

# **Whatcom County Business & Commerce Committee**

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## **WCBCC August Meeting Minutes (8/19/24)**

### **WCBCC Members Present**

Dan Dunne, WCBCC Chair  
Debbie Ahl, Healthcare Industry  
Ryan Allsop, Other For-Profit  
Pam Brady, Energy  
Clark Campbell, Recreation  
Russell (RB) Tewksbury, Internet Technology  
Casey Diggs, WCBCC Co-Chair  
Mayor Greg Hansen

Mayor Kim Lund  
Sarah Rothenbuhler, Other For-Profit  
Tyler Schroeder, Port of Bellingham  
CJ Seitz, Higher Education  
Whatcom County Executive Satpal Sidhu  
Pete Dawson, Commercial Real Estate  
Whatcom County Councilmember Mark Stremmer

### **WCBCC Members Absent**

Paul Burrill, Food Processing  
Matthew Green, Higher Education  
Troy Muljat, Other For-Profit  
Brad Rader, Agriculture

Heather Steele, Public K-12 Education  
Chris Trout, Manufacturing  
Dana Wilson, Marine Trades

### **Non-Members/Public Present**

Port of Bellingham Commissioner Ken Bell, Ann Beck, Lana Burrill, Andrew Calkins, Lance Calloway, Barbara Chase, Anna Dealy, Chris D'onfrio, Jessie Everson, Brady Gustafson, Mauri Ingram, Lindsey Payne Johnstone, Mayor Scott Korthuis, Whatcom County PUD Commissioner Todd Lagestee, Erika Lautenbach, Troy Lautenbach, Bellingham City Councilmember Michael Lilliquist, Derek Long, Gil Lund, Blake Lyon, Kori Olsen, Hannah Ordos, Les Reardanz, Margaret Reich, Andrea Ruback, Gina Stark, Shari Stremmer, Tara Sundin, Megan Whittlesey,

### **Call to Order**

WCBCC Chair Dan Dunne called the meeting to order at 11:00 a.m.

### **Approval of the Minutes**

Clark Campbell moved, seconded by Ryan Allsop, to adopt the meeting minutes from July 15, 2024. Motion passed.

**Whatcom County Legislative Update,** Whatcom County Executive Satpal Sidhu and Whatcom County Councilmember Mark Stremmer provided a Whatcom County Legislative update.

Executive Sidhu discussed Whatcom County's current-year budget process. The county has a hiring freeze and will have a better idea of the budget after the third quarter. The Council is ensuring essential policies

are funded. A draft budget will be submitted to Whatcom County Council mid- to late-September and a final budget will be submitted for approval in mid-November.

Whatcom County continues to focus on the Comprehensive Plan Planning for the next 20 years needs to include creating more industrial lands in the county, beginning with designating 2,500 acres of new industrial land. Also reviewing UGAs and the annexation process and recommending procuring private capital into the UGAs. Additionally promoting new development in mixed housing, industrial, and commercial.

Executive Sidhu recommended that the Whatcom County Business and Commerce Committee play a key role in advising the Comprehensive Plan and discussed the need to write new definitions for housing, commerce, business, industry, high and heavy industrial, and light industrial. Councilmember Stremmer added that the housing issue is critical and that the Whatcom County Council is seeking creative solutions to address the issue.

Whatcom County completed wetland delineation. A full report for mitigation has not been submitted, but the county owns a lot of land that can be used for mitigation.

The anticipated timeline for opening the Whatcom County Jail is June 30, 2028.

Whatcom County Councilmember Mark Stremmer added that a plan has to be in place for the Lummi Island Ferry by July of next year.

#### **City of Bellingham Updates, City of Bellingham Mayor Kim Lund**

Mayor Lund shared leadership updates, including:

The City of Bellingham (COB) expanded to a two-deputy model, allowing the ability to create portfolios of work and distinction:

- Janice Keller: community engagement, communications, lobbying, tribal relations
- Forrest Longman: focused on city operations
- Nationwide searches for director of Public Works and director of Human Resources
- Melissa Morin promoted to a communications director position
- Hiring a new government-relations lobbying representatives and a health and human services manager

The COB is creating a report to the community related to the Executive Order that had a series of 11 steps calling for stabilization downtown. The report will outline the status of actions related to the order and a vision of the next steps. Downtown activation includes a grant-funded project, a video of the murals with elements from the photo archives collection on the fire station building, connecting the arts district from the waterfront.

The COB is in the middle of the budget process. Mayor Lund's proposed budget must be delivered to Bellingham City Council by the first Monday in October. It requires two public hearings on the budget and one public hearing on the revenue forecast for property tax. The budget will return to the Council in October.

Mayor Lund provided an overview of General Fund Revenue sources: sales tax, property tax, business and occupation tax, and utility tax. The COB is seeing decreases in revenue, down from 2023. When adjusted for inflation, the buying power of the money coming in has decreased over time. Revenue sources are either flat or slightly declining. Public safety is a significant portion of the General Fund expenses and the City is looking for practical ways to reduce that percentage.

All ARPA money has been allocated. Updated financial policies. Set new target allocations for emergency reserves and economic reserves.

Financial Policies: The City must maintain a minimum of 15% of the operating budget as emergency reserve in the General Fund. It will not use revenues received that are available for only a limited period of time to fund ongoing operational costs. Reserves should be sufficient to provide adequate liquidity, provide for unanticipated economic downturns, provide for services and costs during a declared emergency, and provide for long-term capital needs.

#### **Whatcom County Shelter Discussion**, Whatcom County Business and Commerce Chair Dan Dunne

Whatcom County Housing Advisory Committee (WCHAC) was tasked by Whatcom County Council to provide advice on a county-run year-round shelter. WHAC formed a subcommittee to provide a recommendation and that subcommittee will be seeking input from Whatcom County Business and Commerce Committee. The timeline for the recommendation on the winter shelter is September 25, 2024. The timeline for recommendation on the county-run shelter is the end of December 2025.

#### **Additional Notes – sub-committees**

- Landmark tree ordinance has been modified slightly. Every person can nominate virtually any tree for almost any reason. Once tree is nominated, it goes through a process that ends with Superior Court. (housing sub-committee)
- Chuckanut Health will be providing assistance to anyone who wants to apply to RFPs for childcare. Latest RFP was published in August and is \$1.5 mil. from the Healthy Children's Fund for innovative approaches to childcare. Assistance focused on rural and underserved communities. (childcare sub-committee)
- Representatives from tribal and irrigation from the Yakima Basin water adjudication project are invited to speak at the October 2024 Whatcom County Business and Commerce Committee meeting. (water/ag/fish sub-committee)
- Draft memorandum relating to Chapter 2. Land Use Chapter of the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan was provided for review by the Whatcom County Business and Commerce Committee. A final will be provided at the September 2024 meeting. (policy sub-committee)
- Whatcom County unemployment rate has remained steady over past four to five months (July 2024: 4.4%, which is just under WA State rate of 4.9% but above national level of 4/4%). WA state added 62,5000 jobs last year, primarily in education and healthcare sectors. NW Education Services District 189, Local community and technical college, Port of Bellingham, Northwest Workforce Council and community partners are planning "Exploring Careers in Healthcare Occupations" (ECHO) tours for Whatcom County high school students at Whatcom Community College in April 2025. The purpose is to provide career exploration to students in the high-wage, high-demand field of healthcare. (workforce sub-committee)

**Public Comment**

Todd Lagestee, Whatcom County Public Utility District Commissioner:

- Encourages PUD representation on the Whatcom County Business and Commerce Committee, particularly when the topic of water adjudication is discussed.
- Further recommends quorum be revised from majority of all voting and non-voting members to majority vote from only voting members.
- Whatcom Council of Governments should coordinate homelessness.

**Adjournment**

With no further business, the meeting adjourned at 12:30 p.m.