

Chapter 4

COMMUNITY PROFILE

Development Patterns and History

According to the 1987 Birch Bay – Blaine Subarea Background Document, the original inhabitants of the planning area were primarily the Semiahmoo tribe who resided, fished, harvested shellfish, and hunted in all of the planning area north of Point Whitehorn. Lummi tribal territory included the area that is today’s Cherry Point urban growth area. While there may have been earlier explorations by Europeans and others, the most referenced early account of Birch Bay is from the Menzies journal compiled during the Vancouver expedition in 1792. The expedition named the area Birch Bay after the predominance of birches along the shoreline and uplands. By the end of the 1800s, the Semiahmoo tribe had left the area due primarily to raids from tribes to the north and by increasing white settlement.

The early explorers and settlers were attracted to the area by the abundance of natural resources. Exposure to Birch Bay was increased by a short-lived increase in population in Blaine stemming from the Fraser Valley gold rush of 1858/59. In the 1870s, homesteading brought a second influx of settlers resulting in a Birch Bay post office and an intent to incorporate as the city of Birch Point, based mainly on an expectation of serving as a terminus for the Union Pacific Railway. Wharves were built and hotel construction had begun in Birch Bay when prospects for the railroad terminus died, along with incorporation efforts.

In 1921, the Peace Arch Monument at the border was constructed and marked the beginning of Birch Bay’s efforts to become a tourism-based economy. Depletion of natural resources, mainly timber, and the effect on the fishing industry from the outlawing of fish traps, provided motivation to become a destination resort. These efforts were not successful and Birch Bay settled into a pattern of summer homes and cottages until tourism came back with the end of World War II. Economic stability was somewhat enhanced by the establishment of the Blaine Air Force Base in 1951 and the industrial development at Cherry Point beginning with the Mobil Oil refinery in 1954, then the opening of Intalco Aluminum in 1966 and the ARCO refinery in 1971.

Summer resort activity evolved through the 1970s to include mobile home and RV Parks and condominiums as well as the traditional rental cabins and cottages. Beginning in the 1980s, Birch Bay felt the effects of a national recession

and in the mid 1990s, the Canadian tourism market, which was the cornerstone of the local economy, began to ebb as Canadian currency devalued.

The Canadian Factor

One cannot understand Birch Bay without recognizing the close, long term ties to Canada both economically and culturally. In the early 1990s, about 51 % of land parcels within the planning area were in Canadian ownership. In 2001, Canadian ownership had dropped to about 37 %. Canadian retail sales in Whatcom County, prior to currency devaluation, were about 33 %. Current Canadian retail sales amount to about 10 %. Border issues, heightened by the 11 September 2001 terrorist events have created additional barriers for Canadian visits to Birch Bay.

By the late 1970s, Birch Bay reached its peak in terms of having an identity as a destination resort community. Seasonal cabin, cottage, mobile home and RV park ownership and rental markets were strong. Condominium second home ownership was emerging as a market force. Day visits were a major part of the tourism local economy supported by a major State Park, roller rink, amusement park, public swimming pool, golf and various taverns (Until 1986 Sunday liquor sales were not available in British Columbia). These activities in addition to traditional crabbing, clamming, swimming and sunbathing beach-oriented recreation created a party-like atmosphere.

Today, Birch Bay has a different atmosphere with year round residential and American ownership gradually taking the place of a seasonal and Canadian atmosphere. Tourism, recreation related activities are more passive in nature as evidenced by the disappearance of the roller rink, amusement park, public pool and much of the tavern market. However, the bond to Canada remains and if currency and border issues change, there is no reason to expect that there would not be a resurgence, at some level, of a stronger Canadian presence in Birch Bay. Underlying the economic link is that of positive, long-term Canadian and American relationships built at the neighborhood and family levels, some going back three, and even four generations. Those relationships based on the motto inscribed on the Peace Arch Monument “Children of a Common Mother,” are important cornerstones of Birch Bay's history.

Demographic Profile

In July 2001, the Washington State Office of Financial Management published the most recent US Census released data on demographics. Table 4-1 presents a demographic profile of the Birch Bay Census Designated Place. Table

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4-1 also presents a demographic profile for Whatcom County and the State of Washington as a whole. By having these two additional profiles, one can make comparisons of Birch Bay with the County and the State as whole.

**Table 4-1
Demographic Profile
Birch Bay Census Designated Place
Year 2000 Census**

Data	Birch Bay CDP*	Whatcom County	State of Washington
Total population	4,961	166,814	5,894,121
Sex and age			
Male	2,448	82,188	2,934,300
Female	2,513	84,626	2,959,821
Children under age 18	1,153	40,247	1,513,843
Under 5 years old	310	10,210	394,306
5 to 18 years old	843	30,037	1,119,537
Adults 18 years and over	3,808	126,567	4,380,278
62 years and older	955	22,757	782,897
65 years and older	788	19,400	662,148
Median age	40.7	34.0	35.3
Race			
White	4,582	147,485	4,821,823
African American	52	1,150	190,267
Native American	59	4,709	93,301
Asian	61	4,637	322,335
Pacific Islander	7	235	23,953
Other race	95	4,159	228,923
Two or more races	105	4,439	213,519
Hispanic or Latino	221	8,687	441,509

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Table 4-1 - cont.
Demographic Profile
Birch Bay Census Designated Place
Year 2000 Census

Data	Birch Bay CDP*	Whatcom County	State of Washington
Households			
Total households	2,125	64,446	2,271,398
Family households	1,417	41,094	1,499,127
Nonfamily households	708	23,352	772,271
65 years and over	549	13,466	184,924
Average household size	2.33	2.51	2.53
Average family size	2.80	3.03	3.07
Housing units			
Total housing units	5,105	73,893	2,451,075
Occupied	2,125	64,446	2,271,398
Vacant	2,960	9,447	179,677
Seasonal / occasional use	2,620	5,946	60,355
Vacancy rate			
Home owner	6.0	2.2	1.8
Rental	21.1	5.7	5.9
Occupied housing units			
Owner occupied	1,614	40,876	1,467,009
Renter occupied	511	23,570	804,389
Average household size			
Owner occupied	2.28	2.63	2.65
Renter occupied	2.49	2.31	2.32

* CDP - Census Designated Place

Neighborhood Profiles

As shown in the preceding chapter on Figure 3-3, ten neighborhoods were established for the planning process. The first three rounds of neighborhood meetings, held early in the planning process, focused on what residents value about their neighborhood and community and what issues need to be resolved.

Neighborhood Values

Extensive discussions were held with each neighborhood to determine their concerns and values. The values identified by each neighborhood are listed below.

Birch Point

- Rural & secluded
- 20 minutes from urban life yet get away feeling

Birch Bay Village Reach

- Quiet
- Gated – good security
- Amenities – i.e. golf course, marina, water views
- Pride of ownership – well maintained

Hillsdale

- Country lifestyle
- Middle income housing

Cottonwood Reach

- Quiet
- Residential atmosphere – friendly
- Beach views & sunsets
- Diversity of homes

Central Reaches

- Quiet
- Beach views & sunsets
- Beach activities & sea-life
- Resort atmosphere - fun

Central Uplands

- Quiet / open space feeling
- Views
- Affordable housing
- Slow development

State Park Reach

- Beach amenities
- Views & sunsets
- Quite & friendly
- Waterfront home atmosphere

Terrell Creek

- Rural & quiet
- Rural zoning
- Good habitat for wildlife
- Natural creek basin

Point Whitehorn

- Quiet & peaceful
- Views & sunsets
- Single family home atmosphere
- Neighborhood pride of maintenance

Population and Land Area

Early in the planning process, the consultant team assembled a baseline data report, for each Neighborhood. Each baseline data report contained existing data on land use, housing, population, shorelines, critical areas, wetlands, transportation facilities, water, sewer, stormwater facilities, fire services, police services, parks and recreation facilities, and schools. The baseline data reports contain tables, graphs, and maps. Further, each baseline data report contains an extensive bibliography of planning documents associated with or related to the Birch Bay area. Table 4-2, on the following page, presents a summary of land area and population for each neighborhood.

Each neighborhood baseline data report also contained an identification and discussion of neighborhood values. A summary of the neighborhood values has been presented above under the title "Neighborhood Values."

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**Table 4-2
Neighborhood Acreage and Population**

Neighborhood	Number of Acres	2000 Population
Birch Point	721	51
Birch Bay Village Reach	444	1,031
Cottonwood Reach	622	946
Hillsdale	812	677
Central Reaches	397	428
Central Uplands	2,275	733
State Park Reach	688	169
Terrell Creek	1,300	62
Point Whitehorn	546	388
West Cherry Point	894	--
Total	8,699	4,485