



DOWNTOWN FORWARD

It starts in the heart



Progress Report | August 2024



Our goals for Downtown

Downtown Bellingham is a neighborhood for everyone because it

is safe and welcoming.

has active public spaces and thriving arts and culture.

is a top destination to work, shop, invest and enjoy.

is walkable, bikeable and resilient.

is a desirable, lively and affordable neighborhood to live in.

Downtowns define great cities.

They are the social, economic and cultural heart of any community, and when a downtown thrives, the rest of the city benefits, too.

Downtown Forward is the City's plan to prioritize bold actions and unbounded thinking to ensure a thriving future for downtown Bellingham. Building on a foundation of safety, we are moving downtown forward, with a vision for the neighborhood we want it to be for everyone.

Bellingham is a great city, and we have a great downtown worth investing in.

Moving Downtown Forward

It starts in the heart

Downtown Forward is a roadmap directing City resources in downtown. It's also a plan that others have roles in as well – roles as business owners, artists, developers, visitors and residents.

Actions in this plan include investments in infrastructure and public spaces, programs to support economic development and a clean and welcoming environment, incentives for private investment in new buildings and businesses, support for events and activities that knit our community closer together, changes to policies and regulations, and other projects to achieve the community's vision for downtown.



Phase 1

2024

In this first phase, we are carrying out existing commitments outlined in Executive Order 2024-01 and taking additional short-term, City-led actions.



Phase 2

2025 - 2026

In the next phase of our plan, we will continue to carry out short-term projects and document our progress. This phase also brings in others to the work. We will engage the community in generating new ideas for the future of downtown, including both

things we can do in the next few years and bold ideas for the long term. We will evaluate and integrate ideas into the City's plans, and we'll also work with other public and private sector partners who have a role to play in realizing the community's vision for downtown.



Phase 3

2027 and beyond

Phase 3 is future-focused on big ideas that require significant pre-planning and investment. We will keep working on priorities identified in earlier phases and also begin launching catalytic actions for long-term projects.

And we will work with partners like developers, business and community groups, investors, and others to support their projects' success. We will continue to check in with the community to stay on track.



Background

Downtown Forward will build on the foundation of the 2014 Downtown Plan, which reflected the community's vision and goals for downtown at that time. Many projects outlined in the Downtown Plan have been completed, and much has changed since that plan was created.

The City's focus shifted in 2020 to support downtown businesses and community members experiencing impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic, a growing crisis related to fentanyl and other drug use, rising homelessness, and increasing behavioral health needs. During this time, the City responded with new ways to support businesses experiencing impacts from the pandemic, increased safety patrols, and continued financial investments in behavioral health and incarceration prevention programs like GRACE, LEAD, community paramedicine, and therapeutic court programs. These and other efforts are described in the 2023 Downtown Safety Strategy.

In February 2024, Mayor Kim Lund signed an executive order that directed immediate actions to address the effects of the fentanyl crisis playing out in downtown Bellingham. These actions were a direct and decisive response to community safety concerns like the sale and distribution of illegal drugs in alleyways and on sidewalks, as well as economic impacts to downtown businesses and declining numbers of people working downtown and going downtown for arts, entertainment, dining, and shopping.

Many of these actions relate to public safety, behavioral health, and cleaning – foundational elements for a healthy downtown and healthy residents. We immediately implemented these actions, knowing that investments in economic vitality, arts and culture, expanding housing options, and creating a sense of place can't succeed without a basis of safety and cleanliness.

Now, we are inviting you to be a part of our work. We've made progress carrying out safety-focused activities, and the effect on community safety has been positive. While we continue to put resources toward downtown safety, we are beginning the process with the community to develop a strategic plan for the downtown Bellingham core, an effort we've named Downtown Forward.

2024 Commitments and Accomplishments - Executive Order

Under Executive Order 2024-01: Addressing the Fentanyl Crisis in Downtown Bellingham, the City committed to 11 actions:

- Establish a downtown public safety response office, where Bellingham Fire/EMS, Police and other response service partners will operate.
- Expand the focus of Bellingham's Community Paramedic program to provide a quick response to overdoses and offer more outreach and treatment options in the downtown core.
- Explore how the City can support more access to methadone and other opioid treatments.
- Create an internal task force to coordinate weekly operations to enhance downtown safety and well-being.
- Prioritize enforcement of laws that prohibit the sale and distribution of illegal drugs within the city.
- Increase police presence downtown through additional emphasis patrols and community engagement.
- Continue prioritizing police officer recruitment.
- Increase the frequency of cleaning, litter control and other sanitation services downtown.
- Support public education efforts about substance use disorder.
- Develop a comprehensive downtown plan to foster safety, economic vitality and sense of community downtown.
- Leverage existing resources and seek additional funding and staffing to support these and related efforts.



Measuring our work



\$1 million +

invested in downtown services and amenities in 2024



3,000

Public Works hours spent cleaning downtown streets



28 tons

of garbage removed



91

emphasis patrols downtown



53

drug citations



441

graffiti tags removed

EMS calls for suspected overdoses have decreased so far in 2024 and are now at their lowest point of the year.

Aside from a spike in suspected overdose calls in May, this is a hopeful trend both downtown and citywide, with an average of 0.4 suspected overdose response calls per day downtown and 1.2 per day citywide as of late July 2024.

1.1

overdose calls per day

March 2024

0.4

overdose calls per day

July 2024

2024 Commitments and Accomplishments

Our actions and accomplishments since February 2024 include addressing the commitments outlined in Mayor Lund's Executive Order 2024-01 as well as other City-led actions focused on making downtown safer, cleaner, and more beautiful and welcoming. We've also taken steps toward our other 2024 goals for downtown and captured some of our accomplishments below.

We are proud of what we've accomplished and excited about where we are heading. To see a full list of our 2024 actions, go to cob.org/downtown-forward.

Downtown Bellingham is safe and welcoming.

Improve hygiene and cleaning services downtown

- **Install and maintain Portland Loos:** The City installed three new public restrooms, called Portland Loos – one at Waypoint Park, and two in downtown, along Railroad Avenue. These bathrooms are designed to be easily cleaned and resistant to vandalism. They are accessible most hours of the day.
- **Increase frequency of cleaning and litter control:** City staff increased sidewalk and alley cleaning in late February, cleaning downtown streets weekly and downtown alleyways monthly. Staff pick up litter and address illegal dumping concerns downtown several times each week. The City also contracts with the Downtown Bellingham Partnership to provide litter cleanup, graffiti removal, and cleaning services.

Prioritize law enforcement for illegal drug distribution and sale

- **Rejoin regional drug task force:** Bellingham Police Department rejoined the Whatcom County Drug Task Force in July. The two BPD staff assigned to the Task Force began their new role in mid-August.



2024 Commitments and Accomplishments

Downtown Bellingham is safe and welcoming.

Expand community-oriented policing and other safety strategies

- **Open a downtown public safety office:** Bellingham Fire Department opened the downtown safety office near the Commercial Street Parking Garage in late February. It is a hub for community paramedics and alternative responders.
- **Downtown emphasis patrols:** Starting in March, Bellingham Police Department (BPD) began hour-long, community-oriented foot patrols downtown. Until June, BPD also conducted additional foot patrols on an overtime basis.
- **Train and onboard new police recruits (underway):** Bellingham Police Department has hired six new officers in 2024, with 10 additional applicants pending as they go through the background investigation process.

Focus services for substance use disorder and other behavioral health needs

- **Expand Community Paramedic program downtown:** Community paramedics are stationed in the downtown public safety office seven days a week. By being downtown, community paramedics are closer to their clients and the services clients regularly use, enabling community paramedics to spend more time providing care and strengthening client relationships.
- **Add an embedded behavioral health specialist at Bellingham Central Library:** A behavioral health specialist began working at the Central Library in February 2024, providing support, referrals and staff training for about 40 unique individuals each month. This innovative program is jointly funded by the City of Bellingham and Whatcom County Health and Community Services and is staffed by Lake Whatcom Center.

Expand therapeutic courts

- **Community Court:** The Bellingham Municipal Court continues to expand therapeutic court options and expects to launch its Community Court this winter. Community courts are specialty courts that reduce low-level, quality-of-life offenses, such as shoplifting, and hold participants accountable while connecting them to social services to address behavioral health, substance use, and other needs.

2024 Commitments and Accomplishments

Downtown Bellingham has active public spaces and thriving arts and culture.

Support events and activities to enliven downtown

- **Downtown Sounds:** The City provided funding and logistics support for the 20th anniversary of this annual event, drawing crowds into the heart of downtown several nights this summer.
- **Funding for Signature Events:** Northwest Tune-up, SeaFeast and Bellingham Exit were all funded by City grants. The City is now offering grant funds to support the next big signature event through a competitive application process. Results will be announced in late 2025.
- **Free First Fridays:** As of January, the Whatcom Museum offers free admission, extended hours, and free programming on the first Friday of each month.
- **Railroad Avenue Block Party:** With support from the City, Allied Arts collaborated with Downtown Bellingham Partnership, WTA and local businesses to host the 2024 Rockin' the Railroad Summer Block Party on August 18.

Create engaging and beautiful public spaces

- **Downtown Activation and Beautification grant program:** In June, the City awarded \$350,000 for seven projects to add aesthetic appeal and create more enjoyable experiences for pedestrians downtown. Several projects are underway, with the first – a mural on the Old Fire Station 1 building – now complete.
- **Landscaping and beautification:** The City continues to fund the Downtown Bellingham Partnership to maintain planters, hanging baskets, and landscaping beds throughout the downtown. Additionally, City staff enhanced the State and Wharf Street roundabouts and areas along Cornwall Avenue. Six information kiosks were also refreshed with new panels and updated information.

2024 Commitments and Accomplishments

Downtown Bellingham is a top destination to work, shop, invest and enjoy.

Support businesses with strategic use of public space

- **Plan for future parking needs:** The City completed an analysis of the Commercial Street Parking Garage to study the necessary improvements to address architectural, security, structural, and aesthetic issues. We will continue to evaluate the best use of this space within the context of downtown parking needs, prioritize improvements for the future and expand affordable parking options for residents and visitors.
- **“Streatory” Program update:** About 30 “streateries” –structures built in on-street parking areas to create outdoor spaces for dining- were built between March 2020 and December 2022, mostly within downtown. Based on a 2022 assessment, the City recommended several improvements to the program, which will be implemented by the end of 2024. These include higher standards for design, safety and accessibility.

Provide funding to support businesses and tourism downtown

- **Downtown Bellingham Partnership:** The City provides ongoing funding for the operation of the Downtown Bellingham Partnership, which provides support for downtown businesses, as well as marketing and events, such as Downtown Sounds, First Fridays and Wine Walks.

2024 Commitments and Accomplishments

Downtown Bellingham is walkable, bikeable and resilient.

Provide infrastructure to support safe and accessible biking

- **Install Holly Street bike lane pilot project:** In April, the City began piloting a new bike lane through downtown on Holly Street. This fall, staff will conduct a final evaluation of public input, traffic and bike counts, and safety indicators that will inform the final design of the permanent bike infrastructure to be installed.
- **Install bike lockers:** Secured bike lockers are coming to downtown in Fall 2024, pending City Council approval. A total of 10 bike lockers are slated for installation – four lockers on the corner of Railroad and Champion, near the downtown WTA station, and six at the base of the Commercial Street Parking Garage.

Provide more electric vehicle charging

- **Install new EV chargers:** As part of our project to install 90 new electric vehicle (EV) plugs across Bellingham, the City added two new public EV chargers next to the Depot Market Square in summer 2024. More chargers are coming near the downtown WTA Station and to the Waterfront on Laurel Street by the end of 2024.



2024 Commitments and Accomplishments

Downtown Bellingham is a desirable, lively and affordable neighborhood to live in.

Providing funding and support for affordable housing development

- **Laurel and Forest Senior Housing:** The 56 units of rental housing for seniors in this development received \$2 million in City Housing Levy funds. Ten percent of the building's units are reserved for homeless seniors, and the remainder are for those making less than 50% of the average median income.
- **Mercy Millworks Family Housing:** The City contributed approximately \$4.89 million toward this family-oriented affordable housing development, including \$600,000 in Housing Levy dollars. In addition to the 83 one- to three-bedroom units targeting families with less than 60% AMI, this development also includes an on-site childcare center, supported with \$1 million in City funds from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA).

Encourage development of additional multifamily housing options

- **Multifamily Tax Exemptions:** The Multifamily Tax Exemption program incentivizes multifamily housing development by temporarily waiving a portion of property taxes. Since its inception, the program has supported more than 1,800 market rate residential units, with over 75% located downtown, including 240 new, planned units. We are examining improvements to this ongoing program.
- **Identify long-term strategies to address vacant buildings:** The City is exploring solutions that can spur both market-rate and subsidized housing options through redevelopment of existing, vacant properties.

Increase staffing to lead health and human services projects

- **Hire a health and human services project manager:** This role will help advance the City's work on behavioral health initiatives, opioid crisis response, justice project programs and addressing the unmet needs of community members without a home or regular shelter. As planning for downtown continues, we must also plan to meet these needs with compassion and care.

Downtown perspectives

In May 2024, the Downtown Bellingham Partnership surveyed business owners to gather information about the health and well-being of their businesses.

According to the survey:

- **Public safety concerns negatively impacted business owners' success.**
- 70% of business owners made financial investments to address safety.
- Nearly 90% spent time addressing non-essential business activities related to public safety.

However, **most business owners reported feeling positive about the future** – about two-thirds of people surveyed said they are hopeful for the future of their business downtown.

“The investment in downtown by the new mayor and her administration is noteworthy and effective. We and our staff, tenants and residents have noticed a significant shift in the safety, feel, and cleanliness of downtown and we appreciate these efforts.”

– Survey respondent, Downtown Bellingham Partnership's 2024 Business Well-being Survey

“I want to take a moment to express our deep appreciation for the positive changes we've seen in recent months. The reduction in prowling and confrontational incidents has been noticeable and significant. Our residents are grateful for the improvement, and the sense of safety and well-being in our community has increased considerably.”

– Downtown Bellingham resident



What's next

As we see improvements downtown, we are setting our sights toward a vision for the future of this vital neighborhood. It's time to plan for the downtown our community wants in the decades to come.

Join us in moving Downtown Forward, together.

Share your ideas, feedback and thoughts about downtown. Visit [engagebellingham.org/Downtown Forward](https://engagebellingham.org/DowntownForward) for virtual opportunities to engage in plans for downtown Bellingham.

>> **Take our short survey** to let us know how what your downtown experience is like. Find the survey on our Engage Bellingham hub.

>> **Keep coming back for more ways to participate.** Over the next several months, we'll be seeking your input on housing, events, public spaces, transportation and more. Sign up on Engage Bellingham to be notified about more chances to be part of shaping plans for downtown.

2025 Commitments

Here's a preview of what we have planned for further improvements to downtown in 2025.

Return of BPD bike unit: Bellingham Police Department will resume its regular bike patrol unit in downtown Bellingham in early 2025. This five-person unit will patrol the city center seven days a week. As a significant part of community-oriented policing, bringing back the bike unit will create more opportunities for police officers to develop relationships with downtown businesses, residents and visitors, further enhancing the neighborhood for the people who live, work and visit downtown.

Downtown activation and beautification grant program: This project, which launched in June, will continue into 2025 and 2026 to fund projects that add beauty and interest to downtown. A total of \$250,000 per year in lodging tax revenue has been allocated for this program for the next two years.

Central Library renovations and improvements to Lee Memorial Park: The City has committed \$6.5 million to renovations at the Central Library that include necessary upgrades to the HVAC system and library interior, and the Bellingham Public Library is working to close a \$2.5 million funding gap to fully fund both interior and exterior improvements. The Parks and Recreation Department is leading the effort to update Lee Memorial Park, located between the library and City Hall, with a focus on creating a fun and family-friendly public space.

Commercial/retail industry trends and strategy: The City is proposing a 2025 study of the economic conditions downtown. The study will inform strategies to eliminate vacancies and encourage redevelopment of underutilized buildings.

Stay informed

cob.org/downtown-forward
engagebellingham.org/DowntownForward

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Cover photo by Aaron Brick

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