

Governor's disability issues council tackles local concerns

By Michael Heinbach

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If there's just one thing attendees learned at last week's two local meetings of the Washington Governor's Committee on Disability Issues and Employment in Shelton, it's that there are many organizations, businesses and individuals in Mason County working to provide assistance to those with a disability, but no one place for someone seeking resources to get connected to those service providers.

The GCDE hosted a Feb. 27 town hall meeting to inform Mason County residents and local stakeholders of the committee's mission and to start a discussion on topics facing the local community of disabled individuals, including transportation, affordable housing, employment, education and transportation issues. The next morning, the committee had an invitation-only leadership breakfast with county and City of Shelton officials, school administrators, transportation providers and others to explore solutions to issues raised the night before.

The GCDE is a 27-member board of contributors from throughout the state appointed by Gov. Jay Inslee to provide statewide advocacy and leadership and to empower the disabled community to gain equal opportunities and to promote maximum independence. The committee's Community Outreach Subcommittee hosted the Shelton meetings, facilitated by subcommittee outreach meeting coordinator Warren Weissman, subcommittee chair Damiana Harper and acting GCDE chair Pat Bauccio and additional GCDE members.

Attendees at both meetings, held at the Mason PUD 3 Johns Prairie



Mason Transit Authority General Manager Danette Brannin, center, discusses issues faced by local people with disabilities as Washington Governor's Committee on Disability Issues and Employment Community Outreach Subcommittee Chair Damiana Harper listens during a Friday morning GCDE leadership breakfast at Mason PUD 3's Johns Prairie Operations Center in Shelton. Journal photo by Michael Heinbach

Operations Center, included Board of Mason County Commissioners Chair Sharon Trask, Auditor Paddy McGuire and Assessor Patti McLean, Shelton City Council members Kathy McDowell and Megan Fiess, Ted Jackson, executive director of the United Way of Mason County, Karin Leaf, Economic Development Council of Mason County Business Outreach Coordinator and Mason Transit Authority General Manager Danette Brannin, Operations Manager Mike Ringgenberg and Outreach and Transit Planner Kathy Geist.

Most, if not all, were vocal at Friday morning's meeting in working to

establish and facilitate action plans to conquer barriers faced by those with disabilities.

"We have work to do with our city council, we have work to do with our county officials, we also have to bring our United Way partners together, Mason Transit Authority ... all those players that have pieces of resource and we need to figure out what our roles and responsibilities are so that we can bring another meeting like this together for our community and figure out what those thriving community action teams are," Fiess said Friday morning. "We already have them; we just need to coordinate them together."

Near the end of the leadership breakfast, after attendees worked in groups to propose answers to disability issues, Trask told those gathered that she, Fiess and Leaf intend start to a local community outreach group in the next several months to focus on harmonizing service provider efforts and gather a list of available resources in Mason County to distribute to those needing help.

"We will reach out to the community, get our volunteers together, bring in some more wonderful people and start working from there," Trask said.

One of the standout issues citizens brought forward during the town hall meeting was limited nighttime access to Mason Transit Authority's Dial-A-Ride program, heavily relied upon by those with disabilities that prevent them from driving, including GCDE member and Lake Limerick-area resident Kevin Frankeberger. Dial-A-Ride is only available until 6 p.m. Mondays through Saturdays.

On Friday morning, MTA General Manager Danette Brannin said she intends to review the Dial-A-Ride's available schedule through the end of March and poll customers to learn how to best suit their needs.

"We also will create a survey for our existing Dial-A-Ride ridership that we will send out to our clients asking them some questions like 'are you being limited from attending night events because there isn't service,'" Brannin said. "We'll get that out to our existing clients and then also send that further out into the community and we will get that done by April 30."

For more information on the GCDE, visit <https://esd.wa.gov/GCDE> or follow the committee on Facebook.