

Whatcom County Business & Commerce Committee

1801 Roeder Avenue ■ Bellingham, WA 98225 ■ wcbcc@portofbellingham.com ■ (360) 715-5118

WCBCC August Meeting Minutes (8/18/25)

WCBCC Members Present

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

Troy Lautenbach, Other For-Profit
Gil Lund, Manufacturing
Kevin Menard, Recreation
Heather Powell, Childcare
Sarah Rothenbuhler, Other For-Profit
Tyler Schroeder, Port of Bellingham
CJ Seitz, Higher Education
Whatcom County Councilmember Mark Stremmer
Russell (RB) Tewksbury, Internet Technology

WCBCC Members Not Present

Matthew Green, Higher Education
Mayor Kim Lund
Whatcom County Executive Satpal Sidhu

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

Non-Members/Public Present

Sarah Simpson, Jill Boudreau, Elizabeth Boyle, Margaret Reich, Port of Bellingham Commissioner Ken Bell, Carly James, Atul Deshmane, Ann Beck, Peter Frazier, Todd Lagestee. Bruce Tabb, City of Bellingham Councilmember Michael Lilliquist, Andrew Calkins, Whatcom County Councilmember Tyler Byrd, Perry Eskridge, Andrea Doyle, Lance Calloway, Andrea Ruback, Blake Lyon, Dan Smith, Downtown Bellingham Partnership, Guy Occhiogrosso, Barbara Chase, Brady Gustafson, Alan Chapman, Mauri Ingram, Jessie Iverson

Call to Order

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

Motion: Approval of the Minutes

Dane Dunne seconded by Ryan Allsop to adopt the meeting minutes from July 14, 2025.

Motion passed.

Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy Update

Tyler Schroeder, Director of Economic Development, Port of Bellingham

Tyler Schroeder presented on the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS), a five-year planning document intended to guide economic development throughout a region. CEDS is a requirement to be eligible to compete for Economic Development Administration (EDA) and other federal funding opportunities and its aim is to make development more programmatic and efficient.

Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy Update (cont'd)

Tyler Schroeder, Director of Economic Development, Port of Bellingham

Schroeder stated the most recent CEDS was years 2022-2026. The CEDS planning process for the next five-year term will be led by Dr. Jennifer Noveck, Ph.D. A schedule of activities will be provided and upon completion of its creation, the plan will be presented for approval to Whatcom County Council.

Schroeder provided a background of the CEDS planning process, including that in 2022, the five-year strategy was approved through 2026, and an annual progress update on CEDS-aligned work completed was published.

Schroeder furthered that the CEDS provides a vision document and a strategy for economic development, identifying six different strategies:

1. Build upon and strengthen Whatcom County's economic base.
2. Develop and enhance critical infrastructure that promotes economic development and resiliency.
3. Develop a skilled workforce, expand educational attainment, and align employer needs with education programs and curriculum.
4. Create a dynamic relationship between Whatcom County and Lower British Columbia, Skagit, Island, and San Juan Counties.
5. Cultivate an economy that values diversity, equity, and inclusion for all.
6. Support countywide economic resiliency and recovery efforts

We work with the different jurisdictions, the cities, and the county to identify infrastructure projects that they can then go and get federal grants or state grants associated with it.

Schroeder stated that his update to Whatcom County Business and Commerce Committee (WCBCC) is to recognize that the process of updating the CEDS is starting in September of 2025, next month.

He stated the CEDS group and the economic development division with the Port of Bellingham have recognized stakeholders to be involved in that process, and the process will likely go through next year with a CEDS update to the County Council by December 2026. He added this will allow time to identify a strategy moving forward and that he is excited that the WCBCC will have ideas and thoughts to be incorporated about that.

Schroeder provided an overview of how the CEDS is different than local city and county comprehensive plans, reiterating that the CEDS is updated every five years, but that it is not guided by state law or the Growth Management Act (GMA). He furthered that community interests and vision and values really need to be incorporated into it and that it is consensus-based. He added that there is a review committee that is set up to complete the work associated with planning, including discussions throughout about what strategies should be accomplished.

Schroeder stated that a lot of people have participated in the CEDS list over the years, pointing to the 2022-2026 CEDS as an excellent example that highlights many accomplishments to date. He stated that the current CEDS has a solid outline and that the CEDS planning team would like to build upon that and identify some outcomes and economic metrics to report on. He added that annual or quarterly reviews will be provided in relation to the metrics and outcomes.

Schroeder stated that the CEDS planning process will involve working with the jurisdictions to identify a priority for infrastructure projects, including what water/sewer and road projects will lead to economic growth, and it will take into consideration a recently completed Industrial Lands Study, which he will present at a future WCBCC meeting.

Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy Update (cont'd)

Tyler Schroeder, Director of Economic Development, Port of Bellingham

Schroeder stated that it is important to recognize that the document, although somewhat guided by federal guidelines, also requires and needs local control to identify the actionable strategy associated with it, stating that while the federal guidelines are imperative for federal grants, etc., the aim is also to ensure that the plan has community values articulated within it.

Schroeder noted that an area of interest is the statistical background of Whatcom County's economy, which will be updated in the upcoming plan. He stated that he is in discussions with the Center for Economic and Business Research (CEBR) at Western Washington University (WWU) to help inform in that process, perhaps as an additive to the Whatcom Impact Report they issue, which highlights demographics and different economic indicators associated with it.

Schroeder stated that the "heart" of the CEDS is the SWOT analysis: the Strength, Weakness, Opportunities, Threat analysis, adding that the planning committee will be discussing it through a jurisdictional frame, including the cities and the sectors – specific business sectors of focus. He added that input and data will be drawn from the comp plan process, and that the county and city staff will be asked to pull out some of the work they have already completed on stakeholder outreach through the comprehensive planning process specific to economy. The information will be used as one guidance to ensure there is consistency between the two.

Schroeder stated other work the Port's economic development team is focused on will be integrated into it as well, citing the Industrial Lands Study, the Point Roberts Economic Development Strategy Study, and the Grandview Study with the City of Ferndale as three examples of this type of consideration.

Schroeder stated that all WCBCC members will be stakeholders within the CEDS planning process. He explained he will revisit the committee throughout the planning process to gain insight into interests, ideas, and values associated with the plan.

Schroeder stated that there will be some focus on a strategy around manufacturing, including small manufacturers, that meet the community's values and vision and an aim to figure out how we can become a stronger player as a community in that. He recognized that WCBCC member Gil Lund's expertise would be instrumental in guiding that discussion and has nominated Mr. Lund to join the CEDS Review Committee with Lund's interest and agreement.

Ryan Allsop recalled WCBCC not being very involved in the process in the past, requiring the need for the committee to push to be updated.

Sarah Rothenbuhler requested a big picture of the schedule and timelines - benchmark timelines versus just popping in. She stated the committee would like to have proper preparation time as there are key topics she would like to see the committee be able to help move beyond looking at past statistics as that seems to be what this does. Rothenbuhler asked, "how do we get our economic development engine of Whatcom County being more front running?" She cited "one example alone is our transportation infrastructure. If we want to bring and recruit the businesses, small and large, we're . . . we're in a crisis transportation-wise – roadways, road-wise. The waterway could be improved dramatically as well, but we are not going to be able to help you with pop ins."

Schroeder responded that if there are other kinds of topics the WCBCC would like to identify that can be incorporated, working with Gil Lund and identifying a schedule will be helpful. As a follow up, Schroeder

Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy Update (cont'd)

Tyler Schroeder, Director of Economic Development, Port of Bellingham

offered to return to WCBCC with a schedule. *Note: Jennifer Noveck, Ph.D. will be presenting this information at the September 2025 meeting.*

Rothenbuhler requested that information includes how the WCBCC committee will be participating in the process, what the main topics are, and then rather than funneling everything through Gil, having the WCBCC subcommittee teams directly involved with the topics that align with respective subcommittees. She stated that there has previously been a choke point created where committee members cannot communicate with government entities because they must speak through one person.

Gil Lund complimented Rothenbuhler's comment and stated, "I think my wanting is to categorize these things and make sure we all have these lanes." He stated that the information is very comprehensive but also needs to be compartmentalized and – like Rothenbuhler mentioned- there are all these pieces that it is no one person or one group that wants to represent all these things. Lund stated that part of his goal is to establish these lanes and then identify who the experts and stakeholders are. Ideally, he stated he sees his role more as helping people get the pieces they are interested in and need and not necessarily representing them. Furthering that they represent themselves and he would be helping to organize and make it easy to access the information.

In response to Rothenbuhler's question of whether those topics are identified yet, Schroeder responded that the topics have been identified in the past, but one of the main efforts in the next steps will be to reexamine those topics to determine if those are the topics we want to continue with or if there will be changes to those topics.

Schroeder reviewed the six strategies detailed in the 2022-2026 CEDS plan (detailed above in minutes): Base economy, Infrastructure, Workforce, Cross-Border and Regional Relationships, DEI, and Resiliency.

Schroeder stated that the "Infrastructure" goal in the 2022-2026 plan includes is somewhat of a laundry list of city and county capital projects, and that there isn't really a prioritized way of identifying which one of those infrastructure projects leads to economic development. He furthered that the Whatcom County Industrial Lands Study that was recently completed and released this week will be brought back to the WCBCC, the City Council, the County Council in late August and September and will serve as a mechanism to try to identify where in our community we want to see that infrastructure investment to be able to attract and allow existing manufacturers and industries to expand. Schroeder added that he thinks those documents will be able to help strategize the infrastructure improvements that will lead to economic development.

Schroeder stated the Industrial Land Study looks at the 19 different industrial areas, acknowledges which lands can be developed, which may have impacts to development (i.e. wetlands), and then where infrastructure could be prioritized to use the local county EDI fund, or the Washington Community Economic Revitalization Board (CERB) funds. He added that bringing those infrastructure projects to fruition would then help open up the privately owned lands for development for manufacturing and industries.

In response to a question of whether the strategies are associated with KPIs that are evidence-based and trends, not only in alignment with federal guidelines, grant parameters, but the kind that fit into the big picture, Schoeder stated there will be a little bit different data source to go towards and that CEBR at WWU has done the best through the Whatcom Impact Report. He added that he thinks it is valuable to go a couple layers down or broader in that to understand what the KPIs are from the data that drives the economy associated with it and that is a main point of what he wants to bring it to the table - to draw that

Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy Update (cont'd)

Tyler Schroeder, Director of Economic Development, Port of Bellingham

data source out, the KPIs, which then is connected to each one of the strategies. He furthered that it could be monitored and reported back on the process annually.

Sarah Rothenbuhler stated it would be nice to move past data analysis, adding that it is the “action,” as focus, and she requested to know the next logical time WCBCC will be roundtabling on this topic.

Schroeder responded he would take the information back to the review committee to best understand the schedule for the outreach associated within the 14 months and then identify some strategic times to come back to the WCBCC to do that, likely in November or December, but requested time to think through it. Schroeder indicated he will provide an update at a future meeting. He added that it would be helpful to have the WCBCC brainstorm on what would be meaningful when talking about it, not just for this group but also for discussions within the community.

Whatcom County Councilmember Tyler Byrd asked a clarifying question whether the CEDS report is one of the items that is a requirement for EDI applications, are those projects on the CEDS report- or a couple other options- the primary option.

Schroeder confirmed that was correct and stated that is the value of the CEDS process for the city and the county, to identify what grants the CEDS actually opens up the door to apply for.

Motion | CEDS Reveiw: Troy Lautenbach motioned to nominate Gil Lund to be appointed to the CEDS Review Committee; Ryan Allsop added to motion to include WCBCC more in the CEDS planning and review process than they have been in the past; Sarah Rothenbuhler requested further quantification of “being involved more” to be connection to the relevant subcommittees as the goal of the subcommittees was to always have it be one WCBCC committee member that is very vested in that topic but also a community member that is very vested in that topic. Tyler Schroeder recognized the subcommittee involvement as language to the motion and encouraged that conversations about that framework remain continuous.

Motioned seconded by Tyler Schroeder. Motion passed.

Options High School, Career Pathway Programs (cont'd)

Jeff Thran, Options High School CTE Teacher

Jeff Thran, a longtime Bellingham resident and educator shared his personal and professional journey, beginning as a 6th grade teacher in Lake Tahoe before moving to Bellingham in 1989–90, inspired by a colleague's recommendation. He described his passion for teaching and the trades, recalling his role in launching a shop program at Kulshan Middle School in 1994, where students engaged in hands-on community projects. He expressed concern over the decline of shop programs due to federal education policies like No Child Left Behind, and emphasized the need to align local education with economic trends and job opportunities in Whatcom County. He urged the community to support vocational training and help students understand their place in the evolving workforce.

Thran described the three courses he teaches: Introduction to Trades, Manufacturing, and Aerospace. The first two are open to all Options students, while the Aerospace class is a three-hour block that functions as a magnet program drawing students from across the district. He emphasized the value of the hands-on learning environment and invited attendees to visit the Options workspace, which he described as a fantastic space supported by strong community investment.

Options High School, Career Pathway Programs (cont'd)

Jeff Thran, Options High School CTE Teacher

Thran addressed the growing conversation around artificial intelligence, emphasizing the importance of hands-on learning experiences that require focus and judgment. He highlighted the advanced tools his students—many of them freshmen—use, including CAD software (Fusion and Rhino), 3D printers, laser cutters, CNC machines, and even a water jet cutter. Students also engage in MIG, TIG, and stick welding, plasma cutting, milling, and woodworking. He stressed how remarkable it is that such experiences are available in a public high school, crediting the community's investment and leadership for supporting the return of shop class. Thran shared a quote from *Shop Class as Soulcraft* by Matthew Crawford, emphasizing the value of attentiveness and the risks of losing it in an automated world. He described the powerful impact on students when they face real-world tasks that demand responsibility and presence—like using a table saw or welding for the first time—arguing that such experiences foster agency, integrity, and meaningful personal growth in ways that passive AI tools cannot replace.

Thran indicated that he is noticing more confidence in the students once learning how to use machinery and equipment. He expressed how COVID had a significant impact on how people learn and feel about schools and teachers and that the new push in the White House for manufacturing is having renewed energy resulting in manufacturing being a space students can visualize themselves in.

Thran highlighted a new trades class he is developing along with another teacher at Squalicum High School, a one-quarter class, which includes PPE and safety protocols. He stated that if any WCBCC members know of groups or individuals he could walk alongside to get pictures of things such as plumbing or fabrication, it would be helpful to his curriculum. Thran encouraged that industry is beneficial for real-world experience within high schools, citing Whatcom Middle School students who had the opportunity to build a shed as one such example.

Thran explained the numerous skills students are attaining through these experiences, including everything from basic hand and power tool operation, to building and designing. He further highlighted additional skills such as budgeting.

Thran shared that he works in partnership with Carlson Steelworks, who provides over half of his students' welding opportunities. He has further strengthened partnerships with power coating companies, welding, fabrication, steel, and chain link, etc.

Thran stated that with budget cuts across the state, he could always benefit from businesses that could donate or point him in the direction to find donated materials and supplies.

Thran shared several presentation slides showing the students building a multitude of construction and aerospace projects. He stated the program he runs is quite aligned with Boeing and described an assembly project that provided his students with the opportunity to design projects using CAD, water jet, and assembly.

Thran further noted that he is always seeking opportunities to take his students on field trips. He shared examples of places he has taken them: The United States Coast Guard station and the Air Flight Museum. Thran has a goal of taking his students to Boeing but has yet been able to do so due to limited budget.

Thran stated he wants the students to understand the complexities of Boeing and the many different career tracks within it, such as environmental and structural engineering. He furthered that he has met with Boeing leadership to determine the hard and soft skills necessary to be successful within that organization.

Thran stated that students can be both stressed and excited about their future, but some of them are confident in that they love the shop – noting that some of the kids that graduated came back to the shop

Options High School, Career Pathway Programs (cont'd)

Jeff Thran, Options High School CTE Teacher

the following week just to work on their projects because they felt as though they were never going to get experience like this again.

Thran requested that if anyone had a relationship with All American Marine, he would be interested in that connection as a potential connection/field trip site.

Gil Lund stated he has been on the CTE program advisory for more than a decade and advocating for supporting Thran's efforts. Lund stated he would like to volunteer to assist with field trips.

Thran stated that in addition to Options, there are a number of local schools with fantastic programs – Squalicum and Bellingham High School– to name a few. He stated the machinery at Squalicum Middle School is next level, especially if kids want to do CNC fab work. He furthered that the construction trades class at Squalicum is also excellent and that if students are on the pathway to be a contractor, which is a great place to be. Thran stated that Bellingham High School is going to do a three-wheeled EV car to be housed at Options this year that students will be working on.

Whatcom County Councilmember Tyler Bird asked about materials. He stated that the Council funded a program to expand resources a couple of weeks ago and that they are taking excess product waste from manufacturers throughout the county for upcycling and reuse – everything from ropes to excess key caps or legends necessary for injection molding to scrap wood. Councilmember Byrd offered to introduce Thran and see if there's some resources. Byrd further stated he is working on a similar project with Mount Baker High School with Dawson Construction and that may be of interest with Thran.

Sarah Rothenbuhler thanked Thran for his exciting presentation and stated that Birch Equipment has provided tours to grade and high school students over the past 20 years and operates an internship program.

Rothenbuhler stated that Birch's maintenance teams are amazing, but that there is a lot more behind what Birch does in their programming and systems, utilization of AI, etc. She encouraged Thran to connect with community businesses that have those top-level jobs and offered to invite students to tours of their operations.

Rothenbuhler mentioned that one challenge is the age restriction for internships and apprenticeships and that she was reviewing state laws because federal laws are not as cumbersome as Washington state laws. She stated Birch Equipment has not been allowed to have youth have a pressure washer in their hands due to age restrictions, and that the best way to initially learn about equipment is to start washing it, start moving it around, start prepping it for the maintenance team to work on, often as a way to impress the maintenance team and gain their confidence that they want the person to assist them. Rothenbuhler stated she would love to team up with Thran and reduce the barriers for kids performing hands-on work. She furthered that Birch certifies for forklift training.

Whatcom County Councilmember Mark Stremer complimented Thran's presentation and asked if there is curriculum in place to teach students how to start a small business.

Thran responded that one of the ways they have done that is by being present in the community and developing relationships that help business owners connect to the students. He provided the example of students engaging in the practices of a t-shirt printing business. Thran stated he leans on those relationships to form new relationships and further opportunities.

Options High School, Career Pathway Programs (cont'd)

Jeff Thran, Options High School CTE Teacher

Thran ended his presentation encouraging committee members to connect directly with him to discuss ways to support skill development in the CTE system, particularly with forging local area business relationships for equipment/materials donation, field trips, and hands-on learning opportunities.

Healthy Children's Fund & Childcare

Sarah Simpson, EMPA, Children and Family Programs Supervisor

Sarah Simpson with the Healthy Children's Fund (HCF) provided an in-depth update on the Fund's recent activities, community impact, and strategic direction. With nearly 20 years of experience in youth-focused work, Simpson expressed enthusiasm for the current initiatives supported through HCF, aimed at strengthening early childhood services and access across Whatcom County. The presentation included an overview of fund distribution, current programming highlights, and upcoming funding opportunities.

Simpson stated that to date, the Healthy Children's Fund has distributed over 37 contracts totaling approximately \$8 million across Whatcom County. One major area of investment is the Early Learning and Care Innovation Fund, launched through a request for proposals about eight months ago. This fund specifically asked childcare providers what services they had historically been unable to secure funding for. The strongest response came for auxiliary services, such as on-site behavioral health, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and speech pathology.

The primary benefits of funding these services are threefold:

1. Improved child outcomes, particularly by identifying and treating developmental delays during a critical period of brain development before age five.
2. Reduced burden on working parents, who often must choose between their job and their child's therapeutic needs.
3. Enhanced classroom support and teacher retention, especially in cases where communication challenges lead to behavioral disruptions.

Simpson added that to further study the impact, HCF contracted with a Western Washington University professor who specializes in early childhood evaluation. This work is helping determine the scalability and efficacy of providing such services across all types of childcare settings in the county.

Simpson stated that HCF has launched a countywide drop-in childcare program, accessible through ChildCareSpaces.com. This tool allows parents to upload required documentation and reserve temporary childcare for situations such as job interviews, medical appointments, or emergency circumstances.

Key features of the program include:

- Free care for families with qualifying emergencies or income thresholds.
- Paid drop-in slots for those able to afford care.
- Monthly stipends to providers to reserve drop-in spots.
- Encouragement of flexible care models, including night and overnight care, particularly among smaller, more agile providers.

Healthy Children's Fund & Childcare

Sarah Simpson, EMPA, Children and Family Programs Supervisor

Simpson stated that currently the program includes over nine providers and more than 130 drop-in slots available monthly and that the model is considered innovative, with few comparable systems in place nationally.

Simpson added that an open capital Request for Proposals (RFP) was announced, closing September 16. The goal is to increase childcare slots by supporting facility expansion through grants for renovation, construction, or property acquisition. The minimum application threshold is \$50,000, and grants are reimbursable. She furthered that HCF is also working with the Opportunity Council and CREC to support smaller maintenance grants (e.g., for sliding doors or fencing repairs) under \$10,000, which are critical for licensing compliance.

Simpson noted that HCF is preparing to release an RFP for a new childcare subsidy program designed to:

- Supplement providers who accept Washington State Working Connections subsidies, which currently fall below the actual cost of care.
- Offer up to \$300 per month for providers serving children ages 0–3, the most expensive and difficult group to care for.
- Provide direct family subsidies for households earning between 60–75% of State Median Income (SMI), a group currently underserved by the state.
- Fund families under 60% SMI who do not qualify for state subsidies due to other benefits (e.g., veteran status).
- Include outreach to raise awareness among families and providers about subsidy options.

Simpson stated the program also aims to educate employers, with the possibility of creating co-funded employer-childcare subsidy models, inspired by a similar program in Texas and that approach could strengthen workforce participation and retention.

Simpson explained that the HCF team shared updates to HealthyChildrensFund.org, which now includes a Power BI dashboard showing detailed contract data. Users can explore funding allocations by year, initiative, or provider, with direct links to contracts and blog updates for deeper context. A new website is in development to further improve community access to resources and updates.

Simpson noted that HCF is collaborating with RAPID, a research initiative out of Stanford University's Early Learning Center, to gather quarterly parent feedback via surveys. Hundreds of families have participated, offering critical insights into childcare gaps, barriers to developmental support, and economic strain. Parents consistently report:

- The emotional and logistical difficulty of balancing employment with developmental needs of their children.
- Appreciation for safe, reliable childcare, which enables work participation.
- Desire for greater access to speech therapy, behavioral services, and early interventions.

Healthy Children's Fund & Childcare

Sarah Simpson, EMPA, Children and Family Programs Supervisor

Following the presentation, attendees provided feedback and posted questions:

- **Employer Resources:** Several participants requested a one-pager or guide that could be distributed to local employers and employees outlining available childcare subsidies and support programs.
- **Summer Gaps for Teachers:** There was concern about educators having to pay to retain childcare slots during the summer despite not working.
- **Provider Fairs and Outreach:** Attendees recommended holding provider engagement fairs to centralize communication and streamline access to funding and information.
- **Unspent Funds:** With approximately \$15 million of the Healthy Children's Fund remaining, stakeholders inquired about strategies for scaling distribution and maintaining high impact.
- **Business Partnerships:** Participants encouraged exploration of employer-matching subsidy programs and praised HCF's collaboration with CREC and Opportunity Council.

Further, attendees expressed strong interest in receiving more detailed information, particularly regarding:

- The drop-in program and its providers.
- The upcoming subsidy program and eligibility.
- Outreach materials for employers and parents.
- Results from the RAPID data collection.

Simpson emphasized ongoing collaboration and encouraged anyone interested in regional impact, data, or partnership opportunities to reach out directly.

Adjourned:

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