



PLANNING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

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Whatcom County P&DS

June 19, 2009

David Stalheim, Director
Whatcom County SEPA Official
Planning and Development Services
5280 Northwest Drive
Bellingham, WA 98226

RE: City of Bellingham Comments on Whatcom 2031 Draft EIS

Dear David,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the County's draft Environmental Impact Statement regarding the urban growth area update process. The document is well done. Please extend my compliments to your staff and consultants.

The City of Bellingham's comments are attached. Please contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,


Tim Stewart,
Director

City of Bellingham Comments on Whatcom 2031 Draft EIS June 19, 2009

General Comments

The DEIS should be revised to include the results of the June 11, 2009 version of the Land Capacity Analysis for the Bellingham UGA (attached). As you know, County and City staff have worked to revise the original LCA in an attempt to improve the accuracy of the analysis. We appreciate the County's willingness to consider the City's comments in this regard. City staff believes that the June 11 version represents the best estimate of the actual buildout capacity of the residential and commercial/industrial areas within Bellingham's current UGA.

This analysis shows that the Bellingham UGA can be expected to accommodate between 22,126 and 24,130 additional residents during the planning period. (The DEIS includes a population accommodation estimate of 31,327 from an earlier version of the LCA). We also note that the LCA methodology did not have an input for residential development in commercial zoned areas like Fairhaven and the Central Business District. The City's 2006 Land Supply Analysis estimated that about 2,700 residents could be accommodated in these areas. Adding this capacity to the County's capacity estimate results in total population growth accommodation of 24,826-26,830. This is consistent with the City's population growth allocation request of at least 23,770 and provides some flexibility for the County to increase the City's allocation if necessary.

The June 11 LCA also updated the commercial/industrial buildout estimates. The new LCA estimates total job accommodation in the Bellingham UGA at 22,023 (The DEIS uses 19,855.) The City's requested allocation is at least 18,830 new jobs during the planning period.

Lake Whatcom Watershed/UGA Comments

We understand that the County will consider removing areas in the Lake Whatcom Watershed from the Bellingham UGA. We offer the following comments on this issue. Based on the following comments we ask that the County not remove these areas from the UGA at this time.

The City reviewed portions of the DEIS dealing with the Lake Whatcom Watershed from the perspective of protecting Lake Whatcom and meeting mandates to reverse water quality degradation. We recognize that the Hillsdale and Geneva UGAs are already mostly developed at the current zoning of three units per acre (UR3). As such, we believe that there is a compelling argument to retain these UGAs for the following reasons.

As noted in the DEIS Water Resource section, all alternatives will have direct impacts to surface water quality. That's because the conversion from a vegetated condition (forested or otherwise) to a developed one (new impervious) results in increased flows and increased pollutant loading to surface water bodies. However, in the "Other Potential Mitigation Measures" sub-section, the DEIS outlines a number of measures that could reduce impacts. These measures, in conjunction with "plan or regulatory amendments" are the very tools the City of Bellingham is employing to reduce impacts in the City portion of the Lake Whatcom Watershed.

Alternatives that concentrate growth in the UGAs, as opposed to the rural areas, have merit when the local jurisdiction can provide the mitigating measures outlined in the Water Resources section of the DEIS. The City of Bellingham has been providing such mitigation measures through a number of efforts. For example, the City just adopted new regulations for the “in-city” portions of the watershed that requires infiltration to mimic pre-development stormwater patterns. The regulations also require greater retention of onsite native vegetation.

In addition, the City of Bellingham has acquired property throughout the Lake Whatcom Watershed in an effort to reduce impacts from development. It has many other resources such as staff from the water quality lab who are gathering baseline data in Silver Beach Creek for an upcoming pilot project. The point is that growth has an impact on water quality, so it's the ability of the jurisdiction, in this case the City of Bellingham, to minimize impacts through regulations and programs that should be a determinant in the Hillsdale and Geneva UGA.

Finally, the City has a long-term interest in the water quality of Lake Whatcom not so much because we are one of the parties responsible for meeting TMDL reduction targets, but because the City is the one responsible for providing the entire population of Bellingham with safe drinking water. It's one of the City's primary obligations to provide this essential resource, and there's an equal obligation to keep the source water clean. Therefore, we believe that an alternative that retains the Hillsdale and Geneva areas in Bellingham's UGA makes the most sense for lake water quality.

Public Service (Fire) Comments

General comment - there is little emphasis in the DEIS placed on the importance of emergency medical services provision by the fire service. This service makes up approximately 75% of all emergency responses on a county-wide basis. It should be emphasized and considered when looking at the impacts of future growth. Creative thinking needs to be demonstrated as not all significant growth –especially in the county – requires a full-size fire station. Medic/Aid stations can be readily deployed to handle the majority of the emergency responses in their areas. Medic One has two county medic stations configured in a similar fashion

Nor did we see any mention in the DEIS of the County-wide 911 dispatch system jointly operated by the City of Bellingham Fire and Police Departments and administered by a county-wide governmental board (“WhatComm Administrative Board”). Growth in the county will impact this service as much if not more so than the fire/law enforcement operations . We are already short of space and are actively seeking alternative sites for future dispatch center operations.

Specific Fire Service Comments

Page 4.10-16 Impacts Common to All Alternatives. We suggest adding the following to the last paragraph on this page:

The character of UGA development is equally important in determining the efficiency of fire protection. Infilling in peripheral city areas may require new or relocated fire stations to quickly serve these areas. The nature of the infill development (adult vs. family housing) can also have a major impact.

Does the DEIS include language that recognizes that Fire Districts 2 and 10 no longer exist? They are now part of South Whatcom Fire Authority.

We note that there is no countywide level of service standard for fire personnel or equipment. There is for trauma service delivery through EMS. Level-of-service standards are anticipated in the future. There is a conspicuous absence of our most important service delivery – emergency medical services. This needs to be considered and addressed in the DEIS, especially since we have two medic unit facilities that, because they only house a medic unit and a two person crew, are significantly cheaper to build and operate than a fire station. This is an important factor as our county growth dynamic changes.

Transportation (Chapter 4.9) Comments

Chapter 4-9: Transportation

RE: LOS Standards:

The City of Bellingham has just deleted the traditional auto-centric volume-to-capacity (v/c) ratio LOS standards for arterial streets and adopted innovative new level of service (LOS) standards that measure pedestrian, bicycle, transit, and auto modes. The City of Bellingham’s experience is that application of v/c ratio LOS standards only results in additional automobile capacity being provided when mitigation is necessary because that is all that has been measured. That is not consistent with Bellingham’s multimodal transportation policy emphasis and it does not allow intense infill development in urban areas unless LOS standards are continually down-graded through lengthy public process, which is neither politically popular nor a good use of staff resources.

We believe that Bellingham is very different from other urban areas in Whatcom County and demands a completely different set of transportation metrics than other urban and rural portions of Whatcom County. The v/c ratio system may be appropriate for rural Whatcom County, but Bellingham has clearly demonstrated that v/c ratios prevent infill development and are inappropriate to apply in a dense urban area. It is unlikely that the WCOG’s new travel demand forecast model will be able to apply a universal LOS standard throughout Whatcom County.

Page 4.9-28 [Table 4.9-5]:

The City questions the assessment that the County roads listed below do, or will, exceed a LOS E/F. Once traffic passes through the traffic signals at the City limits, there is nothing to slow or impede traffic flow on the arterials, with the exception of left-turning vehicles occasionally holding traffic up. This means that in many circumstances, even though there may be high traffic volumes, the traffic is characterized by relatively free flow, rather than the LOS ‘F’ characterization of ‘stop and go’ traffic. It is possible that the ‘design capacities’ assigned to the arterials in question is set too low.

- 1.) Cable Street (Eastbound & Westbound)
- 2.) Hannegan Road (Northbound)
- 3.) Lakeway Drive (Eastbound)
- 4.) Northwest Drive (Northwestbound)
- 5.) Terrace Avenue North (Eastbound & Westbound)

Page 4.9-38 [Table 4.9-10]:

The City questions the 4-lane mitigation listed for Lakeway Drive/Terrace Avenue N/Cable Street from Bellingham to Lake Whatcom Boulevard and considers it physically, financially, and politically infeasible. The City of Bellingham specifically addressed this major transportation corridor in the Transportation Element of the 2006 Bellingham Comprehensive Plan, as follows:

- *The portion of Lakeway Drive east of the City limits is in the unincorporated Bellingham UGA and is therefore the responsibility of Whatcom County until annexation occurs. Lakeway Drive is the only east-west arterial that provides access to Bellingham from residential development in the Geneva UGA, the western Lake Whatcom Watershed, and the community of Sudden Valley which will have approximately 7,000 residents when it reaches the build-out allowed by County zoning. Traffic congestion occurs on weekday mornings and evenings as commuters from Sudden Valley and the Geneva UGA enter and exit the City for work, shopping, and entertainment. The City cannot control the number of inbound/outbound vehicles entering and exiting the City.*

Potential future mitigation could include:

- 1.) Rechannelization from two wide travel lanes to four narrow travel lanes and elimination of shoulder/bike lane. Narrow travel lanes may be infeasible or dangerous due to many curves and limited sight distances. If narrow travel lanes are considered, then speed limits should be reduced from the current 35 mph posted speed limit.*
- 2.) Physically widening and reconstructing Lakeway Drive, which would require expensive right-of-way acquisition and straightening of curves;*
- 3.) WTA high-frequency public transit between Sudden Valley and downtown Bellingham;*
- 4.) Aggressive public educational efforts jointly funded by the City, County, WTA, and the Sudden Valley Association to encourage commute trip reduction such as carpooling, transit ridership, compressed work schedules, etc.; and*
- 5.) Related mitigating measures, such as construction of a community commercial shopping and entertainment center to serve Sudden Valley and a new Sudden Valley public school complex. Both of these land uses have the potential to eliminate or reduce vehicle trips throughout the Lake Whatcom Watershed.*

While ultimately it is not the City's decision to make until annexation of the Geneva UGA occurs, the City has made the following recommendation in regard to widening Lakeway Drive/Cable Street in the UGA portion of the Transportation Element in the 2006 Bellingham Comprehensive Plan.

- **Recommendation:** *Widening Lakeway Drive to add vehicle capacity is not considered feasible or a desirable form of mitigation for the community. Therefore, higher weekday p.m. peak hour motor vehicle traffic congestion is expected for this arterial.*

Page 4.9-38 [Table 4.9-10]:

The City agrees with the recommended mitigation proposed for Hannegan Road, Marine Drive, and Northwest Drive and feels that this form of mitigation would be much more appropriate for Lakeway Drive/Terrace Ave N/Cable Street as well.

Page 4.9-39 [Table 4.9-11]:

City staff appeared before the County Planning Commission in 2004 and 2005 advocating for lower LOS standards for County arterials in the Bellingham UGA, consistent with the v/c ratio LOS standards that Bellingham had in place at that time. County staff and Planning Commission decided that higher, rather than lower LOS standards were more appropriate and ultimately that is what was adopted by the Whatcom County Council. Due to the regional nature of commuter traffic using County arterials that serve as entry/exit points to the Bellingham UGA, neither the County or the City has any regulatory control over how much traffic will use these roads. Setting LOS standards too high will prevent infill growth due to traffic volumes generated from outside of the UGA/City.

Page 4.9-39 [Table 4.9-11]:

As mentioned at the beginning of the City's comments, after 15+ years of use, Bellingham scrapped the v/c ratio LOS system in 2008 and adopted a new and innovative methodology for Multimodal Transportation Concurrency (BMC 13.70). While a v/c ratio LOS system may be more appropriate for a rural county environment, the County should closely examine the net effects that this type of system actually has in the form of capacity mitigation for automobiles. We note that a regulatory approach that requires mitigation to add automobile capacity is at odds with the goal of reducing automobile use.

Page 4.9-39 [Table 4.9-11]:

The City of Bellingham has charged Transportation Impact Fees (TIF) since 1993 in accordance with GMA and RCW 82.02. In 2003 and 2004, City of Bellingham staff regularly appeared before the County-appointed Technical Advisory Committee that was specifically tasked with studying and making recommendations on TIF. The City offered technical advice of adopting and implementing a County TIF. The TAC recommended that the County adopt a TIF at that time, but action was not taken. The City again offered technical advice in 2007 and 2008 when Whatcom County once again studied the feasibility of adopting a TIF system with the assistance of Transpo Group. We urge Whatcom County to adopt a TIF ordinance and fee system as per RCW 82.02 as soon as possible.

Page 4.9-40 [Table 4.9-11] "Land Use Measures"

Intensification of Existing UGA's and Urban Centers:

This will likely not be possible without lowering LOS standards to allow more peak hour traffic congestion and is precisely why Bellingham moved away from the v/c ratio LOS system. Our experience to date leads us to believe that LOS standards will need to be lowered to allow significant infill and urban village development to occur or this type of development may not be possible or successful.

Chapter 4.8 - Cultural Resources Comments

The City's Local Historic Resources Registry (attached) could be included in the DEIS.

Note the Bellingham Central Business District's Multiple Property Listing (available at <http://www.cob.org/services/neighborhoods/historic/hist-thematic-page.aspx>). This listing is being used to preserve the historic character of downtown Bellingham.

Note that Bellingham's City Center Design Review District, which is being used to encourage historically compatible infill in downtown Bellingham.

Note that City of Bellingham has a SEPA policy to require archaeological analysis for developments that could damage archaeological resources (namely, near salt water and/or creeks on lower elevation terraces/benches.)

We note that the center of Bellingham has been more densely developed (aka disturbed) than any other area in Whatcom County. Therefore, redevelopment (aka "infill") is less likely to damage archaeological/cultural resources.

The DEIS should note that Bellingham has a Local Historic Preservation ordinance, which includes significant incentives to preserve historic buildings. Therefore, development within Bellingham City Limits is more likely to preserve a historic resource than less protected properties.

We note that the County could consider adopting a historic preservation code similar to Bellingham Municipal Code 17.90. This code could:

- a. Allow historic buildings to receive State of Washington Special Valuation Tax Credits.
- b. Provide a wider range of uses for historic buildings under the "Adaptive Use" section.
- c. Potentially increase the value of historic buildings.
- d. Allow the County to create local historic districts, preserving and integrating historically significant areas.

We suggest that the "Other Potential Mitigating Measures" section could also include:

- a. Adopt the Existing Building section of the International Building Code. This section allows historic buildings to be reviewed with more flexibility, increasing the odds of their preservation.
- b. Establish an educational program to promote the preservation of historic buildings and archaeological sites.

Bellingham UGA

Residential Land Capacity Analysis Summary -- Planned Densities

June 11, 2009 Draft - Minimum 4/ac

Land Capacity Analysis	City	Unincorp.	Overall
Inventory - Gross Developable Acres	2,776	1,448	4,224
- Pending or Master Planned Projects	595	39	635
- Critical Areas Subtraction	328	192	520
- Public Uses Subtraction	661	207	868
other pub	60	50	110
Subtotal	1,132	959	2,091
- Infrastructure Subtraction (%)	23.0%	23.0%	23.0%
Subtotal	871	739	1610
- Market Factor Subtraction (%)	19.0%	21.2%	20.1%
Net Developable Acres	705	582	1,287
x Assumed Net Densities	7.5	5.9	6.8
Dwelling Unit Capacity	5,283	3,460	8,743
- Existing DUs in partially/under-utilized	1,741	690	2,431
+ Pending or Master Planned Project Dwelling	5,859	184	6,043
Dwelling Unit Capacity with Pending or Master	9,401	2,954	12,356
x Occupancy Rate	87.5%	94.4%	89.1%
x Average Household Size	2.1	2.5	2.2
Population Growth Capacity	17,102	7,027	24,130

Land Demand Analysis including within city limits and Urban Growth Area	Land Demand		Surplus (Deficit)	
	Net Developable Acres Needed	2029-31 Population Growth	Acres	Population
SEPA No Action Alternative	1,170	22,580	117	1,550
GMCC Historic Growth Alternative	1,497	26,920	(210)	(2,790)
GMCC Current Plan Policy Alternative	1,812	31,101	(525)	(6,971)
EIS Alternative X	2,238	36,744	(951)	(12,614)
EIS Alternative Y	1,260	23,771	27	359

Acres Needed and Available -- City Limits Only

Alternative	Net Acres Needed	Net Acres Available	Surplus (Deficit)
SEPA No Action Alternative	1,170	705	(465)
GMCC Historic Growth Alternative	1,497	705	(792)
GMCC Current Plan Policy Alternative	1,812	705	(1,107)
EIS Alternative X	2,238	705	(1,533)
EIS Alternative Y	1,260	705	(555)

Bellingham UGA

Residential Land Capacity Analysis Summary -- Planned Densities

June 11, 2009 Draft - No Minimum 4/ac

Land Capacity Analysis	City	Unincorp.	Overall
Inventory - Gross Developable Acres	2,776	1,448	4,224
- Pending or Master Planned Projects	595	39	635
- Critical Areas Subtraction	328	192	520
- Public Uses Subtraction	661	207	868
other pub	60	50	110
Subtotal	1,132	959	2,091
- Infrastructure Subtraction (%)	23.0%	23.0%	23.0%
Subtotal	871	739	1610
- Market Factor Subtraction (%)	19.0%	21.2%	20.1%
Net Developable Acres	705	582	1,287
x Assumed Net Densities	6.8	5.9	6.4
Dwelling Unit Capacity	4,777	3,460	8,237
- Existing DUs in partially/under-utilized	1,741	690	2,431
+ Pending or Master Planned Project Dwelling	5,859	184	6,043
Dwelling Unit Capacity with Pending or Master	8,895	2,954	11,849
x Occupancy Rate	82.2%	94.4%	85.3%
x Average Household Size	2.0	2.5	2.2
Population Growth Capacity	15,099	7,027	22,126

Land Demand Analysis including within city limits and Urban Growth Area	Land Demand		Surplus (Deficit)	
	Net Developable Acres Needed	2029-31 Population Growth	Acres	Population
SEPA No Action Alternative	1,325	22,580	(38)	(454)
GMCC Historic Growth Alternative	1,688	26,920	(401)	(4,794)
GMCC Current Plan Policy Alternative	2,038	31,101	(751)	(8,975)
EIS Alternative X	2,510	36,744	(1,223)	(14,618)
EIS Alternative Y	1,425	23,771	(138)	(1,645)

Acres Needed and Available -- City Limits Only

Alternative	Net Acres Needed	Net Acres Available	Surplus (Deficit)
SEPA No Action Alternative	1,325	705	(620)
GMCC Historic Growth Alternative	1,688	705	(983)
GMCC Current Plan Policy Alternative	2,038	705	(1,333)
EIS Alternative X	2,510	705	(1,805)
EIS Alternative Y	1,425	705	(719)

Bellingham UGA
Commercial / Industrial Land Capacity Analysis Summary

June 11, 2009 Draft

Land Capacity Analysis	City	Unincorp.	Overall
Inventory - Gross Developable Acres	1,744	1,969	3,713
- Pending Projects	217	16	233
- Critical Areas Subtraction	274	826	1,100
- Public Uses Subtraction	177	233	409
Subtotal	1,076	894	1,971
Other Public Uses	54	45	99
- Other Public Uses Subtraction (%)	5.0%	5.0%	5.0%
Subtotal	1,023	850	1,872
Infrastructure	102	85	187
- Infrastructure Subtraction (%)	10.0%	10.0%	10.0%
Subtotal	921	765	1,685
- Market Factor Subtraction (%)	20.7%	20.8%	20.7%
Net Developable Acres	730.2	605.6	1,335.7
x Assumed Floor Area Ratios	0.24	0.28	0.26
Building Square Ft Capacity	7,659,798	7,344,247	15,004,045
- Sq Ft Existing Bldgs on Underutilized Parcels	3,926,153	1,315,055	5,241,208
+ Pending Project Square Ft	5,170,132	758,005	5,928,137
Building Sq Ft Capacity with Pending	8,903,777	6,797,497	15,701,274
x Occupancy Rate	95.0%	95.0%	95.0%
/ Employment Density	693	657	677
Employment Growth Capacity	12,199	9,824	22,023

Land Demand Analysis including within city limits and Urban Growth Area	Land Demand		Surplus (Deficit)	
	Net Developable Acres Needed	2029-31 Employment Growth	Acres	Employment
SEPA No Action Alternative	1,134	18,829	202	3,194
GMCC Current Job Dist. Alternative	1,317	21,713	19	310
GMCC Regional/Local Alternative	1,284	21,188	52	835
EIS Alternative X	1,580	25,851	(244)	(3,828)
EIS Alternative Y	1,288	21,260	48	763

Acreage Needed and Available -- City Limits Only

Alternative	Net Acres Needed	Net Acres Available	Surplus (Deficit)
SEPA No Action Alternative	1,134	730	(404)
GMCC Current Job Dist. Alternative	1,317	730	(587)
GMCC Regional/Local Alternative	1,284	730	(553)
EIS Alternative X	1,580	730	(849)
EIS Alternative Y	1,288	730	(558)

Employment by Type

	No Action Alt.	GMCC Current Job Dist. Alt.	GMCC Reg. Dist.	Alt. X	Alt. Y
Commercial	2,763	12,255	11,897	14,534	12,012
Retail	10,555	4,042	4,051	4,696	4,440
Industrial	5,511	5,416	5,240	6,621	4,808
Employment Growth Allocation	18,829	21,713	21,188	25,851	21,260

Local Historic Register Buildings	
B. & B. Furniture Building (VECO)	1313 Bay
Barlow Building (Film is Truth)	211 W. Holly
BPOE (Elks) Building	1414 Cornwall
County Courthouse (Old)/ T.G. Richardson Bldg	1308 E Street
Daylight Building	1201-13 N. State Street
Fairhaven Firestation #2 (Fairhaven P.A.C.)	1314 Harris
First Church of Christ Scientists (The Majestic)	1027 N. Forest
Immanuel School of Industries (Akers Taxidermy)	1303 Astor Street
C.X. Larrabee House (Lairmont Manor)	405 Fieldstone Road
Leopold Hotel	1224 Cornwall Avenue
Montague & McHugh Building (Crown Plaza)	114 W. Magnolia
Morse Hardware Company	1023-25 N. State Street
Mount Baker Theater	106 North Commercial
Roeder Home	2600 Sunset Drive
Roth Block	1106 W. Holly, Holly & "G"
Sanitary Meat Market	1015-19 N. State Street
Sweet and Company	1021 N. State Street
Waldron Building	1312 12 th
Washington Grocery Building	1133-35 Railroad Avenue
Whatcom Museum	121 Prospect Street
Wolter/Tweit Home (Ennen Brothers)	1305 Old Fairhaven Pkwy.
Young Women's Christian Assoc.	1026 North Forest

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