

Writer goes on a tear about flabby language

Those who know me know I'm a bit of a stickler about language.

Not so much about the grammar, although of course that matters. After all, nobody likes a grammar cop, running around bugging some poor guy who ends a sentence with a preposition. That sort of thing doesn't make you look smart — it makes you look like a smart-ass, a know-it-all deservng of a spirited application of foot to posterior.

As long as I'm at it, though, that bit about never ending a sentence with a preposition? Forget about it. It has nothing to do with proper English. It's the vestige of a silly attempt by academic dunderheads several centuries ago to Latinize English.

Anyway, here's what I focus on when I work with text: meaning and clarity. My dictum: say what you mean in as few words as you can — knowing what those words mean, of course — then get the hell out, or risk stinking up the joint.

Unfortunately, that doesn't always happen.



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The unlucky fallout for editors is they spend too much time cutting away the verbal flab that has grown about the mid-section of English. By no means is the layer of fat always there by design, but in nearly three decades of laboring in the trenches of this profession, I've dealt with too many instances of words blown-up to Hulk-like dimensions to make matters sound more important than they are.

For instance, using "utilize" for use, which means exactly the same thing. Those are two extra syllables you can never get back.

Then there is the creativity-stifling accretion of euphemisms and dead and petrified metaphors, which broadcast journalists

seem to be especially fond of inserting wherever they can.

Then there's the storm that "left 20 people dead." Are you trying to tell me the storm encountered 20 dead people and refused to resurrect them? Don't you mean that it killed 20 people? If that's what you mean, say it.

Someone — I've forgotten who — described the sort of person who has no idea what he's going to say before he says it, doesn't know what he's saying when he speaks, and sits down again having no idea what he just said.

So, say what you mean in the fewest words.

I summon to the front of the class Ulysses Grant.

During the American Civil War, General George Meade's chief of staff had this to say about the field orders Grant penned to his subordinates.

"There is one striking feature of Grant's orders; no matter how hurriedly he may write them on the field, no one ever has the slightest doubt as to their meaning or even has to read them over a second time to understand them."

"When I put my pen to

the paper," Grant said, "I did not know the first word that I should make use of in writing the terms. I only knew what was in my mind, and I wished to express it clearly, so that there could be no mistaking it."

The Roman poet Horace in his "Ars Poetica" gives us the flavor: "Parturient montes, nascetur ridiculus mus." ("The Mountain labored and brought forth a ridiculous mouse.") To get the point, just look at the size of the Latin words that precede that tiny "mus" at the end. He's talking about a lot of sound and fury, signifying, well, not much.

Here are a few honorable mentions.

Doublespeak, doublethink, call it what you want, it grates and often amuses. In a limited sense, it means a deliberate misuse of language to obfuscate. Up and down the line, the military has always been one of its keenest practitioners.

In a book on this subject I read years ago, I came across some low-level officer's inflated order for "1,000 hydro force blast cups."

What were those, I wondered? Well, toilet

plungers.

In the darker sense, people often employ doublespeak to cloak bad deeds.

I remember watching a television documentary years ago about some guy called to account before a fact-finding commission on a bribery charge. The highlight for me came in the follow-up to the guy's admission that he had indeed deposited money in some dude's bank account to secure what he wanted. The exchange went something like this:

Commissioner: "Was that not bribery?"

Bad guy: "No, sir, that was not bribery."

Commissioner: "Then what would you call it?"

Bad guy: "Sir, I simply utilized the existing funds in order to expedite the solution to a difficult problem."

Then there are the raw police and fire blotters that describe actions carried out by "an adult male." Doesn't that mean "man"? If they're trying to protect someone's identity, here's a tip: calling the guy a man doesn't give away his identity.

When I hear anyone get up before Congress and

say, "Mistakes were made," I'm sure I'm not alone in practically screaming, "Tell us who made the #\$\$\$# mistakes!?!?"

In an abridgement of his best-seller "Doublespeak," the writer William Lutz has the following to say:

"There are no potholes in Tucson, Arizona, just 'pavement deficiencies.' The Reagan Administration didn't propose any new taxes, just 'revenue enhancements,' through new 'user's fees.' Those aren't bums on the street, just 'non-goal oriented members of society.' There are no more poor people, just 'fiscal underachievers.' There was no robbery of an automatic teller machine, just an 'unauthorized withdrawal.' The patient didn't die of medical malpractice, it was just a 'diagnostic misadventure of a high magnitude.' The U.S. Army doesn't kill the enemy anymore, it just 'services the target.'

By gum, I bet you'd never have caught General Grant writing about "servicing the target."

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The ins and outs of this year's short legislative session

The legislative session is slowly drawing to a close. Too bad this was the short session, which does not provide enough time for the debates that were needed.

Typically, the 60-day session does not allow enough time to accomplish all that the Washington Legislature needs to do. And you can't blame

COVID because this was the second session held largely remotely. Although, COVID did hamper compromise, which is usually the end product of debate. Not to mention the sidebar private discussions that occur outside the official meetings.

The short session favors the party in power and incumbents. But media

coverage noted that for a couple of topics, there were hundreds who wanted to testify. One committee mentioned thousands. The most controversial topics that mirror the national debate have been Gov. Jay Inslee's use of his authority during the pandemic, which was defined by whether you were in the majority or minority party. Republicans accused Inslee of trying to govern alone by banning big crowds, shutting down schools, and requiring vaccinations and face masks. Inslee's supporters noted that Washington has one of the lowest death rates due to COVID in the nation.

The next major topic was responding to police who since last session have been complaining about the accountability measures the Legislature implemented last session because people of color tend to get shot more often than white people. Every community from Auburn to Seattle has a story that reflects why those accountability measures were needed. But everyone stayed in their lane, meaning Republicans supported police and Democrats supported the rights of people of color.

In another reflection of

the national debate, free speech was cast against providing misinformation about elections. The losing candidate in the most recent race for governor replicated the spirit of Donald Trump. Those who wanted accountability for suggesting that there was election fraud sought a penalty of a gross misdemeanor that carries a \$5,000 fine or 364 days in the county jail. Legislation was also introduced to provide protection for election workers.

The last of the big anticipated topics was homelessness and affordable housing. Most cities do not allow apartments in single family neighborhoods. But with home prices skyrocketing and not much affordable housing available, the Legislature has been favoring more duplexes and fourplexes as a solution. Since much of the need is in King County, many community leaders were testifying for or against expansion to denser housing into single family areas.

The new term is "middle housing" which includes sixplexes. In a sad historical commentary, the original separation by zoning was to keep people of color out of white neighborhoods. But



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costs are rapidly changing so that many people can't afford a single family home, but might be able to afford to live in a fourplex or sixplex.

Federal Way Mayor Jim Ferrell and Auburn Mayor Nancy Backus were among those who testified against the Senate version even though studies have shown that restrictive zoning laws such as the ones in Federal Way and Auburn contribute to increased housing costs. However, several community leaders from other cities supported the legislation to help people afford the cost of a new home — be it a townhouse, duplex or sixplex.

What really goes on in Olympia will be interpreted differently as the elections unfold.

When the Legislature is

in session, all is fair game for people in power, and the short session favors incumbents. Why? Because they can introduce legislation while their opponent is home campaigning, but has no power unless they defeat the incumbent.

A good example of that recently occurred. In anticipation of an opponent, most likely Republican Kent City Councilmember Bill Boyce, State Sen. Mona Das (D-Kent) used the incumbent's advantage when she announced her proposal to cut the sales tax by 1%. Das may get support from both parties. Even if it doesn't pass, she can still win points if she challenges Boyce to support her tax reduction. That will have a lot of support in Kent among voters. Democrats are usually the ones who want to raise taxes and Republicans want to lower them. State Rep. Drew Stokesbury (R-Auburn) has already announced his support for a sales tax reduction. Others will also support the cut. The longer session next year could be a great one.

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Watching the social media and cable news train wreck

To say that anything is possible is to condition the sinister, pitfall corollary that nothing is ridiculous.

So you told me, dad. All I can say is, if you're following me here, pop, you were right. But I know you would not be happy to hear that.

See, pop, the world you left behind on Christmas Eve 11 years ago has really gone nuts as of late. And every morning when I wake up, I know for certain that the skies are already full of bats, winging their way to sundry belfries.

This bums me out, pop. But that's mostly my own fault. It's a hangover from watching the slow moving train wreck that is social media and cable news, and from picking up fragments of conversations between ordinary people who declare as unquestionable truths what once would have been fall-on-the-floor laughable, ridiculous, dumb.

Only I'm not laughing. T.S. Eliot in *The Four Quartets* referred to "the laceration of laughter that



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ceases to amuse." I know that some poor sucker(s) out there are taking that stuff seriously. I don't know why, but there seems to be a ravenous, frightful appetite out there for gulping down the most preposterous galaxy-spanning, jaw-dropping effluent.

And the purveyors and the gulpers alike have already shown us what the consequences can be: murderous.

In 2022, pop pundits spin — to borrow a phrase from Winston Churchill — "terminological inexactitudes" like tops. But instead of being censured as they would have been not so long ago — and still should be — they

are rewarded, promoted. And their success emboldens them to spin even faster, and the volume of crap mounts up and blocks out the sun, and it goes on and on and on.

The old term "monte-bank" is helpful here. I use it here primarily to refer to the hucksters who used to enter a town, set up a bench — a "bank" — and mount that that bench to hawk their bogus medicinal cures, hoping some crube would buy their pitch. In the service of the dollars they hoped to bring in, the more outlandish the claim, the better.

Pop, too many have found their way up and into high places on radio and television without any concern for the damage their words may wreak. Their eyes are focused only on the ratings and bucks.

I stand cynically at a distance and wince. I ask myself, how can people believe what this guy is selling? I know I am not alone in feeling this gullibility as a jack hammer to my head, a soul crushing reminder of

how few truths there seem to be that we as Americans can agree on anymore.

As far as the media goes, this certainly has not always been the case.

In a documentary on CBS' News coverage of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, we learn that Merriman Smith, UPI's White House Reporter in the press pool car mere car lengths behind the presidential limousine, heard the shots, knew what they meant and called his UPI office in Dallas.

The high standards those guys had for accuracy back then seem almost quaint. Just consider their unwillingness to break the monumental news of the president's death until it was officially confirmed by the White House.

I shudder to think how that event would be covered now.

"These days you hear it, you put it on the air," one of Cronkite's writers, Ron Boon, said in the documentary. "Nobody seems to care anymore. In those days, nothing got on the air

before at least three editors had seen it, and said, 'wait a minute, what do we really know about this?'"

Somewhere along the line, and I don't know when, truth and accuracy became quaint anachronisms.

We all saw what happened on Jan. 6, 2021, at the U.S. Capitol. But since that day, I've heard one elected official say those were ordinary tourists.

You are telling us we didn't see what we saw? What is that but gaslighting on a massive scale? The people who put out things like that are counting on us to be so stupid that we can no longer recognize, hey, that dude's dropping wood over our eyes.

Unfortunately, I have learned via hard, bitter experience that to argue the point is to resolve to bang my already aching head against a brick wall. It's taught me that the lever of Archimedes would not be able to dislodge what someone is bound and determined to believe. You wanna believe the Earth is flat, go ahead. What's perhaps even

more depressing is that so much of this baloney is not incidental. It's being done on purpose, by hostile foreign actors, hostile formal powers and a lot of people here at home.

Steve Bannon has made no secret of his intent to see the government fall. As he recently said to Michael Lewis of Bloomberg News: "The Democrats don't matter. The real opposition is the media. And the way to deal with them is to flood the zone with sh—."

I hope for some return to normalcy.

In the meantime, I reflect on what W.H. Auden said in his poem, *Sept. 1, 1939* on the outbreak of World War II:

"...Ironic points of light
Flash out, wherever the
Just
Exchange their messages:
May I, composed like
them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame."
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Is it really the right time to lift indoor mask mandates?

Mask mandates continue to fall in several other states like New York, Illinois, Massachusetts and Rhode Island, and will also change in California and Oregon in the near future. But if you live in Seattle or King County,

you will be left with a patchwork of different rules to follow for a few weeks until the statewide requirement for masks indoors will no longer be in effect.

In King County the process of change has already started as

restaurants, bars, theaters and gyms will no longer be required to check the vaccination status of their patrons beginning March 1. Part of the reason is that cases and hospitalizations are declining. Also, 87.5% of King County's population ages 12 and older has been fully vaccinated. We have been trained to not leave home without our vaccination card or our mask.

Gov. Jay Inslee announced that the state will lift indoor mask mandates on March 12 for schools, child care facilities, grocery stores and many other indoor facilities, but many businesses will still have authority to require their employees and customers to mask up. Masking will still be required for health care facilities, dental offices, prisons, public transit and school buses.

But that raises the question: Is it too soon?

If you live in Seattle or King County, you won't see much change initially, which raises the next issue: Will it be too confusing to keep track of, and will we be putting masks back on by March 12?

A cynic might also ask the question after training most of us to get shots and boosters and to wear masks: Did Inslee just give in to political pressure as more Republican leaders such as Senate Minority Leader John Braun (R-Centralia) have challenged Inslee's use of his emergency powers, and asked that Inslee immediately end masking requirements, saying if someone wants to wear a mask in public, it should be by choice, not mandate.

However, that is part of the problem. Masks have become a political divider to the public and are seen as reflections of your political party — and should not be.

In a prudent show of caution, which is needed at this time, King County won't be lifting its mask mandate for indoor settings until it monitors coronavirus-related metrics and will reassess the mandate in the coming weeks. Also, cities and counties will have the authority to determine their rules, as will school districts. The lack of consistency with differing rules means we could be putting our masks



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back on by March 12.

I have appreciated Inslee following science rather than politics, unlike the former president. It would have been easy to give in to the political dynamics, but we expect more from the governor. Inslee has been under pressure from school superintendents, and Superintendent of Public Instruction Chris Reykdal recently called to end the mask requirement while maintaining safety protocols including availability of rapid tests. Reykdal also noted that this move by Inslee does not signal the end to the global virus outbreak, as it only provides some flexibility while many

teachers and support staff are more weary of masks coming off at Washington schools.

The head of the teachers union expressed concern that lifting the mask mandate at a time of staff shortages could interrupt learning, especially in low-income areas. School boards can still choose to require students and teachers to wear masks after the mandate ends, and the state Department of Health will update its guidelines for schools the week of March 7 to help districts prepare for the March 12 transition.

And what happens if the next variant isn't reacting the same way, and is more difficult to manage, and we end up back in our masks? And what about the 25% of the population who will never get a vaccine? I think there are too many variables, not to mention the different rules in each city, to cloud the public's thinking with changes in wearing masks now.

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Disconnect grows between public servants and the press

As one small part of the often derided “legacy media,” I am aware that what I am about to say won’t find sympathy with many readers out there.

But it’s been on my mind for such a long time, I figure I may as well say it.

When I began in this business nearly 30 years ago, the beats that guys like me covered — in my particular case, city and county governments and the people who worked for them — were filled top to bottom with public servants much more accessible and willing to speak than they are today.

In those days, it was easy for a reporter — a genre my late father jokingly referred to as “ink-stained wretches” — to arrange in-depth sit downs with public servants, even at the top, who were willing to talk about the



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issues of the day. They may not have liked doing it — I’m sure most didn’t — but they went ahead.

I think they were willing to do that because, at some deep level, they understood that for all of its faults, and there are many, the free press had a place in the choir, just like they had.

That’s not always the case today. I believe a diminution in the understanding of the press’ role, a role that has been key from the nation’s earliest days and

still sets us apart, has taken place, and in step elevated people into positions of power who regard the free press as something alien, a creature antithetical to the American way of life, the enemy.

To get around the press, the tendency today is to create web content more congenial to them, relying on their own in-house spin machines to push out scrubbed versions of events. In this way, public servants are free to weave a rosier picture of the state of affairs than may actually be the case.

I can’t count the number of times in pursuit of a story that I’ve been referred to government-generated web content, which, the person I am dealing with assures me, “explains everything.”

“It’s on our Facebook page, you can read about it there.”

“Yes, but you guys wrote that, and I have a question about —”

“It’s on the page.”

Now let me bring all this rambling to a point.

In the eight years I covered the current administration in Auburn — I say current because such was not the case with the two previous administrations — not once did its highest elected official consent to an interview beyond the congenial soundbite.

What’s more, Auburn’s highest elected official rarely responds to questions herself anymore — at least from this publication — except to complain about stories she believes were in error. Instead, she has the city’s director of administration handle inquiries for her. In this way, the mayor has insulated herself from all that unpleasantness.

A simple inquiry last

spring into how it felt for her to run for re-election without an opponent in the then-upcoming election was rebuffed by the city’s director of administration on the grounds that we were trying to get the mayor to “break the law” by using city-owned resources — a computer or phone at City Hall — to respond when we had specifically noted her concerns about that in our initial request and asked that she respond from a location other than City Hall, say, from home.

In the end we were told we could contact the elected mayor of Auburn via the number she had supplied to the state’s Public Disclosure Commission. We still have the emails from the director of administration — and other e-mails from like rebuffs — to back this up.

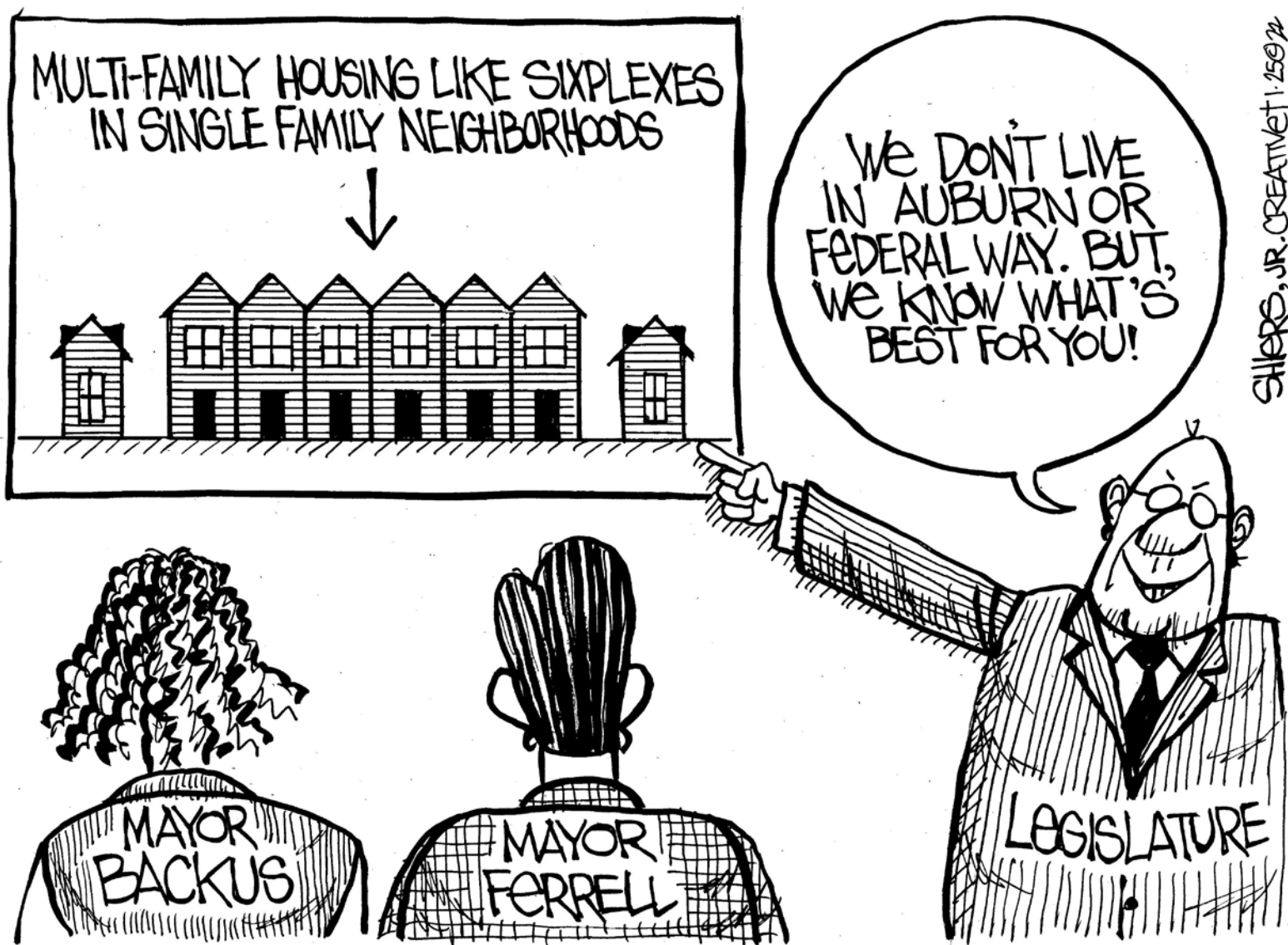
But we may all read

what the elected mayor of Auburn says online, thank goodness for that.

Look, I don’t want to paint with too broad a brush here. Most public servants are happy to speak. But our colleagues who cover other local cities report encountering similar problems to the one just described up and down governmental organizations, from fire chiefs and police chiefs to city council members and beyond.

Well, buddy, some may respond, and that’s your problem, not mine. Maybe it is. But it may become everyone’s problem should things go awry at any time in the future that people in positions of authority would prefer not to talk about. Except at a distance, except online.

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Behind the scenes in the race for King County prosecutor

Politically speaking, it was an exciting week recently when King County Prosecutor Dan Satterberg announced that his current term would be his last.

It’s a job he has held for 14 years after he was appointed when Norm Maleng suddenly passed away.

As the incumbent chief deputy, Satterberg was already knowledgeable about the policy direction in the office and well known professionally. Since then, he has run unopposed in

2010 and 2014. In 2018, his opponent dropped out of the race. Satterberg has a solid reputation as a thoughtful professional and has come up with improvements to try to keep juveniles from revolving through the legal process and ending up in jail with a life wasted. Since 1949, only four people have held the position of King County prosecutor — all men.

While Satterberg has not made a public endorsement to fill his job, he has emphasized wanting to give all candidates a chance to

think about it until the May filing date. Two candidates, both of whom he knows, have filed paperwork with the state’s Public Disclosure Commission (PDC) to run for the position.

Had Satterberg chosen to run again, there seems little doubt he would have won. He remains well respected, even to those who don’t always agree with him.

The two candidates vying to replace him so far are his longtime chief deputy, Leesa Manion, and current Federal Way Mayor Jim Ferrell, who is a former staff member in the prosecutor’s office.

Lisa Daugaard, Executive Director of the Public Defender Association, said in a recent Seattle Times story that Satterberg was ahead of his time in trying to bring more progressive outcomes to the King County Prosecutor’s Office. About 30 years ago, it was enough to promise to arrest all the bad guys and put them in jail. Nowadays, the public has learned that hiring more police and building more prisons is an expensive answer.

Nowadays, the progressive prosecutor has to find ways to try to rehabilitate those who may still be an asset to society if held accountable and mentored. Satterberg proposed a juvenile diversion program that became a nonprofit called Choose 180, which wanted

to keep young people out of the legal system. He was frequently challenged, but Satterberg kept at it. He also had a sister with a drug problem that caused him to think more about treatment rather than prosecution for small-time drug offenders.

I had the pleasure of working with Satterberg during my tenure with King County. The respect he has earned is justified. He truly cares about trying to do the right thing.

While more candidates may decide to get in the race as they think it through, the two people who have made it clear they plan to run will provide an interesting contrast.

Leesa Manion has been Satterberg’s chief of staff for 14 years and has a good reputation among other county workers. She would likely reflect her training and Satterberg’s mentoring. She would be the first female and person of color to be King County Prosecutor.

Ferrell was just elected to his third term as mayor of Federal Way and has been away from the prosecutor’s office for several years. He made no secret of his interest in the prosecutor’s job over the past few months as rumors circulated that Satterberg might not run again. But there may be a policy difference between the two candidates. Satterberg has proposed another



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new plan to keep youth out of the legal system.

The Restorative Community Pathways program is an evidence-based strategy for holding young people who commit a first-time offense accountable, reducing youth incarceration and racial disproportionality and stopping them from becoming repeat offenders. It also includes staffing to help the victims along with a director to supervise and ensure the victims are made whole.

The program was briefed to school resource officers and was implemented in November. The mayors of Federal Way, Auburn, Renton and Kent have asked that the program be paused until they find common ground. Those four cities make up 27% of the felony filings charged by the prosecutor. The mayors like the overall intent, but they want to see more offenses added to the list. They have seen an increase

in the violence in their communities. The program outlines eligible offenses so that youth who cause harm will be held accountable. Ferrell added a “pause resolution” to the agenda at a recent Federal Way City Council meeting, and most of the speakers were on one side or the other of this issue. Most actually favored the program and told how they felt it would have kept them out of trouble. The resolution was held over for a February meeting to ensure council members have a chance to study the issue. More will be heard about this issue as we get into the political season.

In parallel challenges, Kent City Councilmember Bill Boyce was elected council president, then announced his plans to run as a Republican against Democrat Mona Das for her seat in the state Senate. At the same time, Federal Way City Council President Linda Kochmar, a Republican, is getting closer to running against democrat Claire Wilson for the Senate. This could be a busy year for incumbent legislators trying to keep their job — races are expected in Districts 30, 33 and 47, among others. But the race for King County Prosecutor will be the highlight.

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