

Whatcom County Business & Commerce Committee

Mount Baker Conference Room, Port of Bellingham

January 22, 2020

Voting members in attendance: Pete Dawson, Troy Muljat, Clark Campbell, Andrew Gamble, Sarah Rothenbuhler, Debbie Ahl, **(not a quorum)**

Non-voting members in attendance: Don Goldberg, Rud Browne

Public in attendance: Cara Buckingham, Mauri Ingram, Guy Ochiogrosso, Tyler Schroeder, Jennifer Noveck, Rob Fix, Carol Frazey, Satpal Sidhu

Don noted that we do not have a quorum, so we cannot make any voting decisions but we can discuss ideas for how we want these meetings to run, planning for 2020, and Debbie has also prepared a presentation on daycare.

The public present were allowed to make comments throughout the entire meeting.

Discussion on changing the committee structure so that it reports to the County Executive –

Satpal made a few remarks, starting off by noting that this is a new committee and the committee will find its way. He believes that the first project the committee worked on – housing – was extremely important and it truly is a crisis. The 1st step is to love Whatcom County, then to look at other counties that are similar and see what we can do and what we can learn. The day to day workings it is important to pick a direction, keep moving and make progress is really important. He's met with Don and Rud and he would like to spend more time on economic development. He would like to propose that the committee reports to him, the County Exec, with the understanding that anything we do would still ultimately need the approval of County Council. He can also go directly to staff and work through the memo suggestions with them, as well, before taking them to the Council, so that there is more information and so they can assess what can and cannot be done.

Don noted that having a 1-1 direct relationship that would allow for response so that the committee feels heard and like progress is being made.

Rud made the point that the Council members are part-time, whereas the CE is full-time, so he would have more time to focus on the committee. Satpal is in a better position to respond to technical issues, he has the right to instruct department heads to give certain projects priority. Council cannot do that. Legislative changes would have to come back to the Council. He supports shifting the committee to the Executive.

Carol also supports shifting the committee to the Executive. One point of contact is easiest, it is probably faster because again the Council members are only part-time.

Clark asked what the process would like, if we think that this is a good idea. Whats the next step?

Satpal said they could write a letter to the chair of the Council, with bullet points, stating they want the committee shifted. We request it be moved from the Council to the County Executive. Satpal will write a letter saying he is willing to do that, Don might make a presentation to Council.

Rud noted that we could put it on the agenda for next Tuesday's Council meeting.

Satpal suggested that the full quorum should be here, a few weeks will not make a huge difference.

Carol asked if the same people could be kept?

Satpal said yes, we can write in there that we would like to maintain the same committee members. As long as it is transferred, then he can reappointed everyone on the committee.

Tyler confirmed that the appointments have never been denied by the Council.

Clark noted that there are a lot of different perspectives on this committee, which is where its power lays. However, they have not been effective so far. What can they do to be more effective in terms of getting policy changes and getting them to happen faster? We gave the housing presentation at Small Cities yesterday and one thing he noticed is there is a bit of culture clash between business and government, with business wanting changes to be faster and immediate. Would working through the Exec shift the dialogue back in favor of our goals?

Guy thinks it would be valuable to hear from Satpal and Rud what they think success for this group would be? What would a good outcome for the committee to be? What does success look like?

Rud clarified that this is an advisory board, you want knowledgeable experienced people who can help you see around corners. He doesn't see this group as an advocacy group, they do not meet enough. It is an advisory board to help us see trends, obstacles, and so on.

Don noted we had not done introductions and some additional attendees arrived at 12:00 noon.

Whatcom Community College, Eva, is taking Sue Cole's place.

Debbie: Here's what we are working on and where it stands, what issues we will take on in 2020 with a plan (here are the critical objectives), what would we like some research on, expert speakers, hear from the communities. It might give people a sense of purpose, direction, accountability.

Don agrees and thinks this suggestion is great. We did put out a doodle poll out, housing was #1, daycare and infrastructure were also high on the list. When we started working on housing, we ended up spending a lot of time on it. When there was no response, we sort of stalled out and did not approach additional topics.

Debbie thought maybe Satpal could give us a presentation on his priorities, but also maybe get Healthy Whatcom to present and tell us what key areas they should be focusing on. Then after some presentations, get another poll out to them to decide what they want to focus on.

Pete is on board with reporting to the Exec. When he goes to his advisory board, they get input and they ask for feedback on specific items. He thinks it would be useful to know what the County wants feedback on, we would love to get our voice heard but also we do not have the time and resources to do more that give advice. It requires a sort of back and forth with responses from the County.

Don noted that Carol did contact them about the daycare crisis. Don and Debbie have worked on it and Debbie will present on that today.

Satpal said he thinks we need a welcoming community, cheerleaders, if an outsider comes in they can refer them to this group. It could be a recruitment tool, we are organized, businesses are heard. This is the best place to come and do business, tell us how we can help. He does like the idea of it being a back and forth, come up with 5-7 issues that are important. But it is up to the committee to say, this is actually more important. But he can provide a starting point and framework but it will be up to the committee to modify. We need to think about how we are going to expand our tax base but it will be a very long-term process, 20 years, 50 years. But that is where you find results.

Questions he has -

How can we save agricultural land? We keep losing acres every year. What can we do?

How can we prepare for 100,000 increase in population? We cannot say the door is closed. We need to plan for 2045, not plan in 2045.

What are the hurdles to business growth?

It is a 2-3 year process to get 500 acres approved for wetland mitigation.

Rob said that 3 years is to get the permit, if you can do it in 3 years, that would be impressive. It's longer.

Satpal agreed and said yes, this is why we need to plan ahead and prepare for the next 25 years.

Where should the residential growth be? The UGAs were created in 1990. Things look completely different. Younger people want different things than we did when we were 20.

We should envision what we want to do for our kids and grandkids, how the world is changing, and shift our efforts towards these goals.

Rud was previously running multinational corporation before joining local government and he was shocked by how much more complicated it is to run local government than it is to run a business. As the committee thinks through solutions and options, keep this in mind. Housing and childcare are priorities and he is committed to working on both of those issues.

Troy appreciates Rud's perspective, it is good for us to understand. He's really happy to hear what Satpal has said and he is excited about the opportunity. Everyone wants to help.

Andrew would like something to be sent out explaining what the change will be so that everyone gets a full picture. He absolutely supports transferring reporting to the Exec because he's engaged and supportive. That would be positive communication.

It was noted that the City of Bellingham does have a rep – the Mayor – and that if the Mayor does not come, they can assign and send a designee. We need to make the COB and Small Cities aware that they can do this and they should so that someone is at every meeting because they are vital players in many of these issues.

Child and Family Action Plan –

Debbie would like this committee to take action illustrating support to the Health Board / County Council

This plan is all about families. 955 homeless kids. 44% of the County is economically insecure. 52% of white kids are ready for kindergarten, 28% of Black, Indigenous, and POC children.

Three areas of focus and ideal deliverables: behavioral health for families, affordable childcare, stable housing. Put children and families first in policy decisions. Adopt trauma-informed and equity practice.

Debbie has drafted a letter of support and she would like the committee to read it and give their support.

Pete asked about the school districts as part of the solution.

Childcare in Whatcom County – economic impact of the lack of childcare

We are lacking 58% or 4464 additional spots for daycare, kids world is 523 slots and more than half are low income subsidized positions. This is critical for this group. This is also the labor pool, we need the most and get paid the least, we have lots of these positions.

Rud believes that the EDI money should be used first and foremost for purchasing childcare facilities in order to remove that cost so that nonprofits can make the financials work. If businesses want to open and

offer their own facilities, they can, but they cannot offer it to non-employees so it doesn't pencil out for them either. This is a small legislative fix that Bellingham could do to help.

Troy asked what the biggest changes are.

Don said real estate costs and reupping the subsidies.

Tyler noted that there are bills in WA regarding the subsidies. The subsidies have reduced while minimum wage has increased. We need state funding associated with the actual operations.

Debbie said yes, it has to be a combination of all these. While we may not want a levy, the cost of ignoring early childhood education and childcare is higher.

Tyler said they are partnering with Boys and Girls Club, who are taking a big leap, so that we can understand the financial model works, see how a P3 model could work. Private businesses can help support the expansion for buildings and space.

The group was largely supportive of working on the childcare issue.

The group decided to wait and vote on the proposed new structure at the February 2020 meeting, with all voting members present agreeing that the group should be moved from the County Council to the County Executive. The group also agreed to maintain monthly meetings on the Mondays before the Tuesday County Council meeting because that means that most of the Council members may be in town and able to attend if needed.

Clark closed the meeting at 1:40pm.