

Whatcom County Business & Commerce Committee

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WCBCC March Meeting Minutes (3/17/25)

WCBCC Members Present

Casey Diggs, WCBCC Chair

Ryan Allsop, Other For-Profit

Paul Burrill, Food Processing

Pete Dawson, Commercial Real Estate

Dan Dunne, Construction

Matthew Green, Higher Education

Mayor Greg Hansen

Troy Lautenbach, Other For-Profit

Forrest Longman (designee for Mayor Kim Lund)

Gil Lund, Manufacturing

Tyler Schroeder, Port of Bellingham

CJ Seitz, Higher Education

Russell (RB) Tewksbury, Internet Technology

Whatcom County Councilmember Mark Stremmer

WCBCC Members Not Present

Debbie Ahl, Healthcare Industry

Pam Brady, Energy

Kevin Menard, Recreation

Heather Powell, Childcare

Sarah Rothenbuhler, Other For-Profit

Heather Steele, Public K-12 Education

Dana Wilson, Marine Trades

Whatcom County Executive Satpal Sidhu

Non-Members/Public Present: Rich Appel, Ann Beck, Port of Bellingham Commissioner Ken Bell, Dylan Deane Boyle, Lance Calloway, Alan Chapman, Port of Bellingham Executive Director Rob Fix, Heather Flaherty, Adam Johnson, Ashley McClaran, Jasmine Fast, Kori Olsen, Brady Gustafson, Jessie Everson, Peter Frazier, Darby Galligan, Jenny Hagemann, Brian Heinrich, Mauri Ingram, Lindsay Johnstone, Rob Lee, Ryan Likkel, City of Bellingham Councilmember Michael Lilliquist, Derek Long, Blake Lyon, Kendall Nielsen, Emily O'Connor, Hannah Ordos, Rebecca Mertzig, Jennifer Noveck, Margaret Reich, Hayden Richardson, Andrea Ruback, Paul Schissler, Dan Mead Smith, Brad Swanson, Bruce Tabb, Tawsha (last name not provided)

Call to Order

WCBCC committee member Dan Dunne (designee for Casey Diggs) called the meeting to order at 11:00 a.m.

WCBCC Chair Updates

Dan Dunne on behalf of Casey Diggs, Chair

Reminded WCBCC committee members that the vice chair position remains open; Committee members are encouraged to nominate themselves for the position.

Welcomed new members:

- Kevin Menard, Recreation
- Rich Appel applied for the open position representing Agriculture; Application will be reviewed for approval by Whatcom County Councilmembers at the next Whatcom County Council meeting.

Approval of the Minutes

Ryan Allsop moved, seconded by Tyler Schroeder, to adopt the meeting minutes from February 10, 2025, meeting with a change to language requested by RB Tewksbury on the final page of minutes. Motion passed. The corrected minutes as approved have been updated on the Port of Bellingham website.

Whatcom County Jail Update

Ashley McClaran, Principal-in-Charge/Engagement Lead
& Adam Johnson, Project Manager/Main Point of Contact, STV

Ashley stated that STV is currently leading a communications planning initiative to ensure stakeholder involvement and decision readiness throughout the jail project. Ashley provided an overview of the STV team structure, highlighting that core members were indicated in red on the presentation slides (those involved on a day-to-day basis), with additional strategic advisors for justice operations, behavioral health, trauma-informed design, MEP, commissioning, and activation. She emphasized that building is not only structurally sound by operationally effective for Whatcom County's needs.

Project Goals and Objectives

- Develop a stakeholder-driven Communications Plan (living document).
- Design a project scope, schedule, and budget.
- Develop a Construction Delivery Strategy, including preparation for the State Project Review Committee (PRC).
- Pursue alternative delivery method (progressive design-build), pending PRC approval.
- Begin procurement upon PRC approval to select a design-build entity.

Project Timelines and Key Milestones (shared by presenter Adam Johnson)

- **January:** Project kickoff; Initiated capacity and feasibility studies.
- **February:** Submitted PRC application; Communications planning began.
- **March–April:** RFQ development; Stakeholder engagement meetings underway.
- **March 27:** Anticipated PRC approval.
- **April–Summer:** RFQ publication and design-builder procurement.
- **June:** Completion of capacity studies; Interactive meetings with shortlisted teams.
- **July:** Issuance of "Intent to Award" letter.
- **August:** Selection and onboarding of design-build entity.
- **Q1 2026:** Completion of facility size validation and presentation of cost and service options prepared for presentation to County Council.

Stakeholder Engagement

- Stakeholder groups include the Sheriff's Office, Behavioral Health, IPRTF, County Council, and Executive Office.
- Upcoming sessions include two 8-hour working groups focused on capacity analysis.
- STV will use local data where possible and apply best practices where data is lacking.
- Goal is to avoid underbuilding and consider future expansion strategies if needed.

The Bellingham Plan Project Update

Chris Behee, Long Range Division Manager & Sydney Prusak, Planner II, City of Bellingham

Chris Behee provided a high-level overview of the Bellingham Comprehensive Plan Update.

Overview:

- Plan required by Growth Management Act; The update is aligned with the state-mandated 10-year periodic review cycle.
- Last plan was adopted in 2016; the updated 2025 plan will extend through 2045.
- Planning processes address multiple community functions, including utilities, infrastructure, and human services.
- Bellingham is operating on a parallel track with Whatcom County's plan, though each follows its own adoption schedule.
- Anticipated population for Whatcom County in 2045 is approximately 293,000, with 60,000–70,000 new residents. About half of that growth is expected within Bellingham.

Sydney Prusak presented on public outreach and engagement.

Community Engagement Efforts

- **Surveys – Three main surveys conducted:**
 - Community Vision (4,000+ responses)
 - Growth Survey (3,000+ responses)
 - Statistically valid Housing Preferences Survey (specific households)
- **Events:**
 - Open houses were held at various local high schools, focusing on specific topics such as economic vitality.
 - Events included interactive feedback opportunities (e.g., sticky notes, roundtables).
 - One event was conducted entirely in Spanish to engage underrepresented populations.
- **Stakeholder Meetings:**
 - Engagement with groups including Team Whatcom, Whatcom County Health Department, and Whatcom Community Foundation to inform specific chapters.

Project Schedule and Next Steps

- **Phase 4 (Current):** Draft goals and policies under review.
- **Feb-May:** Draft chapters will be reviewed by the Planning Commission in batches.
- **July-Aug:** Planning Commission public hearing and recommendation to City Council
- **Sept-Nov:** City Council public hearing, discussion, and final plan approval
- Formal adoption process will include public hearing and final approval by City Council by the end of 2025.

The Bellingham Plan Project Update (Cont'd)

Chris Behee, Long Range Division Manager & Sydney Prusak, Planner II, City of Bellingham

Land Use Policy and Housing Legislation

- **Middle Housing Legislation (HB 1110):**
 - Applies citywide, transforming single-family zoning into middle housing zones.
 - Allow 4 units per lot by-right; up to 6 units if affordability criteria are met.
- **Neighborhood Commercial Zones:**
 - New policies to allow small-scale commercial use in residential areas to support walkability and reduce car dependency.
- **Urban Villages:**
 - Continued focus on leveraging investments in existing urban villages.
 - Possible designation of new urban villages, especially in North Bellingham (e.g., Cordata area or North Bellingham).
- **Transit-Oriented Development:**
 - Collaboration with WTA to support transit-accessible development.
- **Boundary Expansions:**
 - Considerations for growth north and south of the city, with varying infrastructure challenges.
- **Infrastructure Readiness:**
 - Water, sewer, and fire flow capacity under review.
 - Planning will consider both public and private utility needs.
 - Areas not currently served are exempt from immediate compliance with HB 1110.

Economic Development Chapter

- **City Roles in Economic Development:**
 - Strong leadership and policy environment.
 - Ensuring land and infrastructure availability.
 - Providing quality municipal services.
- **Draft Goals (4 main themes):**
 - Regional collaboration (e.g., Port, County, workforce agencies).
 - Employment lands and supporting infrastructure.
 - Supportive and inclusive business environment.
 - Workforce support (especially childcare and housing affordability).
- **Key Economic Development Topics:**
 - Support for urban villages.
 - High-speed rail advocacy (long-term).
 - Partnerships with the Port and investment in airport/waterfront.
 - Tourism and global economic relations.
 - Recognition of childcare as an economic development issue.

The Bellingham Plan Project Update (Cont'd)

Chris Behee, Long Range Division Manager & Sydney Prusak, Planner II, City of Bellingham

Economic Development Chapter (Cont'd)

- **New Chapter: Community Well-Being**
 - **Topics Covered:**
 - Arts and culture
 - Early childhood learning and care
 - Food systems (production, access, workforce)
 - Healthcare access (zoning and permitting for new facilities)
 - **Goals:**
 - Foster connected and vibrant neighborhoods.
 - Promote health equity and access.
 - Celebrate Bellingham's arts and cultural assets.

Relevant Studies

- A Port-led industrial land study is currently in progress, which will be available within the bounds of the Comp Planning process. Tyler Schroeder, Port of Bellingham, offered to present the findings of the Industrial Land Study at a future WCBCC meeting.
- The City's Comprehensive Plan includes a land capacity analysis for both housing and employment.
- Considerations include pressures from zoning changes and potential loss of industrial lands.

Next Steps

Include further engagement, Planning Commission review in May, and continued policy development.

Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy Annual Progress Report

Tyler Schroeder, Port of Bellingham Economic Development Director

Tyler Schroder presented the Port of Bellingham's [2024 Annual Progress Report](#), highlighting the Port's deliverables relating to the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS), a long-term planning document intended to guide economic development throughout a region.

Overview of CEDS Goals and Strategy Areas

1. Strengthen the base economy.
2. Enhance infrastructure to support development and resilience.
3. Develop a skilled workforce.
4. Foster cross-border relationships with British Columbia
5. Advance diversity, equity, and inclusion
6. Support countywide economic resiliency and recovery.

Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy Annual Progress Report (Cont'd)

Tyler Schroeder, Port of Bellingham Economic Development Director

Progress Highlights – Port of Bellingham

Goal 1: Strengthen the Base Economy

- **Foreign Trade Zone (FTZ):** Continued designation and promotion of Bellingham Shipping Terminal (BST) as a FTZ to facilitate import/export activities.
- **BST Electrification and Rail Reconnection:** Secured over \$20M in funding for electrification and \$17M for rail reconnection to enhance operational resiliency and regional transport connectivity.

Goal 2: Infrastructure Development

- **Industrial Land Planning:** Ongoing studies to assess industrial land needs.
- **Ferndale Sewer Infrastructure Study:** Partnership with the City of Ferndale and Washington State Department of Commerce to analyze sewer expansion in the Grandview area.
- **Point Roberts Economic Strategy:** Development of a long-term economic resilience and growth strategy for Point Roberts.

Goal 3: Workforce and Education

- **Millworks Project:** Phase 1 includes affordable housing and an early learning center. Phase 2 is underway.
- **Marine Trades Career Fair:** Hosted 3rd annual job fair with 42 businesses, over 350 high school students, and 10 hands-on marine activities. Plans for a 4th fair in May 2025.

Goal 4: Cross-Border Economic Collaboration

- Continued support for collaboration with Canadian and BC-based businesses as a vital part of the regional economy.

Goal 5: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

- **Pacific Northwest Tribal Lending:** Partnership with Lummi Nation to issue 12 small business loans to tribal entrepreneurs in 2024.

Goal 6: Economic Resiliency and Innovation

- **District Energy Project:** Partnership with Corix and D Systems to develop low-carbon energy infrastructure in the Waterfront District.

Broadband Project Update

- Tyler provided an update in response to a committee member's question regarding broadband.
- Three EDI-funded projects are progressing: East Nooksack (design phase), North Lynden, and North Ferndale (construction bids expected June 2025).
- The Port and PUD are collaborating on a broadband project in Point Roberts.
- Port submitted BEAD grant applications for broadband expansion across Whatcom County. However, funding limitations remain a challenge with \$1.6B in requests statewide and limited resources available.

Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy Annual Progress Report (Cont'd)

Tyler Schroeder, Port of Bellingham Economic Development Director

Next Steps

- Full report (approx. 68 pages) to be distributed to committee members.
- Continued monitoring of grant opportunities and economic project developments.
- Planning for 2027–2031 CEDS strategy to begin later in 2025.

Adjourn. Upon completion of sub-committee report-outs and with no further business, WCBCC Dan Dunne (designee for Chair Casey Diggs) adjourned at 12:32 pm.