

**Working together essential to protecting Lake Whatcom**  
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**By Bellingham Mayor Dan Pike**

For future generations to look back favorably on how we manage our affairs one thing is absolutely clear: our success will be based largely on how community leaders worked together to solve problems. Nowhere is this need for cooperation more clear than in protecting the Lake Whatcom Reservoir.

We face many critical, long-term decisions on how to protect the lake, including the attitude and means with which community leaders and government agencies work together to manage our drinking water resources.

Recent news has highlighted our efforts to determine how the city and the Lake Whatcom Water and Sewer District will work together, today and in the future. Our communities have a unique opportunity to decide whether to merge our services, and we must make that decision before the district makes further financial investments. Financial and legal analysis is favorable: merging could result in significant cost savings and operating efficiencies.

Most importantly, a merger may provide further opportunities to protect the Lake Whatcom Reservoir.

**A history of agreement**

The city and the district are both in the business of providing water and sewer service. Both rely on the Lake Whatcom Reservoir as the primary source of drinking water, and are subject to stringent state and federal regulations designed to protect public health and the environment. Both use pumps and pipes to deliver drinking water to their customers, and endeavor to serve those customers in the best way possible for the lowest possible price.

The city and the district are due to renegotiate their agreements for water and sewer services, which date back more than 30 years. For years people have suggested that the city and the district merge, and our agencies agreed to evaluate the merger question as part of renegotiating these long-standing agreements. This evaluation includes the financial and legal analysis currently underway.

The timing is important because the merger issue must be answered before the district moves forward constructing a new administration building. If the district and the city merge, the city does not want the new building or the debt to pay for it. The district needs the building if there is no merger, and officials wish to begin its construction now, during the time of year construction is allowed in the watershed. District officials also want to ensure that their customers are properly represented, since they live outside the city.

### **Merger improves financial picture**

The city serves about 45,000 water and sewer accounts; the district serves about 7,200. The district's system is more expensive to operate, as it has more pump stations and far fewer ratepayers to share the costs. So a significant benefit of merging is financial.

Preliminary analysis shows a merger could result in a 20 percent savings for district ratepayers without raising rates for city customers. This does not include the savings of millions of dollars for district ratepayers in not having to bond for a new building.

A combined system serving about 52,000 accounts would change the overall financial picture, benefitting everyone. The combined utilities would have an improved financial picture, greater purchasing power, access to additional resources and operating efficiencies.

### **Merger protects Lake Whatcom**

Equally important is the possibility of greater lake protection. The combined utility described above, with increased financial and managerial capacity, would improve the ability to fix leaking pipes, reducing sewer overflows that harm Lake Whatcom.

A merger also may improve the city's ability to slow development in the watershed. While legal analysis shows the city has the same duty to serve customers as the district, we have less of a financial incentive to add new customers. The financial position of the city also provides options the district doesn't have. For example, the city has purchased more than 1,200 acres in the Lake Whatcom watershed, preventing hundreds of homes from being built.

These benefits accrue to everyone who relies on the Lake Whatcom Reservoir for financial, environmental, public and personal health.

A merger may result in a powerful partnership and could be key to protecting our drinking water reservoir. I am committed to addressing the community's questions, continuing negotiations, and making this partnership a reality.