

Waterfront Redevelopment Discussions Summary of Comments November 13 & 17, 2008

Prepared for:

The City of Bellingham



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OVERVIEW

Mayor Dan Pike invited the public to learn about, and comment on, two plans for the redevelopment of Bellingham's waterfront. Both 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 180 people attended the November 13 meeting, and some 225 people were in attendance on November 17. In addition to the oral comments shared at each meeting, 33 people submitted written comments via email or through comment forms. This report summarizes the oral comments from the November 13 and 17 meetings held for the general public, and also includes written comments that were submitted up to November 20. 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 November 17, Port Commissioner Jim Jorgensen 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 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.

- Seven people said they supported the City's plan to extend the current downtown streets. They explained that keeping flow from the downtown to the waterfront area was critical.

- Three people said they like the Port's angled grid because it was imaginative and considered the center of Bellingham Bay as an element of its design. They identified the commercial green as an attractive park area typical of many American urban parks and liked the east-west orientation of the park for the views to the bay and to the mountains. They also saw the potential for sun gathering from the south.
- Four people commented that the Port's plan seemed too focused on automobiles, noting that it was not friendly to pedestrians, and that the City's plan is better for gas saving in the short-term.
- Two people commented that neither of the plans worked in terms of transportation. They asked to see a comprehensive transportation plan for each scheme. They also stated that both plans fail to achieve the transportation goals set forth in the DEIS/EIS.

Other individual comments included:

- Plan an "extension of downtown" not a "new neighborhood."
- We have enough charm without angled streets.
- One person thought the Port's grid created a barrier and would be confusing to drivers. They saw the City's grid as a better way to tie the downtown to the waterfront since the same street grid would be used. They also mentioned the possibility of better views and less traffic with the City's grid.
- One man urged a compromise between the Port and the City. He suggested that if the City's street grid prevails, the City should make concessions on historic preservation (i.e. preservation of demolition of the granary, tanks, bark/chipping building).
- I don't see the project as an extension of downtown. I believe angled streets will give better views.
- What is the hillside connection to waterfront? Will there be transportation? A connect from the Performing Art Center to Cornwall Street?
- Line up streets and make them work. Look to Newport, Rhode Island and Seaside, Oregon as to how to make the site a walkable, working waterfront.

Written comments included:

- While the City's idea has merit, the Port's concept would be more creative and allow for the benefits of solar gain. New views could enhance the experience of downtown but must be "sympathetic" to traditional values.
- The Port's proposal looks attractive but the City's proposal makes more sense. Port proposal appears too focused on arterials.
- I prefer the City's plan linking the waterfront to downtown. It will preserve views from downtown and cost less to achieve. The city plan for 75' height being the norm for buildings on the site is a vastly superior idea than the height limits proposed by the Port.

- The existing grid is more practical. Why does the Port want a complex, angled grid? It seems expensive and excessive.
- I do not agree with rotated grid at the north end of site as it breaks up connections with downtown and dooms historic buildings. I suggest we follow the Christenson/Blethen plan for streets. We should also move the railroad sooner rather than later.
- The City plan makes more sense for me. Bellingham is tough enough to get around without adding another neighborhood with off angle streets. The “Commercial Green” doesn’t work for me.
- I prefer the City’s plan to keep the existing grid. I believe it best connects the area to the rest of downtown and would create the most interesting view corridors. I also agree with the other benefits the City states – walkable grid, historic preservation, human scale, and even cost.
- I like the City’s proposal. We already have three grids; we don’t need a fourth.
- I strongly prefer the City’s street plan, particularly because of the walkability aspect. As a pedestrian, cyclist and driver, I believe that planning for walkability is key, especially as residents are encouraged to participate in multi-use areas. The amount of fill required to accommodate the Port’s plan is another reason I disagree with their plan.
- Bellingham already has too many conflicting grids, leading to the “you can’t get there from here” comments. Oddly angled intersections impede traffic and cause more accidents.
- I prefer the City’s plan to keep the current street grid. This will emphasize the waterfront’s connection to downtown which should flow back and forth.
- I prefer the City’s grid orientation. The existing grid will: 1) better link up with downtown, 2) use smaller blocks and 3) be bicycle & pedestrian friendly.
- I would like to voice support for the City’s plan as most closely following the citizens’ preferences for new growth. Their plan is preferable because it makes use of the grid and buildings currently on the site.
- The traditional grid in the City’s plan will save money on demolition and building infrastructure. It is environmentally sound, adapting buildings and streets for reuse rather than sending materials to the landfill.
- The traditional grid would save millions of tax dollars and preserve the heritage of our industrial waterfront. The City’s plan embodies a vision that incorporates Bellingham’s past as we move toward the future.
- Bring Kentucky Street up to truck standards. Remove parking on both Cornwall Street and Kentucky Streets on both sides. Build a parking garage along the bluff between Bay Street and Old Town (i.e. the outdated Sears Building).

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 encouraged the City and the Port to study the historical buildings before demolishing them. Several people said that other places have done some fantastic things with historical sites since they add instant character to a place.
- At least nine people stated that preserving historic buildings along the waterfront is a high priority for them. It was their opinion that several of Georgia-Pacific's buildings add visual interest and connect the site with the past.

Other individual comments included:

- Don't let Georgia-Pacific off the hook; they agreed to pay for all structures to be removed. That includes the ceramic tanks. Five existing buildings must be removed; all early studies said it's just too expensive to save them. The original waterfront group said to save the old courthouse and the great Northern Passenger station in Old Town instead. The Granary Esplanade is a bad item to save.
- Educate local youth about the historic value of Georgia-Pacific. Please explain the payoff of the site's development in the long-term.
- I prefer the removal of the mill building.
- Bellingham was built as a mill town; we once had the nation's largest salmon processing plant. Please consider Washington state preservation designations before demolishing a building.
- I think the Port's proposal adequately considers historic preservation in light of structural concerns and sea level issues – no sense in saving buildings that are structurally unsound or overly costly to renovate. New construction should make use of like materials and architecture to maintain the best of the traditional look. Architectural standards need to be developed to reflect historical theme – particularly at street level (i.e. Boston's Quincy Market and waterfront).

Written comments included:

- Take down all but 3-5 old buildings. Save the tanks, the granary building, and the chip/bark building.
- Preserving the existing historic structures should be a high priority if they add to the attractiveness and uniqueness of the area.
- There should be a high priority for preserving historic buildings and structures. Street grid should accommodate historically valuable buildings. The granary building should be preserved – or at least the core of it, with potential reconstruction of the lower portion.
- I think all Georgia-Pacific buildings and Port buildings should be removed so we can start over with cleared ground.

- There should be a high priority on preserving historic buildings. A historic district comes by saving the buildings you have NOW. You can always take one or two down later but you can't replace historic buildings that have been destroyed.
- Preserve existing structures. These buildings are our city's waterfront history. They are interesting since they are of the original brick. Historical buildings only need to be retrofitted for living accommodations not for historical displays.
- Every opportunity to save as many historic buildings as possible should be taken. These buildings could be beautiful centerpieces for the new waterfront, and reminders of the city's history.
- There should be a strong commitment to preserving historical structures and unique structures, but with common sense and pragmatism.
- By saving the granary and brick buildings, it would facilitate creation of a historic district within the waterfront. The more historic buildings we include, the more the waterfront will reflect our unique industrial and maritime heritage. The brick buildings form a cluster that is both aesthetically and historically significant. A historic district comprised of these buildings speaks to Bellingham's past of loggers, miners, poultry farmers, and paper makers; this district could attract heritage tourists and create jobs. Historic status would bring funding in the form of federal and state rehabilitation incentives.
- New construction could connect with the historic buildings by "mimicking" them and playing off the existing architectural styles.
- The Port has shown inexcusable failure to follow through on promises to pursue adaptive reuse. A huge waste of opportunity and resources has already occurred.
- Reuse would be great as long as the structures are safe.

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 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 debate:

- In commenting on this element of the two plans, several attendees said that they hoped the City and Port would keep buildings heights down to not damage current views or the character of Bellingham.
- Eight attendees asked to keep building heights low. They argued that people should not have to walk to the water to see the water.

Other individual comments included:

- Is there the possibility of retrofitting buildings for liquefaction?
- The City's proposal to maximize the existing downtown views and limit building height keeps the development on a scale appropriate to Bellingham. Certainly if taller buildings are allowed (200 ft per the Port's request) they should be off to one side or the other (North or South) of the development not in the center lined up with downtown Bellingham.
- Please be mindful of building heights. Please continue down Portland's path.
- I am comfortable with building heights of up to 75 feet in certain locations.
- "View corridors" are a joke. Keep building heights down so as not to impair current views.
- The Port's 200 foot buildings proposal is ridiculous. Why is that height needed? How about earthquakes? Where are all the kids that will live in those buildings going to go to school?
- Keep heights down. Value quality of life over money in someone's pocket. It sounds like the Port is concerned with profits.
- Keep building heights lower. The Port's plan of 200 feet buildings is just not Bellingham. I have lived here all my life – one reason is because Bellingham is the way it is. The Port is not in the business of community.
- I appreciate the City's investment in the arts district; do not wall it off. I am concerned about height and blocking views and sun.
- Is there information about setbacks? Buffer zones? What is the scale of buildings on waterfront? I don't want large looming buildings on waterfront; I want setbacks defined.

Written comments included:

- I don't think the view corridors are of great value. Tall buildings would be fine with me.
- Buildings should be considered on an individual basis. The demand to give blanket authorization should be resisted until a later stage, if ever.
- Building heights – everyone seems to ignore that the area is landfill. As such, knowing we will eventually have a "big one" it is dangerous to build tall buildings on landfill.
- I don't like the higher buildings. I'd prefer height restrictions throughout the development.
- Views are important. So is scale. The City's height limits are the best/better choice.
- The City's plan seems much more intuitive, keeping direct views with downtown and lower building heights for the maximum retention of views.
- I like the idea of the City's continuity of street views.

- I prefer the lower buildings heights. Every citizen I have spoken to agrees they do want low heights especially towards the water. Reason: more density = more traffic. The look of our City is negatively affected by sky scrapers. We want to remain a beautiful city.
- Strongly disagree with 200 foot buildings. They would dominate the site and block views from any building of lesser height. Restricted height = a more human scale.
- The City's plan is in keeping with Bellingham's character as it preserves views by restricting most buildings to a height of 75 feet rather than the Port's 200 feet. The number of tall buildings should be kept to a minimum and the sites for bulkier buildings should be carefully planned to retain views for existing buildings and homes. As the Bellwether site demonstrates, citizens in neighborhoods adjacent to the waterfront are willing to litigate to preserve their views. With a projected City budget shortfall of 4 million for 2009, this is not the time to build a city in the sky and alienate support.
- Suggest compromise is best here. Suggest maximum of 150 feet, with view corridors planned very early. Only ideal sites, lined-up to minimize impacts, should be allowed above 54 or 75 foot buildings.
- A mix of building heights is superior to uniformity – but I think 200' is excessive – compromise on 140-160' maximum height and only in limited quantities with careful location. View of sky is important too – not just city/bay/islands/mountains.

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 expressed concern about the viability of the City and Port partnership to get this project done, with two of them suggesting that binding arbitration might be the best way to get to a joint proposal.
- Two people suggested that the Port and City manage parts of the project that play to their individual strengths; the Port handles the industrial and commercial areas and the other planning areas go to the City.
- Two people stressed that the Port and the City need to be unified partners to attract NOAA; noting that NOAA is a great opportunity for Bellingham, especially with regards to jobs and to the local economy.

- Two meeting participants stated that every effort should be made to preserve the marine trade area. One recommended including a “farmers’ market-esque” small trade businesses on the waterfront (i.e. working waterfront) for those walking by.
- Eight people urged that development begin at the edge of downtown towards the water. This phasing will allow for changes along the way while preserving the waterfront.
- Two people questioned the financial assumptions that have been used in developing both of the plans. They cited Granville Island as a good development model that was not sold to private sector.

Other individual comments on this element included:

- The City should look at WWU as an “enterprise zone” to move forward.
- The Port and City should enter in conflict resolution and use the best minds in planning. Create an objective forum to balance public and private development with minimum impact to tax payers.
- Explain the tax revenue generated for each plan. How will it be dispersed locally?
- Need checks and balances.
- I do not like WWU as an anchor tenant. Move the railroad first with a 1.5 - mile double track from Whatcom Waterway to Boulevard Park Trail Crossing.

Written comments included:

- I strongly favor the city phased plan. It all seems too fictitious. Does WWU really have the money to buy into either plan?? If not, what is the backup plan?
- Makes sense to move railroad early on, while the money is still there.
- Start near central business district, as per City phasing.
- The Port’s idea makes no sense to me. Phased development will be critical – given the scope of project. Consistency in regulation and process will be essential to attracting investors and developers.
- The City plan is preferable because it phases in development as growth actually occurs, and it preserves Bellingham’s downtown.
- The City’s plan offers phased development and an urban reserve, preserving open space and green areas until they are actually needed for development. The first phase of development might also include pockets of urban reserve green areas that could be developed at a later date but which are initially retained as open space. The City’s plan seems to permit this option. Growth should be phased in as actually needed and as the economy permits.
- Why the rush to give land to WWU? There might be much better alternatives!!
- Phasing of development is the way the plan can be adjusted to need based on growth or the economy.
- Phase in gradually - it’s impossible to predict all contingencies – gradual approach allows for some degree of evolution to occur.

- If the initial phase of development is too rapid or too dense, we risk undermining the economy of the downtown.
- The City's proposed phasing permits adjustments as the economy waxes and wanes, inevitable during the 20 to 30 year development.

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. Under the Waterfront Connections plan, the City also specifies the budget needed for railroad relocation (\$12 million) and for the construction of a new Cornwall Bridge (\$14 million).

Individual comments on this issue included:

- We need financial commitments; state money for site clean up and WWU partnership for funding.
- The public needs clarity on revenue sources and expenditures for both the Port and the City.
- How is it conscientious for tax payers to pay infrastructure costs rather than a developer?
- I support the Mayor's efforts to resist giving the Port a carte blanche pass on regulatory approvals for developers. Values and knowledge change over time and I don't think we can predict what our preferences and needs are going to be in twenty-five years.

Written comments included:

- From the Waterfront Futures Group: The critically significant priorities needing Port and City attention are: a) drawing down state money earmarked for site clean-up, to eliminate the risk of legislative reallocation of these funds; b) providing WWU with all partner commitments necessary to seek state funding this legislative session for University development in the Waterfront District; c) forging the large financial commitments the partnership needs for redevelopment, given the dire economic conditions we all now face and, d) presenting the strongest possible proposal to NOAA for a unified community.
- Neither plan adequately addresses the question of whether selling public property to private developers is a wise financial policy, long-term. There is also inadequate consideration of future liability and monitoring costs, and who will pay for them.
- How will either plan be funded in these times of recession? Why not attract new tenant/jobs before building?
- Do not short-change greenways and parks to include shore restoration. Identify best shore and beach sites prior to losing those limited sites. Phase project similar to City's proposal.
- As much of the infrastructure as possible should be born by the developers rather than the taxpayers.

- Why are the taxpayers funding two parallel planning efforts, two planning staffs, two environmental planning staffs, etc. We have a city government. The Port should cede its authority over the site to the City and refocus their mission of promoting commerce.
- It is not clear that we need more commercial space or condos until we fill the backlog of unleased and unsold space.
- The chosen plan needs to attract developers to interior area near Log Pond Area.
- Private investment is missing in both plans, show me the private investment, then zone the area for that. WWU is not private investment money, it is tax money.

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:

- The Log Pond Area is coming back to life and attracting wildlife; it would be a neat feature to highlight.
- The City of Bellingham needs more than 35 acres of open space. We need a big park!
- Encapsulate the existing dump at the water's edge into the deep water area.
- The Marine Trades Area should include a dedicated corridor for better connection between Old Town and lettered streets at the waterfront.
- What happened to Plan 3, Industrial? The original Waterfront Futures Group was promised that the area east of Whatcom Creek would get equal planning for the City to keep that area industrial. They were also promised to get a full planners' guide to make it a superfast rail, trucking, container ship area. So far the Port has not given us that option.

Written comments included:

- Please protect as much green space near the water as possible. One area in particular that doesn't get much attention but which cries out for preservation as a "green space" is the area at the head of the IFJ inlet.
- Neither plan specifies rehabilitation of the head of Whatcom Waterway!! They should!! And remove the sewer line!
- Environmental clean up, habitat restoration, open spaces, and public spaces should be of utmost priority. Think future – 30 years from now and what will we need there.
- As little car transportation as possible should be encouraged. Encourage pedestrian walkways, places for kids to play and ride bikes (think Boulevard Park on a nice day). There always needs to be more public use areas.

- Neither plan has enough emphasis on water transport! This is a huge omission and needs immediate correction. The Port's plan assumes way too many cars, roads, and parking lots.
- Go green. Wide streets sound nice but will draw too many cars.
- The City's plan is better but not good enough. There should be fewer roads and more bike, pedestrians, and shuttle buses in and out of site.
- Keep blocks smaller as per the City's plan.
- The City's plan would benefit Bellingham's downtown rather than creating a new city center to compete with it.
- Assumption of 12,000 cars is not sustainable!
- Can't materials and old buildings be used for "sustainable development"?
- Do not hinder use of shore-park areas by the location of streets. Avoid roads too close to shore.
- There should be living wage jobs on-site without undue risk to health (on ground floors) or exposure to toxic building materials.
- It is very important to keep the area as open and friendly for all the public to be able to use.
- The merits of situating a marina capable of mooring additional recreational watercraft must be weighed in relation to the overall health of the shoreline and bay ecology.
- What are the long-term environmental consequences, meaning 75 to 100 years, of the various proposed plans?
- The City plan has better ideas for bicycles. The Port is too focused on parking cars.
- The City plan seems better designed for walking and biking. Include water taxis. Limit parking (i.e. less than Port plan).
- Lack of imagination about alternative transport - especially water transport, light rail, etc.
- Keep area the waterside of the Granary building for a pedestrian use only narrow walkway. Move railroad soon. Build high-speed bike path on side by bluff. Include other bike lanes by the water.
- Current idea of a 38' road is NOT pedestrian friendly, particularly when crossing. Consider narrower one-way streets and 20' wide sidewalks to accommodate streetside cafes, benches, or perhaps mini-green spaces as well.
- Less parking means fewer cars. Fewer cars means a cleaner, safer, more environmentally friendly waterfront.
- I like high speed bike commuter idea. This is incredibly effective in Davis, CA.
- I would like to see a pedestrian bridge from the Broadway overlook over the railroad tracks. It would connect Columbia, lettered streets, Broadway Park and Cornwall Park areas to the waterfront; fitting nicely with a pedestrian friendly plan.

- I fear this will be yet another city development with too little parking for realistic use by those who live outside the downtown core and too low a service level on the streets. It's nice to encourage mass transit but it isn't a viable option for many of us and is especially not going to be used by most of the serious shoppers necessary to support the downtown merchants.
- A dedicated high speed bicycle commuter corridor would be a fantastic addition to the planning area.
- Car parking should be hidden like Whistler B.C.