGARTEN SEX ED

I've received overwhelming responses from constituents opposing the bill that would mandate sex education starting in kindergarten. Let's be clear, this is not about good-touch, bad-touch or having healthy friendships. What's really happening is an agenda pushed by special interests to sexualize our children. Discussing and normalizing alternative lifestyles or teaching about sexual pleasure is not 'age appropriate' for young children. You've been clear, and I'm in agreement, we need to get sex entirely out of schools and get back to teaching our students how to read, write and do math. Our state has a persistent opportunity gap and introducing this new requirement will only make matters worse by taking up valuable instructional time on something that is the responsibility of parents and families.



TIME FOR A WASHINGTON PROP 13

Some years back, taxpayers in California revolted because of their skyrocketing property taxes. We are reaching that point here. I've received countless emails from people around the district who can't afford the endless property tax increases. The reality is that the Legislature cannot be trusted.

I voted in support of historic education funding reform to satisfy the McCleary decision that also resulted in a property tax reduction for over 70 percent of Washingtonians. Less than a year later, the majority betrayed taxpayers and undid that work. They opened the door to steep increases in property taxes and an overreliance on local levies that create inequity in our schools. We are almost back in the same boat that got us the McCleary case in the first place.

The state has seen record growth in its budget at the expense of taxpayers around the state. We've reached a point now that is unsustainable for the very people who fund government, and they need relief. Not only are people unable to afford getting into a home, others are

quickly being taxed out of their homes. During my time in the Senate, the state has raked in billions more than we expected and spent it all on everything but what Washingtonians are clamoring for – tax relief.

I sponsored a state constitutional amendment, SJR 8219, aimed at helping people stay in their homes by capping the growth of property taxes paid to the state to a more affordable point when the home is purchased.

By changing our constitution this way, we are giving homeowners certainty they deserve. It will put a check on out-of-control spending and do what the Legislature has been unwilling or unable to do. The sad thing is that some decision makers in Olympia can't be trusted. I voted for historic funding changes to our schools that gave over 70 percent of property owners a tax cut, only to have the majority betray that and fling the door wide-open to additional tax increases. That's unacceptable. We should enshrine this principle of fiscal restraint in our state's constitution.



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COVID-19 RESPONSE

I hope that you are doing well and staying safe and healthy – especially in light of the COVID-19 outbreak. Working together, we’ve been able to meet the challenges that have evolved almost daily. The Legislature did the right thing before our 2020 session ended by appropriating nearly \$200 million from the rainy-day fund – money put toward public-health efforts, expanding unemployment benefits, supporting nursing homes and more. I made sure the legislation instituted some accountability measures on how the money is spent.



Additional Information:

<https://coronavirus.wa.gov/>
www.doh.wa.gov/Emergencies/Coronavirus
www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV

While most Washingtonians have been doing their part to take personal precautions, the spread and severity of this virus in our state has been significant. That led to the imposition of some pretty drastic restrictions on many activities that are part of our everyday lives.

Since this virus is new, nobody really knows what to do. Still, I worry that some of the measures taken may go too far and the “cure” might be worse than the disease. We should be looking at ways to prudently keep people safe, but the forced closure of many businesses across our state has the potential to create a budget shortfall of billions of dollars next year. Based on what we saw from the majority party this year, my concern is that such a crisis will become an excuse to drain the rainy-day fund and raise taxes even more.