

IT MATTERS HOW WE GET THERE



An action plan from the
Whatcom Transportation Policy Steering Committee
Bellingham, Washington
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Sponsored by the City of Bellingham, Whatcom County, Whatcom
Community Foundation, Whatcom Coalition for Healthy
Communities and the Whatcom Council of Governments

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On May 18, 2001 the City of Bellingham, Whatcom County, the Whatcom Community Foundation, and the Whatcom Coalition for Healthy Communities sponsored a Countywide Transportation Summit to lay the groundwork for a more coordinated, comprehensive, and community-based transportation policy.

As a direct result of this Summit, the Transportation Policy Steering Committee was formed in September 2001 to address the Summit's findings by developing an action plan for policy makers and others engaged in local and regional transportation planning.

This report is the result of the Steering Committee's work with the goal of developing common guidelines, common actions, and a collaborative vision for a productive, sustainable transportation system.

"What will the Whatcom County of the future look like? How will we get around? Will we retain livability and prosperity? In the next 20 years our population is projected to grow by 75,000 or more. It is time for us to work together as a community to address the issues of the future."

-- Rick Gordon, Whatcom Transportation Authority

Transportation Policy Steering Committee Members

- Glenn Butler (Community Member)*
- Greg Cowen (Bellingham Schools)*
- Patricia Decker (City of Bellingham)*
- Dewey Desler (Whatcom County)*
- Victoria Doerper (Northwest Regional Council)*
- Don Drake (Whatcom Community Foundation)*
- Michael Durbin (Community Member, Private Engineer)*
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- Julie Muyllaert (Bicycle Pedestrian Advisory Committee)*
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- Bob Morse (Community Member, Business Owner)*
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- Barbara Ryan (Bellingham City Council)*
- Dieter Schugt (Blaine Mayor)*
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The Urgent Need for Coordinated Transportation Planning

Whatcom County is experiencing accelerated population growth. Driving times and distances are growing even faster. More cars on the road leads to heavier congestion, longer delays, and a higher impact on the county's road system.

In addition, land use patterns that emphasize single purpose zoning and low-density suburbs continue to promote sprawl, adding to the congestion. Regional dependence on automobiles as the main method of transportation only exacerbates the problem.

Dozens of agencies currently work hard on addressing these transportation concerns, but without a coordinated approach and a common vision, these efforts remain fragmented and less effective.

A Vision for 2020

Our vision for Whatcom County includes land use and transportation planning that enhances economic development and provides options for people to work, shop, and play close to home. Vital communities, viable farms, and green space should be preserved as attributes of the community.

Timing is everything. Public and private decision makers must act now to influence the future livability of Whatcom County. Inaction and indecision will assure a future of traffic congestion, gridlock and inaccessibility.

The following recommendations propose a **framework for action** to be used by public and private decision-makers.



Executive Summary

Recommendations for Action

The Transportation Policy Steering Committee proposes five action items to be used by public and private decision makers:

1. Influence the ability to make sustainable change by increasing public awareness of transportation choices, costs, and their impacts.
2. Coordinate public and private policy decisions that support a connected regional multi-modal transportation system (car, transit, rail, air, water, etc.)
3. Apply the following Guiding Principles to guide public and private decision making:

Principle One: Land use planning should improve mobility by supporting a robust multi-modal transportation system.

Principle Two: Transportation policy should be strategic, focused, and flexible.

Principle Three: Land use, transportation and economic development plans must demonstrate their overall community value.

Principle Four: Land use and transportation plans should build on the existing systems, incorporate realistic project costs, and be prioritized according to their ability to further the transportation vision.

4. Support development of a comprehensive land use plan that supports and enhances a coordinated transportation system and sustainable economic development throughout the county.
5. Create a community-based, public/private group that supports the implementation and sustainability of action items 1-4 by:

- Serving as a community advisory committee on countrywide transportation issues
- Serving as a public advocate for a coordinated transportation system
- Initiating a public awareness program to increase commitment to a broad transportation vision
- Advocating a process for integrating regional transportation and land use plans



Understanding the Problem

" In almost every case, those communities that are the biggest transportation disasters knew what was going to happen and still could not get their political and technical act together to do anything about it until it was too late. "

*- J. Gary Lawrence,
President, Sustainable
Strategies & Solutions*

Whatcom County must act now to address growing transportation issues and demands! This is a significant problem that will affect almost every aspect of a person's life. The following nine issues are central to the problem. Once addressed, we can build the foundation for a community and environmentally friendly transportation system that will serve the needs of our residents.

Our local population is experiencing accelerated growth.

According to the U.S. Census, Whatcom County added 60,000 people (growing by 36%) in the 20 year period between 1980 and 2000, with 44,000 of those added in the last ten years (1990 to 2000). Population projections indicate that our County's population could double in the next 30 years. This continued increase in population will impact the transportation systems and the quality of life in Whatcom County.

Our driving time and miles are growing at an even faster rate than our population growth.

Population in Washington State (using National Census data for 1980 to 2000) has grown 31% over the last 20 years, while vehicle miles traveled has grown 75%. One national survey found that people drove 37% farther to accomplish errands in 1995 than in 1969. Vehicle miles traveled in Whatcom County are expected to grow over 43% between 1990 and 2010 unless we act now.

Land use patterns that emphasize single purpose zoning and low density suburbs promote sprawl and a heavy reliance on automobiles and are an underlying cause of congestion problems in most urban areas.

Extending infrastructure (roads, sewer, schools, and transit) to low density areas is expensive yet those costs are not factored into our plans and budgets. Continued low-density sprawl undermines cost effective multi-modal transportation solutions.

Reliance on the automobile contributes to reduced physical activity and increased personal health issues such as obesity.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, the percentage of obese adults in Washington State has increased from 10% to 18.5% in the last ten years. Over the last 20 years, the percentage of adolescents and youth who are overweight has more than doubled to 13-14%. The Centers for Disease Control recognizes the dangers of a sedentary lifestyle and recommends improving transportation systems to facilitate the non-motorized movement of people.

Understanding the Problem

Significant numbers of our citizens cannot drive due to age (too young/ too old), disability, or because they can't afford to own and operate a car. Washington's 65 and older age group is projected to increase nearly 83% by 2020. Twenty-five percent of people over the age of 75 do not drive and must depend upon other forms of transportation. These populations have historically been affected more directly by transportation decisions than other populations.

Our transportation systems and driving habits are costly.

Washington State and its local governments spend \$3.7 billion annually on transportation, while households and businesses spend \$11 billion annually. The average U.S. household spends more on transportation (includes car, insurance, repairs, fuel, etc.) than on food. According to the Federal Highway Administration, transportation accounts for 20.3% of household budgets, second only to housing.

Coordinated transportation systems are key to a healthy regional and state economy. One in four Washington State jobs is dependent upon international trade. In Whatcom County, cross-border commercial traffic is increasing more than 10% per year. Maintaining an effective transportation system is vital to preserving and enhancing economic prosperity and quality of life.

Traffic congestion in Central Puget Sound is an example of what we could see in Whatcom County. In a recent survey of Whatcom County residents, 92% thought transportation problems experienced in Central Puget Sound will occur here. Depending on the parameter used, the Seattle-Everett area ranks second or third in the nation for the worst traffic congestion. In the year 2000 the average Seattle driver spent 53 hours stuck in traffic, up from 19 hours in 1982.

A variety of public agencies, private interests and government jurisdictions independently make land use and transportation policies and funding decisions. In Washington State, more than 450 different governments and commissions are involved in planning, building and financing transportation. This results in fragmented projects that lack a cohesive vision or focus.

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Solutions: A Vision for 2020

Summit participants and members of the Steering Committee recognize that we lack a common vision of what Whatcom County could look like with a coordinated, multi-modal transportation system to support our personal, community, and economic quality of life.

Many agencies and groups have actively studied and recommended sound transportation policy for years. The challenge is in translating those thoughtful efforts into a coordinated community vision and identifying practical ways to take meaningful action.

“Not taking action on transportation now is like someone who’s drowning and not deciding to take the water problem seriously. Transportation issues in Whatcom County are compelling, have the capacity to harm or help, and if we don’t act now, later may be too late.”

*- Victoria Doerper,
Executive Director,
Northwest Regional
Council*



Solutions: A Vision for 2020

Connecting Whatcom County: It Matters How We Get There

Our vision is for a community connected by concern for each other, our environment, and our livelihoods. The most visible connection among us is our network of roads, trails, paths, rails, and waterways. How we plan, build and use these connections will directly affect the future livability of our community.

We prize our beautiful surroundings, our friendly community, and our special way of life. We see the downside of poorly planned communities to our south with tangled traffic congestion and long commute times that affect every aspect of life from how much time we spend with our families and friends to the efficiency of our daily commerce.

If we act now, the people of Whatcom County can choose a different future. We can protect and enhance what we treasure most about our community. If we make a conscious decision today we can create a future in which:

- We enjoy **choices** that connect us to our place of work via a network of roads, trails, paths, rails, and waterways
- Our land use and transportation planning enhances **economic development** and provides options for people to work, grocery shop, and play close to home
- We maintain **vital communities**, viable farms, and “wild green spaces”
- Business owners, **tourists**, and residents seek out Whatcom County because of our transportation choices
- People **walk or bike** safely to school and other important community services
- Our grandparents can live where they have **access** to friends, their doctor, and a senior center
- We have a mix of **transportation options** that provide choices for drivers as well as those who cannot or choose not to drive
- We breathe **clean air** and enjoy clean and safe drinking water
- Land developers have clear benchmarks and incentives to build **community benefit** into their projects
- We have appropriate transportation infrastructure to facilitate regional and local **freight movement**
- Government fosters **easy-to-understand** rules and incentives for planned development
- We **enjoy** the trip

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Lack of a clear vision of what we want to become will result in the future of our greatest fears: gridlock.



Recommendations for Action

Timing is everything. Public and private decision makers must act now to influence the future livability of Whatcom County. Inaction and indecision will assure a future of traffic congestion, gridlock and inaccessibility.

The following recommendations propose a **framework for action** to be used by public and private decision-makers:

Action Item #1: Influence the ability to make sustainable change by educating and increasing public awareness of transportation choices, costs and its impacts.

Action Item #2: Coordinate public and private policy decisions that support a connected regional multi-modal transportation system.

Action Item #3: Apply the "Guiding Principles" in public and private decision making.

Action Item #4: Create a county-wide land use plan that supports and enhances a coordinated transportation system and sustainable economic development throughout the county.

Action Item #5: Create a community-based, public/private group that supports the implementation and the sustainability of the action items above.

"Traffic congestion is already a reality in parts of our county. We must act decisively now so our grandchildren will inherit a community at least as livable as we have today. Not one choked with sprawl and snarled traffic."

-- Don Keenan, City of Bellingham

Recommendations for Action

Action Item #1

Public Awareness

Influence the ability to make sustainable change by educating and increasing public awareness of transportation choices, costs and its impacts.

- Involve the public, school age through seniors, in making meaningful change.
- Apply comprehensive cost/benefit analyses to transportation options as a way to increase awareness of the true costs of transportation choices.
- Sponsor demonstration projects as a way to showcase and test creative, innovative approaches to multi-modal transportation.
- Promote and enhance effectiveness of existing programs such as the Bellingham and Whatcom County Bicycle/Pedestrian Committees.
- Expand the Commute Trip Reduction Program.



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Recommendations for Action

Action Item #2

Coordinate Decisions

Coordinate public and private policy decisions that support a connected regional multi-modal transportation system.

Build on existing public and private organizations and plans to create a coordinated decision-making process for regional multi-modal transportation. Existing organizations include:

- Whatcom Council of Governments
- Port of Bellingham
- Whatcom Transportation Authority

Action Item #3

Guiding Principles

Apply the "Guiding Principles" in public and private decision making.

To achieve the goal of an effective regionally connected multi-modal transportation system and the vision of a livable Whatcom County, we need to make decisions *everyday* that support that goal.

Our future as a community depends upon hundreds of decisions made independently of one another in a wide variety of settings. The collective impact of these decisions can result in lasting and positive change. We can each contribute by using universally held "guiding principles" when making land use, transportation and economic decisions.



Recommendations for Action

Action Item #3

Guiding Principles

The following principles were developed based on input from the Transportation Summit and the review of existing work, including the Whatcom County Transportation Plan, the Washington State Blue Ribbon Commission Recommendations, Bellingham and Whatcom County Comprehensive Plans and the Whatcom Transportation Authority Community Survey Results and Recommendations.

We encourage all Whatcom County decision makers to seriously consider these principles when making decisions that affect government, private, community and individual land use and economic and transportation planning decisions.

Principle One: Land use planning decisions should improve access and mobility for people and freight by creating and promoting countywide transportation connections and supporting a robust multi-modal transportation system that includes car, rail, transit, pedestrian, bicycle, and waterway access.

- Land use planning should drive transportation planning.
- Utilize land use and transportation planning to identify where higher density land uses are appropriate to maximize access and transportation options for those areas.
- Design land use and transportation planning processes to achieve essential mobility for all citizens of Whatcom County.
- Create land use policy and implement incentives to maintain open space in areas threatened by sprawl.
- Carry out land use and transportation planning that promotes economically viable long-term growth that maintains and enhances the livability of our communities.
- Scrutinize all transportation projects to ensure coordination with comprehensive land use objectives and determine likely short and long term impacts on the communities they are intended to serve.
- Coordinate Federal, State and local funding for transportation planning, design and construction to gain maximum leverage and integration.

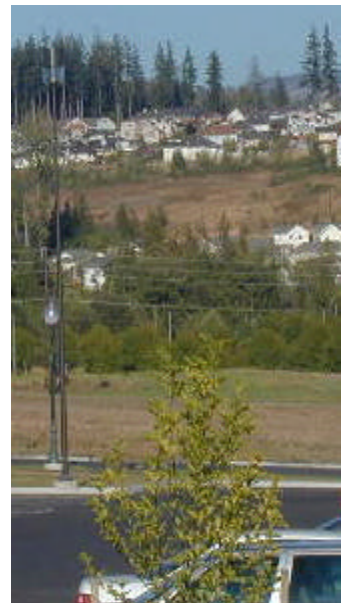
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Recommendations for Action

Action Item #3

Guiding Principles

Principle Two: Transportation policy should be strategic, focused, and flexible.

- Encourage innovative, creative and collaborative solutions, using incentives as well as disincentives to encourage planning and sustainable practices that support economic vitality.
- Although planning decisions may include specific planning horizons (i.e. five to ten years) they should be made in the context of long-term impacts (twenty to fifty years).
- Locally adopted population and economic growth projections should be a required element in all planning efforts.
- All major plans and projects should be evaluated to identify newly emerging technologies, approaches, and best practices.

Principle Three: Land use, transportation, and economic development plans must demonstrate their value to the people of Whatcom County – their livelihoods, their health and their natural environment.

- Affordable, accessible and adequate transportation choices for people who cannot or choose not to drive should be factored into all transportation and land use planning.

Principle Four: Land use and supporting transportation plans should build on the strengths of the existing systems, incorporate a realistic assessment of project costs and funding sources, and be prioritized according to their ability to further the countywide transportation vision.

- Base transportation decisions on the complete costs of project alternatives with identified sources of funding for each.
- Make transportation and land use policy decisions in the context of input from professional planners and engineers and community interests.



Recommendations for Action

Action Item #4

Coordinate System

Create a county-wide land use plan that supports and enhances a coordinated transportation system and sustainable economic development throughout the County.

- Identify a mechanism for developing coordinated transportation and land use policy that is driven by a clear vision of a positive future.
- Improve decision-makers' awareness of the need for coordinated planning and action.
- Provide additional training for professional staff (planners, engineers, and public works) that supports a coordinated land use and transportation planning process.



"Now we have the opportunity on a County-wide basis to integrate land use and transportation to prevent sprawl and traffic congestion."

*-- Dieter Schugt,
Mayor of Blaine*

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Action Item #5

Advisory Committee

Create a community-based, public/private group that supports the implementation and the sustainability of the action items.

Create a group that will:

- Serve as the community voice for a coordinated transportation system.
- Support the work already in place by government and private organizations and facilitate the collaborative development of a multi-modal, regionally connected transportation system.
- Provide a framework for the development of a comprehensive and coordinated land use plan that creates countywide transportation corridors and supports economic development.
- Provide a public/private forum to raise issues, encourage dialogue and initiate problem-solving.
- Focus attention on multi-jurisdictional issues and assist in the coordination of policy that contributes to a sound regional transportation plan.
- Oversee a public education program to increase community awareness, understanding, and commitment to a broader transportation vision.
- Initiate transportation solutions and strategies by encouraging risk-taking, creativity and innovation.

"It is clear the long term livability of our community is at stake. We must respond aggressively to...growth expectations and transportation demands. "

- Glenn Butler



Given that transportation planning for our region is vested in the Whatcom Council of Governments (COG), the Transportation Policy Steering Committee recommends a structure that is integrated with WCOG planning efforts.

This structure (approved by WCOG and funded by the City of Bellingham, Whatcom County, and Whatcom Transportation Authority) will support the implementation of the Steering Committee recommendations while minimizing duplication of efforts and maximizing collaboration with existing transportation planning efforts.

Recommendations for Action

Action Item #5

Advisory Committee

Transportation Advisory Committee Roles & Responsibilities

1. Serve as a community advisory committee on countywide transportation issues to the Regional Transportation Planning Organization and Metropolitan Planning Organization policy boards including:

- Recommending and promoting standards for transportation planning using national “best practices” as well as the Transportation Summit Steering Committee recommendations and principles.
- Recommending and coordinating effective public processes for soliciting public input into countywide transportation planning
- Advocating for implementation of existing plans and strategies such as the Whatcom Transportation Plan
- Reviewing projects that impact a coordinated countywide transportation plan and recommend any needed improvements
- Recommending community initiatives that would support further development of a coordinated transportation system
- Attending RTPO and MPO meetings and serving as a community sounding board for their issues



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Advisory Committee

Transportation Advisory Committee Roles & Responsibilities

2. Serve as a public advocate for a coordinated transportation system including:

- Linking with other state, regional, public and private transportation organizations and their planning processes (such as the WTA).
- Working with school districts on coordinated, connected and safe transportation systems.
- Working with individual jurisdictions on the implementation of countywide transportation planning principles.
- Commenting on jurisdictional comprehensive plans as they relate to transportation and land use.
- Creating relationships with key stakeholders to achieve goals of an integrated, coordinated countywide transportation system.
- Providing a public/private forum to raise issues, encourage dialogue and initiate problem-solving.
- Recognizing outstanding projects and partnerships that contribute to a coordinated countywide transportation system.

3. Initiate and, where appropriate, oversee a public education program that increases community awareness, understanding, and commitment to a broad transportation vision.

- This education program should include small-scale demonstration projects for better public understanding.

4. Advocate, facilitate, and recommend a process for development of a regional coordinated and integrated transportation and land use plan.



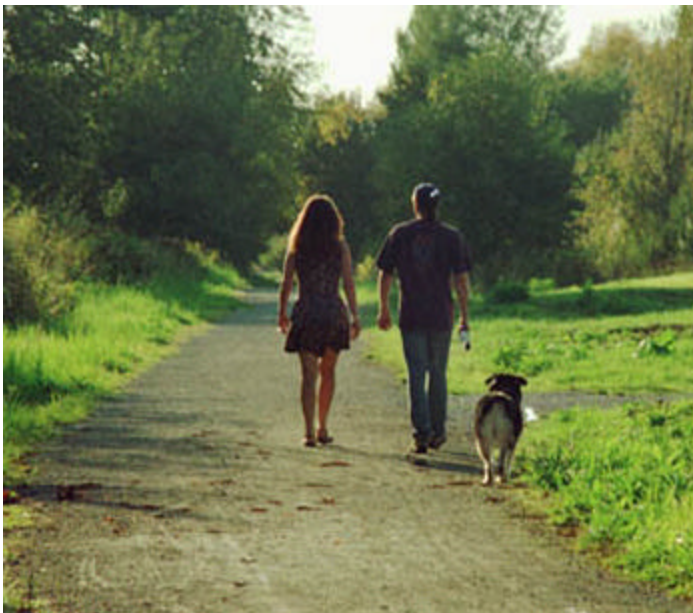
The Time to Act is Now

Whatcom County *can* successfully avoid the congestion levels of the greater Puget Sound region by acting on the recommendations in this report. Without a change in the way we do transportation planning, gridlock will reign.

To preserve our precious quality of life, it is essential that each of the public agencies, private interests and jurisdictions which play a role in defining Whatcom County's transportation system work together in new ways. In the short term, our dedication will enable us to maintain our shared vision, in the long term, it will ensure a prosperous future for Whatcom County.

Through the actions of the Transportation Advisory Group, and the vision, guiding principles, and action steps proposed by the Transportation Policy Steering Committee we can begin to coordinate Whatcom County transportation and land use planning.

The leadership shown here and now has the potential to make Whatcom County a model of smart transportation decisions for the entire region, for years to come. The choice to act is ours.



Building transportation choices into our plans and acting on those plans is what's called for now."

- Patricia Decker, City of Bellingham

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