

Is Decatur an under-resourced outer island of San Juan County?

A recurring question in our community is whether Decatur is under-resourced compared to other parts of San Juan County. The broader reality is that the entire County operates under tight resource constraints — and Decatur is a very small portion of a very small pie.

San Juan County is a uniquely dispersed archipelago of nearly 200 named islands with approximately 18,000 people (2020 census). All that land combined totals only about 174 square miles. Most services must be duplicated across multiple islands, separated by water, and delivered to populations too small to achieve economies of scale. We all experience this firsthand: goods and labor simply cost more out here.

The contrast with the mainland is stark. Snohomish County has a population of more than 825,000 spread across 2,000+ square miles of contiguous land. That density — nearly ten times San Juan County's overall density when including its large water area (72% of the county) — allows services to scale far more efficiently. On Decatur, by comparison, population density is less than one-fifth the San Juan County average based on land area alone, creating what are effectively frontier conditions from a service-delivery standpoint.

Economic indicators add another layer. San Juan County ranks at or near the top in Washington for home values and household income, yet has the lowest effective property-tax rate in the state: about 0.57% countywide and 0.42% on Decatur, compared to 0.92% statewide. To match the county average, Decatur's property-tax contribution would need to rise by more than a third; to match the state average, it would need to more than double. That gap directly limits revenue for county operations — and our proportional contribution to state-supported services.

And this is not just an island issue. As an example, the City of Everett — with an industrial tax base and a dense population — is confronting severe financial strain and evaluating a transition to a Regional Fire Authority to maintain essential services. If major cities can no longer sustain standalone fire departments, the implications for small outer islands are clear.

Decatur receives limited county services not because it is ignored, but because the County itself is limited. We are a small slice of a county already working with one of the smallest fiscal slices in the state. Geography drives costs up. Low density drives revenue down. Yet our community needs are real.

Decatur should advocate for support where possible — while also grounding expectations in fiscal and geographic reality. Strengthening volunteer capacity, understanding county

constraints, and being open to more efficient regional models will put us on the strongest footing.

Self-reliance has always been part of Decatur life. Recognizing the broader context helps ensure we are planning responsibly for what is essential — and what is achievable.