

2021 Legislative Session is One for the History Books

by Carolyn Logue

The 2021 legislative session was one for the history books in many ways. The completely virtual legislative session led to more public participation in legislative hearings but less transparency when it came to negotiating big policy issues such as climate change and the budget. While legislators were originally worried about budget deficits, the final budget reality revealed over \$3 billion in additional revenue for the state and an impressive \$8 billion from the federal government for COVID-19 pandemic relief. This resulted in a budget that increased from \$52 billion in 2019-21 to nearly \$60 billion for 2021-2023.

Legislators also pursued and passed significant policy reforms in the areas of climate change, police reform, housing, and early learning. The Early Learning bill is funded by a new capital gains tax of 7% on earnings over \$250,000.

The capital gains tax is expected to bring in nearly \$500 million this biennium and over \$1 billion in subsequent two-year budget periods. This bill—SB 5096—has generated controversy regarding whether a capital gains tax is an income tax which would be prohibited by our state's Constitution. Two lawsuits have been filed as of this writing. Democratic legislators who support an income tax are hoping that our current, progressive, state Supreme Court will overturn the previous rulings prohibiting an income tax under our state Constitution in order to free up funding sources that are less regressive than the existing sales tax.

The Legislature also focused on reducing the economic impacts of the pandemic on businesses, individuals and communities. This included passing bills which give communities more flexibility to provide tax incentives and to create improvement areas with public funding. These improvement areas could include library improvements. Connect with your city and/or if you want to see how the library can benefit.

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WLA Has A Very Successful Session

With the COVID-19 pandemic still raging as the session started, the issues seen during the pandemic took center stage. This included several areas where libraries were involved—because the pandemic showed the importance of public, academic and school libraries in helping people stay connected with work, school, and other important community functions. WLA members stepped up to the plate by calling legislators, testifying, and participating in other important activities that pushed library-supported policies across the finish line.

- *Broadband Funding:* With \$400 million from the federal government for utility work plus additional state funding, significant financial investments in broadband infrastructure and connectivity were included in both the Operating and Capital budgets for 2021-2023. While more funding will be needed to meet all identified needs, the Washington State Broadband office will be able to begin implementation of projects that increase bandwidth and coverage across the state. WLA actively worked to support funding for broadband infrastructure in the budgets this year through testimony and participation in coalitions. WLA also supported bills HB 1336/SB 5383, both of which expanded the ability for public utility districts (PUDs) to offer broadband to their customers. Both bills were passed by the Legislature and signed by the Governor, despite some conflicts in policy between the two bills. In cases of policy conflict between bills, the Secretary of State determined that HB 1336 policies would supersede because that was passed by the Legislature *after* SB 5383. This bill provided PUDs with much broader retail authority, not limited to unserved or underserved areas, disappointing existing broadband providers.
- *Capital Budget Projects:* In addition to providing money for the Washington State Library in the operating budget, the Legislature also recognized the importance of libraries in the Capital budget. WLA worked hard with Rep. Steve Tharinger, Senator David Frockt, Rep. Mike Steele and Senator Jim Honeyford to fully fund the Library Capital Improvement grant requests to benefit small rural libraries across the state. Several library-encompassing community projects were also funded. This project list is the result of the work done by WLA to help create the grant process at the Department of Commerce. Below is the list:

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Capital Library Improvement Grants

City of Colville:	\$264,000
Sno-Isle Regional Inter-County Libraries (Langley):	\$700,000
Stevens County Rural Library District (Loon Lake):	\$649,000
Stevens County Rural Library District (Chewelah):	\$90,000
North Olympic Library System (Sequim):	\$2,000,000
Spokane County Library District (Spokane Valley):	\$2,000,000
Jefferson County Rural Library District (Port Hadlock):	\$285,000
Stevens County Rural Library District (Northport):	\$50,000
North Central Regional Library (Wenatchee):	\$798,000
City of Seattle:	\$1,889,000
Pend Oreille County Library District (Metaline Falls):	\$40,000
Upper Skagit Library District (Concrete):	\$209,000
City of Cashmere:	\$14,000
Town of Coulee City:	\$760,000
Sno-Isle Regional Inter-County Libraries (Darrington):	\$250,000
Fort Vancouver Regional Library: Foundation (Woodland)	\$2,000,000
City of Mount Vernon	\$2,000,000
Sno-Isle Regional Inter-County Libraries (Lake Stevens)	\$1,100,000
Camas Library Improvements (Camas):	\$515,000
Ephrata Public Library (Ephrata):	\$91,000
Lake Stevens Early Learning Library (Lake Stevens):	\$2,000,000

- *Higher Ed/Low Cost Instructional Materials:* WLA scored a win for academic libraries in helping to expand the use and awareness of open educational resources (OERs) for students in four-year institutions. HB 1119, sponsored by Rep.

Cyndey Jacobsen passed overwhelmingly with WLA support. This bill requires that students be notified of courses with low-cost instructional materials and open educational resources at four-year institutions of higher education. Already in effect in the state’s community colleges, this expansion will help students better afford resources for their higher learning.

- *One-to-One Devices and Media Literacy:* WLA was very active in supporting HB 1365, sponsored by Rep. Mia Gregerson, which established a grant program and training to ensure 1:1 device ratios for K-12 students. First, we advocated for a role for teacher-librarians as existing experts in devices, training and use in our school systems. In addition, we worked closely with legislators to preserve the ability for local schools and districts to request grants, rather than granting the funds to an educational service district (which would then have the responsibility of distributing the funds).

WLA was also instrumental in combining HB 1365 with SB 5242 sponsored by perennial library supporter Senator Marko Liias. SB 5242 created grants to support media literacy and digital citizenship involving teacher-librarians. When it looked like the bill was not going to pass, Senator Liias requested WLA’s help in combining with 1365 since the two bills were related. WLA agreed, and with the help of our testimonies, the bill was merged with 1365 to create a comprehensive device and training bill which fully involves teacher-librarians and recognizes the importance of school library information technology programs in schools.

The Road Ahead

WLA now looks forward to the 2022 Legislative Session. Important in this discussion will be reviving the school library bill to once again require a school library information technology program in every school district. WLA School Library Division members are currently working with the Washington State School Directors Association to determine areas of agreement and to resolve areas of disagreement.

We will need to stay vigilant to ensure public libraries are actively engaged with community broadband needs. As the Early Learning bill gets underway, we will need to ensure that library programs are prioritized.

At this point we need to hear from you. What issues would you like WLA to bring before the legislature? Let us know, and we’ll help you determine the right path for meeting your identified needs.

And as always: do not forget to ask your legislators to visit your library so they can have a better idea of what you do and how it benefits their constituents. 📖