



7 FACTSHEET

WHIDBEY'S WATER

Governance Options Whidbey Island Water Management (2)

Here's a **clear, decision-ready comparison** of the three governance pathways being evaluated. It's written for Whidbey Island Water System Association (WIWSA) members, County staff, and water-system commissioners — neutral, factual, and easy to scan. It shows the tradeoffs without pushing any particular direction.

****Side-by-Side Comparison:**

Status Quo vs. Shared Services Model vs. Whidbey Water PUD**

1. Summary Table

Dimension	Status Quo	Shared Services Model	Whidbey Water PUD
Governance Structure	Dozens of independent systems; no island-wide authority	Voluntary collaboration; WIWSA or a new coordinating body provides services	Single public utility district with elected commissioners
Local Control	Highest — each system fully independent	High — systems choose which services to share	Variable — systems can join voluntarily, but full integration reduces local autonomy
Operator Workforce	Severe shortages; each system on its own	Shared operator pool; coordinated staffing	Full professional operator workforce with 24/7 coverage
Technical Capacity	Uneven; depends on each system	Centralized technical support; shared expertise	Full engineering, planning, and compliance staff
Infrastructure Funding	Very limited for small systems	Some shared grant writing and planning	Access to bonds, state/federal funds, and large-scale capital financing
Regulatory Compliance	High burden on small systems	Centralized compliance support	Full compliance department; reduced risk

Dimension	Status Quo	Shared Services Model	Whidbey Water PUD
Emergency Response	Fragmented; inconsistent	Coordinated mutual aid	Island-wide emergency response system
Cost Efficiency	Lowest — duplication everywhere	Moderate — shared efficiencies	Highest — economies of scale
Aquifer-Scale Planning	None	Partial — shared data and planning	Full aquifer-scale planning and management
Political Feasibility	Easiest (status quo)	High — low threat, voluntary	Hardest — requires public vote and broad support

2. Option Profiles

A. STATUS QUO

“Everyone stays independent.”

Strengths

- Maximum local control
- No structural change
- Familiar and predictable
- No political risk

Weaknesses

- Operator shortages persist
- Aging infrastructure remains unfunded
- Fragmented planning
- High compliance burden on small systems
- No island-wide emergency coordination
- No unified water budget
- Vulnerable to climate and contamination shocks

Best For

Communities that prioritize independence over resilience.

B. SHARED SERVICES MODEL

“We collaborate without changing governance.”

This could be housed in WIWSA or a new coordinating entity.

Strengths

- Maintains local control
- Voluntary participation
- Shared operator pool
- Shared technical services (sampling, reporting, GIS, asset management)
- Better emergency coordination
- Lower political risk
- Faster to implement
- Supports small systems without forcing consolidation

Weaknesses

- Limited authority — cannot enforce standards or planning
- Funding still fragmented
- Participation uneven
- Cannot issue bonds or acquire systems
- Does not fully solve operator shortage
- Relies on goodwill, not mandate

Best For

Communities wanting improved resilience without structural change.

C. WHIDBEY WATER PUD

“One public utility district providing island-wide water services and planning.”

Strengths

- Full professional operator workforce
- 24/7 emergency response

- Engineering, compliance, and planning staff
- Ability to issue bonds and secure major funding
- Economies of scale
- Unified water budget and aquifer-scale management
- Strong support for small systems (voluntary integration or contracted services)
- Long-term resilience and capital planning

Weaknesses

- Requires public vote
- Perceived threat to local control
- Politically sensitive
- Complex transition
- Requires strong coalition and readiness
- Not all systems may want to join

Best For

Communities needing long-term, island-wide resilience and professionalized water management.

3. Which Option Solves Which Problems?

Problem	Status Quo	Shared Services	PUD
Operator shortage	✗	⚠ Partial	✓ Full solution
Aging infrastructure	✗	⚠ Some help	✓ Strong solution
Compliance burden	✗	✓ Shared support	✓ Full compliance team
Emergency response	✗	✓ Coordinated	✓ Island-wide
Aquifer-scale planning	✗	⚠ Partial	✓ Full
Funding access	✗	⚠ Some	✓ Strong
Local control	✓	✓ High	⚠ Reduced if fully integrated
Political feasibility	✓	✓	⚠ Hardest

4. Bottom Line

Status Quo

Maintains independence but leaves systems vulnerable.

Shared Services Model

A practical, low-risk step that strengthens systems without changing governance.

Whidbey Water PUD

A long-term structural solution that provides the strongest support for small and medium systems — but requires readiness, trust, and a public vote.
