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Financial director responds to tax measures

By ROBERT WHALE
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In 2020, Berk Consulting Agency of Seattle studied the city of Auburn's general fund and forecast that over the next decade, a \$10 million gap would open between the revenue Auburn takes in and what it spends.

On March 7, Auburn City Council members pressed Financial Director Jamie Thomas with a lot of "what-ifs" about possible adjustments to measures the city is proposing to deal with that projected deficit: a B&O tax; and, in addition to the B&O tax, square-foot tax only on the warehousing and wholesale sectors.

On that occasion, Thomas' recommendation was for a B&O tax with a \$500,000 annual reporting threshold, with variable rates by industry from half of 1 percent for retail up to 0.18 percent for wholesaling activities, and other sectors falling in the middle, between 0.1 percent and 0.15 percent.

Also on that occasion, Thomas proposed a 10 cent per square foot tax on warehousing and wholesaling activities. Thomas estimated the B&O tax would generate an estimated \$3.94 million in annual revenues and the square foot tax an estimated \$1.35 million, for a total of \$5.29 million annually.

On March 22, Thomas returned with answers.

Her first order of business was to demonstrate what the data would look like and what the impacts on tax revenues would be were the city to increase the tax cap threshold from \$500,000 to \$750,000 — information Deputy Mayor Claude DaCorsi had asked for on March 7.

Thomas cautioned at first, however, that, because she doesn't have data from the Washington State Department of Revenue reporting the precise number of businesses in Auburn that generate more than \$500,000 annually, and precisely how much they make, what she had to share would be based on extrapolations and trends.

If the city, however, were to increase the tax cap from \$500,000 to \$750,000, at the \$500,000 threshold, Thomas said, 991 businesses would likely qualify and report a B&O tax return. But if the city were to bump the cap to \$750,000, that would significantly narrow the number of businesses reporting to 465.

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COURTESY PHOTOS BY NATHAN JANSEN.

Near completion, Return Home, the world's first, large-scale, terramation facility is slated to open within weeks in northwest Auburn.

Death care facility to open

First large-scale, human composting facility in the world will open in Auburn.

By ROBERT WHALE
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Returning the human body to the earth without flames or chemicals.

Such has been a long desired alternative to pumping formaldehyde into a loved one, encasing them in a concrete vault reinforced with rebar and burying them in a six foot deep hole.

Or to reducing one's once-larger-than-life mama or papa, sister, brother or dear friend to a handful of grey ashes.

At last, technology, time and the law have aligned to allow what some once might have considered a fantasy of aging hippies to become reality, poised to reform and rock the death care industry.

As soon as April or mid-May 2021, Return Home, the first, large-scale "terramation" — human composting — facility ever built in the world, opens in an 11,500-square-foot warehouse on Auburn's north end, with 72 vessels that can transform 72 bodies per month into soil at 30 times the rate of ground burial.

To bring "sustainable disposition to the mainstream," said Return Home's CEO and founder, Micah Truman.

At the outset, Return Home's approach is no different than traditional burial or cremation. When someone has died, it's usually family or friends who reach out, and people are highly directed in what they want to do. For example, last week, Return Home got a call from people in Los Angeles who were unwilling to use a crematorium and had already heard about Return Home.



The remains of a pig after processing at Return Home in Auburn, the world's first, large-scale terramation facility.

"We can either work with funeral homes, or we can take the body and work directly with the family," said Truman. "We deal with transportation, both to here and back with the soil. It's completely turn-key, so the family has nothing to worry about. And we have the facility internally, and the technology, which is entirely unique, to completely transform a body into soil, at incredible rates of speed."

How it works

The process uses a vessel, or pod — 8 feet long by 3.5 feet by 3.5 feet — into which workers first place the all-organic bulking material of alfalfa, straw and sawdust. When they have placed the body inside, they close the pod.

The pod includes proprietary machinery and technology that Return Home will not allow the public to see.

What happens next is analogous with composting. In this case, the mix and the body reach a temperature just south of 140 degrees, which is almost cooking heat. The process is aerobic, meaning oxygen flows continuously in and out of the vessel. It takes the microbes in the body and puts them on hyper-drive, making them work incredibly fast. Typically, it takes many years to get that done, leaving behind soil.

"It's what nature meant us to do. We just do it faster," Truman said.

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Inslee expands eligibility with vaccine supply rising

He's also extending moratoria on evictions and utility cut-offs and easing rules for nursing home visits.

By JERRY CORNFIELD
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Another 2 million Washingtonians will soon be eligible for COVID-19 shots as vaccination rates improve and the state forecasts

a supply surge, Gov. Jay Inslee announced March 18.

Starting March 31, restaurant and construction workers, and those over the age of 60 will be among those who will be able to get a shot as the state extends eligibility into the third and fourth tiers of Phase 1B of its vaccination plan.

The move comes with the state expecting about 600,000 doses each week from the federal government in April, nearly doubling the current

supply, the state Department of Health said.

"This timeline is much faster than we would have predicted a few months ago," Inslee said. "And it's thanks to the tremendous work of the Biden administration of dramatically increasing the production of these vaccines."

The governor also eased rules for visitation at nursing homes and long-term care facilities as more vulnerable residents receive the

potentially life-saving shots.

Outdoor visitation remains the safest, preferred option, but indoor visitation will be allowed for visitors or residents who are fully vaccinated.

Compassionate care visits will remain allowed, regardless of vaccination status.

The governor also extended a moratorium on evictions through June 30 and a ban on utility shut-offs to the end of July.

The eviction moratorium has been in place a year and extended several times. It was scheduled to expire March 31.

It bans, with limited exceptions, residential evictions and late fees on unpaid rent. It also requires landlords to offer residents a repayment plan on unpaid rent.

"If you can pay rent, pay it," Inslee said. "It is the right thing to do."

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Inslee

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A continuing concern of landlords is whether they'll ever receive the full amount of unpaid rent. Many have received some assistance through state-funded programs. More than \$500 million has been earmarked to assist tenants and landlords thus far, Inslee said, and the sum will grow as a result of the latest federal aid package.

Meanwhile, on Wednesday, the state expanded eligibility for COVID-19 vaccines to grocery store clerks, agricultural workers, food processors, bus drivers and other staff at congregate settings, as well as women 16 or older who are pregnant,

and anyone 16 or older with a disability that puts them at high risk.

On March 31, those eligible for vaccination in the third and fourth tiers of Phase 1B include:

- Anyone between the ages of 60 and 64.
- Restaurant staff, construction workers and others who work in congregate settings.
- Anyone living in a congregate setting, such as a group home for those with disabilities, a homeless shelter, or a jail or a prison.
- Anyone with two or more comorbidities.

Statewide, more than 2.5 million vaccine doses have been administered since shipments first arrived in December, state data shows.

By the end of the month, roughly 5 million residents statewide will be eligible for vaccination, leaving a little

more than a million adults awaiting a chance to get in line.

The state will likely make all adults eligible for vaccines by late April, Inslee said, meeting the May 1 deadline set by President Joe Biden.

Though, Washington won't open eligibility to everyone right away, as heads of other states have done, because it would drive demand beyond the current supply, he said.

"Governors look great when they just say everybody's eligible for the vaccine," Inslee said. "It's one thing to be eligible for the vaccine and it's another to get it. Just because a governor says, 'I've opened it to everybody, it doesn't mean he or she has delivered it to people. We want people to get vaccines, not just be eligible for them."



COURTESY PHOTOS BY NATHAN JANSEN.

Two of the 72 processing pods and the racks on which they will be stored at Return Home's terramation facility at 4146 B Place in northwest Auburn.

Measures

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That sums to a loss in annual revenue of about \$500,000 based on estimates of the average revenue base of the 465 businesses and the 991 businesses, she said.

Having said that, Thomas noted that a higher tax cap of \$750,000 would work only if the city were to make up for the extra \$500,000 in lost revenue somewhere else.

"If we increase the proposed retail rate from .05 percent to .065 percent, that is almost exactly \$500,000. It would be fewer businesses

reporting, and it would put a slightly bigger impact on that retail sector to make up the difference," Thomas said.

Similarly, if the square foot tax were to increase from 10 cents per square foot to 12.5 cents per square foot, Thomas said, that alone would generate an estimated \$338,000 additional tax revenue for the city per year.

But that adjustment, too, comes with an important caveat.

That is, if the blended tax rate — the B&O tax, plus the square-foot fee that would apply only to the wholesaling and warehousing sector — were to increase from .09 percent to .11 percent, the

result would begin skewing toward a heavier burden on the warehousing and wholesaling sector.

Which, Thomas reminded the council, runs contrary to the city's goal of evening out the tax burden on all businesses as much as possible.

"The average tax rate that we're proposing right now for all the other businesses right now is around .08 percent," Thomas said, adding that if the city were to leave the square foot fee at 10 cents per square foot, the result would be to keep the warehousing-wholesaling sectors at .09 percent, and all businesses would end up paying a similar tax rate.

Facility

From Page 1

Carefully-trained technicians monitor the process. An air-filtration system informally called "The Octopus," which is attached to all 72 pods, carries the odors to a machine where they are treated.

Within a month, the body is gone, leaving only the bones, which workers reduce and then return to the soil in the pod.

After one more month — two months in total — the remains are given to the family.

"This is what we give the family," Truman said, nodding to a bowl brimming with what had once been a dead pig, but was now a fine, dark brown, odorless compost, which slips with ease from the hand and through the fingers. "This is something you can plant in your rose garden, Uncle George no less."

People, Truman noted, have a legal right to use that compost in whatever way they want, just as they are allowed to do with cremated remains.

"We have been working on this for 26 months now, and our facility is just getting up. The science was a heckuva lot of work. Then after we did the science, we had to build the technology, and every machine was individually-designed and

custom-produced. That was its own thing. Then we had to find a facility, and the facility had to be zoned as a crematorium, of a certain size, at a certain place, and that was its own adventure.

"We had to design this air filtration system we call Octopus, and Octopus was its own animal, pun fully intended. It's a very specific design that we did and unique to our industry. So, basically, all the things that we've created have taken a great deal of time and expertise to complete, but I think we're there, we're ready to go," Truman said.

Public is ready

On average in the United States, funeral services and all things associated cost a grieving family about \$6,000, though there is no limit on the price of caskets. Return Home offers its services plus transportation for \$5,000.

"So, we are very moderately priced, and we ensure that your last act on this planet is to give back to it, and not pollute it," Truman said.

Truman said he is confident "the mainstream" is ready to embrace the idea of turning a body into compost that can be returned to the earth without polluting it.

Indeed, the first human composting company, Recompost, opened weeks ago in downtown Kent, though at a much smaller scale, with 10 vessels, and another facility in the southern part of the state is already open with two vessels. Both facilities are already at capacity.

Of course, Truman is aware that some people will be queasy at first about this notion of planting one's beloved in the backyard garden.

"I think we always state that we're uncomfortable with Uncle George going to feed the roses, but Uncle George is going to feed the roses, no matter what," Truman said. "It's a little bit of a misnomer to assume that we're doing something different than the world has always done. So, as I look at weird, I can see our way as fairly

sensible, and the other ones as a little more of a twist. It's not a matter of our disposition method because ours is the most benign of the bunch.

"I think what concerns us most isn't our final disposition. I think what concerns us most is that in order to talk about this, we have to talk about dying. And we don't like to talk about dying. It involves even our own mortality, and, more difficult, the mortality of the people we love," Truman said.

The reaction from faith communities has been mostly positive to date, Truman said.

"Well, there are always going to be certain objections," Truman said. "The Catholic Church objected to cremation for a long time, but I think they've come around. I was just talking on our webinar with a group of rabbis two weeks ago, and they were incredibly interested. They were saying, 'You know, Jewish burial tradition is just that: it's tradition; it's not scripture. What Scripture says is we're supposed to give back to the earth. That's our obligation.' So I was really blown away by the Jewish community I was listening to. In fact, three rabbis are coming here to tour our facility right after Passover. There is a spectrum, but I don't actually see huge resistance from a great deal of it, no more than with any other effort that I would see."

Before any of this could happen, Truman noted, the Washington state Legislature had to approve SB 5001, which legalized terramation starting in 2020.

"This is unprecedented," said Truman. "Iceland, Norway, no one has it. This is the first place in the world to do it. And for some crazy reason, Kent, and Auburn where I am, are at the epicenter of this industry. So suddenly, we have this particular region that the whole world is going to be looking at, and that's kind of crackers. SB 5001 literally changes how we do death care in America. We have cremation, we have burial, and now we have been given a third option."

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