

Whatcom County Business & Commerce Committee

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WCBCC June Meeting Minutes (6/14/25)

WCBCC Members Present

Casey Diggs, WCBCC Chair
Rich Appel, Agriculture
Pam Brady, Energy
Paul Burrill, Food Processing
Pete Dawson, Commercial Real Estate
Mayor Greg Hansen
Troy Lautenbach, Other For-Profit
Gil Lund, Manufacturing

Mayor Kim Lund
Heather Powell, Childcare
Sarah Rothenbuhler, Other For-Profit
Tyler Schroeder, Port of Bellingham
CJ Seitz, Higher Education
Whatcom County Councilmember Mark Stremmler
Russell (RB) Tewksbury, Internet Technology

WCBCC Members Not Present

Ryan Allsop, Other For-Profit
Dan Dunne, Construction
Matthew Green, Higher Education
Kevin Menard, Recreation

Whatcom County Executive Satpal Sidhu
Heather Steele, Public K-12 Education
Dana Wilson, Marine Trades

Non-Members/Public Present

Brady Gustafson, Andrea Ruback, R. Perry Eskridge, Kori Olsen, Elizabeth Hampton, Troy Muljat, Chris Behee, Whatcom County Councilmember Tyler Byrd, Leah Wainman, Whatcom Community Foundation, Dillon Honcoop, Port of Bellingham Interim Executive Director Tiffany DeSimone, Port of Bellingham Commissioner Ken Bell, Fred Likkel, Mayor Scot Korthuis, Jasmine Fast, Clark Campbell, Hannah Ordos, Kiana Oos, Lance Calloway, Bill Craven, Elizabeth Boyle, Todd Lagestee, Andrea Doyle, Lisa Adam, Bellingham City Councilmember Michael Lilliquist, Margaret Reich, Peter Frazier, Rob Lee, Tarah Sundin, Brian Heinrich, Guy Occhiogrosso

Call to Order

WCBCC Chair Casey Diggs called the meeting to order at 11:00 a.m.

Motion: Approval of the Minutes

Sarah Rothenbuhler seconded by Paul Burrill to adopt the meeting minutes from May 19, 2025. Motion passed.

WCBCC Chair Updates

- Applications received for the WCBCC committee position representing healthcare; Will update prior to next monthly meeting.
- Committee term information was emailed to WCBCC committee members.

Water Adjudication, Identifying Key Stakeholders & Next Steps

Whatcom County Business & Commerce Committee Roundtable Discussion

WCBCC Chair Casey Diggs introduced the topic of Water Adjudication in Whatcom County and invited dialogue to assess opportunities for initiating collaborative water resource planning within the County, drawing on examples from the Yakima Basin Integrated Plan and addressing local concerns around adjudication, tribal engagement, agricultural impact, and fishery-related urgency.

WCBCC committee member Paul Burrill introduced community member **Fred Likkell**, who emphasized that Whatcom County could benefit significantly from a more unified, collaborative approach to water issues. He noted that regions like the Yakima and Chehalis Basins were able to make major progress once diverse stakeholders—tribes, farmers, cities, and state agencies—came together with a shared commitment to problem-solving. This kind of collaboration enabled them to access large-scale state and federal funding, implement effective water strategies, and avoid costly legal battles.

Fred suggested that similar collaboration in Whatcom County could lead to several key benefits:

- Proactive solutions to complex water rights issues, avoiding years of court involvement and appeals.
- Better representation and understanding among stakeholder groups, especially for agriculture, which he said currently lacks a strong seat at the table.
- More effective long-term planning around fish recovery, farmland preservation, and in-stream flows—areas often impacted by fragmented decision-making.

Fred noted:

- Many water rights in Whatcom County are confused or contested, often due to property divisions and unclear historical records. These will each require legal resolution unless a proactive solution is found.
- A collaborative approach is urgently needed to avoid this drawn-out and expensive legal process.
- Access to outside funding, which has been significant in other areas once a unified plan was in place (ex. Chehalis Basin Plan secured an excess of \$300 million | Yakima Basin secured an excess of \$800 million).
- A stronger local voice in determining water management strategies, rather than having decisions shaped by litigation or shifting political directives.
- A lack of representation for the Agricultural community at the Watershed Management Board, where they are currently an ex-officio member.
- A coalition, “Water for Whatcom,” is working to raise awareness and advocate for cooperation.

Mayor Kim Lund noted that she has met personally with tribal representatives to discuss water analysis and updated studies, and that those conversations have been constructive and supportive. She emphasized the value of respectful, government-to-government relationships with the tribes and highlighted that both she and Executive Sidhu have unique roles in facilitating those dialogues.

Water Adjudication, Identifying Key Stakeholders & Next Steps (cont'd)

Mayor Lund noted that the tribes have clearly communicated their preferred approach to engagement, and she suggested the group defer to that guidance when determining next steps. She reinforced the idea that broader collaborative discussions can be challenging to have outside of those established tribal protocols and highlighted the importance of initiating dialogue through the appropriate channels. Mayor Lund encouraged that she and Whatcom County Executive Sidhu should be at the core of those conversations. She stated, “I want to be clear that with the tribes it calls for engagement and I think Satpal and I have a unique role to play and we have seen this government to government conversations are the preferred way so it is very hard for this group of people to be sitting at what is the next best step. Our local tribes and Lummi Nation have outlined how they prefer to be engaged. We should defer to what they put out there, and it probably begins the conversation.

WCBCC committee member Sarah Rothenbuhler asked a follow up question of how the WCBCC committee can help and if members should step back and stand by.

Mayor Lund responded, “I think Executive Sidhu and I should be at the core of those conversations.”

WCBCC Committee Member Sarah Rothenbuhler pointed to the Yakima basin as a successful model of multi-party collaboration and suggested organizing a visit to Yakima to visit with the individuals from the Yakima Basin Integrated Planning group to learn more about their framework and best practices to help guide Whatcom County’s adjudication process. She encouraged that this invitation could involve a broad Whatcom County stakeholder group, including tribal members and individuals from the agricultural community.

Port of Bellingham Commissioner Ken Bell stressed the importance of identifying the “ask” from other stakeholders before meaningful progress can be made. Without that clarity, he warned, the group risks repeating past mistakes and going down and hindering forward mobility in the process.

Whatcom County Business and Commerce committee member Paul Burrill noted the urgency of resolving water-related conflicts due to their potential impact on the local fishing industry. He noted that the region is expecting one of the largest salmon runs in recorded history, and delays in policy decisions could prevent fishing from happening—affecting both tribal and non-tribal fleets.

He expressed concern that unresolved issues might lead the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) to withhold fishing opportunities. Burrill emphasized that the stakes are high, with hundreds of millions of dollars in potential economic activity at risk and urged the group to act quickly.

Whatcom County Industrial Land Study

Tyler Schroeder, Economic Development Director, Port of Bellingham

Tyler Schroeder presented high-level findings from the ongoing Whatcom County Industrial Lands and Employment Study, a collaborative effort with consulting firm Maul Foster Alongi. The study aims to inform county and city comprehensive plans by evaluating the current supply, development trends, and future needs for industrial and manufacturing-zoned land. The central purpose is to ensure that Whatcom County has sufficient infrastructure-ready industrial land to support high-wage, high-demand job growth over the coming decades.

Whatcom County Industrial Land Study (cont'd)

Study Goals and Scope

- The study was initiated to align with local comprehensive planning efforts and address industrial land use, employment trends, and workforce implications.
- Comparative analysis included Spokane, Vancouver, and Puget Sound regions to benchmark Whatcom County's industrial growth and zoning strategies.

Study Goals and Scope (cont'd)

- A regulatory matrix is being developed to compare industrial and manufacturing zones across all seven cities in the county, aiming for more consistent and certain zoning policies.
- The study included interviews with business owners, sector trend analysis, employment projections, and land supply assessments using GIS data.

Employment & Economic Trends

- From 2013–2023, manufacturing jobs in Whatcom County grew at a modest 0.14% annually, compared to overall employment growth of 1.39%.
- Manufacturing accounts for roughly 10% of county jobs and is characterized as a high-wage, high-demand sector.
- The slow growth in this sector highlights the need for more developable industrial land and supporting infrastructure to attract and retain businesses.
- The study evaluates both current employment patterns and future projections, with a goal to better inform zoning for industrial versus commercial/office space.

Land Supply and Demand

- The analysis identified 19 industrial clusters across the county, including Blaine, Cherry Point, Grandview/North Ferndale, Bellingham, and West Lynden.
- Near-term developable industrial land (within 5–10 years) totals approximately 263 acres, of which 210 acres are concentrated in West Lynden.
- Long-term developable land (10+ years) includes 452 acres. However, only 50 acres with utilities are near key transportation corridors like I-5.
- Industrial land needs through 2045 are estimated at 370–591 acres, depending on employment growth scenarios (based on county/city "Alt 1," "Alt 2," and "Alt 3" options).
- Current zoning and infrastructure limitations could prevent the county from meeting this demand without policy intervention.

Whatcom County Industrial Land Study (cont'd)

Infrastructure and Utility Readiness

- Many industrial areas lack basic infrastructure (e.g., water, sewer, stormwater), limiting their near-term development viability.
- The study encourages cities to consider regional stormwater systems, similar to those in North Bellingham, Lynden, and Blaine, to accelerate site readiness.
- Economic Development Investment (EDI) funding was suggested as a useful tool for incentivizing infrastructure investment in priority industrial areas.

Zoning, Density, and Land Use Compatibility

- Industrial land is often used for low-density developments like mini-storage, which limits its job-producing potential.
- The study uses a 0.3 floor area ratio (FAR) to project potential industrial building square footage, adjusted based on assessor data and real-world development patterns.
- Schroeder acknowledged that site sizes used in analysis (initially 5 acres) may be too large and are being re-evaluated to include smaller 2.5-acre lots, giving planners a broader range of development scenarios.

Workforce Housing and Job Access

- A recurring theme was the interconnection between housing availability and job growth. Without sufficient workforce housing, attracting and retaining industrial employers will remain difficult.
- While the study does not directly analyze housing needs, its findings should inform related policy discussions on zoning and development capacity across the income spectrum.

Growth Strategy Recommendations

- The study supports a place-based growth strategy, encouraging public investment in areas with infrastructure potential and proximity to transportation routes.
- Key policy considerations include:
 - Updating industrial land inventories in each jurisdiction
 - Evaluating zoning uses to prioritize manufacturing over less intensive activities
 - Clarifying definitions of "industrial" and "advanced manufacturing" across cities and the county
 - Reassessing neighborhood sensitivities and adjacent residential growth pressure

Whatcom County Industrial Land Study (cont'd)

Policy and Planning Implications

- Cities such as Ferndale, Blaine, Nooksack, and Bellingham were specifically highlighted for upcoming zoning or UGA considerations that could increase or constrain industrial land availability.
- The report aims to equip policymakers with baseline data on available land, infrastructure readiness, and projected job growth to guide zoning and infrastructure investment decisions.

Next Steps / Anticipated Outcomes:

- Final report expected by end of month. It will include:
 - Industrial sector trend analysis
 - Land supply dashboard

Next Steps / Anticipated Outcomes:

- Final report expected by end of month. It will include (cont'd):
 - Employment growth scenarios
 - Land/employment reconciliation
 - Policy recommendations
- The study is intended as a fluid, living document to support ongoing comp plan updates and city/county coordination.
- Committee members discussed their potential role in shaping future industrial development, emphasizing the need for alignment between job creation, land use, infrastructure, and housing availability.

Adjourned: With no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 12:34 p.m.