

WaterfrontFutures Group

July 30, 2003

Dear Group Members and cc Recipients,

I just read the article in this morning's Herald about your meeting tonight and was motivated to give you my two bits worth. For about 10 years, I ran the Outdoor Recreation Program for County Parks and I acted as a Staff Planner. In the course of doing those jobs, I went to a number of tourism seminars, workshops and strategy sessions. Over the years, they got boring to go to because it was always same old...".Whatcom County is one of the most beautiful and unique places in the world, mainly because of the San Juans and Mt. Baker." And then the follow up talk..."How do we overcome all the rain?". Good ideas and strategies, and much enthusiasm, would often evolve from these tourism get-togethers only to generally fall by the wayside as time went by.

It seems to me that this waning of enthusiasm was partially due to the decision makers turning their efforts to more "achievable, realistic and more necessary" efforts i.e. manufacturing job marketing, utility and transportation infrastructure and broadband capabilities. I can understand and appreciate that kind of thinking, but I also think it, for the most part, puts us in a very large pool of other Cities and Counties nationwide who are pursuing similar strategies. We should give some serious thought to having more faith that, with the right strategies and follow through, we can do a more effective job of attracting businesses like Nike if we work harder at letting CEOs and Corporate Board members of targeted outdoor oriented businesses come to a conclusion that Whatcom County is not only a good "quality of life" place for their employees but that it can also be important part of their corporate image and a better bottom line. I believe that if we stay focused on our strengths and uniqueness a synergy could occur that ends up in eventually bringing in the better paying jobs we need.

An example of a business that I think is worth targeting...L.L. Bean is apparently giving some serious thought to acquiring Eddie Bauer. Perhaps they are in the mood to consider expanding from the N.E. corner of the U.S. to the N.W. corner. (If your awareness of L.L. Bean is just their seasonal catalogues, go to their web site. They are located in the "boonies" in Maine and attract thousands of outdoor oriented tourists who come for such things as fly fishing clinics, canoeing instruction, etc.). If they are amiable to an organized pitch to come to Whatcom County, there are lots of bullets for a presentation:

1. Northwest Washington and British Columbia have a large number of manufacturing and outdoor adventure businesses that produce products and services that relate directly to their catalogues. A few examples:
  - A) Kayaks and canoes that are paddled worldwide.
  - B) Brently Software backpacks, briefcases, suitcases that are purchased by corporate types world wide.
  - C) Dunham Gooding's American Alpine Institute
  - D) We are a snowboarding mecca.
  - E) We are a salt water sailing mecca.

2. The 2008 Winter Olympics will be in Vancouver – A great opportunity to let the world know that L.L. Bean is now in the N.W.
3. Folks who come to experience our world (Orcas to mountain goats) have to use sunscreen more than they might think.
4. We are ideally located between Vancouver and Seattle.
5. We have a population that has real appreciation for the L.L. Beans of the world.

This is just one example of “hit list” of similar outdoor oriented businesses that could and should be wooed in an on going, quality manner with emphasis on follow through (If they say no this year, try again next year). I have given little thought to how to how this relates directly to your waterfront futures effort. I have always thought of Fairhaven as the right atmosphere for some of this development. My guess is that you all have thought about outdoor oriented shops on the waterfront to go along with other tourist related activities; i.e. Granville Island Mall. Bigger operations like L.L. Bean may still be small potatoes compared to the BPs and Intacos of the manufacturing world, but they could do a lot to attract the Nike types and, in addition, help to bolster the vital tourist businesses in Whatcom County. Providing them a location, even if it’s not on the downtown waterfront could provide a strong indirect boost to waterfront efforts.

In closing, I would like to emphasis the importance of making our robust, outdoor image the cornerstone of efforts to create decent jobs that are integrated into Whatcom County residents’ sense of stewardship for the natural environment with which we are blessed. Think about your own perspective. Whether or not you personally partake of our fresh and salt water activities; whether you or not you day hike or ski at Baker, what do you tell your flatland friends & relatives in Kansas and Nebraska? What do you do with them when they come to visit?

Best of luck in your efforts to make Bellingham’s waterfront a focal point, must do for your out of town guests.

Pat Milliken

Cc: Pete Kremen  
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