



DOWNTOWN RENAISSANCE

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Patricia Decker
Waterfront Futures Director
Port of Bellingham
1801 Roeder Avenue
Bellingham, WA 98225

Dear Ms. Decker:

Attached please find the white paper from the Downtown Renaissance Network regarding the scope of work for the Waterfront Futures Group (WFG). The Network is very appreciative of the invitation to submit our proposal for this exciting planning effort. We look forward to the opportunity to work with the WFG as they begin to delve into the details.

As you are aware, the Network has a waterfront committee comprised of a diverse group of individuals committed to the healthy redevelopment of Bellingham's waterfront.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me. The Network board of directors and I would welcome the opportunity to meet with the WFG.

Thank you, again, for this opportunity.

Sincerely,

Mauri Ingram
Executive Director

attachment



DOWNTOWN RENAISSANCE NETWORK

Waterfront Futures Group Scope of Work

The Downtown Renaissance Network (Network) board of directors recognizes the extraordinary opportunity presented by the redevelopment of the waterfront. As the organization charged with stewarding the downtown neighborhood as the heart of our community, the Network is committed to addressing both the macro and micro perspectives of waterfront redevelopment as it relates to downtown Bellingham. The waterfront from Squalicum Harbor to the Port of Bellingham's shipping terminal is already a part of downtown. However, it has been temporarily disconnected by virtue of its design for industrial use.

Our community has made downtown revitalization one of its highest priorities. Redeveloping the waterfront is an extension of that commitment. As such, linkages between the Central Business District (CBD) and the CBD West should be a top priority.

The inherent value of our waterfront has not changed over the years. It has always provided natural and economic resources, recreational opportunities, unparalleled vistas, and, in part, a definition of our community's history and character. What has changed are the uses, level of public access, and the overall health of the ecosystem. The community now has the rare opportunity to redefine those elements for greater long-term community benefit.

It is our belief that the Waterfront Futures Group's (WFG) study area should encompass areas inland that are not already under the planning purview of another body. Clearly, the Bellingham City Council has jurisdiction over everything within the Bellingham city limits, and the WFG was created to plan for this special project. The downtown neighborhood includes a significant portion of the waterfront, and as such, we respectfully request the WFG's planning in that area be coordinated with the Network. While some specific planning elements will require a blurring of this line, our recommended **inland boundary** for planning purposes is: south of Holly Street in the Old Town District, south of Chestnut Street in the CBD, and east of the South Bay Trail from Laurel Street.

Changes

In the long term, a paramount goal should include the elimination of the presence of **heavy industry** on the bay. The recent development study commissioned by the Port of Bellingham supports this approach: the study indicated heavy industry is no longer considered suitable for mixed-use, urban areas. Public pressures on manufacturing and other industrial uses to relocate will only continue to escalate. In its place, a combination of residential, offices, public access, retail, lodging, recreational, entertainment, educational and light industrial uses are desirable replacements.

We also recognize the circumstance of those currently employed by Georgia-Pacific West, Inc. (G-P). In an ideal world, no individual would be adversely affected by the redevelopment of the waterfront. However, our local experience reflects a nationwide trend. Manufacturing and heavy industry in the U.S. are changing rapidly – relocating, altering long standing operational practices, etc. This knowledge can serve as an indicator, encouraging current employees to plan now: explore opportunities to retrain, return to school, or seek out other business opportunities. As a community, we can and should explore ways in which the private and public sectors can collaborate to plan for these changes, and minimize the impact of any job loss.

Creating **public waterfront access** in the heart of the community is a clear mandate. Most recently during the 1998 Downtown Development Workshops, the community made clear its desire to rectify the current situation. It is highly unlikely we will have a second chance to increase public access to the downtown waterfront. In addition, given the significant and sustained support the community has established for Greenways, it is incumbent upon us to close existing gaps in the trail system. Our trails, parks, and open space collectively represent that defining characteristic of Bellingham. A complete, connected trail system is a basic element of a well planned greenways program, and a waterside trail – for example, below the bluff along Chestnut Street – an invaluable amenity.

Formal **connections** between the CBD, Old Town, the approach area of the CBD, and the waterfront are an essential part of integrating waterfront redevelopment efforts with the broader downtown revitalization already underway. Multiple links can best be established by extending the downtown street grid into the waterfront via Laurel, Commercial and Bay Streets. A single access point, such as the one developed as part of Bellwether on the Bay, will create a bottleneck and an artificial barrier between the downtown core and the waterfront.

Replacement of **Citizen's Dock** should be evaluated. To the detriment of the community, Citizen's Dock was allowed to deteriorate beyond the point of repair. The dock or an alternative structure for public access spanning the waterway should be considered based on the impact on the estuary, and other environmental concerns. The potential for day moorage, and closer access directly from the waterfront to the commercial core of downtown is of great importance to our goal of strengthening that connection.

An assessment of **multi-modal transportation** should be undertaken, and integrated to whatever degree possible with the City of Bellingham's upcoming transportation study. Maximizing the use of alternative modes of transportation will help address our long-term transportation needs. In particular, the use of existing rail lines should be evaluated. Passenger rail traffic is compatible with further development of local tourism and, as the number of scheduled Amtrak runs increase in the coming years, with business travel. Freight traffic is a different matter. Locating the switching yard at the foot of the Columbia Neighborhood and directly across from the Bellwether development may not be in the best interest of the community over time. As heavy industry is relocated and shipping activity is not currently significant, perhaps re-routing freight trains to the other existing rail corridor along State Route 9 would be wise.

The **educational opportunities** the waterfront presents cannot be overstated. Programmatic partnerships should be explored with as many education institutions as possible, including Western Washington University, the group working to develop a discovery center, Whatcom Community College, Bellingham Technical College, the local school districts, private schools and others. Western Washington University also offers unique research and technical assistance resources (e.g., the Center for Economic and Business Research and the Small Business Development Center) that may enhance planning for the waterfront's economic future. Instilling a better understanding of this irreplaceable natural resource is critical to our ability to preserve it. In addition, eco-tourism is on the rise. People are traveling to areas like Whatcom County offering spectacular natural beauty to learn more about them. The redevelopment of the waterfront should be planned with that in mind.

Lastly, the **environmental clean-up** of the waterfront will likely be the greatest project challenge. Ensuring safe use of the waterfront is the goal. This includes restoring the bay to the healthiest possible condition, given limited available resources. There will be compromise required by all parties involved, if we are to realize the potential of our waterfront and not allow it to be mired down in intransigent positions.

Continuity

Bellingham Bay has always been a **working waterfront**. That history should not be lost. Fishing and related operations should continue, as should other uses that are compatible with a healthy, mixed-use area including residential, public access and a vital natural environment.

Preservation of structures with historic and/or architectural value is key not only in the core of the CBD, but also in reclaimed industrial areas on the waterfront like the G-P site. The reinforced concrete building on the south-east corner of Central and Roeder Avenues is a prime example. It has functioned as a poultry plant and a fish market during its history, and remains in generally sound structural condition. There are also a number of brick structures on the G-P site that should be integrated into the new site plan. Retaining some elements of the waterfronts history is our responsibility, and will contribute to achieving a well-rounded and appealing redevelopment of the area; it will reflect our past and encourage thoughtful planning for the future.

Conclusion

This is truly a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for our community. We need to broaden our perspective, look to examples from other waterfronts and focus on collaboration and implementation to realize the tremendous potential of a redeveloped Bellingham waterfront. The **key elements** of this effort are establishing a number of multi-modal connections to the rest of downtown, completing the trail system, and creating a mixed-use waterfront with value to the entire citizenry.