

WHATCOM'S SYSTEM

As the strategies listed in Chapter 1 illustrate, there is strong interest in increasing sustainability of the region's transportation system. For personal travel, this can mean decreasing vehicle trips and increasing trips made by walking, bicycling and transit. For this to occur, improving bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure and increasing transit service may be necessary. Results of implementing Whatcom Smart Trips have shown it is possible to significantly increase walking, bicycling and transit trips through education and encouragement programs. For freight, sustainability means using all modes, including commercial vehicles, rail, water, and air; as well as improving processing times at the border with British Columbia. In later chapters, this plan proposes investing in all of these strategies. This chapter provides a summary of the important transportation modes and facilities for people and freight in this region.



In 2011, CTAG hosted a Complete Streets seminar with the goal of helping jurisdictions in the region adopt Complete Streets policies. Complete Streets are designed and operated to enable safe access for all users – pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists, and public transportation users. Incomplete streets – those designed with only cars in mind – limit transportation choices by making walking, bicycling, and taking public transportation inconvenient, unattractive, and often dangerous. By adopting Complete Streets policies, communities direct their transportation planners and engineers to routinely design and operate the entire right of way to enable safe access for all users, regardless of age, ability, or mode of transportation. The City of Bellingham, for example, has adopted programs and policies reflecting Complete Streets policies and other jurisdictions participating in the seminar expressed interest in adopting policies.

Non-motorized transportation

Walking

Walking is the foundation of our transportation system. Every trip includes some walking, and all users of the regional transportation system are pedestrians during some portion of their trips. At a minimum, walking connects us to motorized transportation facilities. In Whatcom County, trips where walking was the only mode account for 10.7 percent of all trips¹. For people living in



more urbanized areas of our region, walking can be a very important mode of transportation. In Bellingham, 24 percent of all trips are one mile or less, and 12 percent of all trips are made by walking.² Walking is even more significant for the roughly 30 percent of the general population with physical or economic limitations that prevent driving, including seniors and children.³



Bicycling

Citizens, elected officials and WCOG staff have made significant efforts to increase bicycling trips in the region in the past decade. In Whatcom County, 2.9 percent of trips are currently made by bicycle.⁴ But like walking, bicycling is more practical in urbanized areas. In Bellingham, the mode share for cycling is 6 percent city-wide, and 11 percent in the area west of I-5, where there is greater street connectivity, more employment and shopping destinations, higher residential density and fewer streets designed for high volumes of faster-moving cars. As jurisdictions in the region respond to the challenges of a growing population, a greater focus on bicycling as an option is needed.

¹ North Sound Travel Survey Final Report, Whatcom Council of Governments & Skagit Council of Governments, 2008: http://resources.wcog.org/projects/travelsurvey_finalreport.pdf

² *The Surprising Story of Travel Behavior in Bellingham, Washington*, Whatcom Council of Governments, 2012

³ Data Sources: 2010 U.S. Census and the Research Institute for Transportation Analysis

⁴ *North Sound Travel Survey Final Report*, Whatcom Council of Governments & Skagit Council of Governments, 2008: http://resources.wcog.org/projects/travelsurvey_finalreport.pdf

Figure 14: Regional bike routes

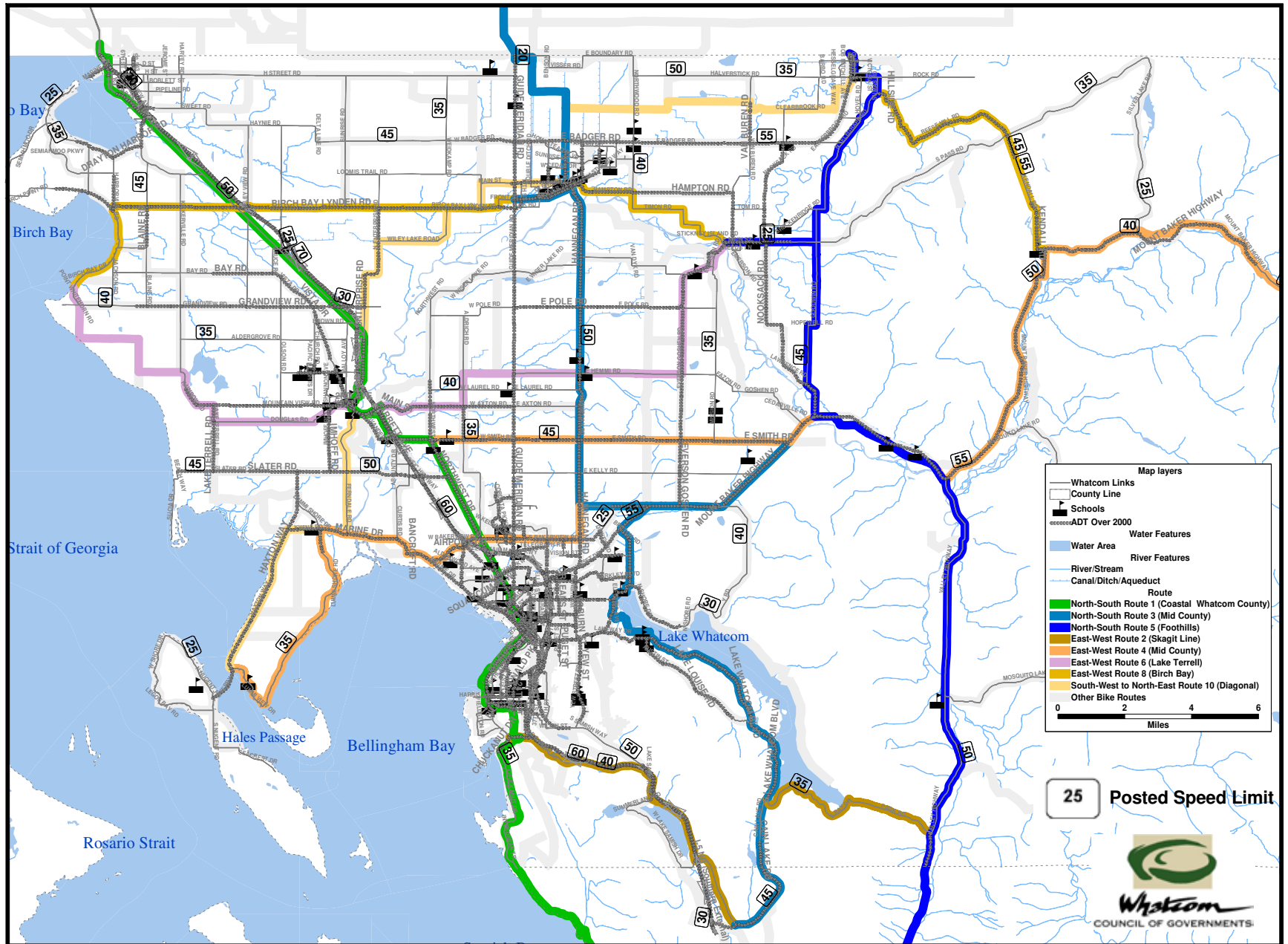
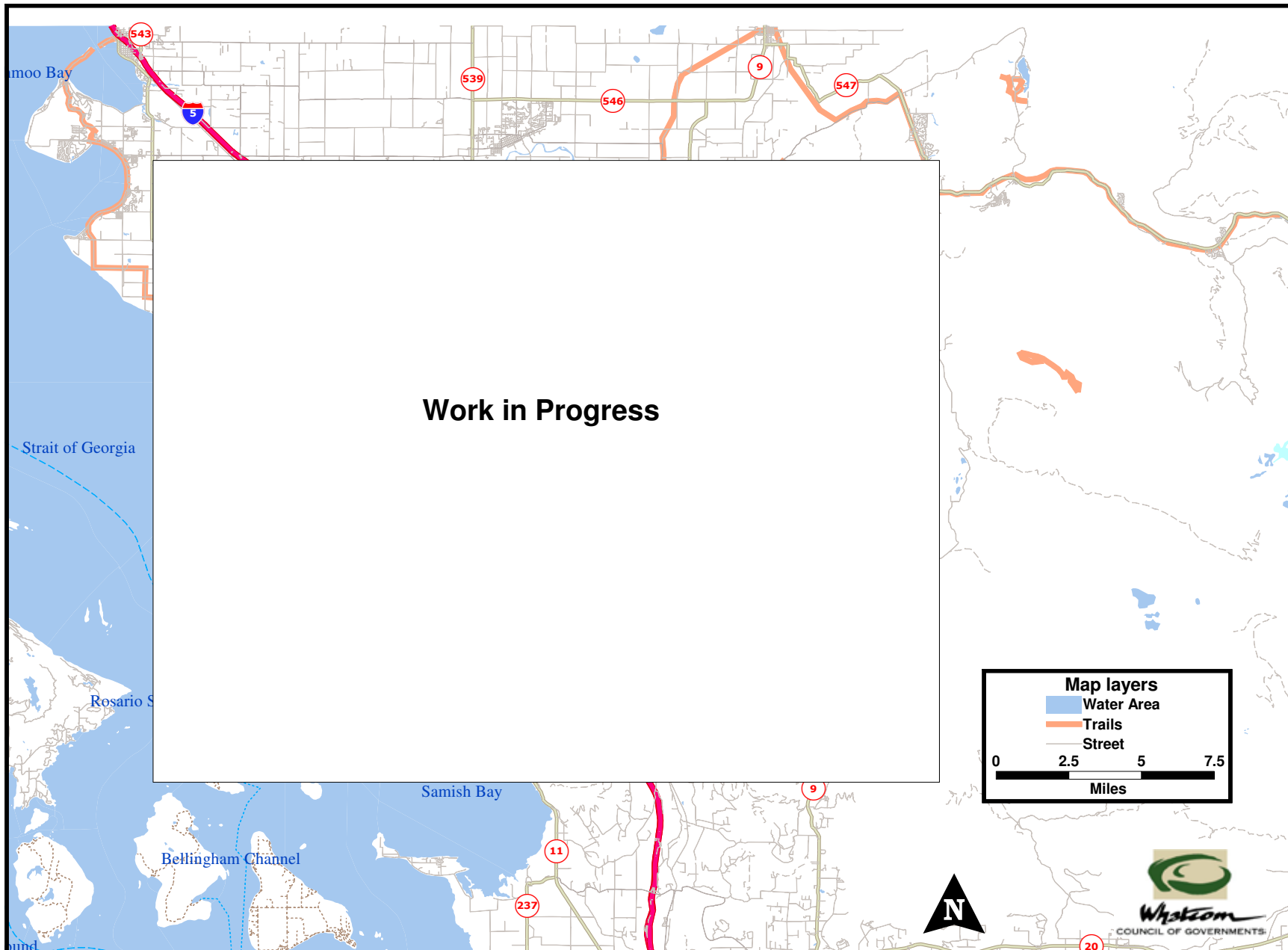


Figure 15: Whatcom County trails



Motorized transportation

Transit

Whatcom Transportation Authority (WTA) is responsible for public transit in Whatcom County. It provides numerous transportation services including fixed route service, specialized transportation, safety net dial-a-ride, vanpool services and a community use van program. Paratransit services provide transportation to eligible riders whose disabilities make them unable to access fixed-route services. These services use smaller vehicles to provide door to door or curb to curb service within the agency service area. In the WTA region, all services are compliant with transit regulations under the Americans with Disabilities Act and serve only customers who qualify under this Act.

In 2004, WTA completed a strategic planning process that expanded their mission beyond serving the needs of the transit dependent. In an effort to recruit more 'choice riders' (people who might otherwise drive), WTA revised its fixed route system to provide more direct and frequent service along corridors with high ridership potential. As of 2012, there are four of these GO Lines with buses running every 15 minutes. In 2005, WTA and Skagit Transit created the Intercounty Connector, which provides service between the two counties. Another important milestone came in 2007, when Western

Washington University students voted to charge themselves a fee to pay for a universal bus pass. Because of these innovations and other efforts, use of WTA services has been increasing for the last five years. Between 2005 and 2010, fixed-route ridership increased by 56 percent. Demand for WTA specialized transportation service increased 17 percent over the same period.

In November 2010, Bellingham voters approved a two-tenths of one percent (0.002) sales tax increase to create a Transportation Benefit District (TBD) and provide dedicated funding for priority transportation needs. Roughly one-third of the annual funding purchases supplemental WTA transit service in Bellingham.

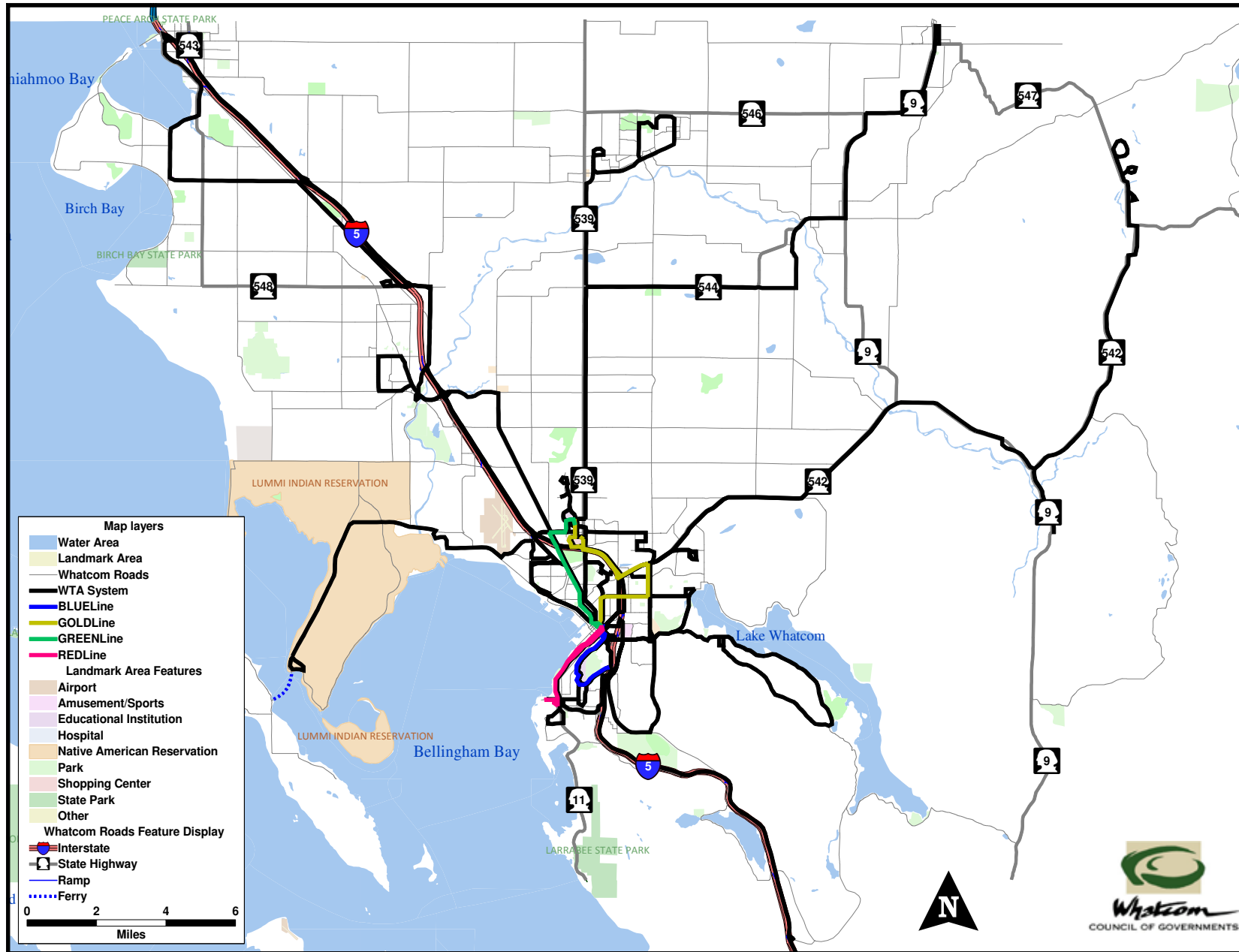


Table 21: Percent change from 2005 to 2010 by service mode

Service Mode	Boardings	Revenue Hours	Boardings per Hour	Revenue Miles	Passenger Miles	Passenger Miles per Hour	Passenger Miles per Boarding
Fixed Route	56%	29%	21%	24%	37%	6%	-13%
Specialized	17%	19%	-2%	19%	9%	-8%	-8%
Safety Net	-59%	-46%	-26%	-36%	-72%	-48%	-31%
Vanpool	68%	114%	-22%	124%	73%	-19%	3%

Source: Whatcom Transportation Authority 2010 Service Performance Report

Figure 16: WTA system



Passenger rail

Over 150 miles of track owned by Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway (BNSF) stretch between Seattle and Vancouver, British Columbia. This mainline provides valuable passenger transportation opportunities for connecting the larger regions outside of Whatcom County, and provide Whatcom County residents and businesses an alternative to the road network.

Ridership on the Amtrak Cascades service has steadily increased by 9.5 percent per year as funding partners add capacity and improve on-time performance.⁵ Two daily round trips operate between Seattle and Vancouver, B.C. and stop at Bellingham. Efforts are underway to grow the service, adding two additional daily round trips between Seattle and Portland by 2017, and there is regional interest in increasing the number of cross-border round trips as well.

Commuter rail has also been discussed as a possibility for connecting smaller communities along the mainline with Sound Transit and the Amtrak Cascades service. The City of Blaine is also pursuing options for a train stop at the border, possibly renovating their historic train station as part of the effort. Efforts to expand passenger rail service, however, are restricted by infrastructure limitations and the schedules of freight movements along the mainline. Regional agencies and community groups continue to work for more frequent rail service to the area.

⁵ WA State Rail Program Presentation to IMTC, WA State Department of Transportation, 2012: <http://resources.wcog.org/border/02-16-12scpres.pdf>

Passenger ferry

There are a limited number of passenger ferry services within Whatcom County, although the services in place provide vital connections to the island communities neighboring Whatcom County. Whatcom County manages the Lummi Island ferry between Gooseberry Point and the island, which carried approximately 200,000 passenger and 110,000 vehicles in 2010, amounting to over 12,400 trips. The ferry used for this service, the Whatcom Chief, is over thirty years old and a replacement must be found, although funds for this have not yet been identified. An agreement was signed between Whatcom County and the Lummi Indian Nation in 2011 to continue to operate the service from Gooseberry Point until 2046.

The Alaska Marine Highway System operates ferries out of the Bellingham Cruise Terminal at the Port of Bellingham's Fairhaven terminal. These ferries constitute part of the Alaska national highway network and carried 12,805 passengers and 5,234 vehicles from Bellingham in 2010. Nearly 11,000 passengers disembarked



in Bellingham during the same year. Ridership has declined over the last decade, although vehicle traffic has remained steady.⁶

In addition to these regularly scheduled services, private companies offer seasonal marine services leaving from Fairhaven and from Drayton Harbor in Blaine to locations in the San Juan Islands, Victoria B.C., and Semiahmoo Point in Blaine. A study completed in 2006 showed high levels of demand for passenger-only ferry service between Bellingham and Friday Harbor on San Juan Island, and a subsequent business case study recommended alternatives for an operating model that addressed how, and by whom such a service might be operated. Funding for such a service, however, has not yet been identified⁷.



⁶ *Annual Traffic Volume Report*, State of Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, 2010

⁷ *Passenger Only Ferry Study*, Whatcom Council of Governments, 2006: http://resources.wcog.org/projects/ferry_finalreport.pdf

Passenger air

Bellingham International Airport is Whatcom County's largest airport. Services operated out of the airport include Alaska Airlines with direct flights to Honolulu, HI and Las Vegas, NV with fourteen weekly departures; Allegiant Air with thirty-nine flights a week to Las Vegas, NV, Phoenix, AZ, and Palm Springs, San Francisco, Oakland, Los Angeles, and Long Beach, CA and Horizon Air operates thirty-five weekly flights between Bellingham and Seattle.⁸

Forecasts for the Bellingham International Airport show short-term growth exceeding that of the economy and population. This growth is expected to slow down once airline service additions are complete.⁹ A smaller airport is also located in Lynden providing facilities for general aviation and light aircraft charter services. A seaplane facility, Floathaven, is located on Lake Whatcom.

Passenger vehicle

Personal automobiles continue to be the transportation mode of choice for the region. In a recent household survey, 81 percent of Whatcom County residents reported making trips by passenger automobile. On average, Whatcom County residents had two or more vehicles per household, and made approximately seven daily vehicle trips.

The majority of auto trips made in the county are for at-home activities (33 percent) and for work (13 percent) with the rest of the trip purposes ranging from school to recreation. There is a direct correlation between automobile ownership and the percentage of trips made by automobile.¹⁰

⁸ Data provided by the Port of Bellingham, 2011

⁹ *Bellingham International Airport Forecast Update*, Port of Bellingham, December 2009

¹⁰ *North Sound Travel Survey Final Report*, Whatcom Council of Governments & Skagit Council of Governments, 2008: http://resources.wcog.org/projects/travelsurvey_finalreport.pdf

Both construction of new multimodal links (streets, bike lanes, sidewalks, trails) and efforts to promote alternative methods of travel help reduce the number of car trips. Incentive programs like Whatcom Smart Trips, efficient transit operations, and improvements to pedestrian and bicycling infrastructure will help to minimize automobile-related congestion in the region.

Commercial vehicle

Freight carried by commercial long- and short-haul vehicles in and through Whatcom County is substantial given the location of the international border. Roughly 75 percent of all trade and travel between British Columbia and Washington State passes through Whatcom County. Nearly 3,000 commercial vehicles cross through Whatcom County's four border crossings every day¹¹, carrying over \$30 million in daily trade¹².

Since 34 percent of commercial trucks crossing the border are destined for locations within Whatcom County, and 36 percent of truck trips originate in the region, the highway system in the region has national significance in serving the needs of trade.¹³

The efforts of regional planning forums such as IMTC continue to address the needs of freight and how to expedite commercial movements while maintaining environmental standards and the safety of the communities through which freight passes through.

¹¹ U.S. Customs & Border Protection & Canada Border Services Agency. Data Compiled in the *2012 IMTC Resource Manual*, Whatcom Council of Governments, 2012: <http://resources.wcog.org/border/2012manual.pdf>

¹² U.S. Bureau of Transportation Statistics

¹³ *Issues with Efficacy of FAST at the Cascade Gateway*, Border Policy Research Institute, 2009: http://www.wvu.edu/bpri/files/2009_Fall_Border_Brief.pdf

Freight rail

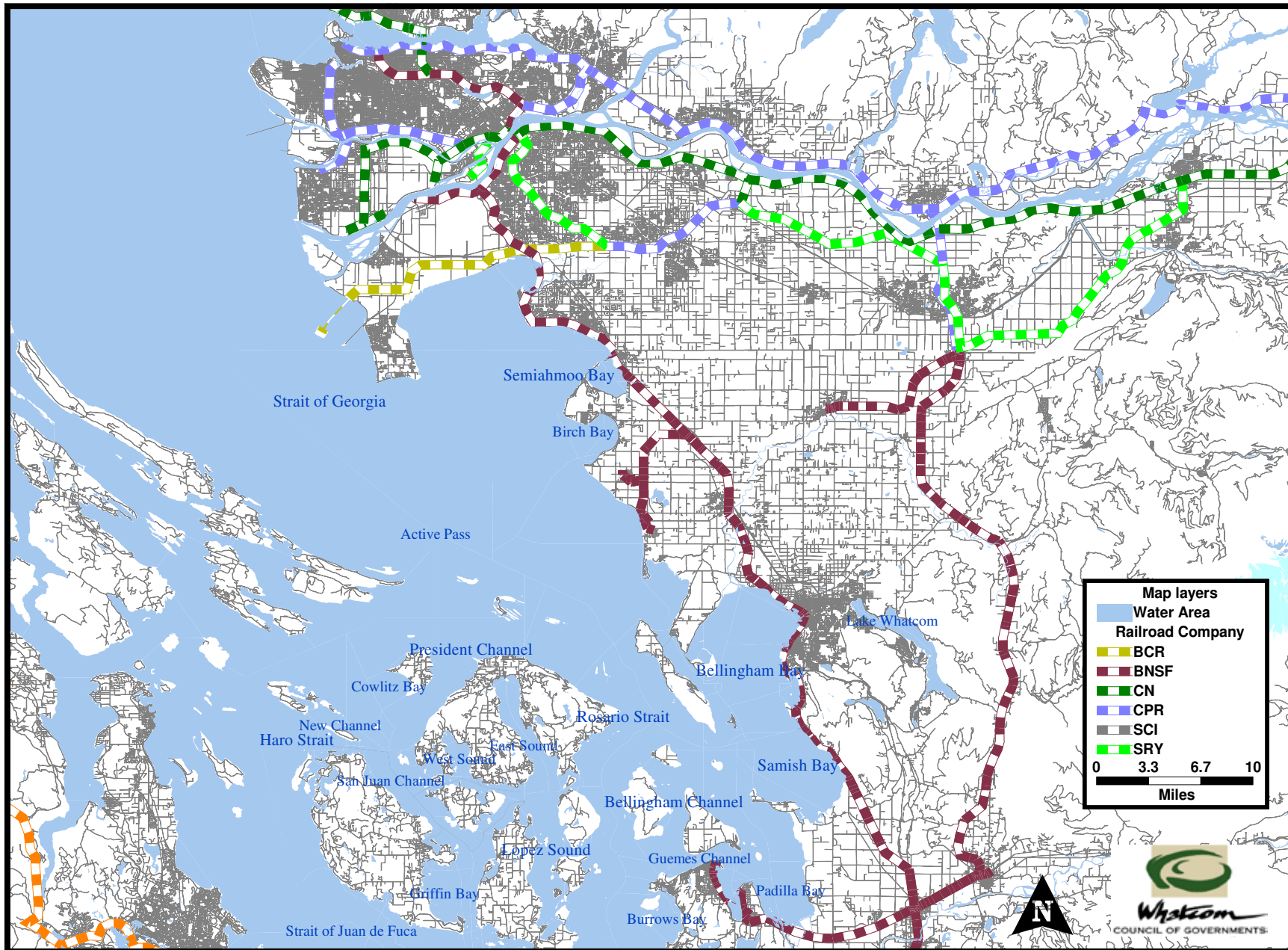
Millions of dollars of commercial freight is transported across Washington State every day. Whatcom County's main rail line, operated by BNSF, serves the bulk of freight rail movement. An additional rail line, also owned by BNSF, stretches 46 miles from Burlington in Skagit County to Sumas in Whatcom, and crosses the border into Canada. This line currently carries freight cars only.



Over 90 percent of the truck trips between the Puget Sound region and the Lower Mainland of British Columbia fall into three commodity groups than can be carried by rail. Since these commodities represent 15-20 percent of the total commodity trips which cross the U.S. – Canada border in Whatcom County, shifting an increased proportion of these commodities to freight rail could have immediate and noticeable impacts on commercial congestion, both at border crossings and on the regional highway system.¹⁴

¹⁴ *2009 Commercial Vehicle Operations Evaluation Survey*, Whatcom Council of Governments, 2009: <http://resources.wcog.org/border/2009CVOFinalReport.pdf>

Figure 17: Railroads



Studies of the rail system were conducted in 2002 and again in 2011 to examine the potential growth of both freight and passenger rails and better ways to utilize existing infrastructure. As highways in the region grow more congested, regional agencies have looked to see if a greater proportion of freight movements could be made via this efficient, cost-effective system.

Marine cargo

Marine cargo operations in Whatcom County are minimal. Opportunities exist, however, to expand these services, which have some potential of reducing highway congestion.

Waterfront facilities are available to serve these needs. Landside facilities at the Squalicum harbor currently includes a shipyard, railroad lines, retail stores, and seafood processing plants and cold storage. Deep-water facilities are operated at Cherry Point by Alcoa – Intalco Works, British Petroleum and Conoco-Phillips. An additional facility for marine shipment of bulk commodities has been proposed for Cherry Point at the last remaining deep-water port location available for development in the continental United States that does not require dredge or fill.

Air freight

Bellingham International Airport (BLI) is host to significant freight operations including freight airlines, freight forwarders, and trucking firms involved in air movement of freight. Cargoes consist of air freight and mail transported by dedicated aircraft and in the cargo compartments of passenger aircraft.

Growing demand for passenger operations will bring some additional freight volume, but expanded freight operations will require additional multi-modal system planning.

The state of the system

To accommodate predicted future changes in the demographic make-up of the Whatcom County region, it is important to view regional transportation modes and networks as a complete system. This system approach allows for redundancy and provides opportunities for shifting goods to alternative modes, and offering travel options to people for commuting, shopping and recreation.

Preservation of the existing system is an increasingly important aspect of transportation sustainability, especially in a time of diminished resources. Entities in the Whatcom region responsible for building and maintaining the transportation system are highly aware of the the current and growing need for system preservation.

