

Business and Commerce Advisory Committee  
Meeting Minutes  
September 18, 2018  
Mt. Baker Room, Port of Bellingham

**Attending:**

Attending Members: Drew Zogby, Doug Thomas, Michael Jones, Susan Cole, Jeff Callender Ryan Allsop Troy Muljat, Andrew Gamble, Paul Burrill, Sue Cole, Pete Dawson, Brad Rader, Satpal Sidhu, Don Goldberg.

Other Attendees: Guy Occhiogrosso, Rob Fix, Bobby Briscoe, Ken Bell, Gina Stark

Don Goldberg welcomed everyone to the meeting. He asked for nominations for committee president and vice president. At the time no one made or presented any nominations. This action item will be placed on the agenda for the next committee meeting.

**Discussion:**

Don Goldberg told the group that he has been giving presentation and is rolling out the economic development strategy for the region. His most recent presentation was at the September Small Cities Partnership Meeting.

Don Goldberg expressed that the first and most important thing we do in terms of economic development is retention of businesses. The companies around this table are our greatest asset. It is best to support the existing businesses. How do we better support our business? Will present economic development regional strategy at the next meeting.

Currently, there is not an active group influencing Whatcom County on what is going on in terms of economic development and what the view of business and commerce is from the private sector's perspective. One of the major responsibilities of this committee is to give opinions and to share what the businesses community requires in terms of economic development support.

Rob Fix expressed to the group that it is an independent body. If the group's opinions don't align with the county it is ok. Retention is important and the opinion of the committee members will help us with this.

Pete Dawson expressed it will be important for each member of the group to identify what economic growth means for them and their industry sector.

Drew Zogby expressed he hoped the committee can pick certain topics and mobilize so that the committee can keep the economy growing. With this approach, the committee can help a company grow.

Don Goldberg expressed it is important to identify the issues and emphasizing solutions. The public is often given opposite viewpoints. Furnish the city and the county good information about issues at hand, so we (committee and County) can move forward. Put boots on the ground and deliver results.

The group engaged in a discussion for the need of affordable housing and the challenges in developing housing and the impact to business. It was expressed that housing is too expensive in our county, there are not enough housing units and this makes it challenging for the County to compete with other areas.

Dave Zogby commented that Whatcom County needs more housing units that are residential and expand businesses so we can get more people. We wanted to do an expansion here but we went to Atlanta instead.

Don Goldberg commented we lack infrastructure. Without housing, we cannot get good employees. Our division is going to figure out where the major infrastructure is located along the I-5 corridor and figure out where the gaps are. If we do not have the proper infrastructure we cannot build the housing needed.

The question was asked: With a topic like zoning and housing, can the committee members at this table do a position paper, sign and put it on the elected official's docket?

This committee is a County Committee not a City Committee but yes I think the city would be willing to listen.

The committee agreed that communication with the City of Bellingham and Whatcom County is important. It is important to do a master plan for economic growth with the businesses. This master plan will help attract and retain our business. The group agreed something needs to be done quickly.

### **Discussion**

The group had a discussion on what they need to do as a group/committee and what their priorities will be.

Doug Thomas commented that we need good high caliber workers who can live in a good neighbor; make a home, family, career, otherwise, we have a problem with retention. When looking at expansion is it important to look at why they come here. Is it berries, cheese or seafood for us. We are the first port facility coming out of Alaska and if we can mount a team to articulate the issues of employment, higher education, and facilities and not about money grab. Then we can talk about why not come to Bellingham. Why not have a flight that goes to Alaska and be the Port of choice for Alaskan goods coming south? We need to develop sister cities along the water corridor from Alaska. We can create barge facilities up and down the water corridor and not up and down the I-5 reducing the need to truck the goods north. We have many ideas but we need to have a base.

Don Goldberg asked for a clarification of what is the base.

Doug Thomas answered the base is a master plan for growth built on the realization that growth need to match the demand for good employment, and keep them here, and this is a career.

Ryan Allsop commented that his family stays here because they love the area. We need to identify what are our strengths. We know our weaknesses. We need to leverage our strengths. We can talk all day long about our weaknesses. Hoping to make a long-term change of why I live here. We have real synergy but how do we leverage those strength? That is why he is participating.

Brad Rader commented that on behalf of dairy and berry farmers they see this as an opportunity to have a stronger voice together instead of if each industry goes in one at time. The farmers have gone in together and having a strong voice makes a difference. Help us make strong statements. He knows there are some things the committee can't do but there are a lot that they can do. Some folks do not like farming but it provides a lot of jobs.

The discussion moved to the need for a workforce that is drug free and who show up on a consistent basis. There is currently a workforce shortage for various reasons. It is important to work with our Community and Technical colleges to make sure the training is in line with what the industries need.

The misperception of going to a community college or a technical school is valued less than going to a four-year college. This misperception needs to be addressed. It is believed in order to be successful a student needs to graduate from a University. Many of the students who graduate from a technical school with a particular skill will get a higher pay rate than someone graduating from a four-year school. As a committee, it is important they get the message out to the students, parents and community.

Sue Cole expressed that at Whatcom Community College they facilitate a lot of workforce training. Filling the pipeline however, there is still not enough people. Sue wants to be a part of a group who finds out what is on the horizon. It is important for the group to not be a rubber stamp committee but a committee that comes up with solutions.

The group discussed that local businesses do try to hire locally but it is challenging because there are not enough housing units in the \$300,000 (+/-) range for young families to move into.

It is important for the group and the business community to tell what their workforce needs are. What type of skills they need to fill their job vacancies? Currently, if a company needed to hire 100 people there is not enough skilled people to hire.

Doug Thomas suggested reaching out to all the high schools and guidance counselors. He believes they are more geared towards students who are planning to go to a four-year college. They are not geared to provide guidance to students who may be looking to attend or are better suited for a two-year trade school. There would be a larger pool of students and workforce if they knew that a 2 year was a good option for them. There is a realization that there is a gap.

The quality of life in this region is what will draw and retain a young workforce.

The discussion turned to what needs to be the next step for the committee. As a committee, they expressed they need to identify what are the next steps and based on that determine what actions they will take.

The committee discussed the need for infrastructure so businesses can expand. There is a growing demand from Canadian companies to re-locate or expand to Whatcom County. When the discussion is around why companies should re-locate to the region the group expressed it will be important to put it in the context of what is going on in other states. Such as tax incentives, infrastructure, housing and permitting.

The group agreed they need to create a unified message around what their goals are and what they want to accomplish.

County Councilman Satpal Sidhu expressed what his motivation was in developing this committee.

Councilman Satpal Sidhu: In our County, we have all kinds of committees but the business community did not have one that represented them and their needs as a business. We (as a council) we do not hear from them directly. The second motivation was economic development. If we put 5 dollar in each person that would turn into 5 million. We should at least put in 1 million for economic development.

We need to market ourselves. We have many good reasons why people should live here. We need to look at who we are as a county and market ourselves as business friendly. The seven people on the County council do not know everything. Everything is a learning moment and this Committee will be a learning moment. This is not a committee that should be filled with government people. We have a lot of capacity to grow and can take advantage of businesses coming out of Canada.

**Discussion:**

It will be important to educate the council on the policy issues that businesses are facing today. It is important to educate the community as well. The group suggested maybe holding a community event and possibly offering it as a luncheon.

The Business and Commerce committee agreed as a group they need to determine what they want and where they as a committee are headed. Topics include housing, public safety, employment and zero in on what growth industry are and do a plan around that.

The group agreed to meet next month and then will meet on a quarterly basis Meeting adjourned at 1:40pm

**To Do for Next Meeting:**

The group agreed to each member defining “ What is economic growth to each member and their sector?”

The committee will complete their Open Public Meetings Act Training

Put forth nominations for Chair and Vice Chair

Don Goldberg will make a presentation on the regional Economic Development Strategy.