

Speaker Laurie Jenkins
Opening Day Remarks – 2026 Legislative Session
“Protect & Make Progress”

Thank you, Chair Peters, for welcoming us all to the ancestral homeland of the Squaxin Island Tribe. It is an honor to have you here, and to continue our work advancing our government-to-government relationship with Washington’s sovereign tribes.

Thank you, Pastor Thomas, for opening our session with a moment of reflection and inspiration to guide our work.

And thank you, Elizabeth, for the gift of song today in our national anthem.

I would like to welcome our newest member, Rep. Zach Hall. Zach’s commitment to the work of this institution goes back to his time here previously as a legislative assistant for the same district he now represents. I know he will continue to serve the people of the 5th LD with dedication and compassion in this new role.

Before I begin my remarks, I want to take a moment to remember the late Sen. Bill Ramos, who also represented the 5th LD, as well the late Speaker Emeritus Frank Chopp. Their sudden and unexpected passings last year impacted us all deeply, but their work as members of this legislature leaves a profound impact. I would also like to acknowledge the recent tragic death of Trooper Tara-Marysa Guting, who was killed last month responding to a traffic collision in my district. Please join me in a moment of silence for these three individuals who left us much too soon.

Thank you.

...

Members of the House and Washingtonians from every region of the state –

We begin the 2026 legislative session with much of our good work from previous sessions now threatened by the actions of a federal administration with far different policy goals than the majority of Washingtonians. I wish it were not so.

In all our recent forecasts from the Economic Revenue Forecast Council, we have seen a recurring theme: President Trump's tariffs are causing higher inflation, more economic uncertainty, and greater price increases to Washington's families.

This is impacting affordability and people are feeling it in every corner of the state. From declining state revenues for programs and services that help Washington families, to rising costs for food, transportation, construction and more.

It's been six months since President Trump signed HR 1 into law.

The impact of this legislation is ugly.

Nearly 300,000 Washington residents are seeing an immediate spike in their health insurance premiums – including many self-employed Washingtonians and those whose jobs don't provide health insurance.

Around 180,000 Washingtonians – families with children, people with disabilities, elderly people in long-term care – will lose their Medicaid coverage in a few short months.

And let me be very clear: these folks are losing their Medicaid directly as a result of actions in the OTHER Washington. While we had to make some difficult decisions last year to balance our state budget, NOT a single person lost Medicaid as a result.

By contrast this legislature, under Democratic leadership, has worked to make health care more accessible and affordable for more people.

We said yes to Medicaid expansion so more Washingtonians could be insured.

We worked to strengthen the individual market to provide more choices for people.

Together, we brought our statewide uninsured rate from a high of 14 percent in 2013 to below five percent – a number which is now certain to rise again because of the Trump Administration’s actions.

We’ve now been irresponsibly and inconceivably handed an incredibly expensive problem that will have dire ramifications for the people of this state.

But it’s not just about health care.

Food assistance for 900,000 Washingtonians is threatened.

Counties with the highest numbers of people at risk of losing this critical lifeline include our most populous counties like mine, Pierce, but also Yakima, Benton, Cowlitz, and Spokane Counties.

Our climate progress is threatened.

The legislature passed the landmark Climate Commitment Act in 2021, and voters affirmed it in 2024.

Now the Trump Administration’s actions threaten credits that Washington households use to purchase a new heat pump or an electric vehicle. Revoking these credits and denying funds for clean energy projects that support a sustainable, healthy future for our state is totally contrary to our values as Washingtonians.

Speaking of our values, we have long been a state that welcomes immigrants and refugees, and celebrates the rich diversity in our communities.

From passing the Keep Washington Working Act, to increasing oversight of private detention facilities, to strengthening hate crime laws, we stand up for our neighbors and stand firm against actions that violate people’s civil rights or deny somebody’s humanity.

The actions of the federal government have statewide impacts that require every one of us to work together on solutions that align with Washington values.

This session will be incredibly challenging. As federal funding is cut off for health care, for food, for clean energy credits, as the state has to shoulder hundreds of millions of dollars to comply with red tape the Trump administration is now mandating for wasteful changes to Medicaid and food assistance, as the uncertainty around tariffs hits our trade-dependent economy especially hard, as we recover from the unprecedented, catastrophic flooding in parts of our state last month...our ability to protect those values is hampered by an outdated tax structure that's bad for working families and small businesses.

I don't tend to live in the problems, but the problems are so big right now we have to be realistic about the impacts on our work here. That's why we must be crystal clear about the challenges we are facing.

...

Still, we need to be focused on the job the people sent us here to do, which is to protect the good things we have accomplished together, continue to make progress where we can, and reject bad things whether they come from this Washington or the other Washington.

We will spend the next 60 days doing those things, and those things only.

We need to protect the hard work we've been doing to improve relationships between law enforcement and communities. When trust erodes, that work is threatened.

In the last few sessions, we've made significant investments in public safety, resulting in 21 classes and nearly 600 new law enforcement officers graduating from our regional training academies since May of 2023.

We got good news recently that both violent and property crimes in our state are down, as they are nationally.

But last week, a mother in Minneapolis, Renee Nicole Good, was shot by a masked ICE agent. And last summer, former Minnesota House Speaker Melissa Hortman and her husband were assassinated at their home by someone impersonating law enforcement.

We must be able to see and believe the law enforcement officers who approach us because there's too much at risk if we can't.

Masks are being used to obscure identities escalate tensions, stoke fears, deny public transparency, and shield government from accountability.

That can't happen here.

That's why tomorrow the House will be hearing a bill that will prohibit law enforcement officers — including federal immigration agents operating in Washington — from wearing face-concealing masks while interacting with the public.

Protecting Washingtonians also means ensuring robust regulations around people's data, including how it is collected and who has access to it.

As we continue to make sure law enforcement has the tools they need to do their jobs, we need to ensure these tools do not create mistrust or cause harm to the communities they serve.

Surveillance tools like FLOCK cameras, which are already in use by some cities and counties in our state, should be regulated so that people can be confident the data is not shared with federal agencies that want to use it to target and harass communities.

Legislation has been introduced to do that and we should act on it, because protecting Washingtonians means standing up to federal overreach.

We saw that when the Trump Administration told our Secretary of State to hand over private voter data. Secretary Hobbs stood up for every voter and said, you can have the public data, but you will not get Washingtonians'

private voter data. Thank you, Sec. Hobbs, and thank you, AG Brown and Gov. Ferguson for standing up for Washingtonians at every turn.

Finally, protecting people in our state means protecting the very basics.

Last session, we passed a two-year budget that prioritized food, health and shelter – the things people need to survive.

We weren't able to progress as much as we wanted, but we tried hard to avoid cuts that would take us backward as a state.

I expect our approach to this year's supplemental budget will be very similar. Each of us has a wish list of things we would like to be able to do, but the headwinds I mentioned earlier mean once again tough choices need to be made.

The impacts of HR 1 have consequences for our state budget. We will be required to spend more of our state dollars to receive less in federal dollars, as outrageous as that sounds.

Protecting food, health and shelter will continue to be a priority, whether it's helping with Affordable Care Act subsidies so we minimize Washingtonians increased costs for health care coverage, maintaining food assistance to those who will otherwise go hungry, or protecting access to reproductive health care even as the federal government slashes funding for it.

...

So yes, we will work hard to protect these and other things.

And where we can, we will not only protect – we will make progress.

We will be persistent in forging solutions. Washingtonians always are, even in the toughest of times.

We can't do anything about the Trump Administration's tariffs, which are impacting affordability. As state lawmakers, that's out of our hands.

But we CAN come together and find ways to hold down costs for Washingtonians for things that ARE within our purview.

We CAN protect access to preventive health care services without out-of-pocket expense for patients, regardless of what actions the federal government may take.

We CAN take steps to reduce the costs associated with housing, increasing the supply of affordable housing for Washingtonians.

We CAN make sure energy costs that data centers drive are not paid by Washington households.

These are just a few examples.

One of the biggest ways we could impact affordability is ensuring our tax code works better and is more fair.

Our current system rests most heavily on those Washingtonians with the least ability to afford it. It's time for us to rebalance our tax code so it meets the needs of all the people of our state, including working people AND businesses.

...

We are in the thick of some very tough times, but it's important to remember that nothing in politics is permanent. Nothing good. Nothing bad. Our job has always been to end the bad things as fast as possible and to build on the good things.

That job feels more urgent today than it has in many of our lifetimes. At times, it feels impossible.

It is not.

I – we -- must never give up on this Washington, on this legislature, on our people.

Our job this session is to spend every drop of energy we have, plus some, stopping the bad and building the good.

Let's start now.