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Whatcom County P&DS

February 6, 2008

To: Whatcom County Planning Commission
From: Nancy Jordan, Executive Director
Bellingham Whatcom Economic Development Council
RE: Mt Baker Foothills Community Development Project

Dear Planning Commission:

The Bellingham Whatcom Economic Development Council (BWEDC) has been pleased to work with the Foothills community in the completion of the Mt Baker Foothills Community Development Project during the last quarter of 2007. Please review highlights of this effort in the attached Executive Summary, and as you have time, read the full report posted at www.foothillseda.org/foothillsinfo.

Since completion of this project, key stakeholders have been meeting to begin implementing next steps, which includes exploring potential funding resources and leveraging partnerships and resources. TAG (Technology Alliance Group), SBDC (WWU Small Business Development Center) and Bellingham Technical College have all approached this group to assure support for and participation with the efforts.

Thank you for all your work addressing the future needs of our community. We look forward to meeting with you with additional results of these ongoing efforts. In the mean time, please feel free to contact me if you have questions.

Cc: Whatcom County Planning & Services – David Stalheim and Matt Aamot

Foothills Communications & Economic Development Plan

Executive Summary

December 2007

The Foothills region of Whatcom County encompasses the county's most rural and least dense population areas. Resources are limited, especially as this community continues to move from a timber-based economy to one that is more diverse.

Washington State Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development (CTED) provided a funding opportunity, through the federal Old Growth Diversification Fund, for the Bellingham Whatcom Economic Development Council (BWEDC) assist the Foothills community in assembling existing information and exploring feasible next steps for improving communications (cell phone and high speed internet), and community and economic development vitality.

The BWEDC was pleased to assist by acting as project manager in securing \$24,000 from CTED and coordinating additional local matches of \$3,000 cash from Whatcom County, \$3,000 cash from the Port of Bellingham and \$18,000 of in-kind match in the form of project participation, goods and services from the BWEDC, local residents, business owners and other stakeholders.

Methodology

The BWEDC worked with the Foothills community, the Port of Bellingham, Whatcom County and others to identify the most pertinent needs for supporting the continued transition from being a timber-based economy. Two areas of focus, Communications (cell phone and high speed internet) and Economic Development, were identified. Also, the need for a coordinator to assemble the information, create a website, and advertise meetings was also identified.

The BWEDC worked with such groups as the Foothills Economic Development Association, the Mt Baker Foothills Chamber, members of the Foothills Sub-area Planning Committee and others to create and advertise three Requests for Qualification (RFQ) to complete the tasks outlined in each project. These RFQs, which were publicly advertised and posted on the BWEDC website, are included with this Report.

Three consultant teams were selected and work commenced in November 2007. All work concluded on December 31, 2007. The methodology of gathering information, conducting interviews and public meetings for each contractor is outlined in the reports following this Executive Summary.

Findings

Some of the key findings of this Foothills project are:

- Communications is a high priority to Foothills residents, business owners and other stakeholders, and solutions are possible through coordination of effort.
- Opportunities for securing the community's resilience and economic vitality, though diverse opinions exist, are important to explore further.
- For successful action, which also honors the rural character of this community, residents, business owners and other stakeholders must work together.

Recommendations

The BWEDC should continue to support the efforts of the Foothills region residents, business owners and other stakeholders in the implementation of action steps suggested in the Coordination, Communications and Community & Economic Development sections of this report.

Priority areas of implementation are:

- Continue the presence of and refreshed information on the website: www.foothillseda.org/foothillsinfo
- Develop a communications master plan for the Foothills as outlined in Communications Chapter 9. This would include community participation on selected tasks through work groups, hired consultants and public forums, and, securing resources through all interested partners for installation of appropriate infrastructure.
- Clarifying what Lt Impact Industrial "looks like" for the Foothills region through a community meeting that leads to action steps as noted in Community and Economic Development Chapter 4.
- Complete a Targeted Industry Analysis (TIA) and Business Retention and Expansion (BRE) Plan. Complete a Business Development and Support Guide and maintain pertinent information on a Foothills website. Also, design a blueprint for a resilient and sustainable economy as outlined in Community and Economic Development Chapter 4.
- Identify development options with potentially affected neighbors and stakeholders for the Old Maple Falls School property.

Conclusions

Options for improving the communications and community and economic vitality in the Foothills region are available. It is important to continue the momentum generated from this and other efforts by selecting and implementing at least one identified task. The BWEDC will work with the participants of this project and others to select task(s) seek funds and carry out the steps outlined.

The BWEDC wishes to thank CTED and the federal Old Growth Diversification Fund team for supporting Whatcom County as we leverage our partnerships for the overall community and economic vitality of this region.