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Thursday, November 18, 2004

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Audience favorable to growth plan

Aubrey Cohen, The Bellingham Herald

People seemed generally receptive Wednesday evening to a consultant's recommendation to accommodate most of Bellingham's growth in dense urban villages, with some infilling of established neighborhoods.

"I hate consultants," Don Shank, of Bellingham, told Spokane consultant Bill Grimes. "I was pleasantly surprised, though, with your effort."

Bellingham, Whatcom County and the Whatcom Transportation Authority hired Grimes' firm, Studio Cascade, to write a plan for how and where the city should accommodate the 31,600 people the city is projected to gain between 2002 and 2022 - growth expected to require an estimated 14,100 new homes.

"No action is not an alternative," Bellingham Planning and Community Development Director Jorge Vega said. The city must plan because of state law and to protect rural areas, he said.

The plan calls for putting 8,475 homes, along with stores and other amenities, in 23 dense urban centers - some existing and some new. The centers include the downtown core; regional districts, like Fairhaven and Barkley Village, that draw people from across the city; neighborhood villages, like the Fountain District, serving people who live within a mile; and pocket villages, like the Silver Beach commercial strip, for the immediate vicinity.

The plan fits 3,775 homes into neighborhoods, mostly as accessory units on existing lots, but also as cottages, town homes and small apartment buildings. The plan includes an alternative with fewer homes in urban villages and more in neighborhoods, but Grimes said putting more homes in villages would make the villages work and protect the character of single-family neighborhoods.

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Craig Moore, of Edgemoor, worried there would be no way to change the plan if it's not working.

"This sounds like it's going to be a juggernaut," he said.

After Grimes' presentation, eight audience members pulled out signs protesting condo development in Fairhaven and calling for an end to the Fairhaven parking district, which allows developers to pay toward street parking in lieu of on-site requirements.

"The test case is going to be what happens in Fairhaven," Moore said. "I have an office there and it's actually impossible to get out of our driveway because of traffic."

The plan falls short of finding a place for all of the projected growth. A draft plan had included another 1,800 homes in Larrabee Springs, a development proposed at Smith Road and Guide Meridian, outside the current Bellingham growth area. But local officials decided to focus just on the existing city and growth area.

Vega said officials would have to look into changing the growth area, much of which is covered with wetlands or is in the Lake Whatcom watershed.

The plan lays out recommendations to guide growth. These include changing plans and zoning, increasing community involvement, providing neighborhood amenities with density, bringing in institutions like schools and churches, adding staff training and design guidelines, mixing residential and commercial uses, allowing rural landowners to sell development rights for use in the city, creating tax incentives for infilling, increasing high-frequency transit corridors and not improving roads that facilitate sprawl.

Grimes recommended prioritizing development of urban villages in Old Town, the Fountain District, the central waterfront and the Ohio Street area.

The Bellingham Planning Commission is scheduled to consider the growth forum report on Dec. 2, then make recommendations to the City Council.

Bellingham planner Greg Aucutt said it would be up to city officials to decide what to do with the plan's recommendations. Earlier this week, he said officials could make needed changes for some areas in 2005, while other changes could take years.

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