

AGENDA

**BELLINGHAM-WHATCOM PUBLIC FACILITIES DISTRICT MEETING
THURSDAY, June 4, 2026
12 P.M. – 1:30 P.M.
Council Room, City Hall, 210 Lottie Street**

CALL TO ORDER

ROLL CALL

OPEN PUBLIC COMMENT PERIOD

Citizens may speak informally to the Board on subjects not scheduled for public hearing. Each speaker is allowed a maximum of three minutes.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

No approval of minutes

AGENDA REVIEW

Allotting time to items #1 and #2 below

AGENDA:

1. Fostering enhancements to the Bellingham Arts District.
Thinking “out of the box” for new ideas
2. Introductory review of potential enhancements at the Whatcom Museum and Mt. Baker Theatre that those institutions have prioritized
3. Consideration of scheduling additional special meetings in 2026 (other regular meetings are June 18, August 20, and October 15).

ADJOURNMENT



MEMORANDUM

TO: PUBLIC FACILITIES DISTRICT BOARD
FROM: TARA SUNDIN, COMMUNITY & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT MGR
CC: FORREST LONGMAN, DEPUTY ADMINISTRATOR
JOEL PFUNDT, PUBLIC WORKS DIRECTOR
SUBJECT: ARTS DISTRICT ENHANCEMENT
DATE: JUNE 1, 2026

The purpose of this memorandum is to inform the Board of a potential “enhancement project” that the City Administration would like to advance for consideration alongside other potential Public Facilities District investment opportunities. At this time, the City is not seeking a commitment of funding, but rather requests that the project be included in the Board's discussions so that its merits can be evaluated against other potential investments.

Background

During the period when the Public Facilities District was making significant investments in the renovation of the Mount Baker Theatre and the construction of the Lightcatcher Museum, the City initiated a complementary streetscape and placemaking effort focused on strengthening the public realm within the Arts District.

That effort resulted in a transformative investment at the Bay Street and Holly Street gateway to the Arts District. The project created a welcoming and distinctive entrance to the district, including the development of a festival street that is now home to the highly successful Downtown Sounds concert series, installation of public art, expanded sidewalks, and amenities that support outdoor dining and a vibrant pedestrian environment.

While these improvements demonstrated the value of strategic public realm investments, little additional streetscape work has occurred within the Arts District since the 2008–2009 timeframe. As a result, many opportunities remain to strengthen the district's identity, improve connectivity, and enhance the visitor experience between the area's major cultural destinations.

Proposed Opportunity

In 2026, the City will initiate a planning and design effort known as **Downtown Connections**, which will examine opportunities to improve multimodal connections and public spaces throughout downtown. Staff will provide a brief overview of this project at your June 18 meeting. As part of that initiative, the City intends to explore enhancements within the Arts District that would:

- Improve streetscape amenities and the overall public realm experience;
- Better connect the district's cultural institutions;
- Strengthen multi-modal connections between the Arts District, Old Town, and the Waterfront District;
- Expand opportunities for public gathering, cultural programming, public art, and pedestrian activity; and

The City would like the Public Facilities District Board to consider participating in a future implementation phase of these improvements. While the specific scope has not yet been determined, the City envisions identifying one or more priority segments within the Arts District that align with the Board's mission and investment objectives.

We haven't estimated costs, but based upon other streetscape work being done nearby, I'd estimate between \$500,000 and \$1million per block (depending on scope). Any future implementation would be structured as a partnership effort, with the City pursuing additional funding sources and grants to leverage PFD participation and maximize overall project impact.

Next Steps

As the Downtown Connections planning and design process advances, City staff can return to the Board with additional information regarding project concepts, estimated costs, funding strategies, and potential opportunities for PFD participation. At this stage, the City simply requests that the Board consider the Arts District streetscape enhancement project as a candidate for future investment and evaluate its merits alongside other potential projects under consideration.

City Administration appreciates the Board's continued commitment to strengthening the community's cultural assets and looks forward to further discussion as project planning progresses.

Whatcom Museum PFD Investment Request List

Summary

This list is prioritized according to conversations with the Whatcom Museum Board of Trustees and current museum leadership over the past year, as well as preliminary conversations with incoming Executive Director Jessica Borusky. The list reflects a deep desire on the part of museum leadership to activate campus assets to the greatest possible positive effect for our wider community.

Each request on this list includes the Whatcom Museum Foundation's plan to supplement the PFD's investment. Importantly, museum staff are also working closely with City of Bellingham Public Works partners to apply for the Washington State Historical Society Capital Heritage Projects grant in 2028, leveraging the funding the PFD invests in the Whatcom Museum as 2:1 match to apply for an additional million dollars to redesign and reopen Old Fire Station No. 1 to the public. Additionally, the Whatcom Museum Foundation received a grant from the Murdock Charitable Trust to hire a Director of Development, increasing the foundation's ability to raise additional funding for future projects.

1. Family Interactive Gallery Redesign

Description:

The Family Interactive Gallery is a well-loved community asset, but its design does not take advantage of copious unused vertical space, and it is not unique enough to be a significant draw for tourism.

We propose redesigning the FIG to accommodate children up to age 12, with a special emphasis on advancing ADA access, going above and beyond what is required by law and thinking creatively about equity throughout the new design. This is an opportunity for Bellingham to be innovative and set a new standard for inclusivity in children's play spaces. The design should reflect Bellingham's natural beauty and community values, so that it feels truly "of" Bellingham.

There are offices on the second floor of the Lightcatcher that overlook the FIG; we propose that some if not all that square footage is repurposed for FIG use, so a large climbing structure or several walkways leading from the ground floor would have a second-floor destination / landing. This would also allow a better connection between the FIG and our second-floor Indigenous Cultures gallery, People of the Sea and Cedar (PSC), creating an opportunity to pull FIG families into the galleries. The second floor of the FIG should incorporate local Indigenous artists' designs and artwork to make a strong connection between the "children's area" and PSC. Many FIG families never go into the other parts of

the museum; we want to fix that and encourage children to explore the entire campus, which will in turn encourage these children to return throughout their lives as they grow up learning in this facility.

In short, this is an opportunity to uplift our community and set an example for innovative inclusivity in children’s museum design.

Key anticipated benefits:

Economic Impact

Creating this kind of inclusive space for children is not just the right thing to do – it’s the lucrative thing to do, not only for the museum but for the entire district.

Imagine Children’s Museum in Everett hasn’t done a recent economic impact study, and our museums are certainly not an apples-to-apples comparison, but they garnered wide support for their project in part from their own study that projected 61 million dollars of impact over their first five years post-renovation.

The Whatcom Museum’s own Economic Impact Study was completed in 2025. Even before improvements to the FIG, the museum is a significant economic contributor to Bellingham’s economy, as the excerpt below illustrates. With a newly designed children’s museum as part of our campus, there is no doubt we would draw more families and business to downtown.

Economic Impacts Results from Visitor Spending.

We also estimated the economic impact of Whatcom Museum Visitors’ overall trip expenditure on the Bellingham MSA and Washington State economy across 5 years (2021-2025). The total estimated economic impact of visitor spending on Bellingham MSA was almost \$11.38 million in total output in 2025. Of the total output, approximately \$7.25 million is the estimated direct impact, while the remainder is split between indirect (\$2.39 million) and induced impacts (\$1.74 million) rippling through the economy. The estimated impact of visitor spending on labor income was approximately \$3.04 million, and visitor spending could be viewed as creating an estimated total of 86 jobs in 2025. In terms of value added, the visitors spending contributed about \$6.9 million to the local economy in 2025.

Table 4: Whatcom Museum: Estimated Economic Impact of 2025 Visitors Spending on Bellingham’s Economy (in 2025 dollars)

Impact	Employment	Labor Income	Value Added	Output
Direct	67.42	\$1,889,638.77	\$4,596,641.04	\$7,255,082.39
Indirect	10.84	\$658,041.55	\$1,202,858.74	\$2,390,976.93
Induced	8.06	\$494,716.01	\$1,103,875.57	\$1,742,165.97
Total	86.31	\$3,042,396.33	\$6,903,375.35	\$11,388,225.29
Type 1 Multiplier	1.17	1.37	1.26	1.33
SAM Multiplier	1.29	1.63	1.50	1.56

By expanding the age range of the FIG, we would expand our access to family foundations and individual giving, programming possibilities, and partnership opportunities with educational entities as well as local businesses.

A Civic Center that Caters to Families

Investing in the FIG now will complement and compound the city's substantial investment in the new children's wing of the Bellingham Public Library, just a block away from the Lightcatcher. That would make downtown and our civic center a convenient day plan for visiting families, hitting up both places and probably getting lunch too. Let's make it easy for families to spend time in the heart of our city and teach children about the community resources available to them.

Indoor Recreation for Kids

Community feedback indicates a desire for more indoor recreation opportunities, spelled out in the 2022 COB Recreation Needs Assessment. Many people mourned the closing of the original children's museum in part because the newer FIG is not a place for children to run and be physical, it is currently more a space for younger children to engage with imaginative play. This is something that would easily be improved with a new design that incorporates multiple levels of play and would fulfill an acknowledged community need.

ROM Cost Estimate:

To obtain a rough estimate, museum leadership engaged with AJ Goehle, Executive Director of Luci, a museum design firm based in New York and Seattle.

The current square footage of the FIG is 4,681, and there are another possible 2,000 square feet of space to play with on the 2nd floor, for a total of 6,681 square feet. For more technical displays or displays involving water, the approximate cost per square foot is \$1200. (Including design and construction.) For more traditional, non-technical displays, the approximate cost per square foot is \$725.

Museum staff recommend some technical displays, but most should not be dependent on technology for maintenance purposes and to give kids a break from tech when they come to play. Therefore, a mix of 75% of the space @ \$725/square foot and 25% of the space @ \$1200/square foot would be an ideal mix, but the PFD board could play with that balance. A large climbing element or walkways was estimated to cost between 1 million and 1.5 million dollars.

Square Footage	Price	Total
75% = 5,011 square feet	\$725 / square foot	\$3,632,975
25% = 1,671 square feet	\$1200 / square foot	\$2,005,200
Walkways or climber	1 – 1.5 million	\$1,500,000

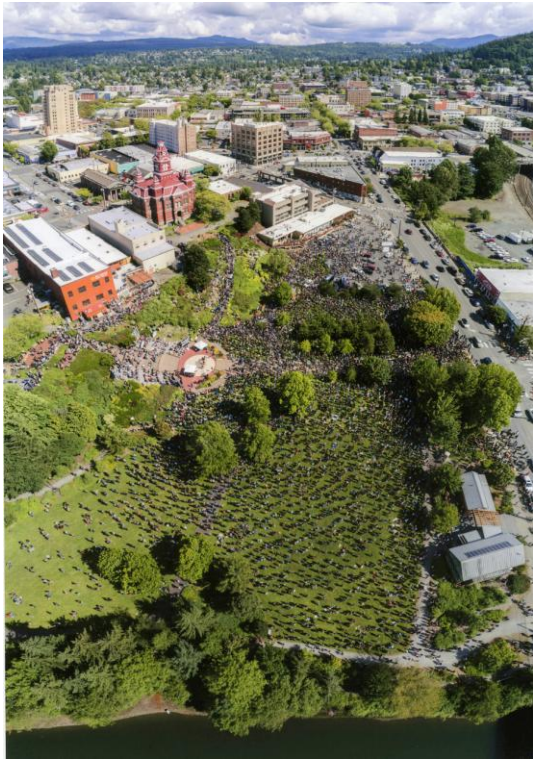
TOTAL ESTIMATE: \$7,138,175

How the Whatcom Museum Foundation can supplement / leverage funding:

The Whatcom Museum Foundation would support this endeavor by writing and managing grants for additional funding. The Washington State Building for the Arts (BFA) program is an ideal opportunity; BFA “is a program that awards state grants to nonprofit organizations for the construction, purchase, or renovation of arts and cultural facilities” and could pay for up to two million dollars of FIG renovation costs, which would bring the total amount of PFD funding needed for this project down to **\$5,138,175** if we received the grant.

2. Pedestrian Gateway via Bellingham’s Iconic Old City Hall

Description:



At the edge of Downtown Bellingham, overlooking Maritime Heritage Park, the Waterfront, and Old Town, sits Bellingham’s iconic Old City Hall. A scenic, sweeping stairway with a built-in slide connects these areas from the back of the Whatcom Museum’s campus. However, pedestrian access to this scenic gateway is not obvious, nor is it even possible for anyone who is mobility impaired.

We propose redesigning the Whatcom Museum parking lot - closing the car alley that currently (and dangerously) doubles as a pedestrian path between Old City Hall and Old Fire Station No. 1 to make that a dedicated pedestrian path to the outdoor stairs. This would necessitate redesigning the parking lot to make the southern driveway both the

entrance and exit for cars, creating a parking lot turnaround, paving some of the grass areas to create more parking spaces, installing removable bollards in the new pedestrian alley for fire access, installing fixed-view telescopes with historical didactics explaining the view, installing wayfinding directing pedestrians to important cultural assets (“This way to... Setting Sun Circle, The Pickford Theater, Mount Baker Theater, Spark”, and going the other direction – “This way to... Paper Whale, Penny Lane, Trackside, The Waterfront, The Loggie, Museo...”) and, most importantly, cutting a switchback wheelchair ramp into the hillside to the north of the stairway to Maritime Heritage Park, allowing mobility impaired community members and parents with strollers easy and scenic access between these important areas of the city.

Key Anticipated Benefits:

Greater connectivity between Downtown, the Waterfront, and Old Town

The Waterfront is an extension of Downtown, but that connection is not always obvious. Standing at the top of the stairs behind Old City Hall, one can see the grand vista and several possible destinations including Maritime Heritage Park, Trackside, Old Town, and the beautiful Bellingham Bay. One is drawn into the landscape, and the path makes visual sense. From below, the iconic Old City Hall is an easy landmark to guide pedestrians downtown. Connecting these areas in an attractive way, via Bellingham’s best-known architectural treasure, will increase pedestrian traffic and encourage more spillover of business from one area to another.

In recent meetings with Mount Baker Theater leadership, it was agreed that greater pedestrian connectivity between our institutions would benefit both entities, and add to the perception of safety downtown, encouraging more people to visit and feel comfortable traversing our city. MBT’s request for streetscape improvements down Commercial and onto Flora would lead directly to this proposed pedestrian gateway down the steps to the park and beyond.

This becomes advantageous to local development, both businesses and renters. By investing in the walkway, that also provides the opportunity for off-season activations such as winter markets and student art fairs, increasing opportunities to engage with partners year-round.

Alignment with Downtown Connections Plan and a vibrant pedestrian culture

Museum leadership met with Tim Hohmann, COB Public Works Assistant Director for Transportation, to discuss the formation of a Downtown Connections Plan and how the museum can support the goals of this plan. Though still in its early stages, the plan would emphasize the importance of easy pedestrian access to key cultural resources. Mr.

Hohmann agreed that Museum leadership's desire to pull pedestrians through the museum campus to connect to the Waterfront and Old Town aligns with the spirit of the Downtown Connections Plan, and more discussions are planned with Mr. Hohmann and Public Works partners after we welcome incoming museum executive director Jessica Borusky.

CPTED

Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) is an important strategy for crime prevention and public safety. The perception of safety at Maritime Heritage Park is an ongoing goal for city leadership, with recent efforts to lift restrictions on public usage of facilities in order to increase positive activity in the park and discourage illegal activities. With greater pedestrian traffic flowing through Maritime Heritage Park as a result of a clear pedestrian gateway, the community will grow more and more comfortable utilizing that beautiful space just by virtue of a density of people. This would activate not just the museum campus, but Maritime Heritage Park and its connecting trails to local neighborhoods.

The switch back wheelchair ramp cut into the hillside would also eliminate dense planting that regularly hosts encampments behind the museum, requiring monitoring and maintenance from museum staff and Parks Department partners throughout the year.

Cost Estimate:

To obtain a rough estimate, museum staff engaged with COB Public Works partners. Please note that we have not spoken about this idea with Nicole Oliver, COB Director of Parks and Recreation, and her input and collaboration would be an essential part of this project.

Depending on the true scope of the project as decided by the PFD Board and COB partners, we estimate the cost would be **between \$350,000 and \$500,000.**

How the Whatcom Museum Foundation can supplement / leverage funding:

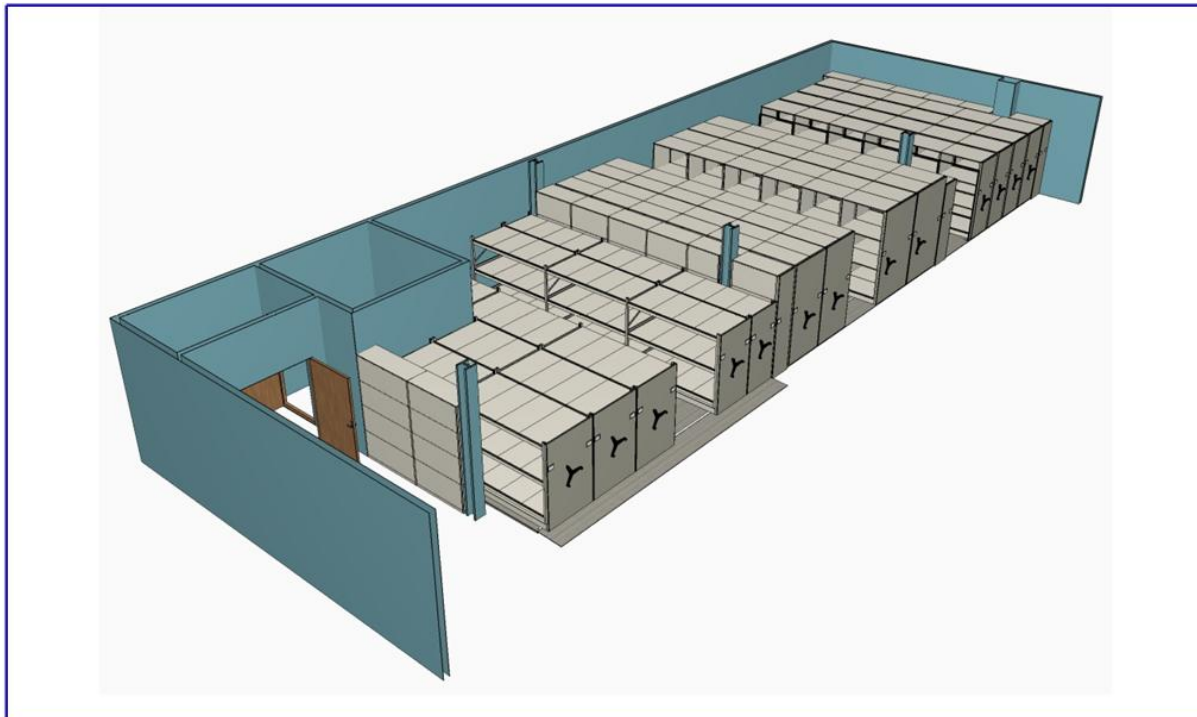
The Whatcom Museum Foundation plans to sell bricks to donors to pave the pedestrian gateway, continuing the donor brick work from the front of OFS1, which will add not only to the budget and aesthetic appeal of the pedestrian gateway, but will also increase public awareness and the sentiment of personal connection and investment in our city's design.


3. Collection Storage Update

Description:

During the PFD Board’s tour of Whatcom Museum Collection Storage, we pointed out how lucky we are at the museum to have this amazing space to store the city’s collection, as well as how the space wasn’t fully completed when the building opened. The floors and walls of the south vault were not finished, and proper collection storage furniture was never installed.

With a quarter of a million items in collection and counting, we are beginning to run out of room to store things with the current shelving. However, with compact shelving, we could store what is currently in both vaults, in just the south vault. By doing so, the collection would be stored in a safer way, and it would be much easier to access for researchers, scholars, or just the curious Bellinghamster.



Customer's Approval:		Date:	
 SOUTHWEST SOLUTIONS GROUP <i>business efficiency systems</i> Texas - Oklahoma - Kansas - Arkansas - Missouri Tennessee - Mississippi - Louisiana Washington - Montana - Idaho - Alaska Toll Free: 1-800-803-1083 www.southwestsolutions.com	Scale: 1:35	Sheet: 2 of 3	Whatcom Museum COLLECTIONS 001 Bellingham, WA <small>Copyright © 2025 Southwest Solutions Group. This material is proprietary and confidential, and the disclosure reproduction by photography, film, blueprint or otherwise or incorporation into any information retrieval system without first receiving written approval from Southwest Solutions Group is expressly prohibited by law.</small>
	Printed Date: 10/10/2025	Drawn By: V.Asuncion	
	Drawing: Number: 121348-2B		
	Salesperson: MOAK,GREG		

Key Anticipated Benefits:

Excellence in collection and loan care

The Whatcom Museum proudly represents Bellingham on the national stage, in publications such as Artnet, The Observer, MSN, The National Review, Art Daily, and The Art Newspaper. With a more professional art storage space, the museum will be appropriately equipped to bring more of the nation's masterpieces to our community.

Risk mitigation

Proper collection storage mitigates risk of damage to the city's collections and loans, ultimately saving funding in conservation and insurance claims.

Access

This is the people's collection. By redesigning the storage, it lets us truly open the museum up to be exactly that.

The way things are currently stored, it can take some time to locate a particular object. This means that if someone requests to see an object, we may have to make an appointment several weeks out. With modern collection storage furniture, ease of access to the collection would greatly increase, and wait times for access would diminish.

Education

This would also provide more opportunities for expanded partnerships with K-12 education and interaction with the collection, as a way to teach local history and preservation methodology. We expect our local colleges would also want to partner to give their students access to this facility.

Maria J. Coltharp, Whatcom Museum Director of Collections and Operations, was chosen in 2024 to attend the FEMA and Smithsonian supported Heritage and Emergency Response Training in Washington D.C., a week-long intensive training in collection care in emergency situations. We would like the Whatcom Museum to be a regional hub for collection salvage training, creating a task force of representatives from regional institutions to assist when flooding or other emergencies threaten cultural heritage. The Whatcom Museum has an important role to play in a region that floods, by sharing this important knowledge with our community.

All of these anticipated benefits would also open up opportunities for individual giving.

Cost Estimate:

To obtain an estimate, museum leadership worked with Greg Moak of Southwest Solutions to design collection storage furniture that would best suit this collection. He estimated the project to cost **\$1,000,000**. (Quote from 2024)

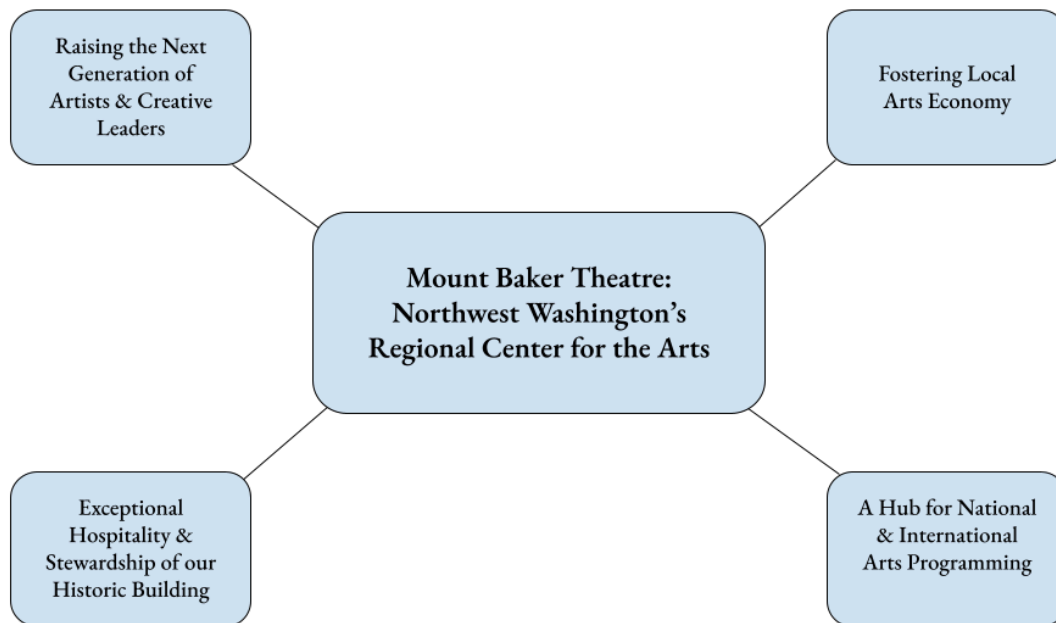
How the Whatcom Museum Foundation can supplement / leverage funding:

To supplement the PFD's investment in museum collection storage, the Whatcom Museum Foundation staff will apply for the Institute of Museum and Library Services Museums for America grant, a 1:1 matching grant for up to \$350,000. The preparation for transferring the collection to a new storage system will necessitate months of careful work by museum staff, and the move itself will be intensive. The Whatcom Museum Foundation will likely need to raise funds to expand staffing for this project.



Mount Baker Theatre: 2028-2045

The Goal: Ensure Mount Baker Theatre continues to grow and thrive as a vibrant regional hub for performing arts, economic activity, and thriving community connection.



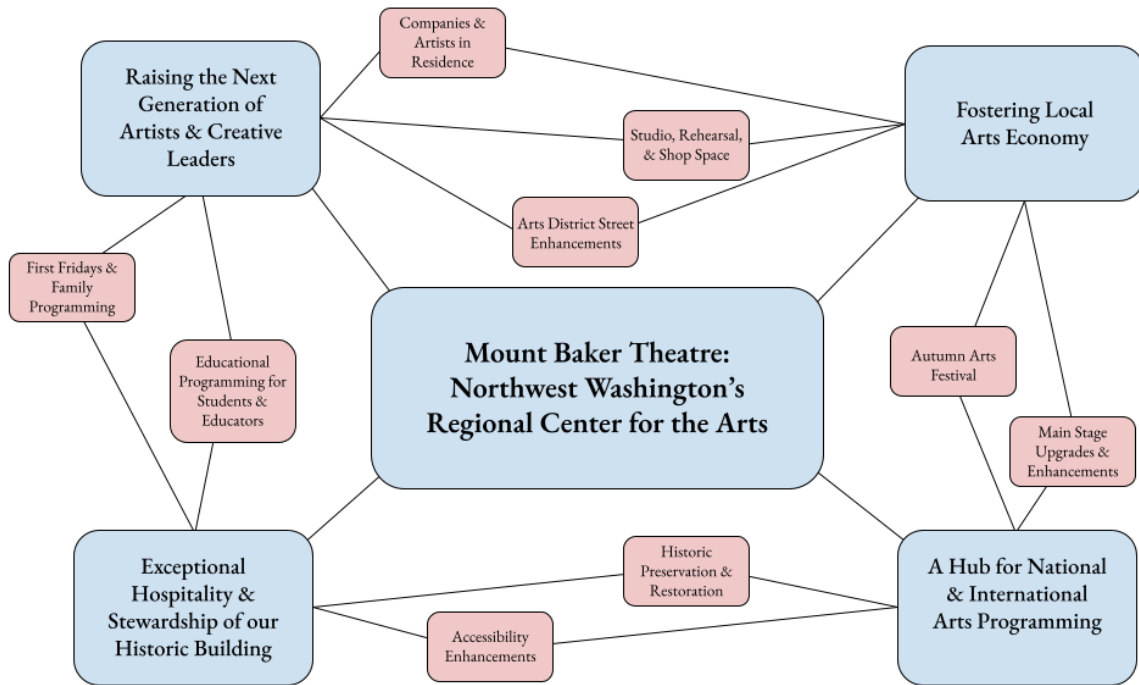
Our plans for the next 20 years and beyond are fourfold, centered around a common goal: sustaining MBT as our region's premier hub for the arts. We envision MBT as a driving force for regional development at all levels - contributing to a vibrant arts scene that serves existing residents of all ages, while also drawing new residents and businesses to our region. Each of the four prongs speaks to this vision:

- *Exceptional Hospitality that Honors our Historic Building:* Over the next 20+ years, MBT will continue the maintenance, renovation, and restoration work that keeps our beautiful historic building shining bright. In addition, we envision significant investments in technology and infrastructure that will make the space and its programming more accessible and comfortable for community members of all ages and abilities - accessibility is core to our values of hospitality. MBT and our neighbors at the Whatcom Museum will develop street enhancements and neighborhood beautification projects that connect our institutions and further define our area as a bustling Arts District. MBT will also

collaborate with local community events like First Fridays to provide family-friendly programming that opens our doors to the public and allows our neighbors to enjoy our historic space.

- *A Hub for National & International Programming:* MBT will continue to provide world-class performing arts programming from across the country and the world. Investments in lighting and sound systems and improvements to our back-of-house spaces will ensure that we continue to recruit the top talent that residents love, and that draws in tourists from a five-county radius, lower British Columbia, and beyond. By ensuring our space offers state-of-the-art performance spaces, we maintain our leverage as a premier presenting organization.
- *Raising the Next Generation of Artists & Creative Leaders:* MBT's Education programs build tangible social-emotional skills, appreciation of the arts, and communication capacity in our region's young people. Over the next 20+ years, MBT will provide high-quality performances for local schools to enjoy, out-of-school-time programming that inspires and educates, and professional development opportunities for local educators to enhance their skills. Investments in rehearsal space and neighborhood enhancements will provide safe spaces for young people to create and explore, and will facilitate increased collaboration between MBT and our peer arts education organizations.
- *Fostering Local Arts Economy:* MBT will build upon decades of relationships, history, and community involvement to deepen our investment in our local artists and arts organizations, and ensure our amazing theatre building serves a diverse audience. Building upon our current "company in residence" model with Bellingham Symphony Orchestra, MBT envisions several resident companies that span artistic genres, from dance to theatre to jazz. In addition, MBT will launch an "artist in residence" program, hosting individual creatives to live, work, teach, and create in Bellingham. These programs will involve significant capital investments in shop space for costume and scenic production, as well as studio and rehearsal space. MBT will also explore the possibilities of an Autumn Arts Festival in partnership with local businesses and peer arts organizations.

How It All Connects:



How It All Contributes to Our Local Economy: By maintaining and growing Mount Baker Theatre as Northwest Washington’s Regional Center for the Arts, we bolster Bellingham and Whatcom County’s local economy from a variety of angles.

- *Exceptional Hospitality that Honors our Historic Building:*
 - By investing in a vibrant and connected Arts District, these enhancements will establish our neighborhood as a safe, enjoyable, walkable area for residents to eat, shop, recreate, and enjoy, and as a promising neighborhood for creative small businesses to establish, grow, and succeed
 - Often described as the Jewel of Downtown Bellingham, MBT’s historic building enhances the aesthetic draw of our City and brings in historic and cultural tourism
 - Enhanced accessibility infrastructure ensures that artistic and cultural experiences are available to everyone

- *A Hub for National & International Programming:*
 - MBT’s world-class programming brings in significant tourism from 50+ miles away, and tourist spending at neighboring businesses like restaurants, bars, shops, and hotels magnifies economic impact

- This programming also enhances resident experiences, and provides options for entertainment that attracts new residents and corporations
- *Fostering Local Arts Economy:*
 - Local art encourages tourism, enhances resident experiences, and attracts new residents and businesses
 - New artistic work increases Bellingham’s visibility as a creative hub, enhances economic activity, and creates new jobs
 - Autumn Arts Festival attracts tourism, drives customers to local small businesses, and activates our neighborhood during a historically slow season
- *Raising the Next Generation of Artists & Creative Leaders:*
 - High-quality educational programming attracts families to our region and makes it more livable for current families
 - Arts education fosters the next generation of arts appreciators and creative leaders, ensuring that Bellingham remains a hub for creativity for many years to come

By The Numbers: These enhancements and investments are all in the early phases of development, and as such these amounts are estimates. We look forward to learning more about the District’s vision for the next 20+ years, and seeing how we can leverage PFD dollars to raise additional federal, state, and private funds to fully execute our goals.

Accessibility Upgrades	\$1-2M
Artist in Residence Program	\$100k-200k/year
Arts District Street Enhancements	\$5-10M
Autumn Arts Festival	\$1.5M/year
Company in Residence Program	\$200k-350k/year
Education Programming	\$150k-300k/year
First Fridays/Open House Program	\$25k/year
Rehearsal & Production Spaces	\$3-5M
Upgrades to Theatre Tech, Stage, & Back of House Areas	\$500,000-1M