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White Paper # 50
Make our Waterfront Attractive
James B. Twining
Handout for November 21, 2003

To: Waterfront Futures Group
From: James B. Twining
Re: Comments concerning the future of the Bellingham Waterfront

I am impressed that you have gone to this extent to gather input. Here is mine:

The dominant presence on the Bellingham waterfront is the GP plant. Other major landmarks include various stand alone industrial, commercial and office buildings and some fairly new large restaurants in the Bellwether and Squalicum Harbor areas. None of these lend cohesion or identity to the waterfront, nor do they have much attractions for residents or tourists.

A vibrant waterfront would attract many thousands of people per day and add greatly to the city coffers due to our high sales tax. If those tax dollars come from out of town (or out of country), all the better.

Simply put, the way to attract people is to make the area attractive. This would include the elements that are present in other booming waterfronts such as those in Lahaina, Maui, Puerto Villarta, Mexico, and White Rock, B.C. which have all of these common traits:

- Ample free parking
- Human scale buildings
- Mixed use residential and commercial
- Long open walkways or boardwalks with views of the salt water
- Access to the water and to the shore by boat
- Multiple restaurants that face the water with open air seating as an option

As an example of concepts that will **not** work, we need look no further than downtown Bellingham or the current waterfront :

- Metered parking
- Large stand alone buidlings with dirty alleys and empty or trashy lots
- Heavy Industry in the wrong place
- Old junk everywhere

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Lets talk about each of these:

1) Metered parking

This has been a destructive force in Bellingham. Many people will not come to downtown ever again because of the negative experiences they have had due to the parking problem. They are discouraged from staying for any extended period of time, because they must go out and move their car. They are ticketed if they don't. I doubt that the city gains more revenue from the meters than they are losing because of lost sales tax revenue. Part of the problem is that some people in government truly don't understand this concept. They see the revenue from the meters and fail to see the lost revenue.

If we want people to come to an area, it must be a pleasant experience. Why do think that some waterfronts are mobbed with diners and shoppers? Part of it is that the parking is free and convenient. It is critical that free parking is available all along the waterfront. This would most likely be satisfactory if it was made available in predominantly residential areas that are not directly on the water. Roads that are perhaps one or two blocks away from the water would be fine for parking. This is more convenient than large (and unsightly) parking structures.

2) Large Stand Alone Buildings

I was sorry to see the Marina and Anthony's develop the way they did. I do not think that this is the model we want for the waterfront. What you have are large stand alone buildings that are not of "human scale". You drive there and park your car in the lot for the sole purpose of eating there, then you drive home.

Instead, it would be nicer to have many places to park that are close to entire sections of the waterfront containing restaurants, shops, apartments/condos, grocery and fish market (like Pike street) banks, office buildings, boat rentals and charters, small parks, theatres for live stage and movies, you name it... all connected together along walkways and boardwalks. The zoning should prevent tacky large buildings and heavy industry. Light industry could coexist if it were endemic to the waterfront such as those connected to fishing, sailing, watersports, etc. There should be many docks where boaters, kayakers, etc. from Squilicum harbor and ports beyond (such as Vancouver BC. and the San Juans) can tie there boats down right there and walk anywhere along the waterfront.

3) Heavy industry in the wrong place

Obviously I am talking about the GP plant. This is the main obstacle. The waterfront will not work with it in place. It needs to be removed, and that includes the environmental hazards that are in the soil, etc. I have heard people talk about the loss of jobs if the GP plant is completely closed down. In my opinion, a well designed waterfront will bring in many times the number of jobs lost at GP.

4) Old Junk

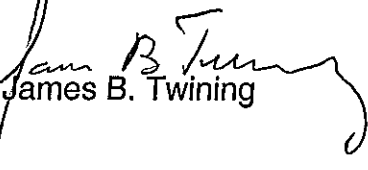
We've got an awful lot of old pilings, deteriorating piers, old buildings, dirt lots with junk in them, etc. All of that needs to be cleaned up.

Summary

Doing a thorough and imaginative job at the waterfront will be very costly, but the benefits will be enormous in my opinion. Those benefits include:

- increased access to the water for local boaters, divers, swimmers, fishermen, crabbers, sailers, etc.
- increased access to the shore by boat which will increase tourism
- residential that will help support local businesses and encourage walking rather than driving to work in downtown.
- increased appreciation by residents of the natural beauty of Bellingham Bay and the islands
- increased tourism especially from Canada and their sales tax revenue to pay for all of this

I wish you the best in your planning efforts! It's going to be great.


James B. Twining