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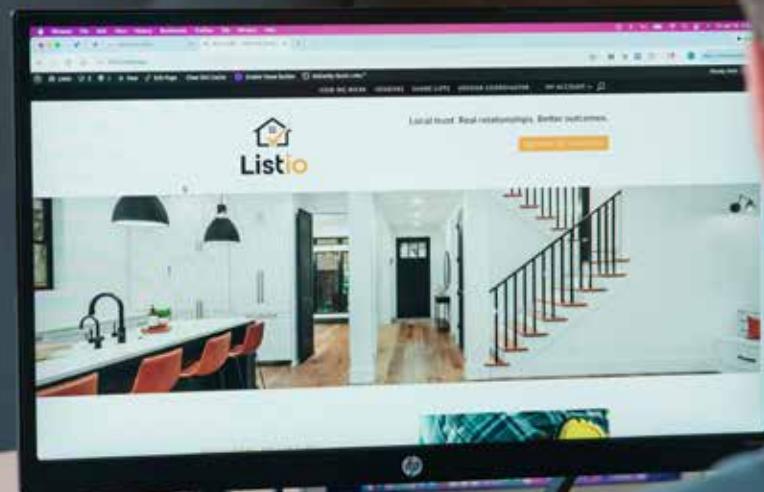
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When belief comes first

There was a time when the phrase felt simple and dependable: What you see, you believe. It reflected an unspoken agreement about how things worked. You observed something first. You decided what it meant second. If something happened in public, on a street corner, in a courtroom, at a school board meeting, people might argue about the implications, but not about whether it happened.

That order has changed.

More and more, it works in reverse: What you believe, you see.

Belief now comes first. Everything else is filtered through it.

This didn't happen overnight, and it didn't happen because of one single force. It happened gradually, as information became more tailored and more selective, and as people grew used to surrounding themselves with voices that already agreed with them. Over time, familiarity started to matter more than credibility. Information that fits what we already think is accepted quickly. Information that doesn't is questioned, minimized, or dismissed entirely.

Agreement starts to feel like proof.

Disagreement starts to feel like a threat.

The result isn't just division. It's separation.

People can sit in the same room, watch the same video, read the same document, or attend the same public meeting and walk away convinced they saw different things. Not because the facts were hidden or unclear, but because conclusions were already formed before the facts were considered.

That has real consequences in everyday life.

When belief outweighs observation, trust erodes. Not just trust in institutions, but trust in each other. Differences of opinion stop feeling normal and start feeling personal. Conversations become shorter. Listening becomes selective. It becomes easier to assume bad intent than to allow for honest disagreement.



Over time, this changes how communities function. Shared spaces feel less shared. People pull back into smaller circles where their views are reinforced instead of challenged. Certainty grows, but understanding does not. The ability to deal with complexity, or to sit with people who see the world differently, weakens.

None of this requires everyone to agree. Disagreement has always been part of a healthy society. Debate and competing ideas are necessary. But those debates only work when people are willing to start from the same set of facts.

That takes effort.

It means slowing down long enough to separate what happened from how we feel about it. It means resisting the urge to immediately sort information into "for us" or "against us." It means allowing evidence to shape belief instead of forcing belief to shape evidence.

This isn't a call to abandon deeply held views. Strong convictions are not the problem. The problem is when certainty replaces curiosity, and belief becomes immune to observation. It is possible to be sincere and still be wrong.

A society that consistently puts belief ahead of reality doesn't just lose consensus. It loses the ability to clearly understand itself.

Correcting course doesn't require grand fixes or sweeping changes. It starts smaller than that. With attention. With restraint. With a willingness to look first, then decide what it means.

A community doesn't need everyone to think the same way. It does need enough people willing to begin from the same reality, even if they ultimately reach different conclusions. ■

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Feature

Bainbridge startup Cedrus builds hydrofoil masts to last, and fit nearly any system

By Quinn Propst | Ward Media Staff Reporter

On a windy afternoon in Puget Sound, the act of rising above the water on a hydrofoil can feel almost magical. Board skims, foil hums, and suddenly the rider is flying—suspended above the chop. It looks effortless. Underneath that moment, however, is one of the most technically demanding components in modern watersports: the foil mast.

For Kyle Lobisser, founder and CEO of Foil Cedrus, that vertical strut connecting board to foil is not just a piece of equipment. It is a systems problem, an engineering challenge, and an opportunity to rethink how high-performance sporting goods are designed, manufactured, and valued.

Founded on Bainbridge Island, Cedrus is a Kitsap-based company building hydrofoil masts intended to last a lifetime. Its approach challenges industry norms built around rapid product cycles, overseas manufacturing, and planned obsolescence. Instead, Cedrus emphasizes durability, modularity, local production, and materials science—an unusual mix in a surf-adjacent industry more often driven by aesthetics and seasonal trends.

"In this sport right now, there's like 30 different brands," Lobisser said. "It would be the equivalent of every bike brand having their own frame and wheel standard, or every ski brand having a different ski-boot connection. Right now, every foil brand is different."

That fragmentation, he believes, drives unnecessary cost and waste. Cedrus' answer is a universal mast system: a single, carefully engineered mast paired with precision-machined adapters that allow riders to connect to nearly any foil system on the market. When a new foil design comes out promising tighter turns or better glide, Cedrus customers don't have to replace their entire setup.

"You don't have to buy that brand's mast," he says. "You just buy our adapter and use our mast. It saves money—and it cuts down on waste."

From Aerospace to the Water

If Cedrus feels more like an engineering firm than a surf brand, that is intentional. Lobisser is a structural analysis engineer with more than 20 years of experience at Boeing, Apple, and multiple startups.

"I've worked on airplanes and iPads and flying cars, and it was all fun," he said. "But I'm an athlete, and I really love how my gear connects me to the earth and my friends. It's a very social thing, whether it's skiing

or surfing. I always wanted to work on sporting goods."

What he found when he looked closely at the industry surprised him. Many outdoor and surf brands rely heavily on overseas factories and industrial designers, with limited in-house engineering expertise.

"A lot of the brands don't really employ engineers," he said. "They're more like designers focused on graphics, and maybe going to the factories in China and working with them to figure out how to make it. They don't necessarily have that expertise in house."

Cedrus was built to do the opposite—starting with engineering, materials science, and manufacturing process design, then letting aesthetics follow function.

The company's origin story is tied directly to Lobisser's aerospace background. In the wake of delays on Boeing's carbon-fiber 787 Dreamliner program, large quantities of high-grade carbon fiber

Photos Courtesy of Foil Cedrus

Kyle Lobisser began prototyping hydrofoil masts in his kitchen in 2016, applying aerospace engineering principles to early composite designs.



Hydrofoilers ride above the water, using mast-and-foil systems that lift boards clear of the surface.



reached their regulatory shelf life. The material, stored frozen to slow the chemical curing process, can no longer be used in aircraft after five years under FAA rules.

"Because of the 787 delays, Boeing had a lot of expired carbon fiber they couldn't use in the airframe," Lobisser recalls. "They were auctioning it off, and I bought like 2,000 pounds. That's how we started making masts."

Carbon fiber, he explains, is a composite material—strong fibers embedded in a polymer matrix, similar in concept to concrete reinforced with steel. Wood, he notes, is actually nature's first composite, combining cellulose fibers and lignin. That realization helped inspire the company's name: Cedrus, Latin for cedar.

The name is also a nod to the Pacific Northwest and to Indigenous craftsmanship. Lobisser draws inspiration from cedar dugout canoes and longhouses built by First Nations peoples, who understood how to work with wood as a high-performance material long before modern composites existed. Cedrus' logo—a dorsal orca fin, cedar bough, and eagle feather—was designed by a First Nations artist in British Columbia.

"I took inspiration from how they worked with wood differently," he says. "And I wanted a logo that incorporated that artistic style."

Solving a Hard Problem

Lobisser began foiling in 2013, as the sport transitioned from a niche pursuit of elite athletes to something more accessible. Early on, he noticed a recurring issue: mast performance.

"The mast was a pretty critical structural element, and it wasn't being designed stiff and strong enough," he says. "Masts were breaking, or they weren't very stiff. You'd go to turn, and there'd be this lag because the mast was bending."

With his background, he believed the problem could be solved—but not cheaply or casually. Tooling for composite parts is expensive, making one-off builds impractical. Instead, he turned to an informal Kickstarter posted on a local kiteboarding forum.

"I just posted, 'Hey, I'm gonna make myself a mast, and I'm going to make 20. If you want one, here's my background, here's everything I've done. I promise I'll deliver,'" he said. "And sure enough, 20 people gave me about \$1,500 each. That's how I started."

What drew him in was the constraint-heavy nature of the problem.

"It looks so simple, but it's really hard," he said. "You're balancing drag, weight, stiffness, strength, cost, how to make it. I like really constrained problems."

Cedrus relies heavily on upfront engineering—structural analysis, CAD modeling, and detailed design—rather than iterative trial and error.

Durability as Sustainability

Since launching its Classic mast in 2017, Cedrus has maintained a warranty rate of under 1 percent—an unusually low figure in a sport where riders regularly push equipment to its limits.

"I'm a structural engineer," Lobisser said. "We're going to engineer this and make a product that lasts."

That durability is central to Cedrus'



Foil Cedrus masts are engineered using structural analysis and materials science to maximize stiffness and longevity.



Foil Cedrus designs hydrofoil masts for long-term durability and cross-brand compatibility.



Scott Norrie, head of finishing at Foil Cedrus, paints a hydrofoil mast as part of the final production process.



Feature



Lobisser was drawn to hydrofoiling for the sensation of riding above the water, a feeling he says resembles flight.

sustainability ethos. Rather than encouraging seasonal upgrades, the company focuses on extending product lifecycles through modular design and universal compatibility. Manufacturing is done locally in small batches, allowing for continuous refinement without excess inventory.

Waste is a core concern.

"My major motivation was just seeing the waste in sporting goods," he said. "Every season there's a new thing, and people are constantly wanting to upgrade, when in reality all that's changing is the color. There's really not a lot of innovation."

"I feel like it's my duty to see the waste and figure out how to make it better and minimize the waste and environmental impact—and make products that last."

Cedrus reinforces that philosophy through material choices and logistics. The company uses up-cycled aerospace carbon fiber, hollow mast designs to reduce material use and shipping emissions, and recycled or reused packaging—even when it costs more.

Making Manufacturing the Moat

For Cedrus, local manufacturing is not a marketing slogan but a competitive strategy.

"As Cedrus has evolved, my goal has been to develop real manufacturing innovation so we can compete with overseas goods," Lobisser said. "The only way to compete is to make it more efficiently. We have to use less labor and have better quality."

Aluminum components are machined in Kingston. A Bainbridge Island painter with a background in high-end automotive restoration finishes carbon masts using zero-VOC coatings and professional protective systems. A technician from Olympic College works hands-on with composites and machining.

"I really love seeing the impact on the community, and it's legit," Lobisser said.

He points to his machinist, who grew from operating a single CNC machine on family

property to running a multi-machine shop in Kingston's Kennedy Business Park.

"We've played a meaningful role in that," he said.

That same manufacturing mindset has driven Cedrus' latest innovation: an aluminum mast engineered to perform like carbon at a fraction of the price.

Most aluminum masts on the market are simple extrusions, limited in shape and performance. Cedrus begins with an extrusion, then forges the center section—the portion that runs through the water—under an industrial press to reduce drag while maintaining stiffness. Robots laser-weld precision components into place.

"The result basically exceeds the performance of a lot of carbon masts, but it's like a third of the price," he said.

The Human Side of Making Things

Running a manufacturing-based small business comes with inherent challenges, and Lobisser has navigated them firsthand.

"Small business is really, really hard," Lobisser said. "Making things is so hard. It's like the most thankless, unforgiving, polar opposite of what American people want right now. All that stuff, when you're a small business, just wears you down."

What keeps him going is not just the product, but the life it enables: working close to home, picking up his daughter from school, supporting his wife as she

attends nursing school, and avoiding a ferry commute to a Seattle tech job.

A Vote With Every Purchase

Ultimately, Lobisser sees consumers as co-inventors in the system Cedrus is trying to build.

"People ask, 'Why is your stuff expensive?'" he said. "I'm like, this is what it takes to make something in America."

He points out that low prices often reflect hidden costs—cheap labor, cheap land, cheap environmental standards.

"If you always shop on price, someone's getting screwed—employees, the planet, or you in the end because it breaks and you just have to buy a new one," he said.

For Cedrus, each purchase is a vote for durability over disposability, local jobs over anonymous supply chains, and engineering-driven innovation over cosmetic redesigns.

"Consumers don't understand the role they have in rewarding companies that are investing in the community and making a better product and not destroying the planet," he said. "When you buy something, think about where the money is going and why it costs what it does."

In a fast-changing niche sport, Foil Cedrus is proving that slow, thoughtful manufacturing still has a place—and that better engineering can mean not just better performance, but a better relationship between business, community, and the environment. ■



Lobisser works on a hydrofoil mast at the Foil Cedrus shop, where products are engineered and manufactured locally.

The Tipping Point:

When DIY IT Stops Supporting Your Growth

By Jon Hoehne | CMIT Solutions

Every business owner understands the appeal of handling things in-house. Why pay someone else when you or your team can figure it out? This logic works well until your business outgrows it. The challenge is recognizing how your IT needs change as you grow from solopreneur, hire your first employees, and eventually to a small enterprise.

Your Technology Needs Evolve As You Grow

When you're a solopreneur, DIY IT makes perfect sense. You handle everything yourself. It's just an email account with some aliases, file storage, maybe a basic website. You can Google or ChatGPT your way through most problems.

As you build a **small team** of 5-10 employees, someone on staff becomes the unofficial IT person. They reset passwords, figure out why files aren't syncing, and troubleshoot video conferencing issues. It's manageable, but IT starts pulling them away from their actual job.

When you reach a **large team** of 15-30 employees, the cracks really show. You're juggling subscriptions across several cloud services. Former employees still have access to accounts. Files are scattered across multiple platforms. Minor disruptions have bigger impacts.

The Hidden Costs of Misaligned Technology

You can muscle your way through each phase, but it gets less efficient each time. When your technology approach doesn't match your business size, you pay in ways that don't show up on a P&L statement: **Decreasing Productivity:** Your office manager spends hours troubleshooting file sharing. Your best salesperson can't access your CRM for half a day. These interruptions compound across your team.

Security Vulnerability: Cybercriminals target growing businesses because security is often handled ad hoc. A single ransomware attack can cost tens of thousands in recovery costs.

Slow Growth: When your technology barely keeps pace with today, you can't explore tomorrow. Could automation save 20 hours per week? Would AI tools give you a competitive edge? Are you spending less time prospecting because you're grown accustomed to the amount of time it takes to keep systems running?

Warning Signs You've Outgrown Your Current Approach

- The same IT issues keep recurring, never fully resolved
- Someone on your team has become the de facto IT person and it impacts their actual role
- You've experienced downtime that lasted hours or days
- You're paying for subscriptions nobody's using
- You're turning down opportunities in regulated fields because your technology can't support them

If several of these sound familiar, your technology approach hasn't kept pace with your growth.

What Each Stage Needs

Solopreneur: Basic cloud tools work fine. You can handle it yourself. You might want some expert advice from time to time.

Small Team (5-10 people): You need organized file sharing, proper password management, reliable backup, security training, and someone to call when things break. Many businesses start with an MSP here for monitoring and support.

Large Team (15-30 people): You need professional IT management, 24/7 monitoring, robust security, organized user management, help desk support, and regular strategic guidance. The cost of downtime and security incidents is too high to wing it.

Small Enterprise (30+ people): Technology becomes more of a competitive advantage. You need advanced automation, compliance management, AI adoption strategy, and a technology roadmap aligned to business goals.

The costliest mistake is using a solopreneur approach when you're running a large team or small enterprise.

The Math of Making the Shift

Consider this textbook example. Your office manager spends 10 hours per week on IT issues. At \$30/hour fully loaded, that's \$15,600 annually spent on amateur IT support.



With a strategic MSP relationship that includes 24/7 monitoring, professional-grade cybersecurity, reliable backup and disaster recovery, help desk support, compliance assistance, and strategic guidance you'll be getting much more value and risk management out of your spending.

More importantly, your office manager gets those 10 hours back. Your downtime decreases dramatically. Your security posture strengthens. Technology moves from being a constraint to a competitive advantage.

What's the Next Step

The shift from DIY IT to strategic IT management starts with understanding where you are and where you're headed. If you're recognizing some of these warning signs, you're not behind, you're simply at a transition point.

A conversation with an MSP doesn't commit you to anything. It's a chance to get a clear picture of where your technology stands, identify quick wins that could save time or money, and understand your options. Whether you're ready to make a change today or just want to know what a potential path forward looks like, that conversation is worth having. ■

Feature

Listio.io

Turning Relationships Into the Future of Home Services

Photos Courtesy of Leah Thompson/Scandia Studio

By Quinn Propst | Ward Media Staff Reporter

Listio.io is a new, curated home services platform connecting homeowners and real estate agents with vetted local providers, aiming to move the industry away from pay-to-play platforms and toward trust-based referrals.

Founded by Kitsap County entrepreneur Ryan Denny, Listio grew out of more than 15 years running Trash Transporters, a local junk removal company that became one of the area's highest-rated home service businesses. That experience shaped the foundation of Denny's next venture: a relationship-driven platform designed to make finding reliable local service providers easier, more transparent and more human.

"It's like asking a neighbor for a recommendation at scale," Denny said. "We help people find trusted local service providers without the guesswork."

Built in Kitsap, for Kitsap, Listio currently features about 90 vetted providers across 40 categories, from painters and plumbers to roofers, crawl-space specialists and more.

The platform is already active in eight real estate offices. But behind the numbers is a broader mission: to redirect home services away from anonymous, pay-to-play platforms and toward a local economy built on trust, accountability and relationships.

A Business Born From the "Worst Season"

Listio's origin story didn't begin with a pitch deck or venture capital. It began during a period of reckoning.

"It started from the worst season in my junk removal business in 15 years," Denny said. "I started looking at how much we were spending on advertising and how much we were making per job, and we were actually losing money. That's not good."

Like many small service businesses, Trash Transporters relied heavily on large, non-local online platforms to generate leads. On those platforms, visibility is often tied to money spent, meaning service providers who spend the most appear first — regardless of the quality of their work.

"These big, billion-dollar ad agencies basically charge as much as they possibly can to extract from small businesses to keep you using them," Denny said. "I had some sleepless nights asking, what is the inverse of this? What's the opposite of this crazy, paid advertising?"

The answer he kept coming back to wasn't technology alone — it was relationships.

"You think about your best clients and your best partners," he said. "They come from relationships, not from bidding wars."

That realization led Denny to a group of professionals who operate at the center of trust-based local networks: real estate agents.

"Real estate agents are relationship hubs," he said. "They could use a vendor list 12 or 15 times a year instead of once. Their clients are always asking, 'Do you know a roofer? A junk removal company? A landscaper?' And agents kept saying the same thing to me: 'We need great service providers!'"

Ryan Denny, founder of Listio.io.

At the same time, Denny knew dozens of skilled local vendors — people he had worked alongside for years or who came recommended by his most trusted partners. Connecting those proven providers with professionals who depend on reputation and referrals revealed a clear opportunity. That intersection became the foundation for Listio.

Why Listio — and Why Now?

The name Listio itself has roots in real estate.

"It was originally like listing a house," Denny said. "A list of vendors, a list of service providers. It fit — kind of a happy accident."

The "io" ending gave the platform a tech-forward feel. Later, Denny realized another layer of meaning: listo in Spanish means "ready."

"It's like, ready to go," he said. "That's what we want this to be — that list that's just ready when you need it."

Denny's path to launching Listio wasn't a traditional startup résumé. Before building Trash Transporters, he deliberately went into car sales as a form of self-training.

"I always knew I wanted to be an entrepreneur," he said. "I knew I had no sales experience, and if you have the best product

Denny collaborates with local real estate agents to connect trusted service providers with homeowners.

but can't show its value, it doesn't work. So I went into car sales to build that muscle."

From there, he built Trash Transporters one job at a time.

"I've probably done over 2,000 one-to-one, low-ticket sales with customers," he said. "Answering the phones, doing the jobs, doing the books, answering the emails. You learn what makes a good homeowner experience."

That hands-on experience now informs Listio's design — especially its approach to vetting service providers.

More Than a Directory

Ask Denny how Listio differs from other home service platforms, and he's direct.

"On most platforms, the only vetting that happens is if you have a credit card," he said. "If you pay the most, you show up the highest. You can put some razzle dazzle on your listing, but it doesn't mean you're the best at what you do."

Listio flips that model. Providers are invite-only and referral-based. Every vendor has either worked directly with Denny's team or been referred by another trusted provider or real estate professional.

Then comes the interview.

"We interview people like we're going to hire them on our own team," he said. "We're not just asking, 'Can you do the work?' We're asking, 'Would we trust you in our own homes? With our own clients?'"

Over more than 1,000 calls to assemble the platform's initial cohort of roughly 100 providers, patterns began to emerge.

"You call seven plumbers and you start to learn best practices," he said. "You see what floats to the top. Then we ask them, 'If

you're too busy and can't get to a job, who is the one person or company you would refer your client to and trust them?' When the same names keep coming up, that tells you something."

Listio evaluates vendors on three core values:

- Excellence** — "Set the bar"
- Growth-oriented** — "Grow or die"
- Collaboration** — "One big team"

"We're rating these values based on the conversation, zero to 10," Denny said. "If someone says, 'I want this whole city to myself, I don't want anyone else in it,' that doesn't sound very collaborative. That might not be a great fit."

The result is a network of providers aligned not only on quality of work, but on how they treat customers and each other.

A "Relationship Generator"

"We're not a lead generation company," Denny said. "We're a relationship generation company."

That distinction matters, particularly among service providers who have grown wary of platforms promising "hot leads" for a fee.

"A lot of home service people hear about a platform and think, 'Here we go again,'" he said.

Denny counters that skepticism with transparency and his own history.

"It's easier to disarm people when I can say, 'I've been a home service provider for 15 years. Here's my company, you can look it up. I've paid for those other platforms. I know what they're like. We're trying to change that.'"

For vendors, Listio's value lies in sustained relationships rather than anonymous inquiries.

One early example involved a painter/drywaller who joined as



Cornerstone Cleaning

Owner: Ryan Nelson

Business: Cornerstone Cleaning

Category: Exterior Cleaning

Website: <https://cornerstonecleaning.com/>



Moss is scraped from a patio as part of Cornerstone Cleaning's exterior maintenance services.

"The second reason I love Listio is that Listio vets their contractors before they're entered into Listio, which means that we now have a network of other contractors that we can refer and gain referrals from through the Listio platform," he said.

"The third reason is we love referrals, and a referral based marketing, I believe, is the best way to do business," he said.

"It's a trusted referral. We love doing referral based business with Listio. Listio is awesome. Couldn't give a better recommendation."



Photos Courtesy of Cornerstone Cleaning

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a beta provider.

"He got connected with a realtor through what we were doing and ended up doing six jobs for her," Denny said. "Tens of thousands of dollars in revenue. But what stuck with me was when he grabbed me the next time he saw me and said, 'This is not what I thought it was going to be. You made it so easy. How do I pay for this? How do I get involved in this?'"

Kelly Wells, owner of Infinity Fencing NW, said the platform has helped establish credibility quickly.

"Listio has been a game changer in trust," Wells said. "I feel immediate credibility from how customers engage with us over something as simple as a phone call. I believe Listio has given us an edge at being a leading and preferred fence contractor here in our local community."

Ryan Nelson, owner of Cornerstone Cleaning, said Listio fills several gaps at once.



"I love Listio for three reasons," Nelson said. "The first reason is it gives us access to a demographic that we love to serve. We love working with real estate agents. And what's cool about Listio is it gives us access to real estate agents that we don't already have in our network."

He also emphasized the value of shared standards.

"The second reason I love Listio is that Listio vets their contractors before they're entered into Listio, which means that we now have a network of other contractors that we can refer and gain referrals from through the Listio platform," he said.

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Opening Listio to the Public

Listio was originally built as a tool for real estate agents and the clients they serve. But as the platform grew, Denny recognized a practical reality: maintaining a high-quality, carefully vetted network requires consistent demand. While he continues to build relationships with more real estate professionals, those partnerships take time to develop.

"One of the most difficult, valuable pieces is curating this list of the best service providers," he said. "They need business in order to stick around. If they're not busy enough, the platform could fall apart."

That insight led to a broader vision for Listio's role in the local home services ecosystem.

"Ultimately the service providers will serve the public," he said. "We're still very much aimed at connecting and

collaborating with real estate agents. Whether it's through us or through agents, we want to serve the public with the best service providers possible."

The answer was to open Listio to everyday homeowners while preserving the agent-focused features that anchor the platform. Today, Listio offers three membership tiers, ranging from a free option to a premium home concierge service. For time-constrained professionals, property managers and landlords, that concierge model may offer the clearest expression of Listio's value — simplifying the process of finding trusted help while maintaining the platform's relationship-driven approach.

Turning Chaos Into Clarity

Denny often sums up Listio's mission with a simple phrase:

"Turning chaos into clarity in home services."

"People will see a number on a truck and just roll the dice," he said. "Sometimes it works out. Sometimes it doesn't. That stress adds up."

In an economy overloaded with information, Denny believes trust-based curation has renewed value.

"People don't want to see 17 web pages," he said. "They just want the answer. In our world, that means: 'Can someone just give me two providers I can trust right now?'"

For Kitsap County, Denny sees that philosophy as an economic strategy as much as a business model — one that keeps dollars local, strengthens small businesses and reinforces the relationships that make communities work. ■

Infinity Fencing



The Infinity Fencing NW crew works on a local fencing project.



Infinity Fencing NW, a vetted service provider on Listio, fabricates custom fencing components.

Photos Courtesy of Infinity Fencing NW

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Human Resources

Digital Transformation Isn't Optional

It's the New Main Street Advantage

By Julie Piazza | SHRM-SCP, SPHR Anew Insights

The Impact of Technology on U.S. Small Business survey from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce reports technology's critical role in business operations. The survey revealed that technology has a key role in helping small businesses weather challenges and small businesses that fully embrace technology outperform their peers and are more optimistic about the future.

According to the survey, companies are also looking to add emerging technologies like AI to their arsenal of digital tools to compete and expand their business. High-tech adopters (firms using six or more platforms) see stronger growth in sales, profits, and employment than low-tech peers, reinforcing the business case for investing in digital tools. Roughly 8 in 10 small businesses say technology helped them cope with inflation, supply-chain issues, and access to capital, making digital tools a key resilience strategy.

Technology in small businesses actually increase sales, profit, and efficiency for a small team (often under five people). Owners see that heavy tech adopters grow faster, but they want concrete use cases like online booking, e-commerce, automated invoicing, and AI-assisted marketing that fit a lean operation.

In this environment, Washington's employees sit at the front line of technological change: they are the ones learning new tools, juggling old workflows, and absorbing both the promise and the pressure of innovation. Any serious conversation about technology and business must include both the needs of the business and what workers need to thrive, not just cope.



What employees really want from tech

Many workers are less interested in buzzwords and more interested in whether technology makes their day tangibly better. They want tools that reduce repetitive work, clarify priorities, and give them more control over how they serve customers, rather than systems that feel like surveillance or extra administration layered onto already full days.

For frontline staff, a new POS system or CRM is meaningful only if it speeds up lines, cuts errors, or makes follow-up easier. Employees want a say in tool selection and rollout because they see quickly where technology clashes with real-world workflows on the shop floor, in the kitchen, or out in the field.

Skills, confidence, and career paths

Technology is reshaping what "entry-level" even means, and employees know that digital skills are fast becoming basic job requirements. Workers in smaller firms often lack structured training, so when new tools arrive, they are quietly expected to "figure it out," which widens skill gaps, undermines confidence, and leads to work-arounds when the new tool is inefficient or not fully optimized due to cost, lack of front line input or both.

Employees are hungry for clear learning paths: short, practical trainings, paid time to experiment with tools, and recognition when they master new capabilities. When small businesses frame digital upskilling as part of career development—rather than just as a way to do more with fewer people, workers

are more likely to embrace new systems and stay longer.

Trust, data, and worker autonomy

As small businesses adopt customer data tools, AI assistants, and connected devices, employees are increasingly concerned about how their own data is used and monitored. Time-tracking apps, productivity dashboards, and AI-generated performance insights can easily feel like a loss of autonomy if there is little transparency about purpose and limits.

Thoughtful leaders explain what is being measured, how data will and will not be used, and where humans will always have the final say. When workers understand that technology is there to augment judgment rather than replace it, they are more willing to contribute ideas on how to refine systems and policies from the inside.

Co-designing digital transformation

The most successful digital transformations treat employees as co-designers, not reluctant users. Inviting staff into pilot projects, asking them to stress-test new tools with real tasks, and incorporating their feedback builds both better systems and deeper buy-in.

This co-creation mindset reframes technology from a top-down mandate to a shared innovation effort. Employees who help design workflows are more likely to champion changes to peers, turning internal skeptics into advocates who can translate abstract "innovation strategies" into everyday language on the job.

An employer of choice mindset

For employees, the real promise of innovation is reduced physical demands, fewer tedious tasks, clearer expectations, and breathing room for creativity and customer connection. Delivering on that promise asks the leaders for a commitment to transparency, paid learning, and shared gains from productivity improvements.

Thought leadership in this space means shifting the narrative from "How can technology help businesses grow?" to include "How can technology help employees grow with them?" In a state defined by both tech giants and Main Street shops, the future of innovation will be written not only in code, but in the everyday experiences of workers who make those businesses possible. ■



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Health & Wellness

A safer future for aging

Technology and design transform senior living

By Jessica Hull | Community Relations Director,
Bay Pointe by Cogir

As the global population ages, concerns about safety in senior living are taking center stage. Falls, social isolation, and healthcare access issues are just a few of the risks seniors face, often with devastating consequences. Meanwhile, loneliness affects many older adults, exacerbating mental and physical health issues. These risks underscore the urgent need for innovative solutions that prioritize senior safety, independence, and quality of life. Fortunately, technology and design are stepping in to address these challenges, transforming senior living into a safer, more supportive experience.

The world of senior living is undergoing a remarkable transformation, driven by a wave of innovations aimed at empowering older adults to age in place safely and comfortably. Whether seniors prefer to remain in their own homes or reside in a community setting, cutting-edge technologies and design approaches are converging to meet their unique needs. Smart home systems, wearable safety devices, and AI-powered monitoring are

just a few examples of the advancements that are redefining senior living. These innovations are not only enhancing safety but also promoting independence, social connection, and overall well-being, enabling seniors to thrive in their golden years.

Technological Innovations

- Wearable Safety Devices:** Wearables like smartwatches and fitness trackers detect falls, monitor heart rate, and track vital signs, sending alerts to caregivers.
- Smart Home Systems:** Voice assistants, motion-activated lighting, and smart thermostats enhance safety, comfort, and independence.
- AI-Powered Monitoring:** AI analyzes data to predict health risks, detect falls, and alert Caregivers.
- Telemedicine:** Virtual healthcare services reduce travel needs and enable remote Monitoring.
- Robotic Assistants:** Robots provide companionship, assist with mobility, and perform tasks like medication reminders.



Design and Infrastructure Innovations

- Age-Friendly Architecture:** Designs prioritize safety, accessibility, and comfort, reducing fall risks and promoting mobility.
- Smart Security Systems:** Biometric access control, video surveillance, and emergency alert systems ensure resident safety.
- Accessible Transportation:** Innovations in transportation services cater to seniors with mobility issues.

Health and Wellness Innovations

- Health Monitoring Apps:** Apps track health metrics, medication adherence, and provide cognitive support.
- Virtual Reality:** Immersive experiences promote cognitive health, engagement, and social interaction.
- Personalized Care Plans:** AI-driven care plans tailor support to individual senior needs.

Enhancing Independence and Quality of Life

- Voice-Controlled Assistants:** Voice assistants enable seniors to control their environment and access services.
- Social Connection Platforms:** Digital platforms foster social connections, reducing loneliness and isolation.
- Cognitive Support Tools:** Digital tools support memory, attention, and processing speed.

These advancements are making a real difference in seniors' lives, from enhancing safety to fostering connections. Imagine being able to live independently, staying engaged with loved ones, sharing experiences, and creating memories.

These innovations are transforming senior living, enabling older adults to age in place safely and comfortably. Governments, tech companies, and healthcare providers are investing in solutions that prioritize senior safety, independence, and quality of life.

The focus on senior safety innovations is yielding promising results, empowering older adults to live independently and securely. As technology continues to evolve, the world continues to adapt to meet the needs of an aging population. ■



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Insights and ideas from Matchstick Lab and across Kitsap's entrepreneurial ecosystem—by, for, and about the people building what's next.

Community as an Entrepreneurial Practice

Why Showing Up Matters

By **Whitney Tatum** | Founder of MOXIE Entrepreneurial Support Services | Matchstick Lab Program Lead, Firebrand Unconference and Entrepreneurs Anonymous

Entrepreneurship is often framed as a solo pursuit—visionary leaders, bold risks, and long hours spent building something from nothing. But beneath every sustainable business is something less often talked about and just as critical: community.

For many entrepreneurs, especially those who build businesses in places they didn't grow up, community doesn't come prepackaged. It has to be built intentionally, one conversation, one meeting, one uncomfortable introduction at a time. In regions like Kitsap—and in entrepreneurial ecosystems everywhere—the real work of leadership often begins not with a business plan, but with showing up.



Showing Up is the Work

Showing up can look deceptively simple. Walking into a networking event where you don't know anyone. Introducing yourself when everyone else seems to already belong. Saying yes to a community meeting when it would be easier to stay home and work. For entrepreneurs, these moments can feel risky. Time is limited. Energy is finite. And when you're still figuring out your place, it's tempting to believe you need to arrive polished, confident, and fully formed.

But the truth is this: community isn't built through perfection. It's built through presence.

Authenticity and Consistency Build Trust

Across entrepreneurial journeys—whether in Kitsap, across the Pacific Northwest, or far beyond—connection grows when people show up as they are, not as who they think they're supposed to be. Entrepreneurs who try to blend in or perform a version

of themselves that feels "acceptable" often find themselves surrounded by people, yet deeply disconnected. Authenticity, on the other hand, creates resonance. It invites trust. It accelerates real collaboration.

Community-building is not separate from entrepreneurship; it is an entrepreneurial skill. Knowing who you are, what you care about, and how you want to contribute gives you an internal compass. That clarity helps you choose which rooms to enter, which relationships to nurture, and which opportunities truly align with your values. It also makes it easier to walk away from spaces that aren't a fit—an underrated but essential leadership move.

In places like Kitsap, where relationships are layered and long-standing, entrepreneurs may feel pressure to prove themselves quickly. Yet credibility rarely comes from titles or pitches alone. It comes from consistency. From showing up again and again. From offering value, listening well, and being willing to start as the new person in the room.

Entrepreneurial community doesn't form overnight. It grows through small, cumulative acts: following up after a conversation, supporting someone else's work, volunteering skills, or simply being present when it would be easier not to be. These acts build trust, visibility, and a sense of shared investment.



From Networking to Belonging

At its core, community is not about networking—it's about belonging. And belonging begins internally. When entrepreneurs are grounded in who they are, they lead more confidently, collaborate more generously, and build businesses that are not only successful, but deeply connected to the places and people around them.

In the end, community is not a byproduct of entrepreneurship. It is part of the practice. Showing up—authentically, consistently, and imperfectly—is not just how communities grow... it's how entrepreneurs do, too. ■



Ready Kitsap: 2026 Business & Tourism Summit

Businesses and nonprofits across the Kitsap and Olympic Peninsulas convened at the Kitsap Conference Center in mid-January as the region prepares for the FIFA World Cup™ games coming this summer. Seattle will play host to six games between mid-June and mid-July.

Attendees first heard from Washington State Director of Commerce, Joe Nguyen, on the economic impact the games will have on Kitsap as well as the opportunities the business community has due to the anticipated increase in visitor traffic. Among the dozen other speakers included Jorge Gotuzzo from Visit Seattle, who introduced a statewide Community Brand, created for businesses to use to co-brand themselves with the summer events, as well as Seattle Metro Chamber's Lynnette Buffington

who introduced a statewide megaevent playbook.

Local Destination Marketing Organization, Visit Kitsap Peninsula, shared how various assets around the County, including parks, trails and other attractions, can be leveraged to promote individual businesses and locations. The day was rounded out with a presentation from local nonprofit, Scarlet Road, who provided insight on recognizing human trafficking during major events like this summer's tournament and the resources available to local businesses.

The Greater Kitsap Chamber has a resource page on our website for those interested in learning more and preparing their business for megaevents and increased visitor traffic. For more information, please contact the Chamber at (360) 479-3579 or hello@greaterkitsapchamber.com. ■



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Kitsap Women's SUMMIT



"Unshaken: Staying True to Self in Unfamiliar Territory"
TRACY FLOOD-HARRIS, ANNA FLOOD, DR. JANEISE BRIGGS

"From Misunderstood to Understood: Tools for Relational Breakthrough Across Differences"
STEPHANIE MIKULASEK

"How Your WHY Can Guide Your WHAT and Anchor Your WHO"
LAURIE CAMERON

"The Freedom and Flexibility Formula: Build Momentum Toward a Life You Love"
LISA KERWIN

"Shelf Life: The Art of Knowing When to Pivot and How to Begin Again"
MONICA DOWNEY

"Showing Up Anyway: The Power of Authentic Presence"
WHITNEY TATUM

"The Conflict Beneath the Conflict"
CARA WILSON

March 19, 2026 | Kitsap Conference Center

GKC Around the Community

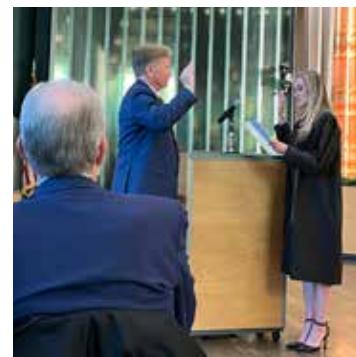
GKC was happy to host the final Chamber: Off the Clock for 2025 at our Downtown Bremerton Visitor's Center. Pictured: Mariah Mendez of Honeybee Horticulture and GKC Board Chair, Susan Larsen, of Land Title Company of Kitsap County.

Honeybee Horticulture served as our catering partner in 2025 as we launched Off the Clock and was also recently named a finalist for New Business of the Year at the Chamber's Annual Business Awards Gala.



GKC was excited to witness the swearing in of 2 new Bremerton City Council members and a new municipal court judge, alongside returning Councilmembers and three-time elected Mayor Greg Wheeler.

From L to R: Rick Tift (new), Michael Goodnow (re-elected), Jennifer Chamberlin (re-elected), Mayor Greg Wheeler (re-elected), Judge Tom Weaver (new), and Christy Cammarata (new). Congratulations to all!



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Congratulations to Anytime Fitness Silverdale on their January 10th ribbon cutting! Since opening in November, their team has created an inviting space where members feel supported as they work toward their health and wellness goals.

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New and Renewal Memberships for December

We appreciate your support of the Chamber's Mission!

Community Connector

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Growth

Encore Communities (1992)
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Suquamish Clearwater Casino
Resort (2001)
The Point Casino & Hotel (2013)

Main Street

Gesa Credit Union (2019)
Parker Mooers & Cena CPA, PS
(1990)
The Doctors Clinic (2005)
United Way of Kitsap County (1978)

Thank you for your continued support of the Greater Kitsap Chamber through your membership. Your commitment to the Chamber plays a vital role in strengthening our business community and fostering growth, connection, and advocacy across the region.

January Member of the Month



The Greater Kitsap Chamber is proud to recognize Ward Media as our January Member of the Month. Serving Kitsap County

Business

Adobe Acrobat (2022)
Albers Marcovina Vista Gardens
Foundation (2024)
Art and Gifts at Water's Edge - Seabeck (2025)
Domino's Pizza (1996)
Filter Girls (2017)
Jeff Reed Insurance Agency Inc.
State Farm Insurance Co. (1994)
Kitsap Fair & Stampede
Association (2022)
Kitsap Family Pancake House
Management (1991)
Kitsap Law Group (2016)
North Kitsap Fishline (2024)
Ofelia Homes LLC (2025)
Peninsula Community Health
Services (1994)
Photonatix Photo Booth Rental
and Beyond (2023)
Shur Kleen Carwash (2015)
Silverdale Water District (1992)
Windermere Real Estate-Carter
Dotson (2009)

with creativity and expertise, Ward Media has become a trusted partner for businesses looking to grow, connect, and thrive. Their team specializes in marketing solutions that

make an impact - from website design and SEO to social media strategy, branding, and advertising.

Where Marketing Meets Community

Ward Media's influence extends beyond individual businesses. Through their flagship publication, Kitsap Business magazine, they shine a spotlight on the innovators and leaders shaping our local economy. Each issue delivers stories that celebrate entrepreneurship and strengthen the bonds within our community. But Ward Media is more than a marketing agency, they're connector. For nearly a year, the Chamber has partnered

with Ward Media to feature our newsletter content in Kitsap Business. This collaboration ensures Chamber news and resources reach a wider audience, helping members stay informed while supporting Ward Media's mission to amplify local voices.

Local Expertise, Lasting Impact

Ward Media's approach is simple: combine technical excellence with a deep commitment to Kitsap County. Whether it's helping a small business build its online presence or sharing stories that inspire, their work reflects a passion for community and economic vitality.

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Finance

Why Retirement is a Terrible Goal

By Kevin Campbell | Wealth Advisor & Founder of Peaks Financial, Host of Kitsap Matters Podcast, Author of *Fearless: Charting Your Course to Financial Independence*

If I asked ten people what their financial goal is, eight of them would give me the same answer.

"I want to retire."

I understand why that feels right. Retirement has been marketed to us for decades as the finish line. Work hard. Save enough. Reach a certain age. Then life begins.

The problem is that retirement, by itself, is a terrible goal.

It's vague. It's outdated. And in many cases, it pushes people toward financial decisions that actually reduce freedom instead of creating it.

In the book *Fearless*, I talk a lot about replacing vague hopes with intentional direction. Retirement is often just a placeholder for something people haven't fully thought through. When I ask the follow-up question, the real one, the conversation usually changes.

"What does retirement actually look like for you?"

That's when people pause. Because most don't want to stop being useful. They don't want to stop learning. They don't even want to stop working entirely. What they really want is optionality. Control over their time. The ability to say yes to what matters and no to what doesn't.

That's not retirement. That's financial independence.

The danger of making retirement the goal is that it encourages people to obsess over a date instead of a lifestyle. Age 60. Age 62. Age 65. Pick a number. Life does not care about your spreadsheet. Health changes. Markets change. Jobs change. Family needs change. When the goal is a fixed date, any disruption feels like failure.

Financial independence works differently. It focuses on resilience, not precision. It asks

better questions. How much income do I actually need to support the life I want? How flexible is my spending? How dependent am I on any single source of income? How exposed am I to market downturns at the wrong time?

These are some of the questions that determine freedom.

One of the most common mistakes I see is people delaying life in the name of a future they assume will be better. "I'll travel later." "I'll slow down later." "I'll enjoy this when I retire." That mindset creates an irony. People spend their healthiest, most capable years sprinting toward a finish line that often arrives with less energy than expected.

The SAIL FORMula was built around this exact idea. Strategy, allocation, income, and legacy are not checkboxes. They are moving parts. Together, they create margin. Margin creates choices. Choices create independence.

Income planning, especially, tends to get overlooked. People focus heavily on growing assets but give far less thought to how those assets will eventually support their life. A portfolio can look great on paper and still fail if income is poorly structured or too dependent on market timing. Independence is not just about how much you have. It's about how your plan behaves in the real world.

Another misconception is that retirement equals safety. It doesn't. In fact, many people take their biggest risks right as they retire. Sequence of returns risk, inflation risk, and longevity risk often show up at the



same time. If your plan only works when everything goes right, it's not a plan. It's a hope.

A better goal is this. Build a life you don't need to escape from. Build financial systems that support flexibility instead of forcing rigidity. Redefine success away from an age or a title and toward independence.

February is a good time for this conversation. The New Year optimism has faded and reality has returned. That makes it the perfect moment to ask whether the goal you're chasing actually matches the life you want to live.

Retirement may still be part of the picture. That's fine. But it should be a chapter, not the destination.

If your plan gives you more options, more confidence, and more control over your time, you're already winning.

Whether you ever use the word retirement again is secondary. ■



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The SAFE Interceptor 41, a high-speed patrol boat built for agencies such as U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

SAFE Boats International at 30

Built for the People Who Depend on Them

Photos courtesy of Seattle Yacht Media

By Quinn Propst | Ward Media Staff Reporter

Born on the rough waters and rocky shorelines of Puget Sound, SAFE Boats International set out 30 years ago to answer a deceptively simple question: how do you design a boat that truly protects the people on it? That human-centered philosophy, focused on comfort, safety and performance in the harshest conditions, has since propelled the Bremerton-based company from a small company into a globally respected builder of high-performance patrol and response vessels.

"We're celebrating our 30-year anniversary this year," said Cindy McFarland, chief people officer at SAFE Boats International. "Thirty years building amazing aluminum boats for first responders and the military, helping them support their missions."

Now employee-owned and under a new leadership structure, SAFE Boats is marking the milestone by staying true to the innovation-first mindset that made it a trusted name on the water.

Today, the company has delivered nearly 3,000 vessels to customers in more than 70 countries, serving first responders, law



SAFE Boats International's executive leadership team, from left, Rob Goley, Tom Gumpert, Cindy McFarland and Christer Bradley.

enforcement agencies and military operators around the world.

A milestone year, a new leadership model

As SAFE Boats enters its 30th year, the company is also navigating a significant leadership transition. Founder-led for much of its history, the company recently announced that longtime CEO Richard Schwarz will step away from day-to-day operations and move into a consulting and advisory role, remaining involved in strategic initiatives and long-term planning.

In place of a single chief executive, SAFE Boats has adopted a cooperative leadership model aligned with its employee-owned structure. Day-to-day operations are now led by a four-person executive team: Rob Goley, chief revenue and customer officer; Christer Bradley, chief operations officer; Tom Gumpert, chief financial officer; and McFarland, who oversees people, workforce development and the employee-owner experience.

The model reflects a company culture that has long emphasized shared responsibility, cross-functional collaboration and

ownership at every level—values that were formalized when SAFE Boats became 100% employee-owned in April 2023.

Ownership as a differentiator

What truly sets SAFE Boats apart, McFarland said, is ownership.

"One of the coolest, most unique things about SAFE Boats is that we are a 100% employee-owned company, which is pretty darn rare out there," she said. "All of our team members are actually shareholders, employee owners."

That milestone, she said, was the natural evolution of an existing mindset.

"Even before we owned the place, we always acted like we owned the place," she joked. "Part of the culture is ownership and commitment to customers and to each other, but now we officially own the place."

That sense of accountability shows up daily on the shop floor. SAFE Boats employs roughly 327 people, most of whom live in Kitsap County, with a small number commuting from neighboring Mason County. Many have been with the company for years, developing highly specialized skills that are central to SAFE Boats' reputation.

Quality above all

Ask anyone at SAFE Boats what has fueled its growth, and the answer comes back to quality.

"We're known for our quality. Our boat builders are the best in the industry," McFarland said.

Customers who have operated vessels from other builders often tell SAFE Boats that directly.

"I genuinely believe that we make the best product, and it's because we have over 200 master craftsmen out here who are doing great work every day," she said.

That commitment is reinforced by what

The SAFE 45 Full Cabin-Inboard, a long-range patrol and rescue vessel designed for extended offshore operations.

the company calls "big Q, little D"—a reminder that quality always comes before delivery.

"If you focus on the quality over delivery, you're going to make the customer happy," McFarland said. While schedules matter, she added, "we would never compromise quality over meeting a deadline or a schedule."

SAFE Boats backs that philosophy with systems that exceed industry norms. The company is ISO 9001 certified, a globally recognized quality management standard.

"We are the only boat builder in our competitive range that is an ISO 9001 certified boat builder, which means we've had to go kind of above and beyond that commitment to quality," McFarland said.

Demand reflects that reputation. The company's order book remains full.

"Our backlog is crazy," McFarland said. "You'd probably have to wait about a year for a slot, and I think that's a testament that we build a really great product."

Built by people who've driven them

For Kelsey Nemeth, brand and marketing manager at SAFE Boats International, one of the company's biggest advantages is who is doing the building.

"Many of our team members are former SAFE Boat operators from previous careers," she said. "They're retired law enforcement, retired military who have felt so strongly about the quality and craftsmanship of our vessels that they come to work at SAFE Boats after they retire from a career in the military or law enforcement."



A Mk VI patrol boat built by SAFE Boats International. In 2021, the Bremerton-based company was awarded a U.S. government contract to design and build Mk VI vessels for Ukraine through a State Department-approved security assistance program.



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Feature



Employees at SAFE Boats International's Bremerton facility.

That firsthand experience creates a powerful feedback loop.

"That level of insight into operator needs and demands really sets SAFE Boats apart, because we have that one-to-one connection with operators," Nemeth said. "We can build the best boat in the industry."

SAFE Boats vessels operate around the world, supporting missions ranging from search and rescue to border security. Nemeth said the company is approaching 3,000 boats delivered and has vessels operating in more than 70 countries—a global footprint built from a Bremerton base.

Custom, not mass-produced

SAFE Boats occupies a niche where craftsmanship still matters.

"If we were building Toyota Camrys, it'd be really easy to get some new equipment in and to automate more," McFarland said. "But that's not what we're building. Every boat we do is

unique and special, like a little snowflake."

The company continues to invest in equipment such as CNC machines and router tables where they improve safety and efficiency. But full automation has limits.

"Because of the fact that our boats are so custom, we really do have to rely on the master craftsmen that we have using the tools that they have," McFarland said.

Rather than chasing trends, SAFE Boats focuses on disciplined processes and incremental innovation. Earlier this year, the company debuted a new offshore interceptor vessel at the International WorkBoat Show.

"We debuted a new offshore interceptor vessel on a proven hull platform, with an enclosed cabin, to meet the evolving needs of law enforcement," Nemeth said. "We are innovating pretty regularly in that regard—listening to the demands of the customer and adapting some of our proven designs to address



Employees at SAFE Boats International's Tacoma facility.

the needs of law enforcement."

A defining customer

One of SAFE Boats' most influential relationships has been with the U.S. Coast Guard. Nemeth said the post-9/11 demand for Homeland Security and border protection "really put SAFE Boats on the map." The company ultimately built more than 600 boats under that program, according to McFarland.

"To this day, we're still building boats for the Coast Guard," Nemeth said.

Most recently, SAFE Boats was selected as one of four aluminum boat builders nationwide to construct a demonstrator vessel for the Coast Guard's Response Boat-Small program.

"It's a huge honor," she said.

Closer to home, SAFE Boats is preparing to deliver vessels to the Bremerton Fire Department and Tacoma Police Department.

"Our boats are serving a much higher purpose," Nemeth said. "There's lots of aluminum boat building in the Pacific Northwest, but not every boat company gets the opportunity to build the types of vessels that we're building at SAFE Boats."

Deep roots in Kitsap

Despite its global reach, SAFE Boats remains firmly tied to Kitsap County.

"Our workforce is part of the community too," McFarland said. The company supports local food banks, sponsors youth

sports teams and looks for ways to give back close to home.

"It all lines up with who we are as an organization and as a group of team members and community members," she said. "It all fits."

Building the workforce pipeline

Like much of the marine manufacturing industry, SAFE Boats faces skilled labor shortages.

"Industry-wide, we're facing skilled labor shortages," Nemeth said, calling it "the number one issue" in the sector today.

For McFarland, workforce development is a priority.

"That's my number one passion and priority," she said. "It's promoting careers in the trades."

SAFE Boats partners with high schools, community colleges and trade schools across the region and sits on advisory boards for multiple institutions.

"We're there helping shape their curriculum, giving them feedback, telling them what industry is really looking for," McFarland said.

Internally, SAFE Boats has built its own structured training paths for new hires.

"We've just determined we need to do it ourselves," McFarland said. "We actually take the time to create a training path for them."

Looking ahead

As SAFE Boats looks to the future, McFarland said the



A vessel hull takes shape on the production floor at SAFE Boats International.

company is guided by what it calls the "three P's": people, purpose and performance.

The first is people—"to attract, develop, and retain the best possible team members that we possibly can, and to create an environment for them where it's the best job they've ever had," she said.

The second is purpose: constantly reminding employees who the boats are for and why the work matters. Once a quarter, SAFE Boats invites end users to speak directly with the workforce on the shop floor.

"They'll say, 'You guys built an amazing boat, and it caught drug runners, or it helped save a life, put out a fire,'" McFarland said. "That really helps drive home the mission."

The third P is performance. As an employee-owned company, financial results directly affect the people doing the work, through profit sharing and share value.

"We're really transparent with the team on how we're doing," McFarland said. One of the company's mantras is "one team working together," she added: "We're all here with one end goal, and that's to provide our customers with the best possible product we can and hopefully make some money while we're doing that, and then share those rewards with the employee owners that work here."

For McFarland, the most rewarding part of the job is watching people grow—from first-time trade workers to

seasoned professionals traveling the world to service SAFE Boats vessels.

"A young person who had never left the state when they started working for us, and now they're flying to Tunisia to do some service work on one of our boats," she said. "It's really just watching people grow in their careers, and in their own confidence, in their own personal lives. That's what's most satisfying to me."

Nemeth, who joined the company more recently, echoed that sentiment.

"It's just such an amazing place to work," she said. "I wish everybody locally knew that so they would come and apply and want to work at SAFE Boats, too." ■



A SAFE Boats employee welds aluminum components as part of the boat-building process.

The SAFE 41 Full Cabin, the latest addition to the company's offshore patrol craft lineup, designed for speed, range and crew protection.



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Recruitment

Hire the Skill, Not the Suit

By Monica Blackwood | President & CEO West Sound Workforce

For decades, recruitment decisions have leaned heavily on resumes, degrees, job titles, and years of experience. While those markers provide some context, they are imperfect stand-ins for what employers truly need to know: can this person do the work well? Skill-based recruitment flips the traditional model by centering decisions on demonstrated ability rather than pedigree. Organizations that adopt this approach are seeing faster hiring, stronger performance, and more resilient teams.

What Is Skill-Based Recruitment?

Skill-based recruitment evaluates candidates based on their ability to perform the core functions of a role, regardless of where or how those skills were learned. Instead of defaulting to degree requirements or arbitrary experience thresholds, employers ask more meaningful questions: Can this person solve the problems this role faces? Can they apply relevant skills effectively?

Traditional qualifications often act as proxies for competence, but they do not guarantee performance. A degree does not ensure adaptability, and years of experience do not always equate to mastery. Skill-based recruitment reduces guesswork by focusing on observable, job-related capabilities that directly connect to outcomes.

Why Skill-Based Recruitment Works

Faster, smarter hiring. When recruitment teams focus on skills, they spend less time waiting for "perfect" resumes and more time evaluating real capability. This accelerates decision-making and reduces delays caused by overly narrow qualification requirements. Candidates move forward based on readiness, not formatting.

A wider and more diverse talent pool. Relaxing rigid degree and background requirements opens access to capable candidates who are often overlooked: veterans, self-taught professionals, career changers, rural workers, parents returning to the workforce, and individuals from nontraditional or underrepresented backgrounds. Expanding access in this way strengthens both talent pipelines and retention without sacrificing quality.

More agile, future-ready teams. Jobs evolve constantly. Tools change, responsibilities shift, and business needs move fast. Recruiting for applied skills and teachability builds teams that can adapt, upskill, and grow with the organization. Skill-first recruits are more likely to cross-train and contribute beyond the boundaries of a static job description.

Better retention and fewer costly mismatches. When people are recruited to use skills they enjoy and excel at, they are more likely to stay engaged. Poor

hiring matches are expensive and disruptive. Skill-based recruitment is more predictive of job fit and long-term success, reducing turnover and improving morale.

Skills Are Everywhere:

Rethinking Talent. One of the most powerful shifts in skill-based recruitment is learning to recognize skills gained outside traditional career paths. Transferable skills show up in unexpected places:

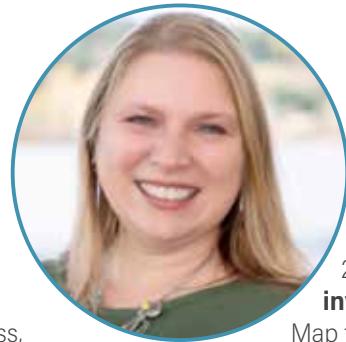
- A PTA parent brings planning, budgeting, stakeholder coordination, and conflict resolution—key project coordination skills.
- A guitar player develops fine motor control, focus, and precision that translate well to detailed assembly or production work.
- A veteran with logistics experience often has direct, transferable supply chain and inventory expertise.
- A former athlete brings teamwork, discipline, communication, and time management—valuable in nearly every role.
- An IT professional applies analytical thinking, systems awareness, and structured problem-solving suited to operations and change management.

When employers broaden how they define "qualified," they uncover talent that was always present—just filtered out by outdated screening practices.

How to Implement Skill-Based Recruitment

1. Rethink job descriptions

Strip postings down to what truly matters: tasks, responsibilities, and outcomes. Replace degree requirements with skill-based expectations such



as managing competing priorities or collaborating across teams.

2. Build a skill inventory

Map the skills your current workforce already has, along with the gaps you need to fill. This creates clarity for recruitment and internal development.

2. Train hiring managers

Skill-based recruitment requires a mindset shift. Hiring managers need interview guides, evaluation tools, and training to assess performance and potential rather than credentials alone.

3. Assess skills directly

Use real-world simulations, trial tasks, or scenario-based interviews. A short problem-solving exercise often reveals more about job fit than a resume ever could.

Skills are the true currency of work. When organizations recruit for what people can do—not just where they've been—they build stronger teams, expand access to opportunity, and position themselves for long-term success. The challenge is simple but powerful: take one role and rewrite it through a skills-based lens. Stop asking where a skill was learned. Start asking how well it can be applied.

Hiring the skill, not the suit, is a smarter way to recruit for the workforce of the future. ■

Monica Blackwood is the President and CEO of West Sound Workforce, a locally owned staffing firm serving employers and job seekers throughout the Puget Sound region. West Sound Workforce provides temporary, temp-to-hire, and direct-hire staffing services with a focus on alignment, performance, and long-term success.

Executive QA & A



Photos courtesy of Leah Thompson/Scandia Studio

Meet Angela Bennink Kitsap Public Utility District General Manager

By Quinn Propst | Ward Media Staff Reporter

As Kitsap County continues to grow, the systems that support daily life — water, wastewater treatment, and broadband — play an increasingly critical role in economic stability and opportunity. At the center of that work is Kitsap Public Utilities District General Manager Angela Bennink, a lifelong Kitsap resident whose career has focused on expanding access to essential infrastructure, particularly in underserved and rural communities.

In this Executive Q&A, Bennink shares her path to public service, KPUD's major investments on the horizon, and how strategic infrastructure planning, technology, and partnerships are helping position Kitsap County for long-term resilience and business growth.

Please tell our readers a little bit about yourself and what led you to your role at Kitsap PUD.

I began working with public utility districts (PUDs) in 2007 when I joined the Northwest Open Access Network (NoaNet), a not-for-

profit, quasi-governmental corporation owned by PUDs. At NoaNet, I worked throughout the state supporting rural communities in gaining access to broadband services. Kitsap Public Utility District (KPUD) is one of NoaNet's owners, and after I moved to Poulsbo, they generously allowed me to set up an office at their facility. The leadership at KPUD had built a team that was great to work with, and it was clear employees were valued and empowered to serve their community. When KPUD offered me a position in 2018, I jumped at the chance. While I enjoyed working with communities across the state, the opportunity to focus my work at home was too appealing.

During my time at KPUD, I have remained engaged in state and national broadband issues by serving on the boards of NoaNet and the American Association for Public Broadband. I have also served on public policy committees for both the Fiber Broadband Association and the Utility Telecom Council.

I was born in Kitsap County at Harrison Memorial Hospital and, aside from time away

for college and my first engineering jobs, have lived here most of my life. My husband and I are raising two kids, a North Kitsap Viking and a Poulsbo Panther, and through them I have had the opportunity to serve on the PTSA and the North Kitsap Lacrosse Club Board of Directors. Being involved in and contributing to my community has been incredibly meaningful to me. I am grateful every day for the work I get to do and the way I get to serve.

As general manager of Kitsap PUD, what are your top priorities for the utility right now, and how do they align with the region's long-term growth?

Successfully executing on projects and grants beginning in 2026. Lots of wins happened all at the same time. We received four grants to consolidate water systems and seven grants for broadband expansion. We will replace water main in Eldorado Ridge (Silverdale), install water main in Fort Ward (Bainbridge Island), replace infrastructure in Port Gamble, and we have recently acquired

Community members and officials attend a ribbon-cutting ceremony for a project to expand water services for residents on the south end of the Bainbridge Island.

the Fort Ward Sewer District (also known as Kitsap County Sewer District No. 7).

These projects bring a lot of new infrastructure and prepare KPUD to better serve the community.

Kitsap County is experiencing steady population and business growth. How is the PUD planning infrastructure investments to keep pace with demand?

As a public entity, preparing for growth is standard. We build plans to make sure we have resources to provide reliable utility services now and into the future. This means balancing costs, looking for grant funding when possible, managing capital facility charges, and investing in regional infrastructure.

We develop water and sewer plans that look 20 years into the future to ensure the projects we are completing today will be adequate to serve our communities for years to come.

During our first 10 years of residential broadband service, we focused on building infrastructure in unserved areas of the community. Today, grant funding will expand that infrastructure, build almost 200 miles of middle-mile fiber, connect around 4,000 homes, and pass by three times as many (reducing homeowner costs to connect to the network). This is a huge win for Kitsap County, building state-of-the-art fiber optic networks to all areas. With the grant funding, we're able to focus our existing capital funds on expanding residential broadband to communities that may technically be labeled as "served," but do not currently have access to reliable home internet and have requested KPUD service.

Broadband has become essential to economic development. How is Kitsap PUD working to expand broadband access, particularly in underserved or rural areas?

KPUD has been strategic in building infrastructure to serve the communities

in our more rural underserved areas. During COVID, we spoke with Kitsap County about the use of ARPA funds to expand infrastructure that would make it less expensive to connect homes in the future. KPUD has used those funds to build fiber connecting 21 new nodes (buildings that house network distribution equipment) across the county and increased the speed capacity of the equipment on the network. We now have fiber and distribution nodes in Twin Spits (Hansville), Fort Ward (Bainbridge), Seabeck-Holly, Olalla, and areas in between. We are reaching the extremely rural areas of the county. While there are still costs to connect homes, we have greatly reduced it by reducing the distance from homes to distribution nodes.

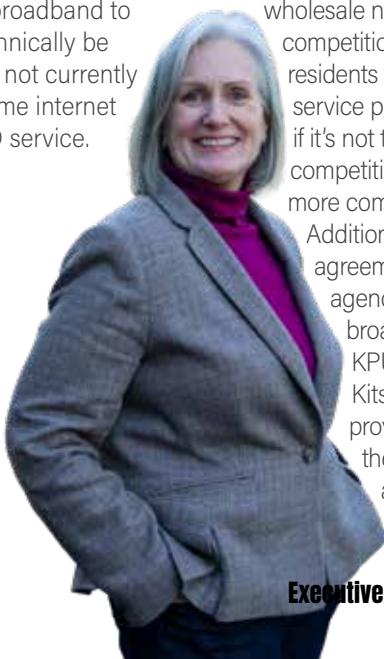
Additionally, we have worked with the county and Kitsap Transit to expand free WiFi sites across the county. We stood up 10 sites during COVID, some of those have been retired since then, and we are creating seven (7) new WiFi sites at Kitsap Transit Park and Rides with the support from Kitsap County ARPA funds.

Whenever we build infrastructure, we evaluate the needs of the residences and businesses it passes and design the project with future capacity in mind.

For businesses, we continue to grow and evolve to provide the products that they need. I think we have the staff to work with small and large organizations to provide services that meet their needs, whether it is the famous Sluy's Bakery or Navy Region Northwest. Our network capacity has grown over this past year to provide 100Gbps services, dark fiber for our public entities, and small business service of 2.5Gbps.

KPUD operates as an open access wholesale network. This creates competition across our services, allowing residents and businesses to choose their service provider and change providers if it's not the right fit. We have seen competition lead to better services and more competitive pricing for our county.

Additionally, we enter into interlocal agreements with other government agencies to exchange high-speed broadband services for services KPUD needs, such as Central Kitsap Fire and Rescue; we provide broadband services, and the fire district provides space and power for distribution nodes where feasible.



KPUD crews work on utility installation along Minder Road in Poulsbo.

From a business perspective, how does improved broadband connectivity impact local entrepreneurship, workforce development, and business retention?

Our high-speed network, expanded to residences, has supported many businesses that started in homes, including video editing, radiology, computer programming, and more. Small businesses that rely on high-speed service have been able to launch from home, and residents have access to remote jobs. During COVID, we saw an influx of people moving to Kitsap County for the quality of life. These residents needed access to broadband to maintain their jobs or build new businesses to support this new lifestyle. By offering services in Kitsap that are available in urban areas, we provide opportunities for businesses and individuals to relocate for quality of life while still maintaining livelihoods.

What role does technology and innovation play in modern utility management, and how is Kitsap PUD leveraging new tools or systems?

Technology is a huge factor in maintaining secure, sustainable utilities. With our water and wastewater utilities, we utilize broadband infrastructure to manage our SCADA (Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition) network. This allows us to control pumps, monitor tank levels, view flow rates, and send alarm signals when there is a risk – all remotely and in real time. We have WiFi infrastructure throughout the county that allows staff to connect to our secure network and transport data.

Automated Meter reading is something we are looking toward in the future to provide our water customers with a real-time view of their usage. By providing customers with real-time usage information, we can encourage more responsible use of our water resources.

In the wastewater utility, we use membrane technology to produce an effluent from the treatment plant that is drinking water quality.

Executive Q & A

This gives us the opportunity to return the water that customers use back to the ground, removing waste and contaminants while recharging the aquifer with clean water. Membrane technology continues to evolve, creating smaller plants that can treat more waste. What does this mean for Kitsap County? Outside of urban growth areas, residents rely on septic tanks. This is an effective method for treating waste and returning water to the ground to recharge aquifers. As infrastructure ages, the use of small treatment plants may become instrumental in reducing emerging contaminants that come from our septic tanks, in our drinking water and keeping our coastal waters free of sewage.

In broadband, we are constantly evolving our network as speed requirements of residential and business customers continue to grow. We have recently modified our residential service to allow new customers the opportunity to purchase a 2.5 Gbps broadband service. Customers on the legacy system can purchase a 1 Gbps service, and we will begin transitioning those customers to new infrastructure as time and funding allow. We have also upgraded our online interface for customers, providing residents with tools to estimate connection costs, sign up for service, and even pay connection fees online. Our online marketplace also allows customers to compare services and pricing from multiple retail service providers.

Public utilities often balance affordability with infrastructure investment. How do you approach that balance while remaining fiscally responsible?

The KPUD Board of Commissioners, who are elected, is very focused on making sure the utility is not only fiscally sound, but also that customers are not overly burdened by capital projects. To do this, we balance the use of long-term bonds with rate increases. In my first year as general manager, we modified our rate structure so that the base water rate covers a higher percentage of operating costs. This ensures a steady revenue stream and supports KPUD's ability to encourage responsible resource use.

Over the past few years, we have had to make difficult decisions to raise rates to maintain services amid dramatic increases



Kitsap Public Utility District crews install infrastructure to support county growth and reliability.

in costs. For capital projects, we have been very successful in accessing grant funding. However, opportunities to qualify for future funding are changing, as funding priorities shift toward distressed communities, which doesn't apply to most of Kitsap County. We will continue to be creative and pursue grant funding where available to reduce the burden on ratepayers.

Sustainability and resilience are growing priorities. How is Kitsap PUD planning for climate impacts and long-term system reliability?

As the water resource manager for the whole county, we are focused on monitoring rainfall, streamflows, and groundwater sources to track changes we are seeing as a result of climate change. All of our groundwater is recharged by rainfall, so we actively engage with climate change models to understand what is being predicted for our area. At this time, the models show little change in the total amount of rainfall; however, that rainfall is expected to occur in larger amounts over shorter periods of time, resulting in bigger storms and less drizzle. This could be beneficial for aquifer recharge if the soil can absorb the water, rather than it becoming excessive runoff.

To ensure that we can provide a reliable water supply, we look at the county as a whole and have built regional infrastructure to move water from areas of abundance to areas with less water. This currently allows us to move water from Seabeck to North Kitsap and the systems along the way, giving us alternative sources to serve customers in the event of a catastrophic failure of any single source. We have completed all phases of this infrastructure up through Phase 8 and are currently designing additional phases. Future phases include Suquamish, Bainbridge Island, and beyond. We have been tasked by Kitsap County to manage

water resources as regional assets, and this regional infrastructure supports us in fulfilling that responsibility.

Partnerships are critical in public service. How does Kitsap PUD collaborate with local governments, tribes, and private-sector partners?

KPUD has strategic goals focused on engaging with other agencies that serve our community. Often, each agency provides a service that can be exchanged, reducing overall costs and while maintaining high-quality services.

One example is our work with local fire districts. Some rural fire stations are located where KPUD needed to house telecom distribution nodes. We were able to exchange broadband services for space and power to house these nodes, eliminating recurring utility costs for both the fire district and KPUD. We have also partnered with Kitsap Regional Library supplement community services. We have worked together to provide digital equity services, such as computer classes, in exchange for broadband connectivity.

On the water side, we partner with Silverdale Water, City of Poulsbo, City of Bremerton, and City of Bainbridge Island on a variety of water issues. Bremerton, Silverdale and KPUD are working together on a mitigation strategy to access new water rights to ensure long-term water availability for residents. This partnership helps reduce operational costs while mitigating streamflow impacts. Poulsbo and Silverdale share resources, wells and storage to better serve our residents.

At the request of the community, we recently acquired the sewer and wastewater treatment plant previously owned and operated by Kitsap County Sewer District No. 7 (often referred to as Fort Ward Sewer). Through this acquisition, we have expanded our partnership with the City of Bainbridge Island by treating sewage for nearly 400 residents who are connected to the city's sewer collection system. This has increased opportunities we have to partner with the city to respond to emergency situations and expanded services for residents on the south end of the island. This is similar to the agreements we have with the county to exchange services and support sewer operations. By partnering with other agencies, we share resources and provide exceptional services to our residents with reduced costs.

Beyond public agencies, we partner with cellular companies by allowing antennas to be attached to water tanks to improve coverage for residents. We work with the Navy, PSNS, Olympic College, and WWU to ensure students have access to infrastructure that supports training, including providing high-speed connection between PSNS and Olympic College to allow for transfer of files for the apprenticeship programs.

For broadband, we partner with retail service providers to create a strong marketplace where consumers have choice. This has led to the growth of multiple new companies that are focused on serving residential and business customers throughout Kitsap County.

Workforce development is a challenge across many industries. How is Kitsap PUD attracting, training, and retaining skilled employees?

We take a dual-pronged approach to work force development. First, the KPUD Board looks at the broader Western Washington labor market when setting wages. We know we are competing with areas that are easy to commute to, including the Everett-to-Tacoma corridor and the Olympic Peninsula. Offering competitive wages is key to attracting and retaining quality staff.

The second approach we take is offering internal training. We regularly hire individuals that started as seasonal staff, and we provide on-the-job training. We value creating opportunities for growth within KPUD.

We do anticipate challenges in our telecom department as the nation continues to experience a workforce shortage. There are efforts at a state and national level to bolster the telecom workforce. While some initiatives have slowed due to administration changes, programs like the Tribal Broadband Bootcamp, Fiber Broadband Association certifications, and other training organizations remain active and will hopefully continue to train new workers.

What should local business owners understand about how public utilities influence economic stability and growth in Kitsap County?

One of the most important things to know about public utilities is that your money stays in the county. We hire your neighbors, keeping high-paying reliable jobs in Kitsap County. We hire local contractors to do work,

and our governance comes from elected officials, not a remote office in Colorado, Missouri, or Kirkland. KPUD Commissioners are Kitsap County residents, elected by the community, who share local values, and live in the areas that are impacted by their decisions.

We are not-for-profit utility, which means we reinvest in infrastructure instead of paying shareholders. By not having to pay shareholders, we are able to keep rates lower and invest directly in infrastructure which leads to long-term reliability. We are regularly working with small water systems that are privately owned and operated, where owners invested only what was necessary to keep the system running. When we step in, we frequently encounter problems caused by deferred maintenance and, in some cases, negligence.

You also have a direct voice in what we do. We are governed by a three-member elected commission that sets policy. Our meetings are open to the public, held on the 2nd and 4th Tuesday of the month, and we welcome input. We are here to serve, and our staff take pride in doing that well.

Economically, utility rates are reinvested back into our community. Public utilities don't relocate. Serving the community that we live in is what motivates many KPUD employees. Utilities are a stable industry. The economy can go up and down, but we still need access to power, water, sewer and internet services.

Looking ahead, what major projects or initiatives are you most excited about over the next few years?

I will respond to this for each utility and for KPUD as a whole.

For water, we continue to consolidate small water systems. As regulatory requirements increase, we can provide economies of scale that ensure reliable, high-quality water for our residents. We have four projects over the next two years that will support small systems by either transitioning off of their current sources or treating water to remove emerging contaminants which can be cost prohibitive for a small community on its own. In these specific projects, the manganese levels are higher than what the EPA considers healthy. While manganese is a secondary contaminant in Washington State and removal is not required, it is the right step for the community.

For the wastewater/sewer utility, we have recently acquired the Fort Ward Water Reclamation Facility. As the name suggests, the facility provides the opportunity to reclaim water and create an additional source for the south end of Bainbridge Island. This will require a significant investment and further study, but it is the first step in having an alternative source beyond rainfall to recharge the aquifer. Even more exciting, is the opportunity to build small-scale treatment systems that can help protect Puget Sound. In Kitsap County, we have over 250 miles of coastline, and many waterfront homes relying on aging septic systems. With most of these homes being rural, where sewer connections are not feasible, small-scale membrane treatment plants could significantly reduce contaminants entering the Sound.

For broadband, our next major step is the Broadband, Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) program. We have been preliminarily awarded nearly \$15 million in federal funding, \$5 million from the state, and will bond for the remaining funds to build broadband infrastructure in the most unserved rural areas of the county.

For KPUD overall, we have outgrown our facilities and are conducting a facilities assessment to determine what we will need over the next 20 to 40 years. We are investing in foundational internal system upgrades that will improve payment options, communication with customers, budgeting, asset and inventory management, and more. Although these types of software implementations are challenging, they ultimately make us more efficient and responsive. I keep looking to the future and know we will be better and faster, that is why it excites me. Also, it is time for an update of our strategic plan. This year we will dive into what we want to accomplish over the next five years. Strategic planning is always energizing.

Now with that said, there are also challenges. We have limited staff and many large projects all hitting at the same time.



Executive Q & A

Coordination with other utilities, such as PSE, has been challenging, time-consuming, and costly. Local jurisdictions are also facing budget constraints, and we are seeing permitting costs increase dramatically. As those costs and timelines increase, it makes meeting our goals more difficult.

Another challenge we all are facing is increasing costs in labor and materials. Some of our projects are coming in over the original estimates. It takes years to design, study, and permit a project, and we typically factor a 3-4% increase in costs over that time. In one example, we saw the costs of concrete construction increase by 250% over two years. While this is extreme, it highlights the risks we have to manage.

What leadership lessons have you learned managing a public utility that operates at the intersection of government, business, and community needs?

We have the ability to make a real difference in our communities. Government agencies



Employees of Kitsap Public Utility District gather for a staff photo.

can have a "yes" mentality. Since I have been at KPUD, we have done some creative things driven by our communities. With that said, we do have limitations. We operate under strict rules designed to prevent fraud, and those can sometimes create challenges. At KPUD we like to say "Yes, and." That "and" can mean it will take time, or it will take a funding source. Our staff are empowered to say yes, and that is a part of our culture. Staff work hard to find a solution. Some of our biggest successes were driven by thinking outside of the box, partnering with other public agencies, and being prepared to act when opportunities arise. There's often a perception that public agencies exist to say

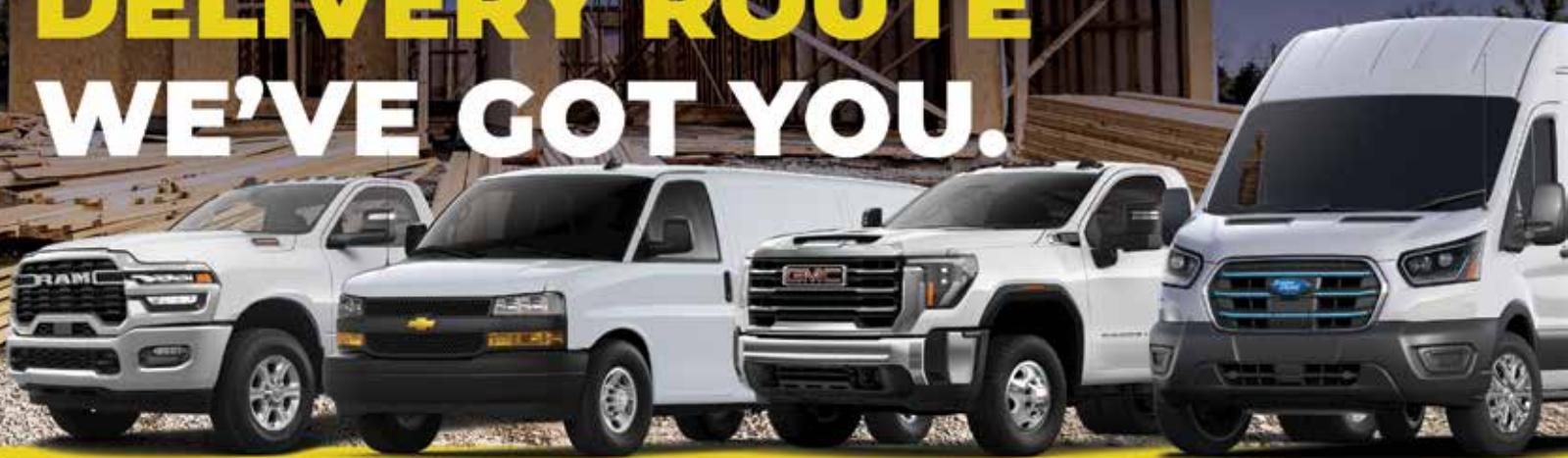
no. We strive to be different. We are funded by the community, and we are here to serve the community.

Who or what inspires you?

Our staff. I am impressed everyday by what they accomplish, their creativity, and their willingness to go above and beyond for the community. We hear regularly from customers and community members giving kudos to staff. I love getting those notes. As we grow, it becomes harder for me to engage with all staff individually, but I am proud to see that even without daily interaction, our staff continue to live our core values. ■

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Personal Development

When Pain Is the Message, Not the Problem

By Dan Weedin | Consultant, Coach, and Head Dog Walker

Pain sucks. And pain has a funny way of demanding your attention, especially when it shows up uninvited and refuses to leave.

As I write this column, my left knee hurts. Not a writhing-on-the-floor kind of pain, but that stupid, dull ache that comes from inflammation. You might say it's "top of mind," which makes it an easy topic to write about.

There's nothing structurally wrong with my knee. It's inflammation under the patella, and it's a bit pissed off right now. Here's the backstory.

I wanted to increase my cardio beyond walking the dog and the golf course. Years ago, interval running (45 seconds running, one minute walking) was my go-to until I realized it aggravated my hip. Every time I went in for my bi-monthly chiropractic appointment with Dr. Tom Lamar at Anchor Chiropractic, my hip would be barking and need adjustment.

So, I stopped running. And the hip stopped barking.

I never found a true replacement (I don't enjoy stationary bikes), so I turned to my pal ChatGPT to see what I could do to reduce strain on my hip. Along with some

exercises, one suggestion stood out: shorten my stride. A longer stride might be the real culprit.

I restarted interval running with this new plan. After two attempts, my hips stayed quiet, but my knee did not. The unintended consequence of fixing one issue was inflammation somewhere else.

Dr. Lamar adjusted my knee and gave me exercises and guidance to reduce inflammation and strengthen the area. And from this experience, I took away three lessons worth sharing for business and for life.

First: AI isn't the problem. It's part of the solution, if you use it properly.

The information about reducing hip issues while running was solid. Since I'd never had knee problems before, how would it know something else was brewing?

Before seeing Dr. Lamar, I used AI again, this time through the lens of an orthopedic expert, to better understand what might be happening. I sent the full transcript to him in advance of our already scheduled visit. He found it useful and said it made our time together more efficient.

Too many people in business don't trust AI. Many are quietly fearful of it. Used correctly, AI is an exceptional tool, especially

when paired with human intelligence. Experts like Dr. Lamar provide the real diagnosis and judgment. AI simply helps us ask better questions.

The Lesson: Ignoring AI doesn't reduce risk. Using it wisely does.

Second: I was the problem—because I stopped listening.

The pain showed up after the first run. It wasn't severe, but it was there, enough that I took two weeks off. When I tried again, the pain returned within minutes.

What should I have done? Stop. Turn around. Go home.

What did I do instead? I kept running.

How often do we do that in life? Ignore our instincts. Push through. Prove something, usually to ourselves. Experience and expertise give us those gut checks for a reason. When we stop listening, mistakes tend to follow.

Trusting ourselves—and listening—usually leads to a better path.

The Lesson: Whether in business or life, ignoring early signals almost always makes the problem more expensive later.

Third: Sometimes the "problem" is just a symptom. You must find the real one.

Running shouldn't be an issue for my hips or knees. I'm in good shape, I wear the right shoes, and my plan is sound. Here's what Dr. Lamar uncovered:

The patella is tied to the quad muscle. If the quad isn't properly strengthened, the sequencing breaks down. His concern wasn't my knee; it was my quad. The real work now is strengthening the weak link so the entire system can function properly.

In risk management, we often use the concept of the *Five Whys* to uncover root causes. Ask "why" enough times (five usually does it) and you'll find the real issue.

Many problems in life are the same. What we experience as pain—physical, financial, or emotional—is often just a symptom. Only through honest self-reflection, vulnerability, and candor do we uncover what's really going on.

The Lesson: Ask "why" one more time than feels comfortable. That's usually where the real answer lives.

Your Bottom Line: Pain isn't punishment. It's feedback. The sooner we listen instead of pushing through, the sooner we stop treating symptoms and start fixing what actually matters. ■



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Friends and Neighbors Continue Brewing Cheer in Kingston!

Last fall, new owners took over Downpour Brewing in Kingston, located right along State Highway 104. Luckily for Kingston, the new owners are eager to continue to build on the strong community and events that were taking place, such as the open mic night on Thursdays and frequently partnering with food trucks! New owners Rob and Kathi Johnson moved to Kingston in 1998 and literally got into brewing because of good neighbors. "There was a nice family living next door with children the same age as ours. We all quickly became good friends. Each family was having a 4th of July party that year at our homes with friends and family. That was the day that Norm came down to the fence and offered everyone some of his home brew. We held our mugs over the fence and

he gladly filled them for us. His beer was excellent."

Rob bought his own equipment in 2008 and started brewing beer. Brewing with his neighbor is where the dream started to own his own brewery. When the opportunity came up in fall of 2025 to take over Downpour, that dream became a reality! The new team focused on getting additional beers into production last fall and now has 7 original beers on tap in addition to guest offerings, guest cider on draft and NA options available as well. The brewery is dog friendly and kid-friendly with an activity corner set up. Stop by 7 days a week and you may just leave with some new friends! Check their upcoming special events on their Instagram @fanbrewing or website: friendsandneighborsbrewing.com ■



News from board

While we are sad to see Kingston's holiday lights come to an end (helped pack up for year on 1/24), we are focused on community building with our new and returning members! Our 2/5 lunch will focus on leveraging AI for small businesses and we're excited to learn and socialize at Pickleball Kingdom on 2/17. Check kingstonchamber.com/events for all the chamber and community events happening this spring! We want to specifically thank our recently renewed members: Nordic Properties and Insulation, Fairbank Construction Company, Aviator Coffee, Beyond Thinking, SJ Graphics, and Greater Hansville Community Center with a special shout out to our renewing Patron member: The Latitude 48 Group-Ameriprise Financial. Thank you for making our work possible!

Welcome New Members

- ECM Homes
- North Kitsap Schools Foundation
- Supreme Apparel
- The Great Outdoors
- Bouquet

Real Estate

Kitsap County – Real Estate, Innovation & Technology

How Local Communities Are Redefining the Buying and Selling Experience

By Tom Earnest | Real Estate Broker / Realtor John L. Scott Real Estate

Across Kitsap County, technology and innovation are reshaping real estate in ways that directly impact how homes are bought and sold. From Bremerton's waterfront revitalization to Bainbridge Island's tech-connected luxury market, innovation has become a cornerstone of today's housing climate—driving smarter decisions, broader exposure, and more efficient transactions.

Here are the top 10 ways innovation and technology are influencing real estate across Bremerton, Silverdale, Poulsbo, and Bainbridge Island.

1. Data-Driven Pricing in Micro-Markets

Advanced analytics now allow pricing strategies to be tailored neighborhood by neighborhood.

In Bremerton, data tools help sellers respond to increased demand near the ferry terminal and naval facilities, while in Poulsbo, analytics capture seasonal demand shifts tied to tourism and second-home buyers.

2. Digital Marketing Elevates Waterfront & Urban Listings

Drone photography and cinematic video tours are especially powerful for Bainbridge Island waterfront homes and Bremerton's downtown condos. These tools attract buyers from Seattle and beyond, many of whom never step foot in a property until late in the process.

3. Virtual Tours Support Military & Relocation Buyers

With Naval Base Kitsap spanning Bremerton and Silverdale, virtual tours play a vital role for military families relocating on tight timelines. Buyers can confidently make narrow choices before arrival, creating

smoother, faster transactions.

4. Remote Work Drives Demand in Poulsbo & Bainbridge

Remote and hybrid work technology has increased demand for homes in Poulsbo's quiet neighborhoods and Bainbridge Island's wooded settings, where buyers seek home offices, privacy, and strong internet connectivity without sacrificing access to Seattle.

5. Smart Homes Stand Out in Competitive Areas

In Silverdale, newer developments featuring smart thermostats, EV chargers, and energy-efficient systems consistently outperform similar homes without tech upgrades. Buyers increasingly view these features as necessities, not extras.

6. Faster Transactions Through Digital Platforms

Electronic signatures, online disclosures, and secure transaction platforms have reduced closing timelines across Kitsap County. In high-demand markets like Bainbridge Island, speed and transparency often make the difference between winning or losing a home.

7. Broadband Access Shapes Buyer Decisions

Reliable high-speed internet has become a major value driver.

Neighborhoods in Silverdale and Poulsbo with upgraded broadband infrastructure see stronger buyer interest, while Bainbridge

Island's continued investment in connectivity supports its reputation as a tech-friendly island community.

8. Predictive Technology Highlights Emerging Areas

In Bremerton, predictive tools help buyers identify up-and-coming neighborhoods tied to waterfront redevelopment and infrastructure investment. These insights allow both buyers and sellers to act strategically rather than reactively.

9. Sustainability Technology Adds Long-Term Value

Solar readiness, heat pumps, and energy-efficient construction are increasingly important across the county. In environmentally conscious markets like Bainbridge Island and Poulsbo, sustainable technology often translates into stronger buyer demand and resale value.

10. Tech-Savvy Professionals Lead Local Markets

Successful real estate professionals across Bremerton, Silverdale, Poulsbo, and Bainbridge Island combine hyper-local knowledge with cutting-edge tools. Their ability to interpret data, market digitally, and manage transactions efficiently gives buyers and sellers a competitive edge in today's market.

Innovation as a Competitive Advantage

In a shifting economic climate, technology has become a stabilizing and empowering force in Kitsap County real estate.

It connects communities, enhances transparency, and allows buyers and sellers to move with confidence—whether they're navigating Bremerton's revitalization, Silverdale's growth, Poulsbo's charm, or Bainbridge Island's premium market. ■

Kitsap County's future isn't just being built—it's being intelligently designed.





Visit Kitsap

Tourism is often talked about as an amenity. In reality, it is economic infrastructure.

When done well, tourism supports local jobs, small businesses, tax revenue, downtown vitality, and long-term community investment. It strengthens the very conditions that make a place desirable to live, work, and build a business.

That level of impact does not happen by accident. It requires a professional, coordinated, and well-resourced Destination Marketing Organization (DMO).

A DMO's core job is simple to explain but complex to execute: **build awareness of a place, convert interest into overnight stays, and ensure the visitor economy grows in ways that benefit the entire community.** That means more than running ads or posting on social media. It means research, data analysis, long-term brand building, industry partnerships, destination development, content creation, media relations, group sales, and continuous measurement of results.

Just as important, modern DMOs do not only "market" destinations. They help develop them.

Destination development is the strategic work of identifying gaps in visitor experiences, infrastructure, and services — and helping communities align around solutions. That can include supporting year-round experiences, strengthening wayfinding and visitor information, improving accessibility, encouraging new lodging or attraction investment, supporting event growth, and ensuring visitor experiences reflect local culture and community values.

Without this function, destinations become reactive instead of intentional.

Today, Kitsap's tourism ecosystem is filled with passionate partners: cities, chambers, visitor centers, event organizers, tribes, ports, nonprofits, and businesses. Each does important work. But without a

Why Kitsap County Needs a Strong Destination Marketing Organization, Now More Than Ever

unified regional strategy, efforts can become fragmented, duplicative, and harder to sustain.

Fragmentation creates three major risks:

- Diluted Market Presence:** Travelers do not think in city boundaries. They think in experiences and trip clusters. Competing or disconnected messaging weakens Kitsap's ability to stand out in a crowded travel marketplace.
- Inefficient Use of Public Funds:** Multiple small, uncoordinated campaigns cost more and deliver less impact than a single, data-informed regional approach.
- Missed Economic Opportunity:** Without consistent promotion and product development, Kitsap leaves overnight stays, visitor spending, and future investment on the table.

This is why Kitsap County, and our cities: Bainbridge Island, Bremerton, Port Orchard, and Poulsbo's 2026 lodging tax investments

in destination marketing and management matter.

A strong, countywide DMO provides:

- One regional brand and voice
- One data-driven strategy
- One set of performance benchmarks
- Coordinated city and partner marketing
- A long-term roadmap for destination development

The goal is not to replace local identity. It is to elevate it — under a shared framework that makes every community more competitive.

Tourism is not a side project. It is a renewable economic engine. Kitsap County's and our cities' opportunity is clear: move from fractured efforts to a unified system that builds demand, strengthens communities, and positions Kitsap as a premier place to visit — and as a place worth investing in. That work starts with a strong DMO at the center of the ecosystem. ■



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