



## **F. Milene Henley, Auditor San Juan County**

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### **How Are We Doing?**

#### **A quarterly review of County Finances by County Auditor F. Milene Henley Third quarter 2016**

My first year of college I shared a landline (we called it a “phone” then) with 4 other dorm rooms. The phone sat in the hallway with a lock on the rotary dial (remember rotary dials?). We rarely used it, because long-distance calls were costly. Instead, we hoped for letters (remember those?) from home, and occasionally even wrote letters back.

Things were very different for my children. They went off to college with cell phones and personal computers. They had more services, better communication, better tools. But life is more expensive for them, as they have to pay for cell phones, for Internet, and for television – all of which were either free or non-existent when I was their age.

For the same reasons, businesses incur expenses today that did not exist 40 years ago. Ledger pads were a lot less expensive – though also less accurate, less complete and less secure – than today’s multi-function financial suites. No business would consider operating without email and Internet. Customers today increasingly demand access to services online, and for the security of their online information to be protected.

So it’s not surprising that the fastest growing budget in the County is Information Technology (IT). Its budget has increased 166% in the last 10 years. A big part of that was the addition of GIS (Geographic Information Services) in 2014, which added 2 staff and about \$250,000.

More recently, public records requests have driven some of the cost increases in IT. Both software to manage requests and software to manage records have been acquired in the past year. Also this year, the County updated its website, the second complete overall in the past eight years. The County’s 911 phone system was entirely replaced last year, both hardware and software. For the first time ever, the County also established a direct connection to a backup 911 system, in Island County, in case of a catastrophic communications failure such as occurred two years ago.

IT has enhanced local connectivity, as well, extending Internet and digital phone services to outlying offices on Lopez, Orcas and San Juan Islands. Sheriff substations on Lopez and Orcas, the Land Bank office, the Orcas Senior Center, and the new Parks and Fair office at the fairgrounds have all benefited.

In our information-rich world, citizens’ demands for access have increased, and the cost of securely meeting those demands has also increased. Increased security measures are being implemented in the County’s networks. In 2017, the County will install computers in the financial offices with direct, limited connections to the County’s bank, in order to

reduce the risk of hacking and phishing attacks. Not surprisingly, the County also now pays for a separate cyber security insurance policy.

We like to think that investment in technology reduces costs elsewhere. I don't believe that it does. Rather, it enables the County to provide better and more complete services, services which we are increasingly required to provide. To a very real degree, we cannot operate without it.

We've come a long way from my college days, when handheld calculators (remember the "Bowmar Brain"?) were a new, expensive, and unnecessary toy. As a scholarship kid, I didn't have one. Instead, I got really good at using a slide rule (remember those?). I still have mine, but I'm grateful today that I don't have to rely on it at work.