



# THE BELLINGHAM PLAN

## PHASE 1 SUMMARY REPORT

**FEBRUARY 2024**

The key to the Bellingham Plan is community feedback. Phase 1 included a robust public engagement and outreach effort the second half of 2023. This summary presents a high level overview of the audience demographics, key findings, and important questions that Phase 2 will attempt to answer.

### OVERVIEW + PURPOSE

#### *What is the Bellingham Plan?*

The Bellingham Plan is the City's Comprehensive Plan that addresses important topics, such as housing, transportation, and climate resilience, which will guide development, capital investments, city programs, and other actions for the next 20 years.



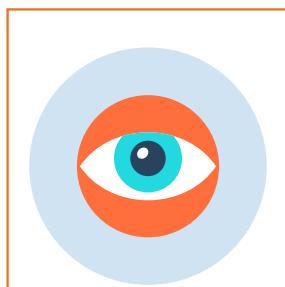
## WHY IS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IMPORTANT IN THIS PHASE?

The Bellingham Plan, or Comprehensive Plan, is the foundational document that guides how land in our city is developed or preserved. This is important because it can affect things like:

- **New businesses** and industries, which provide economic stability that can drive the city's economy.
- **Innovative** and updated strategies towards meeting sustainability goals.
- **Equitable and holistic future developments** that meet the desires and needs of the community, such as affordable housing, improved public transit connectivity and accessibility to services and amenities.

The Bellingham Plan is part of a four-phase project that kicked off in July 2023. Phase 1 was aimed at generating project awareness, building relationships, and understanding the community's priorities, needs, and vision.

## PHASE 1 ENGAGEMENT + TIMELINE



2023

### Phase 1 **VISION & FOUNDATION**

Project awareness + relationship building  
Broad engagement: Visioning + Values  
Listening sessions  
Identification of conflicting issues



2024

### Phase 2 **GROWTH APPROACH**

Focuses engagement on identified issues  
Round table discussions  
Public open houses  
Growth approach comparisons



### Phase 3 **DRAFT REVIEW**

Review of draft language  
Public open houses  
Board & Commission feedback



2025

### Phase 4 **LEGISLATIVE ADOPTION**

Public comment  
Planning Commission recommendation  
City Council adoption

*Focus of report*

## OVERVIEW + PURPOSE

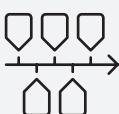
Phase 1 engagement methods and strategies focused on participation from a broad spectrum of voices and diverse perspectives. This involved utilizing both in-person activities and online tools to facilitate an inclusive and engaging experience.



**Vision Survey (online + written):  
4,287 respondents**



**Housing Preference Survey:  
1,475 responses**



**Web Mapping Exercise:  
116 contributors**



**The Bellingham Plan website  
4.2k single visits**

**629 clicked around the website**

**161 active contributions to the page**



**Self-led Virtual Open House:  
69 participants**



**In-person engagement**  
at Western Washington University (WWU), high school civics classes, the farmer's market, a public open house, and several community organizations and events.



**Open house across 25 neighborhoods  
110 open house participants**



## WHAT WE'VE HEARD

- **Housing types, rental protections, and affordability for all** was a clear priority for participants across engagement activities, although it was also noted that the community sees significant barriers to achieving this.
- Participants expressed a clear interest in **creating pedestrian-centric gathering and community spaces**, more greenways, and parks and prioritizing investments and equitable access to these places.
- A **locally scaled economy** that allowed people to comfortably live and work in Bellingham was important to respondents. Highlights included (1) activating downtown spaces to increase business; (2) providing diverse liveable-wage jobs; and (3) focusing on local and small business support.
- When asked what kind of community they would like to see, participants repeatedly said a **lively, creative place that prioritizes walkable, direct, and accessible connections to services and amenities that are dispersed** throughout the city. Many favored mixed-use, and mixed-income higher density neighborhood forms.
- Participants rated **arts and culture** as the fourth greatest strength of Bellingham and called for more investments recognizing that it could be an economic driver for the City. However, participants from historically underrepresented groups were more likely to see it as a weakness, which may indicate a need for more representation.
- Representation was a focal point, calling for more **collaboration with tribal governments, and efforts to empower historically marginalized and underrepresented community groups**.
- The Phase 1 outreach had an overrepresentation of homeowners, those that identified as “White” and older adults. There was **underrepresentation in renters, the Hispanic and LatinX community, young adults ages 18-24, and youth**. This underrepresentation of the younger demographic led to student-specific outreach in civic classes to high school students, tabling on the Western Washington University campus, and a student-focused survey.
- Community feedback highlighted **challenges in accessing health and social services (in particular, mental health), and the overall perception of safety within the City**.

When asked to describe in three words the Bellingham that participants would like to see in 20 years, “safe” was the most frequently spoken or written. This is depicted in the word cloud.



When asked what they would rate as a weakness, **'Home ownership opportunity,' 'Housing for all incomes,' and 'living wage job stability'** were the top three.



Recreational opportunities, a healthy natural environment, and public open spaces, were rated as **the top three strengths of Bellingham**.

## STUDENT-SPECIFIC FINDINGS

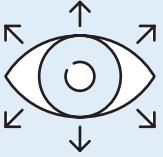
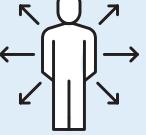
*The following are specific findings from youth and young adults:*

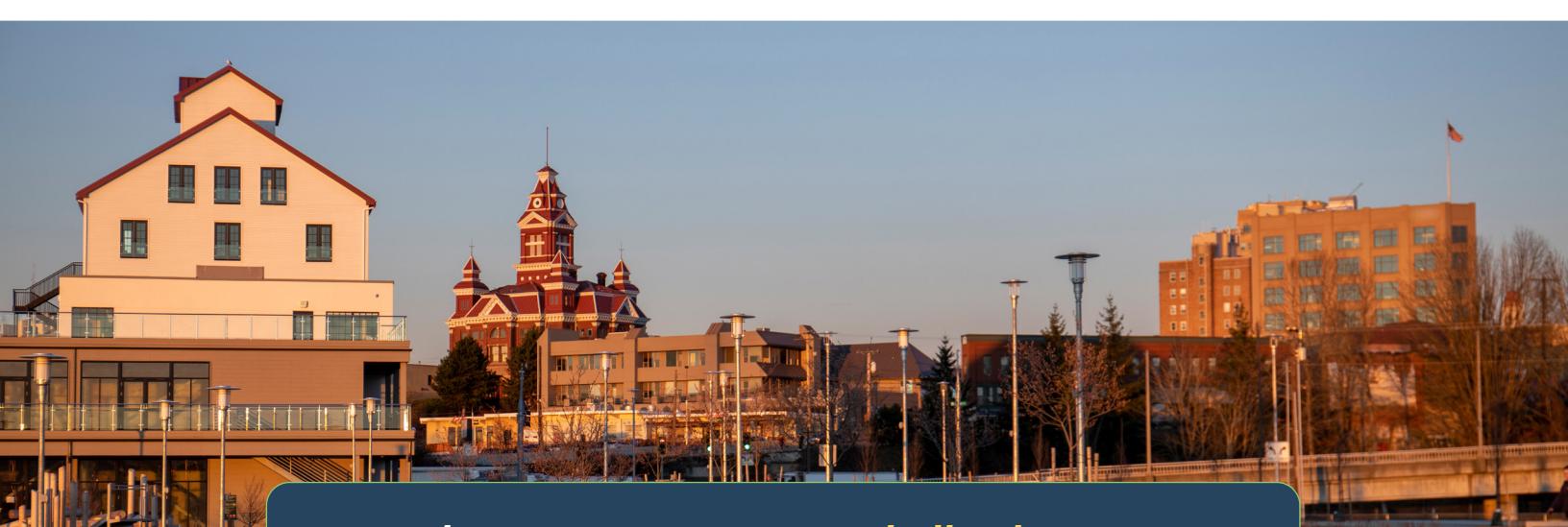
- Younger participants **prioritized centralized growth** (distributed nodes of urban villages) that are walkable and offer multiple transportation options. Housing affordability, climate resilience, and access to amenities were stated as drivers of this interest.
- Teenager and college-aged participants tended to **express concerns about their safety** related to vagrancy in their immediate surroundings. This was closely tied to transportation challenges when it comes to public transportation access, reliability, and safety while bussing or walking to and from their destination.
  - They expressed some appreciation for the diversity of activities but often expressed dissatisfaction with their transportation options (bus schedules) to get there.
- 31% of college students stated that they hope to stay in Bellingham/Whatcom County when they finish their degrees. Of those that stated no/not sure (63%), about half stated a lack of job opportunities as a reason to leave Bellingham.
- Students generally expressed concern in **accessing affordable food** at nearby grocery stores.
- Student respondents **generally supported providing public gathering spaces** and services for mental health and substance abuse treatment centers.
- Students **prioritized parks and trails very highly**, similar to the broader community. However, they highlighted their desire for nightlife, cafes and restaurants, and larger organized events higher than the broader community.
- High school students **emphasized the importance of equitable planning processes** more than the public. This particularly came out while they were considering growth approaches such as transit-oriented development that may result in displacement.



## MOVING FORWARD: PHASE 2 NEXT STEPS

Phase 2 of the Bellingham Plan will primarily focus on engaging the community to further discuss the identified issues, concerns, and feedback from Phase 1. The following graphic organizes the top 10 broad themes heard into six cross-topical themes that upcoming facilitated sessions will focus on in Phase 2.

		
<b>COMMUNITY VISION</b> Recreation and Outdoor Spaces Vibrant and Unique Spaces Social Services and Support Environmental Sustainability Recreation and Outdoor Spaces	<b>VIBRANT, EQUITABLE, AND WELCOMING COMMUNITY</b> Safety Equitable and Inclusive Vibrant and Unique Spaces Social Services and Support Recreation and Outdoor Spaces	<b>HOUSING AFFORDABILITY</b> Housing Affordability Economic Vitality
		
<b>ECONOMIC VITALITY</b> Economic Vitality Healthcare Vibrant and Unique Spaces	<b>HOUSING TYPES AND NEIGHBORHOODS</b> Housing Affordability Vibrant and Unique Spaces	<b>HOW WE WILL GROW</b> Environmental Sustainability Transportation and Access Equitable and Inclusive



*To learn more visit [engagebellingham.org](http://engagebellingham.org).*

**A SPECIAL THANK YOU TO OUR PHASE 1 COMMUNITY PARTNERS**