

**Whatcom County Business and Commerce Committee
Meeting Notes
December 11, 2023**

Voting Members Present: Debbie Ahl, Ryan Allsop, Paul Burrill, Clark Campbell, Pete Dawson, Casey Diggs, Dan Dunne, Sarah Rothenbuhler, Troy Muljat, Brad Rader, Russell Tewksbury,

Voting Members Not Present: Pamela Brady, Chris Trout, Dana Wilson

Nonvoting Members Present: Rob Fix, CJ Seitz

Nonvoting Members Not Present: Jori Burnett, Seth Fleetwood, Whatcom County Councilmember Kathy Kershner, Barry Robinson, Satpal Sidhu

Public Present: Hugh Conroy, Frank Imhof, Ken Marzocco, Margaret Reich, Bruce Tabb, Peter Frazier, Bill Hewett, Chris Hughes, Brian Heinrich, Anna Robbins, Blake Lyon, Chris Behee, Evan Haskell, Guy Occhiogrosso, Hannah Ordos, Jasmine Fast, Jennifer Noveck, Jessie Everson, Lance Calloway, Les Reardanz, Maureen McCarthy, Rob Lee, Scott Korthuis, Scott Pelton, Tyler Schroeder, Kori Olsen, Barbara Chase, Russ Whidbee, Chris Hughes, Mark Stremler, Louis Parr, HJ [did not give full name], Barbara [did not give full name]

December Agenda

Introductions / Administrative business / Comments welcome from the Public (5mins)

- Committee Chair calls meeting to order
- Committee member introductions
- Vice-Chair, Chair updates
- Approve November 2023 minutes
- Invite all attendees to participate along with committee members during Q&A sessions

Policy –

Overview of the Regional & Metropolitan Transportation Plan for the Whatcom Region

Director of Whatcom Council of Governments Hugh Conroy (15 mins)

Q&A (10 mins)

WTA: Pivot Suggestions

Former President of CH2M Hill Energy Group for the America's Ken Marzocco (15 mins)

Q&A (10 mins)

Safety –

Fire Department 101 – Services Provided & Data Dashboard Available for the Public

Bellingham Fire Department Fire Chief Bill Hewett & Fire Systems Analyst Chris Hughes (15 mins)

Q&A (10 mins)

Sarah Rothenbuhler: All right. We're going to start the meeting. We're at the December Whatcom Business and Commerce Committee meeting. Thank you everyone for being here. Everyone that is in attendance, please contribute, if you have something to say, please get involved. It doesn't just have to be the committee that speaks. And we have some housekeeping to do. We have Ryan—who has loved his term as vice chair, and it's been one of his favorite things to do—has resigned. And we are nominating Dan Dunne to be vice chair. And then in January, I'll start the meeting, Dan will take over as chair, and we need to find a vice chair that will step in in January as well. If that sounds good to everybody.

Ryan Allsop: Everybody think Casey will do a great job as vice chair?

Sarah Rothenbuhler: Yes, amazing.

Ryan Allsop: Amazing. Thanks, Casey.

Sarah Rothenbuhler: Clearly. Done deal.

Casey Diggs: When's my time up? (laughter)

Sarah Rothenbuhler: Do we need to vote on vice chair with Dan? Or can we just say, Dan, congratulations.

Gina Stark: You got to vote.

Ryan Allsop: I nominate Dan as vice chair.

Ryan Allsop: Any opposed? Thank you. All in favor?

Sarah Rothenbuhler: Thank you. Thanks, Dan.

Ryan Allsop: Appreciate it. It's awesome.

Sarah Rothenbuhler: November meeting minutes. Do we have a motion to approve?

Debbie Ahl: So moved.

Ryan Allsop: Second it.

Sarah Rothenbuhler: Meeting minutes are approved. We will now go to Hugh Conroy. Is Hugh here?

Gina Stark: He's presenting online.

Sarah Rothenbuhler: Hi Hugh, thank you so much.

Hugh Conroy: Yes. You're welcome. And good to see everyone. Sorry I'm not there with you. It just seems a little easier to do it this way with being able to answer questions that might come up in a more dynamic way. Yes. Good morning. I'm Hugh Conroy, director of the Whatcom Council of Governments, and was asked to attend today and review our Whatcom regional Transportation plan. But I just wanted to set a little context up front and then hopefully have most of the discussion be about what your questions are. Not a lot of people know what the Whatcom Council of Governments is. Certainly my parents don't know what I do for a job. But, I just thought I'd start there a little bit, given that the range is probably a little diverse. (laughter)

So, COG, the Whatcom Council of Governments was formed in 1966 under state law that enabled the creation of regional planning conferences among adjacent governments, like cities and counties. And that is not necessarily just for transportation, although that is the business that we're currently in the most these days. So in the mid-80s Bellingham population was increasing. And when an urbanized area, as determined by the US census, gets a population of 50,000 or greater, they are required to have what is called a metropolitan planning organization, an MPO. So in the mid-80s, the Washington State governor appointed COG as the region's metropolitan planning organization. And essentially the function that serves is local decision makers, typically elected officials. And certainly that's the case in our case regional elected officials form a policy board, and they have prerogative over how large amounts of any federal transportation dollars spent in that region are spent.

So it was an effort to transfer what had historically been the prerogatives of state departments of transportation down to the regional level so that federal investments on the regional transportation system were in line with regional priorities as represented by local elected officials. Then in the mid or early 90s, with Washington state's Growth Management Act, roughly concurrent with that, was formed the Regional Transportation Planning Organization Program, or RTPO, and similarly, Whatcom Council of Governments was appointed as the Whatcom Region RTPO. And so there's mostly overlapping ongoing transportation planning requirements with the MPO functions. But several specific GMA type requirements like certifying the transportation elements of local comprehensive plans, which are local jurisdictions in Whatcom County, are on the GMA schedule for update in 2025. So, we work closely with our jurisdictions, member jurisdictions on that as well. So, just to recap, we have that general COG Council board, which exists independent of these transportation functions that were required to do by federal and state laws. And then the RTPO/MPO policy Board, which is a standing committee of our board, mostly the same people. And I think I'll just go ahead and share my screen for a second if I can, and not to get too meta here, but there you see yourselves and I'll switch over. All right. So that's our website, the COG. And just to show you who that council board is these days.

So here's our board now. I think that's 15 or so folks, elected officials from the region. And that's who the MPO is, who the RTPO is. I'm sorry. Mostly it's the council board. The MPO and RTPO bring in important partners in transportation the state Department of Transportation and Whatcom Transportation Authority. So myself and seven other folks here at the office, are staff to the MPO and RTPO and the council board. And sort of turning all this back to the regional transportation plan. That is our sort of central product that

drives our work. The regional transportation plan is updated every five years as a 20-year plan. Looking forward, and I can just quickly go over the components of that without and also let you know where that is. So here at the COG website, we can just go to it. Right. Let's see. What we do. Regional plan. Way to Go, Whatcom is the name of it. Okay, so, we focus on a regional system, and I won't even click on this, just to say that if you go to the plan website, that will be a narrative description of all the modes of transportation on the major networks. So, you know, that is a key thing.

We are multi-modal in our approach to this. Goals—I will get into a bit. Our regional transportation goals are largely informed by public engagement and then evaluated and approved by the policy board. And to flip to a graphic of that a little better, and I'll enlarge that. We did a big public outreach survey in 2021. Postcards were mailed randomly to about half the households in Whatcom County. We got really good feedback, over 2000 respondents. And that feedback was the first update we'd had to that kind of public engagement and probably over 20 years it didn't radically change our regional goals. It did reorder some of the priorities and add some new components to that. Safety remained our number one regional goal with respect to investments and transportation. Multimodal—or we decided that we can't keep calling it multimodal and expect consistent public engagement, because that doesn't mean much to a lot of people. So we just call it all types of transportation. That came up a bit as, number two in the ranked priorities, environmental quality. We added just sort of to catch up with where we are now a more clear emphasis on climate action as part of overall environmental outcomes. Preservation is a big one and has been an item that we've heard a lot of feedback on statewide and certainly regionally, but keeping existing transportation infrastructure in a state of good repair system efficiency and reliability the next one was expanded and added to include new emphases on equity and access to economic opportunity.

And that one was tied in our evaluation with freight and economic vitality. Maybe a surprise to this group, being that you're more focused on business and commerce. And not to say also that that is a low priority. There are a lot of other things that came up, and these are the top ones that we use to drive the rest of the plan in terms of forming strategies and getting to a project list, which is basically what a lot of people consider the regional plan to be is just sort of the 20-year project list. So back to the plan front page. So we've done the goals very quickly. In terms of how we put the plan together. A big part of what informs the future outlook of needs is land use. And in our narrow band of this whole process, that is primarily about where the jobs are going to be over time and where the people are going to live over time, looking 20 years forward.

So our website has GIS portrayals of those factors. And these are nice online web views because you can scale it to the geography you might be most interested in. And this is broken up by what we call transportation analysis zones. And these tie directly into our travel demand model that we keep updated and use for ourselves. And with all of our member jurisdictions to forecast and estimate where the biggest demands are now and where they're going to be over the next 20-year horizon. But yes, you can zoom in on these things and what these inform the model of. And here's a view of where employment is going to be in 2045, in terms of growth of jobs in those traffic analysis zones. And those are informed by countywide evaluations of available lands, permitted plans, all that information that can give us the best, sense of where those jobs and houses are going to be. And the model looks at those as places where

trips are generated from and places where trips are attracted to. And then the model does its thing based on origin destination surveys, which are updated over time and allocates those trips to the transportation network. And then I'll go to the next slide.

Not that one. And I don't have slides. Sorry to confuse you. Where was I here. When we look at the trips that come out of that model, and I'll just fast forward to the future portrayal and let that come up here in a sec. Can you see the red map lines? Things? Now it's come up on my screen. So this looks at, well this is the no build scenario. Whoops. Maybe it's come up—okay. The build scenario. This is how the network is supposed to look in terms of volume of vehicles over capacity, the build capacity of these roads on the network. In 20 years from now, in a scenario in which all of the funded investments in transportation have been built or completed, and again, this is scalable. What I will say in the context of how things are changing from state and federal law is that this is a very traditional analysis of the future of the network. Again, I just zoomed in on, I guess, what is that, the Guide. You'll see the legend here. This says that this color red indicates that this road will be operating at over 80% of built capacity in 2045. But I will say that this is just peak hour traffic in the PM.

So this is one hour a day in the afternoon when things are at their worst. And this measure of just vehicles over built capacity, that is a set of policies that is changing, the state legislative updates to the Growth Management Act this year will require that jurisdictions start using what is referred to as a multimodal level of service, rather than this type of level of service analysis, which is, again, the amount of vehicles on that road during that hour relative to the engineered built capacity of that road. And so multimodal level of service is more focused on ensuring that the system has enough capacity for person trips, not vehicle movements. And so that would account for people making those trips in various modes like public transit, walking, bike, carpool etc., we haven't figured that out yet. The state hasn't figured out its guidance on how to implement that legislative update. Our county is going to be the most pressed in terms of time to how to start measuring things in those ways, because we're the next update on the GMA comp Plan update cycle. I'll just park that issue there and keep moving on. Unless there are any questions about anything, I'm happy to stop.

Ryan Allsop: Just to clear—You said red is bad.

Hugh Conroy: Red is bad.

Ryan Allsop: Yes. So there's a lot of red.

Hugh Conroy: A lot of red. I mean, you can zoom in and see. And again, it could be 80% of build capacity, which means the road isn't totally full. And it is that one hour a day. But nonetheless, these are the indicators that we continue to use until we maybe shift to a different rubric.

Ryan Allsop: I'd like to quote Sarah on this, and I don't know how involved you are in the decisions for WSDOT to redo I-5 through town, but, I mean, if we have not built or expanded I-5 in town, since when did we build it? 1960?

Sarah Rothenbuhler: 60s, and supposed was to get us through the 70s to 80.

Ryan Allsop: And Whatcom County and British Columbia and our southern counties have all expanded significantly in population, you know, so the multimodal traffic is significantly higher. What's the plan? Do you guys know what the plan is to expand I-5 through Whatcom County, especially particularly from, let's call it, you know, Lake Padden or Fairhaven to the airport or north?

Hugh Conroy: Well, yes. Our relationship or the MPO policy board's relationship to plans to expand capacity or do anything to I-5. The connection there is, again, if there's federal money involved in that project, then the policy board has to approve that expenditure in an annual and updated through the year document called the Transportation Improvement Plan, or the TIP. So, you know, the most like politically hardball thing that could happen is a policy board could start to tell Washington State DOT that they don't want money that's being invested in other projects in the region to be invested there and instead do something relative to I-5. So I was just trying to answer that part of the question, which is what connection does the Whatcom Council of Governments MPO Policy Board have to plan options for that facility? The current plans as I understand it, and I have a slide or a visual that will show and I'll just go there. See watching. Oh, that's maybe down here.

We had a presentation from the area director of Washington State DOT at the Mount Baker office. And these are the funded, WSDOT projects from now through 2025. And to quickly answer the I-5 part, there is no plan to expand I-5, no funded projects to do that. The bulk of projects that are listed here are Port required fish passage improvements. There's some maintenance on here. State of good repair stuff. There is, let's see, this I-5 Slater Road interchange project that was funded under Connecting Washington, I believe. Other than some interchange work from legislatively apportioned projects, there's not, as I understand it, any state driven projects to basically add vehicle capacity to I-5. There is currently a I-5 strategic planning study going on which has been expanded. It did reach the border, but it was sort of initially in three phases. There was a lot of seismic engineering study going on for resiliency improvements through the Puget Sound area. Then, I believe like high occupancy vehicle, carpool lane type of studies coming up farther north. And then our area all the way to the border was part of an aspect of that study called Planning and Environmental Linkages, which tries to anticipate anything going on relative to the corridor that would require EIS studies, and then collecting data and engaging stakeholders in ways earlier than would typically been done in the project, so that subsequent investments in capacity or other systems on the highway could be done more quickly. So anyway, long answer no. No current plans to expand I-5. That I'm aware of, WSDOT reported on at their report to us at the COG board meeting a month or two ago.

Sarah Rothenbuhler: Is there a benchmark or number of the amount of accidents happen on the I-5 corridor that might trigger more action? Is that being looked at all? Because our I-5 corridor, there's multiple accidents a week. In my mind, if that was any of our businesses, we would be sued.

Hugh Conroy: There are. I mean, there's lots of cross data that's compiled. We track that closely with the whole state as a very central performance metric that we're required to have our board align with every year. So we kind of look at it with the state as Target Zero, which is initially was Target Zero 2030. Zero fatalities on the transportation system by year 2030. That's acknowledged as aspirational. And it got kind of old to be resetting the target every year as trends for fatalities have been going in the opposite direction as desired. So now it's just Target Zero and they took the year off. But every year we align with safety targets with WSDOT. The MPO board says we commit to programing that is selecting and advancing projects to the extent that they have decisions there. In line with the state's objective to meet Target Zero. As a region, we're not held to Target Zero, but we do get stats from them that show, you know, if we were, here's what our slice of helping the state make that target overall would be. We also have a grant we got this year from the USDOT's Safe Streets and Roads for All program. So we're doing a regional safety action plan, to identify priority investments, that through engagement of multiple stakeholders, from not just transportation, but from education, public health, traffic safety commission, law enforcement, etc., identify actions that we hope will reduce, fatality and serious injury crashes on the entirety of our, transportation system. So if anyone is interested in the latest, greatest safety stats for our region, I can definitely hook you up. The Washington State Traffic Safety Commission has great data dashboards, on that. And we're in the process over the next few months of compiling our own database, here at COG that will complement that and give us greater insights into regional strategies.

Sarah Rothenbuhler: Yes. It would be wonderful to receive that as a committee when that's available. Thank you.

Hugh Conroy: Yes.

Ken Bell: Your red map with transportation schedules? What if you take that one hour a day out of that map? What does it look like?

Hugh Conroy: Pretty good.

Ken Bell: You said it's red because of one hour a day, right? Yeah. So other than that one hour, you don't look like that.

Hugh Conroy: Not at all.

Ken Bell: What does it look like?

Hugh Conroy: It would probably look like under 50% of capacity.

Ken Bell: So you have to manage one hour a day. Can you rent a bus for one hour a day to run? We're not investing in a big vehicle. I mean, I'm serious about that. Is there a practical way to do that?

Sarah Rothenbuhler: Well, I don't know that the accidents only happen the one hour we're over capacity and everyone is going slower.

Guy Occhiogrosso: I think I just heard Ken advocate for mass transit. That's what I think I just heard.
(laughter)

Hugh Conroy: Peak response, mass transit. No, that's a challenge. I mean, it's like it's like the challenge of delivering cost efficient transit service to sparsely populated areas or relatively sparsely populated areas, is how do you meet the time dimension of that, too, with an operation like transit. And so to surge transit capacity for a couple hours a day, I don't know. I don't know that other transit agencies do much of that.

Ryan Allsop: Frank had a question or a comment.

Frank Imhof: Well, I've been in meetings with the DOT head honcho, and their real plan is to manage the highway system. Now, this is from the top down... in a manner that forces us to use light rail and mass transit so their overall plan is...Don't improve our highway systems. They spent \$40 billion dollars in Seattle to build light rail, which isn't getting used very well, because people are moving away from the city centers. Office space in Seattle is empty. All this light rail they built is not working out too well. The big theory now is let's move fast, fast trains and that's the overall plan.

Ryan Allsop: I mean, that's clear obviously in the cities too. Obviously the bike lanes are taking out car lanes. Clearly that's one of the missions in the local governance as well, not just at the state level. I mean, you can see that all through downtown, and that's pretty obvious. So, it's a forced change that so far doesn't seem like it's driven a lot of change. Even with the e-bikes and stuff coming out, this climate and these hills don't lend to this. This isn't Holland. So it's been a challenge, I think, to adopt..

Debbie Ahl: We have a few more hills and a lot more rain.

Ryan Allsop: And further to go.

Debbie Ahl: What came to my mind is, are we being a strong enough advocate for ourselves with state federal funds, and are we tapping into what those resources might be, you know, light rail, but it looks like the trajectory of the rush hour traffic and that's to businesses. That looks to me like the refineries, it looks like industrial places, but a lot of that could be solved by I-5. And intuitively, if we haven't updated I-5 all those years...you know, what it's like driving on I-5. And every time we hear of another significant accident, it's painful.

Ryan Allsop: You know what it's like driving downtown when there's an accident on I-5, it turns into an absolute cluster in downtown Bellingham.

Sarah Rothenbuhler: And it doesn't tend to happen on just the rush hours. We're overcapacity a lot more than an hour a day. If you're regularly on that highway...my experience doesn't match, it's worse than that report.

Ryan Allsop: Obviously also related to the Sunset, Alabama and Lakeway are the three main on ramps. The east west traffic.

Rob Fix: And I was going to comment—a lot of our on ramps are not to code. They're not up to the spec that DOT would require if you built them today. So it's a bit surprising that there's no plan to address those. Trying to merge in half the distance of what you should be, that's always going to cause problems.

Sarah Rothenbuhler: So how can we help with getting the reports reflect reality, seems that's the first step to get the funds to improve our highway system.

Hugh Conroy: A few things there. The one hour a day was probably not accurate. It's always labeled peak hour. It's actually 4 to 6. So it's two hours. So that gets a little closer, but maybe not all the way to what folks are saying aligns with their driven experience on I-5 and the interchanges. And the someone mentioned the interchanges themselves, the on and off ramps. Yes. That is so true about Bellingham. They are some of the oldest configured, interchanges in the state, you know, referred to as buttonhook interchanges. Or things that were actually service roads for the building of the highway that were left as the on ramp by default. And so WSDOT, in partnership with City of Bellingham, at least, has looked pretty hard at alternatives around like Lakeway Interchange. Not just for better operation within relation to the local network, but also in terms of options for more efficiently feeding cars onto and off of the interstate so that it flows better and is safer. So there are observed issues there for sure. There just hasn't been funding for those improvements around interchanges. But capacity expansion of the mainline itself really hasn't come up in the project alternative discussions much. I mean, I know it's been brought up by, you know, local advocates and other jurisdictions.

But in terms of something like on the calendar for WSDOT, I haven't seen that. And then lastly, because I know I'm probably tight on time anyway, it would be great to have a better ongoing dialog with groups like this and others with respect to the needs of business from the transportation system. Roughly concurrent with the big mail out survey I mentioned earlier that we did to all the households with respect to transportation priorities in general, we also mailed out a postcard to all the business addresses we could get. So we hoped it was basically every business in the county. But, you know, a five by eight postcard isn't the most effective way. We had done pretty well with a similar effort about 10 or 12 years ago, but this one we got really hardly any response. And the basic question was, you know, from the perspectives of all types of businesses, is the transportation system adequately serving you in terms of moving your employees, moving inputs to manufacturing, moving product out the door, getting it delivered on time, etc.? I think traditionally agencies like ours are planning efforts like ours have reached right out to carrier firms, trucking companies and stuff. And that makes a lot of sense. Because they have, you know, a lot of visibility and daily experience on the roads. But even when we got feedback from carrier firms, moving product up and down the road, they were telling us they were more concerned about congestion in

Seattle, than they certainly were about congestion, bottlenecks, etc. in Whatcom County in terms of their business perspective and even more impactful than the border was at that time. And this is like 6 or 7 years ago. Yes, I would love to improve, our planning process's connection with engagement from the private sector in a way that could help us zero in on priorities for future investments, not just in capacity, but operations and safety and intermodal connection, etc.

Ryan Allsop: Okay, one last question. Well, first, when you get those 2000 comments back. In Whatcom County, as most of us know, the people that comment tend to be the same people who show up for public meetings and complain. It's not always the people that you're trying to reach out there or you want both feedback. I never saw a comment card. I've never been asked. I've done state surveys on taxes and stuff. So I'm curious as to where that was distributed for me. And I didn't see it. The other thing is, where is the go/no go or fail point? Because typically you don't want to get to 100% capacity or failure of a road. So when do you make the call to invest in improving it? So we don't get to that point where it's so bad we can't stand anymore.

Hugh Conroy: That's kind of, I guess, a philosophical question in some ways. I know the city of Bellingham anyway, has kind of, as a policy, gotten to the point where they say, for the most part, you know, we're not really going to expand capacity, especially if we're viewing it in a, you know, a peak period. I'll call it the two-hour peak period. When the rest of the day it's enough. And from area to area, the cost and impact of acquiring new right of way to widen the road or build a new connection is, you know, prohibitive. So it just becomes a public policy decision of a city or town as to whether they want to generate that revenue and acquire that land for roadway and do it.

Ryan Allsop: But a lot of that's designed. Right? I mean, if you use examples like Lakeway or Chestnut where we take a car lane out, we're not just we're not trying to expand. We're actually just trying to maintain some of the capacity. And we take a car lane out, put medians in and bike lanes...I mean, I'm all for having the bikers be safer, but when you take a lane out, a lot of cities, at certain peak hours you can—at peak capacity for that hour, like two hours a day, you can drive in that bike lane, but you can't do that when you put a median in or white plastic separators up. But if we design it so that you can drive in it... even 405 now you can drive in the shoulder for like an hour a day, coming northbound on 405 before you get to I-5. Who does the designs for our city roads, bike lanes, because there seems to be like, I'd say there's some common sense feedback we'd love to apply.

Hugh Conroy: I know the designs for the facilities are done by the engineers or the hired engineers from the jurisdictions that own those facilities. So you know, WSDOT for I-5 and interchanges, City of Bellingham for all around there, the cities and then the county itself or the county roads. They're responsible for the actual design our policy board with, again, respect to those federal dollars can as a region say that, you know, they want to emphasize better transportation system management as a way to squeeze more capacity out of existing, you know, right of way availability. And then as a policy board could have influence on which projects get those federal funds to build out, or, you know, they could say we're not giving money to this project because it does or doesn't do what we regionally think is, you know, most important. And I think people understand that, you know, it's not just the residents of one town that

use the streets and roads in that town. I mean, regionally, these connections and our abilities to move between our urban centers and in and out of the region entirely, especially with goods, is significant. So I don't know if that answered your question, but, you know, we do as an agency like to put all the stakeholders in touch with that part of the whole cycle of plan, design, fund, build, maintain and all over again.

Sarah Rothenbuhler: We are getting at the end of our time. Hugh, thank you so much for being here. I would like to reach out for some continued conversation, and really appreciate you being here. I hope you can also reach out to us, the business community in the future. And email is going to be more effective and less costly and than mailers for public opinion.

Hugh Conroy: Yes. And so maybe an initiative we could do is work with groups like yours to compile an email blast list, that would be a good addition to the mail strategy, because I think you got to put all those lines in the water. But that would be great.

Sarah Rothenbuhler: Yes. And connecting with Chamber of Commerce.

Ryan Allsop: Yeah. Chamber of Commerce should be able to help you significantly with communication to businesses.

Sarah Rothenbuhler: Thank you. Thank you, Hugh. (Chair broke) And Casey, if you agree to be vice chair, that won't happen to your chair. (laughter) Okay. We're going to move on to our next speaker. Ken, thank you so much for being here.

Ken Marzocco: Good morning. I'm Ken Marzocco, and I'm not representing any business or group here. Just somebody that gets bored once in a while and starts looking into things. So, well, the presentation is coming up.

Gina Stark: Hugh, can you stop sharing your screen, please? Thank you.

Ken Marzocco: A few of us got interested in WTA. This one goes back about a year, and a lot of us in the group are a number of us are cyclists when we go for riding around the county. And Tim Farris here, he's organized a bike group that has 87 members, around, and we go for a ride couple of times a week and do about 50 miles a week. And it got so we're riding around and we pass a bus and somebody'd say, two, and you'd see another one that's empty and you'd start looking at all these buses around the community and realize that we've got buses running all over the county that are almost empty. So we started looking into it and, the group, we drafted a letter back in June, and it was signed by these people. A couple of them are on the board here, Debbie. Just down here from the board. But there's a few of them. And expressed our concern with the fact that WTA continually spends more and more money. And the ridership is declining.

We listened to a presentation at Rotary about a year ago that didn't address that, and we got concerned. So a bit of history. Back in 2002, there was an initiative to fund WTA, with a sales tax of 0.3%. And then in 2002, it was doubled to 0.6%. Put that in perspective. It's double what was or triple what was just allotted for the jail funding. And then in 2006 to 2009, with that funding, they expanded their services quite a bit and the ridership went from 3 million up to 5 million. And then in 2010, there was a vote proposition that was supported by the city of Bellingham. I think it was funded mostly by the WTA employees initiative, but they wanted to raise another 0.2%, and that was voted down narrowly. I think it was 50.1% voted against it. But despite the rejection of the extra sales tax funding, the floodgates have opened in. The amount of money that's coming into WTA has dramatically increased over the years. And that includes grants both from the city of Bellingham, state and federal. And so, for example, in the last five years, they've received \$107 million of grant money. And that's in addition to the \$188 million of sales tax revenue. So just to show what the sales tax is done, I've created these slides with inflation adjusted data. So you can take that out of the picture.

So if you look at the sales tax revenue, even though it hasn't changed the percentage, it's up 63% since 2011. The operating grants. Every year they get grant money to help with their operation. It's up 800% since that 2011 time period. And the numbers you'll see in the circles. Those are today's numbers. So the grant operating grants last year were \$6.5 million. So if you put it all together the revenue and capital grants is up \$111 million or 116%, I should say, from 2011. And the total amount of money they're bringing in next year is budgeted to be \$80 million. And some of those grants are unusual. You know, we can't perhaps count on them in future because they were related to Covid type funding. But even without that, it's a huge increase. So as we heard some of the discussions on the previous presentation, there's a lot of challenges that public transit are having, and it's just not locally here. It's across North America. And some of those things are remote work. People are taking school by correspondence. They're not going to colleges as much. Remote business transactions, banking, shopping, etc. done online. They're not, you don't go downtown to do it. And sprawl. And you look at the real estate growth in population of the outlying areas versus downtown Bellingham. It's way higher. And so people are moving outside the downtown areas, they're spread out around the county, which is impacting it.

On top of that, there's local challenges. Businesses are leaving downtown Bellingham, and there's a couple of reasons. One is downtown Bellingham isn't a real fun place to go anymore. I go to the bank typically once a month downtown and easily count in there, when I go to the Bank of America, there's more security guards than tellers. And you park in the underground parking lot. You walk out, there's typically somebody urinating on the lane. There's people hanging around, the security guards, but it's just not a fun place to go. I'm not sure how many of you would encourage your teenage daughter to go down to Railroad Avenue and have a bagel, take the bus downtown. It's probably not going to happen. And then there's the city back taxes, which push businesses outside the city limits. And you can see that with people like Anvil moving out. You know, being outside the Bellingham city limits or you drive the I-5 corridor. There's an incentive to move outside the city. There's a parking issues that cost. Employees don't like to pay for parking. And now there's new minimum wage requirements that are going to increase the cost of businesses to be downtown. So as a result, there's not a whole lot of large employers that are

based downtown. And for one thing, the transit systems do is they track ridership per capita. And in 2011, it was 60% higher than it is today. So that's a little bit about the funding.

If you look at trends, these are boardings. And this is how many millions of rides there are every year. You can see ten years ago was over 5 million. And now they hope that it'll get up to 4 million next year. And you can see the Covid dip. But if you take that Covid period out of it, it is a continual decline even without that. And then you look at the amount of money raised. The fares have dropped by half. And so the money collected and this is inflation adjusted. And the average person that rides public transit now pays \$0.44. The operating expense. Even though there's fewer people riding it, has gone up pretty much double. It's now \$12 a ride. And that doesn't include depreciation or the cost of capital. And if you look at the boardings per WTA employee, it takes twice as many WTA employees per ride than it did in 2011. They've continually added staff. They're adding, I think, a dozen or so this year. They've added over 100 employees since 2011, even though there's no more ridership. And along with that, the payroll cost goes up and payroll costs per ride is now \$10. And it's more than doubled since 2011. All the money that or the vast majority of the money that's flowing into WTA is going to the employees. So if you look at what does that mean as far as subsidies.

And so if you have somebody that is a regular commuter on a walk and transit, they take the bus to work or school every day. They stop and get groceries and get back on, etc. The subsidy would be around \$15,000 a year per person. And if you look at half the boardings are college students, which are some of by far the busiest routes. The subsidy they get for riding the bus is almost double or about double what they would pay in tuition. And then you look at the specialty services like paratransit and Lynden Hop. If somebody takes a trip to and from it's over \$100. And Lynden Hop, for example, the amount of money on average the passengers pay is \$0.18. So one of the things that Whatcom County was looking at is this Lynden Hop thing is a pretty good deal. We should look at expanding it to other areas. So when you look at Lynden Hop, it operates 66 hours a week. And the fare is \$1. But over 80% of the people ride for free because seniors over 75 ride for free and students ride for free. So if you're a high school kid and you're kind of dragging your butt after tennis practice, no problem. Pick up the phone. They'll send the bus over, they'll pick you up, they'll bring you home, and you don't have to pay a nickel.

And whereas the cost for that ride is over \$50. And in 2023, the projected revenue is \$2,800, and so the amount of revenue they are going to generate is \$8 a day. On the days they are for every day they operate. So you can imagine there's a and they're going to have three new buses and 300, 450,000 a year to buy three new busses. So you can envision these three drivers at the end of the day saying, how'd you do? I did pretty damn good. I got \$3 today. And that would be the average that each of those would plot wouldn't even pay for their coffee. So with the study looking at Micro Transit, hopefully they'll make the logical decision that it just doesn't make any sense. And they won't expand that to other communities. So then you look at it, well, maybe it's good for the environment. We hear that, you know, the state wants to cut greenhouse gas emissions and cut down, use public transit. Well, if you look at 2022, the last year, they had actual data. They spent \$2.1 million on fuel and at \$4 a gallon. That's just over half a million gallons. So if you do the math, the average economy for every ride, it works out to 20.6 miles per gallon, which is equivalent to every passenger driving an F-150. I mean, that doesn't include the

energy that goes into the half million dollars that WTA spends on utilities or the fact that there's 140,000 trips made just for their employees to get to work.

So now the solution is to spend tens of millions of dollars on electric and hybrid buses. And if you read there was a recent article I read about Edmonton, Alberta, where they have gone to electric buses, and it's basically been a disaster. At any one time only half of the buses will work. They need diesel heaters because there's not enough battery capacity to keep the buses warm. And my understanding is that the buses we're buying here are going to have diesel heaters as well. And then you got to look at is, there really any greenhouse gas savings because the electricity has to come from somewhere. And if you look at the North American grid, there's only maybe 30% of the energy comes from renewable resources. And that energy is therefore spoken for three times over. For any new energy, any new consumption has to come from burning hydrocarbon. So every time those buses get charged, somewhere in the system, there's 100 pounds of coal being thrown in a boiler somewhere. It's nice to say, well, you know, smell the exhaust off that bus. It's completely pollution free. Well, it's not, it's just moving the pollution somewhere else in the country.

So we believe that WTA finances need to have a hard look. And what we looked at is what if they, you know, assuming they were relatively efficient in 2011, what if we could go back and operate at the same efficiency we did? Back in those days. And if you do the math. And in today's dollars they would need, they would have to incur operating expenses of \$24.2 million to deliver the same number of passengers at the same efficiency. However, they budgeted for next year \$53 million. And the sales tax revenue next year is budgeted to raise almost \$44 million plus, or there will be another \$10.5 million that comes in another revenue from grants. And these are reoccurring grants, not the Covid grants or special ones and fares and interest on investments, etc. So they expect to take in operating revenue, \$24 million. So if you could go back to the old efficiency, they would generate a surplus of \$30 million next year. And which means that even if we cut the sales tax in half, they would still have a surplus of \$8 million. And that cutting that sales tax in half is equivalent to funding both the recent Justice initiative and the children's initiative. It's a huge amount of money. We have to think about if you were king for a day and you said there's. \$44 million of sales tax available. How would I spend it in the community? Would you really spend it driving empty buses around town? So we think there needs to be a serious look at changing, changing the sales tax subsidy.

Ken Marzocco: So you think. Well, is it realistic? Could we really cut it that much? Well, the analysis did not include any provision for future special grants. And they've been there's been a lot of special grants. So it's assuming no special grants going forward. It's assuming that even though sales tax is climbing dramatically every year, it's assuming that it only continues on at the rate of inflation. It assumes there's no increase in in fare revenue and no improved efficiency, even though there's been tens of millions of dollars spent on hybrid and electric and modern busses. And on top of that, WTA has \$60 million in cash in which to ease the transition. And so if you compare that to you folks that run private businesses. Getting the house in order should be a relatively easy path because you have no revenue concerns. There's your revenues guaranteed. And all they have to do is work on the cost side. And some examples

of where they might save some money. If you look at travel and education and meetings 2020, they spent \$55 million. Next year they plan on spending \$518 million. More than double what it was 2002. Or sorry, \$55,000. Okay. Payroll costs are due to increase 33% over 2022. Outside services 200% over two years ago. And then another thing I can't understand, is I don't know how much money is held within different agencies within the county. And they hope to raise \$1.26 million of interest in or investment income on right now. They have \$55 million of cash this year, which works out to be about 2.3%. And every time I look at a different, whether it's a fire department or whatever. There's millions and millions of dollars sitting there and very, very little investment income. And you wonder, like, is it really that poorly invested? You can get 5% on money market now.

Rob Fix: They can't invest in money markets. They're very restricted in what they can invest in and they buy.

Ken Marzocco: CD or?

Rob Fix: You're restricted to federal bonds. Fannie Mae.

Ken Marzocco: Federal bonds pay a lot more than that.

Rob Fix: Most of these parking what's called an LGIP, local government investment pool, which is a coalition of small governments that invest in the state and the state treasurer invests it. It's really restricted what we're allowed to invest in.

Ken Marzocco: But isn't it optional whether you participate in that?

Rob Fix: Yes, you don't have to participate in LGIP, but you can't go out and buy stock in IBM.

Ken Marzocco: Right. I'm not going to put any money at risk. So a few options on how we might look initially at it saving some money. The first one is to run smaller buses on routes where you only have a couple passengers. I think the average on all the fixed transit routes is like 5 or 6 people on average. So if you have a route that only has 1 or 2 riders, typically at certain times of day, don't run a 40 person bus. And my understanding is that one of the big opposition items to it is that the drivers want to drive big buses because they don't get the big dollars if they don't drive big buses because it's a different class of license. And then one thing that some transit systems are looking at is just using an Uber type system. Uber costs about \$1.50 a mile. And a lot of the costs here are 20 plus dollars. And so why not just give out Uber vouchers and downsize WTA and then reduce overhead costs. You know they got a third more staff than they, or 50% more staff than they used to. There are some services that could easily be outsourced. Every agency has its own IT group, payroll maintenance. And look at outside outsourcing some of those things to people that can do it cheaper. And also, you know, maybe get rid of some excess assets.

So fast forward, I think the public sees daily all these empty boxes you hear, talk about all the time. It's really obvious that it's flawed both economically and environmentally. And what we'd like to see is that if WTA becomes proactive and in cutting their costs and increasing the return for their investment. But we don't think that will happen unless they have a different mandate. If you give somebody a certain amount of money to spend. Their job is to spend it, and they certainly do that. And so I think the business community needs to help facilitate that change. And, um, a less desirable approach is a bit of an adversarial approach where there's just a citizen's initiative to drop the sales tax, which can be put on the next ballot. And I would expect that the public would fully support a sales tax reduction.

Ryan Allsop: The last method seems quite effective here.

Sarah Rothenbuhler: We have we have five minutes for Q&A. And thank you so much.

Clark Campbell: Initiative question, it seems it's easier to pass an initiative to get a tax assessment put onto the ballot for a fund. Once it's been passed, or you have a legal fund with a tax mechanism in place, has there been in Whatcom County an initiative that undoes that? And is it even legal to do so through the initiative process?

Ken Marzocco: We've looked into that. And our understanding is that if you get the right if you do a right and get the right number of people to sign up, that even the governor could not stop an initiative.

Clark Campbell: Okay. So it has two parts to that question. It has been done before. And Whatcom County?

Ken Marzocco: I don't think so.

Clark Campbell: Question one. Question two, it can legally be done?

Ken Marzocco: We think so.

Gina Stark: To repeal a tax through initiative?

Clark Campbell: Through initiative process.

Ken Marzocco: \$6 million bucks to run initiative.

Clark Campbell: Well yes, there's costs to everything. But I just I wanted to know like before we kind of go down that path of advocating for that. Is that something that's even viable?

Gina Stark: The car tab initiative is a prime example of that.

Clark Campbell: Statewide.

Gina Stark: Yes, it was a statewide initiative. That's how the power of initiative was first birthed.

Frank Imhof: With how much they spend on collecting \$0.14 a ride and keeping the accounting for that. If they just gave free bus service, they'd probably lay off the whole accounting.

Ken Marzocco: Well, in fact, if you took all the revenue that's generated by WTA it would not pay for the accounting department.

Frank Imhof: I'm sure it wouldn't.

Sarah Rothenbuhler: Debbie, did you have any comments?

Debbie Ahl: I just wanted to share a couple of thoughts. A little bit of philosophy, perhaps, but I, you know, I've worked in this community for a lot of decades, and I'm one of the elders, I think. But my impression has always been, we have plenty of money, but it's not always well directed. And I think that's one of the things that Ken has just pointed out. I'm a fan of public transportation. I'm actually—there's many areas I think we need perhaps more routes or more options or anything else that people need, especially like out in East County, for example. And they're complicated. They're very complicated. But on the other hand, if we're spending this much money and 2 or 3 people are riding these buses and we're buying more big, even hybrid buses, good thing environmentally, not a bad thing, you have to go back and focus on who we serve, and we serve all those people who need that public transportation and everybody else in this county. And so it's a combination of what the taxes should be, but it's also where the funding should go. And I just one of the reasons I serve on this coalition here is because I just believe that business can add so much different perspective to the work that's being done throughout our community. And I value that a great deal.

Sarah Rothenbuhler: Thank you.

Frank Imhof: You probably remember Phil Door ran the Lynden stage or Ferndale Stage. He owned the company. He ran the company, drove the bus, had like 3 or 4 buses that served—I bet they've moved as many people as what we do now from Ferndale, Bellingham and it was \$0.35 a ride.

Ryan Allsop: I took a long, deep breath before I just wanted to say anything. So first off, I want to say thank you guys. I mean, that is a very, very, very powerful I mean, just the data and I'm assuming, I mean we're taking the collective like you got everything's accurate. And so we're going by that it's all public information. That's awesome to compile it in the way you did, very powerful. And the list of people you had at the beginning is a powerful list. I know quite a few of those people on there, and it's of both parties. This is not a single party issue. This is just a common sense, it's pretty obvious. I think everybody here drives our roads. Why is WTA always empty. There's probably a few that go to Western from certain routes that make sense. So how do we I mean, you had a list of options, but, I mean, isn't part of that option. I mean, who rides it doesn't Satpal drive this? I don't know if he's on the phone.

Rob Fix: See, they don't report to the county. The county serves on their board. Okay, so the list of board members. They're all government officials. That's who the policy is driven by.

Ryan Allsop: And the person that runs it right now is, he came from Port of Everett?

Rob Fix: City of Bellingham attorney, Port of Everett, executive director. Chmelik, Sitkin and Davis, attorney. And then now WTA.

Ryan Allsop: And have you guys has anybody sat with.

Rob Fix: I meet with him on a regular basis.

Ken Marzocco: He presented a rotary. And unfortunately, we tried getting together a year ago. Tim and I. And it didn't happen.

Tim Farris: I mean, so if I might offer—Tim Farris—we've met with Satpal about this issue. Our group has met with Mayor Lynden Scott Korthuis. We've met with Michael Lilliquist, who's chair of the WTA board. And at least for the first two, they conceded that this is a genuine concern. Mr. Lilliquist indicated that he would get back, as we have not heard back. But one of the things that we would offer is, it's completely obvious that there's a problem. I mean, you just have to look at buses for 40 people, 40 seats and 2 or 3 people around. And once you start doing that, you can't stop looking inside buses. It's a disease. But as much as it's obvious that there's a problem, it's not obvious what the solution is. And I think we would concede that we're lay people in this. And one of the things that we have suggested that the WTA board should consider is, along with the group of independent people, retain a consultant to come in to talk about what possible solutions are. The reason that's important is some of this community is not alone with the problem. Other communities are looking at Uber types, ideas of a blend of bus transit and transit or going all over. If you go to the Uber website, they will talk about a whole web page, about how we're here to replace transit systems. All that to say that any a consultant and getting the WTA to participate in this would be logical to go back and say, okay, let's find a solution that would work for our community. I think there's so much inertia on the board for so many years, and outside pressure for groups like this to do something to nudge them. It isn't going to happen. It's already \$40 million a year. It is a ton of money. Yes.

Ryan Allsop: Rob, do you think you could get, sorry, I forgot his name.

Rob Fix: Les Reardanz?

Ryan Allsop: The gentleman to come to do a presentation.

Rob Fix: Absolutely.

Ryan Allsop: We can kind of.

Sarah Rothenbuhler: That would be great.

Rob Fix: And the question about whether this publication can be made available—it is now public information. Yes. This is on Gina's computer. You can have it.

Ken Bell: I've got a very good friend who owns Bel Air shuttle and he did an entire overview of this. He needs to be a part of your discussion, because he has looked at this entire system. And said, how can I do this from a private sector cheaply? And he's mapped it out. So I encourage you to at least reach out to Richard Johnson. And second on the Uber, it has to be based on a stop. If you make it from the home with a voucher, everybody's going to use it. I'm going to use it. I'm going to call in and say using my Uber voucher.

Ryan Allsop: On Friday nights.

Ken Bell: A little structural around that. But my comment is, there are private sector people who are in this business that need to be brought to the table. And I will tell you, when I looked at Richard's plan, it was an amazing plan.

Sarah Rothenbuhler: Do you have a comment?

Brian Heinrich: The point 6% of sales tax is average throughout state for a transportation system. I'm just wondering if you look at various other communities who are more successful and, you know, you have to compare a rural community like ours to another rural community. So I'd be very interested in hearing who's doing better.

Clark Campbell: Be interesting to look at someplace like Spokane or, you know, that's got a similar—

Gina Stark: Think Spokane is a little bit too urban now.

Clark Campbell: Well, it's a county with one city.

Sarah Rothenbuhler: Thank you so much and great job, this was very enlightening.

Ryan Allsop: How do we sign up if you want more names on your list.

Sarah Rothenbuhler: Please keep coming to this meeting for the monthly meeting, there's a series of topics we're bringing speakers in on; public safety, child care, workforce, policy... There's just a variety of topics that we would love you help with. Okay. So is everybody okay if we go about five, ten minutes long? I want to make sure to give our next gentlemen enough time to do their presentation as well.

Bill Hewett: All right, well, I'll try and keep it as quick as we can here. My name is Bill Hewett. I'm the Fire Chief for the city of Bellingham and Fire District Eight. We cover everything within the city limits, as well as the county areas that go out by the airport, pretty much everything south of Slater Road, including the majority of the Lummi Reservation. So, we're a consolidated agency. We are a department under the city, and we provide services to Fire District Eight through a contract for service. But we are a consolidated agency. We run eight different fire stations, six here in the city and two out in the county. I have about 200 employees working across 13 different facilities. There's the eight fire stations. Plus we have folks at City Hall and our life safety division partner in emergency management with the port and the county, and have folks stationed out by the airport there at the county wide Emergency Coordination Center. And then we actually provide paramedic level services countywide and have one of our medic units stationed up in the City of Lynden. So quite a number of people spread out over quite a bit of real estate there.

As far as our fire department goes, we run just about 23,000 calls a year. Running seven engine companies, one ladder company here in the city and the district area. All of our engines are cross staffed with an ambulance. And what that means is, those fire companies have three people. And they have both a fire truck and an ambulance. And when they get a medical call, they jump on the ambulance and go on the ambulance, or if they get a fire call, they jump on the fire truck, go out on that fire truck. And if you ever see them driving around town, you'll often see an engine followed by an ambulance. And that's when they're moving from one place to the other to pick up supplies or shuttle rigs to the shop and stuff. That's what you're seeing there in that cross staffing. Within the fire department, we have our largest portion of our department is in the operations division, and that's the folks that are out there running 24/7. Our crews actually work 24-hour shifts starting at 8:00 in the morning, going till 8:00 the following morning.

Also within the fire department, we have our life safety division. That is our fire marshal's office. It's a crew of five people and they're actually located over at City Hall here. About seven years ago, we moved them over to City Hall so it could be more responsive and more immersed in the permit center there to make contact with them for folks that are going through the permitting process easier. And to increase the coordination over there. So we have a fire marshal, three inspectors and a permit technician that all work out of that? Also, in addition to our operations, in our EMS or emergency medical services, we also have a specialty unit in there known as our Community Paramedic Program. And Community Paramedicine, we've been running it now in Bellingham for about eight years. It was initially set up to be kind of a 911, trying to get the highest utilizers of 911 to find the correct resources. There's a lot of people in our community that use EMS as their primary care for all of their basic medical needs. And so our community paramedic program is really one where we match up a paramedic with an intensive case manager from the GRACE program, and the two of them work together to with the those high utilizers of the system to try and find them the right resources to so they can hopefully solve their problems or find the right resources to solve their problems and move off of EMS.

Sarah Rothenbuhler: Is that tending to be the people that are in the motor homes, on the streets who are refusing rehabilitation?

Bill Hewett: There's definitely a number of the folks that they manage, their homelessness, mental health, drug addiction is easily the bulk of their client list. There's also folks that are housed living at home but don't have the right support.

Casey Diggs: They're at Francis Place behind the brewery all the time. The community paramedic program I absolutely love. It's really calmed down the alley craziness that happens from time to time. Some people from there go into camps as well. They're doing a lot.

Bill Hewett: Yes. If you see two bright red transit vans that are driving around town. They're not ambulances. They're mobile offices, basically, they're set up so they can bring their clients into the van and do that. That's our Community Paramedic program. We also run the Office of Emergency Management for the city. Their job mainly is to focus on emergency planning for disaster. Long range planning for disasters and how to mitigate after a disaster. And then we have a training division that makes up seven employees that run our recruit academy. We actually run our own fire recruit academy here out of the facility up on Britton Road. And they run the recruit academy. And then they also do ongoing training for all of our employees. So that is a little bit just about what our organization is. I think part of how we kind of came into the conversation here was talk about data when we talked about public safety and looking at that. And one of the things that we wanted to share with everybody. So Chris Hughes here is our analyst at the fire department and is immersed in our data on a regular basis. And one of the things I wanted to share with the group, as you go through, we have a fairly robust analytic here on our website. If you go to the COB.org website, go to the fire page. There's a little button that'll get you to data. And Chris here is going to give us just a little bit of demo on what we have available here.

Chris Hughes: So on the fire, there's the data section. There's the annual reports that you can go through if you want to look at individual years, just how they perform. You can go there and look it all up. But we made this public dashboard for a lot of reasons. One is just to have sort of a high-level overview of the body of work that the fire department does from a 911 perspective, and this data doesn't encompass life, safety, community paramedicine training or any of that sort of stuff. It is sort of a discussion of 911 responses and just sort of put that on display. The other thing I'll say is, it's up there because it's designed around the number of and types of data requests we got. I'll just call myself out and say that I'm lazy. And I got tired of answering, how many how many calls did you do last month? How many calls did you do last year? How many of them were EMS? All these sorts of things. So when you go through the sort of high level, that's why those metrics are on there for folks like you that want to know, like, hey, and how many EMS calls we have and this year or that year, or how many of them are fire, how many structure fires we had.

And I think also it gives us the ability to kind of tell a story about the fire department down along the bottom. You see, there's sort of an overview that goes and talks about the where and the when and the how and the what we do things. And I'm not going to bore everyone by going through and exploring this, but just know that the idea is that you can go here and look at these different things. And also say is that if there's something in here that you don't see, you're welcome to email me. I think Sarah has my contact information. If you have any additional follow up questions, or if you see an error or if you want to see

something else in here. A couple things just about it is we look up, up in the upper left here. This always defaults to the last month, but you're welcome to go in. This connects to data all the way up back to 2018 when we switched systems. So it defaults to last month because that's what everyone would call and ask me about. But you can expand these out to whatever body of data you want to see here. So if you wanted to select the entire year or specific months or whatever you want to see.

This is not a real time dashboard, but it's pretty close. It updates about every three hours. So as opposed to having monthly data or aggregates, you can come in up in the upper right corner of all these pages. That'll always tell you when the last update for this occurred. It is not a system for you to, if you see a fire truck blazing down the road to log into it and see what's going on, it's not going to do that for privacy reasons. And also just reasons for data aggregation. But if you come along the bottom, you're going to see some cool stuff in here. Again, a lot of this the where and the when, driven by the questions that I got asked a lot by people, what our busiest times, hours of days are our date range and what days. And all these are actually interactive. So if you wanted to know the busiest hour of the day on Wednesday, you can click in here. And it'll filter down. You can see all these different times or the date range. You can see when maybe you shouldn't drive. Speaking of peak hours, or when you should avoid stuff. Almost all these pages have spark lines on them, so you can come in and see the highest.

When we had our highest average calls per day or the highest number of total calls, you just click around. The whole point is it's for data exploring. So like I said, I'm not going to walk through every single thing, but, please come, if you have issues or questions please come in and take a look. The other interesting thing is, so this is the time of day. Chief mentioned our apparatus is here, so you can see the number of calls that are going on in the types they're doing throughout the time range you have selected. And then the other one that I get the most comments on are our incident map. And this is for the time range we have selected. It is, for legal reasons, divided into two categories: EMS and fire. So that you can't zoom in and see— you're never going to be able to log in and look at a visual address and see like, oh, this person had a cardiac arrest. It's just an EMS incident occurred, that's publicly related data. Chief also mentioned we respond out to the county. So that's why if you look out there for our paramedics, it's all blue out there because that's where the ALS service is provided. But you can kind of see the density of calls as they come in here.

Ken Marzocco: Are these just for your unit?

Clark Campbell: So it seems like fire is the minority of calls.

Ken Marzocco: 3%?

Chris Hughes: Yes, EMS always ends up in the 80%.

Ken Marzocco: How come you guys still call yourselves firemen?

Bill Hewett: Well we don't call ourselves firemen, we call ourselves firefighters. But that was originally why we existed. We've been a fire department since 1903. EMS didn't come into play until 1974. We're coming up on our 50th anniversary of EMS being in the fire department.

Clark Campbell: So most of those EMS calls are kind of within the city limits. Is that a fair statement? Like what percentage in the city limits versus the county?

Chris Hughes: So the paramedic services that provide to the outside, I don't have the exact—it's on the annual report of what goes to the outside service. That's what the paramedic, the ALS services are meant to do, provide into the city and out. But the Bellingham Fire Department itself are what we call our PLS crews or the ambulances you see rolling around. They only respond with the city District Eight. So, the lion's share is within the city limits.

Clark Campbell: Okay. The lion's share is EMS service, and lion's share of that is within city limits. Yes. So just quick follow up question on that. So, you know, you guys are stressed because you got all this stuff from what's happening with homelessness. What's happening with drug addiction. If there was a separate service that sort of interacted but offered free medical care in the city of Bellingham, how much would that relieve what you guys have to do in doing primary care from vans?

Bill Hewett: You know, that's a great question because Chris told you, you know, he gets most of the calls about the or what was the one that you clicked on? I get most of my calls to this page which is talking about how many overdose drug ingestion calls that we had this year. That seems to be the popular one that comes to me. A lot of what we've got going on when it comes to mental health, drug addiction, and it certainly is the bulk of our calls. When you see on this EMS page, you'll see all out of all the different primary impressions that our folks report, that's the biggest one, or the most common one that that's coming up right now, or at least in the time frame selected here. But that's been pretty consistent all year. Our biggest issue really is the long-term treatment issue. Right. Because we, we can pick people up, drive them up to the hospital, you know, or actually a lot of times even nowadays, we're not even necessarily picking people up. We're reversing overdoses in the street, person is waking up, refusing any further treatment and walking away from us. You know, our community paramedics will tell you that, you know, their biggest issue, aside from just the high number of caseload that they're carrying. Their biggest issue though is that they can't find those long-term placements, you know, and that's something that that I really hope,

Clark Campbell: Long term placements for housing or long-term placements for healthcare?

Bill Hewett: Long term placements for healthcare. And yeah, mental health and drug problems.

Bill Hewett: I mean housing certainly plays into it. And I'm not a housing expert.

Bill Hewett: Well incarceration is a very expensive way for us to treat drug addiction. Well, I was going to say, but you can certainly probably tie some correlations between the reduced number of incarcerations

and the increased number of continuing drug issues we're having. Again, and I'm not a, you know, public policy person, right? I run a public safety organization. I can tell you what my folks are telling me that we're lacking, is we're lacking places where right now, our only option for treating people is either for the fire department to take them to the ER, which is a horribly inefficient method for medical care, or it's to have law enforcement incarcerate them, which, again, is just a very expensive way of drug treatment. Now, both of them are valid ways for us to interrupt the process.

But that is, you know, the, the two biggest things that we are short on here in the community are drug and alcohol beds and specifically for people in crisis where we can take somebody in crisis and move them there. And then the second is mental health beds the same nature where we can actually take somebody who's in mental health crisis at that moment and get them to a provider. And at some point when you have a chance to talk with my law enforcement cohorts there, they will also tell you there's some issues we have in state law about involuntary commitment. That is also very problematic. Because at the end of the day, my ambulances, my paramedics, whoever it is, they cannot, you know, if somebody is conscious and alert enough to be able to tell me who they are and where they are, they have a right to refuse medical treatment, and so I don't have methods to force people into the ambulance and take them off.

Clark Campbell: So just as a follow up to that question, the reason why I was asking is, you know, you guys are set up to do, you know, emergency care and delivery, right? You know, that's kind of the main thing of EMT service, not to be the ongoing treatment. The ongoing treatment option is a very expensive one. And, you know, maybe that's not the right approach. I know my daughter is the director of medical outreach for Salt Lake City, for the Fourth Street Clinic. And that is funded by the University of Utah and the City of Salt Lake. And it is a full-service clinic that provides behavioral health, addiction support, dentistry, you know, small level trauma.

Sarah Rothenbuhler: Are the laws for helping people get to treatment different in Utah?

Clark Campbell: Well, I'm sure there are different laws. But what it does is it actually takes a huge pressure off the EMT community. Yeah. Because they have their own vans, their own street outreach. Their job is to know everybody who's unhoused in that community, what their health conditions are, and make sure they're getting treatment. And because there's a regular place they can go, suddenly they're now not as suspicious of it. And they're not being dropped off at the most expensive, least efficient way to deal with it. Right. And so they it's a great relationship between EMT community.

Sarah Rothenbuhler: Would she come talk?

Clark Campbell: I could potentially see if I could get her to come talk to you. Yes. Like I said, she's lives in Salt Lake City. But it's funded by a combination of the city, private donations and you know, Utah. And it's located in the downtown area where the community is. So you don't have to shuttle them all the way to PeaceHealth and back right there in county.

Bill Hewett: In Whatcom County, we do suffer a little bit up here being out of the metro core of the, you know, King Pierce Sno area. You know, we have a very limited number of providers up here.

Sarah Rothenbuhler: You hear of other communities that that are handling this or being able to support this better than Whatcom County has, like Clark's example?

Bill Hewett: I haven't heard of any here in Washington in the I-5 corridor yet. But, I have heard other places and I think, you know, it's interesting. You take any aspect of this, these issues. Right. And a lot of times it's like playing whack-a-mole. We need people to do that street outreach. But just having a ton of people. And if you look through our community, we have a lot of varied programs for that street outreach. Street outreach doesn't do any good if those if the outreach people don't have other, you know, and that housing is definitely a piece of that puzzle. The medical community is definitely a piece of that puzzle. And yes, and at the moment, we're doing really good on street outreach stuff. But we really need to. . .

Sarah Rothenbuhler: Are these type of calls increasing or decreasing?

Bill Hewett: We continue to continue to see increases.

Casey Diggs: And is there any plans for a new fire station anywhere in town?

Bill Hewett: Currently we are going through an update of our strategic plan and doing what's known as a standard of cover. So we are going through right now and trying to identify, I can tell you anecdotally, yes, we have ideas, that we need additional coverage up north. We also know we have, depending on growth, we know we have some issues on our southeast portion of the city as well, going out to Samish Way and up into the highlands there. But we're currently undergoing a planning process so that we can take that from the anecdotal level of me telling you, sure be nice to have a station up in Cordata, and it'd sure be nice to have one over there, to going through the data and really taking a look at that.

Casey Diggs: Would there be interlocal agreements in there? Like if you do go out to the Cordata area and it's outside the city limits, right? Like, is there a way that you can find some more funding and a way to get the county to throw in some cash to build another fire station?

Bill Hewett: Well, there's a couple different things that are out there. One of them is for us to look at joint facilities, and we have really good working relationships with our neighboring organizations. We have auto aid agreements with North Whatcom that basically kind of runs on the north end of the city there. In fact, the training facility we use up at Britton Loop is actually their fire station. And that engine company at their fire station responds both in the city and out of the city. We have units that will respond out in the county reciprocally with them. So we do, we when we look at it, we're definitely looking at what, how do we best serve the areas that we have right now, but then also thinking about the future. And Rob ran out of the room here, but I'm hoping Rob and I are going to be working on a deal to cooperate because we provide support to the Port's air crash, fire rescue program up there. And we're actually talking about trying to partner on a facility. Our Bennett Road fire station out here at Bennett/Marine Drive is way past

its useful life, and we're hoping to partner on a new facility up by the airport with the port. So we do look for options. Yes.

Ken Marzocco: As a concerned taxpayer, you know, I looked into it a lot on the when District Four was coming up with their funding request. And it struck me as crazy that LA County has one fire department, one fire chief. Whatcom County has 12. Is it 13? 13 fire chiefs, 13 administrations, 13 sets of commissioners. And two 911 systems versus most cities have one. It just seems to me that there's inefficiency in that organization. And I know it's not your mandate, but maybe you don't want to publicly.

Bill Hewett: Oh, no, I love talking about this.

Ken Marzocco: What do we need to do to change that?

Bill Hewett: Well, you know, it's interesting. And I say, I love talking about this because I worked for Fire District Two when we formed the South Whatcom Fire Authority. We took four districts, consolidating them into one. District Eight was originally two different fire districts. District Eight, District Fifteen, that consolidated into one and now are being, and I was part of the process to consolidate them with the city. So we took three departments down to one there. You know, when I started, I started in the fire service in 1990, we had 25 fire chiefs in Whatcom County. Due to the number of fire agencies that were out there. And even within some of those fire agencies, Fire District Four, in particular, they were one district, but they actually had three different fire chiefs for each of their stations. They functioned independently. So we've taken that, you know, in the 33 years I've been here, we've taken that from 25 down to 13. We're working hard to do that.

I mean, California did have they had a statewide mandate that went through, I can't remember when it was, but they went through a process. And the laws in the state of California are way different than they are up here. For those that aren't aware, fire districts in the state of Washington, basically, cities have an obligation to provide fire protection within a city. Everywhere outside of those cities, there is no obligation by any general purpose government to provide fire protection. So instead, what happens is under RCW 52, a group of residents can all get together and say, hey, we want some fire protection in our area. And they draw a boundary. They have an election by those people and they then elect to collect taxes from themselves. And you know, the story and Fire District Eight. Interestingly, Fire District Eight was the Marietta Fire Department for about five years before they became a fire district. And they were a subscription based organization at the time where neighbors would just write a check and if you wanted the fire truck to come when you had a fire, that you could subscribe to it. Well, they turned that into a fire protection district in 1958.

But so many of these fire districts, it was all circled around where the pockets of community were in the county. You know, it wasn't looking at a holistic view of all of Whatcom County. It was it was hey, all my neighbors. And I grew up in what's now the chiropractor's office at Bakerview and James Street. And when I lived there, it was in the county and, you know, a bunch of our neighbors and the folks up on King Mountain, we all got together. Well, I tell you, I have no memory of this, but they all got together and said,

hey, we should build a fire station. And actually, the former fire station that's next to it. Actually, funny story with my dad. My dad said, your grandfather sold me the lot to build our house on, and then immediately sold the one next door to the fire district. And the one on the other side to PSE for a substation. But yes, that's how I mean, that's how. We got to the point where there's all these fire districts, was it was always based on the local needs of those small communities.

Ken Marzocco: So if the counties came out and said, hey, as of January 1st, 2025, we're going to have one fire district that serves everything outside those city limits. Are there any laws that would prevent that from happening?

Bill Hewett: There's no method to allow that to happen, for the general-purpose county government to do that. No. Now, what could happen is if the existing fire districts all passed resolutions, they could form a singular regional fire authority. And they can go that way. But there's no method for the general-purpose county government to force that through.

Ken Marzocco: Another thing to put on the ballot.

Bill Hewett: So, and interesting when people talk about, you know, why fire departments don't consolidate. I jokingly will tell you there's three different reasons, right? There's elected officials, chiefs and unions. In Whatcom County, I can tell you that the chiefs and the unions aren't the issue. You know, like I said, we've narrowed that list from 25 Chiefs down to 13. Any given night, you could walk into our county fire chiefs meeting, and you'd find 12 of us that would all say, I'm happy not to be the chief anymore if we could get to one chief.

Sarah Rothenbuhler: Sounds like our committee chairs. (laughter)

Bill Hewett: And even the union here. The majority of the career firefighters throughout Whatcom County are all represented by the same local. And so those barriers have been broken down. It really is a matter of, it's a matter of local control. It's no different than the school districts. Soapbox for me, tell me why there's eight different school districts in Whatcom County. It's eight different bus garages, eight different, you know, facility manager, eight different sets of mechanics. It's, you know, it just takes time.

Sarah Rothenbuhler: Thank you very much. Great conversation and thank you for all you both do. We should wrap it up. But thank you so much for being here. And please stay in touch and stay involved in our meetings. We really appreciate it.

Chris Hughes: Just want to encourage, if you go and you look around there and you have additional questions, don't hesitate to ask. This is not all the data we have. We do lots of complex aggregations.

Sarah Rothenbuhler: And if there's any topics that you would like to present to business community, reach out to this committee, that's important. I have a quick—for the committee members and the speakers. There's a Birch Golf Classic bottle of Trutina and a calendar for you all over there. Merry

Christmas. Heart health. It's important. And then Guy wanted to wrap up our last meeting of the year with a quick two minutes. So if anyone has to leave, just don't forget to grab that on the way out. And he just wanted a quick two minutes.

Gina Stark: It has to be quick, Guy, because we have another training that will be in here at 1:00.

Guy Occhiogrosso: So number one. So—okay I can be quick but I've got to get the floor first. So number one, as it specifically relates to this committee, there is dialog, going on about a county, I must say countywide, \$2 minimum wage increase initiative. So very similar to what happened at the city, the county, this would only impact unincorporated Whatcom County. I'm looking at Dan across the room. Dan and I and our government affairs committee had a conversation and has been having conversations about this, but this is a very real thing. At this point, it's hard to know whether it's going to be citizen initiative or just directly via the council. And if it is via the council, this body has a lot of, I would say, voice to that process. That's number one.

Number two, starting in about 14 minutes, the City of Bellingham, in their committee of the whole will be discussing a revision to the noise ordinance. Now, we all know the entity that it's being revised or potentially being revised for, but when I'm reading this language, this can be really devastating across the board. This would include any industrial and construction noise, not any zoning specific. So I won't go into the nuance because again, I'm interested in seeing what their conversation is. But when we look at timelines, we may be having a dialog at the county council regarding a \$2 minimum wage in January. We may also have a new noise ordinance in the City of Bellingham in January. And leading to my very quick third piece. Have the 2024 dates for this meeting been set yet? Because if it's still the second Monday, there's a potential that the noise ordinance could be passed on Monday the 8th, which would be the same time. So this committee would have zero dialog on that. And then I'm done.

Ryan Allsop: Guy, just since we don't have a liaison anymore. Really? Because Kathy's leaving, between us, can you keep us apprised of that minimum wage discussion? Well, both of these. But, since we are the economic advisory council to the county council, you would think that they would talk to us about a minimum wage impact in the county. And so it'd be interesting to see how we'd like to be involved and.

Guy Occhiogrosso: Absolutely happy to help. I have about this much jurisdiction and authority to control the agenda of this meeting.

Ryan Allsop: But you're loud.

Guy Occhiogrosso: I've been told.

Clark Campbell: Is that you likely to take an initiative form, or is it more likely to take a county council ordinance form?

Guy Occhiogrosso: Jury's still out. I think it could take either going back to the previous dialog regarding transportation. If it's done through the council process, it can be changed fairly quickly. If it's gone through the Citizen Initiative piece, you have to have a citizen initiative to cancel it out or wait two years. Yes. And the dialog at this point would be to. I mean, probably councilmatic. Like, again, if I'm taking a guess. That's the pathway that again makes more sense to me. So it can be adjusted. But the thought at this point is not make it additional pay bumps through the year. Like for example in the city, it's going to be the next two Mays. We'll see the dollar bumps. Yeah, this would probably get to \$2 before the city would. So this would mandate a \$2 increase above the state minimum wage in a month and three weeks, if it were done via the councilmatic perspective. Which again when we think about this like this is unincorporated county. So this is Laurel, this is Acme, this is Birch Bay, this is Mount Baker Highway. Like when we're looking at these specific pockets. We're not talking downtown Bellingham. Like, it's just it's really it's an interesting conversation. And again, for me, it's like, what is success look like?

Ryan Allsop: Okay. Thanks, Guy.

Sarah Rothenbuhler: Thank you. Thanks, everybody.

Next Meeting: January 8, 2024, 11a-12:30p

Hybrid Meeting - In-person encouraged and Zoom option available