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COUNCILMEMBERS

Elizabeth Boyle
Barry Buchanan
Ben Elenbaas
Kaylee Galloway
Jessica Rienstra
Jon Scanlon
Mark Stremler

WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCIL

DRAFT MEETING MINUTES

MEETING: Lake Whatcom Management Program Annual Joint Council and Commissioners Meeting

DATE/TIME: Wednesday, April 1, 2026 – 6:30-8:30 p.m.

LOCATION: 210 Lottie Street, Bellingham, WA; hybrid

COUNCILMEMBERS PRESENT:

Elizabeth Boyle, Barry Buchanan, Kaylee Galloway, Jessica Rienstra, Jon Scanlon, and Mark Stremler

CALL TO ORDER: 6:31 p.m.

1. Meeting Convened (*Approximate Timestamp – 1:14*)

Meeting Chair Kaylee Galloway convened the meeting at 6:31 p.m.

2. Opening Remarks (*Approximate Timestamp – 4:59*)

- Satpal Sidhu, Whatcom County Executive
- Kim Lund, Mayor of Bellingham
- Justin Clary, General Manager of the Lake Whatcom Water & Sewer District

3. Lake Whatcom Management Program Presentation—Progress in 2025 and Looking Ahead in 2026 (*Approximate Timestamp – 12:02*)

Jason Porter, City of Bellingham Surface and Stormwater Manager, shared a presentation on Lake Whatcom Management Program history, goals, and program areas and highlights from 2025. Some of these program highlights include adoption of the Lake Whatcom Invasive Freshwater Mussel Rapid Response Plan, City of Bellingham’s purchase of 16 properties totaling 1,056 newly protected acres around Lake Whatcom, and the adoption of the first ever joint management plan for 13,000+ acres of city and county-owned forestlands in the Lake Whatcom watershed.

Dr. Angela Strecker, Director of the Institute for Watershed Studies at Western Washington University, provided an overview of key results from the Institute for Watershed Studies’ monitoring program, which examines dissolved oxygen, phosphorus, algae (chlorophyll), and nitrogen as indicators of Lake Whatcom water quality. Dissolved oxygen is variable but low at Site 1; phosphorus is declining in upper layers but high in lower layers; algae is moderately high throughout the lake but has stabilized; nitrogen is showing a steady decline over time.

Gary Stoyka, Whatcom County Public Works’ Natural Resources Manager, provided an overview of Lake Whatcom Management Program goals for 2026, which include designing, building and maintaining stormwater capital projects, addressing existing development regulations, increasing opportunities to address aquatic invasive species vulnerabilities, leading the Climate Vulnerability Assessment, adopting and implementing the Forest Management Plan and conducting a Wildfire Response Capability study.

4. Joint Councils and Commissioners Discussion (Approximate Timestamp – 49:20)

Councilmembers and commissioners asked questions and engaged in discussion regarding the presentation and the Lake Whatcom Management Program.

Anderson asked about plans to begin reporting the number of private stormwater facility inspections completed per year beginning in 2029.

Porter stated that City of Bellingham development regulations in the Lake Whatcom watershed require the installation of a water quality filtering system. The Five-Year Workplan established plans for inspecting those systems in 2027.

Cathy Craver, Whatcom County Public Works, stated that county regulations require new developments to have declarations of covenants granting easements, which provide the ability to do inspections on private stormwater facilities. There has not been staff capacity to do annual inspections for all facilities, but discussions are ongoing about how to do inspections in the future.

Hammill asked a question about the county's commitment to the aquatic invasive species program.

Mike Parelskin, City of Bellingham Public Works Superintendent, stated that a code amendment aims to create an enforcement mechanism across all private boat launches for certain classes of boats on Lake Whatcom. He said they plan to provide outreach to homeowners around the lake to get their involvement in the program. The goal is to protect the lake from any invasive species that may be transported on private boats after visits to another body of water.

Scanlon asked how data is used in day-to-day decisions and what it would take to get to goals.

Porter stated that goal setting is challenging because of the large number of variables that could contribute to success or failure of a particular goal. He said there are goals to reduce phosphorus year to year but not to reduce a particular amount in one year. He stated that the data helps staff identify whether actions are successful and plan for future decision making.

Scanlon asked a question about gaps in fire districts around Lake Whatcom impact wildfire management.

Parelskin stated that they are currently examining existing fire protection framework and will use that information to strategize for future actions.

Stremmer asked how many boats are turned away at the boat launch because of invasive species concerns and whether there is natural phosphorus in the lake.

Parelskin stated that boats are not turned away; rather, trained staff work to decontaminate them. Once the boats are cleared, they are allowed to launch. He estimated they need to decontaminate about six to ten boats per year.

Strecker provided an explanation about phosphorus.

Rienstra asked a question about increasing recreation numbers in the watershed and potential impact.

Christ Thomsen, Assistant Director of Whatcom County Parks and Recreation, stated that there was an increase in visitation to parks during the Covid-19 pandemic, which has continued over the last few years.

Boyle asked about the annual versus cumulative phosphorus reduction amounts.

Porter clarified that phosphorus reduction has been over 200 pounds each year.

Stoyka stated that when new trails are built, staff decommission illegally built trails, which tend to have a higher amount of run-off.

Clary turned the discussion toward policy goals and collaboration.

Galloway asked councilmembers and commissioners to consider what they are hearing from their constituents on Lake Whatcom program areas and identify policy opportunities for the jurisdictions.

Anderson stated that she is interested in updating landscape plan and identifying whether it is a shared priority across the jurisdictions that they can all begin working toward.

Galloway stated that the landscape plan dates back to 2004, and a first step might be to ask DNR whether they have capacity to update the document with current forest practices. She said compliance monitoring post-harvest is another area of the plan that could be improved upon. She said another priority of hers is the interjurisdictional committee, which could be expanded to include more voices.

Stone said she would like to know more about the overall progress toward TMDL goals given that the jurisdictions are 10 years into a 50-year project.

Clary stated that the Department of Ecology is currently reviewing the TMDL reassessment, and, until that reassessment is complete, it is difficult to speak about overall progress. He said that there are positive trends, but it takes a long time to change the trajectory of such a large body of water.

Galloway stated that the county is looking at the built environment for reduction opportunities and activities, including docketing a measure to strengthen the phosphorus-neutral development code and considering implementing private stormwater inspections. She added that Bellingham has done an excellent job of land preservation, and the county is exploring possibilities of conservation futures funds or REET III which could allow for more conservation work.

Scanlon stated that there are opportunities to address Lake Whatcom management in the county's comprehensive plan update.

Carter asked how to increase septic system inspection compliance rates in the watershed.

Clary stated that Whatcom County Health and Community Services (WCHCS) regulates septic systems throughout the county.

Stoyka stated that Lake Whatcom is a target area for inspections, and the current compliance rate is actually quite high.

Anderson stated that the jurisdictions need to make much faster progress toward goals.

5. Public Comment Period (*Approximate Timestamp – 1:32:01*)

The following people spoke:

- Susan Hutton
- Laura Weiss
- Kerri Burnside
- Kaia Hayes
- Susan Kane-Ronning
- Rick Eggerth
- Daniel Harm
- Brian Gass

6. Closing and Next Steps (*Approximate Timestamp – 1:51:20*)

Galloway stated that there are four more Lake Whatcom Policy Group meetings in 2026 and she encouraged members of the public to attend.

Scanlon stated he would be interested in learning about the potential impacts of a moratorium on development in the Lake Whatcom watershed.

Anderson stated there was a moratorium in the Silver Beach area until the city had a chance to determine appropriate zoning and development guidelines for that area. She said that this is something the county could consider examining.

ADJOURN TIME: 8:27 P.M.

MINUTES PREPARED BY: Jenna Gernand

ATTEST:

WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCIL
WHATCOM COUNTY, WA

Cathy Halka, Council Clerk

Kaylee Galloway, Council Chair

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