



Community Photos: A Visual Survey

Community Input

Visual Survey: August – September 2004

Summary of Images & Comments Received

The Bellingham Growth Forum provided numerous ways for participants to share ideas. One novel approach offered citizens free “disposable” cameras, asking each to visually capture favored (or non-favored) elements of Bellingham’s environment. Beginning at the first neighborhood meeting on August 9, approximately 40 participants took part in the visual survey. Each took an average of 20 images based on printed criteria provided at the meetings and at pick-up locations.

The resulting images are grouped into one of seven categories:

1. Streetscapes
2. Public Spaces
3. Mixed-use
4. Shopping Areas
5. Neighborhoods
6. Miscellaneous
7. Negative Photos

Below is a summary and analysis of the photos received. As such, we have not attempted to describe every photo submitted, instead providing an overview of common or predominant themes either represented in the images or, as in some cases, the written comments supplied on the images themselves. The full image collection was posted from September 7th through the month of October at the Downtown Drop-In Center, and was featured at the Forum’s “Planning Fair” event on September 21st. The prints, as well as associated documents, will be provided to the City at time of delivery of the Growth Forum report.

Streetscapes

Circulation and infrastructure concerns were a central theme with participants. Roadway design, alleyways, congestion levels and parking were depicted numerous times in submittals. Themes in the category of streetscapes include:

- **Alleyways:** Participants favored the provision of alleyways, allowing for access to utilities and additional parking, as well as pedestrian paths apart from traffic. Alleyways were also seen to increase the attractiveness of a neighborhood, and were appreciated for their ability to provide meeting areas for neighbors to converse.

- **Street Trees:** Images supported the separation of pedestrians from automotive traffic through the use of street trees. Tree-lined boulevards were visually appealing to participants, and recognized for their ability to reduce traffic speed.
- **Street Lighting:** The presence of lighting in the form of pedestrian-scale lampposts was appreciated for its ability to increase safety - through illumination, and through the delineation such features provide between walkways and motorways.
- **Parking:** On-street parking was seen as an appealing alternative to parking lots. Reasons cited or implied included traffic calming, convenience, and greater space efficiency.
- **Traffic Calming Devices:** Images often portrayed crosswalks, narrowed roadways, pedestrian signage, on-street parking, bike lanes, roundabouts and other features that aid in traffic calming.
- **Planting Strips:** Participants provided images of planting strips between roadways and sidewalks. These green buffers, often with trees, aid to separate walkways from motorways, and add tremendous aesthetic appeal.
- **Sidewalks:** Images favored the provision of sidewalks on both sides of roadways. Variety of sidewalk width was also portrayed, adjusted according to intensity of development.
- **Road Width:** Narrow streets were seen as more appealing than wide expanses of pavement. Some advocated for variety of street width in neighborhoods, adjusted according to use intensity. Photos also showed larger arterials with planted “boulevard” islands separating direction lanes.

Public Spaces

In survey documents, participants were asked “what is special to you about your public spaces?” Many different features were identified in photographs and comments, with broad themes including:

- **Covered Shelters:** These were recognized for direct sheltering capacity, as well as their ability to act as a focal point for public spaces, and facilitating gatherings and street musicians.
- **Community Gardens:** Some identified shared community gardens as a productive use of space, and as a catalyst for social interaction on a neighborhood scale.
- **Playgrounds:** These were identified as an important component in the functioning of public areas; safe and attractive playgrounds are often heavily used, and promote social interaction.
- **Variety:** Many photographs portray variety in urban spaces. Features seen as positive include the natural environment, historic elements, cycling paths, walkways, and other typical components promoting urban activity. All were seen to “activate” and promote social interaction, with photos showing people playing and milling about, holding weddings, family reunions, and neighborhood get-togethers.
- **Water Features:** Participant photographs noted the value of water, with shots of Bellingham Bay, Lake Whatcom, and fountains for kids to play in.

- **Natural Environment:** Natural elements appear frequently in the photographs, including grassy areas, deciduous and evergreen trees, shrubs of every variety, as well as rock outcrops and hills; all were appreciated for their beauty and contrast to the built environment of the City.
- **Welcoming Areas:** Photos and comments supported accessible, inviting public spaces such as Fairhaven Park.
- **Usage Designation:** Images at times conveyed appreciation for design that helped define walkways through public spaces, and for benches supplied in a variety of locations within such spaces.

Mixed-Use

Photographers were asked to identify mixed-use buildings that are appealing around the City. Many people submitted photos that included commercial businesses on the ground floor and residential/office spaces above. A few people included images of a mix of land uses adjacent to one another, i.e., industrial abutting commercial, etc. Site specific and area specific analysis are included in the following common themes:

- **Building Heights:** “Human scale” is recognized as important in determining appropriate heights for buildings in Bellingham. Photos conveyed appreciation for mixed-use buildings between two and four stories. Among these, fluctuation in height was favored for visual variety.
- **Story Separation:** Images sometimes captured architectural details highlighting the transition between building uses, i.e., between ground level retail and residential above.
- **Facades:** Photos depicted many historic or well-integrated historic-context building facades. Architectural style seemed less important to respondents than design conducive to urban vitality.
- **Covered Access:** Awnings were a recognized component of successful buildings, with photographs capturing ground-floor businesses so equipped to shelter sidewalks, as well as those covering building entrances.
- **Windows:** Images often captured window displays fostering transparency between street and building, as well as promoting “window shopping.” Smaller windows for above-grade office and residential occupancies were also depicted.
- **Sidewalk Access:** Every pictured mixed-use building featured sidewalk access. Often, images showed positive “spill-out” onto sidewalks with wares and seating.
- **Places to Park:** Not one submitted photo depicted a mixed-use building with a parking lot between it and the roadway. All showed on-street parking in front of the building, with additional parking lots located next to or behind the building.
- **Age Diversity:** Participants submitted photographs of mixed-use development of varying vintage and style – historic and contemporary examples seemed to find favor in equal measure.

Shopping Areas

Participants were asked to take pictures of what they would like shopping areas in Bellingham look like in the future, based on current examples. Instructions also challenged photographers to envision rising gasoline prices and resulting effects on shopping behavior, and include ideas on archetypes most adaptable to changing conditions over the next 50 years. The following are common among the submitted photos:

- **Vegetation:** Ample grasses, street trees, and shrubs were common in many of the “favorable” pictures of shopping areas.
- **“Buy Local”:** Local businesses within shopping areas were favorably represented, with such businesses often depicted in photos.
- **Neighborhood Grocery:** Participants noted the importance and benefit of neighborhood grocery stores. Often, the same neighborhood grocery would appear in multiple images.
- **Cycling Access:** Parked bicycles, bike riders and bike racks were prevalent among submitted images, highlighting the ability of cycling infrastructure to facilitate travel options.
- **Weather Protection:** Awnings, or other cover for shoppers was seen in many popular shopping areas. The obvious need and utility of such features seemed to be appreciated by participants.
- **Pedestrian Orientation:** Positively identified shopping opportunities displayed a “walk-up” feel. Supporting features included sidewalks, street trees, awnings, stores oriented to sidewalks, and lack of large parking lots in front of businesses.
- **Disbursed Goods and Services:** Though impossible to convey in individual images, the collection conveyed the value of stores dispersed throughout urban areas, providing ease of access, walk-ability, and convenience for residents.
- **Spill-Out:** Some participants noted the lack of barriers between businesses and sidewalks as favorable, depicting “spill-out” shopping, dining, and access to passers-by.
- **Residence Conversion:** Photos showed retail uses in converted houses, showing appreciation for the ability of such structures to “anchor” businesses in a residential context, as well as helping to make doing business in Bellingham more affordable for small merchants.
- **Parking:** A majority of “favorable” shopping areas showed on-street parking in front. One neighborhood grocery, pictured several times, featured a small angled parking lot in front of the store, abutting additional angled street-front parking.

Neighborhoods

Participants were invited to visually depict what they enjoy about neighborhoods within the City. The beneficial aspects of the built and natural environment, as well as the goings-on within neighborhoods, are included in this category. Common themes are:

- **Varying Multi-Family:** Participants identified the importance of diverse forms of multi-family housing. Co-housing, duplexes that mesh with single-family homes, well-

designed apartment complexes and condominiums were all depicted frequently as positive ways to approach multi-family dwellings.

- **Classic Architecture:** An appreciation of classic architectural styles was evident in many of the photos. Especially interesting were images depicting the incorporation of historic architectural elements in newer multi-family housing units.
- **Quality Landscaping:** The value of well-kept yards and vegetated areas was high in the visual survey. Participants found colorful gardens, green lawns, trees, and shrubs very appealing, and appreciated the contribution such elements played in neighborhood “ambience.”
- **Fitting-In:** Harmonizing building design and function with historic neighborhood context was important to participants, who seemed to recognize the importance of good design in Bellingham.
- **Garage Orientation:** Garages depicted were usually recessed from street facades or located behind residences. Few residences were shown with garages oriented close to roadways and/or sidewalks.
- **Infilling in Traditional Neighborhoods:** Several participants suggested infilling techniques such as Accessory Dwelling Units (ADU’s) on single-family lots, and incorporating duplexes designed to harmonize with surrounding neighborhoods. Existing, acceptable examples of these were shown in photographs.
- **Reusing Buildings:** Participants documented reuse examples including a church transformed into a daycare, a house transformed into a chiropractic office, and a commercial space converted to multi-family housing. These types of conversions were seen as favorable from standpoints of affordability, utility, and historic reference.
- **Neighborhood Identity:** Images favored general characteristics of neighborhoods that promoted local identity; such distinctions were celebrated and supported.
- **Smaller Homes:** Often captured are homes of modest size. Interestingly, none of these small homes appeared to be new. Were no new smaller homes worthy of positive identification, or are no new smaller homes being built in Bellingham?
- **Orientation of Houses:** Most pictured residences have small landscaped areas between the home and the sidewalk; very few depict residences set far back from roadways. Front doors are typically shown facing adjoining rights-of way (especially those associated with detached single-family residences.)
- **Front Porches:** Covered spaces at or near front entryways were common to many of the images. As might be expected, porches varied greatly in size and function - some providing space for seating and planters, others as simple entry markers.
- **Green Buffers and Trees:** Support for separating land-uses with greenways was noticeable in many photographs. Advantages of greenways are well documented, though photos received seem to convey appreciation for screening of adjacent developments, as well as obvious ecological and aesthetic functions.
- **Diversity in Neighborhoods:** Whether via housing type, size, architectural style or function, diversity within neighborhoods was often portrayed. Color applied to homes

and neighborhood features, varied streetscapes, differing types of play/gathering areas and houses of worship were seen to promote functional, pleasing neighborhoods.

Miscellaneous

Positive images that did not fit into the above categories were grouped into the following “miscellaneous” listings. (Participants were also given a catchall challenge to identify whatever they enjoy in Bellingham.) Miscellaneous themes are:

- **Spruce-Up Drab Surfaces:** Vibrant color and artwork were seen to improve otherwise plain walls and sidewalks. Public art was portrayed as beneficial in neighborhoods too, outside traditional placement in parks and gathering places.
- **Trails and Natural Areas:** One participant wrote on the back of a picture: “The Arboretum is Bellingham’s jewel – may we always keep its borders intact.” This seems a good example of the conservation ethic that many residents of Bellingham identify with. Bellingham is known for its expansive trail network and abundance of green space. Small wonder then, that trails and natural areas were depicted in nearly half of the photographs in the miscellaneous category.
- **View Preservation:** A few participants considered establishing view corridors and positioning housing on higher lot elevations (to optimize views) as important.
- **Preserving Functioning Historic Buildings:** On the back of one photograph a participant wrote: “Encourage preservation of the story of our heritage.” Many would seem to agree that this is a vital consideration as Bellingham grows. Tremendous historic, aesthetic, and economic value can be tapped through preservation of Bellingham’s original government buildings, schools, and other historic buildings.
- **Low-Income Opportunities:** Some participants tried to convey the need to assure continued and growing support for housing and services made available to those with lower-incomes. Accessible public transportation was also indicated as a priority.
- **Creativity in Parking:** Participants favored on-street parking, though small parking lots located near (but not in front of) shopping areas were also seen as positive. Some wished alleys were also expanded or modified for parking uses.
- **Alternative Education:** Some participants valued different types of learning environments, promoting alternative schools as effective vehicles for quality education.
- **Accessing the Waterfront:** A few photographers emphasized links between Bellingham and its waterfront. Dock and trail connections, as well as informational signs were identified as important in physically and mentally connecting citizens with Bellingham Bay.
- **Public Art:** Art was often photographed as enriching the urban landscape in Bellingham.
- **Accessing Bellingham:** Boats in the Marina, a ferry docked at the Ferry Terminal, the railroad station, and railroad tracks were depicted in many images.

Negative Images

Participants were also given the opportunity to photograph things they disliked about Bellingham. The following are the most commonly acknowledged negative features:

- **Large Parking Lots, Multi-Family:** Numerous participants saw abundant parking visible from adjacent roadways as negative. Some images focused on long rows of covered parking and expansive parking lots abutting roadways.
- **Large Parking Lots, Retail:** Large “Big-Box” parking lots were pictured in a few images. One participant wrote: “How much parking do we really need?”
- **Parking Shortage, Fairhaven:** Images of at-capacity parking in the Fairhaven Business District was presented in a few images. Additional parking needs associated with new development in the area was undoubtedly a concern for these photographers.
- **Garbage:** Participants noted issues with unsightly placement and handling of trash and receptacles. Dumpsters on view and large units used by apartment buildings were present in many photos.
- **Inadequate Streetscape:** A few participants bemoaned the lack of curbs, bicycle lanes and signalized intersections. The need for improving pedestrian and cycling infrastructure and easing congestion (specifically on James Street Road at the Sunset Square shopping area) were visible in a few images.
- **Oversized Buildings:** Participants considered many of the taller buildings in Bellingham disproportionate with their surroundings, arguing, perhaps, for restrictions regarding scale of future buildings.
- **Multi-Family Housing, Design:** The most commonly identified negative element was the poor design of multi-family architecture. One participant opposed the “motley” appearance of many such developments in Bellingham. Another noted that often apartment buildings do not fit-in with surrounding neighborhoods. The words “cheap” and “plain” appear many times in participant descriptions of multi-family housing.
- **Building Placement:** With commercial buildings and multi-family developments, participants noted the need for better placement near roadways. Large setbacks and parking lots in front of buildings were viewed negatively in many images.
- **Quality Landscaping:** The aversion to much of Bellingham’s multi-family housing was not limited to its architecture; images also conveyed distaste for the landscaping of such development. Participants noted the need for common open space for residents, including attractive landscaping. In describing a photograph, one participant wrote: “Porches, fences, and landscaping speak volumes about whether a building cuts corners or works from the heart.”