



January 28, 2021

The Honorable Derek Young, Chair  
and Members  
Pierce County Council  
930 Tacoma Avenue S., Room 1046  
Tacoma, WA 98402

Dear Councilmember Young and Councilmembers:

Tomorrow you will have a retreat to engage in planning and setting priorities for the year. The League of Women Voters strongly encourages you to include implementation of the one-tenth of one percent local option sales tax for housing among those priorities.

We understand that some of you feel either that you should not impose any additional taxes and/or that the behavioral health sales tax adopted in December 2020 is sufficient. Here's why we ask that you reconsider those positions and support this additional measure.

Before COVID, there was a homelessness crisis that was so compelling that the League of Women Voters hosted two major public events to call attention to the emergency and try to develop solutions. One was a CoLab in 2017 and another was a community forum at the Tacoma Convention Center in 2018. Among the solutions called for then was attention to a particular need, supportive housing. This is housing with support services that allow those otherwise unable to live independently to be housed, not on the street, with the treatment and living skills support they need. This is only one – but one very significant – part of the population experiencing homelessness: the most vulnerable, the most chronic and the most visible people without housing.

This work followed our study on mental health (which we now call behavioral health) in early 2016, during which we discovered the two local option taxes which could help fund solutions: the behavioral health and the housing local option sales taxes, each one tenth of one percent, each only one penny of tax for every ten dollars spent. The first was possible with Councilmanic action; the second required a vote of the public. However, as former Rep. Beth Doglio said earlier this week, she led the Legislature in passage of a bill that removed the public vote requirement for the housing tax. So now it is a much easier, more feasible action to take.

In all of this time, the homelessness situation has gotten worse and COVID has exacerbated the situation as a result first of requiring additional shelter capacity for distancing and also increasing the number of at-risk people because of the massive under- and un-employment resulting from the economic impacts of COVID. We have a heroic group of people working in private non-profit organizations doing what they can to provide shelter and essential supplies (from medical equipment, such as wheelchairs, to clothing,

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### **Empowering Voters. Defending Democracy.**

LWVTPC wishes to acknowledge that we gather on the ancestral lands of the Coast Salish peoples, surrounded by their traditional waters, in the shadow of Mount Tahoma. We actively seek inclusive and respectful partnerships that honor Indigenous cultures, histories, identities, and current realities.

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and assistance seeking employment; and more). This group meets informally as the Coalition to End Homelessness, but they have no power or money to enact long-term solutions. As we sit here today, there has been no improvement in the need for affordable housing, particularly for those most in need of support. In fact, the number of people in need continues to grow.

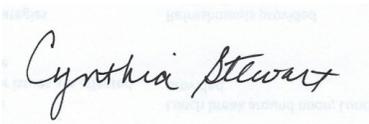
We recognize that the County has particularly challenging financial circumstances. Our budget study in late 2016 clearly portrayed the financial disadvantages that counties are burdened with - fewer funding sources than the state or cities have - and that was before COVID made the situation worse. And we are aware that the County has benefited from federal CARES Act funding, which has allowed a better response to the economic impacts from COVID than would have been possible without it. However, there is no funding source that could address real solutions for our most vulnerable, most chronic cases of people experiencing homelessness.

We ask that the County step up to its regional responsibilities and enact the local option housing tax countywide, work with the cities in how it is used, and fund housing and support for the target population of this tax: those at or below 60% of AMI and who are veterans, seniors, families with children, unaccompanied homeless youth, persons with disabilities and domestic violence survivors. You can bond with a portion of this revenue stream to construct new housing units and you can use part of it for the necessary support services.

When this is available, why would you not take this action, knowing that the number of people experiencing homelessness is going to continue to increase? Why would you wait longer, when the need has been clear since before 2016? Why would you be reluctant to ask people who purchase taxable goods to pay only one penny more on a ten dollar expenditure? Every year that goes by creates a bigger problem to solve. Please take action this year.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Cynthia Stewart". The signature is written in a cursive style and is centered within a light blue rectangular box.

Cynthia Stewart, President

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