



DOWNTOWN BELLINGHAM PLAN

Planning and Community Development Department

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Spanning 249 acres, Downtown Bellingham has been the focus of targeted planning activities and strategic investment since the *Downtown Development Strategies* project was launched in 1989. As the commercial, employment, civic and entertainment center for Whatcom County, Downtown Bellingham has experienced building booms, retail exodus, and the evolution from a “strictly business” district into a multi-use neighborhood. The Downtown area now provides jobs, housing, entertainment and services for a diverse and growing population. Downtown is “everyone's neighborhood”, increasingly drawing visitors and residents who want to take part in the activities and commercial opportunities in Bellingham’s largest urban village.

The Purpose of the Downtown Bellingham Plan

In 2010, City staff began hearing from Downtown stakeholders that a renewed vision for Downtown was needed to update the [*2002 City Center Master Plan*](#) (CCMP). The City responded by launching the “myDowntown” planning process to develop a new plan that would retain relevant portions of the CCMP, while looking ahead to Downtown's future. The result of this process is the *Downtown Bellingham Plan*. It is intended to:

- Describe Downtown's ideal future in vision and goal statements;
- Augment the work done to develop urban village plans in the adjacent Old Town and Waterfront Districts;
- Simplify the regulatory structure in Downtown by reducing zoning districts and aligning the boundaries of different geographic program areas;
- Identify incentives to encourage appropriate development;
- Identify and address barriers to redevelopment; and
- Identify projects and strategies to achieve the goals for Downtown.

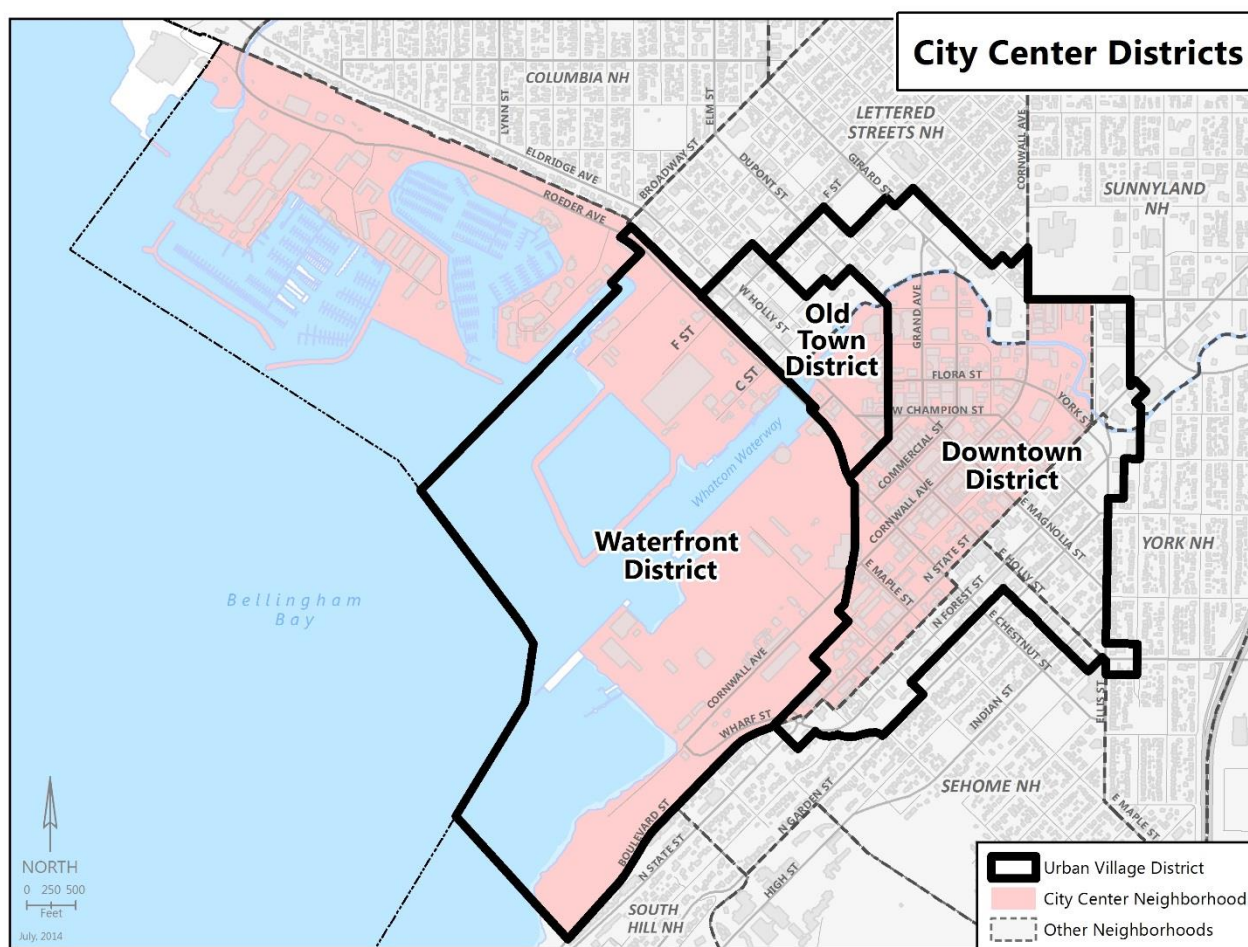
Definitions

Several key terms are used often in this Plan:

City Center Implementation Strategy: A separate document that contains a prioritized list of specific actions that the City will take to help achieve a desired goal or policy. This document includes strategies for the Waterfront, Old Town, and Downtown Districts.

Goal: A desired outcome that is envisioned, planned for, and committed to.

Policy: A governing principle that supports a defined goal and is intended to guide or constrain actions.



Downtown – Part of the “City Center Neighborhood”

Portions of the Downtown District and Old Town District, along with the Waterfront District and Squalicum Harbor, comprise the City Center Neighborhood. The City Center Neighborhood Plan unites the three districts under a common planning umbrella, while the goals, policies, and regulations for each are contained within the plans and development codes for each individual area. The Downtown District also includes portions of the four neighborhoods abutting the City Center.

A Decade of Downtown Accomplishments

Since adoption of the *City Center Master Plan* in 2002, considerable progress has been made on many of the community-identified goals for Downtown:

- **People want to live Downtown.** One of the most dramatic changes in Downtown Bellingham’s recent history has been its emergence as an urban residential neighborhood. More residents Downtown create a stronger sense of community and a larger pool of customers supporting Downtown business;
- **Habitat in the Whatcom Creek corridor has been restored** through cleanup efforts in Maritime Heritage Park and replacement of non-native with native species, and the creek corridor and trail system have become a natural urban sanctuary;

- **Depot Market Square has created a permanent home for the Bellingham Farmers Market** and has become an important part of Downtown community life;

- **All four corners of the Railroad Avenue and Holly Street intersection have been developed** with projects that transformed the space into a vibrant mixed-use gateway;

- **Downtown has a more distinct identity.** The [City Center Design Standards](#), Holly Street gateway improvements, wayfinding signage, banners, street furniture, art and lighting are examples of projects that have strengthened Downtown's identity;

- **The pedestrian environment is improving.** Completion of the [Bellingham Pedestrian Master Plan](#) and incorporation of public space and widening of sidewalks at the Bay/Holly/Prospect intersection are recent examples of projects that contribute to the pedestrian experience Downtown;

- **Bicycling is safer and more convenient.** Over \$11 million in local transportation funds have been invested since 2002 in bike lanes, bike parking, and the Whatcom Transportation Authority's Bikes On Buses Program;



Development at the Railroad Avenue-Holly Street intersection has enlivened the area.



Renovations to the Mount Baker Theatre were completed in 2004.

- **Investment in the Downtown Arts District has created a dynamic cluster of cultural venues.** The reconfiguration of the Bay/Holly/Prospect intersection, redesign of Champion Street, retrofits to the Mount Baker Theater, addition of the Lightcatcher Building to the Whatcom Museum campus, and the expansion of the Spark Museum and Pickford Film Center increasingly draw residents and visitors;
- **Historic buildings have been revitalized.** Many applied facades added in the 1950s and 1960s to "modernize" old buildings have been removed, revealing the original architectural features of Downtown buildings. Because of these investments, Downtown Bellingham now has the potential to become a National Historic District;

- **The private sector has responded to Downtown needs and opportunities.** Since 2002, new businesses have invested in Downtown, corporations have moved into existing buildings, and property owners have made improvements to building facades and signage; and
- **Adoption of new urban village plans for the Waterfront and Old Town Districts.** These plans and corresponding changes in zoning and development regulations provide the opportunity for thousands of new jobs and housing units that will support Downtown businesses.

Community Engagement: The "myDowntown" Planning Process

In 2011, the City launched the "myDowntown" planning process to develop a new Downtown Plan that would retain relevant information from the CCMP, while looking ahead into the next decade of Downtown's future. The goal of the planning process was to engage the community in meaningful, creative and effective ways. The results of the intensive community engagement process were used to develop the *Downtown Bellingham Plan*. See the ["myDowntown"](#) webpage for more information on the planning process.

A Renewed Vision for Downtown

After two years of studying, planning, and gathering ideas and input from the community in the "myDowntown" process, **10 core visions** emerged for Downtown Bellingham:

1. Downtown is a place **where people come to play, work, shop and live** - a vibrant and important community gathering place.
2. Downtown is **safe and friendly** for people of all ages, income levels and cultures.
3. Downtown continues to serve as **an economic engine for the City and region**, promoting a diverse economic environment that supports both local entrepreneurial ventures, as well as larger businesses.
4. Downtown is a **successful and desirable neighborhood** with a variety of housing choices and mix of uses.
5. Downtown protects and restores **natural resources** and incorporates environmentally-friendly elements into new projects.
6. Downtown's **network of public parks, plazas, trails and open space** is enhanced and interconnected.



Phase I community engagement at the Farmers Market, September 2011.

7. Downtown values its **historic buildings** and encourages **compatible, high-quality new construction**.
8. Downtown's streets safely accommodate **many modes of travel**: pedestrians, bicycles, automobiles, transit and freight.



Streetscape improvements, such as rain gardens, bike parking and pedestrian-scale streetlights, should continue to be installed along Downtown streets.

9. Downtown has a **thriving cultural and arts community** and its **lively public spaces** are local and regional destinations.
10. Downtown's **streetscape is active and comfortable day and night**, with pedestrian-scale lighting, street trees, landscaping, seating, and other coordinated amenities that establish a distinct identity.

CHAPTER 2: NATURAL AND HISTORIC CONTEXT

Downtown Yesterday

The Downtown Bellingham of 2014 originated from the two early towns of Whatcom and Sehome, which were settled along the shores of Bellingham Bay in the 1850s. The plats for these two towns meet at Prospect, Bay and Holly Streets, and create the unusual multi-angled street pattern that remains today.

In the early days, the little mining town of Sehome was not much more than a dirt road bordered by tree stumps and surrounded by forest, which provided wood for early buildings. The town of Whatcom was limited to a few commercial blocks centered around the lumber mill on Whatcom Creek.

As decades passed, Whatcom and Sehome, as well as Fairhaven and Bellingham, the two towns down the bay shore that were also being settled in the 1850s, experienced repeated periods of boom and

bust. It was not until the early 1890s when the towns began to get a foothold. The construction of a bridge in 1889 over the Whatcom Creek estuary connected Whatcom to Sehome via Holly Street, allowing the two towns to extend their commercial enterprises along the bay shore. Additionally, a number of local railroad lines were launched between 1888 and 1891, connecting the towns to the national rail network.



Early photo of the town of Sehome, looking north down Elk Street (today's State Street) circa 1889. The road that forks off to the left at the center of the photo is today's Wharf Street.



13th Street (today's Holly Street) bridge being built over Whatcom Creek

In 1891, Whatcom consolidated with Sehome under the name "New Whatcom" and the new town became the dominant financial and commercial center on the bay.

In 1904, New Whatcom and Fairhaven consolidated as the City of Bellingham. Commercial activity in Downtown revolved around the Dock Street waterfront and the railroad-related passenger and freight movement along Railroad Avenue.

In the 1920's, the growing tourism industry and the popularization of the automobile added fuel to Downtown Bellingham's

prosperity, bringing a decade of extraordinary commercial development. Visitors to Mount Baker National Forest used Bellingham as a jumping off point, and grand hotels, restaurants and theatres were built, including the Mount Baker Theatre and 14-story Bellingham Hotel (the Bellingham Tower) in 1927. At this time, Holly Street was part of the State Highway system, bringing travelers directly through Downtown.

By the 1930s, the Great Depression plunged most private development across the country into a state of suspension, and Bellingham fared no better. As the nation grappled with the economic downturn, Downtown businesses struggled to keep their doors open. However, industry quickly ramped up when

the United States entered World War II in 1941. Many Downtown buildings were repurposed to support the war effort, including the vacant Montague and McHugh Building (today's Crown Plaza at 114 W. Magnolia Street), which was converted by the Boeing Company into a bomb casing factory.

By the 1950s and 1960s, the popularity of the automobile began having an effect on city centers nationwide, and Downtown Bellingham was no different. Dense construction oriented to the street and packed onto comparatively small blocks was increasingly considered obsolete, and existing urban commercial cores were being replaced with freestanding or clustered buildings surrounded by open space and parking lots. Downtown Bellingham escaped the wholesale leveling that many other cities experienced in the form of “urban renewal” during the 1960s, but during this time many early buildings were demolished, having fallen out of style or no longer suited for the growing auto-centric population. Most notably in Downtown Bellingham was the loss of many grand corner buildings, whose sites were well suited for auto-oriented development.

A new appreciation of the nation's heritage arose with the 1976 bicentennial celebration, and commercial downtowns everywhere began to be seen with new appreciation. In Downtown Bellingham, preservation forces reclaimed a number of threatened landmarks, most notably the old City Hall on Prospect Street. Preservation efforts have continued through the decades, but City leaders initiated focused revitalization plans for Downtown when the Bellis Fair Mall, built in the late 1980s, began drawing long-time retailers out of Downtown.

Downtown Today

Downtown Bellingham has continued to evolve to the present day. As of 2014, due to years of targeted revitalization efforts, Downtown is once again the hub for cultural, civic, financial and service functions of the greater

Bellingham community. The historic street grid, buildings, bridges, and other features serve as reminders of the people and events that shaped Downtown over the decades, and provide character and context for new development.



Railroad Avenue is a popular destination for pedestrians.

Downtown has changed from a strictly “central business district” into a multi-use neighborhood providing jobs, housing, entertainment and services for a diverse and growing population. Within walking distance of several historic residential neighborhoods, Downtown is frequented by those living both in and outside the district, as well as by visitors seeking an authentic Bellingham experience.

CHAPTER 3: DEVELOPMENT, DESIGN AND SUSTAINABILITY

A full range of land uses Downtown is one of the key components of creating a successful urban neighborhood. Housing, commercial, office, retail, entertainment, public and governmental offices, cultural and art organizations, educational institutions, and human service agencies all combine to provide the activities and services that make Downtown a healthy destination neighborhood.

Downtown Employment

A healthy and supportive business environment is crucial to Downtown's success. In 2013 there were approximately 7,565 Downtown jobs in the office, retail, government and industrial sectors. Growth forecasts estimate the total number of jobs will increase to between 8,135 and 8,410 by 2036. Employees spend money and enliven the streets during their leisure time, contributing to the diversity of daytime activity and supporting the many restaurants, coffee shops, and other businesses that depend on this consumer market. Downtown businesses also initiate the restoration of existing buildings and add to a healthy tax base.

In June 2010, Logos Bible Software, a Downtown business, conducted an informal survey of employee spending Downtown. An analysis of receipts collected from 190 employees over the month showed an average spending of \$705 per person at Downtown businesses.

In 2013, Downtown included approximately 3.7 million square feet of developed employment square footage. It is expected that new construction will continue at a rate consistent with past trends, adding between 40,000-60,000 square feet during the next Comprehensive Planning period from 2014-2036. Industrial development is anticipated to remain relatively steady with little increase, based on the limited industrial land supply.

2013-2036 Development and Jobs

Type of Development	2013 Developed Sq Ft	2036 Total Estimated Developed Sq Ft	2013 Jobs	2036 Total Estimated Jobs
Office	1,260,000	1,400,000 to 1,470,000	3,040	3,390 to 3,565
Restaurant	535,000	575,000 to 595,000	1,080	1,150 to 1,180
Gov't Office	470,000	502,000 to 518,000	2,190	2,270 to 2,310
Light Industrial	300,000	300,000	275	275
Retail	660,000	700,000 to 720,000	980	1,050 to 1,080
Vacant Commercial	450,000	200,000 to 300,000	-	-
Residential	1,232,000	2,732,000 to 3,032,000	-	-
Non-living / working space (25%)	1,683,000	2,136,000 to 2,312,000	-	-
Totals	6,590,000	8,545,000 to 9,247,000	7,565	8,135 to 8,410

The following goals and policies are intended to fulfill the vision of a vibrant and economically successful Downtown.

GOAL 3.1: Downtown Bellingham continues to be the center of Whatcom County job activity.

POLICY 3.1: Provide the physical infrastructure and redevelopment incentives necessary to support continued business expansion and relocation Downtown.

81% of “myDowntown” survey respondents who identified themselves as having a “business interest” rated Downtown as a “good” or “fair” place to do business.

POLICY 3.2: Develop public-private partnerships to capitalize on the various strengths of the government and business sectors to achieve larger projects.

POLICY 3.3 Develop targeted strategies to promote redevelopment of Downtown’s long-term vacant spaces.

The City has worked with the business community to offer a number of incentives to encourage development and redevelopment in Downtown and other urban villages. Existing incentives include the following:

- Limited development regulations
- Reduced or eliminated parking regulations
- Transportation Impact Fee reductions
- Investment in bike and pedestrian infrastructure
- Multi-family Tax Exemption Program
- Park Impact Fee credits for projects listed in the Capital Facilities Program



The Multi-Family Tax Exemption Program has assisted agencies and developers in providing additional housing options for people seeking to live Downtown.

Incentives such as these can have a significant influence on the desirability of developing Downtown. For example, the Multi-family Tax Exemption Program has proven to be a successful incentive, as hundreds of new residential units have been constructed since the program was adopted in 1999.

POLICY 3.4: Continue to offer incentives to encourage investment in Downtown.

- POLICY 3.5:** Continue to identify barriers to Downtown investment and redevelopment, and pursue initiatives to remove these barriers.
- POLICY 3.6:** Provide clear and consistent regulations and timely, predictable and cost effective permitting services.
- POLICY 3.7:** Coordinate with property owners prior to street improvement projects to allow for additional property improvements, such as water stub-outs for future needs.

Note: See the City Center Implementation Strategy for recommendations intended to address the Downtown employment goal and policies listed here.

Downtown Housing

Housing contributes to the overall health of Downtown and supports business activity by enlivening the streets at all hours. In 2014, Downtown included approximately 1,650 dwelling units, with a population of about 2,640¹. Over the next 22 years, the number of dwelling units is expected to grow at an average rate of 66 units per year, depending on market conditions -- a total of 2,950-3,275 housing units by 2036. If this forecasted growth occurs, the Downtown population could increase to between 4,720 and 5,240 by 2036 (a 64%-190% increase).

2013-2036 Residential Development

	Developed Sq Ft	Housing Units	Residents
2013 Residential Development	1,232,000	1,650	2,640
2036 Estimated Total Residential Development	2,732,000 to 3,032,000	2,950 to 3,275	4,720 to 5,240

Housing diversity is key to accommodating a wide variety of people interested in living Downtown. Currently, Downtown lacks housing opportunities for middle- and upper-income households and larger families. Units with two or more bedrooms comprise just 23% of the rental unit supply. Additionally, most housing is in the form of apartments for rent, with ownership units comprising approximately 10% of the total housing units².

In 2013, 25% of the housing units Downtown were affordable units built by supportive service organizations such as the Bellingham/Whatcom Housing Authority and Catholic Housing Services. These projects receive a variety of local, state, and federal subsidies to provide housing for those living at or below the median family income. Downtown serves as a supportive location for these households, with easy access to transit and a network of services.

In 2011, the City conducted a housing inventory and analysis to identify the average cost, square footage, number of bedrooms and vacancies within the Downtown housing stock. The study showed that of the approximately 1,288 housing units surveyed, the predominant housing types were studio and one-bedroom apartments. Average rents were approximately \$1.05/sq ft. The vacancy rate was approximately 1%, which indicates a need for additional housing options.

¹ In addition, over 8,000 people lived within a quarter-mile of Downtown in 2013.

² Based on City records matching ownership with mailing address.

GOAL 3.2: Downtown housing accommodates an increasing and diverse residential population.

POLICY 3.8: Encourage development of a wide range of housing types that are affordable to all income ranges.

POLICY 3.9: Continue to promote the Multi-family Tax Exemption incentive as a benefit for both market-rate and affordable housing.

Sustainability

Sustainable communities contain a variety of housing and transportation options, with employment, services and recreation facilities close to home. Downtown development is often inherently sustainable. High-density development, a broad mix of uses, and excellent transportation options mean less dependence on the single-occupancy vehicle and the most efficient use of the available land supply. Infrastructure and public services such as streets, sidewalks, utilities and emergency services are already in place. Focusing growth in Downtown also diminishes the need for development outside the current urban growth area, helping to meet the City's infill and sprawl reduction goals. The goals and policies in this section are specifically aimed at the environmental aspect of sustainability.

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. – Brundlandt Report

The City can draw from numerous tools and resources when applying sustainable design and development principles to Downtown projects. The Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design for Neighborhood Development (LEED-ND) rating system, EcoDistrict concept, and Greenroads rating system are examples of these models.

LEED-ND - The [Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design for Neighborhood Development](#) (LEED-ND) rating system was developed by the U.S. Green Building Council to analyze whether a development project will achieve a more sustainable development pattern. City staff analyzed the Downtown Bellingham Plan and Development Regulations utilizing the LEED-ND criteria and found the district would score in the "Gold" level, primarily based on previous site development, mix of housing, jobs, recreation and services, a multitude of transportation options, and a compact street grid.

EcoDistrict Planning - An [EcoDistrict](#) is a model of public-private partnership that emphasizes innovation and deployment of district-scale best practices to create efficient and sustainable neighborhoods. Initiatives include efficient use of land and building resources, protection of the environment, support of the local economy, and fostering social equity. Cities around the world are creating EcoDistricts to use resources more sustainably. The Port and City of Bellingham have partnered to incorporate EcoDistrict planning concepts into the Waterfront District and a portion of the Downtown District.

The [Greenroads Rating System](#) is a third-party, points-based system operated by the nonprofit Greenroads Foundation to certify sustainable roadway and transportation infrastructure projects. The system provides metrics to measure the benefits of design and construction practices that can be implemented on a project to earn points toward one of four certification awards. The elements of Greenroads are the standard in Bellingham; in fact, the City's [Meador-Kansas-Ellis Trail](#) project received a silver certification in 2011.

GOAL 3.3: Tools and resources, such as LEED-ND, EcoDistricts, Greenroads and other innovations are utilized when appropriate to facilitate sustainable projects.

POLICY 3.9: Ensure that City development regulations, design standards and permit review processes encourage the use of sustainable tools and resources.

POLICY 3.10: Promote energy conservation in City of Bellingham facilities and services.

GOAL 3.4: Design and construction of buildings Downtown include sustainable elements that contribute to a healthier, more livable community.



Thirty-six rain gardens were installed Downtown in 2014 as part of the Downtown Improvement Gardens ("DIG") Program.

POLICY 3.11: Encourage building owners to participate in energy efficiency retrofits and access incentive programs, such as the [Community Energy Challenge](#), where appropriate.

GOAL 3.5: The impacts of untreated stormwater on Whatcom Creek and Bellingham Bay are reduced through the application of low-impact development techniques, such as on-site control measures and green stormwater infrastructure.

POLICY 3.12: Whenever possible, projects in the public right-of-way, such as streetscape improvements and stormwater systems, should incorporate bioswales, rain gardens and other green stormwater infrastructure elements.

POLICY 3.13: Encourage and provide incentives for on-site measures to reduce or eliminate runoff from private properties, such as green roofs and low-impact landscaping practices.

Note: See the City Center Implementation Strategy for recommendations intended to address Downtown sustainability goals and policies.

Historic Buildings and Resources

Historic buildings make up a key part of Downtown's character and represent tangible links to the past. Downtown's sense of place relies, to a large extent, on its historic buildings and landscapes. These assets attract tourists, shoppers, businesses and residents. Many grand historic buildings have been lost, making those that remain even more important if Downtown is to keep a link to its past.

The values associated with the preservation of historic resources include:

- Providing a link with the past;
- Establishing a distinct market image;
- Quickly making a building available for occupancy;
- Providing an attractive image;
- Supporting heritage tourism strategies;
- Supporting goals for sustainability by conserving resources; and
- Reinforcing Downtown's character.

The statement with the highest level of agreement in the Phase I "myDowntown" survey was that "historic buildings add to the character of Downtown".

The City can help foster rehabilitation of buildings and support renewed economic activity by incentivizing the reuse or repurposing of existing buildings ("adaptive reuse") and providing educational tools to encourage preservation. It is important to build on these actions and to address some of the critical risks and challenges that are facing Bellingham's historic core.

The Downtown Bellingham Historic Resource Survey, completed in 2012, identified properties and districts eligible for the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP), the Washington State Heritage Register (WHR), and the City of Bellingham's Register of Historic Places (BRHP).

GOAL 3.6: Downtown's historic buildings are preserved to maintain a link with the past and contribute to the social, economic and environmental vitality of the City.

POLICY 3.14: Consider developing the following incentives to encourage the preservation and rehabilitation of historic buildings:

- Improve the Historic Preservation Commission review process;
- Provide education and outreach regarding programs that support the redevelopment of historic buildings, such as the International Existing Building Code (IEBC), local and federal tax credits, and adaptive reuse;
- Create design education materials for historic commercial and residential buildings;
- Promote the connections between historic preservation and sustainability principles; and



The first floor of the Dahlquist Building on State Street was rehabilitated into a modern space.

- Develop a program to promote the benefits of the Downtown Bellingham National Historic District and to recognize outstanding restoration, rehabilitation and adaptive reuse projects by Downtown property and business owners.

POLICY 3.15: Encourage the public and private sectors to identify possible intact archeological resources at project sites through survey work and contact with the State Department of Archeology and Historic Preservation.

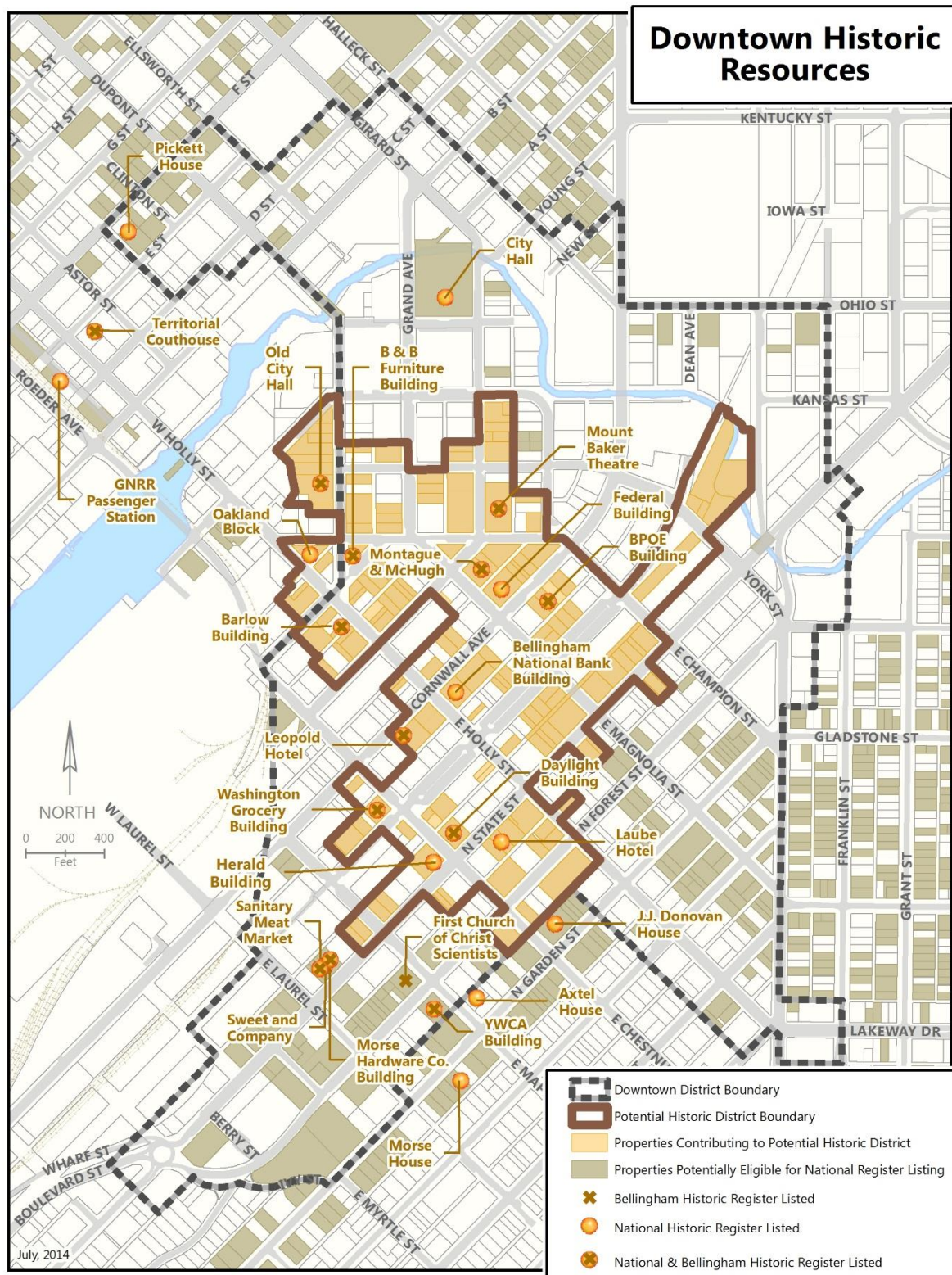
Many Downtown buildings have been restored, revealing original features previously obscured by applied storefronts. Clusters of architecturally-intact historic buildings have been nominated as a National Historic District.

POLICY 3.16: Encourage the removal of applied storefronts to restore the architectural character of historic buildings.

POLICY 3.17: Encourage businesses to use signage designed, sized and located primarily for pedestrians and compatible with the character of Downtown.



Removing a 1960's applied storefront revealed original brick on the historic Barlow Building in the Arts District.



Since 2002, new construction has been subject to the [City Center Design Standards](#), resulting in many new buildings designed to create an attractive, pedestrian-oriented environment. All properties Downtown are subject to this design review for new construction and significant alterations to existing buildings. The guidelines neither dictate taste nor assure good design, but instead outline traditional elements of Downtown building design to ensure continuity in the streetscape and general development pattern, and to protect and enhance the character of Downtown.

POLICY 3.18: Ensure that development regulations and design standards encourage new buildings to be designed to be compatible with, and contribute to, the historic character of Downtown.

POLICY 3.19: The City should, whenever feasible, uncover, preserve, salvage and restore historic features such as rail tracks, brick streets, granite curbs, glass sidewalk prisms, and other features that tell the story of Downtown's layered history. If preservation is not possible, the City should photo document artifacts prior to removal.

Note: See the City Center Implementation Strategy for recommendations intended to address the historic resources goals and policies.

Capital Facilities

Capital facilities typically include water, sewer, stormwater conveyance systems, streets, parks, and government buildings. Some of these facilities are covered in other sections of the Plan.

Public Utilities

Public utilities Downtown include water, sewer and stormwater conveyance systems. The City has adopted City-wide plans for each of these systems that include an analysis of the existing facilities and a forecast for future needs. In general, the sewer, water and stormwater systems Downtown are adequate to meet future needs. One significant improvement for the sewer system is a new lift station (the Roeder Avenue Lift Station), scheduled to be constructed in 2017-2018. This \$15 million dollar project includes conveyance improvements along Roeder Avenue from Squalicum Creek Parkway to Whatcom Creek, and will provide capacity for additional Downtown development.

Public Buildings

The City owns a number of buildings Downtown, including City Hall, the Central Library, Police Department Headquarters, Municipal Court Building, Commercial Street Parking Garage, and the Federal Building. Whatcom County also has a number of facilities in the area, including the County Courthouse, Senior Center, Whatcom County Health Department, and a number of other County offices. Some of the City-owned buildings are addressed in more detail in Chapter 5.

GOAL 3.7: Civic functions, cultural institutions and government services continue to be located Downtown whenever possible.

POLICY 3.20: Enhance the character of the Civic Center by maintaining or expanding institutional uses such as government offices.

Federal Building

The City acquired the Federal Building in 2004. This 100-year old historic building offers quality office and meeting room facilities in the core of Downtown. The building is currently being remodeled to allow relocation of several City governmental offices. This will increase the number of employees who will shop and eat Downtown, helping to boost economic activity in the area.

POLICY 3.21: Renovate the Federal Building to serve as governmental offices to increase positive activities Downtown.



Upgrades to the Federal Building will allow the City of Bellingham to locate public offices in this historic building.

Municipal Court Building

The Municipal Court Building on Girard Street was acquired by the City in 1999 to temporarily house the newly-created Municipal Court. The 31,000 square foot building was built in 1951 and previously used as a church. It has been determined that the growing needs of the community for a modern, safe and efficient court facility cannot be met by this building without significant investment.

POLICY 3.22: When no longer needed for a court facility, the City should consider alternative uses for the Municipal Court property.

Note: See Chapter 5 for additional information regarding the Mt. Baker Theatre, the Bellingham Central Library and the Whatcom Museum buildings. Also, see the City Center Implementation Strategy for recommendations intended to address the goal and policies in this section.

A Safe and Welcoming Downtown

To capitalize on the many cultural and entertainment options available Downtown, people must feel safe and comfortable. The cleanliness, comfort, and safety of Downtown are key to attracting residential, business and tourism investment. Additionally, accessible tourist resources are essential to a positive visitor experience, and influence the likelihood of a future visit or positive recommendation.

81% of [myDowntown Survey](#) respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they feel safe Downtown during the day. Corroborating this response, Bellingham Police Department (BPD) statistics show that many of the 911 calls originating from Downtown are similar statistically to other commercial neighborhoods in Bellingham, reflecting that Downtown is generally a safe neighborhood. The number of calls are higher for Downtown when it comes to nuisance issues such as disorderly or malicious mischief, liquor law violations, driving under the influence convictions, assaults (typically between acquaintances) and graffiti.



Participants of the Procession of the Species parade fill the streets of Downtown Bellingham every spring.

Coupled with the statistics, the perception of safety can have an impact on the economic health and utilization of Downtown.

Behavioral issues outlined above are concerns of Downtown business owners and their patrons. Also, groups of people gathering on a street corner without purpose may not be breaking the law, but can be intimidating to some Downtown users.

The City and its partners in mental health, homeless, low-income housing, and other human services continue to work together to address broad societal issues that tend to manifest in an urban

environment. There have been several iterations of this effort, including the “Downtown Community Safety Alliance (DCSA)”. In 2012, this group met to learn about current crime statistics/trends, understand what each organization was currently working on and services they provide, and to brainstorm tools to address some of the behavioral issues of concern.

In 2014, Bellingham Mayor Linville convened the Community Solutions Workgroup, comprised of DCSA participants, community stakeholders and City staff to prioritize public health and safety solutions for various challenges facing the community, especially in Downtown. The goal is to make people feel safe Downtown and provide services for those in need. Issues addressed included homelessness, alcohol/drug consumption, Maritime Heritage Park programming, an ambassador program, social service coordination, police/community coordination, nuisance laws, and improving communication between agencies and the Downtown neighborhood.

The Community Solutions Workgroup identified key issues and potential solutions that should be addressed in an action plan in early 2014.

In addition to daily foot and bike patrol officers, the Bellingham Police Department also helps contribute to the sense of safety Downtown by offering free services such as consultation to property and business owners on **Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED)** techniques. The goal of CPTED is to prevent crime by designing a physical environment that positively influences human behavior. The proper design and effective use of the built environment can lead to a decrease in crime and fear of crime, and can improve quality of life.

GOAL 3.8: Downtown is a safe and welcoming place for all ages and walks of life.

POLICY 3.23: Prioritize and implement the recommendations from the [Community Solutions Workgroup](#).

POLICY 3.24: Strengthen partnerships with local business networks, human service providers, and mental health agencies to address behavioral and safety issues Downtown.

Because Downtown represents the "face" of the community, keeping it clean and comfortable are of utmost importance in making a good first (and lasting) impression. "Cleanliness, landscaping, and sidewalk design" were identified as the #2 priority in the [myDowntown Survey](#). In other areas of the City, property owners in commercial and residential districts are responsible for maintaining the public areas abutting their property, but in Downtown a City-funded work crew maintains cleanliness on the sidewalks.

POLICY 3.25: Continue to maintain a clean, attractive Downtown streetscape that includes hanging flower baskets, landscaped flower beds, street trees, and potted plants.

POLICY 3.26: Encourage property owners to activate dead spaces and blank walls by adding exterior windows, removing tinting from windows, and improving the space in front of their buildings using Placemaking and Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED) tactics.

POLICY 3.27: Partner with Downtown business owners, property owners and organizations to provide services to maintain and improve the cleanliness and environmental health of Downtown.

POLICY 3.28: Support initiatives to create a Downtown Business Improvement District to fund projects and provide services such as cleaning streets, providing security, making capital improvements and marketing the area.

Note: The City Center Implementation Strategy and the Community Solutions Workgroup Action Report include specific recommendations intended to address the Downtown safety goal and policies.

CHAPTER 4: LAND USE AREA DESCRIPTIONS

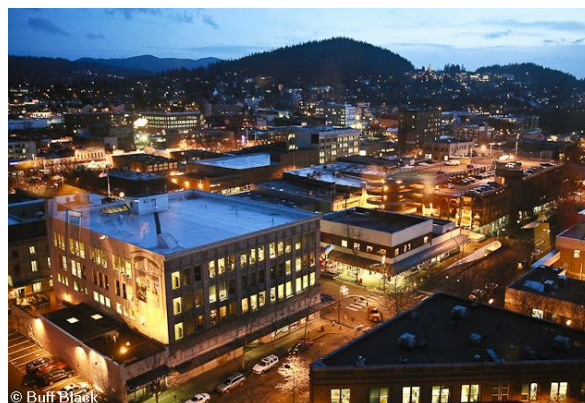
To ensure development is appropriately scaled and designed, and to encourage uses that are compatible with each other and the surrounding neighborhoods, Downtown is divided into commercial, industrial, and residential land use areas. The purpose of these areas is to establish goals, policies, zoning and development regulations that require development to be consistent with the desired intensity, physical and aesthetic characteristics, and neighborhood scale in each area. All Downtown development and substantial redevelopment is subject to the *City Center Design Standards*. These design standards emphasize the pedestrian environment, preservation of historic buildings, and compatibility of new development with the existing architectural character.

The Downtown land use areas are further defined as Commercial Core, Commercial Transition, Industrial Transition, and Residential Transition-1 and Residential Transition-2. A brief description of each area and supporting goals and policies are outlined below.

Commercial Core (CC)

The Commercial Core (CC) area is intended to be the most densely developed area within Downtown, with the highest concentration of employment, services, entertainment and housing. The wide range of allowed land uses, including retail, office, recreation, governmental facilities, parks and open space, are supported by well-developed transportation facilities and contribute to the activity within the urban environment.

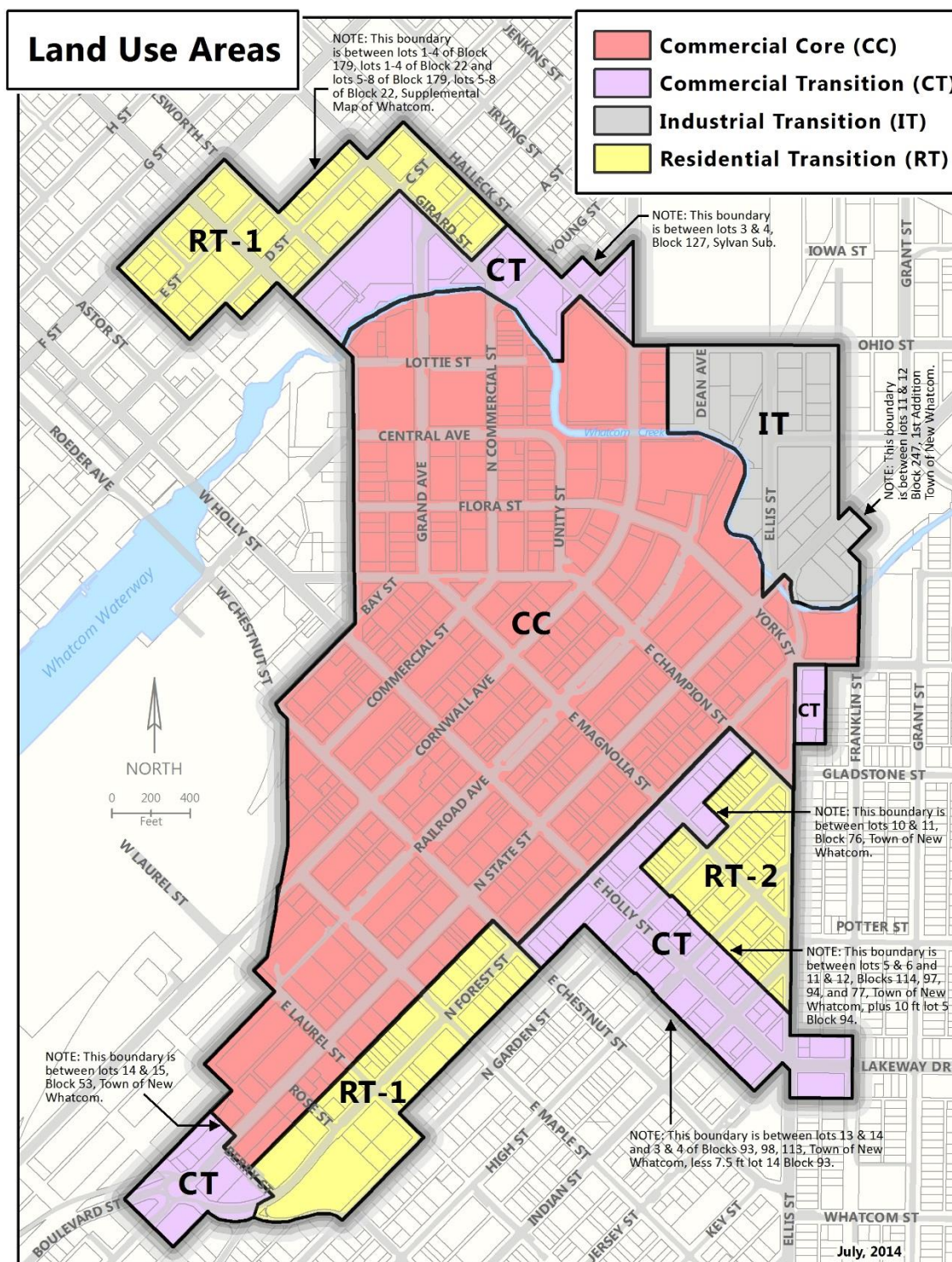
The majority of existing buildings in the CC are less than 35 feet tall, although several exceed 55 feet. Development regulations encourage taller buildings, masonry construction, structured parking and a range of uses. The *City Center Design Standards* are intended to promote compatibility with existing buildings and street character, and emphasize street level design to enhance the pedestrian experience.



© Buff Black
The Commercial Core lights up at night.

By 2010, the increase in residential units in the CC prompted City Council to adopt an [Entertainment District Ordinance](#) to regulate sound from music venues within a defined area. The Entertainment District Ordinance recognizes that while music venues add to the vibrancy and economic vitality of the City, Downtown residents should not be unreasonably disturbed by excessive late night noise. Disturbances have been limited by establishing a boundary and list of criteria for law enforcement to consider when evaluating complaints related to music-related noise within the Entertainment District.

GOAL 4.1: The Commercial Core area is economically healthy, unique and attractive, offering a full range of employment, housing, retail, cultural and recreational opportunities.



- POLICY 4.1:** Downtown zoning and development regulations encourage and allow a full range of high-quality mixed-use development options that include ground floor retail, a mix of housing types, offices and entertainment.
- POLICY 4.2:** Continue to invest in public facilities located in the Commercial Core such as the Central Library, City Hall and Federal Building.
- POLICY 4.3:** Improve the quality of the pedestrian experience throughout the Commercial Core.



Bellingham City Hall is located in the Civic Center, part of the Commercial Core.

COMMERCIAL CORE LAND USE DESIGNATION: Commercial

Commercial Transition (CT)

The Commercial Transition (CT) areas are located on the periphery of the Commercial Core and bordered by residential areas. These areas include several of the primary gateways into Downtown: the Holly Street corridor, the Forest Street gateway from the south, Cornwall Avenue and Dupont Street.

Permitted commercial uses in the CT zone are similar to those found in the Commercial Core. The three CT areas provide an opportunity for dense but appropriately-scaled mixed-use development near the commercial core. To address potential impacts and ensure an adequate transition to adjacent residential areas, CT development regulations include limits on building height.

GOAL 4.2: The Commercial Transition areas are developed with commercial and residential uses at a scale and intensity appropriate for an area transitioning to a residential zone.

- POLICY 4.4:** Allowed uses and development regulations in CT areas encourage appropriately-scaled development to provide a transition between the Commercial Core and the adjacent residential neighborhoods.
- POLICY 4.5:** CT zoning regulations and/or design standards require commercial and residential buildings to have a direct interface with the sidewalk to support a positive pedestrian experience.

COMMERCIAL TRANSITION LAND USE DESIGNATION: Commercial

Industrial Transition (IT)

The Industrial Transition area contains a well-established mix of industrial and commercial uses and is a successful employment zone.

The IT area is intended to accommodate a compatible range of industrial, commercial and residential uses to create a dynamic and eclectic setting that fosters business incubation. Industrial activities are limited to those that do not create excessive noise, smoke, odors or other objectionable nuisances. Permitted residential uses are intended to be included within mixed-use buildings and located above the first floor.

GOAL 4.3: The Industrial Transition area is developed primarily with industrial and commercial uses, with residences integrated to provide an eclectic live-work environment.



The live-work development along Whatcom Creek in the 1700 block of Ellis Street exemplifies the type of residential / commercial / industrial mixed-use development desired in the Industrial Transition subarea.

POLICY 4.6: The Industrial Transition zoning provides the opportunity for a thriving job base and additional residences to be located near the Downtown core.

POLICY 4.7: Design standards and development regulations allow new construction in the Industrial Transition area to be more industrial in style, massing and materials.

INDUSTRIAL TRANSITION LAND USE DESIGNATION: Industrial

Residential Transition (RT)

The Residential Transition areas abut residentially-zoned neighborhoods at the north and south ends of Downtown. These areas provide a variety of housing options and low-intensity commercial uses within walking distance of Downtown employment, services and amenities. One of the main goals for the RT areas is to retain the residential character and preserve and adaptively reuse historic buildings. New uses and development is compatible in style, scale and materials. In addition to residential uses, neighborhood-oriented services, such as a hair salon or corner store, are permitted in the RT areas.

The Residential Transition-1 areas are located in the Lettered Streets and Sehome Neighborhoods. The Lettered Streets section is flat in topography, and includes municipal parking facilities, Municipal Court, and several medical, dental and professional offices. The Sehome section of RT-1 is characterized by relatively level benches broken by steep hillsides. It is currently developed with a mix of single and multifamily housing, offices, and institutional uses such as churches and meeting halls.

The Residential Transition-2 area is located in the York Neighborhood and contains a mix of historically significant single-family residences and two historic churches, as well as several newer commercial buildings. The area was identified in a 2009 historic resource survey as being potentially eligible for the National Register of Historic Places as a historic district. Limited commercial uses, a lower height limit and housing density further support historic preservation in this unique area.

GOAL 4.4: The historic character of the Residential Transition areas is maintained while appropriate and compatible infill development occurs.



The existing historic residential character in the RT-2 subarea includes single-family homes.

- POLICY 4.8:** Encourage preservation and adaptive reuse of historic buildings, including single-family residences, as infill occurs.
- POLICY 4.9:** Encourage the design of alterations and additions to existing buildings to be compatible with historic features.
- POLICY 4.10:** Maintain the existing streetscape, especially in the RT-2 zone, with sidewalks separated from the street curb by landscaping, street parking, and development having windows and prominent front entries oriented to the street.

RESIDENTIAL TRANSITION LAND USE DESIGNATION: Multifamily Residential, High Density

Note: See the City Center Implementation Strategy for recommendations intended to address the Downtown land use goals and policies listed in this chapter.

CHAPTER 5. DOWNTOWN ACTIVITIES AND TOURISM

Arts, Culture and Entertainment

Downtown Bellingham's arts and cultural activities provide a wide range of attractions and settings, including exhibits in museums and galleries; the performing arts; the architectural arts expressed through new and historic buildings and heritage tours; murals, sculptures, and other urban art.

On any given night, music emanates from Downtown venues, drawing crowds to listen to a variety of music styles. Occasionally, Downtown's streets and alleys serve as the platform for concerts and small festivals such as Downtown Sounds, a weekly summer concert series held on Bay Street. Balancing the interests of music fans and Downtown residents will be an ongoing issue as more people choose to live Downtown.

GOAL 5.1: Downtown's concentration of art galleries, live music, theatres, museums, the Central Library and other creative and cultural destinations is cultivated, expanded and promoted.

POLICY 5.1: Maintain a healthy mixed-use environment that respects the needs of both residents and late night venues, as outlined in the City's Entertainment District ordinance.

POLICY 5.2: Encourage better design and construction practices to reduce unwanted sound transmission arising from musical and other entertainment establishments, minimizing potential conflicts with residents and other users of Downtown.

POLICY 5.3: Highlight Downtown's entertainment and cultural offerings in tourism materials.

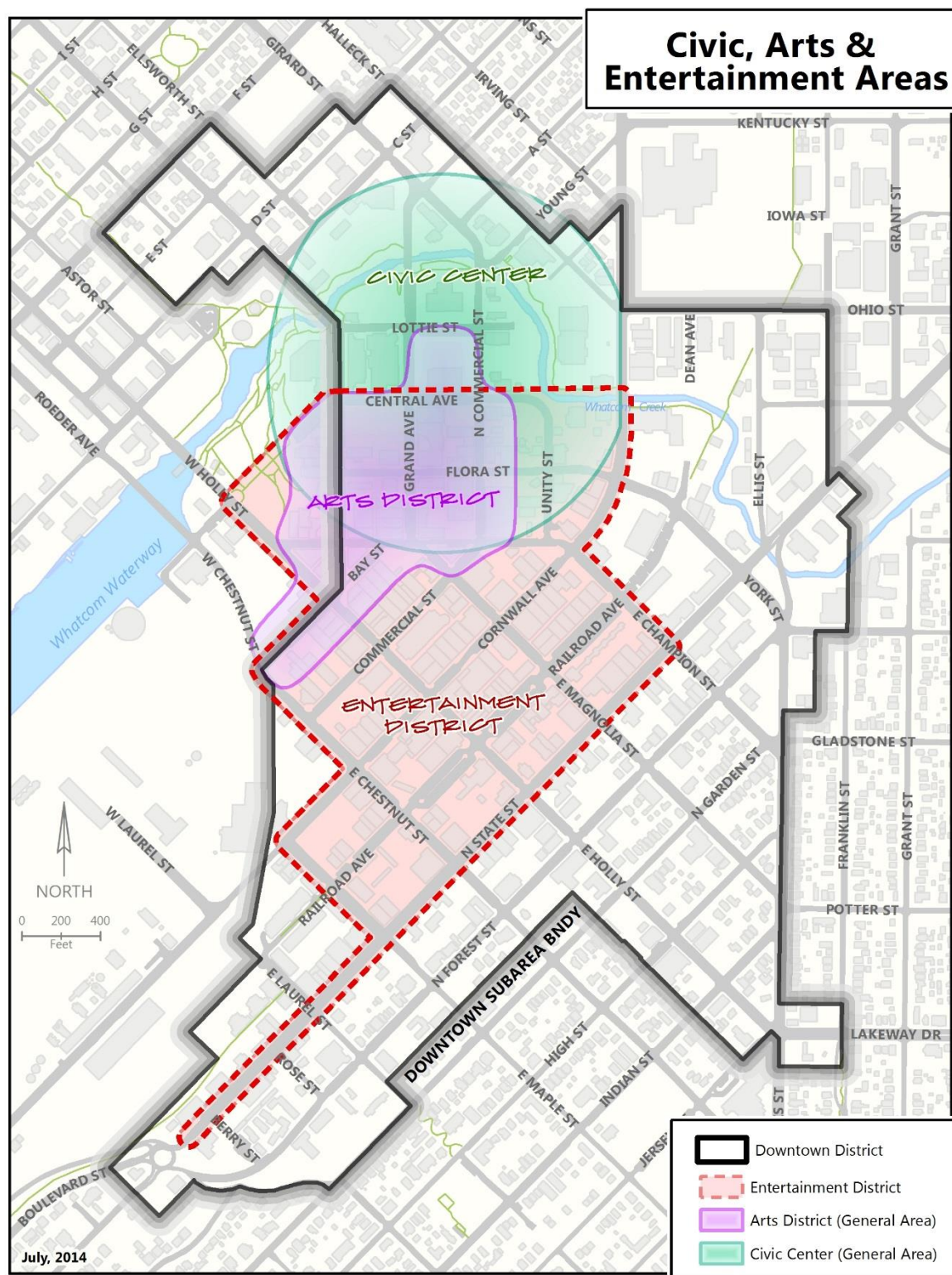
POLICY 5.4: Incorporate art wherever possible into the Downtown streetscape, including the small triangular spaces at the ends of blocks where differing street grids intersect.

POLICY 5.5: Continue to foster partnerships between property owners and arts organizations to create street-level interest in vacant ground floor commercial spaces with pop-up galleries and art in display windows.

Arts District In 2002, the City of Bellingham and Whatcom County formed the Bellingham/Whatcom Public Facilities District and identified an area within the Commercial Core as a regional center for culture and the arts. The Arts District connects Downtown to the Old Town and Waterfront Districts, and includes assets such as the Mount Baker Theatre and Whatcom Museum. The [Arts District Conceptual Plan](#) contains the specific vision for this area.



Downtown public art draws interest from visitors of all ages.



- POLICY 5.6: Enhance and upgrade the City's Downtown outdoor art collection.
- POLICY 5.7: Encourage private and public galleries and other art venues to locate Downtown, especially within the Arts District.
- POLICY 5.8: Enliven Downtown streets by allowing and encouraging street performers.
- POLICY 5.9: Continue to support the performing and visual arts as important Downtown attractions.
- POLICY 5.10: Support community arts events, such as monthly “First Friday Art Walks”.
- POLICY 5.11: Support educational or entertainment activities and events for all ages at the Central Library and its adjacent lawn, within the public right-of-way, and on other City-owned Downtown properties to activate public spaces.



The Lightcatcher building was added to the Whatcom Museum campus in 2009.

The Arts significantly impact the economy of Downtown, not only by providing jobs within the industry, but also by attracting customers who go on to spend money on surrounding restaurants, bars and services.

Whatcom Museum

The Whatcom Museum provides cultural, natural, and historical education and exhibitions at three distinctive buildings in Downtown’s Arts District: Old City Hall, the Syre Education Center and the Lightcatcher building.

- POLICY 5.12: Support the ongoing expansion and exhibitions of the Whatcom Museum campus as a regional destination.



Old City Hall is part of the Whatcom Museum campus.

Mount Baker Theatre

The iconic Mount Baker Theatre is the largest performing arts facility of its kind north of Seattle. Owned by the Bellingham-Whatcom Public Facilities District (a partnership between Bellingham and Whatcom County) and managed by the non-profit Mount Baker Theatre board, it is housed within the City's original City Hall, a beautifully-restored 1927 architectural treasure, listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The theatre hosts world-class performances in a wide realm of genres, catering to a variety of ages and interests.

POLICY 5.13: Support the maintenance, restoration, construction and expansion of major cultural facilities such as the Mt. Baker Theatre and the Bellingham Central Library.

The Bellingham Library

The Bellingham Central Library is located in the Civic Center. The current building housing the library was constructed in 1951, and added onto in 1983. The Library Board of Directors has, in recent years, engaged the community in a discussion regarding the future of the facility. In 2013, the board adopted a five-year strategic plan that includes a goal to replace the current facility.



Replacement of the Bellingham Central Library is a Downtown priority.

Because libraries generate a steady stream of visitors, they have the ability to act as a destination attraction and catalyst for place-based economic development. A new facility in Bellingham could further boost the library's use. For example, the Seattle Public Library doubled the use of their library from 4,000 to 8,000 visitors a day when a new building was built in 2004. A new or expanded library would bring even more people (customers) to

Downtown, adding to the vitality of the area. The library could serve as an anchor tenant in a new, mixed-use development, while contributing to Downtown economic development. If strategically located, a new library could also spur redevelopment of the area around it and add to the appeal of living or doing business Downtown.

GOAL 5.2: Civic uses, such as a new Central Library, reflect the community's needs and vision well into the future and promote connections between other key cultural facilities.

POLICY 5.14: Locations for civic facilities, such as the Central Library, should help stimulate Downtown commercial and retail activity and redevelopment.

Note: See the City Center Implementation Strategy for recommendations intended to address the Downtown arts, entertainment and cultural facilities goal and policies listed in this chapter.

Downtown Tourism

An analysis of tourism trends in Whatcom County found that one of the most common activities for visitors is to spend time sightseeing in Downtown Bellingham³. This is largely due to the ambiance and authenticity of Downtown, the dining and entertainment options, and the cultural and arts amenities described earlier in this chapter. Interest in Downtown tourism experiences continues to grow.

The Bellingham-Whatcom County Tourism Bureau promotes Bellingham as authentic and natural, appealing to those that seek experiences in the natural environment, as well as in the area's cultural heritage.⁴ Sometimes referred to as "geo-tourists", these people prefer traveling to places where tourism sustains or enhances a community's character - its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and the well-being of its residents. Among other outcomes, geo-tourists seek rewarding cultural experiences and authenticity. They may enjoy walking through historic neighborhoods and strolling, shopping and dining in architecturally-interesting historic areas.

Bellingham is well positioned to benefit from the expanding heritage tourism market. Providing an attractive streetscape and shopping environment, rehabilitating historic buildings and developing an overall branding and marketing package will help promote the historic character of the City Center.

GOAL 5.3: Downtown Bellingham is an increasingly attractive destination for tourists.

POLICY 5.15: Encourage investment to bring new hotels, motels and/or hostels to Downtown.

POLICY 5.16: Enhance the way-finding experience of visitors Downtown by providing signage, clear driving directions, information kiosks, a visitor's center, and pedestrian amenities.

POLICY 5.17: Promote Downtown as a historic destination.

POLICY 5.18: Support efforts to develop a unified brand image and advertising campaigns, highlighting easy access, energetic atmosphere, unique history and strong local economy.

POLICY 5.19: Encourage coordination of the Arts, Tourism, and Historic Preservation commissions and the Museum and Design Review Boards to reinforce and coordinate their respective goals and missions.

POLICY 5.20: Work with the Bellingham-Whatcom Tourism Bureau and others to staff a Downtown tourist welcome center and to promote Downtown's historical, cultural, arts and other entertainment activities.

Note: See the City Center Implementation Strategy for recommendations intended to address the Downtown tourism goal and policies listed in this chapter.

³ Bellingham and Whatcom County Tourism Analysis and Recommendations, Dean Runyan Associates, 2010.

⁴ 2003 Bellingham / Whatcom County Tourism Bureau Branding Strategy.

CHAPTER 6. PARKS, OPEN SPACE AND PLACEMAKING

Downtown's location on the bluff overlooking the waterfront offers spectacular views of Bellingham Bay. Access to trails, wooded areas, and parks within ½-mile walking distance is available from many points Downtown. This chapter provides an overview of existing park amenities, ideas for enhancing underutilized public areas, and a future vision for a plaza and parks within Downtown and the greater City Center Neighborhood.

Inviting and useable public spaces are integral to the success of an evolving Downtown. Studies show the health benefits of nature are especially important in an urban environment where a fast-paced life surrounded by hardscape has historically been the norm.⁵ Safe, inviting, and comfortable public parks, plazas, trails and open space are vital for urban livability, quality of life, and the overall success and health of a growing downtown.

The guiding values and principles for parks identified in the [Parks, Recreation, and Open Space](#) (PRO) Plan chapter of the [Bellingham Comprehensive Plan](#) form the basis for this chapter. The PRO Plan includes the most recent maps of the parks, trails and open space located not only Downtown, but throughout the rest of the City.

Maritime Heritage Park

Maritime Heritage Park (MHP) was designed to serve a broad range of activities and users within a one-mile radius. Although technically located in the Old Town District, MHP serves as one of the primary open spaces and recreational resources for the Downtown area.



Maritime Heritage Park is an important open space amenity for not only those who live and work Downtown, but also the broader community.

Current amenities include a large grassy lawn and riparian trail system with native plant interpretative signs. Access to Whatcom Creek, the Whatcom Museum on the bluff, Old Village Trail, and the waterfront make this park a key connecting point between multiple Downtown amenities. Views of Bellingham Bay from the amphitheater are stunning. Shade trees, benches and a sculptural fountain also provide additional areas of interest. In the future, Maritime Heritage Park will also serve as a key connector, via Central Avenue, to the large network of public parks, shoreline access and trails associated with the Waterfront District.

⁵ <http://depts.washington.edu/hhwb/>

Unfortunately, the park is currently underutilized and has become a popular place for loitering and criminal activity. In 2013, a work group was formed to identify strategies to revitalize the park. The group conducted an analysis of the park's conditions and developed a series of prioritized recommendations. *The Maritime Heritage Park Report and Recommendations* addresses many of the safety and other issues that were raised during the process to develop the Downtown Bellingham Plan. The Old Town Subarea Plan also contains strategies for improving the function and safety of the park.

GOAL 6.1: Maritime Heritage Park fully realizes its function as a destination park for Downtown residents, the greater Bellingham community and visitors.

POLICY 6.1: Partner with community organizations to provide an ongoing variety of programmed activities in the park.

POLICY 6.2: Establish an active use in the Environmental Learning Center.

Note: See the City Center Implementation Strategy for actions intended to implement the Maritime Heritage Park Report and Recommendations.

Bellingham's Town Square

Historically, urban public squares have been host to many political, social and economic activities. Modern plaza development in the United States has been hindered by competing uses such as private building construction and space for parking and traffic maneuvering.

Successful town squares have a number of common elements, including prominent architectural features, a multitude of activities for all interests, food vendors, play areas and amenities such as seating areas for movies, concerts or other group activities. Depot Market Square serves this function during the Farmers Market and other community events; however, the desire for a true town square in the heart of Downtown was identified throughout the “myDowntown” public process. The identification of a new town square should take into account the elements necessary to ensure its success as a thriving public space. Ideally, a town square would be located in an area of Downtown not currently served by a park, plaza or other community gathering facility.

GOAL 6.2: Bellingham has a vibrant town square in the heart of Downtown.

Plaza/Placemaking Opportunities

Downtown contains several small plazas and underutilized areas within the public right-of-way that provide open space amenities for the district. Often, the management and purpose of these areas are unclear. The City can take an active role in promoting the use of these spaces so that they are more visible to the public.

An excellent example of Placemaking is the retrofit done in 2009 at the corner of Bay, Holly and Prospect Streets. The project established a gateway to the Arts District by repurposing a

Using Placemaking to Activate Public Spaces

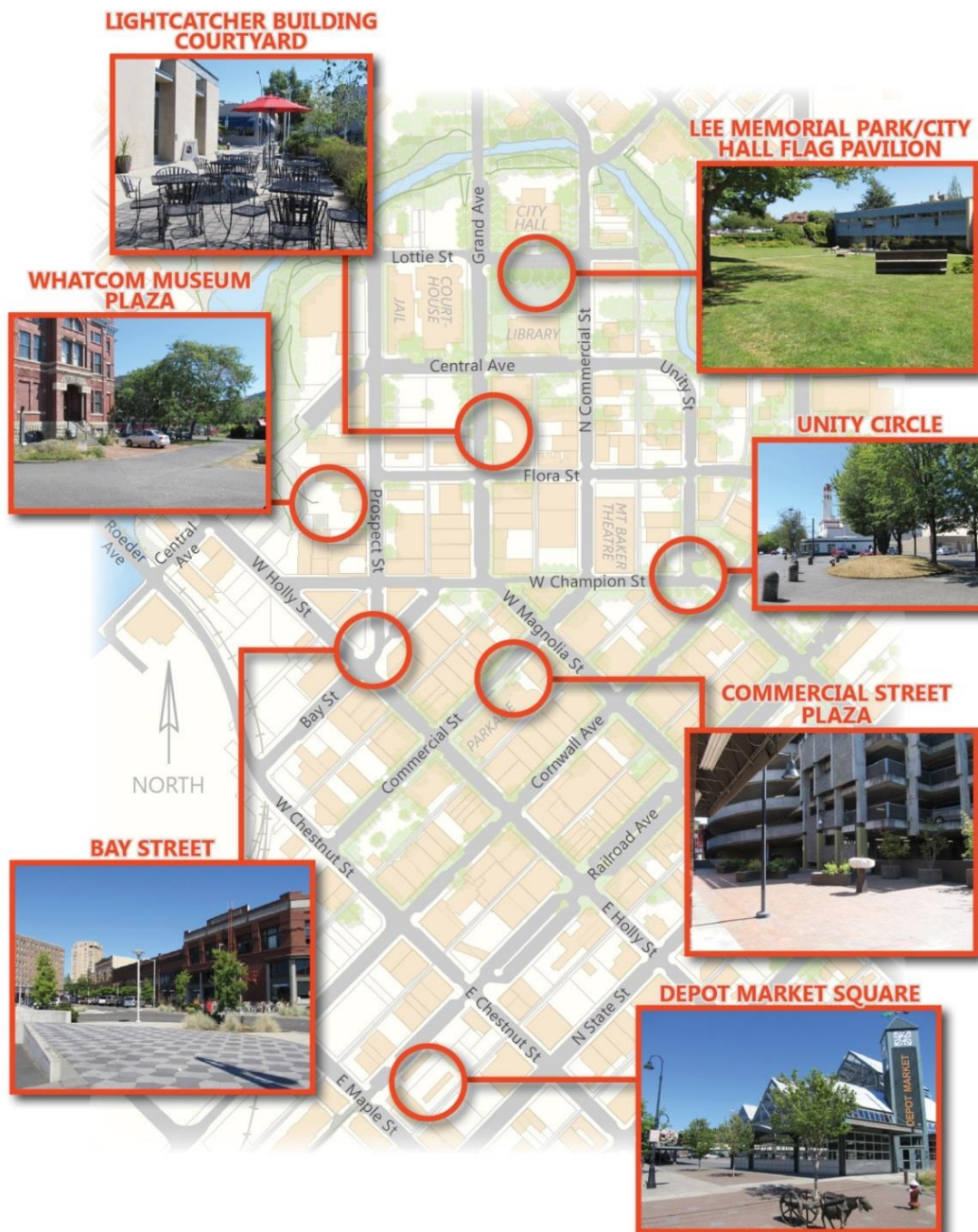
- The core principle of Placemaking is to focus on activities over aesthetics – what people are doing in a public space should drive what it looks like.
- Any great place should offer at least 10 things to do or 10 reasons to be there.
- Starting with inexpensive and/or experimental improvements allows users to test what works and what doesn't prior to making large financial expenditures.
- For more information, visit *Project for Public Spaces*: www.pps.org

traffic lane, widening sidewalks, and incorporating artistic streetscape elements and artwork. The additional space now accommodates businesses spilling out onto the sidewalks and plaza area, and facilitates outdoor community events on Bay Street, including the perennially popular Downtown Sounds concert series.



Improvements to Bay Street created additional public space. Nakano and Associates.

OPPORTUNITY SITES



GOAL 6.3: Plazas and pocket parks draw people to use public spaces in a variety of positive ways.

- POLICY 6.3:** Encourage use of new and existing public spaces by incorporating amenities and opportunities for interactive play and functions that serve all ages and demographic groups.
- POLICY 6.4:** Review and prioritize investment in identified Opportunity Sites.
- POLICY 6.5:** Conduct short-term experimental uses of public assets for community events and public outdoor space. This could include temporary street closures, events on the Commercial Street Parking Garage rooftop, and creative use of sidewalk space.
- POLICY 6.6:** Seek opportunities to expand on the successes of the Bay Street Plaza.

Depot Market Square

Bellingham's Farmers Market began 20 years ago in a parking lot on Railroad Avenue at the site of the City's first railroad depot. With financial support from the City and community advocates, Depot Market Square was built in 2006. On Saturdays, the site comes to life as the home of the Bellingham Farmers Market, a weekly activity that makes the Depot Market Square a hub of Downtown activity. Over 2,000 visitors flow through the market each week, perusing a variety of farm, craft, botanical and food stalls. They often continue on to patronize other Downtown businesses. The Farmers Market is one of the most treasured Downtown traditions and provides an anchor to the area. The Market also serves as a catalyst for new businesses, some of which go on to create their own permanent Downtown storefronts.

"The Farmer's Market is more than just a place to buy fresh produce and hand-crafted products. It fosters a social life and acts as a gathering place for friends and family. Not only is it a place for locals to congregate, but the market is also a tourist attraction. The market brings many people Downtown that might not otherwise come". - Mike Finger, first board president, Farmers Market

During the remainder of the week, the Depot often is vacant, except for one retail space and a parking lot scattered with vehicles. During the "myDowntown" planning process, workshop participants brainstormed ideas for how to activate this space to maximize its use as a public amenity year-round. In 2013, the Parks and Recreation Department took over the programming of the facility and is promoting the space for more community events.



Depot Market Square comes to life during the Farmers Market.

GOAL 6.4: Depot Market Square fulfills its potential as a community gathering space and a popular Downtown venue used for a variety of events and activities.

POLICY 6.7: Encourage and support establishment of a year-round Farmers Market.

- POLICY 6.8:** Continue to experiment with temporary closure of Railroad Avenue during market days.
- POLICY 6.9:** Enliven the Depot by adding retail and food services, programming the space for community events/competitions/etc., incorporating tables and movable furniture, and installing a permanent outdoor performance space.



An architect's rendering of an activated Depot Market Square. Zervas Group.

Commercial Street Plaza

This small public plaza northeast of the City's public parking garage has been enhanced over the years with the addition of art, landscaping, and street furniture. The plaza provides access to one of the only public restrooms Downtown.

Unity Circle

This swath of wide public sidewalk west of Cornwall and Magnolia Streets has historically been used as an informal gathering place, with a few benches and a grassy knoll. Benches and temporary artwork were removed in 2012, leaving the space unused and bare. Uses in close proximity include one of Downtown's only child care facilities and a large residential development blocks away at Walton Place. Children living in and visiting these areas could benefit from the use of this open space.

Whatcom Museum (Old City Hall) Parking Lot

The parking lot behind the Whatcom Museum contains a view of the San Juan Islands and Bellingham Bay, several pieces of public art, open space, and a trail to Maritime Heritage Park and the waterfront below. Some of the space is currently used for onsite parking; however, the area, including the alley along the north boundary of the Museum, has been identified as a potential public amenity and an important connection between the Arts District and Old Town.

POLICY 6.10: Use Placemaking, art, and other enhancement tools to improve and expand the public spaces and/or increase activities at the Commercial Street Plaza, Unity Circle, the Whatcom Museum parking lot, City Hall Flag Pavilion, Central Library lawn and Bay Street Plaza.

Note: See the City Center Implementation Strategy for recommendations intended to address the town square, parks, plazas and Placemaking goals and policies listed in this chapter.

Trail Connections and Open Space

Trails leading to and from Downtown provide a pleasant recreational experience for pedestrians and bicyclists. They also serve as part of the transportation network between neighborhoods, parks, schools, open space, civic facilities and commercial centers. These trails connect Downtown to adjacent and nearby neighborhoods and provide a more leisurely route than sidewalks and streets.

GOAL 6.5: Visitors and residents have well-connected, safe and pleasant ways to walk or bike to, from, and through Downtown, and can easily access nearby parks and trails.

POLICY 6.11: Continue to develop a coordinated circulation system with wayfinding and connections to existing trails and abutting neighborhoods to facilitate non-motorized transportation use and bring more people Downtown from adjacent neighborhoods.

POLICY 6.12: As redevelopment and infill continue to occur, seek partnership opportunities to add plazas and walkways that will enhance the existing open space network serving the urban core.

POLICY 6.13: Encourage participation in the City's "Adopt a Trail" program to promote stewardship of the trails that serve the Downtown area.

South Bay Trail

The South Bay Trail is one of the most utilized trails in the City, with especially high pedestrian and bicycle counts where it intersects with Wharf Street. And no wonder - this amazing recreational and transportation amenity connects Downtown to the Sehome and South Hill Neighborhoods, Boulevard Park, and the Fairhaven Urban Village, and ultimately to the Chuckanut mountains and Larrabee State Park, passing through some of the most beautiful shoreline scenery in the Bellingham.

Old Village Trail

The Old Village trail connects Downtown to Elizabeth Park and provides a serene pathway from Downtown to the Lettered Streets and Columbia Neighborhoods. Beginning at Maritime Heritage Park, the Old Village Trail was created along landscaped rights-of-way, connecting to Elizabeth Park and the rest of the Columbia Neighborhood.

Whatcom Creek Trail/Greenway

The Whatcom Creek Trail and Greenway is Downtown's premier open space area - a natural jewel and oasis in the heart of Downtown. This corridor provides access to a serene, wooded, natural area that not only protects a significant natural resource, but also provides an important outlet from the hardscape of the urban environment. The creek has undergone years of restoration, transforming it from a dumping ground overgrown with invasive plants and debris to a natural landscape and trail

corridor. The corridor is also an important ecological and recreational link to all three City Center Districts.

The pedestrian trail and habitat along the edges of the creek should continue to be protected, enhanced, and restored. Vegetation in the corridor should meet habitat restoration goals and be maintained to allow visibility to and from the trail to keep the area safe and comfortable for users.

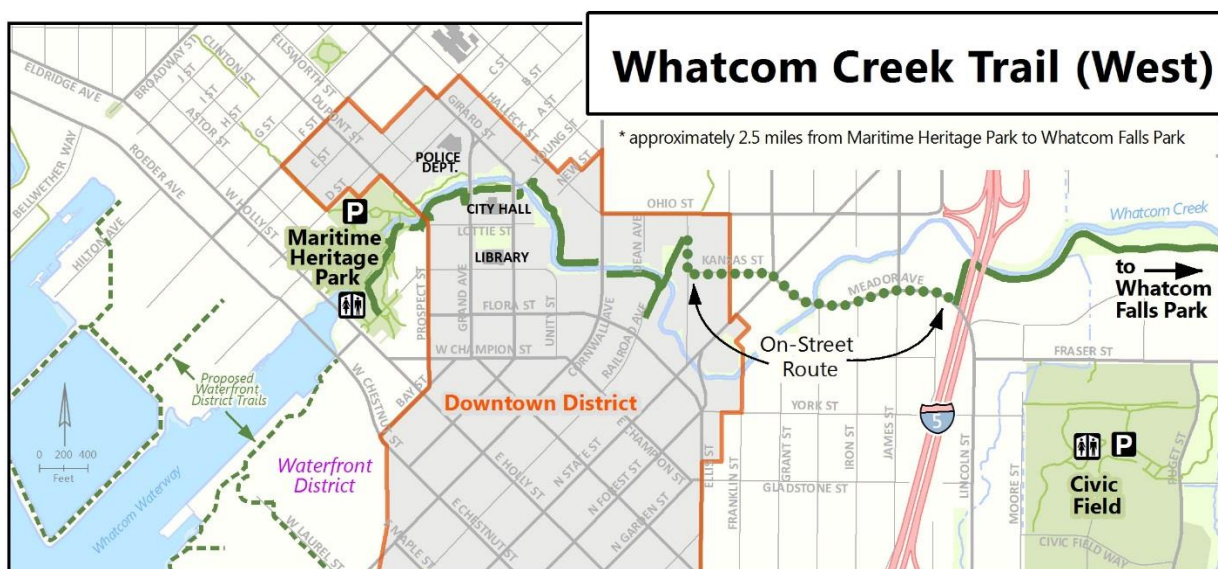
GOAL 6.6: New development celebrates, complements and provides improved access to Whatcom Creek.

POLICY 6.14: Support preservation of the Whatcom Creek corridor as a riparian, scenic and recreational corridor.



Habitat in the Whatcom Creek Corridor has undergone significant restoration efforts.

POLICY 6.15: Design standards should encourage developers to orient new buildings, whenever possible, toward the creek and to provide connections from new development to the trail.



Note: See the City Center Implementation Strategy for recommendations intended to address the Downtown trail and open space goals and policies listed in this chapter.

CHAPTER 7: TRANSPORTATION AND STREETSCAPE DESIGN

Downtown offers a compact, pedestrian and transit-oriented environment, accommodating a lifestyle that is not dependent on the automobile. Nearly all that Downtown has to offer - shops, restaurants, and entertainment - is within a 10-minute walk. This chapter highlights the variety of transportation options for moving people to, from, and within Downtown. It also highlights the revitalization of the public realm, including streets, sidewalks, and streetscape amenities, and future opportunities for making the best use of the public right-of-way.

Existing Transportation Network

As emphasized in previous chapters, Downtown Bellingham is the regional center for shopping, dining and entertainment, and a popular destination for City and County residents, as well as tourists from outside Whatcom County. Over 98% of those employed Downtown commute daily from elsewhere in the City, County and beyond⁶. This daily influx of people into Bellingham has a tremendous influence on both the Downtown and City-wide transportation networks.

Most Downtown employees and visitors arrive by private automobile, but there are a significant number of transit, bicycle, and pedestrian commuters into Downtown Bellingham, as well. This is due partially to the City's emphasis on providing non-automotive transportation facilities, including well-connected sidewalks, curb extensions with shorter crosswalks, dedicated bicycle lanes, walking and biking options on separated pathways, and the support of Whatcom Transportation Authority's (WTA) high-frequency GO lines based in central Downtown.



Bicycling is a popular way to travel around Downtown.

The [Transportation Element](#) of the *Bellingham Comprehensive Plan* includes City-wide transportation mode shift “target goals” to reduce automobile trips as an overall percentage of total trips made in the future, while increasing non-auto trips. These targets are important to meet the City's sustainability goals, but must be balanced with the reality of geography and the important destination role of the Downtown.

Motorized Transportation

Downtown Streets

The existing arterial street grid in Downtown Bellingham is well-established and compact, with most blocks approximately 440 feet by 240 feet in dimension. Major arterial streets connect Downtown to Bellingham's other neighborhoods, allowing convenient travel into and through the Downtown area.

GOAL 7.1: Downtown has an interconnected multi-modal transportation system that provides safe and convenient travel opportunities for pedestrians, bicycles, transit, automobiles, and freight, while also supporting established economic development goals.

⁶ 2010 US Census.

POLICY 7.1: Balance the need for freight truck access and the efficient movement of freight and goods with the needs of other transportation modes in the limited physical space on Downtown streets.

POLICY 7.2: Streetscape improvements, such as visually narrowing streets and providing landscaping and other features, should be considered to slow traffic on Downtown streets.

Public Transit Service

Public transit service throughout Whatcom County is provided by Whatcom Transportation Authority. Downtown Bellingham is extremely well-served with high-frequency transit service provided from WTA's main transit hub, Bellingham Station, located between Magnolia and Champion Streets on Railroad Avenue. In 2013, over 400 WTA busses arrived and departed from Bellingham Station each weekday, with almost 250 busses on Saturdays and almost 150 busses on Sundays.⁷

GOAL 7.2: Transit service to and from Downtown offers a quick, safe, affordable and convenient option for commuters, residents and visitors.



The Wharf Street roundabout was constructed in 2013, improving traffic flow and providing a gateway into Downtown from the south.



WTA's Bikes on Buses Program makes it easy for cyclists to use transit.

POLICY 7.3: Support WTA, Western Washington University, and other service providers in the delivery of an efficient, convenient, safe and affordable transit system.

POLICY 7.4: Establish shuttles or other transit modes to transport people between satellite parking areas and the Downtown core.

⁷ Per Rick Nicholson, WTA.



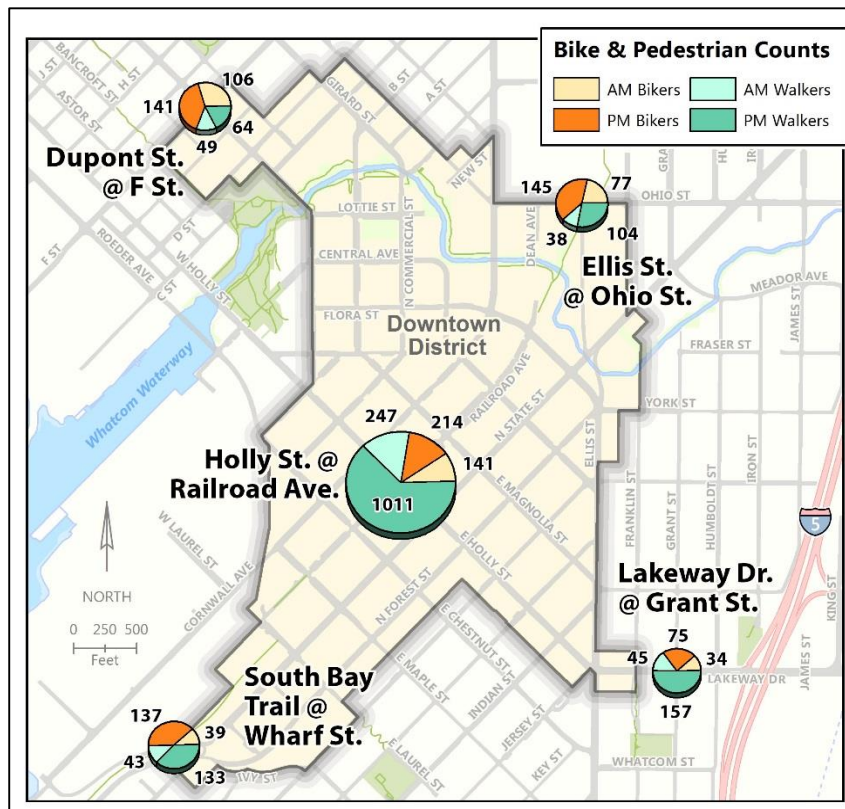
An architect's rendering of an activated plaza outside the WTA Downtown transit station. CDM.

Non-Motorized Transportation

As Bellingham has invested in multi-modal transportation improvements both in and leading into Downtown, the area has seen a corresponding increase in bicycle and pedestrian use. Each autumn since 2008, bicycle and pedestrian counts are collected at particular locations across the City. The count locations in and around Downtown consistently record some of the highest bicycle and pedestrian use in Bellingham.

Pedestrian Facilities

Pedestrian facilities are of paramount importance in a vibrant downtown environment, and have been heavily emphasized in all previous Downtown planning



efforts. The City has constructed or installed a wide variety of pedestrian amenities, including sidewalks, curb extensions, crosswalks, street furniture, street lighting, landscaping, waste and recycling bins, wayfinding kiosks and signs.

In 2011, Bellingham engaged in an effort to define a City-wide "Primary Pedestrian Network", which includes a prioritized list of sidewalk needs and intersection crossing improvements. The resulting [Bellingham Pedestrian Master Plan](#) was adopted in August 2012. While the Primary Pedestrian Network does not include all public streets in the City, it does include most of the arterial streets Downtown and many residential streets that connect to the Downtown. Sidewalk and crossing improvements within this area have been identified and prioritized.

The [Bellingham Pedestrian Master Plan](#) includes a recommendation to study and develop improvements to the following five specific Downtown intersections where collisions have been documented between pedestrians and vehicles:

- East Chestnut/North Forest;
- East Holly/North State;
- East Holly/Railroad;
- Chestnut/Cornwall; and
- East Magnolia/North State.

The East Holly/Railroad and East Magnolia/North State projects have been identified as capital projects that will be improved during 2014-2015. The North State Street/Laurel Street intersection reconstruction is also scheduled for completion in 2015. The pedestrian crossing of Ellis Street at the intersection of Gladstone Street should also be improved to enhance the connection between Downtown and the York Neighborhood.

Pedestrian accessibility needs, wayfinding, lighting improvements, and integration with existing and future trails are also recommended in the *Bellingham Pedestrian Master Plan*. Additional opportunities for street improvements identified during the "myDowntown" planning process are outlined in the Streetscape Design and Amenities section.

Connections to Adjacent Neighborhoods

Downtown is directly adjacent to four residential neighborhoods - Lettered Streets, Sunnyland, York and Sehome. Each of these neighborhoods has substantial residential populations that provide a major customer base for Downtown businesses. In 2013, over 8,000 Bellingham residents lived within a ¼-mile of Downtown, which is considered a five-minute walk for the average pedestrian. The combination of existing sidewalks and trails makes it easy to walk to Downtown from surrounding neighborhoods, but improvements in wayfinding and connections could be made in specific areas.



Pedestrian-oriented wayfinding signs Downtown add to the pedestrian experience.

The long-term redevelopment of the Waterfront District represents another important adjacent district within the City Center Neighborhood. As Waterfront District development occurs, the multi-modal transportation connections between the waterfront and Downtown will become increasingly important.

The City has made commitments to fund and construct multi-modal arterial streets with the full range of sidewalks, bicycle lanes, crosswalks, street lighting, and traffic signals to provide these connections. When ridership justifies the cost of providing service, WTA will also provide transit routes into the Waterfront District.

POLICY 7.5: Strengthen safe, convenient, and easily accessible connections to surrounding neighborhoods.

Bicycle Facilities

Downtown is a popular destination for bicyclists. Several Downtown arterials include marked bicycle lanes to safely accommodate riders. Bike corrals, racks, and covered bike parking provide secure locations for riders to park their bikes when they arrive. Provisions for both long- and



New bicycle parking requirements will make riding Downtown even easier.

short-term bicycle parking are included in the Downtown development regulations to ensure bike parking continues to be implemented with the construction of new buildings.

Two paved multi-use trails also provide pedestrian and bicycle connections into Downtown from surrounding neighborhoods – Whatcom Creek Trail (West) and the South Bay Trail. See Chapter 6 for more information on these trails.

Wayfinding and safety are becoming increasingly important issues where the South Bay Trail intersects with Laurel Street. A sign posted on the trail across from the Laurel Village apartments informs inbound travelers that the South Bay Trail ends at Laurel Street, but many bicyclists attempt to cross Laurel and continue down the alley, then also attempt to cross Maple Street. Traffic has increased on Laurel and Maple Streets, and in the alleyway over the past 10 years as hundreds of apartments and condominiums have been constructed on the Morse Hardware site. Safety improvements to the alley are discussed in the Alley Opportunities section below.

In 2013, Bellingham engaged in an effort to define a City-wide “Primary Bicycle Network”, which includes a prioritized list of bicycle facility needs and intersection crossing improvements. The Bellingham City Council approved the [Bellingham Bicycle Master Plan](#) during the spring of 2014. This plan established a Primary Bicycle Network that includes many streets Downtown and many streets that connect Downtown to nearby neighborhoods. See the [Bellingham Bicycle Master Plan](#) for a list of Downtown improvement projects and the most recent map of bicycle facilities.

The Primary Bicycle Network includes a range of bicycle facility types. These include traditional marked bike lanes on arterial streets, shared lane markings (“sharrows”) where bicycles and vehicles share the lane (such as on Indian Street), and also “bike boulevards” optimized for bicycle traffic on low-volume residential streets. In addition to bicycle facilities, crossing

improvements and connections between surrounding neighborhoods and important bicycle destinations in the City Center Neighborhood are identified and prioritized.

GOAL 7.3: Downtown's sidewalk and trail network safely accommodates pedestrians and bicyclists and provides linkages to regional trail systems.

POLICY 7.6: Link popular Downtown destinations by clear transportation connections, activity along sidewalks, safe crossings and directional signage.

POLICY 7.7: Fill infrastructure gaps in the sidewalk, bicycle, and multi-use trail networks between Downtown, the surrounding neighborhoods and the Waterfront District.

POLICY 7.8: Work with Downtown businesses to promote pedestrian, bicycle, and transit use for their employees and customers.

POLICY 7.9: Encourage a grade-separated multi-modal connection to the Waterfront District.

Note: See the City Center Implementation Strategy for recommendations intended to address the motorized and non-motorized transportation goals and policies listed in this chapter.

Streetscape Design and Amenities

A pedestrian-oriented environment is a basic ingredient of a successful downtown. Pedestrian amenities include wide sidewalks, paving treatments, directional signs, pedestrian-scale lighting, and street furniture that reinforces the safety and comfort of pedestrians.

Activating Streets as Places

Streets are Downtown's largest public spaces, yet much of their area is dedicated to moving and storing cars. The concept of "Streets as Places" suggests that, where appropriate, a more balanced sharing of space between vehicles and people adds interest and economic vitality to Downtown. Active streetscapes encourage people to walk to popular destinations, improve the safety and comfort of users and encourage the growth of retail and community institutions.



The streetscape along Champion Street is a good example of a "Streets as Places" transformation.

"Streets as Places" aligns closely with Complete Streets design concepts; both which are implemented through the *Bellingham Pedestrian Master Plan* and *Bellingham Bicycle Master Plan*, the Transportation Element of the *Bellingham Comprehensive Plan* and current City street design standards. The Complete Streets design concepts prioritize safe access for all users, including pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists and transit riders of all ages and abilities. Just like Placemaking, there is no prescriptive design for Complete Streets; each one is unique and responds to its community context.

Two successful “Streets as Places” projects that created a more balanced use of the right-of-way were constructed by the City in 2009 and 2010. The largest was the reconstruction of a major Downtown intersection at Bay/Holly/Prospect streets, which removed a right-turn lane and provided better traffic control on side streets. This allowed conversion of the former traffic lane into a public plaza.

Parklets

Another facet of the "Streets as Places" concept occurred in 2012-2013 with the installation of Bellingham's first "parklet". Parklets provide additional public outdoor space by retrofitting on-street parking stalls, creating a quick and economical solution to the public desire for wider sidewalks and additional outdoor space. They can enhance the streetscape through the incorporation of landscaping, art, or other amenities and provide a place for pedestrians to sit and enjoy their surroundings.



A parklet is a quick and inexpensive way to provide more public space Downtown.

GOAL 7.4: Creative alternative uses of the public right-of-way offer new opportunities for public space, while balancing the needs for traffic flow and parking.

POLICY 7.10: Use streetscape amenities to establish a unified image for Downtown and promote a sense of place.

POLICY 7.11: Allow and support parklets, bike corrals, temporary pedestrian zones, and other creative uses of the right-of-way in appropriate locations to activate the street and provide public space.

POLICY 7.12: Incorporate Placemaking principles where the right-of-way can accommodate attractive and inviting pedestrian amenities.

POLICY 7.13: Continue to promote uses and facilities that enhance the public realm, such as ground floor retail, plazas and parks, landscaping and street trees.

Streetscape Opportunity - State Street

North State Street is one of the main one-way arterials through Downtown Bellingham and serves as a major pedestrian, bicycle, transit, auto, and freight truck route. In 2001, the City determined that the three vehicle travel lanes on North State Street provided excess vehicle capacity and the corridor from York Street to Wharf Street was put on a “road diet”. This reallocation of public space reduced the street to two vehicle travel lanes to accommodate a new seven-foot wide bike lane from York Street to Wharf Street. The eight-foot wide on-street parallel parking spaces were retained on both sides of the street.



Businesses on State Street contribute to an active sidewalk.

Changes to North State Street have been positive for the bicycling community, but the two remaining 16-foot vehicle travel lanes make pedestrian crossings unnecessarily long. The wide travel lanes provide an opportunity to develop a plan for the corridor that could include some Placemaking and/or parking opportunities.

POLICY 7.14: A corridor plan should be developed that identifies and evaluates pedestrian environment, Placemaking and parking improvement opportunities on North State Street.

Streetscape Opportunity - Railroad Avenue

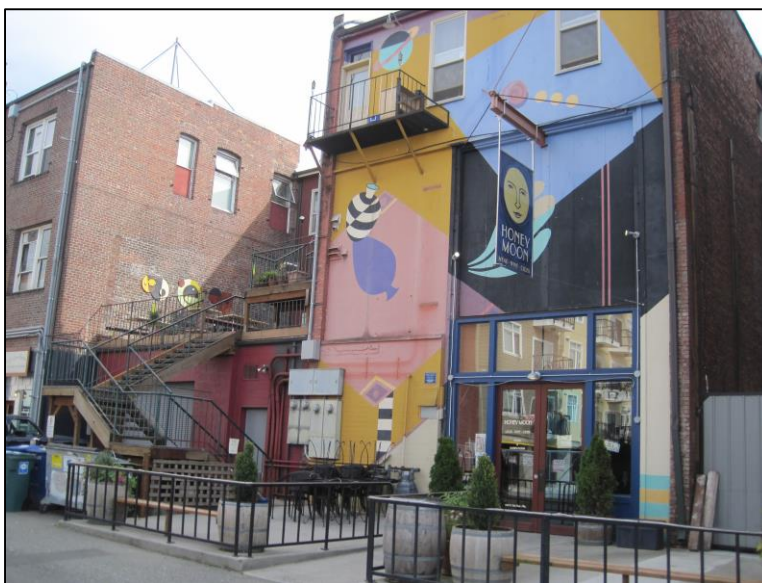
Railroad Avenue has historic significance as the site of the Downtown railway station and the only track on a major Downtown Bellingham street. Today, it connects several primary Downtown destinations - Depot Market Square on the south end, Bellingham Station in the middle, and major trail connections on each end (South Bay Trail on the south, and Whatcom Creek Trail on the north). It functions as a significant link in the Downtown pedestrian and bicycling system; however, many users may not be aware of the connections and destinations it serves. The City's Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Plan calls for well-signed on-street links to illustrate this connection and facilitate movement to and through Downtown.

There are a number of opportunities to enhance Railroad Avenue. The segment between Magnolia and Holly Streets and the northwest intersection of Holly Street was identified during the “myDowntown” planning process as one of the community's “Favorite Places” Downtown. The foot traffic here is some of the highest in the City, but space for pedestrians is limited by six-foot sidewalks in some areas. Bicycles also struggle to navigate safely on Railroad. The use of this 130-foot wide public right-of-way is not maximized to accommodate the multiple functions occurring along this stretch.

GOAL 7.5: Railroad Avenue provides a critical on-street link in the bicycle and pedestrian transportation system by incorporating wayfinding signage and by safely accommodating all modes of transportation.

Alley Opportunities

The scale of the buildings, narrow alley passageways and architecture make Downtown alleys visually alluring. Typically utilized solely for service areas (e.g. waste receptacles and deliveries, which must still be considered), these underutilized public ways hold the potential for providing additional public space and retail activity. Two Downtown alleys have been identified as good starting points for experimental alley uses.



Businesses along Morse Alley.

Morse Alley

The State Street/Railroad Avenue alley between Laurel and Maple Streets, informally known as "Morse Alley", has become a popular place for business activity, with several storefronts using it as their primary business frontage. This presents particular challenges for ensuring the safety of pedestrians and bicyclists utilizing the space, especially considering the concurrent increase in the number of residents driving down the alley to access parking garages.

Commercial Street Alley

The Commercial/Cornwall Avenue alley behind the Commercial Street Public Parking Garage (between Holly and Magnolia Streets) was identified as a prime location for enhancement. Some patrons of the parking facility use this alley to access the garage. It also leads directly to the Commercial Street Plaza and the rear access to businesses fronting on Cornwall Avenue. Any improvements should be pursued in partnership with the adjacent businesses and other interested stakeholders.

GOAL 7.6: Downtown alleys are clean and safe, with targeted corridors serving as bicycle or pedestrian connections where appropriate, and may include public space amenities and retail destinations.

POLICY 7.15: Accommodate all users of alleyways and support businesses adjacent to alleyways.

POLICY 7.16: Where appropriate, install warning signs or alternative surfacing treatments to signal to all alley users that this is a shared space and to use caution.

Note: See the City Center Implementation Strategy for recommendations intended to address the streetscape and alley goals and policies listed in this chapter.

CHAPTER 8: PARKING

Proper management of the parking system offers employees, customers and residents of Downtown a wide range of appropriate and easily-accessible off-street parking choices. Parking is also provided along most of Downtown's roadways, helping to slow drivers and providing easy access to customers and short-term visitors. Parking policies and requirements can have a strong influence on both the built and natural environment in a community. In a mixed-use area with access to transit and walking, flexible parking requirements can help encourage growth and meet other community goals, such as sustainability and health.

Current Conditions

A [2013 parking study](#)⁸ assessed on and off-street parking utilization, future parking needs, and parking management strategies. The study area encompassed the Downtown, the Old Town District and residential portions of the York and Sehome Neighborhoods. A summary of the results is shown in the table below.

2013 Parking Study Summary

Parking Location	Number of Spaces	% Studied (of supply)	Avg. Utilization	Avg. Turnover
On-Street	2,773	98%	50-60%	< 1 hour
Off-Street	6,695	22%	40-50%	< 2 hours
Totals	9,468	44%		

These results reflect several points:

- 1) The turnover of the parking system is working as intended, with on-street turnover occurring more frequently and longer-term parking occurring off-street.
- 2) There is parking capacity throughout the entire study area through 2036, which allows time to plan future parking needs and adjust management strategies as needed to best distribute the demand.

Although the study indicates overall capacity throughout the broad study area, there were some areas of Downtown where utilization exceeded 85%. This utilization rate is the point at which drivers tend to circulate as they look for available stalls, compounding traffic problems. "Hot spots" include:

- The area north of Whatcom Creek on C Street in the Lettered Streets Neighborhood;
- Holly Street (primarily near the intersections with High/Forest Streets and Railroad/Cornwall Avenues);
- The Arts District (Bay & Champion Streets area); and
- North Forest Street.

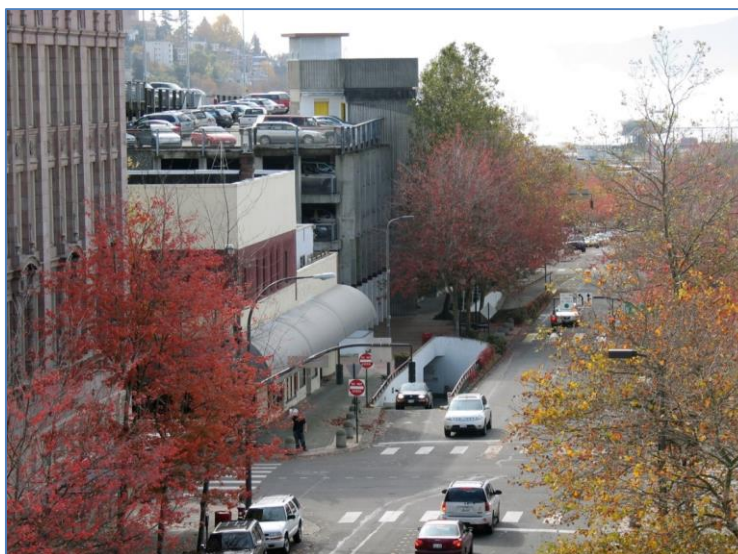
⁸ By the Transpo Group.

Management strategies for addressing this disproportionate demand include evaluating the feasibility of variable pricing (i.e. higher cost to park on highest demand blocks, less costly to park off-street, etc.), encouraging non-motorized transportation modes, adding to the parking supply, and employing signage and technologies to alert drivers to preferred parking options.

A comparison to a previous 2005 parking study of just the Downtown Commercial Core indicates that on-street parking demand has decreased 10-12%, despite a reduction in the overall supply. Also, off-street parking demand increased by 11-16%, despite an increase in supply. This is a positive indication of a continuing shift of parking utilization to off-street facilities in support of leaving on-street spaces available for short-term customer use.

Future Parking Forecast

Future parking demand and supply was estimated through the year 2036 using growth projections for both the commercial and housing sectors. These projections were based on a combination of the City's historic and anticipated rates of development Downtown, the assumed rate of absorption of vacant commercial square footage, and the adopted Old Town development assumptions. Overall, the total forecasted growth for the parking study area, which is broader than the Downtown District, is approximately 690,000 sq. ft. of commercial space and 2,300 housing units.



The Commercial Street public parking garage underwent several improvements beginning in 2014.

Supply calculations were conservative, applying an assumption that all existing surface parking lots currently available for public parking could be converted to private use (resulting in a loss of 1,130 parking spaces). Although this scenario is unlikely, especially considering recommendations within this plan that encourage shared and unbundled parking, it was determined to be prudent in forming a plan for the “worst case scenario” of parking supply.

Together, these demand and supply numbers result in an overall 85% utilization rate by the year 2036.

This estimate assumes increased demand over a 22-year period, indicating ample time for continual monitoring and adjustment of management policies and strategies as needed to ensure the utilization rate stays well below this level. Tactics for parking management are described below.

Parking Management

Management of Downtown parking is key to supporting the function and flow of traffic, as well as the health of the Downtown economic environment. Parking management strategies include improving efficiency, reducing demand, increasing awareness and enforcement, increasing supply, and monitoring progress.

GOAL 8.1: Maximize the efficient use of the existing parking supply in on-street, off-street and private parking facilities and areas.

- POLICY 8.1: Improve the public awareness of the benefits of the parking system while providing for fair and equitable use.
- POLICY 8.2: Enhance wayfinding and information about parking availability by improving signage and exploring new technologies, including Intelligent Transportation System and mobile applications for payment, availability and locations for parking.
- POLICY 8.3: Pricing for parking should be tied to specific performance benchmarks. Areas and times with higher demand for parking should have a higher cost to park. Variable rates responding to demand should be considered for implementation.
- POLICY 8.4: On-street parking should primarily serve the short-term parking needs of street level retail and service customers.
- POLICY 8.5: Off-street peripheral lots and parking structures should be primarily dedicated to employee, resident and other long-term parking uses and connect to the transit system. Continue to price parking lots lower than on-street parking to maximize this type of use.
- POLICY 8.6: The use of free on-street parking should be minimized. Where free parking is provided, enforceable time limitations should be established.
- POLICY 8.7: Enhance efficiency of enforcement through use of technology.



Parking meters along Railroad Avenue.

POLICY 8.8: Conduct enforcement activities in a courteous and respectful manner to protect the visitor-friendly atmosphere of Downtown.

POLICY 8.9: Fines and penalties should be established to discourage abuse of the parking system and reduce scofflaws or habitual offenders.

- POLICY 8.10: Consider using net revenues from parking fees and fines to provide public improvements in the City Center Neighborhood.
- POLICY 8.11: Consider implementation of a residential parking zone, time-restricted, or paid parking in the portions of neighborhoods adjacent to Downtown.

POLICY 8.12: Where possible within the existing curb-line and where it will not adversely impact transit, bike routes, or truck routes, increase the on-street parking supply through changes in parking configurations and dimensions.

POLICY 8.13: Encourage Downtown employers to create incentives for their employees to park in lesser-used off-street facilities.

POLICY 8.14: Encourage building owners and property managers to include parking as a separate line item in leases and sales agreements, also referred to as unbundling.

POLICY 8.15: Provide safe and secure public bicycle storage facilities and on-street bicycle racks to meet the increased demand at transit centers, as well as near parking garages and public buildings.

POLICY 8.16: Removal of parking spaces for pedestrian facilities, stormwater, recreation, open space, urban amenities or other non-parking related functions should occur only after careful consideration of the impacts of reducing supply.

POLICY 8.17: Evaluate opportunities for public/private partnerships to construct new structured parking facilities to increase supply, when deemed necessary, through monitoring and analysis. These structures should be within mixed-use buildings.

Note: See the City Center Implementation Strategy for recommendations intended to address the parking goals and policies listed in this chapter.