

## The Bellingham Plan

# Engagement Plan

### Setting the Stage

Comprehensive plans are used by communities to establish a vision for the future and provide a framework for building toward that vision. Bellingham’s document looks forward twenty years and provides guidance for development, capital investments, city programs, and other actions over that timeline. This document provides a framework for staff to follow as they work with the community on a once-a-decade update to the plan.

While an annual process provides a framework for targeted updates to the plan each year, a major update each decade known as the Periodic Update allows the City to respond to changing conditions and needs over time. The City will be working towards the 2025 Periodic Update to its Comprehensive Plan, to be known as “The Bellingham Plan,” over the next two years.

Community engagement is a critical part of the Periodic Update process. Washington’s Growth Management Act (GMA) defines the process, timeline, and requirements for updates and emphasizes the need to engage meaningfully with the community. The City strives to not only meet requirements but to truly engage with the community, collaborating on a plan that will successfully guide the City moving forward.

While part of the update requires technical analysis to be performed by staff and/or consultants, a large portion of the project will rely on bigger-picture planning. Staff will work with the community to understand current values and concerns as well as what they hope for the future. This community feedback will help guide the formation of draft policies and potential map amendments that will be considered by the advisory boards/commissions and ultimately City Council.

### Goals of Engagement

The following goals will inform and frame the engagement process throughout the project.

1. Build trust between community members and city staff.
2. Gather broad and representative feedback from a range of community members, including those who live or work in, go to school in, or visit Bellingham.
3. Ensure that groups that have historically been underrepresented in city outreach participate in the planning process.
4. Make the process accessible, understandable and engaging for a broad range of community members.
5. Value community members’ time and respect their input.
6. Support community-driven planning.
7. Understand where general consensus exists. Define what values or experiences are driving this consensus.
8. Define where heightened tensions and disagreement exist. Dive into the details of *why* each party holds their unique opinion.
9. Strive for understanding and respect, not agreement.
10. Utilize a transparent process that clearly tracks the inputs and outputs of each decision.

## Ensuring Equitable Engagement

The goals of engagement for this project include outcomes of equitable outreach and engagement. While staff hope to hear from a broad range of community members and encourage all to participate, certain groups will require additional effort or unique approaches. The intention is to have the range of engaged community members broadly represent the interests and needs of the entire community. This means focusing particularly on those groups that generally do not participate as much as others.

Traditionally, many groups have been under-represented in past planning projects, meaning that a lower percentage has participated than exist in the community as a whole. Exhibit A highlights those groups that will receive focused outreach on this project, particularly those who are traditionally under-represented. Although this plan focuses on engagement with the general public, the project will also engage with public agencies on both technical work and broader engagement efforts. The following approaches will be utilized to focus on these community members with the goal of including a more representative percentage of them in the engagement process:

- Requesting (optional) demographic information from event and survey participants, including basic information regarding age, gender identity, race, income, and neighborhood of residence (or if working in Bellingham but living elsewhere);
- Comparing the demographic information of participants to the percentages present in the community. This does not apply to employees or small business owners, who may not be residents and therefore cannot be compared by percentage to resident demographics;
- Utilizing a variety of opportunities for engagement both in person (at a variety of locations) and remotely accessible;
- Offering both live and on-demand (available on the participant's schedule) opportunities for providing feedback and engaging with other community members;
- Offering stipends to community-based organizations (CBOs) for organizing outreach and discussion opportunities for under-represented groups;
- Offering stipends to individuals participating in consistent engagement commitments such as the community workgroup;
- Recognize community member's participation with hospitality at public outreach events;
- Utilizing targeted awareness campaigns such as posting flyers or tabling in areas frequented by these groups;
- Offering presentations or discussions to organizations focusing on serving or working with these groups;
- Focusing social media posts and ads towards groups that traditionally have not participated in planning processes; and
- Providing information in multiple languages, as identified under engagement strategies.

## Strategies for Engagement

Throughout the process, a variety of strategies will be used to engage with the community. These generally fall into the following tiered categories of participation. Some approaches may fall into multiple categories, such as if staff mail a flyer (inform) to residents with a survey attached (consult).

**Inform** – Staff inform the community about the project or future engagement opportunities. This is often used at the beginning of a project to build out an engagement list.

**Consult** – Staff request feedback about the project. This one-way communication approach is useful for broad, representative engagement from the largest group possible.

**Involve** – The community engages in two-way communication, discussing the project, providing ideas, and giving feedback.

**Collaborate** – Community members participate in the project process, providing direct feedback and working with staff and one another to develop recommendations together.


**Empower** – The community is empowered to make decisions, provide formal recommendations, or otherwise directly impact the project outcome.

The intent for each form of engagement should be clear to participants, defining expectations for that strategy at the start. This ensures that participants' expectations align with the intended level of engagement for each approach.

The following strategies will be utilized during various phases of the project.

**Web Presence** – The City will maintain a standard city website with information on formal city processes as well as a link to the Engage Bellingham site, which will be the hub for two-way engagement throughout the project. Social media posts and digital advertisements will be utilized to direct community members to project and event information, sign up for news alerts, or to engage with the project.

**Flyers, Newsletters, + Outreach** – Staff will work with local businesses, community events, property management companies, and others to get information out to the community about the project and upcoming engagement opportunities. Live events or high foot traffic areas will provide great tabling opportunities, and community members will be able to check Engage Bellingham for future opportunities to connect with staff out in the community. Existing CBOs, non-profits, professional organizations, and others will be important partners in both getting the word out and coordinating events.



**Engage Bellingham**

While Engage Bellingham can be used to provide information, it can also allow community members to give feedback, discuss topics with one another, and engage more meaningfully on the project on their own time (“On-demand”).

**Listening Sessions, Presentations, + Discussions** – Throughout the project, staff will go out into the community for both city-led events and as invited by community organizations or groups. These events may be in-person, online, or hybrid to allow flexibility in attendance. Throughout the phases of the project, these sessions will shift from an initial focus on listening, to more focused discussion on targeted issues, and ultimately to direct feedback. Presentations may be used as needed to inform the community about the process, but the majority of time will be utilized for staff to hear from the community. Community members will also be encouraged to discuss issues with one another.

**On-demand Activities** – While live engagement can be beneficial, not all community members will be able to attend specific events. City-led events will include mirrored materials and activities posted on Engage Bellingham. Surveys that are handed out in person may also be mailed to residents and made available online. Additionally, community members will be empowered to

run their own events or discussions, providing information back to staff. Examples of key on-demand activities include:

- A statistically valid housing preference survey to set the stage (Phase 1);
- A visioning and values survey mailed to every household, handed out in person, and available online (Phase 1);
- Targeted surveys and engagement activities on topics identified during Phase 1 engagement (Phase 2);
- “Meeting-in-a-box” style packets for community members to use to host their own engagement events or discussions (Phase 2); and
- Online opportunities to provide feedback on draft updates, reflecting the open houses planned for Phase 3.

**Translation + Interpretation** – Not all members of the community speak English fluently, so the project team intends to reach and engage with those who may not. In Bellingham, Spanish is by far the most common primary language after English, while many other languages are also spoken first by members of the community. Basic project information, all major surveys, and other significant milestones will be translated into Spanish and will include guidance in a variety of languages regarding how to contact the city for more information, translation, or interpretation. Materials for specific events, such as an event at an international festival or tabling at an ethnic grocer, may be translated into appropriate languages for those groups. Interpreters may also be included for these types of events.

**Community Workgroup + Focus Groups** – While many of the above approaches will be used to gather basic feedback and hear from the broadest cross section of the community possible, it will also be important to dive deep into certain topics. A Community Workgroup will be set up with a commitment to meet regularly throughout the process. This group will include members of the community that broadly represent the city as a whole and will help staff discuss critical issues, identify successful methods of communication for the public, and generally provide more informed and representative feedback and discussion throughout the project.

Separate from the Community Workgroup, individual stakeholder focus groups will be formed on targeted issues in Phases 2 or 3 of the project. Each will gather only once or twice to tackle a specific issue on which those members have relevant expertise or lived experience.

**Report-Backs** – A critical part of empowering the community and building relationships with community members is reporting back on how their engagement influenced the process. After each phase of engagement or major engagement activity, staff will summarize what we did, who we reached, what we heard, how it was used, and what comes next.

These strategies will be utilized throughout the process to help define the trajectory of the project, inform key decision points, and refine the plan as it moves forward. While it is unlikely there will be any topic with complete community agreement, this combination of strategies will ensure broad participation and balanced discussion. Not only will all opinions be heard and carefully weighed, but active discussion between opposing viewpoints will be essential at key decision points. This “collaborate” approach will often be used at key decision points, allowing deeper dialogue by bringing disagreeing parties together for meaningful conversation.

## Engagement Topics

The Comprehensive Plan is a broad, long-range planning document that must balance the City’s needs and desires around a myriad of topics. Often, several interests may compete. The Comprehensive Plan needs to define those interests and their potential conflicts clearly. In addition, emphasis on those issues that are most important to the community is critical to prioritizing actions in the future. In a broad sense, the Periodic Update must identify changes to the plan to focus on:

**Building upon** what is valued by the community;

**Responding to** changed requirements (such as state mandates) and conditions (such as local issues that have cropped up since the last periodic update); and

**Aspiring to** a brighter future, setting the framework for actively planning towards a vision for the future.

This means that a combination of reflecting on the past and looking ahead to the future will be needed. The project scope will define the specific items to consider in each of these categories, but it is important that the engagement plan recognizes the need to both reflect and envision.

The early phases of engagement will help further define the topics of most interest to the community, but many themes have already come to the forefront through other City work and engagement with the community. These topics will require both expertise and lived experience as staff engage with the community.



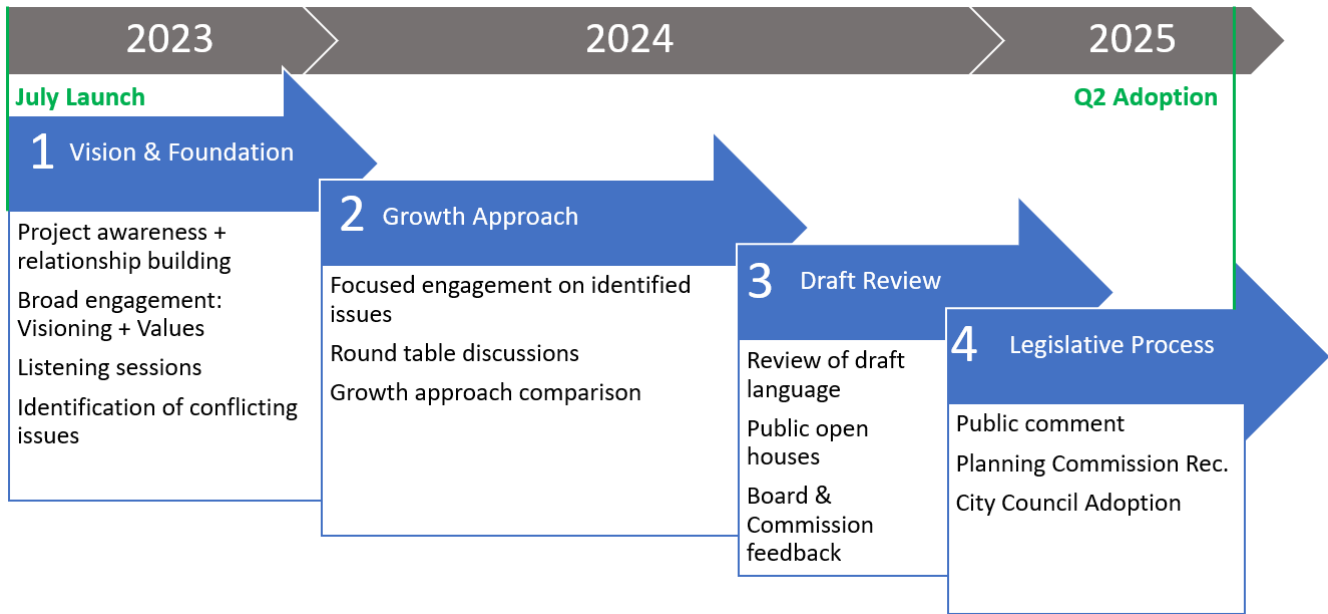
## Engagement Phases

The planned engagement process is broken out into four phases. These phases are based on several drivers:

1. Start with broad feedback that will help shape the engagement that follows;
2. Build around the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) process that defines a schedule for developing and analyzing several alternatives for the community’s growth;
3. Allow time for the community to become familiar with draft changes proposed by the project team and provide feedback; and
4. Plan for significant engagement with the City’s boards, commissions, and City Council during the adoption process.

These drivers broadly define the four phases of engagement. Each phase is described in detail below but may be adjusted based on feedback received in early phase(s) of engagement. In particular, engagement activities and strategies will respond to discussions with the community around how best to connect with hard-to-reach or under-represented groups. The topics covered in specific events may be adjusted to meet concerns or interests expressed by the community in previous discussions.

The following diagram highlights the anticipated phases of engagement. The timeline for each phase may shift slightly based on engagement opportunities, County timelines, and other unanticipated events. The topics to be covered in each phase may be adjusted or defined based on early community discussions, but they will broadly focus on the following.



**Phase 1: Vision & Foundation** This phase focuses on setting the stage for the phases to come. Engagement will aim toward two goals:

1. *Gather a robust and diverse set of stakeholders with whom to engage in future phases.* This list-building stage should produce an engaged list of residents, employees, students, and visitors who fully represent the broader Bellingham community. Later phases will continue building upon this list, but those brought in during Phase 1 will likely form the basis for the majority of public participation throughout the project.
2. *Listen to the community’s priorities and garner broad feedback to help support the definition of several possible growth approaches for the next twenty years.* This feedback will focus on filling out the three areas described above under Engagement Topics. It will also develop an understanding of what is working well and what could be improved upon within the topics covered by the existing Comprehensive Plan.

Concurrent with engagement efforts, City and County staff will be working together on growth projections and capacity analysis to inform the development of growth alternatives as inputs for the EIS. As a technical exercise, this will not be a focus for engagement but will need to be summarized in a manner that is understandable to the general public.

**Phase 2: Growth Approach** This phase focuses on the majority of technical work. Engagement will aim toward three goals:

1. *Educate the community about the issues at play.* Determining the most appropriate approaches to growth requires a deep understanding of the issues at hand. This includes summarizing Phase 1 engagement and how it has been incorporated in potential changes brought forward by staff.

Technical work completed in Phase 1 will also need to be summarized and explained. Finally, general planning concepts and how they relate to one another will need to be described. Often, community values conflict with one another in determining an appropriate approach to growth. Education in Phase 2 will focus on digging into these conflicts so that the community can participate in the selection process in an informed manner.

2. *Gather feedback to help support targeted updates to the plan.* This will include targeted outreach on specific issues that will inform updates to goals or policies within the plan. These issues may relate to the growth alternatives also being discussed in Phase 2, but they will also address topics that span all potential approaches to growth. For instance, Phase 2 will require feedback on ways to address resilience to climate change impacts. These policy updates will apply to all growth alternatives. While topics will be added to and further fleshed out for this Phase's scope following Phase 1 engagement, the following themes will guide discussion.
3. *Consider the potential impacts of various approaches to growing as a community.* These approaches will reflect the elements of the growth alternatives developed at the end of Phase 1. During Phase 2, these alternatives will be undergoing analysis through the EIS. The EIS findings will be wrapped into the final stages of Phase 2 discussions. A preferred growth alternative will be selected based on this engagement and the related discussions with boards, commissions, and the City Council.

While working with the community on the above goals, staff will be developing draft targeted updates to the plan throughout Phase 2. These updates will reflect both technical work, such as incorporating new growth projections and housing needs analysis, and updates reflecting community needs, such as those identified in working with the community in Phase 1. By the end of Phase 2, an initial draft update will be developed that reflects both the preferred growth alternative and any other areas determined for changes in the plan.

**Phase 3: Draft Review** This phase allows the community to reflect on an initial draft of targeted changes being proposed to the plan. Engagement will aim toward two goals:

1. *Familiarize the community with the proposed changes, relevant issues, the work done to date, and how that engagement was wrapped into the draft changes.* Reports from Phase 2 will continue to be utilized in Phase 3 to explain complicated concepts and track community feedback through the proposed changes.
2. *Gather feedback regarding the proposed changes.* This phase is an important way to respond to what was heard in previous phases and ensure that it reflects the communities needs and desires. While not all community members will agree, this phase will allow them to reflect on what others said throughout the process and how it was wrapped into the changes. Staff will then be able to refine the draft changes into a final draft to be brought through the legislative process in Phase 4.

Phase 3 will bleed into Phase 4, as the legislative process also focuses on reviewing the draft plan and includes a recommendation from Planning Commission.

**Phase 4: Legislative Process** This phase includes less targeted community engagement than prior phases but focuses instead on representing community sentiment to decision-makers throughout the legislative process. Reports from each of the prior phases of engagement will be utilized to explain why changes

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are suggested throughout the plan. Additionally, the community will be welcomed to participate in public comment opportunities as defined by the [Type VI process](#). Engagement will focus on informing stakeholders of these opportunities and educating them on how engagement has been incorporated in the plan updates to date.

### **Staffing Strategy**

The project team includes a diverse array of staff focused on implementing various parts of the project. They generally fall into the following categories.

1. **The Core Team:** Four staff members within the long-range planning group in the Planning and Community Development Department have been identified as the central project team members. This group may be augmented by additional staff as the project progresses. This team will organize outreach events and activities, develop public-facing materials, staff engagement events, and coordinate all proposed updates to the plan. They will also manage any consultants that may be utilized for the project to focus on equity, public-facing graphics and documents, survey design and delivery, meeting facilitation, or other engagement foci.
2. **Primary Subject Matter Experts (SMEs):** Key staff members across all departments have been identified as point people for various topics of the plan. These staff members will act as connections to the rest of their workgroup or department. Additionally, they will help connect the project to community members or organizations for engagement efforts, staff events relevant to their areas of expertise, and provide feedback on the project as specific plan amendments are drafted by the Core Team.
3. **Additional SMEs:** Additional staff members across the City will be pulled in on an as-needed basis to provide expertise, lessons-learned, or assistance on targeted efforts. These staff will generally not work with the public on engagement events or activities unless there are clear synergies with their typical duties.

### **Contact Information**

A large, cross-departmental team with representatives across the organization is collaborating on this project. A project email and phone number have been set up for efficient directing of inquiries.

[TheBellinghamPlan@cob.org](mailto:TheBellinghamPlan@cob.org)

(360) 778-8310



*Exhibit A: Stakeholder groups for focused project outreach*

<p><b>Traditionally under-represented community members</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adults utilizing services</li> <li>• BIPOC community members</li> <li>• Employees who may live outside the city</li> <li>• Immigrants and others whose primary language is not English</li> <li>• Low-income households (Owners and renters)</li> <li>• Low-income seniors on fixed incomes</li> <li>• Mobility-impaired residents</li> <li>• Renters</li> <li>• Students and youth (aged 14-25)</li> <li>• Those who have experienced/are experiencing homelessness</li> <li>• Traditionally marginalized community members such as those who are disabled and those who identify on the LGBTQ+ spectrum</li> <li>• Tribal members</li> <li>• Youth utilizing services</li> </ul>	<p><b>Other community members with unique experiences</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bikers &amp; micro-mobility users</li> <li>• Residents in areas with increased change such as those within or adjacent to UVs</li> <li>• Residents in areas with limited access to basic needs</li> <li>• Residents looking for housing</li> <li>• Residents of existing middle housing developments</li> <li>• Residents representing array of neighborhood types, such as through neighborhood associations and community spaces</li> <li>• Seniors</li> <li>• Single-member households</li> <li>• Transit users</li> <li>• Veterans</li> </ul>
<p><b>Community and activism organizations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Art organizations</li> <li>• Climate Advocacy organizations</li> <li>• Community-oriented Organizations, such as those focused on particular geographic, ethnic, or topical groups</li> <li>• Environmental Advocacy organizations</li> <li>• History organizations such as museums</li> <li>• Organizations that provide services to the community</li> <li>• Those who work with the unhoused</li> <li>• Transportation-related Advocacy organizations</li> </ul>	<p><b>Professional organizations and businesses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Architects, Developers, Builders (including their professional organizations)</li> <li>• Businesses located in existing mixed-use nodes or other areas with increased recent changes</li> <li>• Designers/builders of middle-scale housing</li> <li>• Health providers</li> <li>• Industrial business owners and organizations</li> <li>• Large employers</li> <li>• Manufacturers</li> <li>• Realtors</li> <li>• Small business owners</li> <li>• Sustainability leadership within both public and private organizations</li> <li>• Tourism-based organizations</li> <li>• Workforce or employment groups focused on the local economy</li> </ul>