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Center helps growth dialogue



Dedicating a space for people to give input on growth issues speaks to the city's commitment to involve residents in the process of deciding how Bellingham and Whatcom County will handle change. The changes seem to be coming faster and faster as more people move into the city and homes are springing up everywhere.

The city has always provided venues for people to give input, but not everyone is willing or able to go to a meeting or forum. And sometimes those events are seen as "Oh, just another one of those meetings."

A physical space that says, "Hey, we are talking about growth issues and we can



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answer your questions or listen to your ideas," offers a whole new array of ways people can participate on various levels. The center is housed in one of downtown's newest buildings, the Marketplace Building at Railroad Avenue and Holly Street. This center is a place where people can learn about the process, see recommendations and find out how to participate.

Bellingham, Whatcom County and Whatcom Transportation Authority are all involved in the center because all are impacted by Bellingham's growth. Projections estimate that 31,600 will move to Bellingham in the next 20 years.

As with most issues, this one is divisive and has vocal groups on either end of the spectrum. There is a faction of residents who thinks growth is evil and will ruin our community. There is a faction that thinks the more new driveways we put in, the better. And there is the vast majority in the middle, who enjoy their current quality of life and are largely unsure how things might change and how those impacts might affect them.

Public forum

First series of public forums on growth begins Saturday at Sehome High School, 2700 Bill McDonald Parkway. For details, call: 676-6982.

The drop-in center is located at 120 E. Holly St. and can be reached at 647-5235.

These people are probably the least likely to be involved in the discussion - until something affects their neighborhood. Those who have been involved in issues for a long time can already navigate the confusing process, so this will be most beneficial to people who want



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to become involved.

It's essential that people are talking about outcomes and planning and driving the future of our community, rather than just letting it happen. Too often, citizens get involved too late in the process to make a difference and planners are left scratching their heads and saying, "Where were you when we were asking for public comment on this?"

So much is going on right now, it's sometimes hard to keep track: there are new commercial and residential buildings recently completed, under construction and still on paper from Fairhaven through downtown, to the Fountain District and out near Whatcom Community College.

There are plans for a new library, a new Children's Museum and an enclosed Farmers Market. The Mount Baker Theatre is under renovation.

And there are new little neighborhoods springing up everywhere from the southern part of the city out to Northwest Road.

The city, county and WTA have done their part in reaching out. Now it's time for the citizens to respond.

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