



## Purpose of Presentation

Representatives from Chuckanut Health Foundation are reporting on findings related to the establishing ordinance as well as providing insights from their research and community engagement.

*Intended purpose and outcome of the presentation to County Council is to provide context for final ordinance to establish the Whatcom County Racial Equity Commission (WREC). This context includes quantitative and qualitative data from constituents – gathered through comprehensive focus groups and through traditional online surveys, as well as details regarding the process of engagement with the Stakeholder Group that resulted in the final recommendations of forming and operationalizing the WREC.*

Since April of 2021, Whatcom County, City of Bellingham, and Chuckanut Health Foundation have worked in partnership to convene a community-led process for developing a county-wide racial equity commission. One component of this workplan included a comprehensive and robust focus group process designed to gather detailed community input. Additional “on-ramps” for engagement and feedback from the community were established, including a traditional online survey. Key to the community-centered approach was establishing a Stakeholder Group, a diverse, representative body, who met regularly and were charged with formalizing community feedback into recommendations to the County.

With the culmination of the Stakeholder process in June of 2022, a draft ordinance crafted by these community members was brought forward for legal review with partners at City of Bellingham and Whatcom County. Following a thorough and diligent review from the County Legal team—that included ongoing engagement from a smaller workgroup of Stakeholders—the recommended ordinance for establishing a Whatcom Racial Equity Commission is submitted for consideration by Council as part of a larger packet that provides additional context.

## Community Ownership & Public Participation

*Engaging with communities to foster policies and governance “of the people, by the people, for the people.”*

Deep community participation was critical to the design of recommendations coming forward to Council. As stewards of process, the Chuckanut Health Foundation team’s primary focus was to facilitate the wisdom, creativity, and talent of community members throughout the development of documents and processes. Inspired by the work of Rosa Gonzalez & Facilitating Power as well as earlier work of Sherry Alderstein, the proposed method for developing recommendations was rooted in implementing a community-owned and led process that was supported by a nonprofit convener and local government partners. This challenging work enables the creation of policy that encapsulates the vision of creating policy that is truly *of the people, by the people, for the people*.

**“Let’s stop talking about it. Let’s *be* about it.” – Jason McGill, Stakeholder**

The team researched and developed methods to make informing and writing the establishing ordinance and the corresponding exhibit an accessible process to all stakeholders regardless of their familiarity with governing documents. Through a partnership with “system navigators” in our Working and Planning Groups, as well as a diligent legal review process with the City of Bellingham and Whatcom County, feedback and guidance were provided to stakeholders about how to revise the community draft to be both legally sound and enduring while maintaining the spirit in which it was drafted.

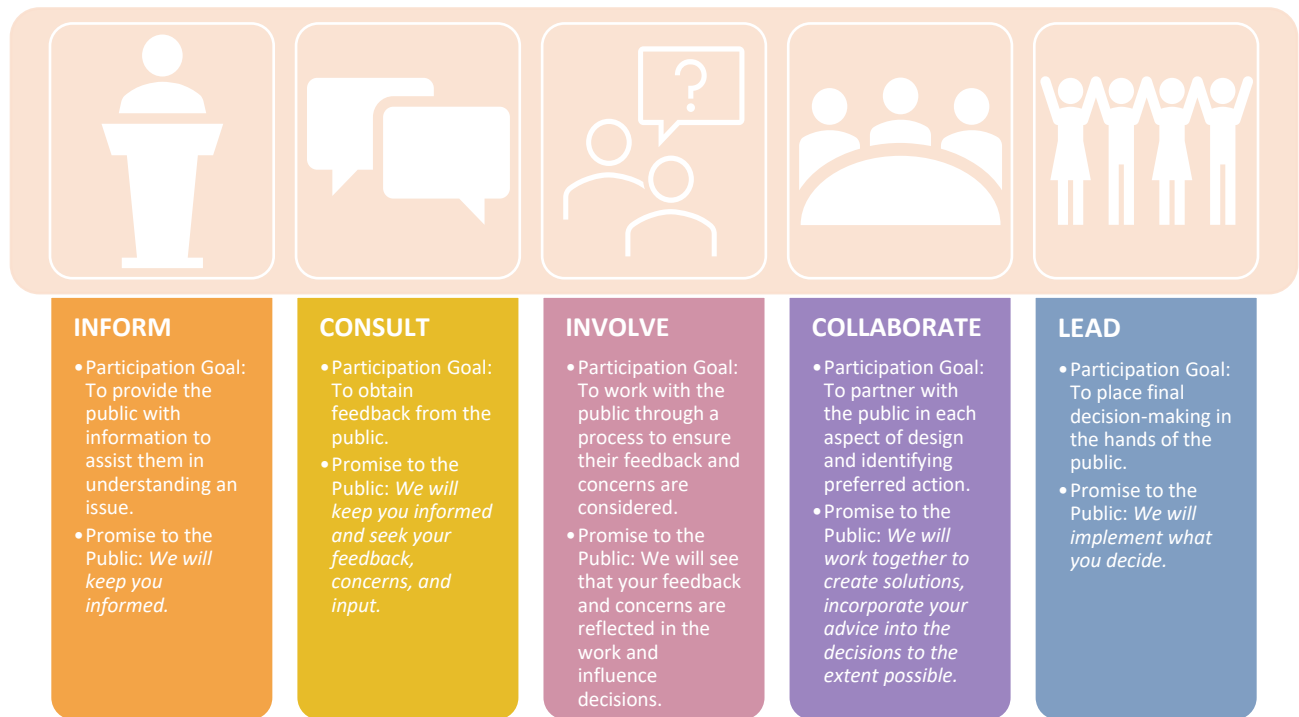


Chart Adapted from “The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership” by Rosa Gonzalez & Facilitating Power.

Additionally, Stakeholders were asked to design mechanisms for increased community accountability and input into the development process. Stakeholders crafted the questions, identified key demographics for outreach, and also facilitated the focus group process. Focus group participants across the community determined what subject matters needed to be discussed, what they hoped to learn through the discussion, and the framework for implementing the process. Because of their co-creation and implementation of the research process, the resulting product was both shaped and informed by the community members themselves rather than the project team.

### Mapping Engagement

*Ensuring representation of the diverse communities across the geographical regions of Whatcom County.*

Included in the image below are the locales across Whatcom County from which participants joined the development of recommendations. Additionally, we had participants from unincorporated areas across Whatcom County and some participants from outside of the area

who had an interest in Whatcom (ex: working or attending school but technically residing in another county.)



*Participants involved development process by Council district.*

The **representation of constituents from all five Council districts is a benchmark for accountability** to the diverse communities within each region. Not only were there participants from each district, but there was also participation from all districts at every community input mechanism designed in the process—as Stakeholders, as focus group members, and as survey takers.

## Focus Group Report

*Capturing the stories, values, and vision of Whatcom County residents as they consider the necessity and potential impact of a Whatcom Racial Equity Commission.*

The full qualitative report from the focus group process provides a deeper understanding of the stories and experiences of our neighbors throughout Whatcom County. The focus group process yielded 991 pages of raw data that was analyzed for over 200 hours by Dr. John Korsmo, Associate Dean for Students, Success and Outreach and Chair of the Health and Community Studies department at Western Washington University. Though the **over 100 participants** who contributed **more than 60 hours** of time chose to participate in the focus group process, the discussions varied significantly as these community members **represented significantly different populations** within Whatcom. There was diversity of participants across multiple different demographic considerations. From the salient information, **nine themes emerged from the conversations across most, if not all of the focus groups and questions**, despite these groups being diverse in terms of race, geographical region, religious affiliation, and other lived experiences. **Considering both the combination of the range of the participants as well as the saturation of themes within the data, we have confidence that this sample size was comprehensive for our community.**

Through the stories captured in the pertinent data and the emerging themes of Dr. Korsmo's analysis this report **provides three pieces of critical information** for the consideration and operationalizing of a Whatcom Racial Equity Commission:

- **Community Weaving & Common Ground:** Seemingly disparate communities hold shared values and hopes that bridge perceived divides. When discussion moves past rhetoric, commonalities become evident and deeper understanding of seemingly different communities is fostered.

**Opportunity:** Discovering and focusing on the common thread through our collective stories allows us to build a stronger community.

- **Context for Quantitative Data:** Providing critical information about the everyday circumstances that contribute to outcomes in our data, stories provide a depth of understanding as well as specific details as to why disparities in data may exist based on lived experience. These are the stories behind the trends in data that provide insight into what may lead some to better outcomes than others and if there is equitable opportunity for better outcomes.

**Opportunity:** These glimpses into someone's life can help identify not only what is contributing to the outcomes in data, but also, may bear strategies for change.

- **Catalysts for Amelioration:** Learning directly from communities about where they see opportunities for healing, growth, and change - "Listening to learn" lays a foundation for collaboration. By bringing communities together to discuss what they see as issues in their community, funds of knowledge can be pooled to develop strategies to address inequities experienced by our neighbors.

**Opportunity:** Accepting what there is to learn from these stories and leveraging any new understanding gained in that process will support shaping better solutions as one community, one Whatcom County.

## Data By Districts

*Insights into the current landscape in each district through data and story as we envision an equitable future for a more racially diverse younger generation.*

In each data sheet, is information specific to the five Council districts. Contained in each document is K-12 public school data on enrollment and kindergarten readiness. We can look at kindergarten-readiness data as a proxy measure for the circumstances leading up to a child's first day at school. **Consistently, across all districts, there are different outcomes when the data is disaggregated by race.** School district by school district, the disparities within the data shift as to which racial group is experiencing the lower rates of kindergarten readiness; however, white students average a higher rate of kindergarten readiness than some, if not all, other racial and ethnic across all districts.

Additionally, the proportion of enrolled students of color in each of our public schools compared to the population of Whatcom County is included in the data by County district. **Within each school district, there is a 2.1-3.4x greater proportion of students of color compared to the population of Whatcom County.** Within educational environments, children and youth are

more likely to see and/or interact with someone of a different race or ethnicity than they are in the county overall. This means that not only will we see growing diversity within the county, but that right now, there are generational differences between the experiences of children and their parents as it related to race.

Because of the participation from each district, there is also qualitative data included. We have been able to prepare focus group **quotes directly from constituents** related to their experience or perspective. *Our process has been able to reach participants who may not have given feedback in a civic process otherwise.* Council expressed a need for voices that they don't always hear from through other input structures. The quotes included from the focus group process provide an opportunity for Council to read what was shared from their constituents who may less frequently connect with them.

## Implementing Community Recommendations: Legislative Actions

*In previous meeting with Council, we've heard a curiosity about who is would be on the Commission and their scope of work.*

### Scope of Work

Preceding the drafting of the Commission's **Function [.040]** the stakeholders created two preparatory pieces.

A **Vision Statement** and **Guiding Principles [.030]**.

The Vision Statement allowed the group to envision the future first and to consider how we, as a county, can realize the dream together. Starting with the "end" rather than where we currently are asks participants to work backwards and identify assets or limitations as well as assess whether existing resources need to be adapted to achieve the goal. The points within both the Guiding Principles and Function of the Commission serve to achieve the Vision Statement.

### Our Vision

**People of all races in  
Whatcom County live,  
thrive, and belong for who  
they are, as they are.  
Without fear. Every day.**

**Guiding Principles [.030]** are unique to this establishing ordinance. While it is common to have guiding principles or similar clauses in by-laws, member expectations, or rules of procedure, including this section within the establishing legislation was unique, intentional, and an innovation that is a result of working with community members on what they hoped to see included. Stakeholders created the principles to ensure that the Commission members had benchmarks for decision-making that ensured fidelity and continuity both to the development process and throughout the lifetime of the Commission. The principles were informed by the elements of a racial equity tool as outlined by the Government Alliance on Race and Equity<sup>1</sup>. This formalizes the Commission in serving as a racial equity tool in its advisory capacity in all its work.

How the commission will conduct its work and what the scope of its advisory capacity are included in the **Function [.040]** of **Exhibit A**. These functions codify an ongoing relationship of the Commission to the broader community in it work; the required use of both quantitative and qualitative data to inform decisions; the advising and recommending role of the Commission; the

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<sup>1</sup> Government Alliance on Race and Equity Tools and Resources. <https://www.racialequityalliance.org/tools-resources/>

necessity of creating metrics for to measure progress and reporting for ongoing accountability; and the ability to bring additional funds into the county through grants or private resources to advance its work and build capacity.

### Membership Composition

There are three sections of composition listed in **EXHIBIT A** of the establishing Ordinance—**Representative Members [.050], Additional Appointed Members [.060], and Liaison Members [.070]** that are differentiated by appointment process. In addition to practical considerations like the durability of the ordinance and troubleshooting potential issues like longstanding vacancies, there were three boarder points intentionally incorporated when formulating composition that are rooted in the effectively advancing the work of the Commission.

1. That the Commission members share a common interest in the work of advancing racial equity collaboratively.
2. That those who have been impacted by racial equity issues and therefore stand to benefit most from the work of the Commission are engaged and at the table.
3. That key partners and people most familiar with potential areas of work are also included to provide insight into how develop implementable strategies for advancing racial equity locally.

### Interlocal Agreement

Similar to the structure of support for the Commission on Sexual & Domestic Violence and also modelled through their active partnership over the course of the Commission development process, **City of Bellingham had committed co-funding the Whatcom Racial Equity Commission.**

An Interlocal Agreement formalizing the support of both government entities in the work of the Commission will be ready for review by both County Council and Bellingham City Council in the coming weeks.

The document is being prepared by County Legal who, in addition to including considerations of both government entities, have been working to incorporate a critical recommendation from both Stakeholders and our Planning and Working Group members—**the ability for cities other than Bellingham to join on an ongoing basis.** A **New Parties** clause will create a mechanism for other entities to sign onto the Interlocal Agreement should their Councils choose to in the future. This ensures that the door remains open to City Governments.

### Next Steps

*Voting to establish the Whatcom Racial Equity Commission will enable the next steps of implementing the recommendations of the Stakeholders.*

Leadership from community members has been critical to executing a process rooted in equity and accountability. Building on the momentum of the Stakeholder process, the first working priority after the Commission is seated will be to establish operating by-laws so members can then elect a Steering Committee to engage in the next several steps of process. Working in partnership with local government entities, the Steering Committee will engage in determining essential criteria for a long-term fiscal sponsor as well as the hiring of a Commission Director.





*Phases of Community Involvement & Decision-Making in building Commission Infrastructure*

## Acknowledgement & Gratitude

Many community members, local leaders, and organizations came together to engage deeply in this work. It was the wisdom, leadership, advocacy, and support of these individuals that the community-owned process was devised, championed, and executed. As shepherds of the process, our Project Team holds so much gratitude for all the discussions and for this group of individuals who rolled up their sleeves together, determined to move forward with a shared purpose. **It has been an honor to hold space for our neighbors to come together.**

**We would also like to extend gratitude to the participants in our Focus Groups.  
Thank you for the gift of your story.**

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## FUNDING PARTNERS

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