
City Center Master Plan



Bellingham, Washington

August 2002

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Introduction

Bellingham, Washington's City Center has been a focus of planning and strategic investment for more than two decades. During that time, the City has engaged in a series of planning steps, including a *Downtown Development Strategies* report in 1989, an urban design concept developed through the American Institute of Architect's R/UDAT program (1992), the *Visions for Bellingham* report (1992), focused plans for Railroad Avenue (1994) and Whatcom Creek (1996), the *Bellingham Comprehensive Plan* (1995) and an overview of goals and objectives produced through the Downtown Development Workshops (1998).

Capital improvements have followed these planning efforts. Recently completed City projects include the Maritime Heritage Park and construction of an outdoor amphitheater. The Commercial Street Parkade has seen recent enhancements and the City has committed to managing downtown parking as a coordinated system. Trailhead construction and creek improvements are also among ongoing improvements.

The private sector has responded to downtown needs and opportunities. Individually, many new retail businesses have invested in the City Center and corporations have located their offices here. Enterprising entrepreneurs have improved existing housing stock and converted other spaces into exciting urban residential environments.

All of this work demonstrates the community's commitment to maintaining the vital heart

of its city. Nonetheless, many opportunities for improvement remain. While broad planning concepts have been widely discussed and general consensus on major recommendations exists, individual project ideas need to be coordinated more carefully in a plan that integrates City Center improvements into a series of urban systems. In addition, some projects require more specific design concepts in order to move them forward to implementation.

The purpose of this document, the **City Center Master Plan** (the Plan), is to provide the framework for coordinating public and private investment decisions. This framework plan describes and illustrates the overall visions for the City Center. Accordingly, the plan and its key strategies provide the framework for citizens, city staff and decision makers to use as they plan and construct public, private and joint projects. When appropriate, each



Bellingham's original City Hall was constructed in 1892, and it housed City offices until 1939.

city department will integrate the plan into their capital facility and other planning efforts. New city policies and actions shall be consistent with, and further the recommendations in this plan whenever possible. Similarly, city staff will assist the citizenry in complying with relevant sections.

The Planning Process

The City of Bellingham established its neighborhood-based planning and zoning system in the 1980 comprehensive plan. The system was continued in the 1995 update. This system includes specific plans for each of the City's twenty-three neighborhoods, including one for the downtown area, referred to as the "Central Business District Neighborhood." The City has been working since 1996 to update the neighborhood plans to be consistent with the overall comprehensive plan and the State Growth Management Act. The City Center Master Plan updates and augments the CBD Neighborhood Plan and is intended to be a 20-year planning document, with recommended changes and physical improvements phased in over time.

The Plan contains recommendations for improvements to the physical elements of downtown, including: the street, pedestrian and bicycle circulation systems; traffic calming measures; parking and signage (wayfinding) systems improvements; parks and open space



Recent investments in downtown Bellingham include renovation of this building at the corner of Holly and Cornwall Streets.

Plan Sources

The City Center Master Plan builds upon recommendations that are set forth in the following documents:

- **Downtown Development Strategies (1989)**
- **R/UDAT Report (1992)**
- **Visions for Bellingham (1992)**
- **Railroad Avenue Action Plan (1994)**
- **Bellingham Comprehensive Plan (1995)**
- **Whatcom Creek Waterfront Action Program (1996)**
- **Parking Master Planning Study (1997)**
- **Downtown Development Workshop Report (1998)**

building design standards (see separate document, *City Center Design Standards*).

Because it serves as "everybody's neighborhood" this City Center's Master Plan also includes greater emphasis on physical and economic attributes consistent with its role as the "heart" of the City. A community's downtown area is the first place a visitor looks to understand the community's

sense of itself. Physical evidence of community pride and "place-making" features must be part of the downtown of any truly great city, regardless of its size.

For all of these reasons, the City Center Master Plan identifies specific improvement projects for key "Opportunity Sites" (see Chapter 10) and builds on the unique attributes of each of its five "Character Areas" (see Chapter 3). This Plan also goes beyond the

regulatory and physical planning elements to include strategies for stimulating downtown's economy and facilitating appropriate redevelopment.

In early 1998, representatives from a diverse cross-section of the community began holding a series of Downtown Development Workshops to examine downtown Bellingham as it currently existed and to envision its future. This planning process continued with a series of public workshops, focus group meetings and personal interviews. Members of the Downtown Development Workshop Steering Committee continued to serve as advisors to the development of this Plan.

Market Opportunities

In a parallel effort, Leland Consulting Group provided an overview of market opportunities within the City Center. Their market analysis indicates that opportunities exist for specialty retail and offices as well as housing within the City Center and its immediate environs. Key markets that need to be addressed are downtown residents, government office workers, shoppers from the region and visitors who are seeking historic and waterfront-related experiences. Within the residential market, substantial segments are students, young professionals and seniors. These market segments enjoy dining in downtown restaurants, shopping in specialty stores

and recreating in urban parks. They also patronize cultural events and institutions.

Streetscape Opportunities

Government office workers will use services that are within convenient walking distance and that operate later into the evening. Tourists seeking to experience the heritage of the community will be drawn to the waterfront, Whatcom Creek and restored historic buildings throughout the City Center.

For all of these users, it is important that the streets be visually attractive and accommodating to pedestrians and bicyclists. It is also essential that a wide variety of events and activities be offered to enrich the downtown experience.

The location and availability of civic uses, including libraries, museums and theaters, should be clearly identified, as should public parking, in order to make these visitors feel welcomed.

While opportunities exist, they require careful nurturing or the City Center's potential will not be realized. A fundamental principle for expanding the markets of the City Center is to "grow" a larger customer base by constructing more attractive, high quality housing that appeals to a wide range of occupants.

Housing Opportunities

Recent successes, such as the new mixed use building under construction at the northeast corner of Railroad and Holly, and new market information indicate that a variety of uses are becoming viable for downtown.

Many of these focus on increasing the amount of housing in the Commercial Core Area itself (see Chapter 3 for the identification of the plan's Character Areas) as well as areas that immediately abut it, because residents are a key to a sustained economic vitality in the downtown.

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

In addition, markets are emerging that will support construction of new housing, particularly that which is targeted at special market segments. For example, a new mixed-use office and housing building is proposed for the former Mason Building site at the southwest corner of Railroad and Holly. New housing projects will be most successful when they also incorporate amenities and services that enhance these special living environments.

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

Retail Opportunities

While new housing is being developed, it is also important to enhance the offer-

ings of office and retail space. Street level retail spaces in the 1,000 square foot range will appeal to the emerging specialty retail market.

Market Conclusions

All of these users groups are attracted to the urban amenities described in this City Center Master Plan. This includes enhanced streetscapes, parks and water features as well as exciting shops and restaurants. They also expect a diverse offering of cultural events and outdoor activities. The parks, plazas and civic buildings proposed in this City Center Master Plan, therefore, are directly linked to the economic vitality of the City Center.

Even so, the fundamental policies of the City Center Master Plan speak to the basic goals for livability that are outlined in the *Bellingham Comprehensive Plan* and *Visions for Bellingham*. These policies transcend immediate economic considerations in some situations, while reaching to a long-range investment in a sense of community that, in itself, will also build economic health into Bellingham's future.



Bellingham's City Center viewed from the southwest corner of the Civic Center looking east.



Bellingham's City Center viewed from the Civic Center looking southwest across the waterfront to the bay.

Map on the following page

The City Center Master Plan project area officially includes the two City planning areas of CBD and CBD West. In addition, some blocks that immediately abut these areas are included, where development should be coordinated with that in the downtown.

PLACEHOLDER FOR 11 X
17 CITY CENTER PLAN
BOUNDARIES MAP

PLACEHOLDER FOR 11 X
17 CITY CENTER PLAN
BOUNDARIES MAP
AERIAL