



Lake Whatcom Policy Group

December 2, 2020 Meeting

Brief Digest of Presentations and Discussion

Policy Group members in attendance: Todd Donovan (Whatcom County Council); Michael Lilliquist, Hannah Stone (Bellingham City Council); Bruce Ford (Lake Whatcom Water and Sewer District Board). Other representatives present: Todd Citron, Lake Whatcom Water and Sewer District

1. Aquatic Invasive Species: AIS Prevention Program Annual Review

Aquatic invasive species are non-native plants and animals that can cause negative economic, environmental, and human health impacts. Zebra and Quagga mussels are the most concerning. They are not yet in the Pacific Northwest, possibly because there is a regionwide network of inspection stations that is helping to prevent infestation. The local AIS program consists of education and mandatory inspections and has been in place since 2013. There are six inspection stations, and those at Bloedel Donovan Park on Lake Whatcom and the launch at Lake Samish that have the largest number of boaters are open seven days a week from dawn to dusk. Annual boat registration fees range from zero for hand carried watercraft to \$60 for the largest and most complex boats, although a \$10 reduction occurred in 2020 on all fees because of COVID.

COVID-19 required a retool of inspections and training. Staff were assigned specific roles and had designated devices to reduce cross-contamination. PPE was issued and disinfection of surfaces and equipment was frequent. All payment was on-line, as was staff training. No inspections occurred in April. Canadian visitors usually make up about 10 percent of all boats but were not present this year because of the border closure. Despite a delayed start and no Canadians, the total number of inspections countywide still went up from 12,923 in 2019 to 14,773 in 2020. Inspections were up 17% at Lake Whatcom and 30% at Lake Samish, although they were down at a few of the smaller stations.

In 2020, boats inspected had been in water bodies in 52 states or provinces and in 1,004 different water bodies, and 19 boats had last launched in mussel infested water bodies. Also, 270 boats had launched in or near mussel infested water bodies at some point. Of those boats inspected, about 1,700 required attention, ranging from draining of tanks to full decontamination. Use of the boat sealing program, where people who exit a launch after previously being inspected have a wire placed between their boat and its trailer, went up as people sought to save time when returning to one of the lakes.

Staff also completed watershed surveys to look for invasive plants and animals, which aids in early detection and monitors spread of existing species. In some areas artificial substrates are placed near the shore to collect plant and animal species. Although the most destructive mollusks have not taken hold locally, Asian Clams have been detected in Lake Samish, and recently more infestations have been found. New Zealand mud snails are in Lake Padden and have recently been found in Squilicum Creek.

There has been more support from the County Sheriff's officers on boat patrol in responding to this issue. Officers have been helping with boater education on the water.

2. Land Use: Review of status of Lake Whatcom Urban Growth Areas (UGAs)

There are a number of Urban Growth Areas surrounding Bellingham and many have been annexed in recent years. Of the UGAs in the watershed, areas near Britton Road and in Geneva have not been annexed. A University of Washington Urban Design and Planning graduate student research project surveyed residents of UGAs to record their knowledge of and support for annexation. [See <https://cob.org/gov/dept/pcd/university-of-washington-bellingham-annexation-research-initiative>] The researchers held neighborhood meetings and also went door to door. Of the UGAs in the watershed, there was some support for annexation on the west side of the Britton road area, but less on the east side of that area, and in Geneva. Getting access to City utilities is the main driver of support for annexation, and these UGAs have already been provided with utility access as a result of prior City policy which allowed extension of utilities outside City limits.

The land supply, the potential to add new building units, and population growth projections are the main factors that help determine the amount of land needed in UGAs. Since the Lake Whatcom UGAs do not have much buildout potential, and there is not a desire to increase density around the lake, they do not play a big role in these calculations. Also, the City and County development standards are now very similar. The main impact on the County if areas stay under County jurisdiction as opposed to being annexed is that the County has to pay for any road improvements needed.

If the Lake Whatcom-area UGAs were withdrawn during the next round of growth management, which is slated to be completed in 2025, there would not be a direct impact to the Water District. There are slightly different requirements as to whether properties under development are required to hook up to a sewer line depending on whether they are in or outside of a UGA, but the District's analysis showed there would be no actual impact on developable properties. If these areas remain in the UGA it allows for flexibility later in case the costs and benefits of coming into the city change. Annexations can now occur through interlocal agreements as well as a vote of the residents in the area.

3. Land Use: Land acquisition and management review

The City has recently completed some purchases of land near Olson Creek and Agate Creek. Both the City and the County are actively engaged in managing the lands that are under public jurisdiction. One issue that warrants some exploration next year is the impacts of recreation around the lake. Popular trails have created parking and waste problems at the end of Northshore Drive and have generated comments and complaints from residents as well as some safety concerns.

In some areas unauthorized mountain biking trails have been built which may be unsafe and result in erosion. Land managers of the different jurisdictions have been meeting to discuss recreation issues, especially the creation of mountain bike trails. A joint statement is being created in response to this concern. City staff have responded to similar issues on Galbraith Mountain and have informed the mountain biking community that trails built by volunteers will be removed until an overall trail plan can be developed.

The State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has applied for a grant to create trails on Stuart Mountain. This could take some of the pressure off other areas.

Another land management issue that has arisen is logging and other forest practices, which the state allows to occur in the rainy season outside of the allowed seasonal land disturbance period set up by the City and County. Staff will discuss with DNR the possibility of limiting the time of the year where logging or roadbuilding is allowed.

For City-owned lands, the City is looking to contract with a national organization to assess its potential for carbon sequestration and water quality improvements. Work on this is expected to begin in January.

4. Stormwater: Homeowner Incentive Program (HIP) update

City of Bellingham: Now that Whatcom County has a watershed stormwater utility, both the City and the County have separate funding streams to pay for their programs. The County will be modifying its program to more closely align with the land use patterns seen in the County. The City will continue to provide funding for HIP activities within County jurisdiction until the County funding stream is fully on-line. The City's program will remain largely the same, with additional focus on user-friendliness and making adjustments to the program to make it more appealing. The City will continue to consider the projects implemented in the HIP program as helping to meet its phosphorus and fecal coliform limits under the Department of Ecology's Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) requirements. More assistance may be provided to low income seniors to be able to participate. The contractor training program may change to improve its effectiveness. The City and County will continue to cooperate in joint management of most program activities.

Whatcom County: The County is working with the Whatcom Conservation District to modify some aspects of its program. Changes are expected to be finalized in December. The reach of the program will expand to Basin 3 at the South end of the lake. A do-it-yourself program will be maintained as will a program that targets shoreline properties. The County Council will be looking at the new interlocal agreement for the HIP program on December 8.

5. Administration: Discuss possible topics for 2021

The following items were tentatively added for the 2021 meeting schedule:

- Discuss Joint Councils Annual Meeting agenda
- Annual Lake Whatcom Build-out Report
- AIS early season update
- Water quality and data reports
- AIS 2021 program review
- Land acquisition program review
- Recreation management (parking, traffic, unauthorized trails, etc.)
- Logging and forest practice standards
- Discussion of acquisition funding
- TMDL progress – are we moving fast enough?

Policy Group members indicated that, to the extent possible, staff should highlight or emphasize policy issues in future presentations.