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## 2. Land Use and Zoning

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### Policy:

“Downtown Bellingham should retain its role as the community’s center through preservation and increased use of its fine historic buildings. Professional offices, government services, cultural, art and entertainment facilities, support services, retail uses and higher density housing combine to create the complex mix that is “downtown.” Access to these features is supported by an integrated parking and alternative transportation system that is responsive to its users. New development adds to the existing building stock, complementing it in scale and quality. Public buildings set a standard of design quality that contributes positively to the community.”

*VISIONS FOR BELLINGHAM, 1992*

### Background

The Central Business District (CBD)/City Center is Bellingham’s core downtown neighborhood. Consistent with the goals of the 1995 Comprehensive Plan, it is important to the community that the area maintains its role as the dominant cultural, civic, financial, and service center of the community. Additionally, it should provide active retail, office, housing, service, commercial and recreational land uses.

This section of the Plan measures existing land use policies against existing conditions and emerging market trends. It also outlines related regulatory changes that might be needed to help implement the plan. It should be noted that the City Center Master Plan

extends beyond the adopted boundaries of the CBD Neighborhood Plan, but recommendations for interface areas do not contain actions involving regulatory revisions unless specifically noted.

### Existing Conditions and Land Use Patterns

The existing land use pattern of the CBD does indeed reflect the overall goals for the area as established in the Comprehensive Plan in that it includes the following general use types:

- Commercial (including: retail, personal services, business and professional offices, eating establishments, theater, parking facilities, etc.).
- Multifamily residential
- Institutional

- Public (including: governmental services, parks, open space and recreation)
- Industrial (including: light, heavy, marine and planned)

These diverse but complementary uses provide the backbone to a vital downtown area serving both the community at large as well as the adjacent neighborhoods.

### Central Waterfront Area

Bellingham’s central waterfront is one of the City Center’s most important assets. It offers opportunities for recreation, commerce and living in a unique environment. The waterfront will be the community’s signature area and its greatest drawing card in the future.

**The 1995 Bellingham Comprehensive Plan establishes several significant goals for the downtown:**

- **Bellingham should rely on distinctive neighborhoods, a vital downtown area and the community's respect for its natural setting to retain its unique identity in the 21st century.**
- **Downtown, including the Central Business District, Civic Center and Cultural District is the heart of the community as evidenced by new development in the form of major new office uses, higher density housing that is well-designed and reflects a variety of housing costs, and related goods and services to support those uses.**
- **Land uses that promote and allow public access to the waterfront should be encouraged.**
- **Increased housing density and infill exists in the downtown area...appropriate for small lots or higher density housing, reflecting a variety of housing costs.**

The future disposition of the Georgia Pacific facilities remains an issue of concern in planning for downtown Bellingham. Citizens recognize that, while these facilities represent an important element in the economy of the community, in past decades the waterfront has experienced a series of development cycles that may continue to evolve.

Recognizing that these circumstances present significant re-development opportunities, participants in the Downtown Development Workshop recommended production of a Georgia Pacific contingency re-development plan as a moderate to high priority item.

With the advent of the more specific development proposals contained in this City Center Master Plan, planning for this potential future event remains an essential task. Serious discussions among key community leaders, representatives of Georgia Pacific, and the public should move ahead soon, so that shorter-range development activities can be planned within the broader context of what might occur at the Georgia Pacific facilities. It is critical to the long-term interests of the community and the future of Bellingham's waterfront that an ongoing dialog be initiated between community representatives and Georgia Pacific.

## Issues and Opportunities

The character of the City Center area has changed partially due to economic and retailing conditions that reflect significant national trends.

Many emerging development trends blend favorably with existing and allowed uses in the downtown area. With the exception of single family residential, all general use types are evident in the CBD area at some level. Some residential uses (such as multifamily, mixed use and co-housing), while not as of yet a large portion of the overall City Center market, reflect emerging national trends. Residential uses in the downtown area are a potential growth area and, if well received, could continue to influence a broader mix of land uses (such as "live/work" opportunities).

For these reasons, the City Center Master Plan proposes that appropriate emerging market opportunities be promoted when they help to reinforce the mix of uses envisioned in this plan and in the Comprehensive Plan.

## Recommended Actions

Several recommendations intended to assure an appropriate balance of land uses consistent with emerging development trends and opportunities follow.

### 1. Promote residential uses.

Recent successes and new

market information indicate that a variety of uses are becoming more viable within the downtown area. The City should focus on increasing the amount of housing in the City Center itself as well as in areas that immediately abut it, because residents are a key to sustained economic vitality.

To date, new housing has been provided in the upper floors of existing buildings. This is an important part of a growing market and policies should be refined to encourage continuing adaptive reuse of buildings for residential uses.

In addition, however, markets are emerging that will support construction of new housing, particularly if it is targeted at special market segments such as students, seniors and young professionals. Such developments will be most successful when they also incorporate amenities and services such as parking that enhance these special living environments.

In general, sites that permit assembly of larger parcels, have convenient access to downtown services and have distinct features will be successful.

To assure the mix of uses desired, residential uses (including potential “live/work” opportunities) should be made a permitted use throughout the downtown as codes are updated.

## **2. Encourage mixed-use development.**

High quality mixed-use development that includes ground floor retail, a mix of housing types, offices and

entertainment is a key to the success of downtown. Several of the existing zoning districts within the City Center permit the types of mixes that market trends suggest are viable in the region.

To accommodate the objectives of encouraging a mix of uses in the downtown area, mixed uses also should be made a permitted use throughout the area as codes are updated.

## **3. Invest in civic facilities.**

Some of the most important investments that local government can make in the downtown are in civic operations. These include administrative offices and public service facilities. These operations house employees who can support businesses downtown and help to animate the street. Public service facilities, such as the library, also are activity generators that bring people downtown. Combined, these types of operations can be important in a revitalization strategy. They can represent millions of dollars in ongoing commitment to the area.

Civic operations must be strategically located and designed, however, in order to maximize the potential economic development benefits. For example, when a new library is constructed, it should be positioned so that it is conveniently accessible by pedestrians from the heart of downtown, in order to maximize spin-off business opportunities. Civic buildings or the new library also should be located such that government employee parking facilities can be designed to also accommo-

date shoppers and other downtown users.

In addition, other civic facilities that serve the general public should be located downtown when feasible.

To ensure that civic and governmental services continue to play a role in the economic vitality of the City Center, public uses (e.g., governmental services, open space, parks) should be permitted in the Civic Center, Old Town and Commercial Core Character Areas. This may require amendments to both the CBD and the Lettered Streets Neighborhood Plans.

## **4. Review existing parking standards for residential and mixed-use projects.**

As a first step in encouraging more residential and mixed-use projects within the CBD area, existing parking standards should be reexamined to ensure that they are consistent with the goals and policies of this plan. The revised parking standards should be coordinated with the proposed parking management system/facilities recommendations of this plan, and any other follow-up implementation efforts.

## **5. Consider amending the zoning area boundaries of the CBD neighborhood to be consistent with City Center Master Plan Character Areas.**

Many of the proposed mixes of land uses contained within the City Center Master Plan planning area build upon the existing conditions of the downtown. To facilitate imple-

Implementation of the Plan and future projects, the City should consider amending the CBD's zoning area boundaries and allowed uses to reflect the boundaries of this plan's Character Areas.

**6. Adopt and administer design standards for the City Center area.**

In response to the Downtown Development Workshop recommendations, the City has developed design standards as a supplement to this City Center Master Plan. These design standards are consistent with the goals of the Comprehensive Plan and are intended to protect capital and public investments made in the downtown area for existing structures and proposed new infill development. These standards should be adopted as a supplement to the existing development standards included within each general use type in Title 20 of the Municipal Code.

The design review process is explained in the City Center Design Standards handbook

**7. Establish a height review procedure for residential and mixed-use projects.**

To encourage the densities necessary to stimulate more residential and mixed-use projects within the City Center, a height review process should be established for residential and mixed-use projects that allows for structures higher than 35 feet. This height review process should be linked to the proposed design review system. Buildings proposed to

exceed 35 feet, for example, could do so if they contain housing and if they are found to be compatible with the proposed design standards.

**8. Integrate into greater City planning efforts.**

The land use and zoning principles of the City Center Master Plan should also guide planning in areas outside the city center (i.e., minimize sprawl and focus commercial development primarily in the City Center) and other neighborhood plans (i.e., informing the development of smaller centers of commerce within walking distance of the surrounding areas).

**9. Encourage educational institutions to locate facilities in the City Center.**

Western Washington University has planned campus expansion needs that could be well suited for the City Center. WWU and similar institutions such as Whatcom Community College and Whatcom Technical College should be encouraged to locate new facilities such as, classrooms, offices and residences in the City Center.

**PLACEHOLDER FOR 11 X 17**  
**ZONING MAP (GENERAL USE**  
**TYPES)**

**PLACEHOLDER FOR 11 X 17**  
**DESIGN STANDARDS**  
**ZONE MAP**