



## **Legislature approves \$69.2B two-year state budget that funds worker pay, climate, education**

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**Democratic lawmakers in the Washington Legislature on Saturday afternoon unveiled a new, two-year state budget that boosts funding for worker pay, climate projects and special education.**

The release of [the \\$69.2 billion state operating budget](#) comes less than 36 hours before the end of this year's 105-day legislative session, giving the public – and lawmakers themselves – little time to actually read the spending blueprint before it was scheduled to be voted into law on Sunday.

The operating budget deal [struck between House and Senate lawmakers in the Democratic majority](#) distributes spending on a range of programs across Washington, from K-12 schools, prisons and the mental-health system, to social services, parks, wildfire response and environmental programs.

It adds approximately \$4.7 billion in new spending, according to a statement by House Democrats, and leaves a total of \$3 billion in reserve accounts, and doesn't include any broad increases in taxes.

At the budget's unveiling Saturday afternoon, Sen. Christine Rolfes, D-Bainbridge Island, said the final deal increases funding for K-12 schools the most since the Legislature's investments last decade to resolve the landmark state Supreme Court order to fund basic education in what is known as the McCleary decision.

“Probably the biggest investment in public education since the McCleary era,” said Rolfes, who is the chief Democratic budget writer in the Senate. The budget includes increased spending for special education, and school counselors and nurses to help children throughout the state, she added.

Sen. Lynda Wilson, R-Vancouver, said she wanted to see tax relief in the budget, but she agreed with the boost in special education, and some of the spending on climate change.

“One of the priorities for our caucus was special education, and there is historic funding for that in this budget,” said Wilson, the ranking Republican on the Senate Ways & Means Committee.

Leaders in the Democratic-controlled House and Senate have focused on boosting pay to attract state workers in a tight labor market still experiencing rising prices and disruption from the COVID-19 pandemic. Shortages of nurses, law enforcement, social services workers and other laborers are impacting a variety of state and local government agencies.

The new budget approves and pays for \$2.2 billion in pay increases for state workers and school employees, according to Democratic budget writers. On top of that, the spending plan increases government reimbursement rates so privately-run care

operations – like skilled nursing homes and assisted living facilities – can better recruit and retain workers.

Also included is an additional \$4.6 million annually to fund and expand the [Amend program being used in a handful of Washington's 12 prisons](#). Amend seeks to reshape the culture of prisons through more humane treatment, in an attempt to improve the lives of both incarcerated individuals and corrections officers.

In addition to the state operating budget, lawmakers are also expected to approve by the end of Sunday a pair of other new, two-year budgets to fund transportation and capital construction.

Among other things, the new capital budget includes \$400 million for affordable housing projects across Washington, according to a statement by Rep. Mike Steele, R-Chelan. Steele, the ranking Republican on the House Capital Budget committee, called the agreement proof that “bipartisanship does exist in Olympia.”

“This plan reflects key priorities that don’t simply serve minority interests, but all of Washington state,” Steele said in prepared remarks. “This budget supports development, encourages economic vitality, and puts people to work, even in the smallest of communities.”

While the housing increase in the capital budget is sizable, Saturday's budget deal officially marks the end of more ambitious [proposals to construct affordable housing](#). Gov. Jay Inslee's proposed housing-bond referendum stalled in recent weeks, and the new deal does not include a proposed increase in the real estate excise tax, also known as the home sellers tax, that would have boosted funding for affordable housing projects.

This story was originally published by Crosscut, a nonprofit news organization covering state issues and part of Cascade Public Media. Read more at [www.crosscut.com](http://www.crosscut.com).

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