

Bellingham Comprehensive Plan

Community Design Chapter

2016



I. Introduction

Urban design is concerned with the arrangement, appearance, and functionality of the community. It focuses on the shaping and uses of urban public spaces— the public realm—and the way these public places are experienced and used. Architecture and urban form have played a significant role in defining Bellingham’s sense of place within its urban villages, including the downtown core, and neighborhoods.

Carefully planned urban spaces affect the quality of the physical environment and the perception, economic investment, and success of the City. The quality of the built environment is a key factor that affects the local image of Bellingham and sets the stage for economic activity. The City’s cultural identity is an important factor determining why people choose to visit, invest in or relocate here. Well-proportioned public spaces and streets contribute to business visibility, accessibility, and viability. The use of design features, such as appropriately-scaled lighting, street furniture, street trees, and other amenities, can help to define places. An authentic, well-designed urban environment uplifts the community spirit, becomes the stage on which the community conducts its daily life, and helps give identity and meaning to the special places that comprise Bellingham.



The Fairhaven Village Green is lively on a sunny day. Photo by Thomas Calderon.

Building and site design standards have long been discussed in Bellingham. Improvements to existing design standards and guidelines as suggested in this chapter are intended to result in commercial and residential developments that complement or enhance their surroundings, appeal to and accommodate pedestrians, help encourage transit use, and contribute to the economic vitality and perception of the City.

A key objective for the Community Design Chapter is to enhance Bellingham’s sense of place in a manner that reflects the community’s values and its deep connection to the history and traditions that distinguish Bellingham from other cities in the region. Shaping the built environment through high quality urban design requires resources and community consensus. Strong community support and interest exist for preserving and enhancing the City’s historic character while accommodating new growth and change. Good design need not increase the cost of new development; however, the absence of good design can adversely affect the quality of life in a neighborhood, or the commercial success of a commercial district.

Another key objective in this chapter is to promote community design for all ages and abilities, consistent with multigenerational planning principles. By designing for the older population and children, the community is made safer and more accessible for everyone.

Multigenerational planning is a comprehensive approach to community and economic development that enables people of all ages and abilities to lead active and fulfilling lives.

In the future, traditional single-family areas will be complemented by higher-density housing, jobs and services located in a number of urban villages and along high-capacity transit corridors. Urban villages will be linked by corridors that provide transportation choices and help connect residents to

jobs and services. Within and between these places will be green spaces that promote healthy lifestyles. Many of the existing “strip commercial” areas and “big box” retail areas will gradually redevelop into attractive walkable, mixed-use areas.

The purpose of the Community Design Chapter is to provide a framework for shaping the future form and character of Bellingham. This chapter focuses on placemaking and on those physical features which shape the setting for life in the community. It addresses the design of buildings, groups of buildings, spaces and landscapes, open spaces between buildings, streetscapes and other physical features. Policies in this chapter focus on the image and character of the City’s streets, urban villages,



This streetscape along Champion Street includes amenities that make it an extension of nearby businesses.

transit and commercial corridors, and appropriate infill development. They seek to enhance Bellingham’s commercial resources and provide guidance for new growth and redevelopment by strengthening the public realm and the image of the community. Attention is also given to residential neighborhoods and their interface with commercial areas, and historic preservation. The chapter identifies the physical features and spaces desired by the community, and establishes the goals and policies that reflect those desires.

additional element in the Comprehensive Plan. This chapter plays a critical role in maintaining and improving the physical quality of the environments that define the City’s identity and give character to its commercial districts and residential neighborhoods.

The Community Design Chapter is not a required Comprehensive Plan element under state law; however, because of the value Bellingham places on urban design, the City has chosen to include it as an

This chapter has been developed in accordance with the Whatcom County Countywide Planning Policies (CPPs) and is coordinated with the other chapters of the Comprehensive Plan.

These concepts outlined above are further defined under the following eight categories, which form the organizational basis for the goals and policies of this chapter:

- Streets as Places**
- Community Image and Character**
- District and Neighborhood Identity**
- Site and Building Design**
- Urban Villages and Transit Corridors**
- Appropriate Infill Development and Renovations**
- Historic Preservation**
- Public Spaces and Open Space**

The chapter's eight goals mirror the City's Legacies and Strategic Commitments and emphasize the interdependence of the environment, economy and society:

- GOAL CD-1** **Promote streetscapes that enhance the economic vitality and overall visual quality of the City, support the circulation network, and support pedestrian-scale streets and patterns of activity.**
- GOAL CD-2** **Express the City's distinct community identity and sense of place through improvements to the appearance of new development, commercial centers, urban villages, transit corridors and streetscapes.**
- GOAL CD-3** **Establish and reinforce district and neighborhood characteristics recognized both within the community and throughout the region.**
- GOAL CD-4** **Provide a well-designed, pedestrian-friendly, and community-oriented environment.**
- GOAL CD-5** **Ensure that the design and development of urban villages and transit corridors convey a positive image of the district they are located within, contribute to the economic vitality and perception of the City, and improve visual and physical transitions into adjacent neighborhoods.**
- GOAL CD-6** **Encourage contextually-appropriate infill development projects and property renovations.**
- GOAL CD-7** **Preserve historic and cultural resources.**
- GOAL CD-8** **Interconnect parks and natural features by establishing an integrated network of trails, parks and open spaces; maintaining existing trees; and incorporating landscaping into new developments.**

II. Goals and Policies

Streets as Places

City streets are a major physical component of urban structure and organization. They organize movement from one place to another, providing people with ease, safety, and choice when moving to and through places. City streets also structure how places and uses relate to one other. Major streets serve as gateways to the City and play a key role in expressing the image and character of the City, and of the areas they traverse. Coordinated street landscaping and improvements enhance the character of districts, soften the transition between commercial and residential areas, and create impressions and experiences for Bellingham residents and visitors. See the Transportation Chapter for more information.

GOAL CD-1 Promote streetscapes that enhance the economic vitality and overall visual quality of the City, support the circulation network, and support pedestrian-scale streets and patterns of activity.

Policy CD-1 Enhance the streetscapes along the City's major commercial corridors and other major streets through coordinated public and private improvements to convey a positive image of the district they are located within, contribute to its economic vitality and perception of the City, and improve visual and physical transitions into adjacent neighborhoods.

Policy CD-2 Ensure that land use, fire, and street standards are coordinated to provide greater pedestrian comfort and safety and more attractive alternative modes of transportation. Implementation strategies include:

- Discourage cul-de-sacs where topography allows and encourage well-connected streets in new and existing neighborhoods.
- Connect missing links within the Citywide multimodal transportation network for all modes of transportation, including pedestrians, bicycles, transit, freight trucks, and automobiles.
- Implement street calming measures in street designs to improve speed limit observance.
- Where possible, install physical buffers between the sidewalk and traffic such as site-appropriate street trees and landscaping, street furniture, rain gardens or other low impact development techniques, and on-street parking.
- Orient new development to streets, and effectively frame in the streetscape.
- Encourage commercial activities such as sidewalk retail and outdoor dining.
- Restrict parking to the side or rear of development, or within a structure.



Sidewalk separated from roadway with street trees and on-street parking along Garden Street. Photo by Jane Gershovich.

- Consider allowing on-street parking to count toward off-street requirements in selected mixed-use areas to encourage compact, pedestrian-oriented development and to lessen the size and impacts of large parking lots.
- Encourage the use of alleys for vehicle access and utility installation.
- Coordinate placement of physical features between streets and buildings to accommodate staging areas for emergency response vehicles, including aerial apparatus.
- Prioritize implementation of the above in designated urban villages as outlined in the Land Use Chapter.

Policy CD-3 Coordinate with local utility providers to identify priority areas for undergrounding or relocating overhead electrical and telephone/cable wires to remove visual clutter of existing infrastructure.

Policy CD-4 Install noise buffering in residential, commercial, and industrial development proposals adjacent to Interstate-5. This may include landscaping, berming, sound walls and other methods.

Community Image and Character

At a Citywide level, programs and improvements will be pursued to improve the visual character throughout Bellingham in order to enhance the economic vitality and overall visual quality of the community. The following goals and policies address this desired enhancement of character and identity.

GOAL CD-2 Express the City's distinct community identity and sense of place through improvements to the appearance of new development, commercial centers, urban villages, transit corridors and streetscapes.

Policy CD-5 Promote community identity through streetscape enhancements, building designs, and treatments marking the primary entrances, or gateways, to the City.

Policy CD-6 Strengthen the urban form of the City's urban villages and commercial, industrial, and institutional districts by building on the character of the existing historical and architectural fabric of the community, while allowing for the addition of complementary new development and urban design elements.

Policy CD-7 Ensure that new development is of a type, scale, orientation, and design that maintains or improves the character, aesthetics, and livability of neighborhoods. While compatibility is more of an issue in established neighborhoods, new development needs to take into account the context of the area and should result in an improvement to the surrounding neighborhood.

Policy CD-8 Discourage future extension of linear auto-oriented commercial development along rights-of-way in areas already developed. Existing auto-oriented strip commercial areas should be converted to support and contribute to walkable, mixed-use areas wherever possible.

Policy CD-9 Support public and private investment in improved infrastructure and amenities in existing neighborhoods, particularly in areas with high concentrations of low-income housing.

Policy CD-10 Encourage property owners to maintain their properties to help beautify their neighborhoods, including improvement of parking areas through the addition of landscaping, trees, boundary definition, and other enhancements.

Policy CD-11 Encourage the incorporation of public art features with new development.

Policy CD-12 Periodically review and update the City's zoning regulations, design standards and design review process to ensure they promote quality development and result in projects that consider and complement existing neighborhoods. Specific recommendations include:

- Consider establishing building height and bulk rules for all areas of the City as part of defining the “character” of each area. Impacts on views from identified public spaces should be among the factors considered when establishing height limits.
- Explore the use of form-based codes, incentive zoning and similar regulatory means that may serve well to implement Comprehensive Plan policies related to general land use; building, site and sustainable design; multimodal transportation; environmental protection; and public services and amenities.
- Require the installation and maintenance of adequate landscaping and screening in commercial, industrial and multi-family (including duplex) projects.
- Prohibit invasive species in required landscaping and encourage native plant species whenever possible.
- Allow open space to be satisfied with innovative and flexible applications of landscaping in denser development, including green walls and roofs and more



Statue on Holly Street in downtown Bellingham. Photo by Carol Sheppard.

Form-based codes consist of land development regulations that foster predictable built results and a high-quality public realm by using physical form (rather than separation of uses) as the organizing principle for the codes. They are useful for creating more walkable and adaptable environments.

Incentive zoning consists of a rewards-based regulatory system that is intended to encourage development that meets established urban development goals.

intense landscaping of smaller open spaces, to allow more efficient use of the land for buildings.

- Review auto parking standards to reduce the impacts of parking on urban form, adjacent uses, housing affordability, pedestrian mobility, and the natural environment. Continue to pursue parking management best practices.
- Adopt long- and short-term bike parking requirements.

Policy CD-13 Review and update the City's sign standards to:

- Encourage signs to be complementary in scale to the building architecture and site design.
- Discourage multiple or large signs that clutter, distract, or dominate the streetscape of commercial areas.
- Encourage replacement of pole signs with context-sensitive monument and building signs, and prohibit new pole signs.
- Encourage the consolidation of signs on a single structure where a commercial development includes multiple businesses.
- Encourage signs on multi-tenant buildings to be complementary in size and style for all commercial and mixed-use zones.
- Discourage signs that are distracting to drivers.
- Continue to ensure that there will be no increase in the existing number of billboard signs allowed in the City or in the urban growth area (UGA) as of the date of adoption of this plan, and consider amortization of existing billboards.
- Use design review for new signs to protect views of significant land forms and community features, avoid visual clutter, and ensure Citywide design standards are met.



A downtown business includes attractive signage and pedestrian-scale sidewalk amenities.

Policy CD-14 Provide builders, developers and architects with a set of clear objectives and performance goals which promote the highest attainable standard of quality consistent with economic feasibility for new development.

District and Neighborhood Identity

Bellingham's numerous distinctive residential neighborhoods and commercial districts contribute to the City's identity. However, the interface between these residential and commercial areas in Bellingham presents special challenges. The following goal and policies describe the City's strategies to enhance district and neighborhood identity and the transition between commercial and residential areas through urban design.

GOAL CD-3 Establish and reinforce district and neighborhood characteristics recognized both within the community and throughout the region.

Policy CD-15 Establish appropriate transitions between commercial, industrial, higher-density residential, mixed-use development, and lower-density residential areas. Consider methods such as architectural techniques, landscaped buffers, or transitional uses such as plazas and pedestrian-scale offices, retail, services and live/work units.

Policy CD-16 Encourage the use of creative landscape designs to visually define districts and reduce conflicts between residential and commercial land uses.

Policy CD-17 Create an attractive, walkable environment within and between commercial districts and neighborhoods through careful site planning, architectural design, and pedestrian amenities such as sidewalks, benches, pedestrian-scaled lighting, and other street furniture.



Live/work units on Ellis Street.

Policy CD-18 Encourage development of public spaces and plazas within commercial, mixed-use and residential projects that can accommodate civic events and function as community gathering areas.

Policy CD-19 Foster placemaking by reinforcing key design themes in building facades, public spaces, streetscapes and other built elements within the visual public realm to create a sense of place and inspire a greater sense of community pride and ownership.

Site and Building Design

There is a high expectation for quality design in Bellingham, and a set of adopted design standards provides local guidance. Urban village, multi-family, and many commercial and institutional projects receive a higher level of scrutiny than single-family homes. Many projects are evaluated by a design review board. Some projects with nominal impacts are reviewed at an administrative level using the adopted design standards.

GOAL CD-4 Provide a well-designed, pedestrian-friendly, and community-oriented environment.

Policy CD-20 Encourage high-quality and attractive design that promotes variety between different developments and different areas in Bellingham to maintain and create a sense of place.



Creative architecture on Railroad Avenue in downtown Bellingham.

Policy CD-21 Maintain a system of design review that applies more intense levels of review where the scope of the project has greater potential impacts to the community. Implement this system through a formal design review board process in conjunction with administrative review.

Policy CD-22 Use design standards and design review to accomplish the following:

- Retain and create places and structures in the City that have unique features.
- Ensure elements of design, proportion, rhythm, scale and massing are appropriate for proposed structures and sites and contextually compatible with surrounding development.
- Maintain the integrity of zones with unique or historic qualities such as Fairhaven.
- Encourage the use of high-quality and durable materials, as well as innovative building techniques and designs.
- Promote environmentally-friendly design and building techniques and rating systems such as Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED).
- Encourage the use of low impact development practices where feasible.
- Minimize negative impacts such as excessive lighting and glare and unsightly views of parking.
- Provide reasonable solar access and privacy to adjacent property.
- Consolidate on-site landscaped areas to be large enough to balance the scale of development and functional enough for leisure and recreation.
- Encourage native plant species whenever possible and concentrated seasonal planting in highly visible public and semi-public areas.
- Where feasible, preserve significant trees and mature vegetation.



Walkway with pedestrian amenities in Fairhaven.
Photo by Jacqueline Stambaugh.

Policy CD-23 Design and build Bellingham's public buildings using best practices in sustainable design and high-quality materials to serve as models for the community.

Policy CD-24 Provide adequate resources to ensure that conditions of approval placed on development projects are monitored and enforced.

The National Crime Prevention Institute endorses a set of guidelines called Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED). CPTED is based on the theory that the proper design and effective use of the built environment can lead to a reduction in the incidence and fear of crime and an improvement in the quality of life. The CPTED concept packages quality planning and design standards into a development tool that supports public safety. If a project is designed with safety in mind and operated with CPTED principles, the likelihood of undesirable behavior or property damage may be reduced.

Policy CD-25 Apply CPTED principles in the review process for development proposals.

Urban Villages and Transit Corridors

The City's primary growth strategy is to accommodate future growth and development through a system of compact, walkable urban villages (or centers) that are connected by transit corridors. Their coordinated development will provide a vibrant mix of housing, employment, services and other uses, as well as convenient and affordable transportation options. Key to their success are master plans (where appropriate) and development and design standards that result in development that is transit supportive, pedestrian-oriented, and bicycle friendly. An objective of this infill strategy is to take development pressure off existing single-family neighborhoods to preserve their continuity.

Growth in urban villages and along transit corridors should benefit all people by increasing economic development and access to jobs, expanding housing and transportation choices, promoting neighborhood character and vitality, and improving public health and environmental quality. Buildings should respond to their context, including nearby buildings, the network of public streets and sidewalks, and natural areas to create a lively and comfortable human environment that builds on Bellingham's urban character.

More information on urban villages and transit corridors can be found in the Land Use and Transportation Chapters, including a map of existing and proposed urban villages.

Since adoption of the 2006 Comprehensive Plan, master plans, design standards, and regulations have been developed for six urban villages - the Downtown, Waterfront, Fairhaven, Fountain, Samish Way, and Old Town Districts. These villages are part of a larger "centers and corridors" planning approach that links mixed-use centers of activity through vibrant, high-frequency transit corridors. As implementation of these urban villages progresses, planning work can begin on certain transit corridors that connect them. A formal urban village plan has not been adopted for the Barkley urban village, but it functions as an urban village in many ways and is identified as an urban development center in the Barkley Neighborhood Plan.

GOAL CD-5 Ensure that the design and development of urban villages and transit corridors convey a positive image of the district they are located within, contribute to the economic vitality and perception of the City, and improve visual and physical transitions into adjacent neighborhoods.

Policy CD-26 Successfully integrate mixed-use development within urban villages and along certain high-capacity transit corridors linking urban villages as outlined in the Land Use and Transportation Chapters, providing residents with shopping and employment within walking distance.

Policy CD-27 Continue to develop and implement plans, programs, and regulations that incentivize higher-density TOD along certain WTA high-frequency transit routes as outlined in the Transportation Chapter.



Mixed-use development on State Street, a WTA high-frequency transit route.

Policy CD-28 Ensure development within urban villages and along transit corridors is compatible with the scale and character of the surrounding neighborhood.

Policy CD-29 Design urban villages and transit corridors to promote reduced dependency on automobiles and provide opportunities for increased pedestrian, bicycle, and public transit access.

Policy CD-30 Ensure that Bellingham's City Center (i.e. Downtown, Waterfront and Old Town) is unique, attractive, and reflects Bellingham's history and natural setting. The bulk and mass of downtown buildings should be recognized as a positive aspect of urban design.

Bellingham's City Center. For more information, see the Downtown Bellingham Plan, Waterfront Master Plan, Old Town Subarea Plan, City Center Neighborhood Plan, and City Center Implementation Strategy.

Appropriate Infill Development and Renovations

Many of Bellingham's older residential and commercial areas are experiencing infill development and redevelopment. At the same time, aging structures in these areas require exterior renovations. Many of these same neighborhoods include some of Bellingham's most affordable homes. It is important to maintain and improve existing housing, so that it doesn't fall into disrepair, making it attractive for demolition and replacement with more expensive housing. The following goals and policies outline the City's preferred strategy to address infill development and exterior renovations in a manner that is sensitive to the context established by surrounding development.

GOAL CD-6 Encourage contextually-appropriate infill development projects and property renovations.

Policy CD-31 Ensure that new infill development contributes positively to the quality of the surrounding corridor or neighborhood, including the potential to provide additional opportunities for parks and other public spaces that are proportionate to the scale and impact of the subject project.

Policy CD-32 Provide development standards that are adaptable to a variety of conditions to allow for diversity in building styles within districts and neighborhoods.

Policy CD-33 Encourage the construction of innovative small-scale housing types that fit the context of single-family neighborhoods such as accessory dwelling units, cottage housing, cohousing, townhomes, zero lot line homes, and small lot housing.



Matthei Place, comprised of 14 single-family homes in the Happy Valley neighborhood, provides affordable homes for first-time homebuyers.

Policy CD-34 Emphasize pedestrian-oriented development that includes building facades that relate to the street and clear pedestrian entries.

Policy CD-35 Allow flexible setback, parking and lot coverage requirements in older neighborhoods with established lots, so that infill housing can conform to the existing neighborhood structures. In established neighborhoods, for example, new buildings should be the same distance from the street as neighboring buildings.

Policy CD-36 Allow lot coverage and density bonuses for multi-unit structures which, through superior design, lessen the appearance of obtrusive height, bulk and parking.

Policy CD-37 Discourage developments with “snout houses” that contain a series of garages that dominate the streetscape.

Policy CD-38 Promote the maintenance and improvement of existing housing stock.

Historic Preservation

Historic resources connect the community with its past, providing a sense of continuity and permanence. Recognizing and preserving historic resources are essential to the long-term maintenance of the City’s character. The community is committed to identifying, maintaining, renovating, and reusing buildings and sites important to its history. These resources may represent architectural styles or development patterns such as small lots typical of specific periods in the past. They may also represent places associated with notable historic persons or important events.

A significant number of historic resources in Bellingham have already been identified and mapped. As of 2015, the City had 39 buildings listed on the National Register of Historic Places, two buildings and one barn listed on the Washington State Heritage Register, and 25 buildings listed on the Bellingham Local Register of Historic Places. Bellingham also has eight National Historic Districts, seven of which are primarily residential in character. The Downtown Bellingham National Historic District is primarily commercial, but also has residential units within its boundaries.

Historic resources enhance Bellingham's sense of place. These unique historic and heritage resources should become a key element in the urban design of the Downtown and Fairhaven Districts and the older neighborhoods surrounding them, so that they will remain an integral part of the experience of living in this community.

Additional policies related to historic preservation can be found in the Land Use and Housing Chapters.

GOAL CD-7 Preserve historic and cultural resources.

Policy CD-39 Encourage and assist historically-distinct commercial districts such as the Fairhaven, Old Town, and Fountain Districts to retain their unique identities and qualities as they grow and change.

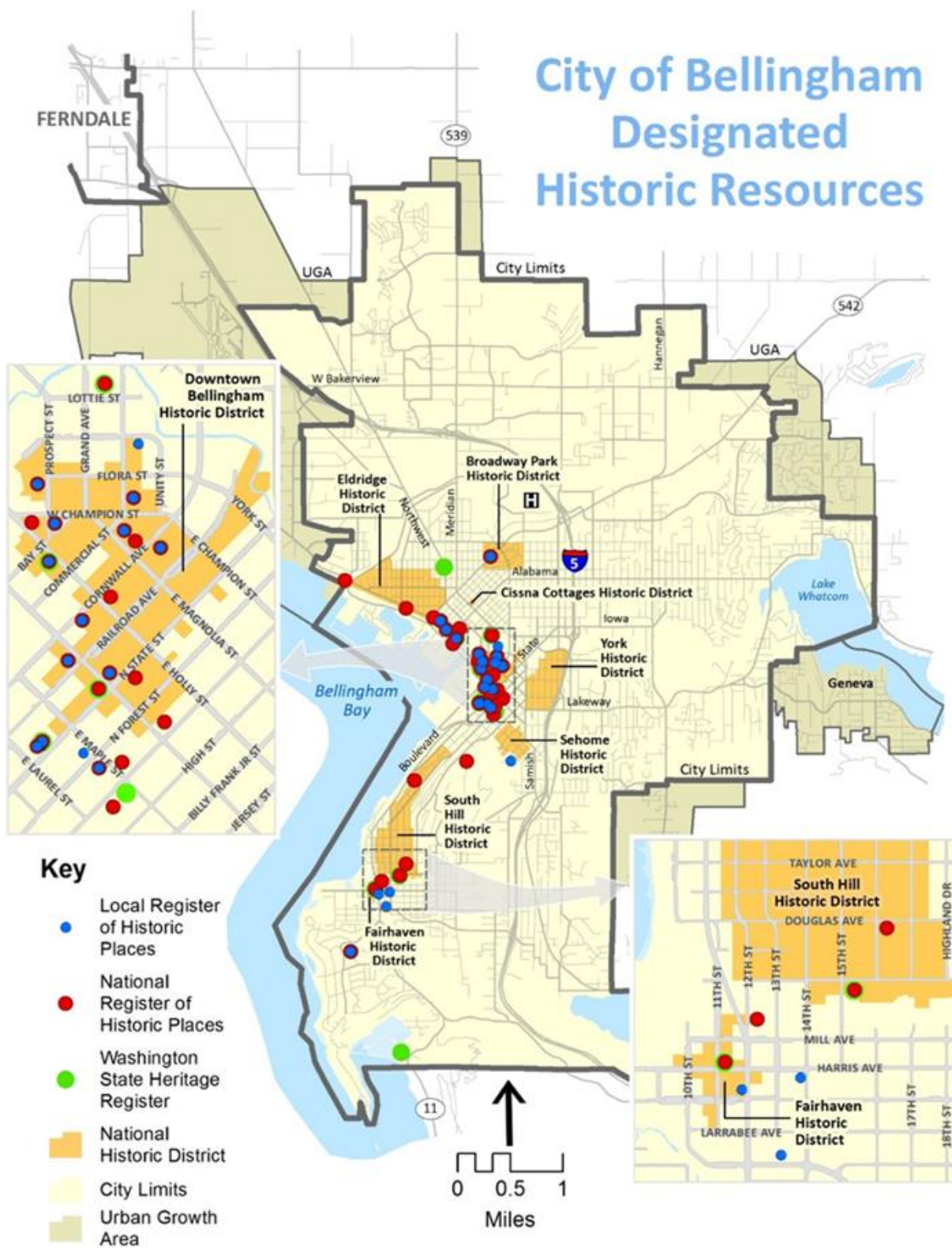
Policy CD-40 Encourage preservation, restoration, and appropriate adaptive reuse of historic properties through code flexibility, fee reductions and other regulatory and financial incentives.

Policy CD-41 Refine and expand existing information on historic resources and significant landmarks in the City to create a more comprehensive historic resources inventory.

Policy CD-42 Incorporate features, such as interpretive signage, historic street names and other elements reflecting original historic structures and sites, into parks and transportation projects and buildings located on historic sites, when feasible, as a means of commemorating past events, persons of note and City history.



The Gamwell House at 1001 16th Street on South Hill is listed on the National Historic Register.
Photo by Margaret Ziegler.



Public Spaces and Open Space

The Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Plan (PRO Plan) element of the Comprehensive Plan elaborates on the value of providing, preserving, and maintaining open spaces and greenbelts throughout the community for recreational and wildlife habitat benefits. This section focuses on the community design of these areas, particularly when they are provided in conjunction with private development. Publicly-accessible open spaces in high-density areas are valuable amenities to those who work and live here. The best public spaces appeal to all people, regardless of age, ability, income level, or ethnicity.

GOAL CD-8 Interconnect parks and natural features by establishing an integrated network of trails, parks and open spaces; maintaining existing trees; and incorporating landscaping into new developments. (See the Environment Chapter and PRO Plan for more information).

Policy CD-43 Preserve, encourage, and enhance open space as a key element of the community's character through parks, trails, water features, and other significant properties that provide public benefit.

Policy CD-44 Provide public spaces of various sizes and types, including informal gathering places, throughout the community.



Policy CD-45 Provide incentives to create neighborhood parks, green spaces, and other public or private open spaces throughout the City, particularly within commercial areas, urban villages, and transit corridors. **Pocket park in the Cordata Neighborhood.**

Policy CD-46 Require developers to provide and maintain publicly-accessible, privately-maintained open spaces (e.g. neighborhood pocket parks and plazas) that are proportionate to the scale and impact of the subject project in commercial zones.

Policy CD-47 Consistent with the Environment Chapter and PRO Plan, require or incentivize the connection and linkage of parks, neighborhood greenways, trails, open spaces and greenbelts in new development and redevelopment projects.

Policy CD-48 Encourage land uses that promote and allow public access to and along the Bellingham waterfront.

Policy CD-49 Design public spaces to provide amenities and facilities such as seating, lighting, landscaping, and connections to surrounding uses. Encourage activities in these spaces that contribute to a sense of security.

Policy CD-50 Encourage the integration of arts and culture into public improvements.

Policy CD-51 Encourage the use of native plantings throughout the City.

Policy CD-52 Identify and strive to preserve scenic vistas of important natural features such as the Cascade Mountains, Lake Whatcom, Bellingham Bay, Chuckanut Bay, the San Juan Islands and hills that provide the natural backdrop to the City.



Bellingham Bay, the San Juan Islands and the surrounding foothills can be viewed from many locations throughout the City.