

# Republican response to Gov. Jay Inslee's Inaugural Address

## Rep. Drew Stokesbary

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Fellow Washingtonians,

I am Representative Drew Stokesbary of Auburn. I represent the 31st Legislative District in the state House, where I am the ranking Republican member on the House Appropriations Committee.

You just heard Governor Inslee lay out his vision for Washington state in 2021, and I'm pleased that we have some things in common.

We are both concerned about students falling behind in school, about our neighbors of color whose interactions with the police don't always go like ours, about those suffering from homelessness, substance abuse or mental health disorders, and about the loss of lives to COVID-19.

I also strongly condemn, with no equivocation, last week's seditious assault on not just the physical totems of our republic, but on the very fibers of democracy itself.

And like the governor, I am hopeful that we can defeat coronavirus and recover stronger than ever.

Unfortunately, his lone-ranger response has made that fight harder than it should be. For the past 10 months, he has ruled by executive order. He alone decided how more than \$3 billion in federal funds were spent, which businesses were essential, and whose livelihoods would be destroyed.

We are not meant to be governed this way, even in times of peril. We elect a citizen Legislature, not a king. Not because kings can't have good intentions or good ideas, but because one person should not have absolute power.

One person alone cannot reflect Washington's ethnic, professional, geographic and political diversity or make dissenting voices feel represented. That's why Republicans have introduced bills to include the Legislature as a check against unfettered executive power. These are reasonable limits that states like Oregon, New York and California already have.

Now that the Legislature has finally assembled, Republicans are laser-focused on safely reopening our schools, reviving our economy, providing direct support to struggling families and businesses, and prioritizing public health.

First, we must dramatically improve the state's abysmal vaccine delivery rate. We have had months to prepare. Yet as of last week, Washington has administered less than one-fourth of the vaccine doses it received, ranking us just 45th in the nation. This is unacceptable.

The Legislature must deploy new federal funding immediately, and the governor must develop clear, consistent policies that prioritize the most vulnerable populations without causing further delays. Right now, state government is a bottleneck, which means more avoidable deaths and hospitalizations. That must change.

Second, we must extend a lifeline to families and businesses struggling to survive. For years, Democrats have promoted a tax rebate for working families, but have never once funded it. Families are in crisis. We should use \$200 million from the state's rainy-day fund to deliver a one-time "recovery rebate" to working Washington families.

In addition, the Legislature should immediately deploy additional rental assistance to tenants who can't work because of the prolonged shutdowns. And low-income families deserve a one-time grant of \$300 per student to help defray the financial burdens of remote learning while schools remain closed.

After taking care of our families, we must help our employers survive as well. Small businesses have been shut down for months. Lifetimes, even generations, of work are being destroyed before our eyes. Astonishingly, the governor is insisting that businesses cover the loss of \$600 million in fake claims his Employment Security Division paid out to Nigerian scammers.

Few small businesses can afford a 500 percent unemployment tax increase to cover the costs of state-mandated closures and bureaucratic incompetence. The Legislature must shore up the state's unemployment fund and then dramatically expand grants to shuttered small businesses so there are jobs to return to after the pandemic.

Finally, we must undo the damage caused by the prolonged shutdowns.

If education is the state's paramount duty, how can we stand idle witness to a generation of students being sentenced to delayed cognitive development, stunted social-emotional growth, record rates of depression and suicide, and a potentially permanent gap between the academic achievement of wealthy and poor children?

We cannot undo past decisions, but we can stem the tide. After a year of unclear and unpredictable rules, the Legislature must intervene, recognize the latest and most accurate science, move teachers up the vaccine priority list, and insist on resuming in-person instruction as soon as it is safe to do so.

All of these problems are pressing, and I know Democrats care deeply about solving them too. But solutions cannot wait until the final days of session. They must be sent to the governor's desk this month. Republicans stand ready to work across the aisle to fund a much more significant and urgent recovery plan than the one suggested by the governor today.

In addition, Republicans will continue to offer real solutions that provide Washingtonians with real opportunities.

While acknowledging inequities and injustices past and present, Republicans believe in defending police – not defunding them.

We think mental health and substance abuse services should be available to those in need, but worry that heroin injection sites ultimately do far more harm than good.

We will support policies that make essentials like housing, child care and medicine more accessible and affordable.

We will always defend the constitutional rights of everyone, without compromise.

And we will do all we can to hold the governor and his cabinet accountable when they fail to live up to the standards of competent and open governance that Washingtonians deserve.

Most importantly, we believe that now – more than ever – government should do no harm. Regrettably, the governor is promoting a litany of measures that will make driving, working and living more expensive for average Washingtonians.

The governor spoke at length about his cap-and-trade proposal to regulate greenhouse gas emissions. Never mind that a one-state approach will drive manufacturing jobs to Idaho, Texas and South Carolina, or that China has already emitted more CO2 this week than Washington state will emit this year.

The most glaring flaw is the enormous financial burden it will place on working families. The vast majority of Washington's carbon emissions come from transportation, energy and agriculture, meaning gasoline, electricity, home heating and food prices will soar under the governor's plan.

At a time when our health is imperiled, we need to make care more affordable. Instead, the governor wants a new tax on health insurance plans that will make coverage more expensive.

Other Democrats have suggested a new payroll tax. They argue as a tax on employers, it won't affect ordinary Washingtonians like you and me. They're wrong. The economic science is clear – adding a new tax on jobs makes hiring people more expensive and will mean fewer jobs, lower salaries, or both.

And now, for the fourth biennium in a row, the governor is pushing a capital gains income tax. Yet graduated income tax proposals have already been rejected by the voters 10 times, not to mention twice declared unconstitutional by the state Supreme Court. Income-based taxes are highly volatile and would make funding for schools, health care and social services unstable and unpredictable.

What's more, our economic recovery will depend on private investors and entrepreneurs betting on Washington's ingenuity and hard work. However convenient of a political target they may be, taxing investments and innovators is a surefire way to hamper the state's recovery.

The governor and I do agree, however, that working-class families pay too much in taxes. But the solution to inequity isn't to punish others. Instead, let's actually help those who are burdened. That's why I'm cosponsoring a new version of the Working Families Tax Credit with my friend across the aisle, Representative My-Linh Thai of Bellevue. Families need tax relief now. We should fund this rebate this year, and in the future.

Many families and businesses are in crisis, but your state government isn't. Tax collections are up by nearly 10 percent this biennium despite the pandemic. We can pass a budget this session that is balanced, funds our priorities, and avoids cuts to critical services, all without raising taxes or hampering our recovery.

I know this has been a difficult season. I assure you, Republicans see what you see. Our frustrations are your frustrations. But there is hope. Republicans offer a home for anyone, because we stand for the principles that matter to everyone – freedom, equality and opportunity.

Republicans will not stop fighting for these principles and what we what know is right. We look forward to working with our colleagues across the aisle on areas of agreement, but will not fear proclaiming our differences when there is a better way forward.

Thanks for listening. Please stay safe and healthy. May God bless these United States, and may God bless the great state of Washington.