

3. Character Area Development

Policy:

“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 Twenty-first Century.”

VISIONS FOR BELLINGHAM, 1992

Background

The City Center is a collection of smaller “neighborhoods,” each of which has distinct features that reflect historical land uses, topography and geographic location. For example, the Old Town area was shaped by the economics of the Port of Bellingham, while the Commercial Core Area has a long-standing tradition of general retail. Railroad Avenue has a unique identity as well, which in part comes from the very wide street that reflects the existence of a rail line earlier in the City’s history.

For the purpose of this plan, the City Center is divided into five separate character areas. Within each of these character areas, differences in development appear in the scale and character of buildings and their orientations on their sites. In other cases, the width and orientation of the streets themselves vary.

Issues and Opportunities

Each of the character areas exhibits physical characteristics that can provide interest to

the City Center. The differences in each area could be used to attract uses that build on the traditions in the area while still meeting contemporary needs.

The question is: How can the City build on these established characteristics and strengthen the identities of each of these character areas, while also promoting a unified image for the City Center as a whole? Following are the plan’s recommendations for answering this question.

Key Downtown Development Workshop Report Recommendations

- Designate downtown mixed-use development districts.
- Develop Civic Center subarea plan.
- Develop Waterfront subarea plan.



Traditional commercial buildings align at the sidewalk edge in the Commercial Core Character Area.

**PLACEHOLDER FOR 11 X 17 CHARACTER
AREA MAP**

Recommended Actions

1. Define the City Center as a collection of Character Areas.

While respecting and even strengthening the unique features of each of the Character Areas, it is important to ensure that there are a number of unifying elements that cross Character Area boundaries and help strengthen the identify the City Center as a whole. For example, sites should be designed at the street level to appeal to pedestrians, in order to encourage walking. In addition, the sidewalk edge should be clearly defined with building fronts or landscaping in order to establish a “street wall.”

2. Apply design standards to help enhance the development in the Character Areas.

The proposed Design standards for the City Center will help to strengthen the appearance, character and feel of each individual Character Area. Design Standards help develop clearer identities for the character of each Area and encourage new development or redevelopment of existing buildings consistent with existing activity.

The proposed design standards are general in nature and apply to the entire City Center area. In the future, a few specific standards or guidelines for each character area could be developed. These area-specific guidelines would encourage development to respect the unique identity

of each area. This will allow for diversity in design while providing cohesion within the City Center.

3. Create Streetscape Guidelines that reflect the nature of each Character Area.

Streetscape design is one of the stronger visual urban design elements, providing cohesion and identity for an area. Streetscape design standards for each character area could be developed to reflect the history, economic nature and land use of the area as well as the degree of pedestrian and vehicular activity. For example, streetlights in Old Town should convey the area’s nautical history. (See Chapter 8.) Streetscape design standards could also have unifying elements that cross character area boundaries and help identify the Areas as parts of the larger City Center.

Specific discussions of each of these character areas are provided in the remainder of this chapter.

1. The Commercial Core Character Area

Boundary

The Commercial Core Area is bounded by Cornwall Street on the southeast, Flora on the north and Chestnut Street on the west, and also includes the rail lines that run along the edge of Georgia Pacific’s properties.

Key Features

The Commercial Core Area contains the greatest concentration of larger, retail-oriented spaces. Building heights vary, from one story to a few mid-rise structures,

but most buildings are two stories in height. Ground floors align at the sidewalk edge and display windows provide views inside to goods and services. Upper floors house additional retail in limited cases, but more frequently have offices and residential uses or remain vacant.

Land Use Goals

The Commercial Core Character Area should remain the retail and office center of downtown. Specialty retail should continue to be promoted, particularly at the street level, as should development of upper-floor office and residential space, such that the variety and interest of a mixed-use environment is enhanced.

Design Character Goals

The traditional row of commercial buildings fronting the street wall should continue to be the dominant image in the Commercial Core Character Area. Zoning and design standards should promote development that builds to the sidewalk edge and that activates the street or offers visually interesting activities at the street level.

Streetscape enhancements should be designed to facilitate promotional activities related to retailing and to highlight the identity of this character area. Space for outdoor displays and events should be available as well. On-site parking should be visually subordinate, included in structures or screened from the street.

2. Old Town Area and Maritime Heritage Park Character Area

Boundary

The Old Town Character Area lies along Holly and Roeder Streets, from Bay Street on the southeast to Broadway on the northwest. It also includes the lower reach of Whatcom Creek and the Maritime Heritage Park.



Pedestrian crossings over Whatcom Creek are an essential ingredient of the Old Town Character Area.

Key Features

Old Town exhibits its roots in early historical port and railroad activities. Early buildings reflect the scale and materials of construction associated with waterfront-related commerce. Many are wood frame, while occasionally masonry structures are found. The historic rail depot is also a distinguishing feature of Old Town.

Several vacant lots also are found here, in part a result of the loss of buildings. These gaps in the street wall weaken the pedestrian experience. Over the years, the identity of Old Town has dimmed somewhat, with alterations to some structures and the loss of others. Nonetheless, because of its close proximity to the water and the rail lines, the fundamental characteristics of Old Town survive.

Of special note are Whatcom Creek and the Maritime Heritage Park. These aesthetic and recreational amenities give distinct identity to Old Town and enrich its appeal.

At the mouth of Whatcom Creek, the former historic Citizens Dock once stood as a reminder of the close connection that citizens had with the waterfront. Citizens Dock was a key resource that should be restored or its waterfront access function replaced in Old Town. It also was a reminder of the extent to which the character and use of the waterfront has changed within recent decades and an indicator that further changes should be expected in the long term, as market opportunities evolve and public policies clarify community objectives for the area. (See also the Waterfront Character Area.)

Land Use Goals

Old Town should contain a mix of uses that express the unique identity of this area. Businesses that contribute to Bellingham's waterfront commercial activity, including retail and dining, should be promoted. Antique stores in the area also reinforce

this sense of heritage. Some institutional functions could also be located in this area. (See the recommendation in Chapter 10 to redevelop the old Sash-n-Door site.)

The acquisition of brownfield sites in Old Town should be a priority in cases where the property owner is unable to remediate the site, and/or where redevelopment consistent with this plan is otherwise prohibited. City ownership allows access to certain public funds (unavailable to the private sector) to assess and remediate sites. Once cleanup is complete, acquired parcels should be resold to the private sector unless development of City park or other public facility is desired.

Design Character Goals

Old Town should establish a balance in its character that is distinct from the Commercial Core Area and yet visually related to it. Traditional commercial buildings should predominate. Infill development should be encouraged such that the street wall will be strengthened and the pedestrian experience will be enhanced. Street furniture designs should reflect the character of this area as well, by drawing upon the maritime theme established in Maritime Heritage Park.



Railroad Avenue has an existing median landscaping.

3. Railroad Avenue and State Street Character Area

Boundary

The Railroad Avenue and State Street Character Area includes these two streets, running from Whatcom Creek on the northeast to Ivy Street on the southwest.

Key Features

Railroad Avenue itself is a distinguishing feature, because its 130-foot right-of-way makes it much wider than typical streets in the City Center. This wider right-of-way was to accommodate a rail line early in Bellingham's history. Buildings in this area are relatively small in scale, and most are one or two stories in height.

State Street defines a transitional area into the City Center from the southeast. It includes a variety of building types, including larger warehouse and commercial structures, many one-story structures and some auto-oriented sites. Some buildings are quite

substantial in scale.

Both streets retain some of the older, well-established businesses of the City Center, mixed with a collection of newer businesses. Many convey distinct features that reflect their special market niches. Housing also occurs in this area.

Land Use Goals

The Railroad Avenue and State Street Character Area should develop as a mixed-use place. An eclectic mix of

commercial, office and residential uses should be promoted. Special retail, dining and entertainment venues that would reinforce the unique character of the Area should be encouraged.

Design Character Goals

These two streets should be considered corridors with distinct identities. Streetscape features should reinforce this distinct character and encourage compatible new construction that can house mixed-use developments.

4. Civic Center and Cultural District Character Area

Boundary

The Civic Center and Cultural District Character Area lies along the northern edge of downtown and spans Whatcom Creek. Buildings in this area house City and County offices as well as a variety of other governmental services. The Post Office and Public Library are also a part of this complex.



The Old Power station sits in a traditional area that could link with the Cultural District.



The lawn behind the Central Library offers an opportunity to establish an open space of a civic stature.

The southeastern portion of the Civic Center area also contains a concentration of uses focusing on the cultural activities. The underlying framework for this “Cultural District” is an extension of the traditional storefront buildings of the more commercial part of the Commercial Core Area.

Key Features

Key buildings have monumental qualities that are appropriate to the character of the area. Major institutional buildings are set on their sites as freestanding features. City Hall, the Library and the County Courthouse Building are examples. Other supporting buildings convey elements of traditional commercial buildings, with storefronts at the sidewalk edge.

In general, the area is perceived as a “campus,” with buildings sitting as objects in civic spaces.

Within the Cultural District of the Civic Center, two key cultural institutions, the Whatcom Mu-

seum of History and Art (the Whatcom Museum) and the Mount Baker Theater, stand out as civic landmarks. These are monumental buildings that provide visual accents in the urban fabric. This emerging Cultural District is a special asset in the City Center that should be encouraged to develop.

Land Use Goals

Civic functions should continue to be the focus of activity within the Civic Center. However, supporting businesses should be encouraged, in order to maximize the potential of serving government-related markets and in order to link commercial activities in this area with the Commercial Core.



The Whatcom Museum is a key feature of the Cultural District in the Civic Center Area.

Arts and humanities activities should be strengthened within the Cultural District. (See specific recommendations in Chapters 9 and 10.) This area should continue to develop with an emphasis on cultural institutions and on commercial enterprises that support this image. Development of art galleries, for example, should be encouraged. In addition, commercial and residential uses should mix with cultural



The Mount Baker Theater is an anchor of the Cultural District in the Civic Center Area.

activities to provide a diversity of experiences and to help animate the area.

Design Character Goals

The sense of a civic campus should be strengthened. In this regard, lands abutting Whatcom Creek should be developed emphasizing creek-side open space and where the creek serves as a focal point and amenity.

Places that can accommodate civic gatherings and celebrations should be developed. Additional civic facilities should be located within this Area. (See the specific recommendations in Chapter 10.)

The arts and humanities should be emphasized within the Cultural District, through the use of public art and heritage interpretation markers. The Cultural District also should develop with buildings that define the sidewalk edge. However, key cultural buildings may be designed to be placed as freestanding objects, in a monumental manner.

5. The Waterfront Character Area

Boundary

The Waterfront Character Area extends along the western perimeter of Chestnut Street and Roeder Avenue from Cornwall, on the southeast to Squalicum Way in the northwest. A line extended from West Pine Street forms the approximate southwestern boundary of the Area.



The former "Citizen's Dock" during its heyday.

Key Features

Because of the strong influence of the harbor and Port of Bellingham, the Waterfront is an important Character Area. Presently, a significant portion is occupied by Georgia Pacific and has an industrial appearance.

To the north, a collection of harbor-related activities exists, including Squalicum Marina. This area is owned by the Port of Bellingham, with whom the City should continue to work with collaboratively.

Land Use Goals

The Waterfront should include a mix of water dependent, water related and non-water related uses that serves a wide spectrum of the community, including commercial, residential and industrial functions. While some of these uses may not occur until the long term, it is important to plan for them.

A plan currently in production by the Port of Bellingham for this Area calls for development that will appeal to a broader range of uses and that will enhance access for the public in designated areas.

Design Character Goals

The Waterfront should develop

with a character that invites public use. This should include opportunities for trails to and overlooks of the waterfront. Streetscape design elements should form a visual link with Old Town and provide safe and convenient access from Old Town to the Waterfront.

A concerted effort should be made to reestablish public waterfront access (such as day docks for small vessels, if possible) at the foot of Central Avenue in conjunction with the Corps of Engineers and other private and governmental parties. In addition, the connections between the City Center Master Plan boundaries and the Port of Bellingham properties along Roeder Avenue and elsewhere should be strengthened.