

## 9. Parks, Open Space & Public Art

### Policy:

Parks, plazas and open space are an integral part of the fabric of the City Center. Works of art should be a required element of public projects and strongly encouraged in private development.

### Background

While parks have had a presence in the City Center for some time, the major, official City parks were actually in the abutting neighborhoods. An exception was the Library lawn (Lee Memorial Park) open space.

In recent years, Whatcom Creek has emerged as a focus of park planning. Today, it is recognized as a unique open space opportunity and the Whatcom Creek Waterfront Action Program (1996), and the Whatcom Creek Trail Master Plan provides details for recent improvement projects.

### The Hillclimb

Of particular note is the Hillclimb, a ceremonial stairway leading from Holly Street to the Civic Center /Cultural District. The stairs include an expanded landing area, which serves as an outdoor amphitheater.

### Lee Memorial Park

An important park is the grass and landscaped area between City Hall and the Library that serves as a key place for passive recreation and also is used for small concerts and other special events.

### Key Downtown Development Workshop Report Recommendations

- Provide access to the waterfront at Colony Wharf and the former Citizens' Dock site.
- Expand Maritime Heritage Park.
- Redevelop the Sash-n-Door site.
- Extend the trails along Whatcom Creek.
- Establish a distinct identity for Railroad Avenue.



Children's concert on the library lawn with City Hall in the background.



*A series of public art installations already exist in Bellingham. These pieces significantly enhance the character of the City Center.*

### **Streets**

In addition, some streets are occasionally closed to automobile traffic for special events. In particular, a portion of Railroad Avenue is closed for Farmers Market activities during its operating season.

### **Public Art Program**

Public art can help to establish a unique identity by contributing a special image beyond that which conventional street elements provide. Public art may include individual art objects that are installed in City Center gateways, along sidewalks and in association with public buildings. It also may

include spaces or sites that can accommodate performances and other cultural events. Other art installations may incorporate decorative painting, murals and modifications to street furniture that provide surprise and delight in the urban setting.

A series of public art installations already exist in Bellingham. These pieces significantly enhance the character of the City Center. Of noteworthy recognition is a series of individual pieces that are located in small triangular spaces at the ends of blocks where differing street grids intersect.

These small triangles of land were improved as part of streetscape enhancement and feature public sculptures. They are, in essence, “art parks.”

## **Issues and Opportunities**

While the City Center enjoys the parks currently available, the amount of outdoor space that is officially managed as urban parks and open space is limited. Parks provide recreation opportunities for residents and visitors and enhance the livability of the community. Parks within the City Center should serve the Bellingham community at large, regional residents and visitors, as well as downtown dwellers and employees.

Parks also should be designed to support downtown events and activities as well as to serve future residential populations, current residents, employees and visitors. Each park could be designed to contribute to the distinct identity of the Character Area in which it is located.

More parks and open space are needed for passive recreation, to serve downtown dwellers and workers. More venue opportunities also are needed for outdoor events:

- A more substantial civic park is needed as a ceremonial space in the Civic Center.
- Performance space is needed for outdoor concerts and for other cultural events associated with the



*Provide access to the Whatcom Creek Trail at bridge crossings.*

Mount Baker Theater and other cultural district activities.

- Waterfront-oriented park space is needed for visitors as well as local users, especially children.
- The Farmers Market should have an enhanced venue, that can be adapted to market days but also can serve other purposes at other times.
- Outdoor space is needed for special promotional events in the Commercial Core Area.

Funding, managing and maintaining a network of City Center parks is a significant issue in its own right. A specific funding and management program is needed in Bellingham.

As nice as the existing public art pieces are, their impacts are less than their potential, because these sites are not seen as a part of a more comprehensive public art program. More public art is needed and it should be more widely dispersed, promoted and developed as part of a coordinated public art program.

## Recommended Actions

### 1. Develop a series of parks, trails and open spaces that are tailored to meet specific needs of City Center users.

While siting future parks and open spaces needs to be somewhat flexible to be able to respond to other development activities, they should at a minimum include the following:

**1A. Continue to Develop Whatcom Creek as a linear, urban park.** This should include the trails system under development and also provide overlooks and seating areas along the way. Key access points should be provided at the bridges per the 1995 Whatcom Creek Trail Master Plan.

**1B. The South Bay, Railroad, and Whatcom Creek trails should meet at a central trails “hub”.**

See the Parks and Trails Map at the end of this chapter.

**1C. Improve the 1100 block of Railroad Avenue as a venue for the Farmers Market.** Consider designing this block as a “Festival Street,” so that it can be closed for market days. Consider adding space to the market area for performances and other compatible activities.

### 1D. Continue expansion and development of Maritime Heritage Park.

This is a key resource in the City Center and its enhancement is a high priority. Coordinate expansion on the north side of Whatcom Creek with redevelopment of the former Sash-n-Door property. (See Chap. 10.)

### 1E. Consider siting a Civic Plaza park or town square, perhaps on the site of the present Library on Central Avenue.

The Library Board is considering a number of options for siting a new library facility. If the library were to move from the current site on Central Avenue, a new “Civic Plaza Park” could occupy all or some portion of the block between Lottie and Central.



*Civic Plaza, Library Lawn and City Hall.*

**1F. Consider siting a park with the trails hub near the intersection of Railroad Avenue and York Street.** Some of the existing parking area could be converted into a park that highlights the heritage of Railroad Avenue. One idea could be a “kids park,” including amenities that appeal to families. The train sculpture that is suggested for the Railroad Avenue and Holly Street development could be installed at this location.

**1G. Consider developing a park at the intersection of Railroad Avenue and Maple Street.** A park could serve as a gateway to residential development at the former Morse Hardware property. (See Chapter 10.)

**1H. Provide Additional Whatcom Creek Waterway access.** Continue efforts to develop waterfront amenities at the former Citizens Dock site and Colony Wharf. This access should be linked to Maritime Heritage Park.

**1I. Consider developing a plaza/art park at Champion and Commercial Streets.** This triangular lot is currently used for parking. With development of new parking facilities in the area, this parcel could be developed as a key site in the spine of art parks. It could accommodate small performances and receptions associated with the Mount Baker Theater as well. This should be coordinated with the intersection

improvements proposed in this Plan, such that the visual impact of the streetscape is extended across the intersection.

**2. Connect City Center parks and trails in a coordinated system.**

Convenient pedestrian and bicycle routes should link all of the parks. (See Chapter 7.)

**3. Consider improving Railroad Avenue into a landscaped boulevard.**

Railroad Avenue should provide a critical link in the bicycle and pedestrian trails system. Heavily landscaping the median and adding streetscape elements would enhance its ambiance and park-like feel. Changes to the streetscape that would result in significant loss of on-street parking should be timed to coincide with nearby additions to the off-street parking supply.

**4. Develop informational materials that present the City Center parks, plazas and trails as a system.**

This could include maps on kiosks and trailheads as well as directories and brochures for public distribution.

**5. Consider expanding the public art program throughout the City Center by installing and maintaining public arts exhibits.**

A 1%-for-Public-Art Program is one way to provide basic funding for these installations. Such a program conveys a sense of excitement and activity in the City Center, and provides changing features that even frequent visitors will find refreshing.



*The Hillclimb at Central Avenue includes an amphitheater for events and also provides an overlook opportunity to the waterfront.*



*A corner of a parking lot offers a public art site opportunity.*

installation that would be considered a part of the parks system. An art park could expand on a theme, such as an interpretation of Old Town.

A specific public art proposal is illustrated in the sketch for a cut-out of a steam engine that was included in the Railroad Avenue plan. This proposal for a playful sculpture is ideal for the “Kids Park” that is recommended for the north end of Railroad Avenue.

Art works in public areas can provide a means of personalizing Bellingham, by creating unique “place makers.” Free-standing sculpture, wall murals and decorative sidewalk mosaics are some examples of familiar public art media.

Future art exhibit locations should be somewhat flexible to accommodate other development activities.

Art in public places should be defined broadly to include a wide range of media and experiences. Public art installations in the City Center could include the following types:

- **Art Sites.** These sites should be strategically located to serve as accents in the community, such as at gateways into the City Center or as focal points in public parks.
- **Streetscape Art.** These installations should be designed as integral components of the streetscape work. For example, an artist might design a special decoration for a selection of

public planters.

- **Performance or Events Sites.** These include small plazas or amphitheaters designed to accommodate performances. The Hillclimb in Maritime Heritage Park is an example.

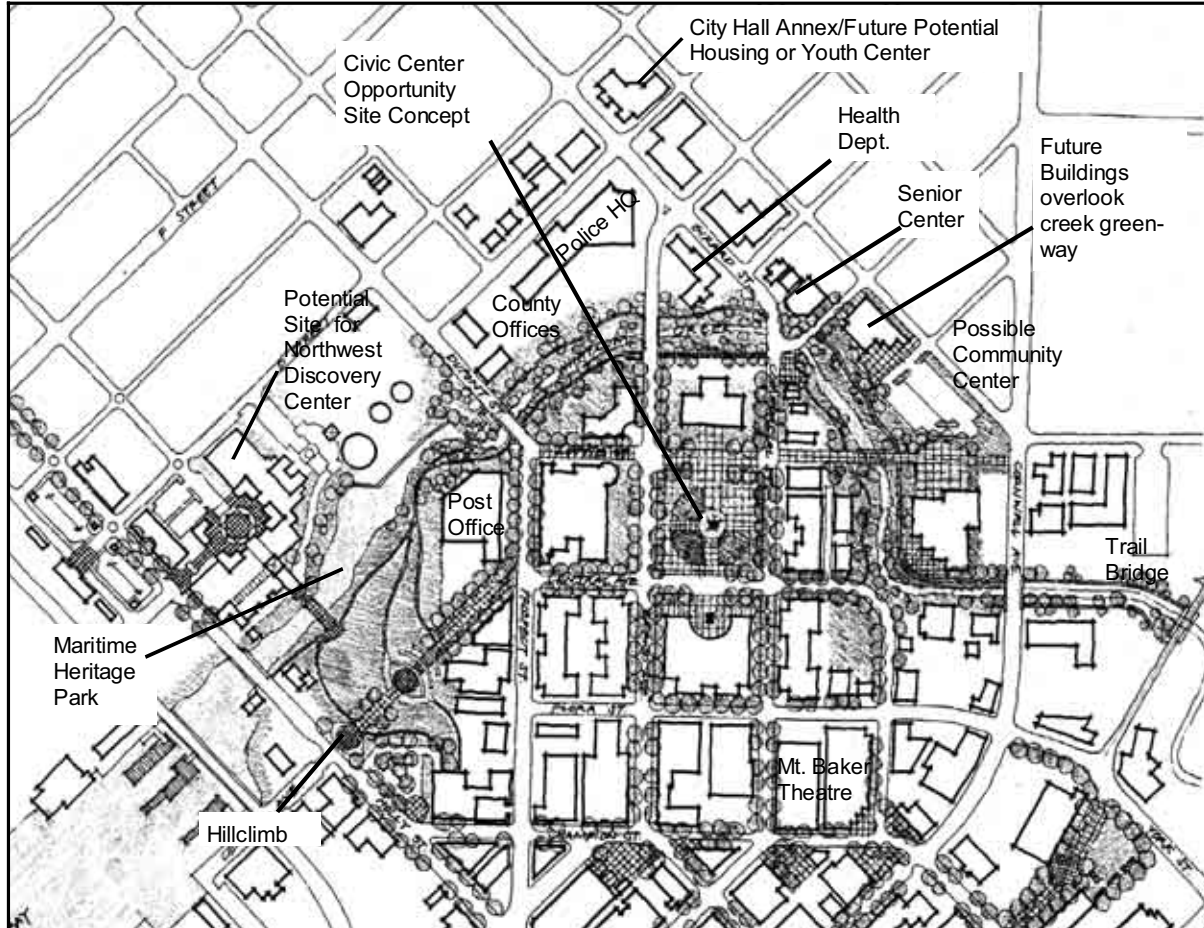
### 7. Consider Organizing art installation sites in a series of “Art Parks.”

These are sites where artists would be commissioned to develop an entire site as an art



*Children’s concert on the library lawn.*

## Whatcom Creek Linear Park Concept

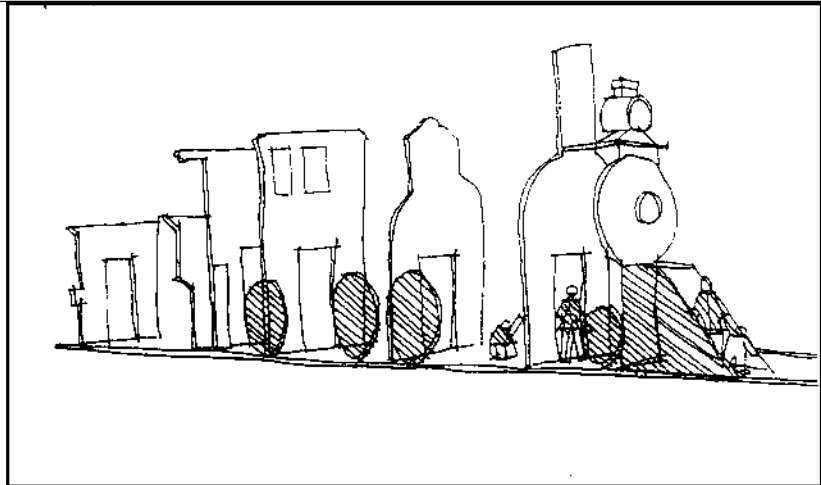


*Whatcom Creek Park features:*

- *Connections to Whatcom Creek Trail should be provided at each street bridge crossing.*
- *Trails run along both sides of the Creek, when feasible.*
- *Connections also may be provided to other regional trails.*
- *A variety of civic and cultural facilities are accessible by the Whatcom Creek Trail.*
- *An expanded Maritime Heritage Park could be a focal point.*
- *Access to the waterfront in the area of the former Citizen's Dock should be provided.*

**8. Consider a rotating art exhibition program.**

In addition to the more permanent sculpture programs that exist, a system of presenting changing exhibits also should be provided to help enliven the downtown.



**PLACEHOLDER FOR 11 X 17**  
**PARKS AND TRAILS MAP**