

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.0 Introduction

Bellingham’s central waterfront is in a state of transition from its long history as an active industrial site to a new mixed-use neighborhood. Over the past several decades, the Port of Bellingham and the City of Bellingham have joined together to create a vision and develop a clear path to transform this under developed brownsfield site into a thriving mixed-use urban neighborhood. In early 2005, the Port of Bellingham acquired approximately 137 acres of waterfront property and tidelands adjacent to Bellingham Bay. This property had been owned by the Georgia-Pacific Corporation, which operated a pulp and tissue mill on the site. This property, along with other Port, City and private properties make up the Waterfront District. See Figure 1-1 Waterfront District Boundary.



### 1.1 Purpose of the Sub-Area Plan

The Sub-Area Plan’s purpose is to provide a framework for future development of the “Waterfront District”. The Waterfront District Sub- Area Plan includes a balance of environmental, economic and community objectives developed to restore the health of the land and water, improve waterfront access, promote a healthy and dynamic waterfront economy, and reinforce the inherent qualities of the waterfront.

The initial 2013 Waterfront District Sub-Area Plan was prepared jointly by the Port and the City of Bellingham with input from residents, landowners, community stakeholders and resource agencies to create a long-term redevelopment opportunity for the Waterfront District. The proposed 2018 update to this plan was prepared by the Port of Bellingham and Harcourt with input from City staff and the public. After additional public input, Planning Commission hearings and City Council review, this plan is intended to be adopted by the Port and City as an amendment to the 2013 Sub-Area Plan.

## 1.2 Relationship to the 2016 Bellingham Comprehensive Plan

The 2016 City of Bellingham Comprehensive Plan establishes goals and policies to guide future decision-making and coordinate growth within the City over a 20-year planning period. The Comprehensive Plan serves as a guideline for designating land uses, infrastructure development and community services, and long-range implementation strategies. The Waterfront District falls within the Waterfront Urban Village defined in the City of Bellingham Comprehensive Plan. Infill within urban villages is an essential element of the City growth strategy.

Comprehensive Plan Goal LU-2 is to “foster vibrant urban villages,” and Policies LU-12 through LU-19 encourage “intensively-developed mixed-use development within urban villages with significant job opportunities and a substantial amount of new housing, allowing people to work, shop and recreate near where they live.” Land Use Policy LU-14 is to “ensure that Bellingham’s City Center (i.e. Downtown, Waterfront and Old Town Districts) retains its role as the dominant cultural, civic, financial and service center for the community and region” and calls for unique, attractive development, which reflects Bellingham’s history and natural setting.

The Waterfront District is located within the City Center Neighborhood, which was formerly called the Central Business District Neighborhood. The Waterfront Futures Group Vision and Guiding Principles are referenced in the City Center Neighborhood Plan. Upon adoption of the 2013 Waterfront District Sub-Area Plan, the Waterfront District was rezoned to a new zoning category called “Waterfront Mixed-Use”. The proposed 2018 amendment to the Waterfront District Sub-Area Plan is consistent with the City of Bellingham Comprehensive plan, City Center neighborhood Plan and Waterfront Futures Group Vision and Framework Plan.

## 1.3 The Planning Process

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

- Regional Urban Design Assistance Team Report (1992)
- Visions for Bellingham (1992)
- Bellingham Bay Demonstration Pilot (1996–present)
- Whatcom Creek Waterfront Action Program (1996)
- Downtown Development Workshop (1998)
- Bellingham Bay Comprehensive Strategy FEIS (2000)
- City Center Master Plan (2002)
- Community Forum on Growth Management (2004)
- Waterfront Futures Group (WFG) Vision and Framework Plan (2005)
- Bellingham Comprehensive Plan (2006)
- Central Business District Neighborhood Plan (2008)
- The Waterfront District Sub-Area Plan (2013)
- Downtown Bellingham Plan (2014)
- City Center Neighborhood Plan (2014)
- The Bellingham Comprehensive Plan (2016)

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

Each process identified the Waterfront District as an underutilized area and a vital link between the Downtown, Old Town, and adjacent residential neighborhoods. Job opportunities, environmental restoration, and increased public access and recreational opportunities on the waterfront have been identified as priorities for this area.

An extensive planning effort was conducted by the Waterfront Futures Group (WFG) in 2003/2004. The Port and City appointed this citizen-led task force to take a fresh and independent look at the future of the entire waterfront in response to the closure of Georgia-Pacific's (GP) pulp and tissue operations. The WFG held 41 public meetings and had 26 guest forums and special events focusing on the future of the waterfront. The WFG completed the community visioning process by publishing the Waterfront Vision and Framework Plan which called for redevelopment of the city center waterfront into "a mixed-use neighborhood that combines commercial, institutional, industrial, retail and residential uses, and that over time will provide many new job opportunities and a substantial amount of urban housing."



*Conceptual Illustration by Stephanie Bower*

The WFG vision was approved by City Council, and the guiding principles and recommendations were used to update Bellingham's Comprehensive Plan and the CBD Neighborhood Plan in 2006 and 2008 respectively. The Waterfront Futures Vision and Implementation Strategies recommended by the Waterfront Advisory Group were included in the Waterfront District Sub-Area Plan in 2013 and referenced in the 2014 City Center Neighborhood Plan. The proposed 2018 amendment to the Waterfront District Sub-Area Plan is consistent with the WFG Vision and WAG Implementation Strategies.

Figure 1-1: Waterfront District Boundaries



### *Public Investment*

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

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



*The Whatcom Waterway cleanup project removed 111,450 cubic yards of contaminated sediments from Bellingham's downtown waterfront.*

## The Waterfront District Planning Process

The Port and City launched a public planning process to develop a Sub-Area Plan for the Waterfront District shortly after acquiring the GP property. To ensure this plan was consistent with the community vision, the Port and City appointed the Waterfront Advisory Group (WAG) to integrate recommendations of the WFG into plans, projects and regulations. From 2005-2010, this citizen-led task force held regular public meetings to gather public input and ensure public awareness and participation in waterfront planning.

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

The Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) and subsequent Addendums, Final EIS and Supplemental EIS evaluated alternate street layouts, densities and other mitigating measures to address traffic, view corridors, historic and cultural resources, critical areas and a range of other important considerations. During this process, the public provided input on the Waterfront District's character-defining features, view corridors and vistas, preferred land uses, building heights and design standards. The community discussed the role of Western Washington University (WWU) and its plans to create a campus on the waterfront, multimodal circulation, development character, environmental considerations, parks, trails, plazas, economic viability, block sizes, parking strategies, development phasing, historic and cultural resources, and sustainable strategies.



*Conceptual Site Plan by D2 Groups, LLC*

The proposed 2018 amendment to the Waterfront District Sub-Area Plan was prepared after a series of additional public meetings and public input opportunities, additional SEPA analysis, and will include additional public input during the Planning Commission and City Council review process.

## 1.4 Context

### *Natural and Historical Setting*

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



Source J.B.Hann circa 1902

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

For the last 100 years or more, Bellingham's waterfront has served the regional economy as a thriving industrial area, transportation gateway and home to many maritime activities. In 1891, the Great Northern Railroad finished an overwater rail trestle across the mud flats on Bellingham's central waterfront allowing the distribution of goods across a new, nationwide rail network. In the early 1900's, the Whatcom Creek federal waterway was established and silt from the dredged waterway was used as fill along parts of the waterfront.

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

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

The GP mill adjusted to economic trends over the years, but in 2001 the pulping operation was permanently closed down. This signaled a slow decline that continued until Georgia-Pacific closed its Bellingham site permanently on December 21, 2007.

## The Waterfront District Today

Today, the Waterfront District part of the City Center neighborhood and is bordered by Bellingham Bay to the west, Downtown and Old Town districts to the east, the Lettered Streets and Columbia neighborhoods to the north, and Sehome and South Hill neighborhoods to the south.

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

Redevelopment of the Waterfront District is a “once in a century” opportunity intended to restore public access along the shoreline and convert the upland area closest to the Central Business District to a vibrant mixed-use extension of downtown Bellingham. Other portions of the site will be remediated and marketed for shipping, marine trades and light industrial uses to replace a portion of the jobs lost when the Georgia Pacific mill closed. The City and Port have invested considerable public funding over the past five years to complete environmental cleanup projects, restore a portion of the shoreline, and install arterial roads, parks and utilities to prepare the Downtown Waterfront area for redevelopment.

### 1.5 Redevelopment Potential

The redevelopment of the Waterfront District as an urban neighborhood will help concentrate a significant amount of expected population growth within the existing city limits and reduce impacts on agricultural, forest and rural landscapes in the county. The 2016 Bellingham Comprehensive Plan projects a demand for 6,459 new infill housing units and 3,930 new jobs within Urban Villages by the year 2036. The Waterfront District encompasses a significant portion of the vacant land within City Urban Villages. Redevelopment at urban density is an important element in the City’s adopted infill strategy.



*The Granary Building was built in 1928 for use as a chicken and egg cooperative. This historic building has been redeveloped for commercial and office use.*





There are 237 acres within the planning area of the Waterfront District, including the ASB lagoon, most of which is currently in public ownership by the Port, City and Washington State Department of Natural Resources. Over half of the project area will be retained for public open space and infrastructure, including at least 33 acres of new park land, 4 acres of existing public open space, 60 acres for streets, utilities and railroad rights-of-way, and 29 acres for a marina. The remaining Port, City and private property will be available for industrial use or redevelopment for residential, retail, commercial, and institutional use.

One of the key challenges for this planning effort was the definition of an appropriate goal for the level of development density within the Waterfront District. During initial planning discussions in 2005, the Port and City planning team evaluated a range of alternatives in the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). A low-density alternative of 4.0 million square feet, medium density alternative of 6.0 million square feet and a high-density alternative of 7.5 million square feet were analyzed. Based on this analysis and public comment, the medium-range density of 6.0 million square feet of floor space was selected as the preferred alternative in the 2008 Supplemental Draft EIS, 2010 Final Environmental Impact Statement and the assumptions regarding density at full build-out were reduced to 5.3 million square feet in the 2012 EIS Addendum.

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

The proposed 2018 amendment to the Sub-Area Plan does not propose any changes to the assumed density or the mix of land uses.



*Conceptual Rendering by D2 Groups, LLC showing an average floor area ratio of 3.0 to 4.0 FAR*