



Cowlitz County

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News Release

COWLITZ COUNTY COMMISSIONERS TO CONSIDER HIRING CHIEF OF STAFF

Former Cowlitz County Commissioner Axel Swanson has accepted contract terms to become Chief of Staff for the current Board of County Commissioners, Board Chairman Joe Gardner announced today. Mr. Swanson, a Castle Rock resident, is currently employed as the Research Director for the Washington State Association of Counties in Olympia and hopes to join the county in mid-November. The full board of commissioners will consider Swanson's contract at their meeting next Tuesday.

"The Board of Commissioners looks forward to Mr. Swanson heading up the County Executive Management team upon approval of the contract," Gardner explained. "With his depth of knowledge and experience, we have confidence that he will be successful in improving the quality of service delivered to the citizens of Cowlitz County." Gardner was first elected in 2014 and became chair last January.

The Commissioners decided to hire a Chief of Staff following the announcement that veteran budget director Claire Hauge, Director of the Office of Financial Management, would be retiring in January 2018. To ensure this move is budget-neutral to the General Fund, she recommended that two positions in OFM not be filled, including hers. Hauge recommended Swanson for the new position. "I am absolutely thrilled Mr. Swanson has agreed to join the county," she said.

The changes comes after years of discussion at the County on how to improve the coordination, communication, and effective decision-making among Department Heads, Elected Officials and the Board. "Under the current decentralized system, there was a lot of wasted time at staff meetings, department heads felt that direction from the board was inconsistent, and commissioners felt their decisions were constantly being delayed," Commissioner Dennis Weber explained. "It takes forever to make changes," he continued, "It reminds me of steering an aircraft carrier. It takes a long time to change direction." Weber is the senior member of the Board of Commissioners, serving since 2013.

The Chief of Staff will be responsible for managing the executive and administrative functions between county departments and between those departments and elected officials. Directly reporting to him initially will be managers and directors of Information Technology, Facilities Maintenance, Purchasing Services, Financial Management, Risk Management, Human Resources, Visitor and Community Services, Museum, Public Works and Building & Planning. Law and justice agencies, other elected officials, and the health and human services departments will coordinate budget expenditures and personnel decisions through the Chief of Staff.

“With this hire, we are starting with a budget-neutral move into a new structure which will eventually lead to all departments reporting to a traditional county manager,” explained Commissioner Arne Mortensen, who joined the commission last January.

Axel Swanson is currently the Director of Research for the Washington State Association of Counties. He has a Law Degree and Master’s Degree from Vermont Law School and a Bachelor’s of Arts, Political Science Degree from Gonzaga University. Swanson grew up in Cowlitz County, graduating from both R.A. Long and Lower Columbia College. While an R. A. Long student, Swanson served as ASB president and welcomed US President Bill Clinton at a huge campaign rally in 1996. He served for six years in the United States Marine Corps Reserve earning the rank of Sergeant. In 2006 Swanson was elected county commissioner and served a single four-year term. He then worked for Clark County as a Senior Policy Analyst. In 2013, Swanson graduated from Leadership Clark County and was recognized by the Vancouver/SW Washington business Journal as a member of their 2014 class of Most Accomplished and Under 40. He lives with his wife and daughter in Castle Rock.

“I am so excited for Axel,” said Eric Johnson, Executive Director of the Washington State Association of Counties and Mr. Swanson’s current supervisor. “Axel’s work on county issues from a statewide perspective will serve him well in his new role in Cowlitz County. Axel has been an excellent member of our staff and phenomenally respected by county elected and appointed officials throughout our state. While it is a tremendous loss for our organization, I am thrilled he is staying in the county family and will be a tremendous asset for Cowlitz County.”

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