

Waterfront Redevelopment Discussions Summary of Comments October 28 & 29, 2008

Prepared for:

The City of Bellingham



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December 3, 2008

OVERVIEW

Mayor Dan Pike invited members of the City's boards and commissions to learn about, and comment on, two plans for the redevelopment of Bellingham's waterfront. Both plans, the Port of Bellingham's "Waterfront District" and the City of Bellingham's "Waterfront Connections" plans contain excellent ideas, and both were created by highly talented architects and planners. However, they come at the waterfront with different approaches and philosophies.

Approximately 70 people attended the October 28 meeting, and some 50 people were in attendance on October 29. In addition to the oral comments shared at each meeting, 11 people submitted written comments via email or through the comment forms that were provided at the meetings. This report summarizes both oral and written comments from the October 28 and 29 meetings held for board and commission members. Both meetings were held at Depot Market Square.

Meeting Format

The meeting format was the same on both nights. Meeting facilitator Margaret Norton-Arnold opened with a brief presentation comparing the similarities and differences between the two plans. On both nights Mayor Dan Pike followed this presentation by describing the reasons for his support of the Waterfront Connections plan. On October 28, Port Commissioner Scott Walker likewise reiterated his support for the Port's Waterfront District plan.

Meeting attendees were then encouraged to make comments and ask questions in a town hall format.

SUMMARY OF ORAL QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS

What follows is a summary of the plans and the comments received during the meetings; they have been organized according to the various issues associated with the two waterfront plans.

Street Grids and Focal Points

This is the single greatest point of difference between the two plans. The **Port's plan** calls for *rotating city streets to create a new street grid that would connect to the waterfront*. The Port says the benefits of the new road configuration include: *the creation of a "Commercial Green" focal point, the opening up of new views from downtown to the west, a shorter connection between downtown and the waterfront, and the enhancement to potentially capture solar energy*.

The **City's plan** calls for *using the existing street grid that is in place downtown to connect to the waterfront*. The City says the benefits of this configuration include: *the provision for multiple "Great Places" and views, a pedestrian, human-scale, walkable street grid, and the ability to potentially preserve for a historic district*.

Many of the questions and comments at the meetings were focused on this key difference.

- Several people wondered what had happened to the “Downtown Framework Plan,” which had been introduced to the public in September 2006. This plan had incorporated a number of ideas generated from the public design meetings, and included the use of the existing street grid to enter the waterfront site, with a rotated grid on the site itself from the downtown out to the water. For these commenters, the Framework Plan had represented a good starting point for the master planning process, and they urged that it be revisited.
- Two people wondered about the level of private developer interest in the waterfront. How do each of the proposed street alignments work to attract private developers? Which one are they more interested in?
- Two people wondered whether the City or the Port had conducted a study to analyze the level of solar gain possible under each of the plans. Can you quantify what you will gain by using the rotated street grid?

Other individual comments included:

- Both plans need more excitement; they lack pizzazz. The east-west alignment of roads seems a little more exciting.
- Both plans lack a “sense of arrival.” The Port and City should work together to create a more notable entrance to the waterfront.
- The City’s plan is preferable. We want a straight shot to the water. Also, the City’s plan is better for transit operations.
- I’m glad the Port is considering smaller city blocks in their plan.
- I’m in favor of linking the new waterfront streets directly with our old city streets.
- I like the multiple entry points -- the City’s “Great Places” approach.
- I would like to see the area between downtown and the waterfront developed – it would be good to not have a “gap” between downtown and the water.
- Have you analyzed the impacts of each of the plans on wind flows? Does one plan have an advantage over another in terms of how wind will blow through the properties?
- Rounded corners are preferable for transit operations, especially at Bay and Oak and at Cornwall and Oak. The City should modify its plan to help better navigate street corners.

Written comments included:

- I think the Port’s rotated grid WITH more connections like the City’s is the best.
- The rotated grid will make the area feel unique and won’t create long views along streets, will calm traffic, will encourage development BUT to be bikeable, several connections are critical.
- I prefer the same street grid (City’s plan). Bellingham already has too many changes in street angles. No reason to continue it. The City’s plan has more entries in the area which will diffuse the traffic. The smaller blocks are more people sized. The Center for Public Places encourages people-sized development.
- The changing street names and angles that already plague the city will be increased by yet another odd grid. I prefer the continuation of the current downtown grid. Avoid: “Is that Dupont or Grand that turns into Meridian?”

Historic Preservation

This is an area of difference between the two plans. The **Port's proposal** addresses site history by *retaining large ceramic tanks, industrial equipment, and building materials for reuse. Five existing buildings would be further evaluated to determine if they can be preserved.*

The **City's proposal** addresses site history by assuming *retention of all historic properties, subject to further analysis and with their possible inclusion in a new "historic district."* For instance, the granary could become the focal point of the new "Granary Esplanade."

This topic generated numerous comments at both meetings:

- Four people urged the City and Port to compromise on this issue. While some buildings are important to save, they said, perhaps we do not need all nine buildings to be preserved. A substantial analysis should be performed to determine the cost of preservation/retrofit, as well as the cultural, historic and aesthetic value of each. The costs should be weighed against the benefits for each of these buildings.

Other individual comments included:

- We should slow things down. Why are we rushing to tear down buildings when the waterfront will take another twenty years to implement?
- Both the City and the Port should review documents from the Washington State Historic Trust. It recommends that certain buildings be protected from demolition, and both parties should consult this document before demolishing any buildings to accommodate new roads.
- The shipping terminals and warehouses should be preserved.
- I'm not interested in saving toilet paper buildings.

Written comments included:

- Preservation is key. I don't see why the rotated grid means all buildings are demolished, simply don't put the street through them. Dead ends (or walking plazas) will create gathering places.
- No historic buildings should be left unreinforced.
- The Museum's 1892 City Hall is a historic structure with architectural value. The Georgia-Pacific buildings have been an eyesore and are basically bricks surrounding machinery. If any are to be saved, it seems like a quick visit by folks with an eye purely for aesthetics (artists, architects etc.) could help put this one to bed. Let's use the bricks though....
- If possible and retrofitting is not too expensive. We have very little history still standing. We need to honor the past.
- I'd error on the side of preservation now. Take the buildings down later if needed.

View Corridors and Building Heights

The two plans differ on view corridors and building heights. The **Port's proposal** says it opens up new views from the downtown area out to the Puget Sound and the mountains.

There are *views to the site and to the water from downtown, and views back to downtown from buildings on the site. A few buildings could be up to 200 feet.*

The **City's proposal** says it maintains *existing views from downtown to the water and from the site back toward downtown. Most buildings would be constructed to a 75 foot maximum height; five or six buildings could be up to 120 feet.*

This topic created a lively discussion:

- In commenting on this element of the two plans, several attendees said that they hoped the City and Port would be able to reach a compromise on building heights. There was some indication from Port and City officials at the meeting that compromise was possible, and these commenters said they hoped that would, indeed, be the case.
- Two attendees asked how the developer perspective had been addressed in the City's plan. "Where are the opportunities for private investment?"

Other individual comments included:

- Have the City and the Port completed a mobility and a viewshed analysis for each of the plans?
- Be sure to impose strict design standards for any new buildings on the waterfront. The architecture for these buildings needs to be of high quality.
- What are the number of proposed housing units called for in each of the plans? (Both the City and the Port plans include about 2000 housing units.)
- Height limits should not be imposed. The plan should call for "skyline design" to embrace articulation. The City of Barcelona is a good example of this. Don't be scared by 200-foot buildings; give the development community some flexibility in this regard. 75-100 foot buildings are not necessarily economic from a construction perspective – don't impose stringent limits.

Written comments included:

- The most important thing is to not have all buildings the same height.
- If 200 feet is about 20 stories (10 feet/story) the few buildings will not fit with the design of Bellingham. There is more than one good view in this area. Also, the shadow and wind corridors from larger buildings are greater. 75 feet must be about 7 stories; that is still quite tall.
- I thought that the Waterfront Futures Group had really worked out the view corridors from both the water and downtown. The compromise shown by Christianson looks like it has potential. I like tall buildings too.

Phasing of Development

The **City's proposal** has put a high priority on ensuring that new waterfront development begins at the edge of downtown and moves out toward the water; the City is worried about "stranded" development on the waterfront. The **Port's proposal** has been less emphatic

about this; for example, its plan shows Western Washington University located on the water, with several blocks separating the WWU satellite campus and downtown. With its emphasis on the use of the existing street grid, the City's plan also calls for, and includes budget for, the immediate relocation of the railroad. This needs to occur before the new Cornwall Bridge can be built to provide a connection from downtown onto the waterfront site.

Comments on this aspect of the two plans included:

- A number of attendees asked about the timing of the railroad relocation, with two of them suggesting that this take place as soon as possible.
- Two people asked about the economic models/analysis that have been created for each plan. Is there economic data available to back up the ideas put forward in each of the plans?
- Two people asked the Port and the City to invite WWU to the table and public meetings in an effort to move the process along.
- Two meeting participants were enthusiastic about the potential for NOAA's partnership as a tenant on the waterfront, noting that NOAA is a great opportunity for Bellingham, especially with regards to jobs and to the local economy.

Other individual comments on this element included:

- WWU should be considered a highly valuable tenant, especially considering today's market economy. It is going to be very difficult to attract private investment, so we should consider WWU as a crown jewel for redevelopment. They should be allowed to locate themselves wherever they want to.
- One man urged the Port and City to create a timely mechanism for determining the final plan.
- One man said that the plan is a "placeholder." The development industry is dynamic; so Bellingham shouldn't get too hung up on details. He urged all participants to "get together and find something that works."
- The City and the Port need to take the needs of the public seriously when considering how to phase in the plan over time.
- Do either of the plans allow enough room for the current marina trade businesses on L and J Streets?

Written comments included:

- Railroad and Cornwall Bridge should be dealt with first as soon as possible.
- Do it right the first time. Move the railroad first. Do it right even if it is a little slower development at first.
- I am not sold on WWU at the waterfront. A lot of tax dollars in downtown – local and state money. If they're the anchor then hopefully their investment in development directors all over campus are securing private funds. Their development directors make more money than most faculty.

Costs

Estimates of the funding needed to create the infrastructure for waterfront redevelopment are very similar between the two plans: \$28 million for the Port's proposal, and \$33 million for the City's plan. In its budget, the City also calls for the budget needed for railroad relocation (\$12 million) and the construction of a new Cornwall Bridge (\$14 million).

Individual comments on this issue included:

- Are there specific funding deadlines we need to be aware of? Will we miss out on some grant funding, for example, if we don't make decisions soon enough?
- One man argued that from a sustainability perspective, up front costs are "first costs." He suggested that all costs are important including the long-term operation and maintenance costs for solar power versus other forms of energy.
- One meeting attendee urged the City and the Port to perform a life cycle cost analysis to determine the best way to establish long-term costs.

Written comments included:

- Do development at a cheaper cost.
- Why wasn't WWU at the meeting?

Planning Areas, Green Spaces and the Environment, Multi-Modal Transportation

The two plans are in strong agreement on these plan elements. Both plans call for five similar planning areas, 35 acres of parks and trails, and extensive accommodations for pedestrians, transit, and bicycles.

Comments received at the meetings included:

- Bellingham needs family housing and parks for kids who will live in those houses.
- What is the status of the waterfront clean up? Have the streets been designed in a way to serve as caps on the most contaminated areas?
- Two commenters asked about plans for bicycle and pedestrian analysis. Has a "mobility modeling analysis" been conducted on the two plans?
- Two people wondered how the Port and the City plan to address parking for users within the project area.
- Another meeting participant asked to see analysis of how each plan intends to be walkable and bike/pedestrian-friendly.

Written comments included:

- I like giving the waterfront to the residents of Bellingham and honoring marine trade heritage. We need to make our waterfront areas more than boutiques and restaurants but a space to live and work.
- Build the parks by the water early to give the citizens of Bellingham access to their waterfront.

- How are we to be certain WWU will make good use of funds towards “sustainable development” or “triple bottom line?” They don’t pay property tax and they may make parking handouts to deal with financing.
- I don’t understand how the claim of walkability, bikeability, transit/mobility can be made without knowing the street grid. What mobility modeling has been done?
- The Port plan funnels the traffic into one or two roads. Traffic jams are more likely. Have more entrances and exits for walkers, bikers, buses, and trails.
- I like the last bike route near the moved railroad track.
- I prefer the multiple access points from downtown to waterfront from City plan.