5. Automobile Circulation, Wayfinding and Signage

Policy:

The City Center should have a balanced, safe, and interconnected circulation system that provides expanded travel opportunities for transit, pedestrian, bicycles and autos while supporting established economic development goals.

Background

Access to the City Center, circulation within it, and clear directions controlling automobile, pedestrian and bicycle traffic are all major areas of concern in Bellingham. The need to encourage the increased use of mass transit, walking, bicycling, car and vanpools is also a priority.

How people find their way around downtown is an important concern. At present, a variety of sign types are used and most are based on established standard signs that can be purchased "off the rack."

Dealing with these areas of urban design within the City Center not only can significantly enhance the experience of the pedestrian, driver, worker, shopper or visitor but also can help encourage stronger, more robust economic activity.

Existing traffic patterns, signage and street designs in Bellingham do not clearly lead the traveler into the City Center. Commuters, shoppers, and visitors coming into the City Center have five main routes that they can take to get downtown. These entry routes are:

- From the Interstate 5 freeway, using Lakeway and then Holly Street.
- From the northeast and the freeway, using State Street.
- From the northern neighborhoods, using Girard Street, Dupont, or Holly.

Key Downtown Development Workshop Report Recommendations

- Promote alternative modes to reduce traffic.
- Enhance operations through signal and crosswalk timing.
- Improve visibility from the freeway.
- Eliminate some one-way street designations.
- Enhance wayfinding through street name and sign improvements.
- Establish a downtown transit circulator.
- Operate a waterfront trolley.
- Extend transit circulators to Western Washington University.

Drivers often cannot see that they are approaching downtown.

PLACEHOLDER FOR 11 x 17 TRAFFIC CIRCULATION MAP

- From the northwest and the freeway, using Roeder and then Chestnut Street.
- From the south using Samish Way or Boulevard Street.
- From Western Washington University (WWU), using Forest and Garden Streets.

When using any of these five major entry routes, drivers often cannot see downtown (or see that they are clearly heading toward it) until they are relatively close to being there.

When drivers reach downtown, there are three primary arterials that dictate traffic circulation patterns through the City Center. These are coordinated one-way streets—Chestnut and Magnolia Streets, running from the northwest to the southeast, and Holly Street, running from the southeast to the northwest. Visitors coming downtown from the freeway generally approach downtown on Holly Street, but they must leave downtown on Chestnut or Magnolia, if they want to return to the freeway.

In addition to the main arterial streets, that carry heavy traffic, a number of other streets carry significant volumes to and from the City Center. Holly, Chestnut and Roeder carry the most traffic to and from the northwest, but Dupont and Girard also receive relatively high volumes. State Street has the highest numbers to and from the northeast. Cornwall. Commercial, Champion and Bay also carry relatively high volumes in the core of downtown.

WTA provides a regional transit system of buses that brings commuters downtown from outlying areas.

While significant numbers of cars appear to be traveling through downtown, substantial traffic volumes are generated internally, within downtown itself. A part of this volume may be attributable to drivers' searching behavior for parking spaces. Multiple purpose business trips within downtown also account for some of this activity.

Aside from the older streetscape enhancements in the Commercial Core Area, there is currently no distinctive identity to the streets of the City Center. Consistency of signage, curb and corner treatment, sidewalk treatment, lighting, parking, and circulation patterns does not exist.

Issues and Opportunities

A number of traffic and access issues in the City Center provide opportunities for change that can encourage and support further economic development. These issues fall into three groups:

- Automobile access and circulation
- Mass transit
- Wayfinding and City Center identification

A Circulation & Access Policy

While it is important to strive for efficient traffic flow, it is equally important to engineer traffic patterns such that they support downtown functions. This may mean that, in some cases, some compromise in traffic flow will occur in order to further economic development objectives.

Automobile Access and Circulation

Bellingham should provide simple, straightforward entry into and exit from the City Center. Access from outlying areas is sometimes confusing and it is difficult to return to the freeway from downtown.

Because downtown is some distance from the freeway, there are points at which an infrequent visitor can become disoriented and uncertain about where downtown is located.

Automobile circulation patterns within downtown are perceived to be "unfriendly," primarily because three major downtown streets—Chestnut, Magnolia and Holly—are one-way streets.

One-way streets may limit access to parking, diminish the pedestrian experience and limit retail exposure. They can also encourage higher traffic speeds and possibly

more "through" traffic than would be there, but for the one-way street.

From an economic development perspective, two-way streets are preferred downtown because they improve retail exposure and facilitate parking system access. On a two-way street, motorists pass the businesses located there both during their morning and evening commutes, whereas businesses on a one-way street may only enjoy such exposure once a day. Two-way streets also make it easier for motorists to turn into parking facilities since they can turn from both directions.

Mass Transit

Parking, pedestrian/ automobile interaction, and general congestion are all minimized as the use of mass transit increases. Regional commuter buses, car-pooling, and downtown circulator systems help minimize the volume of traffic that must be dealt with downtown.

A downtown circulator system is a transit system that operates on a fixed route(s) dedicated to the downtown area, easy to use, and often with no fee. The circulators can be small buses or small fixed rail trains. A circulator system offers a solution that many downtown areas across the country have employed. They are best when tied to major regional transportation centers and/or parking lots that lie on the out skirts of downtown. Downtown circulator systems require frequent headways in order to be successful.

Expanding sources of downtown user populations, including residences and governmental offices, will make a downtown circulator system more feasible and economically attractive in Bellingham. Also, two-way street systems can facilitate transit circulator systems, whereas one-way streets complicate the logistics and a customer's tendency to use circulators.

A trolley in the Waterfront Area would add to the charm and tourist appeal of the area. It should be coordinated and interface with a downtown circulator system.

Wayfinding and the City Center

A "wayfinding" system is a series of signs and graphics intended to help people find destinations. A cohesive and user-friendly "wayfinding" system is a high priority because the City of Bellingham was originally four separate towns and the downtown roads do not line up in a typical grid pattern. This layout can be confusing for residents and visitors to find their way. Visitors may also be confused or frustrated by the one-way street pattern. The route visitors use to enter the downtown is not necessarily the same as the return route. Plus, there are not adequate landmarks, signs or other identifying features showing people the way to the City Center or waterfront from the freeway or other sections of the city.

A few wayfinding signs exist that lead to the City Center. A more extensive, and coordinated, system is needed.

To address these issues, a "Wayfinding" System" is proposed. Such a system will help people navigate this confusing grid system and improve circulation for pedestrians, bicyclists and motorists by eliminating visual clutter, providing useful and clear information, and incorporating a consistent and recognizable design theme. This system will also market City Center resources, evoke a sense of pride and community about downtown history and character, create a distinct identity and improve the streetscape.

Recommended Actions

1. Conduct a comprehensive automobile circulation study for the City Center, including a review of the potential benefits of converting streets from one-way to two-way.
Further study, including feasibility analysis, is needed to evaluate conversion of the downtown street grid (other than Holly Street, see below) back to two-way traffic. The analysis should consider current and projected traffic demand and level of service standards in light of other City Center goals for economic development and creating a pedestrian friendly environment. Conversions, if deemed desirable and appropriate, may be phased in order to ease residents through the transition.

Holly Street was proposed to be converted to two-way by the consultant team who prepared the original version of this plan. The Transpo Group completed a traffic study and the results were reviewed by staff, the Planning Commission, and City Council. It was determined that conversion to two-way would seriously compromise the function of Holly and adjacent streets, would be very costly to do, and would not accomplish the goals set forth in this plan.

The City should invest in streetscape improvements on Holly rather than the more expensive option of converting the street to two-way. The Holly streetscape should calm traffic and reflect the fact that it is the main entrance to the City Center.

Holly Street, approaching the City Center, lacks a strong identity.

2. Establish a strong entry identity along major entry corridors.
Approaches to the City Center have few distinguishing features. When a visitor approaches the downtown area they do not know if they are headed in the right direction, are close or far from “being there” or where the downtown begins and ends.

Common streetscape design elements can lead the traveler into and out of the City Center. The following intersections are major ”entries” leading into downtown:

- From the freeway on Lakeway and Holly
- From the freeway on Ohio
- Along Holly and Roeder, approaching from the NW.

3. Create a more pedestrian friendly environment in the City Center.
A pedestrian oriented environment is a basic ingredient of successful downtowns. The City Center should have uses and facilities that enhance the

Several outlying intersections are points where information is needed to assist motorists in finding downtown.

streetscape, such as ground floor retail, open space plazas and parks, and street trees. Also important are amenities like wide sidewalks, bike lanes, street lighting, paving treatments, directional signs and benches that will reinforce the safety and convenience of pedestrians and bicyclists. (See details about streetscape suggestions in Chapter 8.)

Pedestrian and bicycle systems should be linked more directly to the WTA transit center.

4. Provide a coordinated wayfinding system for automobiles, bicyclists, and pedestrians along key routes into and around the downtown.

A coordinated wayfinding system as described in this chapter will make it easier for pedestrians and motorists to negotiate their way into and around the City Center, but also will help reinforce its identity.

Signs, landscaping and other design features can be used to create a system of wayfinding that informs travelers of where they are in their approach to and travel within the City Center.

An important element of developing a good wayfinding system is that it be expandable. Eventually, this system should be expanded to include pedestrian and bicycle trail signs and street name signs. New street name signs with block numbers would decrease visitor and resident frustration when trying to find a specific address. The Bicycle Advisory Committee has identified a number of Downtown arterial streets as preferred bike routes. See the Bicycle Routes Map in Chapter 7.

There are a number of elements to this recommendation that should be coordinated with each other to achieve a consistent look and "feel" of the downtown area and its environs:

4A. Install Information kiosks.

Kiosks could be used in the downtown and waterfront areas to provide the pedestrian or cyclist with specific and useful information. Kiosks will include a map panel outlining destinations, the transit station, bus stops, trail access points and routes, a panel with photos and text communicating the history of that area, and a panel posting current and upcoming events.

4B. Develop directional signs that are coordinated with those along major entry corridors.

Place directional signs along arterial streets from Interstate 5 (I-5) exits and other areas of town. Signs should be placed at key decision points directing travelers to the downtown and waterfront areas. Approximately thirty destination signs are planned for the downtown and waterfront areas providing clear directions to specific points. Directional signs will only be used for major public facilities such as City Hall, Library and Mt. Baker Theater. Standard I-5 signs will be installed on return routes directing travelers to north and southbound freeway ramps.

4C. Create a boulevard effect along Holly from Ellis Street into downtown.

The boulevard streetscape should increase in intensity of design and implementation as it approaches the City

Center. When downtown is reached the streetscape along those blocks of Holly should be made to clearly say that the driver (or pedestrian) is in the center of the commercial area of the City Center. Decorative banners could also be used on the Lakeway/Holly entry corridor.

4D. Construct landscaped gateways at key traffic decision points.

Gateway signs and landscaping or other features could be installed at key entry points into the downtown area, such as Holly at Forest or State Street, Holly at Whatcom Creek, and State at Whatcom Creek. These "welcoming" features will not only add to the scenic streetscape, but also will communicate a sense of pride and celebrate arrival at the City Center.

4E. Use decorative banners to provide visual cues on key entry Corridors.

Banners can be used to provide visual cues that the traveler is headed toward the City Center. Banners will also beautify and individualize the streetscape.

5. Promote the use of mass transit.

This recommended action has a number of elements, including:

5A. Consider a downtown circulator bus system.

5B. Develop a plan to encourage greater ridership on regional mass transit and on a circulator system.

5C. Consider a waterfront trolley.

5D. Coordinate circulator and trolley routes with parking facility plans and regional transit routes.

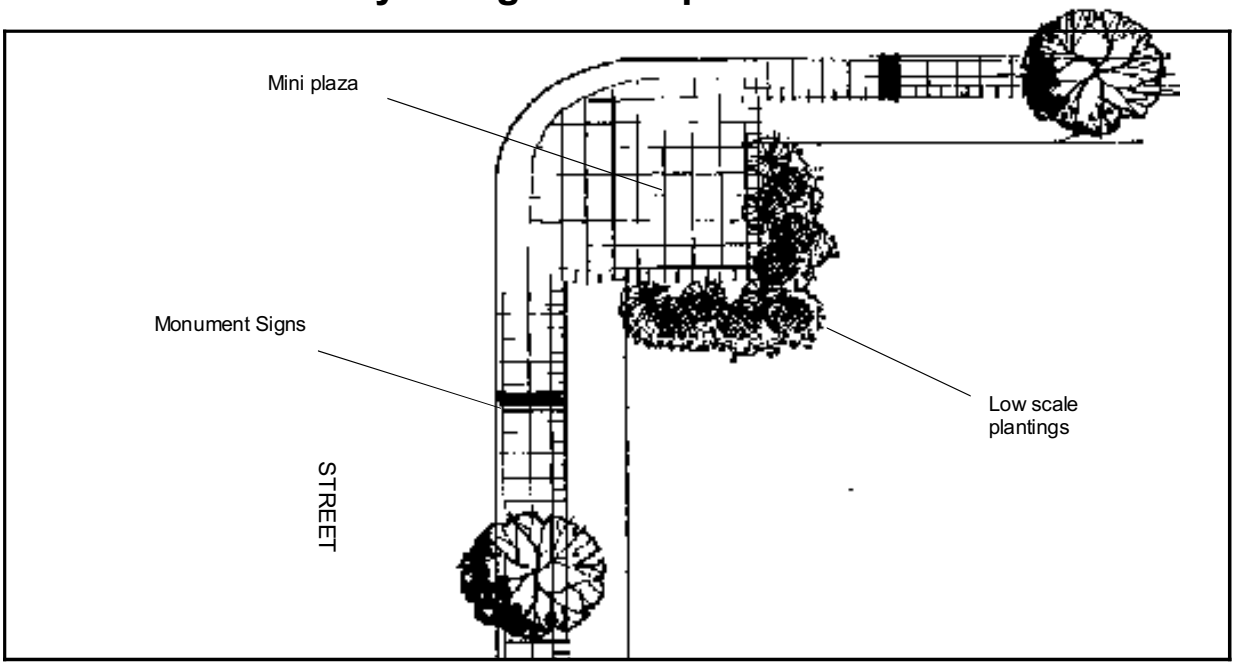
5E. Provide shelters at key bus stops.

5F. Link the circulator system with the trails plan and consider providing bike-carrying capability on the buses.

5G. Consider seasonal service for visitor-targeted routes of the circulator and for the trolley.

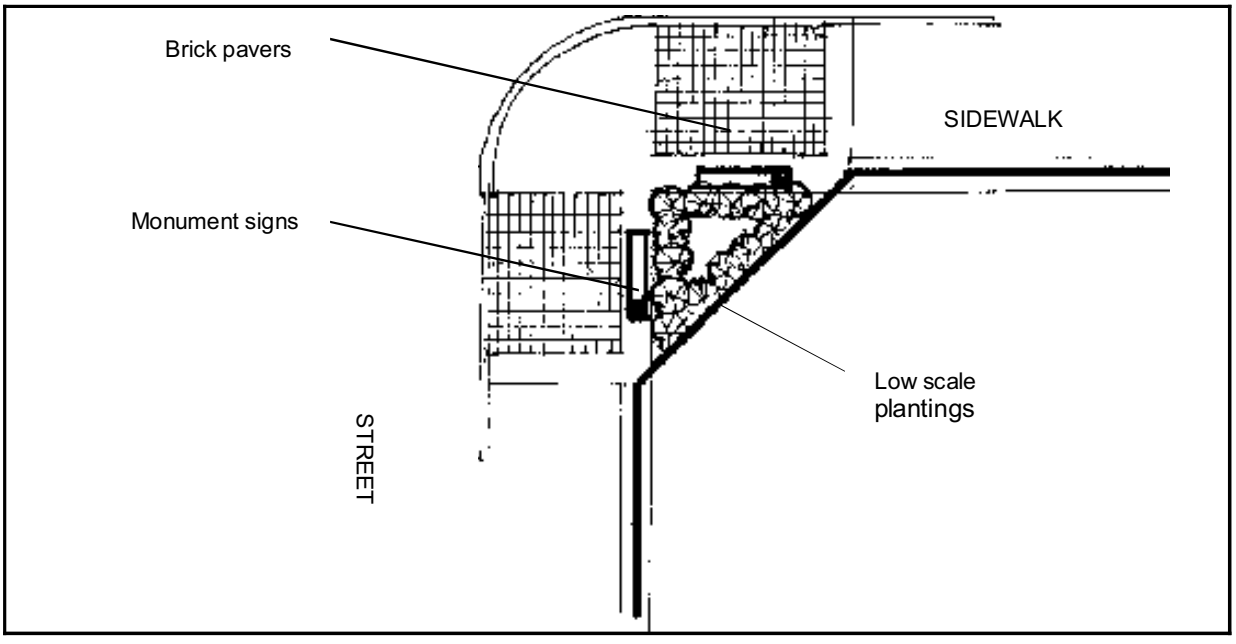
5H. Link pedestrian and bicycle systems to the WTA transit center.

Alternative Gateway Design Concepts



Corner Gateway with Plaza

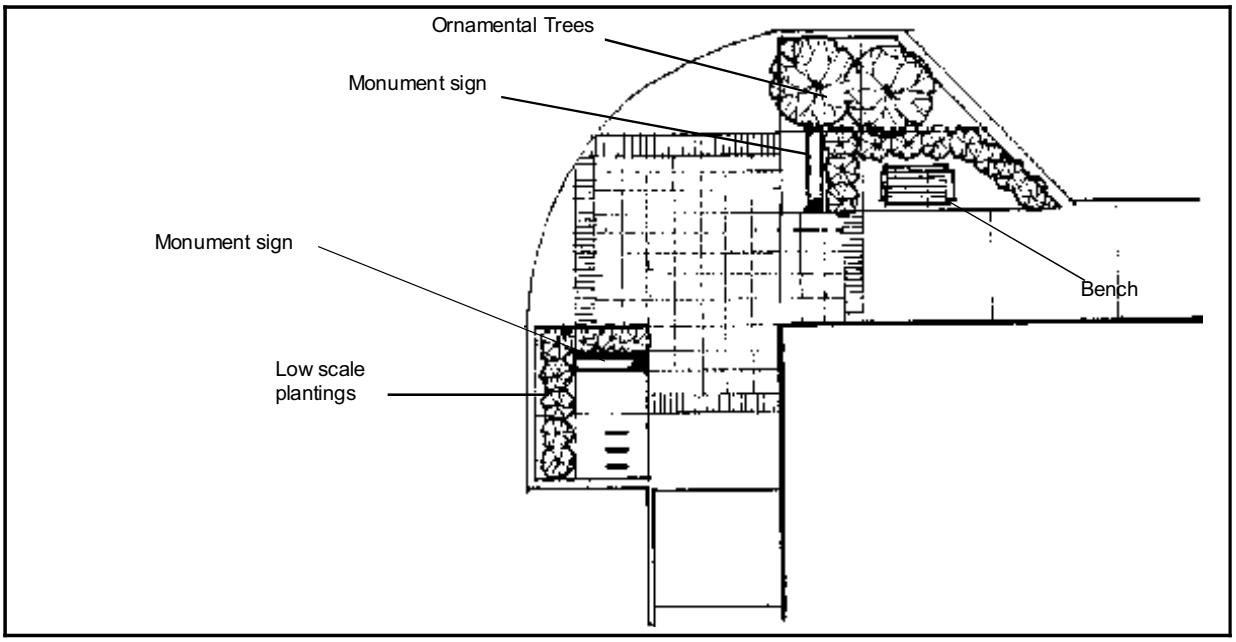
- *Mini plaza at corner on the inside edge of the sidewalk may include ornamental lights and benches.*
- *Gateway signs may be located in decorative paving along the sidewalk edges.*



Corner Gateway

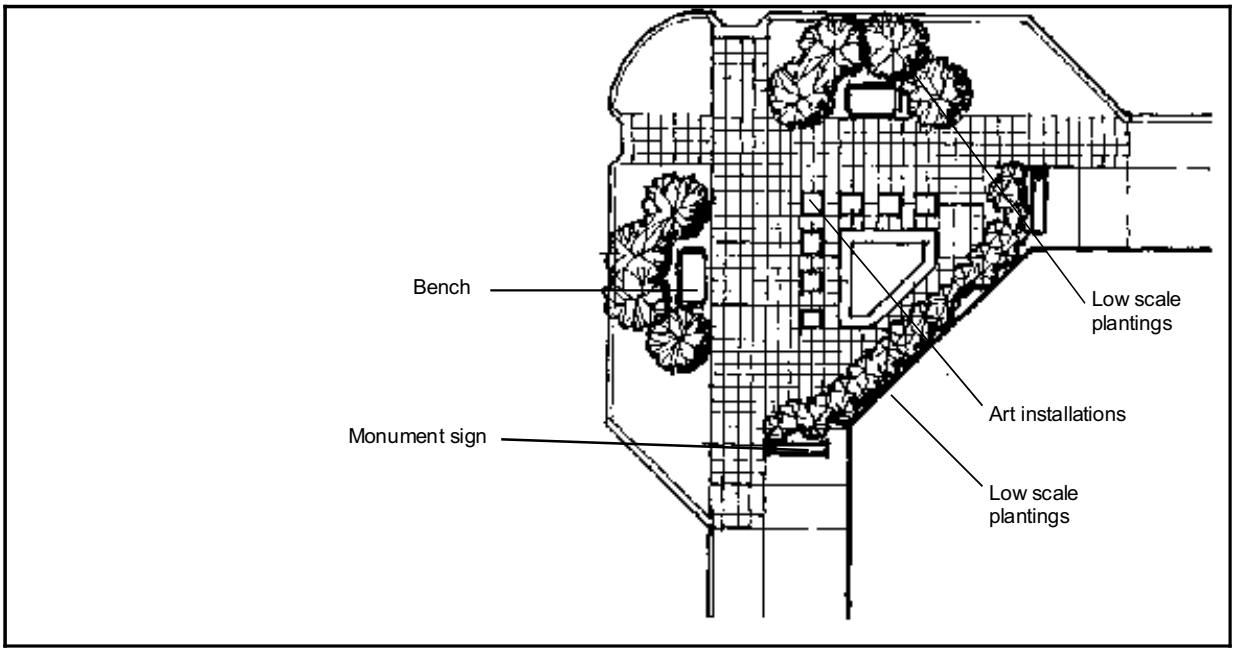
- *Standard sidewalk width should be used.*
- *Decorative paving may be used at crosswalk connections.*
- *Landscape plantings can serve as background for gateway signs.*

Alternative Gateway Design Concepts



Corner Gateway with expanded corner

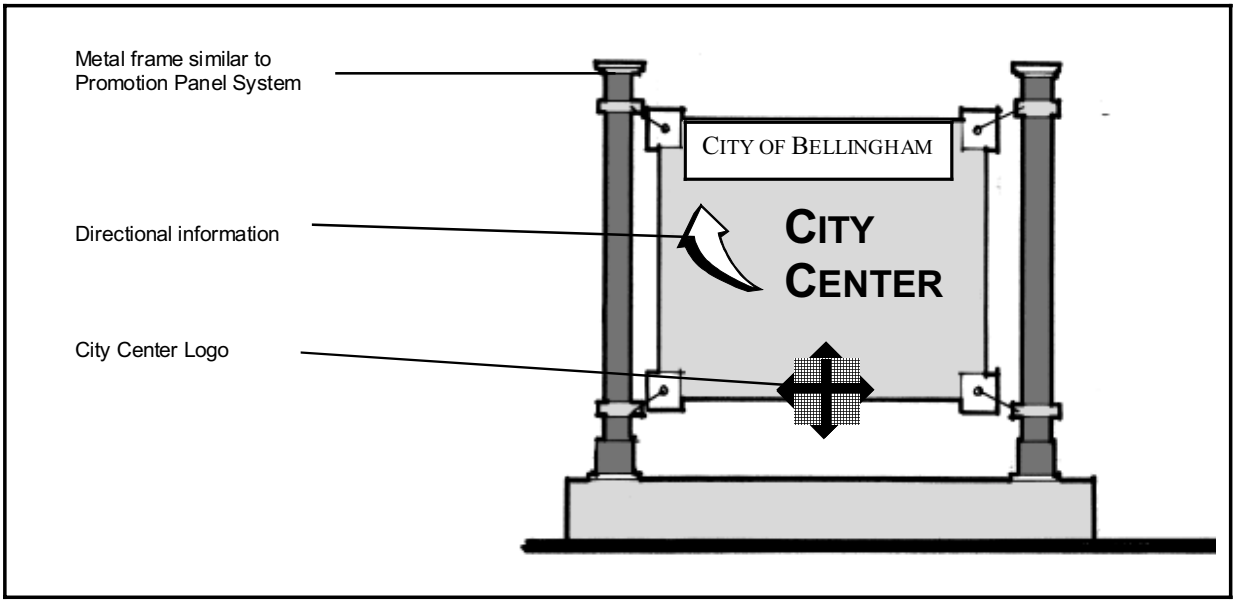
- *Expanded sidewalk at corner provides space for signs and seating.*
- *Decorative paving can be used to define a mini-plaza.*



Corner Art Park Gateway with expanded corner

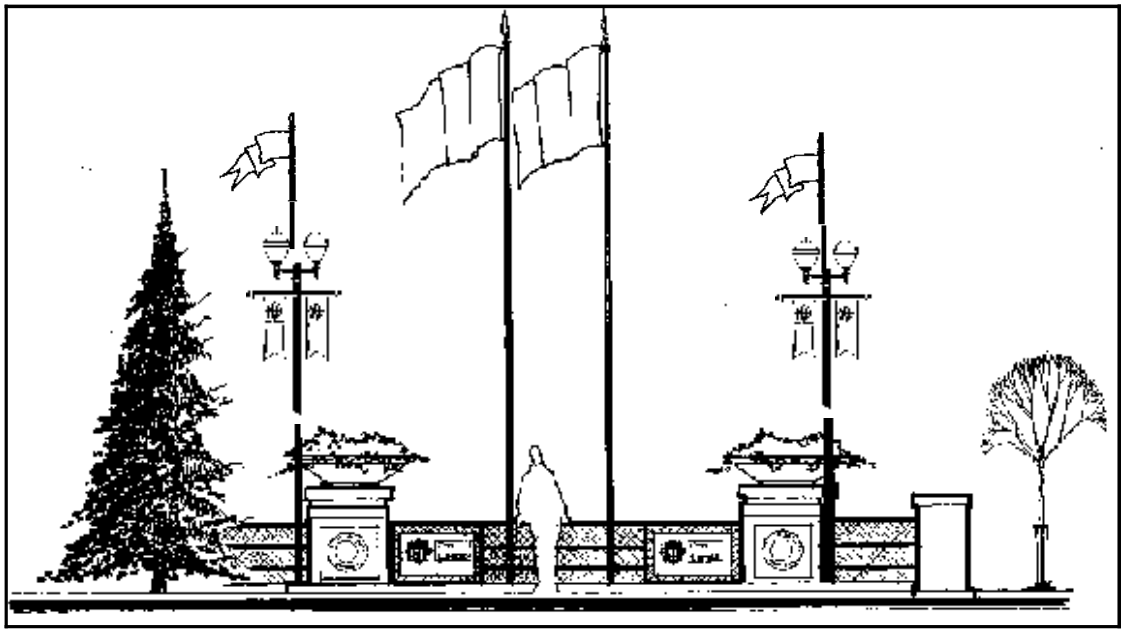
- *Large scale art installation is visible to approaching motorists.*
- *Monument signs provide directional information.*
- *Seating can belocated in expanded corner.*

Gateway Sign Concept



One of a Gateway sign concept for use at outer entries into City Center.

Large Key Information Point Design Concept (elevation view)



Key Information Point Design at Whatcom Creek and Dupont in Old Town:

- *Planters extend creek landscape onto the walkway.*
- *Ornamental lights extend Commercial Core Area images.*
- *Railing design draws up the metal frame component system.*
- *Flags and large scale trees are visible at a distance by motorists*.

Key Information Point Design Concepts: Trailhead and Interpretive Markers

Currently trailheads are not well marked in the City Center.

In addition to pole-mounted signs, special trail markers provide a distinct identity.

An effective historic interpretive sign draws tourists' attention.

PLACEHOLDER FOR 11 X 17 WAYFINDING SYSTEM MAP