

II. Community Setting

2.1 Location, Topography and Climate

Bellingham is located in northwest Washington along the shores of Bellingham Bay. The inland urban area is framed by the slopes of Stewart, Lookout, and Chuckanut Mountains, at the edge of the Cascade foothills with Mount Baker in the background.

Topography ranges from sea level to about 500 feet on the hilltops around Bellingham. Elevation increases to 3,050 feet at the top of Stewart Mountain, and eventually to 10,785 feet at the top of Mount Baker. The land is generally flat to rolling within the urban growth area, though the plateau edge overlooking Bellingham Bay can drop off abruptly in slopes ranging from 40% to 75%.

Bellingham has a mild maritime climate with an average temperature of 50 degrees Fahrenheit. Mean temperatures vary from a high of 71 degrees in July to a low of 32 degrees in January. Average annual precipitation is about 36 inches; approximately 80% of the precipitation occurs from October through March.

2.2 Historical Development

Lummi, Nooksack, and Samish Indians lived in and around the Nooksack River and Bellingham Bay area. These tribes fished in saltwater and the river. The tribes also exhibited some agricultural and hunting practices common to eastern or interior tribes. Village sites were located along Bellingham Bay and the Nooksack River.

In 1792, the first European exploration of Puget Sound was accomplished by British explorer Captain George Vancouver. Vancouver charted Bellingham Bay and named it in honor of Sir William Bellingham, Controller of the British Navy.

In 1852, Henry Roeder and Russell Peabody arrived from California and started the Roeder-Peabody-Page sawmill on Whatcom Creek Waterway to process virgin red cedar and Douglas fir.

By 1854, the towns of Whatcom, Sehome, Bellingham, and Fairhaven were settled around Bellingham Bay; the Washington Territorial Legislature established Whatcom County and the county seat. Whatcom was derived from an Indian term meaning “rough tumbling waters” – a reference to lower Whatcom Falls.

In 1903, the towns of Whatcom, Sehome, Bellingham, and Fairhaven were consolidated into the City of Bellingham. Tideland areas were filled, and the Great Northern Railway constructed passenger and freight depots in the Whatcom “Old Town” business district to service the rapidly expanding city. As Bellingham continued to expand, the core business district gradually moved onto the hill overlooking Whatcom Creek and Bellingham Bay.

2.3 Natural Features

The first Greenway Levy passed in 1990 largely in response to citizen interest in protecting valuable wildlife habitat corridors, shoreline, riparian, wetland and unique upland areas and providing public access to those unique areas. The levy was approved again in 1997, 2006 and 2016.

In 2005, Bellingham strengthened protection of wetland and streams by adopting the Critical Areas Ordinance in compliance with the requirements of the Washington Growth Management Act (GMA) which also protects steep slopes and frequently flooded areas. The Shoreline Master Program (SMP) was updated in 2013, adding more protection for shorelines and providing habitat restoration guidance while supporting public access.



Whatcom Falls. Courtesy of Whatcom Museum archives.

In 2012, the City Council adopted an Environment Element (Chapter 9) of the Comprehensive Plan to address environmental protection and ensure compliance with the GMA. The City developed a Habitat Restoration Technical Assessment and a marine nearshore assessment. The plan uses a science-based prioritization framework to guide the preservation, restoration, and recovery of the City's terrestrial, aquatic and riparian habitats.

Following is a list of important environmental features with public recreation elements in and around the Bellingham area.

2.3.1 Creeks

Three major creeks and multiple minor creeks drain the Bellingham area. Squalicum, Whatcom, and Padden Creeks and their tributaries are on the Washington State list of impaired water bodies. Preventing further degradation and improving water quality of the City's creeks is important to ensure the resources they provide to the community are protected.



Lake Whatcom. Photo by Grady Haskell.

- Squalicum Creek is a major creek that starts at Squalicum Lake and flows southwest to the mouth of Bellingham Bay. The Bay to Baker Trail is partially built within the creek alignment.
- Whatcom Creek is a major creek that drains from the northwest end of Lake Whatcom west into Bellingham Bay. Whatcom Creek Trail and Greenway generally follow the alignment of Whatcom Creek.
- Padden Creek is a major creek that drains from the Lake Padden west into Bellingham Bay. Upper and lower Padden Creek Greenway Trail follows the corridor.

- Little Squalicum Creek is a perennial stream northwest of Squalicum Creek that flows through Little Squalicum Park and into Bellingham Bay.
- Connelly Creek is a perennial stream that drains south from Sehome Hill into Padden Creek. The 26 acre Connelly Creek Nature Area preserves valuable habitat and provides walking trails.
- Chuckanut Creek is a perennial stream that drains from near Lake Samish west into Chuckanut Bay, through Arroyo Park.



Whatcom Creek in Whatcome Falls Park. Photo by Evan Bogart.

2.3.2 Lakes, ponds and estuaries in and near Bellingham

Lakes are defined here as water bodies greater than 20 acres in size or more than 6 feet in depth.

- Lake Whatcom is 10 miles long with a surface area of approximately 5,000 acres. Since 1968, the City has relied on Lake Whatcom for its municipal water supply. The lake is on the Washington State list of impaired water bodies. Public swimming and boating access to the lake is provided at Bloedel Donovan Park, with monitoring for prevention of aquatic invasive species. Other public access within the UGA is available at the DNR lease property located on North Shore Drive, Euclid Park, and several unimproved street rights-of-way.
- Lake Samish located south of the urban growth area, is three miles long with a surface area of approximately 809 acres. Most of the lake shoreline has been developed for private residential uses. Whatcom County has developed Lake Samish Park with swimming, fishing, and boat access.
- Lake Padden is one mile long with a surface area of approximately 151 acres. The entire lake is within the boundaries of Lake Padden Park with a perimeter trail, swimming, boating and fishing access.
- Toad Lake is a one-half mile long with a surface area of approximately 28 acres. Washington State Fish & Wildlife has developed swimming, fishing and boat access on the south end of the lake. The rest has been developed with primarily residential uses.
- Sunset Pond is a man-made freshwater retention pond at Sunset Pond Park with improved perimeter trails.

- Bug Lake is a man-made freshwater retention pond with informal walking trails.
- Padden Lagoon is a saltwater estuary at the inlet of Padden Creek into Bellingham Bay. The shoreline has been restored and preserved but has no on-water access.



Lake Padden. Photo by Chris Hughes.

Most of the other small ponds or lakes in the Bellingham urban area have either been developed for private residential use and/or are too small to support public access activities.

2.4 Population

The 2018 population for Bellingham was estimated to be 88,500. Bellingham’s official census population for 2000 was estimated to be 67,171 resulting in an average annual increase of 1.54% per year over the 18 year period. The unincorporated Urban Growth Area (UGA) for Bellingham contains an estimated 10,316 people for a total UGA population of 98,816 in the year 2018.

2018 City Population = 88,500

2018 UGA Population = 10,316

2018 Total Population = 98,816

2040 Projected Population = 130,618

According to the 2016 Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan, the City’s population will increase to 124,157 persons by the year 2036 assuming all UGA areas are incorporated, or by another 25,341 people from the 2018 population. Estimating the population of Bellingham in 2040 can be done by using the 2018 population estimate of 98,816 and the Comprehensive Plan’s 2036 population estimate of 124,157. The growth rate between 2018 and 2040 would then be an annual average of 1.28% per year. This growth rate can then be used to derive a value of 130,618 people living in the City of Bellingham and the UGA by 2040.

2.5 Recreation Trends

Similar to the rest of Washington State, Bellingham has seen a steady increase in organized sports. In Bellingham, that increase has also included new types of activities, such as pickle ball, rugby, lacrosse, ultimate frisbee and disc golf.

A changing demographic and an increase in cultural diversity in the Bellingham area have brought new types of interests in recreational activities and programs. It has also brought a greater need for more general recreational activities and financial assistance to residents where needed for recreational program or facility fees.

Similar to trends across the nation, Bellingham residents continue to demand more off road walking and bicycling trails. As trails increase in popularity and the community grows, there are conflicts among trail users, with a high increase of dogs off leash in undesignated areas.

The census data also shows that, much like the rest of the nation, Bellingham's population is aging with the percent of the population over 65 years of age increasing from 13.2% in 2014 to 17.3% in 2017. Ensuring that parks facilities are accessible for those with limited mobility will be key in ensuring our goals of access for all groups in our community.



Sehome Hill Arboretum Trail. Photo by Sean Stockburger.

Nationally, there has been recognition of the importance of recreation and park systems to overall quality of life, health and well-being especially as related to the growing obesity rate across the nation. Research shows that well-designed and accessible parks and open spaces are correlated with better physical health, through increased rates of physical activity, and with many mental health benefits, such as lower rates of depression and stress. Establishing a level of service for parks and trails that ensures equitable access and proximity for all populations within the community is an important step towards addressing health disparities and promoting good health for all.