

# No. 4 – 2022 Staying in Touch

A communication from the Washington County Board of Commissioners

## Construction begins on METRO Gold Line through east metro



Officials from across the region celebrated a groundbreaking for the Gold Line Oct. 19. At the groundbreaking were, from left, Charlie Zelle, Metropolitan Council Chair, Washington County commissioners Stan Karwoski, District 2, and Lisa Weik, District 5, U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum, U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar, Ramsey County commissioners Rafael Ortega and Trista MatasCastillo, and Nikki Villavicencio, Maplewood City Councilmember.

Construction is underway for the METRO Gold Line, a 10-mile bus rapid transit (BRT) line between St. Paul and Woodbury with bus-only lanes generally north of and near Interstate 94.

A groundbreaking for the project was Oct. 19. The Gold Line will provide frequent, all-day service in both directions through 21 stations and four Park & Rides.

"Not all residents are licensed drivers," said Commissioner Lisa Weik, District 5. "The inability to access jobs, services, and activities limits both the independence of residents and prospects for economic growth."

Construction work in 2022 will be site preparation, including tree removal and grading near Bielenberg Drive in Woodbury, and at I-94 and near the

I-494/I-694 interchange in Woodbury and Oakdale. There will also be work in the St. Paul and Maplewood segments of the corridor.

An example of infrastructure that will be improved in the county along with the project is the Bielenberg Drive-Helmo Avenue bridge over I-94 in Woodbury and Oakdale. Both cities had long planned to build a bridge over I-94 but securing local funding for a project of that size was difficult. This bridge will have bus lanes, lanes for cars, and a trail. The trail on that bridge is just one segment of \$20 million in new trails and sidewalks that will be constructed with the Gold Line project.

"The Gold Line will provide a new transportation choice for our residents," said Commissioner Stan Karwoski, District 2. "It is an excellent

collaboration with our cities and community."

Residents are invited to sign up for weekly email updates that will highlight planned work. See [metrotransit.org/gold-line-construction](https://metrotransit.org/gold-line-construction) and sign up to receive email updates. There is also a construction hotline at 651-602-1919. Callers will either receive an answer to their questions immediately, or their question will be referred to someone who will be able to answer the question. More information is at Gold Line Project ([metrotransit.org](https://metrotransit.org))

The federal government is paying 45% of the project's cost. Washington and Ramsey counties are each contributing about 25%; the remainder is being paid from state and local grants. Washington County's portion of the cost will be paid with the proceeds of the existing transportation sales tax, and does not include any property tax levy.

When the Gold Line opens in 2025, it will be Minnesota's first rapid-bus line to operate primarily in bus-only lanes. It is expected to be the fifth busiest bus route in the Twin Cities transit system.

When complete, the 10-mile BRT route will connect St. Paul, Maplewood, Landfall, Oakdale, and Woodbury with stops at key shopping, employment, and regional destinations. This includes the 3M campus, Sun Ray Shopping Center, Metropolitan State University, a new development on Helmo Avenue in Oakdale, and Woodbury Village.

# Long-term opioid settlement funding coming to county

As the opioid crisis continues to impact communities, funding from the national opioid settlements is on its way to support local efforts across Minnesota.

According to the Minnesota Attorney General's Office, Washington County's estimated allocation of the settlement funding is more than \$6.8 million, which will be spread over 18 years. The funding must be spent on activities that directly address the opioid crisis - saving lives by preventing overdoses through a number of strategies.

"Opioid addiction and drug overdose is devastating families in our communities," said Commissioner Lisa Weik, District 5. "Illicit drug use by parents is often the primary reason for children being placed in out-of-home care, straining our county safety net services."

Washington County is well-positioned to effectively use this funding, thanks

to strong preexisting efforts in response to the opioid crisis. One example is the Medications for Opioid Use Disorder (MOUD) Program, which provides life-saving medications for people incarcerated in the Washington County Jail. Medications are considered the gold standard of treatment for Opioid Use Disorder. They have been shown to save lives and reduce reincarceration after release from jail.

As part of the funding conditions, Washington County Public Health & Environment (PHE) will lead the strategic planning for the response resulting from the settlement. This will involve collaboration between agencies, including cities and townships, as well as engagement with community members who are disproportionately affected by the opioid crisis. Racial disparities related to substance use in Minnesota are present in both the criminal justice system and in overdose deaths. The county will ensure racial

and health equity impacts are at the forefront of the strategic plan.

The county's opioid strategy will also embrace a philosophy of harm reduction. Some traditional strategies that address substance use promote complete abstinence from all substances. Research demonstrates that an abstinence-only system can stigmatize and alienate community members who are most at-risk of dying from overdose. However, a harm-reduction philosophy expands the list of available strategies so that each person's plan can be better adapted to meet their unique needs and circumstances. Even if immediate cessation of all substances isn't realistic for an individual, systems can provide support for reducing the risk of overdose and other substance use-related harms. Harm reduction embraces equity and engagement with people who use drugs and has proven to be a more compassionate and effective approach to address substance use.

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## Washington County completes Wildwood Road project

Washington County, along with local officials, conducted a groundbreaking for the County Highway 12, or Wildwood Road, project, a major road reconstruction in Mahtomedi.

The project, on former state Highway 244, presented some unique challenges as it required closure of the roadway for a time to safely and efficiently complete construction of significant improvements. To operate safely, the roadway needed new pavement, a large diameter culvert replacement, and turn lanes. The project installed a 10-foot wide bituminous trail from Century Avenue to a city trail on Old Wildwood, four pedestrian median refuge crossing islands, a traffic signal at Wedgewood Drive, and a stormwater basin near Old Wildwood Road to improve water quality.

"Washington County recognizes the opportunity these turnback projects provide in addressing safety, economic development, retention water quality improvements, and multi-modal transportation needs," said Commissioner Fran Miron, District 1. "We value the partnerships necessary for successful projects such as Wildwood, and recognize the pain and inconvenience they can create for businesses and residents."

The project required significant erosion control measures, which required engaging the Rice Creek Watershed District for its input on the design of the erosion control measures. Public engagement was also a major component of the project, with an in-person open house pre-COVID-19, and a robust project web page and

online comment capability was provided to the community.

The project required closure of the roadway for almost five months, as the construction crew was working amidst water bodies, and there were limited practical detours. The county worked with local residents to provide as much access as possible, while maintaining a safe construction zone.

The county worked with the Minnesota Department of Transportation; the cities of Mahtomedi, Birchwood Village, and Willernie; the Rice Creek Watershed District, which used a grant for the stormwater basin; the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency; and Forest Lake Contracting. The Washington County Sheriff's Office dedicated special patrols to monitor city streets during construction.

# County moving toward providing adult emergency housing

All people in Washington County deserve a safe and dignified place to live.

Yet, for a number of residents, that hope can be just out of reach, including seniors living on a fixed income, persons living with a disability that limits their ability to work a full-time job, single adults at the lower end of the economic spectrum who cannot afford the high cost of housing on one income.

"We in Washington County had been aware of this need and were working on solutions to address this concern before the pandemic began," said Commissioner Wayne Johnson, District 4. "However, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the critical need for emergency housing in Washington County."

Beginning in April 2020, workers at Washington County kept those experiencing homelessness safe by providing emergency housing in temporary locations. The need continues and it's critical to develop a more appropriate and cost-effective response. Washington County, in partnership with the Washington County Community Development Agency, plans to purchase a property for short-term emergency housing with robust support services. A local

nonprofit would provide 24/7 services for members of the community experiencing homelessness.

Drawing from the demographics of the more than 200 people served in the last two years, 30% of those served are 55 years or older; the average age of a person in emergency housing is 56 years old. Half of the people served are receiving support for a disabling condition. They are single or have a partner, but do not have minor children, making them ineligible for the family shelters in Washington County.

Providing emergency housing with support in Washington County ensures that homelessness in communities is brief, rare, and non-reoccurring. It also gives people the chance to keep their jobs, maintain their health, and stay close to family and loved ones, all critical for getting through the crisis presented by homelessness. The face of homelessness is changing. Homelessness is not a character defect, but the result of a combination of many factors that can be challenging to overcome. Developing a program in Washington County will bring resources together to serve community members.

Emergency housing with services that serve the whole person (employment, housing search, basic needs) will be an asset to the community and create an environment in which all are treated with dignity and respect.

How many people used emergency housing in our county in 2020?

93 individuals



One illustrated individual is equal to five single individuals

15 families

About 60 people



One illustrated family is equal to five families

For information or assistance, call 651-430-6455.

## Free Product Room Project Contest



Have you tackled a project using items from the Environmental Center Free Product Room?

Whatever the project is, we want to hear about it! Submit a photo for a chance to win a DIY gif basket!



Enter by Friday, December 16!

Submit a photo and description to

[environmentalcenter@co.washington.mn.us](mailto:environmentalcenter@co.washington.mn.us)

# County Board votes on final 2023 budget, levies in December

The Washington County Board of Commissioners will adopt the final budget and levy for 2023, along with the five-year capital improvement program, Dec. 13. The board received public comment on the proposed budgets and levies through their final adoption.

## The levies proposed are:

- \$127.6 million for the general levy and Land and Water Legacy Program; and
- \$660,000 for the Regional Railroad Authority levy.

Under the proposed budget that the board has been reviewing, the county net levy would increase 4.88% over 2022, and non-levy revenue, a revenue source that fluctuates each year, would be \$108.3 million, a decrease of 18.5% from 2022.

The board is considering a budget that includes a 6.0% levy increase for the Land & Water Legacy Program, and a 0% levy change for the Washington County Regional Railroad Authority.

Throughout August and September, individual departments provided detailed presentations of their budgets and answered questions from commissioners during televised workshops which were open to the public.

As in nearly all counties, property owners in Washington County have experienced increased property values from the rise in sales prices, especially for residential properties. The median value of a home in the county went up about 20% between 2021 and 2022. The proposed levy, combined with new construction and the rising valuations, results in the county's tax rate decreasing by 14.5%.

With the approval of the budget and levy, the median valued home in the county, which is \$386,500, assuming



that its value increased by about 20% in the past year, would be taxed \$919 for 2023 by the county, a \$40 or 4.6% increase over 2022.

New costs in the budget will pay for areas of public safety for which the county is responsible, such as deputies who patrol county communities, correctional officers who serve in the County Jail, and dispatchers who manage 9-1-1 calls in the Sheriff's Office. High turnover, growth in vacancies, and a small pool of applicants have created an employment atmosphere which makes it necessary for the county to expend more effort to retain employees and attract employees when there are open positions.

There has been an increase in applications for service and more need for the health and human services that the county provides, such as services for those with mental health needs and homelessness prevention. The proposed budget calls for more employees to review applications, determine eligibility, and provide services.

Inflationary costs are having an impact on managing the county's vehicles, such as plow trucks and deputies' vehicles. The cost of replacement machinery, fuel, salt for clearing roads, and construction and building materials have risen substantially in the past year, raising the cost of doing business

for the county. Also, the county's Information Technology costs related to data management, data security, data storage, and technology infrastructure are increasing.

The 2023 budget calls for 24 new positions countywide, which is typical in an average year. The ratio of employees to residents would be 4.9, slightly down from 5.0 in 2022. Washington County is a rapidly growing county in population, which is reflected in the growth in the request for services.

The budget includes Gold Line construction costs, the bus-rapid transit line that will be built from downtown St. Paul to Woodbury, roughly along Interstate 94 and then south along Bielenberg Drive in Woodbury. While money for construction is part of the budget, no property tax dollars will be used to build the line, which is funded through the local option sales tax and federal grants.

A public budget meeting is scheduled for 6 p.m. Tuesday, Dec. 6, in the Board Room of the Government Center in Stillwater. The public is invited to attend to comment on the 2023 budget.

The budget workshops may be viewed through webstreaming of the County Board meetings.

To view the budget materials, see the county website at [www.co.washington.mn.us/budget](http://www.co.washington.mn.us/budget).

# County parks expanding equity initiatives for outdoor fun



Washington County Parks staff works to expand equity initiatives for parks access and programming.

The county was recently awarded several grants from the Metropolitan Council to fund equity initiatives for programming and recreation, as well as accessibility within the parks.

This past summer saw the first wave of equity programs in Square Lake Park and Cottage Grove Ravine Regional Park. A learn-to-ride bicycle program was a collaboration with REI that offered free lessons and supplied a free bicycle helmet to each participant to keep. Paddle ports offer equipment rental of kayaks and stand-up paddle-

boards in the parks. All equipment, including lifejackets, are part of the rental. These rental stations will be available seasonally from May to September. Reserving paddle port equipment is completed online.

"Although our parks are popular, we realized that to attract new visitors, we needed to be very intentional with efforts to make our parks accessible, equitable and welcoming," said Commissioner Stan Karwoski, District 2.

To help introduce new users to parks, the county hired a Equity Program Coordinator. The staff member's first task was to connect with the community. Through efforts over the summer, she organized a new event that took place in September, a Free Outdoor Family Time. It was free to the public, provided transportation from several communities to Lake Elmo Park Reserve, offered free school supplies to students, and allowed guests to participate in outdoor recreational activities.

The event was held in partnership with several county programs and included

input from individuals who don't frequently use parks. Similar initiatives will be made by Washington County Parks as feedback is collected from local communities to prioritize park equity programs to remove barriers and improve access to the parks.

In addition to community events, there are specialized group programs. Small groups may schedule time with Parks staff to enjoy an outdoor activity, such as hiking, snowshoeing, or disc-golf. Programs are scheduled around group availability and tailored to match participant skill levels and needs. Opportunities are available at each Washington County park. Indoor activities may be scheduled for the Historic Courthouse at the corner of Pine and Third streets in Stillwater. Fees for programs are kept nominal and based on group size.

For questions on equity initiatives, or to request further information on group programming, contact the Parks Division at [parks@co.washington.mn.us](mailto:parks@co.washington.mn.us) or call 651-430-8370.

## Emergency Management requests community input

Every year, emergencies big and small happen in Washington County. County leaders are working with cities and townships to assess risks and vulnerabilities across the county and request community input. Washington County residents are uniquely situated to provide insight into what they see as concerns and ideas that should be shared with local officials. Residents or those who work in Washington County are asked to complete an online survey, which can be found with the QR code.

Every five years, the Washington County Sheriff's Office Emergency Management staff updates its All



Hazard Mitigation Plan, which includes not only a risk assessment, but also identifies ideas and projects that can be implemented to lessen the impact of future emergencies. By keeping this plan current, Washington County and local communities retain eligibility for federal grants to implement local mitigation projects.

This also creates more resilient neighborhoods and communities.

The survey results will be gathered and shared with public safety and community leadership. Unless respondents specify personal information in an open-ended question, there will be no personally identifiable information associated with responses. The information collected from the public survey will be included in the 2022-2023 update to the Washington County All Hazard Mitigation Plan.

The survey will close Jan. 15, 2023.

# Find legal help at Washington County Law Library

When navigating the court system or a legal issue, the Washington County Law Library may be a resource to get started.

Located in the Washington County Courthouse in Stillwater, the Law Library offers services for residents and attorneys. Law librarians can provide legal information and reference, find court forms, and offer limited assistance to attend remote court hearings. They also connect residents with other legal and advocacy organizations for additional support.

## Legal Clinics

The Law Library organizes Legal Advice Clinics, led by volunteer attorneys, to advise residents maneuvering the Washington County judicial system. Individuals may access free half-hour consultations with a volunteer attorney from the Washington County Bar Association.

Legal Clinics are available on the following topics:

- Civil Legal Clinics – can assist in areas

such as default judgment, housing and eviction, judgment collection, consumer issues, conciliation court, and automobile title transfer.

- Criminal Legal Clinics – can assist in areas such as traffic tickets, the criminal process, criminal expungement, and DANCO orders.
- Family Legal Clinics – can assist in areas such as marriage dissolution, child support, domestic abuse, paternity issues, child custody, visitation, spousal maintenance, and name changes.



## Meet the Law Librarian

Washington County Law Librarian Suzi Stephenson is experienced connecting with individuals of

various backgrounds and cultures. She started her career teaching English in Hangzhou, China, before earning her degree in librarian and information services. Her background working in libraries throughout the Twin Cities gives her a wide knowledge of available legal resources.

Stephenson is passionate about helping residents access the support they need to navigate the court system. She also makes sure people know they are available to assist with other concerns. “It doesn’t have to be legal – we also assist with tax questions or insurance,” Stephenson said. “Even if we don’t have the resources here, we usually can find them.”

## Connect with Us

The Law Library is in the Washington County Courthouse:

14949 62nd St. N.  
P.O. Box 6  
St. Ilwater, MN 55082

### Open Hours:

Monday - Friday, 8 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.

### Contact:

651-430-6330

[LawLibrary@co.washington.mn.us](mailto:LawLibrary@co.washington.mn.us)

### Learn more:

[WashColib.org/LawLibrary](http://WashColib.org/LawLibrary)

# Veterans' benefits expanded through PACT Act

Washington County Veterans may be eligible to receive benefits through the PACT Act, the largest benefit expansion in Veterans Administration (VA) history.

The law is The Sergeant First Class (SFC) Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act. It expands VA health care and benefits for Veterans exposed to burn pits and other toxic substances in multiple locations and eras of service.

The PACT Act will bring these changes:

- expands and extends eligibility for VA health care for Veterans with toxic exposures and Veterans of the Vietnam, Gulf War, and post-9/11 eras.

- adds more than 20 new presumptive conditions for burn pits and other toxic exposures.
- adds more presumptive-exposure locations for Agent Orange and radiation.
- requires the VA to provide a toxic exposure screening to every Veteran enrolled in VA health care.
- helps to improve research, staff education, and treatment related to toxic exposures.

"At Washington County, we respect Veterans and work with them to ensure that they receive the benefits that they deserve," said Commissioner Gary Kriesel, District 3.

Veterans who previously applied for VA benefits for toxic exposure and

were denied are encouraged to reapply. Surviving spouses of Veterans previously denied benefits for these exposures are also encouraged to apply for benefits.

County Veterans Service Officers are available to assist in applying for these benefits. If you or someone you know may be affected by this new legislation, call your County Veterans Services staff at 651-430-6895 or e-mail [VSO@co.washington.mn.us](mailto:VSO@co.washington.mn.us) for more information.

More information on the PACT Act is at [www.va.gov/resources/the-pact-act-and-your-va-benefits/](http://www.va.gov/resources/the-pact-act-and-your-va-benefits/)

## Washington County Board of Commissioners

Washington County Commissioners develop policy and make decisions and laws that govern the county. Commissioners encourage calls or emails on any issue related to county government. For service-related questions, visit the county website at [www.co.washington.mn.us](http://www.co.washington.mn.us) or call 651-430-6000 (TTY - 651-430-6246).

### County Board Meetings

The County Board generally meets most Tuesdays at 9 a.m. Meetings take place at the Washington County Government Center in Stillwater, 14949 N. 62nd St. Agendas and directions to the building are posted online at [www.co.washington.mn.us/board-meeting](http://www.co.washington.mn.us/board-meeting). See the county's website calendar for details on the meeting schedule. Contact the Office of Administration at 651-430-6001 for more information.

### Cable Television/Webstreaming

Board meetings are webstreamed live, and may be accessed from [www.co.washington.mn.us/webstream](http://www.co.washington.mn.us/webstream). The webstreamed meetings are also archived on the county website. Board meetings are cablecast on government access channels throughout the county on South Washington County Cable Channel 16, Channel 16 and Valley Access Channel 16.



Left to right, Fran Miron, Lisa Weik, Wayne A. Johnson, Gary Kriesel, Stan Karwoski



#### District 1 - Fran Miron

[fran.miron@co.washington.mn.us](mailto:fran.miron@co.washington.mn.us)  
651-430-6211

#### District 2 - Stan Karwoski

[stan.karwoski@co.washington.mn.us](mailto:stan.karwoski@co.washington.mn.us)  
651-430-6212

#### District 3 - Gary Kriesel

[gary.kriesel@co.washington.mn.us](mailto:gary.kriesel@co.washington.mn.us)  
651-430-6213

#### District 4 - Wayne A. Johnson

[wayne.a.johnson@co.washington.mn.us](mailto:wayne.a.johnson@co.washington.mn.us)  
651-430-6214

#### District 5 - Lisa Weik

[lisa.weik@co.washington.mn.us](mailto:lisa.weik@co.washington.mn.us)  
651-430-6215

# Washington County

*Washington County is an equal opportunity organization and employer*

### Vision

A great place to live, work and play... today and tomorrow

### Mission

Providing quality services through responsible leadership, innovation and the cooperation of dedicated people

### Values

- Ethical: to ensure public trust through fairness, consistency and transparency
- Stewardship: to demonstrate tangible, cost-effective results and protect public resources
- Quality: to ensure that services delivered to the public are up to the organization's highest standards
- Responsive: to deliver services that are accessible, timely, respectful and efficient
- Respectful: to believe in and support the dignity and value of all members of this community
- Leadership: to actively advocate for and guide the County toward a higher quality of life

### Goals

- To promote the health, safety, and quality of life of citizens
- To provide accessible, high-quality services in a timely and respectful manner
- To address today's needs while proactively planning for the future
- To maintain public trust through responsible use of public resources, accountability, and openness of government

\*\*\*ECRWSS\*\*  
Postal Customer



10/21/2022/115,000

## County plans for capital improvements for the next 5 years

Washington County released its Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) for 2023-2027 in early October and invites comments on the plan until its final adoption with the county's 2023 budget Dec. 13.

Capital improvement planning is one of the fundamental building blocks in the county's budget and financial management. The CIP establishes a guide for making capital investment decisions logically, and in a deliberate and accountable fashion.

The 2023-2027 CIP includes nearly \$400 million in community investment. The CIP outlines plans to maintain current infrastructure and includes projects for new roadways, buildings, and park facilities to address a growing population and service demands. The investments in the CIP help keep roadways safe, facilities efficient and effective, and provides parks amenities that serve the needs of the county.

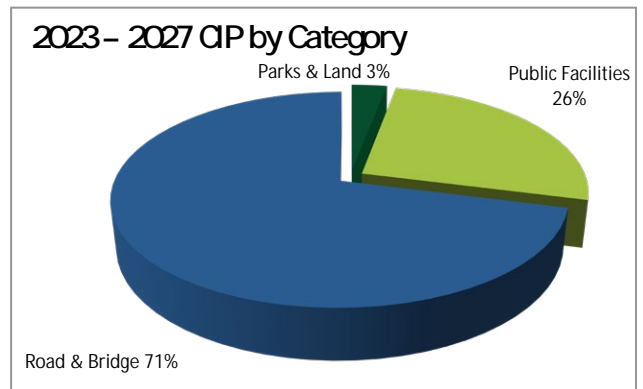
The CIP includes more than \$17 million in investments at seven different county parks and trails, along with major maintenance projects, including:

- parks and trails pavement preservation;
- interior and exterior renovations for the Historic Courthouse;
- renovations to the shelter and play area at St. Croix Bluffs Regional Park;
- facility improvements at Point Douglas Park; and
- an extension of the Hardwood Creek Trail.

Public facilities improvements include construction of a new West Central Service Center, as well as improvements to the highway maintenance facility in Woodbury and the Park Grove and R.H. Stafford libraries.

Major roadway improvements planned for the coming five years include:

- more than a mile of improvements to



a portion of County State Aid Highway (CSAH) 32 in Forest Lake;

- a grade-separated intersection at Highway 36 and CSAH 17 at the border of Grant and Lake Elmo;
- a half-mile of improvements of County Road 74 in Cottage Grove;
- more than six miles of improvements on County Road 50 from Highway 61 to Manning Avenue; and
- the realignment of 100th Street in Cottage Grove.

Residents may view the CIP on the county's website at [www.co.washington.mn.us/CIP](http://www.co.washington.mn.us/CIP). Comments may be left on a form on the website, emailed to [administration@co.washington.mn.us](mailto:administration@co.washington.mn.us), or residents may call 651-430-6001 to leave a comment.









# Fiscal Responsibility

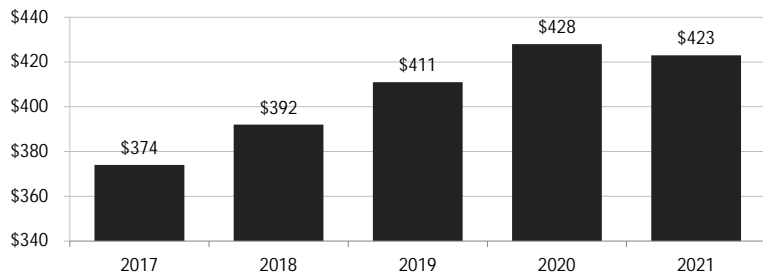
## Price of Government

Has remained stable since 2017

Washington County provides governmental services as compared to total personal income.

Washington County's low debt service cost allows the county to issue debt in the most favorable terms, saving interest costs.

## Levy per Capita



Washington County maintains one of the lowest levies per capita among all Minnesota counties.

Washington County's commitment to high-quality service that meets the needs of our community and the region is the 23rd annual report and is a key indicator of our performance.

[www.co.washington.mn.us/performanceasures](http://www.co.washington.mn.us/performanceasures)