

Whatcom County Business & Commerce Meeting

August 27, 2019

In attendance: Andrew Gamble, Casey Diggs, Paul Burrill, Clark Campbell, Ryan Allsop, Debbie Ahl, Bob Pritchett, Drew Zogby, Troy Muljat, Pete Dawson

Non-voting members: Don Goldberg, Michael Jones, Ken Bell, Jeff Callander

Public: Jennifer Noveck, Derek Long, Cara Buckingham, Roger Almskaar, Tom Gurr

Call to order by Chair, Bob Pritchett. Seconded by Clark Campbell.

Don: Last month we met at Rader Farms but we did not have a quorum. The 1st topic on today's agenda is to discuss the presentation to the County Council on housing and what next steps we should take. The presentation was on June 27 to Council, it went mostly as expected, they gave us a lot of time. They listened but we have not received a response. The reason this group was created was by a County Council ordinance. They can respond by disagreeing but we should still get a response. I was interviewed by KGMI, the Bellingham Herald, and Pulse Magazine. Last week Don, Pete, Clark made a presentation to BIA.

What do we want to do with the work we've done? What are the next steps?

There was a recommendation by Bill at BIA to take legislative action.

Clark gave an overview for how they presented the case, how the presentation was set up. They anticipated the Council identifying all actions they couldn't take. Our role is to identify an issue and then look at recommendations to change the housing outcome. We did not constrain ourselves with jurisdiction. We knew that there are these issues, but that's not the issue at hand. Here's what the number shows and here's what the solution is if we are targeting workforce housing. Takeaway was that it is an election year, so it is political. A lot of people respond positively, everyone is for housing (golf clap). On the other side, he felt like the issue was dismissed / put on Bellingham.

Clark believed there were two reactions: take this to the cities. But our point was we are a County-wide committee, set up to inform the County about our challenges. The other reaction was that we cannot have a county committee making recommendations or telling the cities what to do and we didn't want you specifically as members anyway.

We put out the idea, but it needs to get broken down to the policy weeds, here is what can be done at the county level and city level. Retailor and repackage the issue to each audience. This is small ball option. Or keep it as a big issue and push the County to figure out jurisdictional issues.

Cara: is the committee formed in the same way as other county committees? I haven't really understood the structure of the committee either.

Ken noted that he thinks Clark's explanation and description of the presentation was very diplomatic. However, his impression was that certain councilors were actually hostile to them. We gave them specific details and was quite shocked at their response. There was a group who didn't just dismiss the recommendations, they were hostile.

One option is to report to the cities now. This can be done in a very objective way. This is a report, these are our findings.

BIA suggested the committee take a legislative action, but do we need to do this?

Debbie commented we need to work on fixing the relationship between the committee and council, go in and meet with them and see what it will take to get them to work with us.

Derek suggested going to the cities and taking the presentations there. It would be good for the city councils to know that this group is paying attention to the housing issue.

Another option is to write a letter to the Council and County Exec asking for a response.

Another option is to ask them if they could attend our meeting and have a less formal discussion.

Technically Carol Frazey is our liaison to the County Council. She's not here today.

Ken is worried about Committee members leaving / quitting because they aren't being treated respectfully.

Action steps –

- 1) Write a letter to Council asking for a formal response to our recs and clarification on our role
- 2) Don will follow up with Mayor Kelli Linville
- 3) Don will discuss with Michael Jones regarding the presentation to the Small Cities Caucus, essentially report the findings to the Mayors, can put that on the agenda
- 4) Send a letter to the County Executive to request this to the planning dept and try to get some direct action this way

Roger from BIA was very thankful, said that our presentation and two page letter were the best documents that have come out on housing in the County. BIA would like to help, they can develop lists of short term and long term actions. There are things the County can do! Another organization is doing an event on September 11th about housing and water issues. Bill Geyer, Rick Sepler, Mark Personius will be there. The focus will be on the nuts and bolts.

Pete noted that the sub-committee can execute the letter requesting a response.

The committee decided to talk about another issue that of concern to the group: the proposed mandated apprenticeship program for public works projects.

Committee is largely opposed not to apprenticeship programs, but to the mandate. Smallest businesses in the County will not be able to meet these requirements and so won't be able to get the contracts. It adds costs to businesses, the contracts will end up going to business from outside Whatcom County, that's not good for economic development. It is also not convenient or aiding development in terms of training staff because all the training is done outside of Whatcom County. These are bad outcomes.

We should ask for an exemption, ask for BTC to qualify for valid training. If we are going to do this then it should be a Whatcom based certification, local training, so they can get local jobs with local contractors.

Don announced that the Regional Economic Partnership will be working on an economic recovery plan for the county and the Port. As part of these efforts to improve disaster preparedness REP will also host business continuity planning workshops for free for the community.

Disaster – can we help smaller businesses? One location for everyone to hold critical files and equipment.

Meeting adjourned at 1:32pm.