

Whatcom County Business & Commerce Committee

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WCBCC July Meeting Minutes (7/14/25)

WCBCC Members Present

Casey Diggs, WCBCC Chair
Ryan Allsop, Other For-Profit
Paul Burrill, Food Processing
Pete Dawson, Commercial Real Estate
Dan Dunne, Construction
Elizabeth Hampton
Mayor Greg Hansen

Troy Lautenbach, Other For-Profit
Mayor Kim Lund
Heather Powell, Childcare
Whatcom County Councilmember Mark Stremmer
Russell (RB) Tewksbury, Internet Technology
Whatcom County Executive Satpal Sidhu

WCBCC Members Not Present

Rich Appel, Agriculture
Pam Brady, Energy
Heather Steele, Public K-12 Education
Dana Wilson, Marine Trades
Matthew Green, Higher Education

Sarah Rothenbuhler, Other For-Profit
CJ Seitz, Higher Education
Tyler Schroeder, Port of Bellingham
Kevin Menard, Recreation
Gil Lund, Manufacturing

Non-Members/Public Present

Andrew Reding, Peter Frazier, Mayor Scott Korthuis, Blake Lyon, Margaret Reich, Port of Bellingham
Interim Executive Director Tiffany DeSimone, Kori Olsen, Bellingham Councilmember Michael Lilliquist,
Port of Bellingham Commissioner Ken Bell, Hayden Richardson, Rob Lee, Whatcom County
Councilmember Tyler Byrd, Mike Hogan, Emma Herlinger, Downtown Bellingham Partnership, Ann
Beck, Tarah Sundin, Hanna Ordos, Patricia Kewan, Whatcom County Council 1, Kiana Oos, Derek Long,
Guy Occhiogrosso

Call to Order

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

Motion: Approval of the Minutes

Paul Burrill seconded by Ryan Allsop to adopt the meeting minutes from June 16, 2025.

Motion passed.

WCBCC Chair Updates

- Casey Diggs, WCBCC Chair, welcomed WCBCC committee member Elizabeth Hampton, representing Healthcare.

Port of Bellingham Three to Five Commissioner Discussion

Roundtable Discussion

In anticipation of the scheduled Port of Bellingham (POB) Commissioner meeting the following day, an open discussion was held to gather perspectives and provide background on the proposal to expand the Port of Bellingham Commission from three to five members. Tiffany DeSimone, Interim Executive Director of the POB, explained that the item would appear on the next day's agenda as an action item for the expansion of three to five commissioners for placement on the ballot.

Commissioner Ken Bell joined remotely and provided context for the proposed change. He emphasized the current challenges of a three-member commission, highlighting that any meeting between two commissioners constitutes a quorum, effectively prohibiting informal discussions. This structure has hindered communication and collaboration, requiring all commissioner communication to be funneled inefficiently through the executive director or staff. Bell cited specific instances where discussing sensitive or strategic matters—such as the executive director search or port development projects—was constrained by legal limitations. He stated this commission adheres strictly to legal standards, avoiding any form of backchannel discussions.

Ryan Allsop reinforced the communication inefficiencies under the current structure and compared it to more functional public bodies like city councils. Casey Diggs posed a question about potential political maneuvering in a five-member structure, asking whether two commissioners might influence others informally. In response, Blake Lyon clarified that even under the Open Public Meetings Act (OPMA), “serial meetings” are prohibited and would constitute a legal violation if used to circumvent public transparency.

Ken Bell further detailed that the motivation behind expanding the commission stems from increasing need for peer collaboration and the desire for elected officials to retain strategic oversight. He explained that with three commissioners, the structure heavily filters information, undermining elected oversight. Bell proposed a transition to five commissioners elected through a model similar to county commission elections—five districts, with district-based primaries and countywide general elections. He emphasized that all port commission elections, including the current structure, are countywide, and expanding to five would not change that, although primaries would become district-based.

Pete Dawson expressed concern that expanding the commission could shift its orientation away from being business-focused and financially responsible, a model he stated had proven effective for over a decade. Bell acknowledged this risk but reiterated that port positions have always been countywide and susceptible to political shifts, stressing the importance of electing competent, business-minded commissioners. He also noted that he was initially not planning to run for re-election but decided to do so to help preserve balance and vision at the port.

Dan Dunne and Mayor Korthuis sought clarification on the election structure, with Korthuis confirming that while a countywide vote is required to adopt the five-member structure, subsequent general elections would also remain countywide, after district-based primaries. Bell reiterated that current elections already follow this model, and only primaries would change under the proposed system.

Discussion also touched on commissioner recruitment, with Dawson speaking about low candidate engagement—highlighting that one current seat was unopposed. Bell acknowledged the challenge, stressing the need for proactive recruitment and competitive races to ensure qualified representation. The issue of compensation was raised, with Dawson suggesting that the expansion could prompt a reevaluation. Bell shared his personal preference for maintaining the current part-time and modestly compensated structure to preserve civic motivation.

The meeting concluded with a reminder from Diggs that the formal commission meeting would be held the following day at 4 p.m. at the Port of Bellingham in the Harbor Center Room, encouraging participation in public comment from individuals if they had a vested interest.

Form-Based Codes and Smart Code Application

Blake Lyon, Director of Planning and Community Development, City of Bellingham

Blake Lyon provided an overview of form-based codes and their relevance to local planning. He explained that traditional zoning, rooted in early 20th-century land use separation, has evolved into a complex, often text-heavy system. Bellingham currently has 434 subareas in its multifamily zones, down from over 700, highlighting the administrative burden and difficulty for residents and developers in navigating the code.

Form-based codes prioritize the physical form and relationship of buildings to public spaces over specific land uses, aiming to simplify regulations, improve predictability, and create walkable, mixed-use environments. These codes typically include visual illustrations, simplified tables, and clear standards and guidelines, making them more user-friendly.

Lyon introduced Smart Code as a type of form-based code that uses a standardized "transect" model ranging from rural to urban zones (T1–T6). It is open-source and can be locally calibrated, making it adaptable for jurisdictions across the county. The benefit is a consistent organizing principle that can reduce complexity and support cross-jurisdictional understanding.

He referenced examples from other cities, including Buffalo, Bothell, and Redwood City, where form-based codes have reduced permitting timelines and supported revitalization efforts. In Redwood City, project approval timelines dropped from 18–24 months to 3–6 months after form-based code adoption.

In discussion, Lyon emphasized the importance of upfront public engagement, clarity in code structure, and political commitment to maintain adopted visions. He noted that Bellingham currently uses form-based principles in its urban villages but has not expanded them citywide. Staff is beginning internal conversations on broader adoption, especially as the city prepares for its Comprehensive Plan update and state-mandated zoning changes.

Questions from the audience addressed topics such as permit streamlining, transportation integration, and potential community resistance. Lyon confirmed that form-based codes can help clarify expectations, reduce review timelines, and allow faster permitting when standards are clearly met. He acknowledged that larger code reform would require outside consulting support and a multi-year public process.

Mayor Lund expressed support for further exploration of form-based code adoption. Lyon concluded by underscoring the importance of early public education, stakeholder engagement, and clear regulatory structure in ensuring successful implementation.

Executive Housing Order

Blake Lyon, Director of Planning and Community Development, City of Bellingham

Blake Lyon provided an update on the Mayor's Executive Order on Housing, issued in November of the previous year. The Order outlines administrative and legislative actions to address local housing challenges. Initiatives were categorized by implementation status. While no item is fully complete, many have advanced significantly.

Lyon highlighted the launch of a new public-facing housing data website, which offers interactive tools for tracking permit volumes, housing types since 2016, and economic development trends. The platform supports both state reporting requirements and transparency goals under the Executive Order.

In compliance with Senate Bill 5290, the city has met new state requirements for multifamily permit timelines and was recognized by the Department of Commerce as a top performer. Opportunities for continued improvement remain, and the city is committed to ongoing process refinement.

Two key legislative actions have been implemented: a citywide interim parking reform adopted in January (in effect through 2025) and expansion of the Infill Toolkit citywide (excluding the Lake Whatcom watershed). Plans to streamline design review are on hold due to delays at the state level.

Presentation included a discussion of a case study on a housing project in Old Town that demonstrated the impact of reduced parking requirements. The project tripled its unit count—from 30 to 90—by relocating parking off-site and avoiding structured parking, saving approximately six months in permitting. Similar trends are emerging citywide, with many projects reducing parking by 20–30%.

The presentation also addressed the importance of market-based parking strategies, referencing European models such as centralized “parking houses.” While not universally applicable, such approaches could benefit walkable, transit-accessible areas.

Lyon noted that the city is advancing a broad set of code reforms. Near- and long-term efforts will address zoning for multiplexes, single-stairwell buildings, and battery storage, among other priorities. Some changes will depend on state-level code updates.

Lyon noted that regional energy storage is being explored. While large-scale battery facilities are better suited for county areas, the city is in early discussions with Puget Sound Energy about smaller-scale urban installations to support localized energy resilience.

The update concluded with a reaffirmed commitment to continuing progress on both administrative and legislative elements of the Housing Executive Order.

Adjourned:

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