

Colleen McAleer's remarks for the 2025 Clallam County EDC Gala

March 14, 2025

Thank you everyone for joining us tonight and thank you to the awesome EDC team that put this event together.

As I look around, I know we have people that have joined us from the business world, the government sector and the non-profit sector. Some of you are retired and some are of working age, some are Democrats and others are Republicans. But there is one thing that every person in this room has in common. We all really care about our communities, and we want to see all of our neighbors thrive.

I'm looking forward to hearing Jordan Babineau speak about "Pivot to Win". It's a perfect theme because we need to do just that, and your Clallam EDC has been doing that as well.

We must pivot because our current economic trend is a dangerous one.

30 years ago, Clallam's wages were 85% of the state's average, but today they are down to only 60% of the states. This is not a trend we can allow to continue. If we do, where will we be in 10 years?

Your EDC recognizes that Every Job and Every Business is important, but if we continue to expand only those private sectors that pay below the average wage, we will be an even poorer county in 10 years. We must pivot.

Today more than a third of our jobs are in the healthcare field and while those jobs pay well, we all know our communities are more reliant on Medicare and Medicaid reimbursements than nearly any other. If you watch the news, you know that Medicaid and reimbursement rates may be reduced by the new administration. These two factors create an enormous amount of risk for the healthcare industry.

I've been doing this type of work for nearly 20 years in one way or another. And there are a couple things that have become very clear - I've learned we cannot rely on outside entities to improve our economy. Secondly, we must rely on leveraging our existing unique assets to recruit high wage businesses, expand our existing businesses and start new ones.

The strategy that the EDC has pursued is focused on industry sectors and businesses that pay more than \$28/hr plus benefits. That's what's needed to afford rent and just get by in Clallam County today.

From housing unaffordability to substance abuse - a high wage jobs either helps solve those issue or provides hope and a pathway to a future for those that are struggling. It means more tax revenue for infrastructure and beautification projects, more funding for schools and more funding for our critical charitable organizations.

We are entering into a new period where federal and state funding will no longer be supporting our safety net at the level that we've become accustomed to. We've got to rely on ourselves and our community leaders to get focused on solving our economic challenges.

I have a personal goal to see Clallam County no longer be categorized as Economically Distressed before I retire. I don't want to still be working into my 80's!

I have an ask of everyone here tonight, especially our elected officials. Let's stop being so reactive and let's lead our own economic destiny. Let's affect change at the root causes and not solely react to the problems that a lack of a good income creates. To do that though we need to change some things.

First, we need to make improving our economy everyone's #1 priority. If that is not part of your local government's strategic plan it needs to be.

Second, our region's leaders to get more involved and work with us to establish a long-term coordinated plan to focus on the industry sectors and businesses that pay their employees greater than \$28/hour.

Third, we need to set the table so those sectors and employers will have an easy time to expand or enter into our community. Just as the Cities have done for reducing barriers for housing, I'd like to see us follow Governor Ferguson's example but apply it to businesses – let's review all regulations that impact business permitting and construction and identify any provision that can be streamlined, deferred or eliminated.

If we do these things and become known for having the welcome mat out, both inside the county and out, we will be able to expand our economy in those private sectors (manufacturing, maritime and forest products) where we have inherent advantages and that pay above the average wage.

I wanted to take this opportunity to make this important ask of you. We live in a gorgeous place where people will continue to move without significant climate affects and importantly, we have strong leadership. I hope you will take this message to others.

There is also a lot to celebrate – we've finally passed school bonds in PA & Sequim, Peninsula College has nearly doubled their enrollment since Dr. Ames took over, our communities came together and formed an important cohesive strategy around Recompete and won \$35Million and the EDC won the \$5M for the Clallam Forest Products Innovation Program and there are countless organizations putting funding to work to address our communities challenges.

Thank you for listening and I appreciate you being here. Remember we can and must Pivot to Win. Thank you.