

# 7TH LEGISLATIVE DISTRICT • 2026 SESSION REPORT



## REP. HUNTER ABELL • SEN. SHELLY SHORT • REP. ANDREW ENGELL

Dear Friends and Neighbors,

The 2026 legislative session was one of the most consequential in the history of the state – and not in a good way. What happened this year still is hard to believe.

**The Legislature passed an income tax.** Washington voters have been saying no to this idea since the Great Depression, 10 times since 1934. This year our majority Democratic colleagues passed an income tax whether the people want it or not.


This historic end-run around the people may be the one thing anyone remembers of this year's Legislature, but there was so much more. In this ninth session of one-party control, an emboldened Democratic majority doubled down on the disturbing trends of recent years. Skyrocketing state spending. Unsustainable budgeting. Big new taxes to pay for it all. Bills that enhance the power of government over the people. Legislation that continues to make life in this state less affordable.

**There were a few bright spots this year**, including restoration of wildfire-prevention funding that was cut in last year's budget, a truly bipartisan accomplishment. Our 7th District delegation passed a half-dozen bills. But our biggest victories involved teamwork at the House and Senate level to stop some terrible ideas – and any of those could return next year.

We'll tell you about these things and more in this legislative update. Please take a moment to send us a letter or an email to let us know your concerns. **Your opinions matter to us.**

  
Rep. Hunter Abell

  
Rep. Andrew Engell

  
Sen. Shelly Short

## 2026 SESSION ENDS IN INCOME TAX

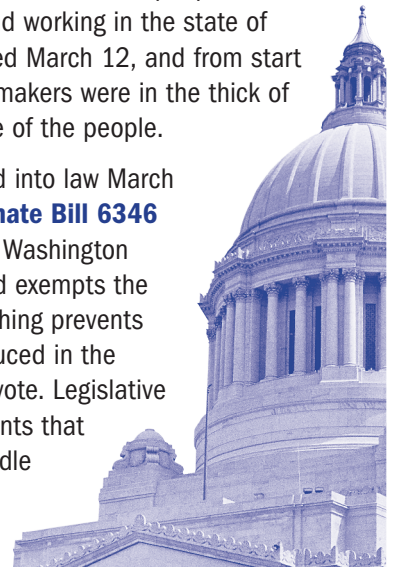
### HITS HIGH EARNERS FIRST – HOW SOON BEFORE IT HITS THE MIDDLE CLASS?

**A brand-new state income tax** became the signature measure of Washington's 2026 legislative session as majority Democrats continued a years-long ramp-up of state spending and taxes to pay for it.

The new tax flouts nearly a hundred years of legal and political tradition in Washington state by ducking a public vote. The income tax measure shifts the battle from the ballot to the courts and cuts the public out of the loop.

It was the crowning stroke of a 60-day legislative session that accented the power of government over the people and increased the cost of living and working in the state of Washington. The session ended March 12, and from start to finish, your 7th District lawmakers were in the thick of the battle, fighting on the side of the people.

The income tax bill was signed into law March 30 by Gov. Bob Ferguson. **Senate Bill 6346** imposes an income tax on all Washington residents starting in 2028 and exempts the first \$1 million in income. Nothing prevents that threshold from being reduced in the future with a simple majority vote. Legislative Democrats blocked amendments that would have protected the middle class. **How long do you think it will take?**



# A HISTORIC 24-HOUR INCOME TAX DEBATE

In the final days of the 2026 legislative session, House Republicans forced an unprecedented 24-hour floor debate on the income tax, reflecting the seriousness of the issue and raising concerns from lawmakers and the public alike.

Republicans offered dozens of amendments to require a public vote, prevent the tax from being expanded to the middle class and fix implementation issues. These were rejected, clearing the way for a bigger, broader tax.

## IGNORES CONSTITUTIONAL LAW

For nearly a century, Washington courts have held that income is property and must be taxed uniformly. That means a graduated income tax requires a constitutional amendment and a vote of the people. Tax advocates hope to overturn this interpretation, and their deliberate effort to cut the people out of the decision means lengthy legal challenges and uncertainty for taxpayers, employers and the state's financial outlook.

Just as important, the tax enables our colleagues to avoid tough decisions, instead of right-sizing government and establishing spending priorities. This new income tax forces the public to pay for the Legislature's continued financial irresponsibility. There is a better way, and the debate made that clear.



The income tax brought high drama to the House floor March 9 and 10 as Republicans forced the longest continuous debate in state history.

## A BLOATED STATE BUDGET

### BIG DEFICIT ON THE HORIZON IN 2027-29

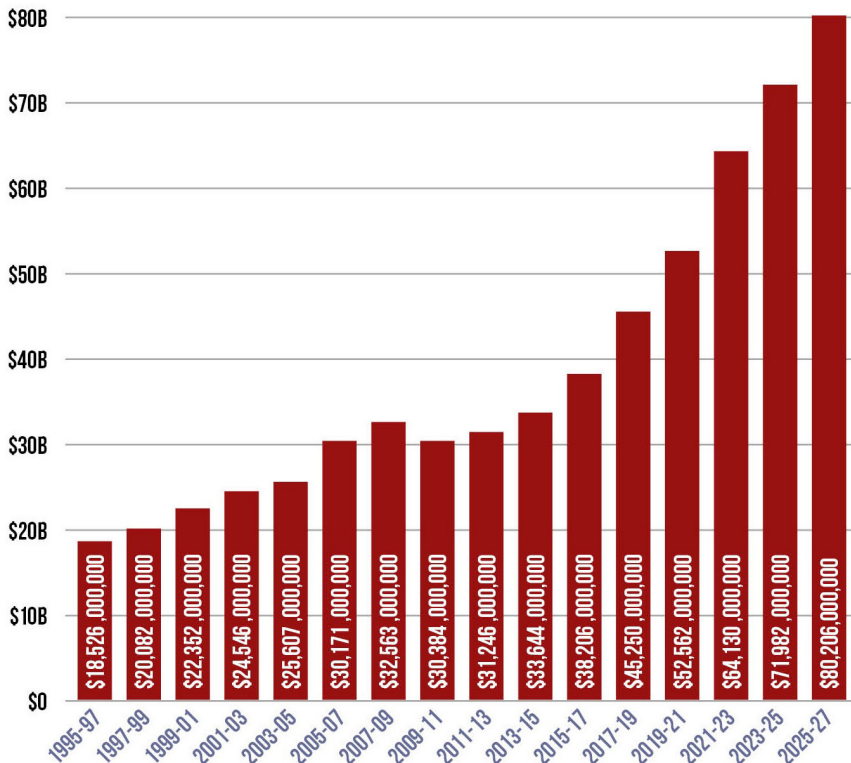
**Why this push for an income tax?** Under current leadership, the Legislature has a spending problem. This year's Legislature increased the 2025-27 budget to \$80.2 billion, double what we spent 10 years ago. Spending has increased twice as fast as median family income, and this rapid growth of state government is getting Washington into serious trouble.

Last year this unchecked spending put the state in a deficit, but the only solution our colleagues were willing to consider was a \$12 billion tax increase, the biggest in state history. All told, the current budget spends about \$5 billion more than we expect to receive in taxes, making up the difference with one-time sources of money and other maneuvers. No course corrections ensure the problem will only get worse next time.

The new income tax is a Band-Aid, not a cure. If it sticks, most of the revenue is already spoken for, to sustain all the new spending in the current budget. The outlook is ominous. The only way our next budget will balance will be if our colleagues can hold spending increases to 2.8 percent. But average spending growth under current leadership is 15 percent. Unless something changes, we could be looking at a deficit for 2027-29 of \$7 billion to \$10 billion. **More taxes, here we come.**

## State spending doubles in a decade

### 30-year operating budget history



# A SESSION OF MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

## AFFORDABILITY ISSUES GO UNADDRESSED



This legislative session presented an opportunity for Olympia to address the top issues for the people of Washington. Things like the fast-rising cost of living, jobs, education, public safety, accountability from state agencies

and officials, and a steadily increasing tax burden.

Unfortunately, the majority had other priorities. Affordability became an empty slogan as this year's Legislature passed bills making Washington more expensive. Making sure county sheriffs embrace our colleagues' war on the feds was more important than addressing crime, drug abuse and the state's shortage of law enforcement officers. When a record number of Washington residents signed on to the Legislature's website to express opposition to the income tax and other agenda-driven legislation, Democratic leaders blamed it on bots and shrugged.

Even when hundreds of thousands of Washingtonians spoke up through the initiative process, their voices were ignored. The majority refused to consider initiatives forwarded by the people to protect girls' sports and restore parental rights in public education, despite the constitutional requirement that initiatives be the Legislature's top priority.

This session could have been about restoring affordability, right-sizing a bloated state government, strengthening communities and respecting the voice of the people. Instead this session took the state further down the wrong path. Under 'progressive' leadership the state continues to fall behind.



Short and Abell were among Republican lawmakers who participated in a listening session in the House after Democrats refused to hold hearings on a pair of initiatives submitted by the people. Because the Legislature took no action, both measures advance to the November ballot.

## MORE POWER FOR GOVERNMENT

### COMMON THREAD IN SESSION'S MOST CONTROVERSIAL BILLS

The big trend in legislation this year appeared to be more power for Olympia at the expense of the people. Among the prime examples:



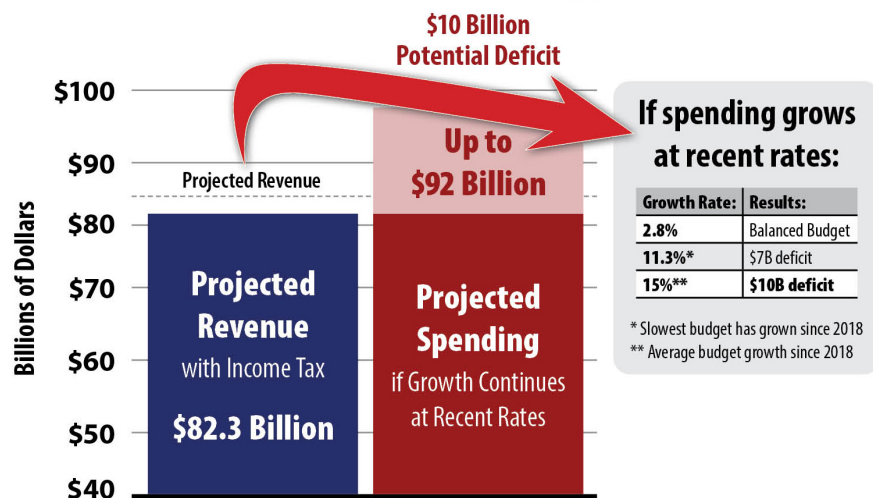
**OVERRIDING SHERIFF ELECTIONS:** **Senate Bill 5974**, the "anti-sheriff bill," gives an unelected board appointed by the governor the ability to remove elected county sheriffs from office. The measure gives

Olympia power to force compliance with political mandates on police procedures, cooperation with federal immigration authorities and other policies.

**THREATENING COUNTY AUDITORS:** **Senate Bill 5892** threatens county elections officials with prison time if they divulge voter information requested by the U.S. Department of Justice. The bill makes cooperation a felony offense, and marks another power grab designed to reduce the independence of elected officials.

## \$10 Billion Deficit Next Biennium Even With an Income Tax?

Based on projected revenues and spending growth trends



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**Sen. SHELLY SHORT**, fresh from a bipartisan success this session on wildfire funding (**see page 6**), hopes next session to keep up the momentum on wildfire risk as it affects homeowners' insurance. Keeping insurance affordable and available is a major concern for homeowners in fire-prone areas as premiums soar and policies are canceled without explanation. This year Short co-sponsored **Senate Bill 5928**, requiring insurers to disclose how risk scores are calculated and giving homeowners an opportunity to address potential problems. Short also co-sponsored **Senate Bill 6079**, which aims to reduce non-renewals and policy cancellations by creating a grant program for wildfire risk mitigation efforts.

Both bills were introduced at the request of the state insurance commissioner and passed the Senate, but neither made it to the governor's desk. Short plans to make the issue her top priority for 2027. She says lawmakers on both sides of the aisle can agree risk should be shared between insurers, homeowners, communities and the state, and the issue presents great opportunity for bipartisanship.

Short, now in her 18th year in the Legislature, serves as Senate Republican floor leader, overseeing the flow of business for her team when the Senate is in session. A voice for sensible policies on the environment, energy and wildlife management, Short also serves as ranking member on the Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee.



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**GOVERNMENT FISHING EXPEDITIONS: Senate Bill 5925** greatly increases the authority of the state attorney general's office to go after political targets, by expanding its power to make "Civil Investigative Demands" on businesses, individuals, non-profit organizations and law enforcement agencies. This chilling legislation allows the AG to demand records and compel testimony without proof of a crime, in hopes of finding a violation that could lead to charges.

**ENDING TAXPAYER PROTECTIONS: House Bill 2442** dramatically expands the ability of cities and counties to raise taxes and fees by loosening safeguards for taxpayers. Among other things, the bill ends requirements for voter approval, removes limits on tax increases and their duration, and erodes voter oversight and accountability.

**BILLS THAT DIDN'T PASS** were just as troubling, and any of them might be reintroduced next year. Agenda-driven legislation included bills to weaken the people's right of initiative (**Senate Bill 5973**), prosecute violations of civil environmental laws as felony crimes (**Senate Bill 5360**), prohibit law enforcement from removing homeless camps on public property (**House Bill 2489**) – and many more.

**ADDING INSULT TO INJURY**, 26 bills this year were passed with emergency clauses or similar language, prohibiting the people from filing referendums to overturn them. Few involve an actual emergency. The people's only option is to file an initiative, which requires double the signatures and creates additional legal hurdles. Is it any surprise that one of these bills is the income tax?



# SEN. SHELLY SHORT • REP. HUNTER ABELL • REP. ANDREW ENGELL

**Rep. HUNTER ABELL** focused this session on advancing targeted, well-crafted legislation grounded in the needs of rural communities and guided by a commitment to sound, constitutional policymaking.

Several of Abell's bills passed into law, reflecting a disciplined approach to solving specific problems without creating unintended consequences. One measure ensures port district employees are not forced to pay into multiple retirement systems for the same job (Sen. Short sponsored companion legislation in the Senate), protecting workers and local employers from duplicative costs. Another allows families to establish small, private burial sites on their own property, honoring longstanding rural traditions while maintaining clear standards for health, safety and transparency. Additional legislation focused on veterans' issues and rural quality of life.

Abell also worked on proposals that did not advance this session related to wildlife management and other rural priorities. These remain important issues for the district, and Abell plans to continue working with stakeholders and local communities over the interim to refine those proposals and build broader support.

As a constitutional attorney, Abell also played a leading role in major policy debates. During the extended floor debate on the state's new income tax structure, he raised concerns about its conflict with longstanding Washington Supreme Court precedent and emphasized the Legislature's responsibility to operate within constitutional limits.



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- Health Care & Wellness
- Housing
- Transportation

**Rep. ANDREW ENGELL** focused this session on delivering practical, community-driven solutions passing two bills this year addressing issues reflecting the realities of rural Washington.

One improves access to diagnostic imaging by allowing qualified radiologic technologists to perform certain procedures under appropriate supervision, helping hospitals and clinics maintain services, especially in rural areas where staffing shortages are a constant challenge. Another ensures vehicle owners are not charged to replace defective license plates issued by the state, requiring the Department of Licensing to waive fees when plates fail prematurely. Both bills received strong bipartisan support and reflect a focus on fairness and access to essential services.

Engell also worked on broader issues affecting rural communities, including health care access and natural resource management. His bill to restore a residency focus to charity care and protect access to services in border communities did not advance, and legislation to downlist wolves as a "sensitive" species, allowing for more balanced management while maintaining protections, also did not pass.

Engell plans to continue working with stakeholders, local leaders and constituents over the interim to refine those ideas and build support for future action.

In a year when many larger issues remained unresolved, Engell's work showed that steady, locally driven policymaking can deliver meaningful results.



# 2026 SESSION REPORT

Sen. Shelly Short  
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## 2026 SESSION REPORT • 7TH LEGISLATIVE DISTRICT

### LEGISLATURE RESTORES WILDFIRE PREVENTION FUNDING

**Remember those smoky skies** we used to see about 10 years ago at the peak of summer fire season? We still get them, but they're nothing like they used to be, thanks to the innovative wildfire prevention and forest health program Washington launched in 2021 with **House Bill 1168**. By combining best practices in forestry and firefighting, we are getting to fires faster, containing them sooner and reducing their severity.

We call this the 1168 program, and it is one of our state's biggest success stories. We are positioning fire crews and air fleets around the state, investing in new technologies and thinning forests to prevent deadly crown fires. This 8-year program costs \$125 million every two years. Our district, ground zero for wildfires in this state, certainly benefited from this investment – until last year's Legislature slashed funding in half and put the program in doubt.

Sen. Short sponsored **Senate Bill 5893** to restore funding, while concerned lawmakers of both parties worked to underscore the program's urgency with their colleagues. Success came in the final budget bill, which restores the wildfire program to full funding with an additional \$60 million for 2025-27 and keeps the forest health program on track. This rare bipartisan victory of the session shows what lawmakers can accomplish when they put aside political differences and work together.



Forest management makes a difference. Left, unmanaged tract in Oregon's Deschutes National Forest was charred in a 2020 fire; managed forest to the right survived largely unscathed. Source: U.S. Forest Service