

# CHUCKANUT BAY FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

**Pamela M. M. Jull, PhD**  
**Applied Research Northwest**

## INTRODUCTION

In October and November 2009 the City of Bellingham and Applied Research Northwest hosted two focus group discussions regarding the restoration of the Chuckanut Bay Marsh. These discussions followed three public meetings and the design of structural changes to the beach and access for visitors. The purpose of the discussions was to:

- Present the current plan for the structural changes to the beach and the timeline.
- Review the City's justification for the project (preserve one of Bellingham's few remaining salt marsh habitats and improve tidal flow into the marsh while reducing pollutants).
- Identify their current perceptions of problems in the area.
- Discuss potential interventions using a social marketing framework (prioritize problems, identify barriers and incentives, messages and methods for communicating them).

The first group consisted of eleven residents of the Chuckanut Marsh area and the second included six kayakers and visitors to the beach.

## OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE PLAN

Response to the plan was mostly positive. Initially, residents had been concerned that the City would try to transform the area into a more formal park, like Marine Park or Boulevard Park. The area has a wild, untamed feel to it that is highly valued among residents and visitors to the beach. Although the plan changes the way that the beach is accessed, participants saw removing parking from the beach as being very beneficial at preventing problems they've observed in the past (partying, littering and noise in particular), without unfairly inconveniencing them. However, there were some concerns as well.

The bay is hit by southerly winds during the winter, which pushes driftwood high onto the beach. Residents anticipate that the new culvert may be damaged or blocked by driftwood, requiring maintenance on the part of the city. Some said they thought the city routinely came to the beach to clear driftwood on an annual basis.

Some kayakers were concerned that people would misuse the loading zone as parking, leaving others to haul their boats from the more remote parking area. In addition, some participants were concerned about poor visibility (and therefore safety) in the loading zone's backing area due to some high-growing brush. Still others were concerned that poor parking practices might

lead to the access trail being blocked and inaccessible to bikes and pedestrians. For all these reasons a circular drop off area is preferred.

Many participants expressed concerns about disruption of bird and other nesting animals' habitat during the construction.

**PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION**

Participants identified problems related to people's use of the area and problems that may arise due to the changes the City plans. Participants identified those that have the largest negative impacts either socially or ecologically and chose to focus on the following (additional issues are addressed below).

**Table 1. Key problems identified in focus groups.**

| <b>Group 1: Residents</b>                                 | <b>Group 2: Kayakers/Visitors</b>                   |
|---|---|
| Illegal activities and parking                            | Parties (especially at night)                       |
| Overnight camping human waste and litter, noise, drug use | Fires   |
| Parking illegally   | Littering   |
| Speeding  | Human waste (no outhouse is available at the beach) |
| Fires and fireworks                                       | Parking problems                                    |

The following additional concerns were raised. They are not a focus of the remainder of this report, but are included for City information and use.

- Property owners have moved their landscaping down into the buffer zone (300' buffer mandated by Shoreline Management Act).
- People's use of the area disrupts bird habitat and nesting. Raising people's awareness of where the nests are so they aren't disturbed is important
- The beach has the dual designation as a shellfish harvesting area and a city park. Since city parks are closed after dusk, and low tides often occur in the winter months after dusk, these mixed uses are in conflict with one another.
- DNR is not able to staff sufficiently to enforce regulations regarding shellfish harvesting in the area

The behaviors the groups determined they wanted to promote were:

- Keep it clean – litter, human and dog waste in particular
- Keep it broadly accessible – to bikes, pedestrians, and people who need/want to park there. This means that visitors both to the beach and the neighborhood are aware of pathways and parking areas and don't block them or overwhelm the area.
- Treat the area with respect for people, the animals and the shoreline – keep noise down, use the site appropriately, understand its fragility

- Be aware of where you walk, protecting sensitive areas

## BARRIERS AND INCENTIVES

The groups identified barriers and incentives associated with these goals. Some address multiple behaviors. Barriers are anything that makes it difficult to engage in the desired behavior. They often include cost, inconvenience, a lack of awareness or skills, poor motivation and poor memory. Incentives are anything that makes a behavior easier to do or makes the competing behaviors more difficult. They often include providing education, building/making visible social norms, providing reminders, asking for a commitment, or providing for discounts or fines. Not all of these may be needed to successfully encourage the desired behaviors.

### Barriers

- Dog owners are unaware of the impacts of dog waste
- People have their dogs off leash and so they don't know where the dogs are leaving their waste
- People are not willing to pick up their dogs' waste.
- There is no facility for people to use as a restroom.
- There is limited parking for visitors to residents in the neighborhood
- Trash cans are not located in optimal places. There are not enough of them.
- Visitors to the beach are not aware of their impacts (noise, litter) on wildlife
- Visitors to the beach are not aware of their impacts on local residents
- Visitors to the beach are unaware of the character or sensitivity of the area
- Visitors at the beach feel isolated and so they behave as if they are not impacting anyone
- Public land is not designated clearly, so people aren't aware of how much they can legally access. Similarly people are not aware of the sensitivity of areas that they are permitted to access.

### Incentives

- Provide a pet waste bagging station close to the beach so pet owners can easily get a bag if they are willing.
- Maintain an outhouse at the site.
- Place trash cans in parking area and close to the beach. Empty as frequently as needed.
- Make parking rules clear from the start
- Prohibit overnight parking
- Promote remote parking and carpooling for groups (Kayakers already are doing this)
- Provide information about the marsh near the parking area, much like the information posted at many trail heads. Maps may designate public lands and sensitive areas. Interpretive info could also be provided (where bird nesting areas are, species there etc.).
- Make a clear distinction that people will notice upon entering the area – perhaps designate it as a Sanctuary.
- Post a sign prohibiting fires and fireworks
- Remove the parking from the beach so people will have to walk down rather than party in their cars
- Give residents and visitors clear information about who to call to report problems and to get law enforcement involved.
- Provide a locked gate that can only be opened by park employees and local residents for afterhours access
- Develop a Beach Watch network, much like a neighborhood watch to provide neighbor to neighbor support in monitoring illegal use of the area

## STRATEGIES

The groups' participants discussed ways to enhance the incentives and build awareness beyond signage. Although engaging local service clubs (e.g. boy scouts) in protecting, maintaining or improving the area or providing education events might help build awareness, both users and residents view the beach as a "well kept secret" and do not want to engage in activities that promote use of the area to more and more people. If more people use the area, it will be more likely to result in more of the problems they are seeking to solve.

## MESSAGES

Discussion group participants discussed what they wanted people to believe or think about the area in the long term, as well as in the short term as the construction changes how it looks and is used. These messages can be used to set the tone for the development of the interpretive and other work at the site. They include:

- This is a sanctuary. It is beautiful and has a unique character
- By respecting the area people are protecting a nursery of wildlife where nesting, spawning and birthing takes place.
- It is a magical spot, providing an illusion of being in a wild space in the midst of a city.
- Save it.
- The Golden Rule applies.
- It has been a socially transforming area for more than 100 years. It connects us to our history.
- The changes will improve fishing and shell-fishing for those who use the area for those pursuits.
- The changes will not remove kayakers or residents access to parking.
- The changes will reduce unwanted behaviors and questionable uses of the beach.

## NEXT STEPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Participants in focus groups provide useful, rich and clear information for development of environmental education and outreach programs. However, their ideas are not broadly representative of all people in the area. The findings from these focus groups will inform the development of a survey to be fielded in January 2010 to residents of the area and those who attended any of the three public meetings. The survey findings will help the City prioritize it's approach to developing the environmental education plan for the area as well as identify effective messengers for the information.

Several problems will require additional attention from the city. Although it was previously evaluated, engineers should revisit the plans to determine if a circular drop off area is yet

feasible, given the anticipated problems the current design may produce (misuse of loading area for parking, blocked pedestrian and bike access and poor visibility and safety for those using the backing area).

Although not discussed in the focus groups, the City needs to consider carefully the placement of the restroom facilities for the beach. If it is too inconvenient, people will not use it reliably.

People need to be repeatedly informed of the considerations the City is undertaking to protect the shoreline and animals that inhabit the area during construction. They need to be assured that is being managed properly.

Limiting promotion of information to on-site displays is a safe first step, though regular visitors and neighbors will need to be encouraged to take on the role of local experts to help people who do not read the interpretive information or do not understand proper use of the area. Promoting awareness of the area to people who do not currently use it could inadvertently increase use and therefore human impacts and problems in the area.

Dog walkers may need more information and education to be motivated enough to manage their dogs' waste at the beach. Snohomish County Surface Water Management's program characterizes dog waste as raw sewage to get the message across. They provide a number of [posters](#) that help people understand the contaminants of dog waste and why it's important to bag it and throw it away. Adapting them to the beach and rotating them periodically could raise awareness of the problem.

People are unlikely to read more than one or two short sentences from any of the information provided on the site. To effectively reach a broad audience, the City's interpretive materials and signage should be strongly visual and easy to understand at a glance. Additional information can be provided for visitors who are interested in learning more, but high priority messages must require little time or interest from others in order to comprehend what they need to do.