



MEMORANDUM

TO: Whatcom County Council

FROM: Tawni Helms, Administrative Coordinator

THROUGH: Tyler Schroeder, Deputy Executive *TS*

RE: Countywide Wayfinding Project

DATE: November 13, 2019

Background: in 2015, Roger Brooks International was hired to assess Bellingham and Whatcom County's tourism assets, activities, supporting amenities, as well as the destination's marketing efforts. This multi-day process culminated in a photographic "Findings & Suggestions" workshop and a written report. In this report, countywide wayfinding was identified as **the** top priority for Whatcom County. By way of definition, wayfinding includes signage at gateways and entries into the communities; attractions and activities; amenities including parking, restrooms and visitor information centers; trail markers and access points; visitor information kiosks; pedestrian wayfinding specifically in downtowns.

In 2017, Bellingham Whatcom County Tourism (BWCT) worked with the City of Bellingham and Whatcom County, who invested \$50,000 each to hire wayfinding experts to develop a countywide wayfinding plan. BWCT conducted a search for qualified wayfinding experts and, in the summer of 2017, MERJE was hired to develop a plan because they follow a holistic design approach that merges graphic design with the built environment, helping destinations like ours enhance our brand and achieve our mission. MERJE has planned and designed more than 75 community wayfinding programs for regions, cities, and towns of all sizes.

MERJE engaged stakeholders and facilitated the Wayfinding Steering Committee to develop a schematic design and preliminary sign design. The proposed signage was presented to stakeholders and the general public and is now moving through the Department of Transportation for review.

In 2019, the County and the participating cities worked together to prepare an interlocal agreement to plan and prepare for the program implementation. The purpose of this Agreement is to establish a coordinated Regional Wayfinding and Gateway Program, which is designed to establish a consistent identity throughout the region and provide visitors a seamless journey and experience, which will

benefit each community. This agreement includes program implementation, budgeting, cost sharing and program maintenance plan.

Phase 1 of the project, the implementation process, includes the hiring of a Program Management Firm or Program Manager to work with Merge and oversee the development of the bid-ready construction documents and the development of a Management and Maintenance Plan.

Phase 2 of the project will be accomplished through the finalization of the Cost Sharing Plan and will include the Program Management, Design and Installation of the project elements.

The final phase of the project will be the development of a long-term maintenance, replacement and decommissioning plan between all parties of the agreement.

Benefits to Whatcom County: Through a coordinated wayfinding program, we can drive visitors from heavily visited areas (think Fairhaven) to other attractions and less frequented cities, towns, and attractions in Whatcom County. Enhanced awareness (think gateway signs indicating you are in Whatcom County) can enhance awareness of the county that could potentially increase not only tourism, but business relocation and economic development.

Funding Amount and Source: Funding in the amount of \$2,674,700 is to be shared between the parties as outline in this agreement. Whatcom County's initial portion in the amount of \$565,775 from the Lodging Tax Fund was approved by Council at the November 6th council meeting. The City of Bellingham has approved using their Lodging Tax dollars to fund their portion of over \$500,00.

Future funding request of approximately \$940,000 will be proposed to the Economic Development Investment Board and County Council to further support the project.

Please contact Tyler Schroeder at extension 5207, if you have any questions or concerns regarding the terms of this agreement.

Encl.