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Subject: Whatcom County Review and Evaluation Program: Draft Buildable Lands Report April 7, 2022
Date: Tuesday, October 11, 2022 7:27:38 AM
Attachments: [Buildable Lands Review Oct 10 2022.pdf](#)
[ATT00001.png](#)

Honorable Commissioners - We have attached our written comments for the public hearing to be held regarding the Buildable Lands Report this Thursday, October 13. We appreciate the opportunity to participate in this process and look forward to working with you. Please let me know if you have any questions or need additional information.

Please include the attached comments in the public record for the Buildable Lands review process.

Thank you and Best Regards,

Darcy Jones
Jones Engineers, Inc.





Date: October 10, 2022

Whatcom County Planning Commission
Via email

Subject: Draft Buildable Lands Report – July 7, 2022
Whatcom County Review and Evaluation Program

Honorable Commissioners,

We write on behalf of Caitac, USA regarding the draft Buildable Lands Report 2022, (BLR). We would like to extend our appreciation to the County and City officials for the preparation of this document. Staff members from both the County and City have provided their time and insights to help stakeholders understand the methodology, procedures, data collection, and analysis that went into its development.

We acknowledge significant improvements which have been incorporated into the methodology and analysis of land capacity. For example, deductions for critical area buffers (such as wetlands, steep slopes and shorelines) are more appropriately applied. The addition of an "infrastructure gap deduction," while incomplete, is a step in the right direction for assessment of available, buildable land. Also, the supporting worksheets are much easier to understand so that density assumptions and parcel status can be cross checked. Overall, the analysis spreadsheets are more user friendly than in previous years.

The findings of the BLR provide a baseline of analysis for the upcoming 2025 Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan update and therefore it is important the report present a realistic view of Whatcom County's current housing situation. In the spirit of offering constructive input, we provide the following observations and comments focused on the land capacity and housing analysis presented in the City of Bellingham jurisdictional profile found within the report:

1. The BLR should include a more comprehensive assessment of the growth and development assumptions, targets and objectives contained in the countywide planning policies and county and city comprehensive plans.
2. The availability of lands for single-family homes in Bellingham is extremely constrained. The City is relying too heavily on small lot and attached housing products to meet the expectations for single-family homes established in the City and County Comprehensive Plans.
3. Certain geographic areas within Bellingham have been assigned unrealistic densities to be achieved by the end of the planning horizon (2036). The result is an unrealistic expectation of available land capacity, especially for single family homes.
4. Housing production in Bellingham has not kept up with demand.
5. Lack of proposed "Reasonable Measures" to address housing issues.

1. COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT

As this is the first Buildable Lands Report created for Whatcom County, this report can set a higher standard for buildable lands and housing assessments that embraces recent amendments to the Growth Management Act, (GMA).

In our discussions with City and County staff it was pointed out that in the past most cities and counties operating under the State Buildable Lands Program have adopted an approach that is focused primarily on population accommodation and achieved densities.

However, in 2021, the State legislature amended the GMA to strengthen the standards for Comprehensive Plans with regard to housing needs assessment. The GMA now requires cities and counties to do more than plan to accommodate projected population growth. It also requires cities and counties to plan for housing that is affordable to all segments of the population, which includes assessing a variety of residential densities and housing types, (see RCW 36.70A.020).

RCW 36.70A.215 (1) establishes the purpose of a "Buildable Lands Report".

"The purpose of the review and evaluation shall be to: (a) Determine whether a county and its cities are achieving urban densities within urban growth areas by comparing growth and development assumptions, targets and objectives contained in the countywide planning policies and county and city comprehensive plans with actual growth and development that has occurred in the county and it's cities."

RCW 36.70A.215 (3) establishes the minimum standards for adoption of a "Buildable Lands Report".

At a minimum, the evaluation component of the program required by subsection (1) of this section shall....

(d) Determine the actual density of housing that has been constructed and the actual amount of land developed for commercial and industrial uses within the urban growth area since the adoption of a comprehensive plan under this chapter or since the last periodic evaluation as required by subsection (1) of this section; and

(e) Based on the actual density of development as determined under (b) of this subsection, review commercial, industrial, and housing needs by type and density range to determine the amount of land needed for commercial, industrial, and housing for the remaining portion of the twenty-year planning period used in the most recently adopted comprehensive plan.

At best, the BLR reflects a very narrow view of these standards. The approach taken in the analysis should be more comprehensive in its assessment of the City of Bellingham's relative success or lack of success in meeting all of the goals and objectives of the Countywide Planning Policies and the Comprehensive Plan. Objectives related to housing variety, neighborhood character, affordability and preservation of existing housing stock should be incorporated into the assessment of available land supply and the associated findings and recommendations clearly presented.

For example:

The BLR should more clearly demonstrate how it has addressed Countywide Planning Policies G. 1 & 2, which state:

1) The county and the cities shall take actions to ensure a balance of housing and economic growth consistent with each jurisdictions' employment base and diverse income levels and to reduce commuting times and traffic congestion.

2) The county and the cities shall plan for a range of housing types and costs commensurate with their affordable housing needs.

The BLR should more clearly address the goals and policies within the City of Bellingham's Comprehensive Land Use and Housing Chapters which promote a variety of housing choices, which include:

City of Bellingham Housing Chapter - GOAL H-1 Ensure that Bellingham has a sufficient quantity and variety of housing types and densities to accommodate projected growth and promote other community goals.

City of Bellingham Housing Chapter - POLICY H-2 Encourage mixed housing types for new development on greenfield sites, a benefit of which is the integration of people from various socio-economic backgrounds.

City of Bellingham Land Use Chapter - POLICY LU-5 Foster neighborhoods with a balanced mix of housing prices that are compatible with the wages and incomes in the community.

The BLR should address issues associated with meeting the goals and policies of the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plans related to affordability and the preservation of existing housing stock, which include:

Whatcom County Housing Chapter: Preservation of Existing Housing Stock - Destruction of existing housing units due to redevelopment may be counterproductive for housing affordability. Instead, redevelopment should be taken as an opportunity to increase affordable housing.

Goal 3H: Facilitate maintenance and rehabilitation of existing housing.

Policy 3H-1: Wherever there is potential for destruction of existing structures, provide for preserving existing housing or creating new housing, whether by incorporation into the new project, moving, or recycling.

Policy 3H-2: Support creation of one or more additional housing units, within permitted density, when existing housing is remodeled, or commercial or light industrial facilities are redeveloped.

Policy 3H-3: Identify and implement incentives to preserve and sensitively rehabilitate historic properties.

An honest assessment comparing how the above goals and policies fit with the current housing situation in Bellingham is largely absent from the draft BLR. The emphasis in current comprehensive plans on providing a variety of housing and affordable housing is striking. Yet we have a housing affordability crisis in Bellingham. By not acknowledging our failures as a community to keep housing affordable, and not examining the reasons for this failure, we do not comply with RCW 36.70A.215, and miss a real opportunity to learn from our mistakes. There are many issues worth examining in the BLR, which are not. One such question is whether the infill development emphasized by the City provides affordable housing, or whether affordable housing is better provided by "greenfield" development. We believe the greenfield development is more likely to lead to equitable and affordable housing than infill.

2. AVAILABILITY OF BUILDABLE LAND FOR SINGLE FAMILY HOMES

The Housing chapter of the City Comprehensive Plan discusses alternative housing types and it is understood that some small lot and Infill Toolkit housing forms would be represented in the single-family category. However, we are concerned that a disproportionate amount of attached housing product is anticipated to fulfill the single-family demand in the future.

We are also concerned that there is not enough capacity for single-family homes to meet the expectations established in the Comprehensive Plans for the City and the County.

The City of Bellingham embraced a growth strategy in their 2016 Comprehensive Plan which promotes the achievement of a near equal mix of single-family and multi-family housing products. In order to achieve that goal, the City and County planned for the future housing production to be generally a split of one-third single family and two-third multi-family housing until the equal mix was achieved.

Page I - Section 2, (Goals and Policies) of the Housing Chapter of the City of Bellingham Comprehensive Plan states:

Approximately 44% of the current housing stock in Bellingham is multi-family. The projected mix (i.e., current mix + growth), which is based on current zoning and the land capacity analysis, is 49% single-family and 51% multi-family. This split not only supports the City's growth strategy, but also provides options for changing demographics.

At the time, the City's existing single-family housing stock was comprised of mainly traditional detached single-family homes. In this context the City's future single-family sector was widely recognized to be comprised of primarily traditional detached single-family homes.

Currently, according to the City of Bellingham Development Dashboard website, the desired split between single-family and multi-family homes has already been achieved. Therefore, in accordance with the City's growth strategy, projections for future residential development through the year 2036, should anticipate approximately 49% of all new homes to be single-family homes.

Exhibit 16 of the report indicates that the capacity for future single-family homes makes up only 26% of the capacity for all residential units projected from 2021 to 2036. It is acknowledged that since the adoption of the 2016 Comprehensive Plan, the City of Bellingham has increased capacity for multi-family homes, therefore, the proportion of single-family to multi-family capacity as been reduced. The City's efforts to increase housing capacity through regulatory changes and revisions to zoning rules have produced a surplus of multi-family capacity, however the capacity for single-family homes has remained static.

According to Exhibit 16 of the draft BLR, the currently available capacity for single-family homes may be marginally adequate to accommodate the single-family component of the remaining population growth for the planning period. However, most of the capacity lies within lands zoned for multi-family. Exhibit 16 indicates that there is available capacity for 4,200 single-family homes in Bellingham. 3,070 single-family homes would be located in the multi-family zones, (73%). 505 homes in the single-family zones (12%); 527 homes in the mixed-use zones (12.5%); 82 homes in the Commercial/Industrial zones, (2%) and less than 1% of single family homes in the Urban Villages.

Chart 3, Page 3-8 of the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan anticipates the City of Bellingham to accommodate 5,171 single-family homes from 2013-2036. Page 31 of the draft

BLR provides calculations which estimate the capacity for single-family homes in Bellingham to be 5,366 (including the homes built between 2013 and 2016). Based on these calculations, the City of Bellingham would appear to have a surplus capacity of approximately 3.7% of land available for single family homes. However, no data has been provided in the draft BLR to support the existence of a 3.7% surplus of land available for single family homes. Calculations provided on the current City data sharing site (FTP Outgoing Files) are not consistent with Exhibit 16. The posted worksheet data estimates approximately 2% less single-family home capacity than what is presented in Exhibit 16 of the BLR, resulting in a surplus of 1.7% (not 3.7%): (CAI_UGA_SLT_FINAL_2022_0610.xlsx "Whatcom County Review and Evaluation Program FINAL Suitability Land Tool"). Given the nature of the data and the margin of error in these calculations, whether it is 1.7% or 3.7%, we assert there is no meaningful surplus of single-family lands based on the estimates anticipated in the 2016 Comprehensive Plans.

The ratio of single-family home construction to multi-family home construction has not kept pace with the projections established in the Comprehensive Plans.

Chart 3, Page 3-8 of the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan indicates that the total number of housing units to be achieved in Bellingham between 2013 and 2036 is 14,678. 5,171 (35%) to be single-family homes and 9,507 (65%) to be multi-family units. According to page 30 of the BLR between 2016 and 2021 only 24.9% of new homes constructed were single family. Adding years 2013 to 2016 increases this ratio to 27%, but still falls short of the 35% objective. Again, the existing draft BLR does not include sufficient introspection on this problem to begin addressing it.

3. UNREALISTIC DENSITIES IN CERTAIN AREAS

Certain areas within the City and its UGA have been assigned development densities which are not realistic.

For example, properties within the Whatcom Falls Neighborhood and the associated UGA to the south at the base of Lookout Mountain are not reasonably expected to be developed by the year 2036. Based on the GIS data provided by the City, we estimate approximately 250 units are assigned to this area. We understand there may be some owner interest in development, however critical areas, the existence of power lines and gas pipelines, lack of primary and secondary access and road connections, as well as the lack of public utilities render this area highly unlikely to achieve home construction within the next 14 years. We acknowledge that the City has assigned a 10% deduction in density to this area, however it is unlikely that any density will be achieved within the planning period. See attached Exhibit A.

We have similar concerns about the density assigned to blocks of properties located within the Samish Neighborhood between Padden Creek and Interstate 5 (approximately 210 units assigned) as well as the area along the west side of Samish Hill lying east of 40th street, (approximately 55 units assigned). See attached Exhibits B and C.

Significant commitments of finances and time would be required to obtain approvals, permits and to construct regional infrastructure, road access and utilities suitable for urban densities into these areas. Given the necessary investments to achieve the urban services and access it would be expected that a much higher density yield would be sought to make such a project financially viable let alone attractive, compared to those densities depicted in the GIS data. Higher densities will raise even more challenges in areas blanketed with critical areas, such as these. It is simply not reasonable to expect that these events will occur in the next 14 years.

We believe zero density should be assigned to the above identified areas for the purpose of the draft BLR report. This would reduce the single family capacity by approximately 515 units. Additionally, there are other lands within the City which would benefit from a higher level of scrutiny to confirm the realistic development capacity.

4. HOUSING UNDERPRODUCTION

Page 22 of the draft BLR, exhibit 9 shows that overall Housing production in Bellingham has not kept up with demand as projected in the 2016 Comprehensive Plan. In order to catch up with needed housing Bellingham needs to increase housing production by approximately 10% year over year through the end of the planning horizon (2036). The draft BLR does not clearly acknowledge this as a problem or clearly present strategies to address the underproduction of homes.

Given that the City does not have a margin of surplus land available for single-family homes, we believe that the City's capacity for single-family lands falls short of the expectations established in the both the City and County Comprehensive plans.

5. REASONABLE MEASURES

The lack of availability and the continued underproduction of housing in the City of Bellingham has forced those looking for affordable home ownership to live in smaller cities and rural areas of Whatcom County. The negative effects to the unincorporated area and small cities associated with the lack of housing choices in Bellingham are sprawl, lack of capital facility planning, budget shortfalls, social and economic stratification, lack of equity, school overcrowding, property tax increases, traffic issues and environmental pressures, among others. We agree that the City has made progress, implementing programs to solve housing issues. Yet, there is still much work to do.

Shortly following the circulation of the Review and Evaluation Program's Buildable Lands Report the Bellingham Chamber of Commerce hosted the "State of the City" event on July 19, 2022. At this speaker series, Mayor Seth Fleetwood announced he had tasked Planning & Community Development Director, Blake Lyon, with creating a "Radical Affordability Plan" to address the issue of missing-middle housing in Bellingham.

Yet, on page 32 of the Buildable Lands Report, the Analysis of Comprehensive Plan Objectives and Reasonable Measures for Bellingham states:

"Over the past five years Bellingham has worked hard to implement the goals adopted in the 2016 Comprehensive Plan. As described below in the Regulatory Changes section, new development rules for land division, multifamily housing, and infill toolkit (middle) housing have expanded capacity significantly. And as documented in this report Bellingham is meeting or exceeding the development assumptions in the county-wide planning policies and the comprehensive plan. To that end, and as stated in section 5.2 of the Whatcom County Review and Evaluation Program Methodology, ***no reasonable measures are required.***"

The Washington State Department of Commerce 2018 Buildable Lands Guidelines, page 43 states reasonable measures as actions to reduce the differences between planned and realized growth may be necessary when *actual development patterns are inconsistent with*

growth and development assumptions in the county-wide planning policies and comprehensive plan which is what we are seeing in the City of Bellingham.

If Mayor Fleetwood and Director Lyon agree there is justification for a plan to address missing-middle housing and increase affordability, is it fair to say “*no reasonable measures are required*” to address Bellingham’s housing issues? The current draft BLR seems to conclude that planning for housing in Bellingham is going just fine, when we all know it is not. A sense of urgency is required. Respectfully, we believe reexamination and revision of the draft BLR, consistent with the comments made here, is a good place to start.

Thank you for your consideration in reviewing our comments, please let us know if you have questions or need additional information.

Best Regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Darcy Jones". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Darcy" being more prominent than the last name "Jones".

Darcy Jones, AICP, LEED-ND, PLS
Jones Engineers, Inc.

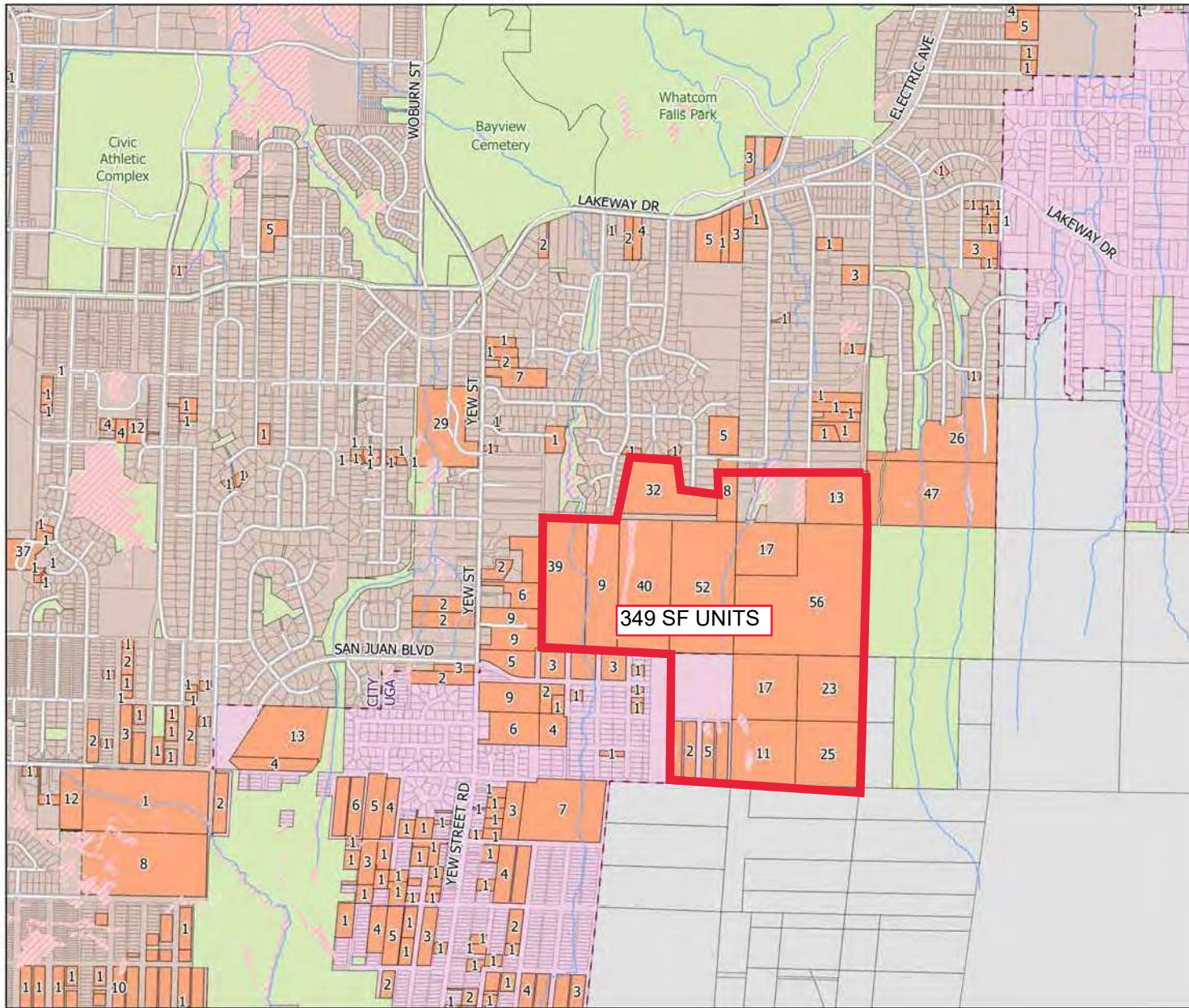
CC:

Whatcom County Council
Bellingham City Council
City of Bellingham Planning Commission
Seth Fleetwood, Mayor City of Bellingham
Satpal Sidhu, Whatcom County Executive
Blake Lyon, City of Bellingham Planning Director
Mark Personious, Whatcom County Planning Director
Steve Roberge, Whatcom County Assistant Planning Director
Chris Behee, City of Bellingham Senior Planner
Matt Aamot, Whatcom County Senior Planner
Whatcom County Business and Commerce Committee

EXHIBIT A

WHATCOM FALLS

Single-Family Residential Development Potential Bellingham - South of Lakeway Drive



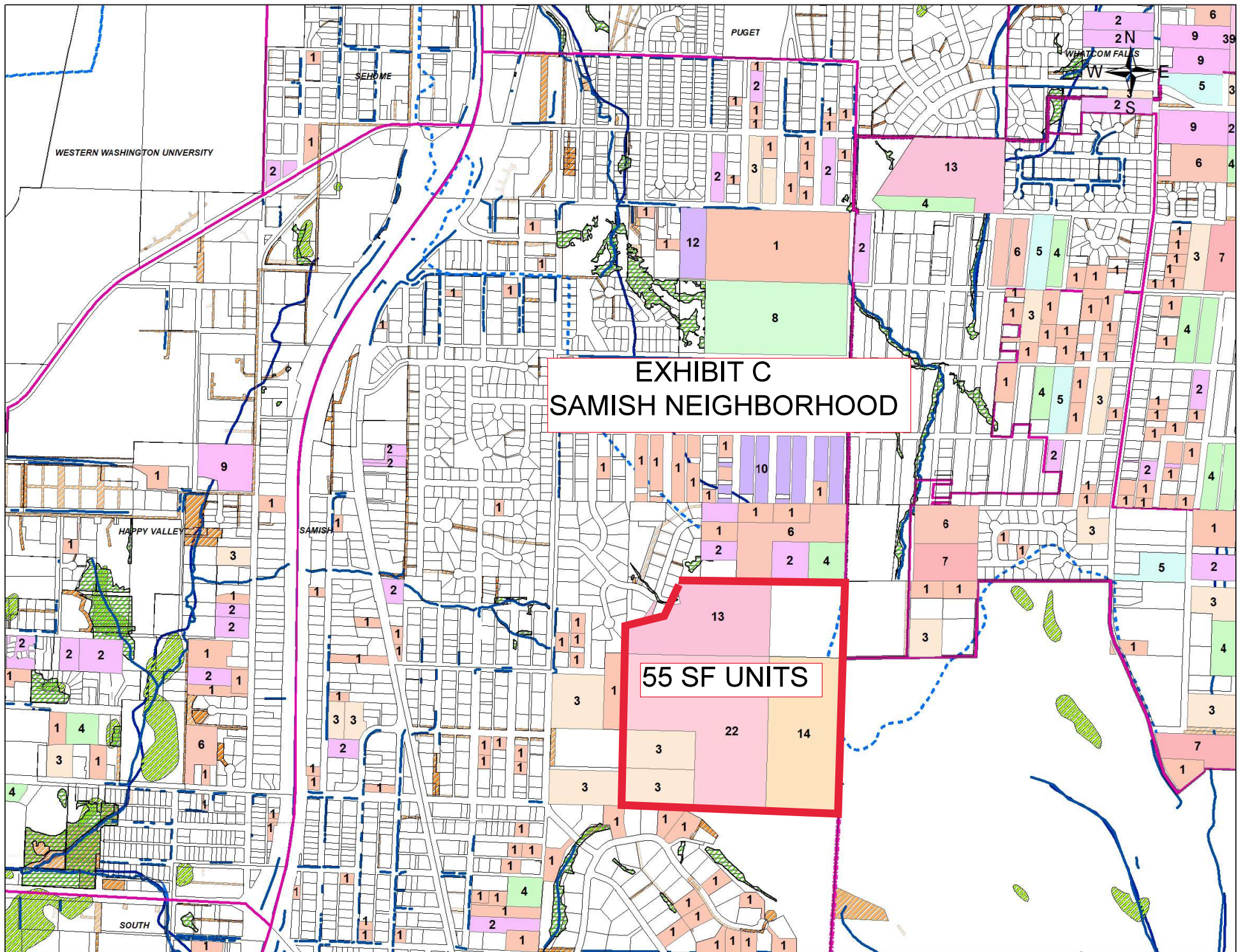
- Stream/ Channel
- BLR Defined Critical Area
- Park
- Future Single-Family Unit
- Boundary
 - City
 - Urban Growth Area
 - Rural

Numbers shown on parcel indicate the number of potential single-family units per parcel according to the 2022 Whatcom County Buildable Lands Report.



0 1,000 2,000 feet

Map authored by J. Fast | 10.07.2022
Data sourced from the Whatcom County Buildable Lands Report and City of Bellingham | 10.07.2022



From: [Tim Trohimovich](#)
To: [PDS Planning Commission](#)
Subject: Comments for Planning Commission Oct 13 Public Hearings on Buildable Lands Report and Public Participation Plan
Date: Thursday, October 13, 2022 11:29:11 AM
Attachments: [image003.png](#)
[Futurewise Comments BLR and PPP Whatcom PC Oct 13 2022.pdf](#)

Dear Ms. Axlund:

Enclosed please find Futurewise's comments for the October 13, 2022, public hearings on the Buildable Lands Report: 2022 Whatcom County Review and Evaluation Program (issued July 7, 2022) and the proposed Public Participation Plan for Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan and Development Regulation Amendments.

Please contact me if you require any additional information.

Tim Trohimovich, AICP (he/him)
Director of Planning & Law



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October 13, 2022

Kelvin Barton, Chair
Whatcom County Planning Commission
ATTN: Tammy Axlund
5280 Northwest Drive
Bellingham, Washington 98226

Dear Chair Barton and Planning Commissioners:

Subject: Comments for the public hearings on the Buildable Lands Report: 2022 Whatcom County Review and Evaluation Program (issued July 7, 2022) and the proposed Public Participation Plan for Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan and Development Regulation Amendments.

Sent via email to: PDS_Planning_Commission@co.whatcom.wa.us

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Buildable Lands Report and the proposed Public Participation Plan for the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan and Development Regulation Amendments. We recommend that the Planning Commission recommend approval of both documents. We do have a suggestion for the Public Participation Program. Our recommendations are discussed below.

Futurewise works throughout Washington State to support land-use policies that encourage healthy, equitable, and opportunity-rich communities, and that protect our most valuable farmlands, forests, and water resources. Futurewise has members across Washington State including Whatcom County.

Futurewise suggests the Planning Commission should recommend approval of the Buildable Lands Report: 2022 Whatcom County Review and Evaluation Program (issued July 7, 2022).

Futurewise has reviewed the Buildable Lands Report and has concluded that it accurately analyzes recent growth trends and the availability of developable land in Whatcom County. Futurewise appreciates that the county staff invited comments from interested members of the public including Futurewise and we





appreciate that the staff considered our comments. We recommend that the Planning Commission recommend approval of the Buildable Lands Report.

Comments on the Public Participation Plan for the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan and Development Regulation Amendments.

Futurewise also supports the proposed Public Participation Plan. We recommend that the sections 4.2.1. Approach on page 4-2, 4.3.1. Approach on page 4-4, and 4.4.1. Approach on page 4-5 provide that the various county bodies will accept the transfer of documents supporting public comments and intended for the record by Dropbox, Box, and similar file transfer protocols that do not require a payment for the county to transfer the documents. The electronic transfer of record documents is quick and economical for the county and the public and allows the county to maintain the documents in an electronic format making them easier to store, distribute, and work with.

Thank you for considering our comments. If you require additional information, please contact Tim Trohimovich at telephone (206) 343-0681 Ext. 102 or email: tim@futurewise.org.

Very Truly Yours,

Tim Trohimovich, AICP
Director of Planning & Law





Date: October 13, 2022
Whatcom County Planning Commission
Subject: Draft Buildable Lands Report – July 7, 2022
Whatcom County Review and Evaluation Program

Honorable Commissioners,

The Building Industry Association of Whatcom County is a Professional Trade Association Comprised of almost 400 member companies representing 7000 employees who are committed to the construction of Single-Family homes and the affordability of said homes. Recently one of our members, Jones Engineering, submitted written testimony regarding the Buildable Lands Report 2022. We stand behind all their comments and would like to reiterate the following.

1. The BLR should include a more comprehensive assessment of the growth and development assumptions, targets and objectives contained in the countywide planning policies and county and city comprehensive plans.
2. The availability of lands for single-family homes in Bellingham is extremely constrained. The City is relying too heavily on small lot and attached housing products to meet the expectations for single-family homes established in the City and County Comprehensive Plans.
3. Certain geographic areas within Bellingham have been assigned unrealistic densities to be achieved by the end of the planning horizon (2036). The result is unrealistic expectation of available land capacity, especially for single family homes.
4. Housing production in Bellingham has not kept up with demand.
5. Lack of proposed "Reasonable Measures" to address housing issues.
6. The City of Bellingham is not realizing Affordable housing with its Infill Tool Kit. Many of the homes that are being built with this program are very high end and do little to address the "Missing Middle".
7. Lack of adequate capital facilities (arterial streets, "trunk" sanitary sewer and water lines, major storm water systems etc.) in under or un-developed urban areas.
8. Excessive development rules, e.g., wetlands and streams and habitat. See the partly subjective Department of Ecology wetland rating forms and arbitrary buffer tables.
9. High permit costs and fees, and often slow, subjective review processes.
10. Under-zoned" areas in UGAs, with extra-large lot requirements: eg the Birchwood, South neighborhoods in Bellingham;

Also, In the Comprehensive Plan, the Bellingham Urban Growth Area has a growth allocation of 19,688 new jobs between 2016 and 2036, implying an increase of about 1,000 jobs per year. The achievement of this goal assumes that industrial and commercial land capacity is the primary driver of employment, and that if we have enough land, we will achieve our employment goals. However, between 2016 and 2021, Bellingham only created 3,108 new jobs, or 621 per year. To make up this deficit over the next 15 years, we need to produce 1,105 jobs per year,

or 150% of what we created in the first 5-year period. The report states that no reasonable measures are needed to accomplish this goal of accelerated job production. In addition, the report does not consider a primary barrier to employment - the cost of housing.

In Bellingham, housing costs have doubled since 2016, see chart A. Many employers report losing well qualified applicants because they can't find affordable homes in Bellingham. This results in the leveling off of employment, see Chart B, even though there are jobs available in the community.

Please consider taking reasonable measures to produce more homes that are affordable to employees across the income spectrum. This, more than measuring commercial square footage, will increase employment in our community.

Chart A from <https://data.bls.gov/pdq/SurveyOutputServlet> using BLS data for Bellingham Metropolitan Area.

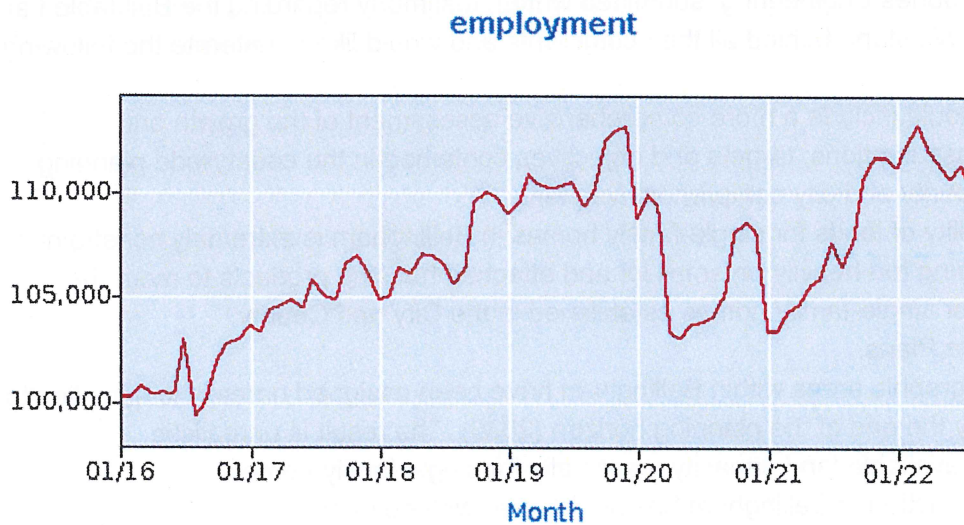
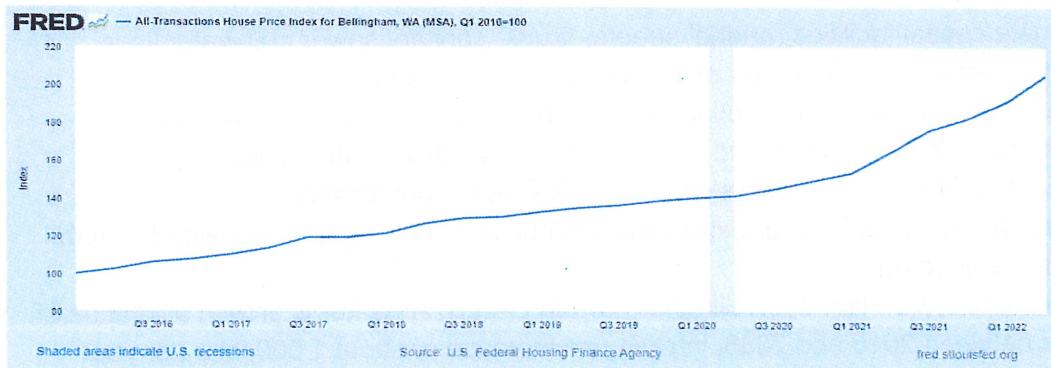


Chart B, Indexed to 2016 = 100. from <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/ATNHPIUS13380Q>



Respectfully

Robert Lee: BIAWC