

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

Bellingham's central waterfront is in a state of transition from its long history as an active industrial site to a new mixed-use neighborhood. Over the past several years, the Port of Bellingham and the City of Bellingham have joined together to create a vision and develop a clear path to transform this vacant brownfield site into a thriving mixed-use urban neighborhood. In early 2005, the Port of Bellingham acquired approximately 137 acres of waterfront property and tidelands adjacent to Bellingham Bay. This property had been owned by the Georgia-Pacific Corporation, which operated a pulp and tissue mill on the site. This property, along with other Port, City and private properties, made up a project site, which was initially called "New Whatcom", and later renamed the "Waterfront District". The Sub-Area Plan boundary was expanded in 2012 to include the bluff along Boulevard and State Street to make the boundary contiguous with the Sehome and South Hill neighborhood boundaries and to delete several parcels which overlapped with the Old Town Urban Village Plan. See Figure 1-1 Sub-Area Boundary.



1.1 Purpose of the Sub-Area Plan

The Sub-Area Plan's purpose is to provide a framework for future development of the 237 acre site known as the "Waterfront District". The Waterfront District Sub-Area Plan includes a balance of environmental, economic and community objectives developed to restore the

health of the land and water, improve waterfront access, promote a healthy and dynamic waterfront economy, and reinforce the inherent qualities of the waterfront.

The Waterfront District Sub-Area Plan represents a joint planning effort with the City of Bellingham involving residents, landowners, community stakeholders and resource agencies to create a long-term redevelopment opportunity for the Waterfront District.

1.2 Relationship to the 2006 Comprehensive Plan

The 2006 City of Bellingham Comprehensive Plan establishes goals and policies to guide future decision-making and coordinate growth within the City over a 20-year planning period. The Comprehensive Plan serves as a guideline for designating land uses, infrastructure development and community services, and long-range implementation strategies.

The Waterfront District falls within two urban villages defined in the Comprehensive Plan: the "Central Waterfront District" and the "Central Business District (CBD) Core Village". Infill within urban villages is an essential element of the City growth strategy.

Comprehensive Plan Policy FLU-18 requires a master plan to be prepared for each urban village to provide a framework for development. The Waterfront District Sub-Area Plan meets the criteria for a Master Plan as defined in the City Comprehensive Plan. Master or Sub-Area plans for urban villages must specify land uses and densities; street and utilities layout; lot arrangement; housing types; village square or plaza locations; streetscape amenities; relationship of the buildings to the street; parking structures or lots; protection of critical areas; pedestrian and bicycle facilities; and compatibility with surrounding areas.

The Waterfront District is located within the City

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of Bellingham CBD Neighborhood. When the CBD Neighborhood Plan was updated in 2008, the neighborhood plan incorporated sections of the Waterfront Futures Group Vision and Framework Plan pertaining to the City Center, which includes the Waterfront District. Concurrent with the adoption of the CBD Neighborhood Plan, the Waterfront District was rezoned to a new zoning category called “Waterfront Mixed-Use”. This new zoning designation becomes effective upon adoption of the Waterfront District Sub-Area Plan, which more clearly defines the intended uses and development patterns within the area.

1.3 The Planning Process

Related Planning Processes

Bellingham’s City Center and Central Waterfront has been a focus of numerous planning efforts since the early 1990’s. Those plans include:

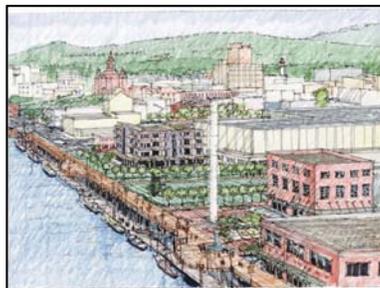
- Regional Urban Design Assistance Team Report (1992)
- Visions for Bellingham (1992)
- Bellingham Bay Demonstration Pilot (1996–present)
- Whatcom Creek Waterfront Action Program (1996)
- Downtown Development Workshop (1998)
- Bellingham Bay Comprehensive Strategy FEIS (2000)
- City Center Master Plan (2002)
- Community Forum on Growth Management (2004)
- Waterfront Futures Group (WFG) Vision and Framework Plan (2005)
- Bellingham Comprehensive Plan (2006)
- Central Business District Neighborhood Plan (2008)

These planning efforts involved various forms of community input and involvement.

Each process identified the Waterfront District as an underutilized area and a vital link between

the Central Business District, Old Town, and adjacent residential neighborhoods. Job opportunities, environmental restoration, and increased public access and recreational opportunities on the waterfront have been identified as priorities for the area.

An extensive planning effort was conducted by the Waterfront Futures Group (WFG) in 2003/2004. The Port and City appointed this citizen-led task force to take a fresh and independent look at the future of the entire waterfront in response to the closure of Georgia-Pacific’s (GP) pulp and tissue



operations. The WFG held 41 public meetings and had 26 guest forums and special events focusing on the future of the waterfront. The WFG completed the community visioning process by publishing the Waterfront Vision and Framework Plan which called for redevelopment of the city center waterfront into “a mixed-use neighborhood that combines commercial, institutional, industrial, retail and residential uses, and that over time will provide many new job opportunities and a substantial amount of urban housing.”

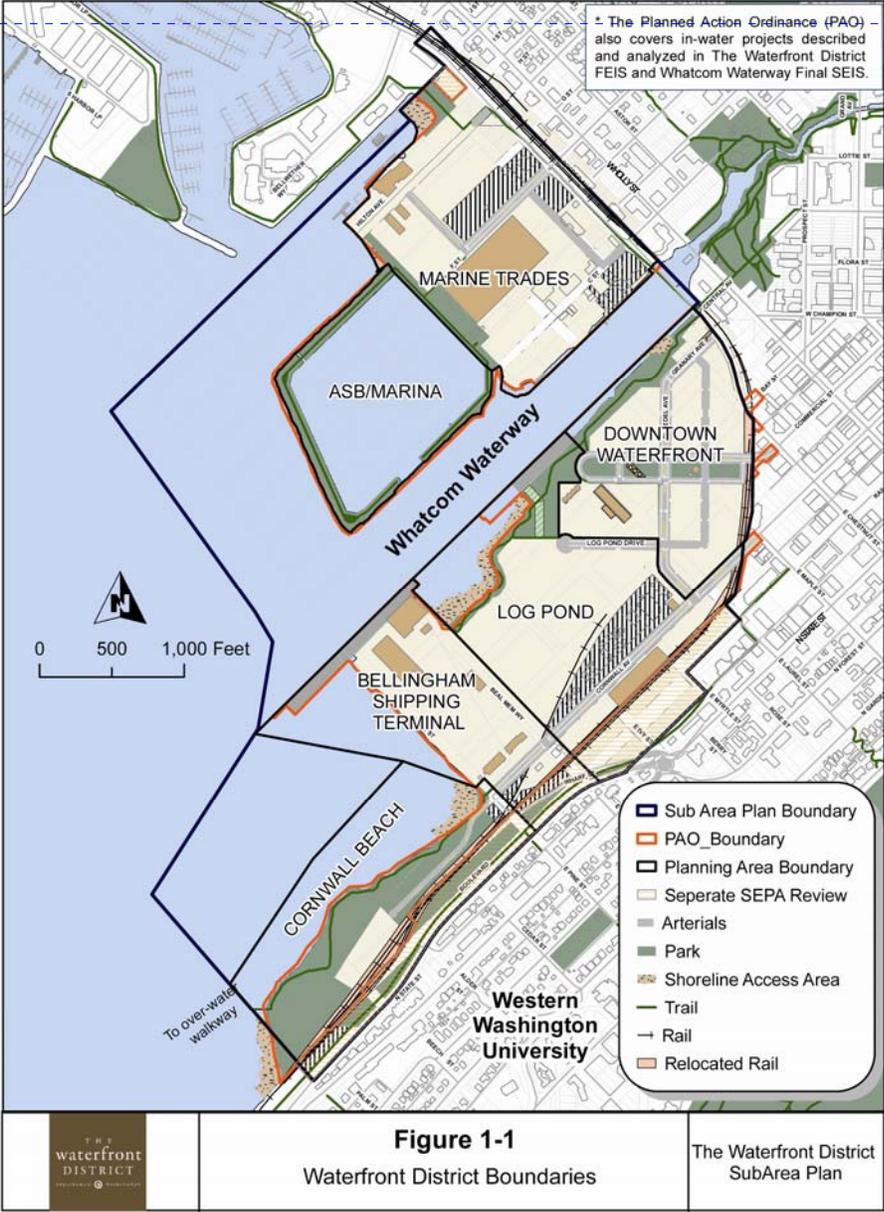
The WFG vision was approved by City Council and the guiding principles and recommendations were used to update Bellingham’s Comprehensive Plan and the CBD Neighborhood Plan in 2006 and 2008 respectively.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Figure 1-1: Waterfront District Boundaries

Comment [GM1]: New figure added.



Public Investment

After closure of the pulp mill in 2001, GP explored options to fund the required environmental clean-up to market the property for private development, but the cost of clean-up and the required infrastructure investment made it difficult to attract private investors. During this period, the Port studied the potential acquisition of the GP property to determine if public ownership was viable. The Port purchased the GP property in 2005 after extensive community outreach and partnership commitments from the City and the Washington State Department of Ecology to make the long-term public investments necessary to implement the community’s vision on the central waterfront. The Port committed to pay for most of the environmental cleanup, to build marine infrastructure, and to dedicate land for parks, public space and rights of way. The City agreed to build new streets and utilities to serve the site, to develop waterfront parks and trails, and to create a regulatory environment that would attract private investment. The Department of Ecology pledged grant support for environmental cleanup costs.

Since acquiring the GP property, the Port and City have secured significant state and federal grant support and have started to spend money on environmental cleanup, habitat restoration and infrastructure design. These public investments are intended to attract substantial private sector investment and generate long-term positive impacts for the community.

The Waterfront District Planning Process

The Port and City launched a public planning process to develop a Sub-Area Plan for the Waterfront District shortly after acquiring the GP property. To ensure this plan was consistent with the community vision, the Port and City appointed the Waterfront Advisory Group (WAG) to integrate recommendations of the WFG into plans,

projects and regulations. From 2005-2010, this citizen-led task force held monthly public meetings to gather public input and ensure public awareness and participation in waterfront planning.

The Port and City started development of the Sub-Area Plan by inviting neighbors, business owners and anticipated stakeholders to a series of eight workshops and community meetings during 2005 and 2006 to help turn the WFG vision into a Draft Framework Plan, which could be tested under the



State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA). During these meetings and workshops, the community evaluated a range of design alternatives that illustrated how infrastructure, development, public parks and trails, and new habitat might take shape on the waterfront.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) identified a traffic congestion problem with the proposed street layout in the “Draft Framework Plan” and evaluated alternate street layouts, densities and other mitigating measures to address traffic, view corridors, historic and cultural resources, critical areas and a range of other important considerations. The Draft Framework Plan also provided an opportunity for the Port and City to assess the project economics.

Additional public meetings and workshops were held during 2007 and 2008 to update the community, address specific issues raised by the SEPA analysis and by the public, and receive input to guide development of draft master plan concepts and regulations. During this process, the public provided input on the Waterfront District’s character-defining features, view corridors and vistas, preferred land uses, building heights and design standards. The community discussed the role of Western Washington University (WWU) and its plans to create a campus on the waterfront, multimodal circulation, development character, environmental considerations, parks, trails, plazas, economic viability, block sizes, parking strategies, development phasing, historic and cultural resources, and sustainable strategies.

A group of local architects volunteered to evaluate the planning concepts and provide recommendations and ideas that maintained the original WFG vision. The Port and City also hired an architectural firm to assess the potential for preservation and adaptive reuse of eleven industrial buildings and structures. This evaluation considered the condition of the historic resources, the cost of construction, market feasibility and compatibility with other planning objectives.

In addition to the public input received during the planning process, the Port and City received feedback and recommendations from the Waterfront Advisory Group, Western Washington University, Whatcom Transportation Authority, environmental resource agencies, regional and local developers and professional consultants. This Sub-Area Plan is the culmination of these public processes.

1.4 Context

Natural and Historical Setting

Bellingham’s current waterfront is made up of land forms created by filling tidal flat areas over the past century. Before this filling occurred, these tide flats provided food and protection to young salmon as they left nearby rivers and adjusted to salt water in preparation for a journey out to sea. For



Source J.B.Hann circa 1902
thousands of years, ancestors of the present day Lummi Nation and Nooksack Indian Tribe relied upon catching the salmon passing the nearshore areas. The beaches and nearshore areas were used by these Native American tribes as seasonal encampments for fishing and shellfish harvesting.

For the last 100 years or more, Bellingham’s waterfront has served the regional economy as a thriving industrial area, transportation gateway and home to many maritime activities. In 1891, the Great Northern Railroad finished an overwater rail trestle across the mud flats on Bellingham’s central waterfront allowing the

distribution of goods across a new, nationwide rail network. In the early 1900's, the Whatcom Creek federal waterway was established and silt from the dredged waterway was used as fill along parts of the waterfront.

In 1926, Ossian Anderson opened Bellingham's first pulp mill on the south side of the Whatcom Waterway creating a new economic opportunity for Whatcom County's extensive timber resources. In the years after, Pacific Coast Paper Mills and Puget Sound Pulp were founded and operated as major employers on the waterfront. Through the 1930's and 40's, the Bellingham waterfront saw major activity related to the pulp mill and the production of ethyl alcohol (a by-product from pulp mill waste). In the early 1960's, Georgia-Pacific acquired the waterfront mill site. Operations continued through the following decades, discharging various waste products to adjacent waterways and upland properties. During this time, Bellingham's waterfront industries were largely unregulated and there was not a general



awareness or understanding of the importance of environmental stewardship.

In 1972, the United States passed the Clean Water Act ushering in a new era of pollution control. In response to the growing framework of environmental regulations, GP built a 36-acre wastewater treatment lagoon on the north side of the Whatcom Waterway to treat process water.

The GP mill adjusted to economic trends over

the years, but in 2001 the pulping operation was permanently closed down. This signaled a slow decline that continued until Georgia-Pacific closed its Bellingham site permanently on December 21, 2007.

The Waterfront District Today

Today, the Waterfront District is bordered by Bellingham Bay to the west, CBD and Old Town to the east, the Lettered Streets and Columbia neighborhoods to the north, and Sehome and South Hill neighborhoods to the south.

Present densities within the Waterfront District are low. There is no residential population and most of the property is vacant with pockets of contamination due to past industrial activities. The site is primarily paved and occupied by inactive industrial structures. Despite its prominent location between Bellingham Bay and downtown Bellingham, public pedestrian and vehicular access is limited and the only recreational use of the site occurs at the southwesterly end of Cornwall Avenue where a small pocket beach is located. Most of the shorelines are hardened with industrial wharfs, bulkheads, and non-engineered rip rap.

Redevelopment of the Waterfront District is a "once in a century" opportunity intended to restore public access along the shoreline and convert the upland area closest to the Central Business District to a vibrant mixed-use extension of downtown Bellingham. Other portions of the site will be remediated and marketed for shipping, marine trades and light industrial uses to replace a portion of the jobs lost when the Georgia Pacific mill closed.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.5 Redevelopment Potential

The redevelopment of the Waterfront District as an urban neighborhood will help concentrate a significant amount of expected population growth within the existing city limits and reduce impacts on agricultural, forest and rural landscapes in the county. The 2006 Bellingham Comprehensive Plan projects a demand for 1,225 infill housing units in the Central Waterfront District Urban Center, and an additional 1,321 units in the Downtown Core Urban Center by the year 2025. The Waterfront District encompasses the majority of the vacant land within these two Urban Centers and redevelopment at urban density is an important element in the City's



adopted infill strategy.

There are 237 acres within the planning area of the Waterfront District, including the ASB lagoon, most of which is currently in public ownership by the Port, City and Washington State Department of Natural Resources. Over half of the project area will be retained for public open space and infrastructure, including 37 acres of parks and open space, 60 acres for streets, utilities and railroad rights-of-way, and 29 acres for a marina. The remaining 111 acres of Port, City and private property will be available for industrial use or redevelopment for residential, retail, commercial, and institutional use.

One of the key challenges for this planning effort was the definition of an appropriate goal for the level of development density within the Waterfront District. During initial planning discussions in 2005, the Port and City planning team identified the Fairhaven Historic District as a starting point for evaluating density options. The density of building in Fairhaven, if applied to the entire Waterfront District would result in approximately 6.0 million square feet of building floor space. This density assumption was used in the Draft Framework Plan published jointly by the City and Port in September, 2006, and was used as the medium density development alternative in the evaluation of a range of alternatives in the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the proposal. A low-density alternative of 4.0 million square feet and a high-density alternative of 7.5 million square feet were also analyzed. Based on this analysis and public comment, the medium-range density of 6.0 million square feet of floor space was selected as the preferred alternative in the 2008 Supplemental Draft EIS.

As the preferred alternative was further refined, five separate planning areas were defined, each of which has a different redevelopment character and density. The Downtown Waterfront Area is expected to accommodate a density somewhat higher than Fairhaven, while the Marine Trades, Shipping Terminal and Cornwall Beach Areas will be significantly less dense than Fairhaven. The Log Pond Area is proposed to remain in industrial use through the end of the planning period for the Sub-Area Plan. At full build-out, the Waterfront District is projected to have 5.3 million square feet of building capacity, with a mix of commercial, residential, office, institutional and industrial uses.

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