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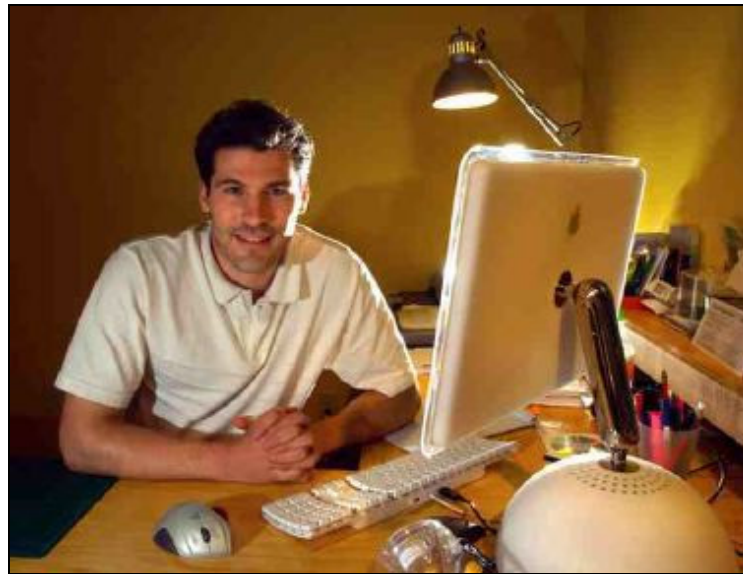
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VOICES BEHIND THE NEWS

Student finds strong feelings about growth



LEARNING CONCERNS: Mark Hamilton is an Urban Planning and Environmental Policy student through Huxley College at Western Washington University. He's interning at the Bellingham Growth Forum drop-in center, 120 E. Holly St., where he hears a lot of public concerns. *PETE KENDALL*

Aubrey Cohen, The Bellingham Herald

As intern planner for the Bellingham Growth Forum, Western Washington University student Mark Hamilton is seeing what happens when civic planning gets out of the classroom.

The forum - sponsored by Bellingham, Whatcom County and the Whatcom Transportation Authority - is an effort to involve residents in deciding how to accommodate the 31,600 people projected to move to Bellingham and its growth area between 2002 and 2022.

today's

Hamilton, 27, is majoring in urban planning and environmental policy. With the growth forum, he staffs a drop-in center, helps with meeting logistics and discussion of growth options, and has asked people around the city to prioritize issues like traffic congestion, affordable housing and economic development.

The drop-in center, at 120 E. Holly St., is open from noon to 6 p.m., Monday, Wednesday and Friday through the end of the month, when consultant Studio Cascade presents its recommendations and Hamilton's internship ends.

What's the attendance been like at the center?

"On average probably 10 people a day. ... When we first opened we had quite a bit more traffic. ... Through the middle of the summer there still were many people coming in, but not to the same volume. The last two weeks there's been an increased volume again."

What is the most important thing you've learned from this process?

"Taking classes at Huxley you don't learn how contentious some of the issues are. ... You don't quite know what you're getting into until you get out there and actually start experiencing it."

What else?

"People really have as good an idea of what they want to have their community look like as professionals. ... There's kind of an untapped wealth of knowledge and caring in the community."

Has there been anything particularly surprising about your work on this?

"I would say the only surprising thing is there is a sense of distrust between a lot of people I talk to and the city, or toward the city's intents or motivations. ... I get the impression that some people think they're in bed with the developers and the development community, and they're not looking out for the little guy."

What are people worried about?

"I think a lot of people see bad examples of growth and see bad examples of multi-family (housing) and then they see this process and intuitively they think we're going to be getting more of those. ... When people come in and they can see what the actual proposals are and what these might look like they are not as fearful."

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