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City of Bellingham Historic Preservation Commission
Mr. Thomas, Planning Dept.
N. Oliver, Planning Dept.

Dear Commission Members, Mr. Thomas and Ms. Oliver,
I have read the draft Fairhaven Design Standards and have some changes I hope you will adopt to make this draft plan one that supports the purpose as stated, "Fairhaven Design Standards strive to maintain Fairhaven as a cohesive, livable place and promote the appropriate treatment of historic buildings, structures, sites and objects."

The most significant design element, and change to our existing plan, is a near doubling of maximum allowed heights from 35' to 66' in most areas. As you can imagine, this doubling of building height and mass will undeniably alter Fairhaven. Today, the commercial core encompasses our 17 historic structures, only 4 of which exceed 35' from the sidewalk standard.

The draft plan offers this standard, "New buildings in and directly adjacent to the HD DRA shall be similar to the traditional scale of historic buildings." Elsewhere, the draft states, "Buildings should not be monolithic in scale or greatly contrast with those seen traditionally in Fairhaven." (e. Massing and Articulation). How is it possible to reconcile these standards with new height limits of 56 or 66'? Only **one** of our historic buildings, the Waldron, approaches this height. 76% of our historic buildings are 35' or less from the sidewalk edge. In order to follow the stated standards and "showcase" our historic structures, we must maintain our current height limits of 35'.

In the past 20 years 38 structures have been built in the Fairhaven commercial core, many of these within the past 10 years. Of these 38 new buildings, only 7 are over 35' from sidewalk standard.

If we seek to maintain the character of Fairhaven which is the dominance of our historic buildings, as stated in the draft, then we need to make sure that the new structures around these treasures are not 56-66' tall, but rather 35' as has been the standard. 56-66' tall structures on existing vacant/re-developable land will negatively impact these adjacent, historic buildings:

- 1) **Mason, Library and Pharmacy**, if the old gas station property and mall to the east (12th -13th between Harris and Mill) and vacant lots on Finnegan Way and Mill are allowed to develop to 56-66'. Two, newer buildings on Mill at 13th, Fairhaven Gardens, and Judson Plaza, all at or below 35', would also be dwarfed by 66' neighbors.
- 2) **Pharmacy**, if adjacent vacant lot and Key Bank properties are allowed to develop to 66', especially as the Pharmacy is a one-story building. Preserving a functioning pharmacy in this historic spot keeps Fairhaven's history alive and helps make this a functioning village, not an artificial retail center. New, adjacent buildings negatively impacted include, Judson Plaza and Fairhaven Gardens.
- 3) **Grad Building**, if 2 adjacent lots with run down houses on Larrabee are rebuilt to 66', looming over the Grad building, even if the new building were "stepped back." Also, a 66' building would hover above the adjacent, new, mixed-use building on 10th and Larrabee, which is built to 35'. Building to 66' at this site will also eliminate a portion of the public water view, as seen from 12th St. Across 10th St., McKenzie Sq. already encroaches on the public's view of the Bay and it is further downhill from the potential building site on Larrabee.
- 4) **Morgan Block**, if the adjacent vacant lots to the south along 10th are developed to 56-66'.
- 5) **Kulshan**, with 2 stories and a pitched roof, if properties across the street on 11th and Mill and to the north are developed to 66' or even 42' as recently proposed for northern properties along Finnegan Way/11th St. The Kulshan's roof line barely rises above adjacent Fairhaven Gardens at 35' from the sidewalk. New buildings that will be damaged by development beyond 35' include Fairhaven Gardens, Zielstra Building, Eclipse Books, Fairhaven Bike and Ski, Blessings Salon, Village Inn, Village Green, Village Books and Judson Plaza, all surrounding properties to the vacant block 10-11th at Mill.

Perhaps part of the justification for the height increase arises with the new Design Standards, which seek to regulate interior building heights, 14' for 1st floor, 12' for second floor, 10' for 3rd floor. (Commercial Façade Character) With these limitations, one cannot build a 3-story building within 35'. However, I, and many others, disagree that new construction must have such tall interior ceilings to fit in the historic district. Many examples of recent developments demonstrate that 9-10' 1st floor ceiling heights are not incompatible with exterior, historic design: Judson Plaza, Fairhaven Gardens, Zielstra building, Village Inn, Young Building, 12th St. Village. Overall design can make lower ceiling heights appear compatible with historic buildings with high ceilings. We have many, successful examples of 3-story, 35' tall buildings built recently in Fairhaven.

By eliminating the interior ceiling requirements, we can maintain the 35' height for new construction, achieving density needed while maintaining Fairhaven's distinct character of pedestrian-scale, brick and stone buildings. Also, it seems counter intuitive to **require** such unnecessarily high ceilings, which demand greater energy resources for light and heat, at a time we are all looking to minimize our energy needs.

Further brief comments on the Design Review Standards:

1) "In the HD and HI DRAs, on commercial buildings, set a primary entry door back an adequate amount from the front facade to establish a distinct threshold for pedestrians. A recessed dimension of 4' is typical." (Entries Guideline) Recessed entry is desirable, however, I don't think we need to require 4' in order to be compatible.

2) Whereas the standard seeks to prohibit projecting/cantilevered decks, we have recent examples of cantilevered decks that are not, in my opinion, out of character for Fairhaven – Village Books, Fairhaven Gardens, Young and Waldron buildings. These decks make condos more livable and add interest to the building facades.

3) I recommend that sidewalk café seating be removed October through April. Currently, most owners remove their outdoor seating during the winter months.

4) The standards for lighting, awning and mechanical and electrical building equipment are welcome additions and help clarify what exists, for the most part, in our current village.

5) Intent: "Provide a pedestrian-friendly street edge by maintaining strong alignment and traditional, uninterrupted character of the commercial "building wall" edge." (Ground Floor Details / Street-level Interest) Harris at 11th St., referred to in the plan as "the center of the historic district," offers an example of corner lots with buildings set back from street edge, an "opening up" in the "heart" of Fairhaven. It is part of what makes Fairhaven feel like a traditional "village." Due to proposed construction, this open corner will change. I just want the plan to recognize that there may be situations, especially, but not solely, on corner lots, that could allow for a different, desirable orientation.

In conclusion, to make the new plan comply with the Design Standards, we need to eliminate the interior ceiling height restrictions and maintain the 35' height for new construction. The Design Standards state, "Design new buildings and alterations so that the character of adjacent historic buildings remains dominant." (Architectural Character). The near doubling of height and mass will not be compatible with the intent stated above, for, how can a building remain "dominant" if it rests in the shadow of a new building nearly twice its size? Another draft standard states, "Taller portions of new buildings shall be located so as to minimize looming effects and shading of lower-scaled neighboring buildings." (Massing & Articulation) This statement recognizes that the doubled increase in heights will shadow and dwarf most, 76% historic and 82% new, of today's built village.

You have the challenge to preserve Fairhaven's historic character within the parameters of the City's Comprehensive plans. That challenge will be difficult to meet if the proposed doubling of building height and mass remain part of the final plan. Please recommend that interior height restrictions be eliminated, allowing the existing, 3-story, 35' building height to remain, meeting density needs while maintaining the strong character, human scale and history of our village.

Sincerely,

Barbara Zielstra

Cc: Mayor Kelli Linville
City Council Members
Planning Commission