

### 1. INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1. PURPOSE OF THE SUB-AREA PLAN

This document provides a policy framework for managing growth and development in Bellingham's Old Town district, and for preserving and enhancing its natural and historical resources. The Plan's purpose is to guide development toward thoughtful redevelopment that achieves the vision for Old Town. It will be used to help reclaim and revitalize this historic and underutilized area of Bellingham's City



Center.

The goals and policies within this document are applicable to only those areas within the Old Town Boundary, see Old Town Sub-Area Plan map on Page 6. While important, implementing policies and strategies affecting adjacent neighborhoods would require neighborhood plan amendments.

#### 1.2. RELATIONSHIP TO THE 2005 COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

The City of Bellingham Comprehensive Plan was updated in 2005. The Plan calls for the creation of urban villages, or centers to accommodate the City's anticipated growth. Urban centers are to provide a pleasant living, shopping and working environment; pedestrian accessibility; adequate well-located open spaces; attractive, well-connected street systems; and a balance of retail, office, residential and public uses (FLU-18).

The Comprehensive Plan's Framework Urban Center Policies call for urban centers to:

- Have an appropriate mix of commercial, service and residential uses,
- Maintain the character and livability of adjacent residential neighborhoods,
- Serve as a neighborhood focal point,
- Attract and encourage non-motorized trips,

- Include a central park, plaza village green or other public space, and
- Minimize the impacts of parking.

The Comprehensive Plan directs that Master plans be developed for each of the proposed urban centers (Policy FLU-18). Each plan must specify land uses and densities, street and utility layouts, lot arrangements, housing types, village square or plaza locations, streetscape amenities, the relationship of buildings to the street, parking structures or lots, protection of critical areas, pedestrian and bicycle facilities, and other items deemed necessary to ensure compatibility with

surrounding areas.

Old Town is identified in the Comprehensive Plan as a priority urban village and one that requires additional regulatory changes in order for

redevelopment to occur.

### 1.3. THE PLANNING PROCESS

#### 1.3.1 Related Planning Processes

Old Town has been the subject of several community plans for more than a decade. Those plans include the:

- Regional Urban Design Assistance Team (R/UDAT) report,



**Boundary** The Old Town Sub-Area Plan boundary follows Roeder Avenue at Bay Street north to G Street east to Bancroft, south to D Street, east following Maritime Heritage Park to Dupont Street, south to Prospect, south to Bay Street and west to Roeder .

- Whatcom Creek Waterfront Action Program (WCWAP),
- Downtown Development Workshop recommendations,
- City Center Master Plan (CCMP), and the
- Community Forum on Growth Management.

These planning efforts involved various forms of community input and involvement. Each process identified Old Town as an underutilized area and a vital link between the Central Business District, the waterfront and adjacent



residential neighborhoods. The Community Growth Forum Report recommended that Old Town be a priority 'urban village'. Preservation of neighborhood character, historic resources and public views have been

identified as priorities for the area.

### *1.3.2 Public Investment*

Since 1996, local business owners, many community organizations and the City of Bellingham have been working to implement WCWAP. Nearly \$8 million dollars in local, state and federal funds have been invested in Old Town over the last 10 years. Public improvements focused on improving amenities such as Maritime Heritage Park, streetscapes along Central and Holly, Holly Street Landfill cleanup and restoration of Whatcom Creek estuary. Minimal private sector investment has followed public investment to date. As with urban centers region-wide, markets for mixed use, urban infill, and redevelopment are maturing. Since 2004, property transactions within the Old Town area indicate a level of interest in redevelopment, yet the Neighborhood Plan is outdated for this area and does not reflect the new goal of establishing an urban village.

### *1.3.3 Old Town Planning Process*

The City hosted several community meetings in 2005 and 2007 to seek input about how Old Town should redevelop in the future. During these meetings the public identified Old Town's character-defining features, view corridors and vistas. They discussed preferred land uses, building heights and building designs. Several ideas generated from

these meetings were used to update the City Center Design Standards and Bellingham's Comprehensive Plan in 2006.

This Plan is the culmination of these public processes. Following this introduction, Old Town's rich natural and historic context is described followed by the public vision for Old Town in the future. Policies and implementation strategies for Old Town's Development Character, Circulation, Streetscape and Parking, and Parks and Plazas are then articulated in greater detail, providing specific guidance for new development.

## 14. CONTEXT

### 1.4.1 *Natural and Historic Setting*

Whatcom Creek has for centuries been the most attractive area for human presence on Bellingham Bay. Consequently, Old Town has a rich archaeological area in the city. Fresh water, shelter and abundant salmon attracted native peoples and the creek was a watering stop for early European exploring expeditions, sailors, whalers and fur traders.

In December of 1852, the creek attracted the area's first settlers intent on harnessing the falls to drive sawmill blades. Indian treaty wars, a gold rush and political boundary disputes all left

marks on the fledgling efforts to build a township around the mouth of Whatcom Creek.

Distinctly within the urban downtown Bellingham area, Old Town clings for definition to its natural setting. Its boundaries are for the most part determined by natural edges - edges between land and water and between uplands and lowlands. The district largely fits within a half bowl landform that rises from the course of Whatcom Creek on all sides except the west, where it is open to Bellingham Bay.

The "Old Town" of Whatcom was



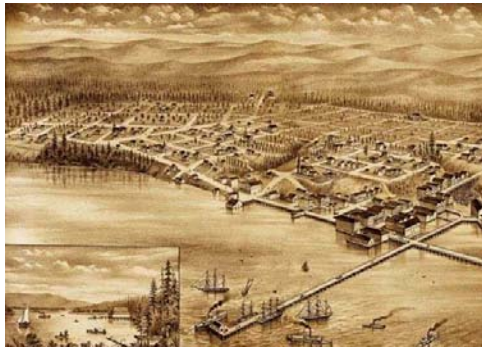
situated below the natural bluff on the north side of Whatcom Creek beginning in the 1850s. On top of the bluff a block houses were built as well as Captain George Pickett's house in 1856. This was a high point topographically for viewing incoming ocean going vessels.

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

Most of the early buildings were of wood construction with the majority erected during the Fraser River Gold Rush, including the brick 1858 T. G. Richards supply house that still is standing today. Once the Holly Street viaduct was constructed, Old Town expanded to include the buildings on the south side of

and helped to establish Old Town as the primary point of entry into the city. For decades the Colony Wharf, which ran from Whatcom Falls directly out along the creek channel to deep water, was the main entry portal into the city. The Colony Pier axis with Holly Street marked the historic centerpoint of Bellingham. The Holly Street crossing of Whatcom Creek is the perceived epicenter of Old Town.



Early in the twentieth century, the creek channel was dredged and a formal passenger terminal for ferry service was built on pilings at mid channel. The terminal, which became Citizen's Dock, faced onto Roeder Avenue where it was outside the arching viaduct of the busy Great Northern rail line. Later, the Great Northern Passenger Depot was built just north of Whatcom Creek. Together, the two passenger arrival points reinforced Old Town's role as Bellingham's front door. Visitors, immigrants, tourists and returning locals all fed the Holly Street corridor where one of the city's busiest streetcar lines operated.

the creek just before the border of the town of Sehome.

### ***Bellingham's Front Door***

The deeper water in the channel of Whatcom Creek accommodated the largest vessels visiting Bellingham Bay

### ***Early Years***

The street grid and building lot patterns of Old Town reflect its early years as a town built over mudflats on long piers reaching from the foot of the shoreline bluff to deep water. The heart of Old Town was burned in a fire in 1885, destroying 17 buildings. With the mudflats becoming buried under layers

of landfill, increasingly larger buildings were constructed, and the stilted character of streets and sidewalks gave way to graded rights of way and streetscapes that blended smoothly into the neighboring commercial and residential areas.

At the turn of the twentieth century, lower Holly Street just north of the Whatcom Creek Bridge hosted an opera house, several hotels, restaurants, saloons, markets and retail shops. Upper floors accommodated newcomers and waterfront workers. Along Astor and Bancroft streets between Holly Street and the bluff, smaller residential buildings and houses sat intermittently amid industrial yards and plank workshops. The northern banks of the creek were given over to water-dependent business mostly related to timber milling and wood products. Construction below the bluff was light framed lumber on shallow pilings built without stone or masonry foundations.

### ***Historic Buildings and View Points***

The bluff (along Prospect St) created an early platform for the city's most prominent public buildings, including City Hall (1892). The looming drama of formidable architectural landmarks built along the crest of the bluff was an impressive and memorable attribute of Old Town, particularly for people arriving by water or rail for the first time. Today, the topographical contrast continues to create important views and visual perspectives, particularly in regard to the landmark Old City Hall building.

### ***Character Shift***

As the automobile, surface roads and state highways took over as the most common system of transportation, Old Town faded as Bellingham's arrival point. By the mid 1920s, large areas were filled to extend the shoreline further into the bay on both sides of Whatcom Creek. Ambitious industrial facilities with large workforces began dominating the bay's shoreline and Old Town's character shifted to reflect its transitional role between the downtown's commercial district and the working waterfront.

By the late 1930s, the streetcar line had disappeared and Holly Street and Roeder Avenue became busy industrial



routes for both cars and heavy trucks. The wood frame architecture north of the creek deteriorated rapidly and the busy urban landscape thinned to just a few sturdy masonry buildings, such as the Great Northern Railroad Station. As the wood frame structures disappeared, so did the lot lines. Blocks were consolidated into open industrial yards and building sites for warehouses and simple steel frame industrial buildings.

### *1.4.2 Old Town Today*

Today, Old Town is bordered by Bellingham's downtown to the south, the Lettered Streets and Columbia neighborhoods to the east and north, and the waterfront and Bellingham Bay to the west.

Present densities within Old Town are low. Old Town today is interspersed with vacant land, large footprint industrial structures, parcels of public open space and a relatively low residential population. Little in the way of new uses, quality new construction or targeted adaptive reuse and preservation has occurred in Old Town compared to other areas in Bellingham.

Old Town has a number of existing attributes that make it a great urban village candidate:

- Existing street grid layout
- Variety of topography and land forms
- Historic structures and history

- Proximity and connection to Downtown, Waterfront and Lettered Streets and Columbia Neighborhoods
- Existing diverse uses
- Underdeveloped with large parcels under single ownership
- Existing parks and open space
- Served by public transit
- Proximity to schools and services
- Existing infrastructure and recreational areas
- Whatcom Creek

### *1.4.3 Redevelopment Potential*

All parcels in Old Town were evaluated for potential redevelopment, based upon physical characteristics of the lots, condition of existing structures, size of lot under single ownership and redevelopment interests of property owners.

Utilizing this analysis, it is estimated that between 860 and 1120 housing units, and up to 400,000 square feet of commercial space could be added by 2022.