



Lake Whatcom Policy Group

June 2, 2021 Meeting

Brief Digest of Presentations and Discussion

Policy Group members in attendance: Todd Donovan, Ben Elenbaas (Whatcom County Council); Michael Lilliquist, Gene Knutson (Bellingham City Council); Bruce Ford (Lake Whatcom Water and Sewer District Board); Nancy Alyanak, Sudden Valley Community Association.

1. 2021 stormwater capital project review

City and County staff reviewed design and construction activities for stormwater capital projects for 2021 and beyond. City projects are:

- Advanced Phosphorus Treatment Media. The City has been working with the State Department of Ecology and Western Washington University for a number of years to develop new treatment processes and technologies. The result will be a new method of treatment that captures a high level of phosphorus (60+ percent) and can also handle high volumes of water. Lab and field testing is now complete.
- Park Place reconstruction. This project will treat 160 acres and remove 75 pounds of phosphorus annually. The project will treat some areas currently without treatment and will also improve treatment in some areas that have existing systems. Construction costs will be \$1.7 million which translates into a treatment cost of \$27,000 per pound of phosphorus removed, which is considerably lower than the average assumed for prior projects. The project is at 100% design and construction will start this month. Construction is expected to take two years. The project will use the newly developed technology described above, called Phosphorus Optimized Stormwater Treatment (POST).
- Donald Avenue Water Quality Facility reconstruction. This will cover 27 acres and result in 14 pounds per year of phosphorus being removed. Costs will be approximately \$300,000 which translates into a cost of \$21,000 per pound of phosphorus removed. Design will begin later this year and proceed through 2022, with construction occurring in 2023.

Whatcom County projects are:

- Silver Beach Phase 1. This will create a modular wetland to infiltrate water before it reaches the creek.
- Lake Louise Road. The County will work with Sudden Valley to replace existing pipes, basins, and vaults. The projects is in the design phase and construction is expected to occur in 2022.
- Academy Road. This project was completed by the City and County in 2015 and covers 125 acres. The land is owned by the City. Outflow was monitored and it was discovered that the treatment technology needed to be redesigned. Construction is expected to occur in 2023.

Staff answered questions raised in discussion. The POST technology is designed to work well in both low flow and high flow situations. The technology will be available to the County for future projects, but some projects require other technologies such as vaults.

The new County stormwater utility will provide \$40,000 to the Academy project. Some projects such as Park Place have an extended construction window because of the seasonal restrictions on land disturbances. It would be possible to seek an exception to these rules to speed up projects but that creates a situation where the governments are exempt from their own rules. Also, although speeding up construction would start phosphorus removal quicker, it also creates a risk that phosphorus will be introduced into the water flows during the rainy season.

2. Forest practices update

Staff have been looking at the phosphorus impacts of forestry practices (logging, thinning, roadbuilding etc.). One issue is that forestry practices on state or private lands can occur year-round including in the seasonal closure window that applies to residential owners and other public entities. Large disturbances during the rainy season can mobilize soil and lead to phosphorus being transported into streams and surface runoff. Staff have discussed this issue with the State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) staff, and DNR has indicated that they have the authority to restrict the time of year that forest practices occur. Staff will continue discussions with DNR to see if this can be implemented.

Forest practices receive Clean Water Act certification assurances from the Department of Ecology (DoE). These include assumptions that forestry activities have a minimum phosphorus impact on the land, and these assumptions are adopted as part of the TMDL phosphorus loading model. However, actual conditions at forestry sites are not monitored so there is no way to determine if these assumptions are accurate. A long-term study from 2009 to 2021 in a forest near Olympia indicated that these assurances may underestimate actual impact. As a result, DoE will reassess the assurances to make sure they contain accurate assumptions about impacts. Strengthened requirements may be put in place. Staff will continue to monitor this issue and will report back to the Policy Group if there are policy implications.

3. Annual Lake Whatcom Build-out Report

Every year since 2005 staff have carried out analysis of building activity in the watershed and have issued a report summarizing the findings. This is a repeatable gross analysis that relies on parcel and zoning information. It does not apply other criteria that could result in reduced development capacity, such as critical areas. Any parcel where development is worth more than \$10,000 is considered already developed. Commercial forestry and public park lands are also taken out of the developable lands category, as are vacant lots held by the Sudden Valley Community Association.

The analysis indicates that Sudden Valley and areas zoned rural have the most development capacity. Conversely, parcels in Bellingham and in the Urban Growth Areas (UGAs) are almost entirely built out. Developable lots vary substantially in size, with lots in the City of Bellingham and Sudden Valley being relatively small, and lots in the rural areas quite large. Most of the rural areas are zoned for one residential unit per 5 acres.

Development trends can be divided into periods, with the mid-2000s seeing much development, and the first part of the 2010s slower growth as a result of the Great Recession. Development picked up again starting in 2014 with a spike in the rural watershed, and there has been recent activity in the rural zones as 80 new units were built in the Wildwood resort. These build-out reports can be viewed at: <https://www.lakewhat.com.whatcomcounty.org/resources>.

4. Bloedel Donovan boat access issues

There has been recent interest in exploring whether the City could close the boat ramp at Bloedel Donovan park in the off season to prevent uninspected boats from launching. Currently there are two gates separated by a berm, and they could be closed. If the gates were closed then most boating in the lake would be limited to lake residents. Alternately, closing the gates at Bloedel Donovan could push boaters to unregulated launches such as the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) launch at South Bay. That launch does not have a gate. It is unlikely that WDFW would participate in a closure as they do not have local staff capacity to do this. Also, more traffic at those sites could overrun their capacity.

A phone number is available for boaters to arrange for off-season inspections of boats before launching. There are cameras at the launch area now, and staff do monitor off-season boaters. If unpermitted boats launch staff will try to identify the owner and provide education regarding the rules. Some boats do launch without inspections, and staff will work to get a better count of off-season users, and unpermitted launches, to inform any possible changes to current practices.

5. Topics for next meeting

The following topics were proposed for next meeting:

- Water quality and data reports
- TMDL modeling update
- Forestry issues update