
1. Achieving the Vision for “Everyone’s Neighborhood”

Refining the Vision of the City Center

The City Center Master Plan was inspired by a series of planning processes that occurred during the 1990s, culminating with the 1998 Downtown Development Workshops. This process involved many citizens who were excited about the redevelopment possibilities in the area termed, “everyone’s neighborhood”. Hundreds of ideas and recommendations were produced.

The workshops, along with earlier processes such as the 1992 “Visions for Bellingham” established that the long-term vision citizens have for Bellingham’s City Center can be expressed by the following goal statements :

- ***Bellingham will have an exciting, active and economically diverse City Center that enhances the quality of life for residents and visitors.***
- ***The City Center will be an attractive area, with a distinct character.***

In this vision, commercial buildings have a sense of relatedness, while also expressing their individual identities. Redeveloped and new buildings will encourage pedestrian activity by presenting store-

fronts and other visually interesting architectural features to the street.

New streetscape design elements include benches, banners, landscaped areas, wide sidewalks and paving treatments are all coordinated to establish a distinct identity.

- ***Bellingham Bay and Whatcom Creek provide the City Center with a unifying theme.***

These historically underutilized water resources are the jewels of Bellingham’s City Center. They will be the centerpieces of a revitalized City Center in Bellingham.

- ***Visitors to Bellingham will be able to easily find their way to and around the City Center.***

A coordinated and distinctive gateway and “wayfinding” sign system will be in place to aid residents and visitors getting to the City Center.

- ***Once in the City Center, drivers will find a number of strategically located parking facilities.***

Both short and long-term parking needs are met with a series of relatively small, attractively designed parking facilities.

- ***Complementing the vehicle circulation system will be an efficient, convenient, safe and affordable transit system.***

The Whatcom Transportation Authority (WTA) will become an increasing important component of successful City Center redevelopment efforts.

- ***Pedestrian and bicycle circulation routes link many of the features of this City Center vision.***

Visitors and residents will make their way throughout the area easily, with well-coordinated trails and walkways that serve as viable alternative transportation and commuting options as well as recreational amenities.

This plan, along with the Design Standards and Implementation Strategies documents, are intended to organize and prioritize ideas and recommendations developed over the years into a coordinated and complementary series of key strategies and actions. The strategies that follow are intended to help guide the public and private sectors, with involvement from the citizenry in achieving the vision described here.

Key Strategies

How will this vision be achieved? A dozen key strategies should be followed:

1. Develop the City Center as the heart of commercial, cultural and civic activities for the community.

The City Center area should continue to develop as a center of services, specialty retail, offices and community facilities with a strong, diverse housing component as well. Compatible industrial uses may also have a role. Overall, these activities should encourage pedestrian activity.

2. Guide the development of key projects such that the maximum public benefits will be realized as well as to leverage funds unavailable to the private sector.

Special site development concepts are presented for the Civic Center, the Morse Hardware property, and the Sashn-Door area, as well as a variety of other locations. Public sector involvement should be used in these situations to attract private investors as partners.

3. Expand the network of urban parks and open space in the City Center.

The City should develop a ring of parks framing the City Center. The parks should include lands for urban recreation activities and other sites that are reserved as natural places. All parks should be linked through a network of walkways and trails.



Downtown looking east from the Bellingham Towers. The triangular site in the foreground is a potential art park and plaza site.

Investment Strategies

Achieving the projects recommended in this Plan will require careful use of public and private funds. The following strategies should guide those investments:

- Extend the impact of public funds by joining in partnerships with other organizations and private developers.
- Coordinate private funding strategies to complement civic investment.
- Plan investments in phases such that cumulative benefits will be realized.

4. Develop a coordinated walkways and trails system.

A circulation system that accommodates pedestrians and bicyclists should include a continuous on and off-street network of lanes, paths and trails throughout the City Center with establish links to regional systems. This will help reduce demand for parking and also provide a recreational amenity as well.

New development should be planned to link with the existing walkway and trails system and should be designed with the special climatic conditions of Bellingham in mind.

5. Improve auto and transit access, circulation and parking.

The City Center street system should be evaluated to determine if changes are needed to better address established goals related to access, circulation, safety, streetscape design,



View of the City Center and Bellingham Bay.

parking and economic development.

A parking management system should maximize use of existing parking resources. A series of new, strategically located parking facilities should be developed in conjunction with other public and private uses.

6. Establish a distinct landscape design image for downtown Bellingham.

The City Center should express its identity as a livable, coastal setting. A consistent scheme of landscape and streetscape elements could be used to express this unified identity. This includes such items as a coordinated set of street furniture, lights, signs, and paving designs.

7. Clearly identify gateways into the City Center in conjunction with an overall public way-finding system.

Over the years, downtown planning processes have consistently noted that there are not adequate landmarks, signs or other identifying features leading to the City Center or the waterfront from the freeway or from other sections of the City.

To address this issue, entries or “gateways” to the City Center should be established with distinctive landscaping and signage so that entry points are clearly recognizable.

Also, a “wayfinding” system containing a series of signs and graphics is needed to help people find City Center destinations.

8. Establish a proactive program to encourage and build housing for the full range of income levels, either as stand-alone projects or as part of mixed use developments. Based on the experience of other cities across the U.S., the introduction of housing for

all income ranges is a critical component in successful downtown redevelopment efforts. Housing contributes to the overall health of downtowns by encouraging investment in new and older buildings, enlivening the streets and supporting downtown businesses. In order for housing to succeed in Bellingham's City Center, it is necessary to create an environment with a rich mix of uses and a sense of place. One such opportunity identified in this plan is the area along the south end of Railroad Avenue, known as the Morse Hardware site (see Chapter 10). This area near the farmers market presents a prime opportunity for redevelopment with housing projects, street-level retail, restaurants, parking and entertainment – exactly the kind of development that is critical to the success of redevelopment efforts in Bellingham's City Center.

9. Improve Whatcom Creek as a scenic and recreational corridor.

The character of Whatcom Creek, its pedestrian trail and the habitat along the edges should continue to be protected and enhanced where appropriate.

10. Improve public access to the waterfront.

The waterfront is the City Center's underused resource. It offers exciting opportunities for recreation, commerce and living in an environment that is unique between Seattle and Vancouver, B.C. This asset could be one of the city's greatest draws in the future.

11. Provide public facilities that will enhance livability.

The City should provide additional facilities to complement community functions, including developing a new library and meeting space. A Community/Youth Center and an enlarged Senior Center also should be developed and more space added to the Mount Baker Theater. New government office space should be located within the City Center, not in abutting neighborhoods. Outdoor plazas, public markets, recreational sites, and public art should be developed.

12. Promote a healthy and diverse economic environment in the City Center.

Coordinated with the City’s downtown market analysis, development should focus on projects that will promote a healthy economic climate. Also the City should work to recruit businesses, property owners and developers who will contribute to the economic vitality of the City Center.

13. Provide the leadership to implement the Plan.

The City should work with public and private sector groups to help lead the development and revitalization efforts for Bellingham’s City Center.

Implementing the recommendations in this plan may, in some cases, require the City to purchase or otherwise participate in the redevelopment of underutilized property to

gain access to grants or other funds not available to the private sector.

Illustrative Plan Summary

How might the City Center appear after implementation of the Plan? The map that follows illustrates its potential character by 2020.

- The park system includes Whatcom Creek, Maritime Heritage Park, a potential Civic Center Plaza between Lottie and Central Streets, a series of recommended “art parks” along Champion and a linear landscaped median on Railroad Avenue with parks at both ends. Any changes to Railroad Avenue should be evaluated against the need for additional off-street parking in the area.
- New cultural facilities could include a Northwest Discovery Center somewhere in Old Town, a new library, expanded Mt. Baker Theater and Whatcom Museum facilities, a Senior Center at Cornwall and Ohio, and a Community/Youth Center at the Municipal Court site.
- Streetscape improvements could include enhanced crosswalks, banners, kiosks and coordinated furniture.
- Existing buildings are renovated and adapted to new uses, including specialty retail, offices and housing.

- New mixed-use developments add retail, housing, work spaces and parking at Railroad and Holly, Morse Hardware site, Sash-n-Door area and Cornwall and Ohio Streets.

- Waterfront access is enhanced.
- Entry experiences into the City Center are enhanced with gateways and an improved wayfinding signage system.

These improvements, as well as others, are addressed in the chapters that follow.

PLACEHOLDER FOR CITY CENTER
ILLUSTRATIVE PLAN
8 1/2 X 11