

DATE: March 2022
TO: The Bellingham City Council and Mayor Seth Fleetwood
FROM: The Lake Whatcom Watershed Advisory Board
RE: Accelerating the Success of the Lake Whatcom Land Acquisition Program
CC: Whatcom County Council and Whatcom County Executive Satpal Sidhu

The Watershed Advisory Board (WAB) is respectfully submitting the following letter to provide our recommendations on accelerating property purchases in the Lake Whatcom Watershed.

For more than two decades the WAB has pursued its overriding goal -- as described in the group's enabling legislation -- to protect the source drinking water quality in the Lake Whatcom Reservoir. Bellingham Municipal Code also tells the Board it "shall be guided further by consideration of reducing development and development potential in the watershed."

All of us care deeply about the health and long-term viability of our drinking water. We acknowledge all of the great work and investments the City and County have made for Lake Whatcom over the last 20+ years but more needs to be done.

The WAB recommends the city work to accelerate the pace of land acquisition. Of the strategies currently employed to protect the watershed, the purchase and protection of land has one of the highest life cycle benefit/cost ratios in terms of phosphorus reduction per dollar spent. We believe purchasing land is one of the most powerful and pragmatic tools we have to protect the resource.

Our Primary Recommendation: Accelerate the pace of land acquisition and protect the remaining undeveloped lots

At the moment, there are about **3,300 acres of developable land** in the watershed, totaling over 1,400 units (according to the City's 2021 Build Out Analysis). In the last 5 years, 218 parcels have been developed, while in the same time period, the **City has acquired 358 acres of land in the watershed, totaling 41 units**. While laudable, it seems our land acquisition program is not keeping up with the pace of development (41 units purchased while 218 were developed). We believe it is critical to accelerate the pace of land acquisition and build upon a proven model, one that needs to be scaled, and have growth barriers addressed.

Further, there are roughly 7,000 acres of privately-owned forest land in the watershed. The Forest Practices rules governing privately owned forest lands are not designed to protect a source of drinking water supply, so logging on these lands has the potential to negatively impact Lake Whatcom water quality. By purchasing these

forest lands, the City is making another important step toward a long-term, sustainable solution to protecting our drinking water.

There seem to be a number of barriers to increasing our pace of land acquisition, including staff time, the land acquisition budget, finding willing sellers and appraised value limitations. In order to accelerate the City's efforts to acquire land in the watershed, the WAB submits to you the following recommendations.

- **Increase the city's investment** in staff time and resources dedicated to Lake Whatcom land acquisition and other protection efforts.
- The City Council should work with the County to establish clear **measurable** goals for land preservation in the Lake Whatcom watershed to enable measurement against the objective.
- Staff should seek more opportunities for **non-local matching funds** to help optimize funds in the Lake Whatcom Land Acquisition Fund such as federal funds under the Infrastructure bill or Clean Water Act.

It's critical we accelerate the pace of land acquisition in order to most effectively reduce pollution today and into the future. Water treatment and lake restoration will only get much more costly, so we are urging the City to act with an increased level of urgency. Land acquisition is the most cost-effective way to protect our drinking water.

The future of Bellingham's drinking water depends on your leadership. Every dollar we invest now to protect the lake will save money down the road for the City and its residents.

The WAB requests an opportunity to discuss these recommendations with you at an upcoming City Council meeting.

Thank you.

Respectfully,

WAB Members:

Garrett Leque, Chair

Laura Weiss, Vice Chair

Abe Lloyd

Angie Nelson

Allan Richardson

Ernest Scherb

Jeff Daffron

John Peppel