



# **City of Bellingham Public Safety Level of Service Standards Needs Assessment**

March 2026

## Executive Summary

The City of Bellingham faces a critical juncture in sustaining and improving public safety services. Both the Police Department and Fire Department are experiencing rising service demands driven by population growth, increasing call complexity, and evolving community expectations. This level of service assessment evaluates current levels of service, identifies gaps, and outlines a roadmap for maintaining nationally recognized standards while preparing for future needs.

## Fire Department

The Bellingham Fire Department provides fire suppression, emergency medical services, and limited specialized rescue across the city and portions of Whatcom County. In 2024, the department responded to approximately 24,500 calls for service. Call volumes have grown steadily in the last ten years. From 2015 to 2025, call volumes increased by 35%, or nearly 9,000 additional annual calls, compared to a 17% increase—about 2,500 calls—in the previous decade (2005–2015). The Bellingham Fire Department uses a cross-staffing model where three firefighters operate a fire engine and an ambulance. Originally implemented as an efficiency measure, it is now stretched to its practical limits. Every time a cross-staffed engine is committed to an EMS response, its paired unit becomes unavailable for fire suppression or other emergencies. With call volumes at historic highs and EMS incidents comprising nearly 75% of calls, this creates more frequent gaps in coverage, longer response times, and reduced ability to manage simultaneous or complex incidents. The operational data is clear: the model that once allowed the department to do more with less is now forcing it to do less with less.

Strategic investments in personnel, additional Basic Life Support units, and facility improvements are essential to maintain safe response times and ensure readiness for complex emergencies. The department also faces urgent needs in training, succession planning, and specialized capabilities such as technical rescue and wildland fire response.

The service improvements recommended in this document would cost \$60-80 million over the first five years of implementation, ultimately costing \$18-30 million annually. Even with no increases in service levels, general fund costs for the Fire Department are expected to grow by a minimum of \$1.5 million in 2027.

## Police Department

The Bellingham Police Department responded to over 53,000 calls for service in 2024, the equivalent of 145 calls per day, with workload assessments confirming that current staffing levels

are insufficient to meet demand. Patrol officers often move from call to call with little time for proactive policing or thorough investigations. Detectives face similar challenges, with caseloads exceeding capacity and delays in case resolution impacting victims and community trust. Facility limitations, technology needs, and the growing complexity of crime further strain resources.

To maintain safety and accountability, the department must increase staffing, expand investigative capacity, and invest in modern infrastructure and technology. The service improvements recommended by the Police Department would cost \$5-18 million over the first five years of implementation, ultimately costing \$2-6 million annually. As with the Fire Department, even with no increases to service levels, general fund costs for the Police Department are expected to grow by a minimum of \$1.5 million in 2027.

## The Funding Challenge

Public safety already accounts for approximately 60% of the City's general fund, and costs are rising faster than revenues. Labor expenses, equipment needs, and inflation have created a structural deficit, forcing reductions in public safety staffing and programs.

Without new revenue sources, the City will struggle to sustain current service levels, let alone implement potential improvements outlined in this assessment and keep up with projected population growth. With no staffing increases, by 2030 the combined expense of the two departments will likely be at least \$100 million, a 36% increase over the 2024 amount. Historical trends suggest general fund revenues will increase approximately 20% over the same time frame, further exacerbating the City's financial challenges. The increased staffing needs identified in this assessment compound the issue, making additional funding imperative.

## Path Forward

To preserve community safety and meet future demands, the City must explore new, dedicated revenue streams. Options include forming a Regional Fire Authority (RFA), implementing an ambulance utility fee, adjusting property tax levies, or adopting a fire benefit charge.

After studying the advantages and disadvantages of these options, City staff concluded that the City should explore the development of an RFA, in partnership with Fire District 8. An RFA provides the most flexible, stable funding source for fire and emergency medical service. At the same time, this option frees up capacity in the City's general fund to meet other public safety needs—such as policing, alternative response programs, public defense—or other priorities.

Public safety is a cornerstone of a thriving community. This assessment makes clear that without decisive action to secure sustainable funding, Bellingham risks longer response times, reduced investigative capacity, and diminished readiness for emergencies. By investing now, we can ensure that our law enforcement, fire response, and emergency services systems remain strong, responsive, and prepared to serve a growing city with excellence.

## **Purpose of Assessment**

The purpose of this level of service assessment is to evaluate current and future levels of service for public safety services in Bellingham. The assessment defines current levels of service, identifies service gaps in the first-responding public safety landscape, and provides options for improved levels of service. It also evaluates revenue options to support expanded levels of service.

The document focuses on first-line responders and describes level of service targets for the Police Department and the Fire Department. Other aspects of the public safety system, such as Municipal Court and public defense, are considered in the landscape of City funding needs but are not the primary focus of this assessment. Furthermore, this assessment does not focus on diversion from the criminal justice system other than in the context of police and fire level of service. It acknowledges the ongoing and active work our community is undertaking through the Incarceration Prevention Task Force, therapeutic courts, and other bodies as essential components of the criminal justice and emergency response systems, but it does not make recommendations for levels of service in any of these areas.

## **Background: About the City & Growth Projection**

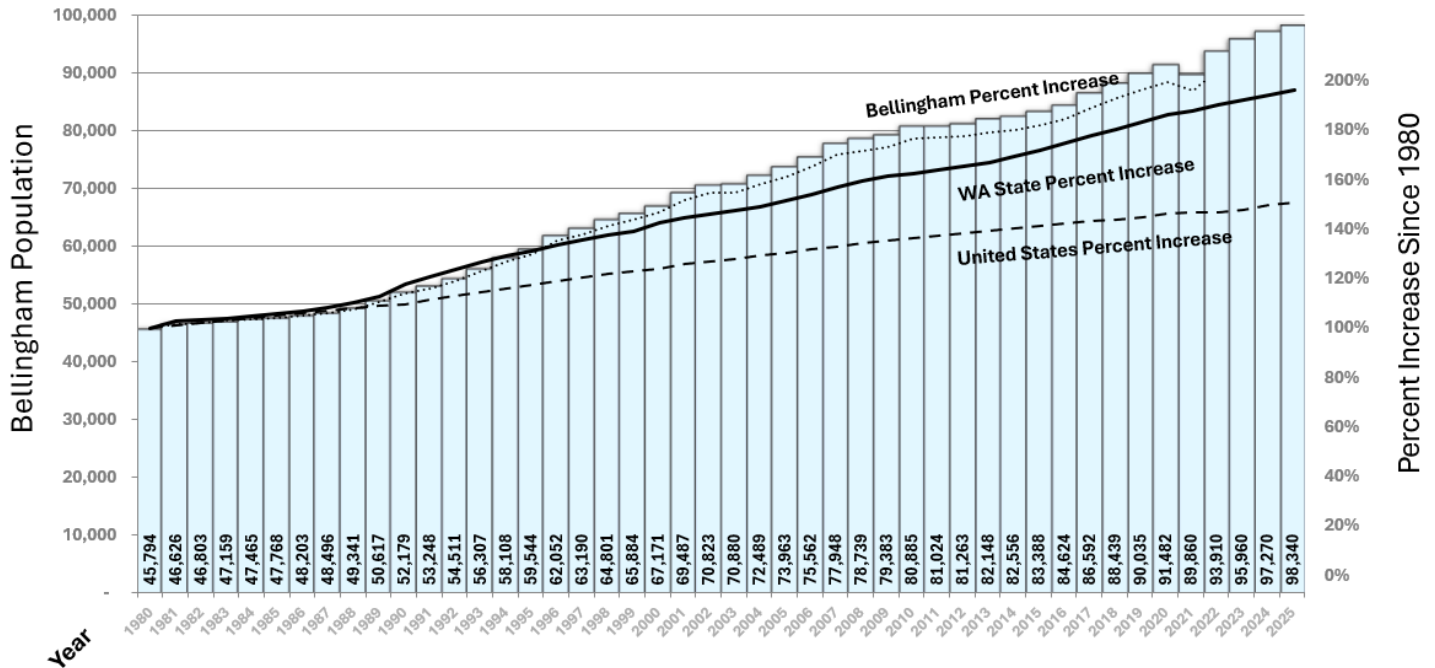
### **Overview**

The City of Bellingham is located in the northwestern section of Washington State 52 miles southwest of Vancouver, British Columbia and 90 miles north of Seattle. To the west the City is bordered by the Bellingham Bay, and to the east is the cascade Mountain Range. Bellingham serves as the county seat for Whatcom County and has an estimated population of 97,000 residents. The City covers approximately 30 square miles, of which two square miles is water. Interstate 5 transects the City providing a north/south route from Seattle to the Canadian border.

## Demographics & Growth

The current population of the city of Bellingham is approximately 97,000. The city has experienced significant growth over the past 20 years, with the percentage of growth outpacing the state overall.

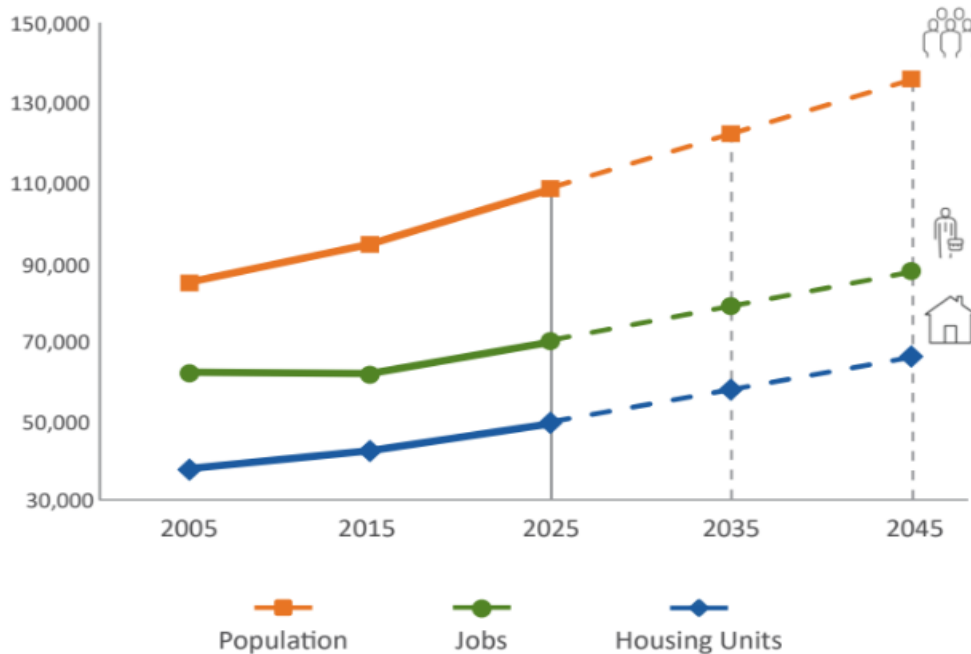
**Figure 1:** Population growth in Bellingham, 1980-2025



US Census Bureau Counts 1980, 1990, 2000, 2010, 2020. All other years WA State OFM Estimates (adjusted post-Census) except since 2010. Drop in Bellingham 2021 population estimate due to Covid-19 quarantine reduction of students in on-campus housing at Western Washington University.

State forecasts predict that Bellingham will grow at similar rates in the next 20 years. The Bellingham Plan (the City’s comprehensive plan) suggests a population around 105,000 in 2030 and 112,000 in 2035. Additionally, housing units are projected to increase from the current 44,000 by approximately 846 per year.

**Figure 2:** Projected growth in Bellingham



These numbers include students of Western Washington University (WWU) who increase our population by approximately 14,000 when WWU is in session. Approximately 9,500 of those 14,000 leave Bellingham during the summer months.

This document assumes the above rates for planning, although no service levels are directly tied to population rates and the authors recognize there may not be a causal relationship between calls for service and population. Nonetheless, growth expectations are one consideration.

## Fire Department Level of Service Evaluation and Recommendations

### Introduction

#### *Mission Statement*

The Bellingham Fire Department (BFD) mission is simple: Helping People Every Day. This mission statement encompasses the work that BFD members do to ensure their personal readiness for

their job, the health and safety of their co-workers, the BFD's role as a department of the city government, and the varied services that are requested of the fire service in our community. The department's vision is to focus on the value and safety of people as we strive for excellence in providing service to our neighborhoods and community.

## **Area of Service**

The Fire Department provides fire protection, emergency medical response, and life safety services within the City of Bellingham, and oversees the City's Fire Marshal (Life Safety) functions and Emergency Management services.

Through a long-standing contract for service, the Department also delivers fire protection and basic life support to Whatcom County Fire District 8. The two agencies merged administrations in 2013 and fully merged fire and EMS operations in 2016. BFD also provides countywide Advanced Life Support through four paramedic units and a paramedic supervisor.

The Department serves a diverse and growing population:

- City of Bellingham/WCFD 8: Approximately 107,000 residents.
- Whatcom County: Approximately 240,000 residents.

The service area includes urban, suburban, and rural areas, each with distinct challenges and resources needs. The department continually evaluates population growth and demographic trends to ensure that fire protection and emergency medical services keep pace with the evolving needs of the community.

## **Funding**

Financial stability and effective management of resources are crucial for the Bellingham Fire Department to fulfill its mission. The department's funding comes from multiple sources:

- City general fund: The primary source of funding is the City's general fund, which receives revenue from sales taxes, business & occupation taxes, utility taxes, and general property taxes.
- Contracts for services: The BFD receives funding from Whatcom County to provide emergency medical services, and from Fire District 8 to provide fire and EMS to District 8's area.
- Service fees: Fees are collected for ambulance transport services, for some permitting services, and for providing fire and EMS dispatching services for other fire agencies.

Fire District 8's funding comes primarily from property taxes as well as contracts for service with the Lummi Nation, Port of Bellingham, and several smaller contracts with other government agencies.

## Description of Agency Programs and Services

### *Fire Operations*

The Bellingham Fire Department is equipped and trained to manage a wide range of fire-related emergencies, including residential, commercial, industrial, and urban-vegetation fires. The department's fire suppression mission focuses on rapid containment and extinguishment to protect lives, property, and critical infrastructure.

BFD also participates in the countywide Specialized Emergency Response Program (SERP), a public-private partnership that provides technician-level hazardous materials response throughout Whatcom County. The department supports this capability by contributing annual program fees and maintaining up to 10 trained members assigned to the SERP team.

### *Emergency Medical Services (EMS)*

A large portion of the calls for service are medical in nature. The Bellingham Fire Department is equipped and trained to provide both Basic Life Support (BLS) and Advanced Life Support (ALS) through a tiered response system. This system is designed to dispatch the closest available BLS crew, and when necessary, the nearest ALS paramedic unit. Many medical calls are effectively handled by a single fire company or ambulance. However, more critical incidents require more trained personnel and may involve multiple support units.

- **Basic Life Support:** Each firefighter in the Bellingham Fire Department provides BLS services and is trained as an Emergency Medical Technician Basic (EMT-B.) They respond to medical emergencies, provide initial medical care, and stabilize patients for transport.
- **Advanced Life Support:** Approximately 40 firefighters have been trained to the EMT-Paramedic level. The department operates four paramedic units that provide ALS services across Whatcom County. These units are staffed with paramedics capable of delivering advanced pre-hospital care, including cardiac monitoring, medication administration, and advanced airway management.

## ***Life Safety***

The Life Safety division focuses on proactive strategies that prevent emergencies and strengthen community safety. Core functions include:

- **Fire Prevention:** Conducting fire inspections, plan reviews, and code enforcement to ensure compliance with fire and life-safety regulations.
- **Public Education:** Delivering programs and outreach efforts that promote fire safety, emergency preparedness, and injury prevention. **Fire Investigation:** Determining the cause and origin of fires to improve prevention practices and support legal processes.

## ***Communications Division/Dispatch Center***

The Communications Division and its team of 16 dispatchers are a vital part of the Bellingham Fire Department's operations handling thousands of calls every month. In addition to providing dispatching for Bellingham Fire, the Communication Division provides fire and EMS call-taking and dispatching services for all public fire agencies in Whatcom County.

As the first link in the continuum of care, dispatchers are responsible for receiving emergency calls, quickly assessing the situation, and deploying the appropriate resources. They provide critical pre-arrival instructions to callers, helping stabilize patients and guide lifesaving actions before crews arrive. Beyond coordinating responses, dispatchers play a key role in ensuring firefighter and paramedic safety by maintaining situational awareness, relaying updates, and managing communications throughout an incident. Their precision, calm under pressure, and deep operational knowledge make them an essential foundation of the department's emergency response system.

## ***Emergency Management***

The Bellingham Fire Department's Office of Emergency Management (OEM) works closely with public safety agencies, including fire, police, medics, and public works, to ensure a comprehensive and effective response to emergencies 24/7. This includes:

- **Preparedness:** Offering education and training programs to enhance individual and community preparedness for various hazards. The OEM also engages with residents through safety fairs and educational events.
- **Response:** Managing and coordinating emergency response efforts during disasters, including resource allocation to ensure effective management of emergencies.
- **Recovery:** Facilitating recovery efforts and coordinating assistance to individuals and communities affected by disasters.

- Working closely with local organizers during large events such as concerts, community events, and large planned events to ensure a safe community experience.

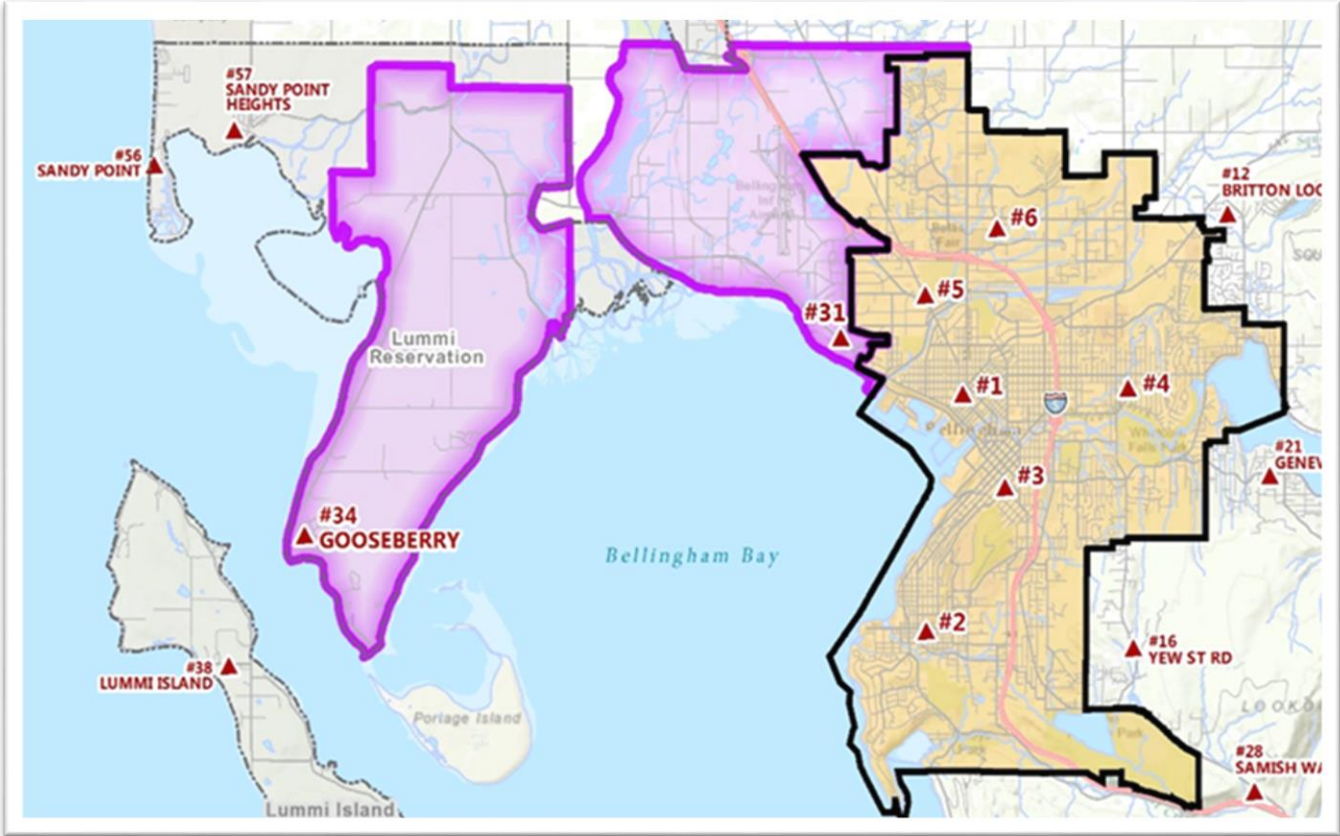
### ***Training Division***

The Training Division plays a vital role in supporting the readiness and professional development of over 200 firefighters, paramedics, and dispatchers. It oversees all aspects of training—from initial recruit academies to ongoing skills maintenance and specialized instruction in fire suppression, EMS, rescue, and hazardous materials. The division ensures personnel meet state and national certification standards, stay current with evolving best practices, and are fully prepared to respond safely and effectively to a wide range of emergencies. In addition to its core training responsibilities, the division plays a major role in department safety initiatives and provides essential support throughout all promotional processes, helping to uphold high standards of performance and leadership across the organization. Through structured programs, live drills, and classroom education, the Training Division fosters a culture of excellence, safety, and continuous improvement across the department.

### ***Station Locations, Facilities, and Staffing***

The Bellingham Fire Department operates eight fire stations strategically located throughout the city and District 8 to ensure efficient response times and comprehensive coverage. Each station is equipped with personnel, apparatus, and equipment necessary to handle a variety of emergencies, including fire suppression, emergency medical services, and hazardous materials incidents.

Figure 3: Bellingham Fire Department Stations



- Fire District 8
- Bellingham Fire Department

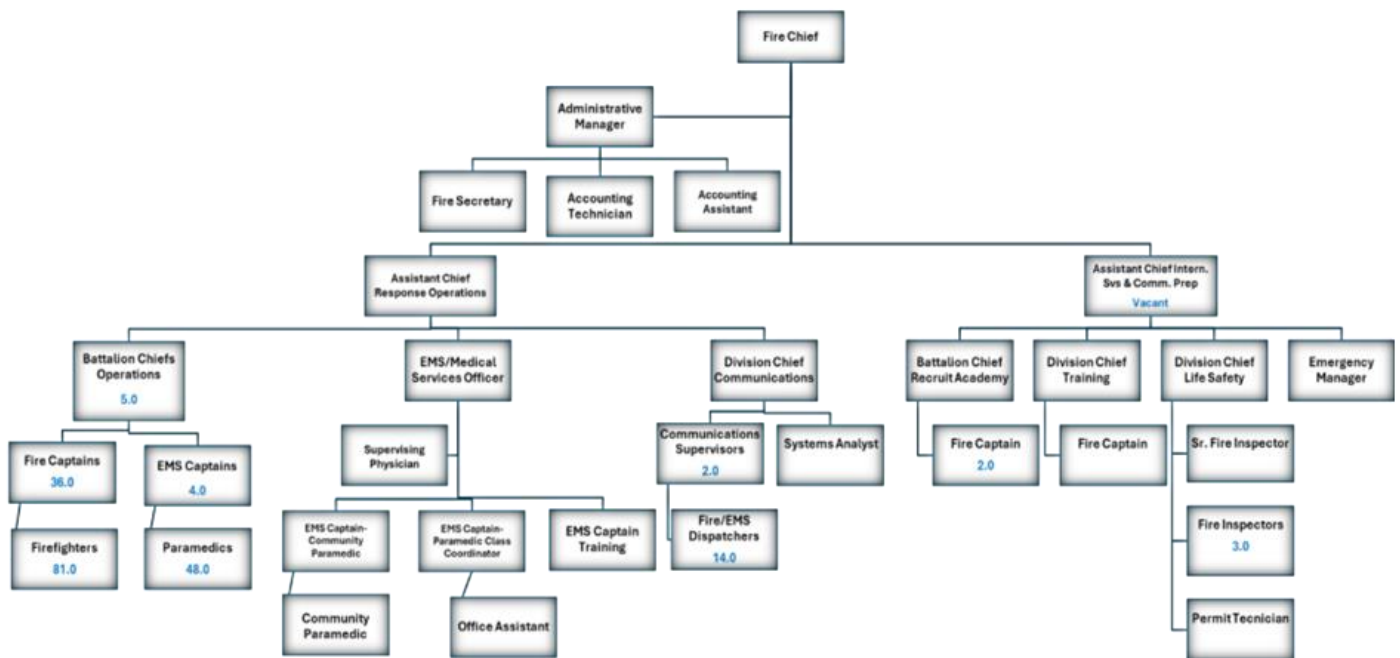
**Table 1: Bellingham Fire Station Locations, Resources, and Staffing**

<b>Station</b>	<b>Address</b>	<b>Resources</b>	<b>Staffing</b>
<b>Station 1 - Broadway</b>	1800 Broadway St.	Engine 1 Aid 1 EMS1 Battalion 1 AT102	1 Battalion Chief 1 EMS Captain 1 Fire Captain 1 Driver/Operator 3 Firefighter/EMTs
<b>Station 2 – Harris</b>	1590 Harris Ave.	Engine 2 Aid 2	1 Fire Captain 1 Driver/Operator 1 Firefighter/EMT
<b>Station 3 – Billy Frank</b>	1111 Billy Frank Jr St.	Engine 3 Aid 3 Medic 3 AT302	1 Fire Captain 1 Driver/Operator 3 Firefighter/EMTs 2 FF/Paramedics
<b>Station 4 – Yew St</b>	2306 Yew St.	Engine 4 Aid 4 Medic 4	1 Fire Captain 1 Driver Operator 1 Firefighter/EMT 2 FF/Paramedics
<b>Station 5 – Northwest</b>	3314 Northwest Ave.	Ladder 5 Aid 5	1 Fire Captain 1 Ladder Operator 1 Firefighter/EMT
<b>Station 6 – Deemer</b>	4060 Deemer Rd.	Engine 6 Aid 6 Medic 6	1 Fire Captain 1 Driver/Operator 1 Firefighter/EMT 2 FF/ Paramedics
<b>Station 31 – Marietta</b>	752 Marine Dr	Engine 31 Aid 31 Marine 1 “Salish Star”	1 Fire Captain 1 Driver/Operator 1 Firefighter/EMT
<b>Station 34 – Gooseberry</b>	2600 McKenzie Rd	Engine 34 Aid 34	1 Fire Captain 1 Driver/Operator 1 Firefighter/EMT

In addition to the stations within the city and fire district, the following additional locations house BFD staff.

- Medic 75 is staffed by two firefighter-paramedics and operates out of Station 75 in the City of Lynden under an agreement through Whatcom County EMS.
- The Community Paramedics operate from a satellite office located in the core of downtown Bellingham.
- The Life Safety Division operates out of a City-owned building at 3250 Northwest Ave near Fire Station 5.
- The Office of Emergency Management works out of a joint City/County emergency operations center near the airport in Fire District 8.
- The Training Division is housed at Station 12 (a Fire District 4 facility) in conjunction with the training tower and classroom facilities used by the recruit academy and paramedic training program.
- All other administrative services and the dispatch center are located on the administrative side of Fire Station 1.

**Figure 4:** Bellingham Fire Department Organizational Chart, 2026



## *Resource Descriptions*

**Administration and Support Staff:** The primary responsibilities of the Bellingham Fire Department's administration and support staff are to ensure that the organization's operational elements have the ability and means to accomplish their service delivery responsibilities. This team provides the necessary oversight, planning, documentation, training, and maintenance that allow the department's operational entities to perform their duties effectively. The Administrative Services Manager oversees most of the administrative functions and support personnel.

**Aid Transport Unit:** The Aid Transport unit is an ambulance staffed by a two-person firefighter/EMT team. Its primary purpose is to respond to low-acuity EMS incidents.

**Ambulances/Aid:** Ambulances provide Basic Life Support (BLS) care and transport and are staffed by firefighter/EMTs. These cross-staffed units respond to medical emergencies, provide initial medical care, and transport patients to healthcare facilities for further treatment.

**Assistant Chief:** The Assistant Chief is a high-ranking officer in the Department who assists the Fire Chief in managing the overall operations and administration of the department. The department has two Assistant Chiefs, one that oversees the 24-hour response operations, and one that oversees internal services and community preparedness. In 2025, one of the Assistant Chief positions was frozen to address a budgeting shortfall.

**Battalion Chief:** A Battalion Chief (BC) is responsible for supervising all personnel assigned to their battalion. Under the current resource configuration, each of the four 24-hour shifts functions as a battalion, with one BC on duty for each shift. The Bellingham Fire Department also has two administrative BCs. One oversees the department's recruit academy, and the other manages operations scheduling and supports daily administrative and supervisory tasks. The administrative BC positions are staffed during normal business hours.

**Chief:** The Fire Chief is the highest-ranking officer in the Department and is responsible for the overall leadership and management of the department. The Fire Chief's duties include strategic planning, policy development, budget management, and ensuring the department meets its mission. The Fire Chief oversees all divisions within the department, including fire operations, emergency medical services, life safety, training, communications, and emergency management.

**Community Paramedic:** Community Paramedics (CPM's) with the Bellingham Fire Department serve during regular business hours as part of the Community Paramedic Program, which is designed to connect individuals with non-emergency medical, social, and educational resources. Their primary role is to support and facilitate this program, which aims to improve overall community health by addressing the root causes of frequent emergency service, particularly among vulnerable populations such as the elderly, those with chronic health conditions, and individuals with limited access to care. While their focus is proactive outreach, CPM's also respond to nearby EMS incidents, especially those involving patients enrolled in the program.

**Division Chief:** A Division Chief is a senior officer responsible for overseeing a major functional area within the department. These positions provide strategic leadership, manage day-to-day operations, and support the coordination of specialized programs. The department also has a non-uniformed Emergency Manager who fulfills equivalent leadership responsibilities within the Office of Emergency Management.

**Engines:** Fire engines are equipped with a water pump, hoses, and various tools essential for firefighting operations. They are primarily used to deliver water to the fire scene, allowing firefighters to extinguish fires efficiently. Engines also carry ladders, fire extinguishers, and other EMS/fire equipment necessary for fire suppression, emergency medical care, and rescue operations.

**EMS Captain:** A 24-hour shift Captain with a paramedic certificate is responsible for the supervision of all on-duty ALS/BLS medical personnel as well as assisting, as needed, in EMS responses. The EMS Captains may also fulfill fire-scene duties such as command post aid. In addition to the 24-hour EMS Captain, there are three EMS Captains on administrative assignments. Two are engaged in coordinating the paramedic training class and ongoing EMS training. One is a supervisor for the Community Paramedic team.

**Ladders:** Ladder trucks, also known as aerial apparatus, are equipped with extendable ladders that allow firefighters to reach high places, such as the upper floors of buildings or rooftops. Unlike engines, ladder trucks do not typically carry water; instead, they provide access and ventilation at the scene of a fire and carry specialized rescue tools. Aerials are also used for rescue operations, providing a means to evacuate individuals from elevated positions and to deliver firefighters to higher levels quickly and safely. The ladders on these trucks can also support hose lines, enabling firefighters to attack the fire.

**Marine Unit:** The department operates a fire-rescue boat that provides marine fire suppression, rescue, and emergency response capabilities on Bellingham Bay and surrounding waterways. The boat is cross-staffed by an on-duty fire company, ensuring a rapid and flexible response without dedicated standalone staffing.

**MSO/Division Chief of EMS:** The MSO (Medical Services Officer) or Division Chief of EMS oversees the day-to-day operations of the EMS division and responds to incidents as needed. This position is staffed during regular business hours and plays a key role in the development and execution of the department's paramedic training program. The Bellingham Fire Department partners with Bellingham Technical College to deliver initial paramedic education, including a field internship component. As part of this collaboration, BFD members manage the program, provide classroom instruction, and serve as preceptors during field training.

**Paramedic Unit/Medics:** Paramedic units provide Advanced Life Support (ALS) services and are staffed by two highly trained paramedics. These units are equipped to handle severe medical emergencies and offer advanced pre-hospital care, including cardiac monitoring, medication administration, and advanced airway management. The Department's paramedic units provide ALS services to all of Whatcom County, ensuring that residents have access to critical medical interventions in emergency situations.

## Current Level of Service and Call Volume

Each fire company in the city is cross-staffed with an ambulance and either a fire engine or a ladder truck, meaning the same crew responds with whichever apparatus is appropriate for the call. This model was originally designed for efficiency, but rising demand has pushed it to its practical limits. When a cross-staffed engine is committed to an EMS incident, its partnered unit becomes unavailable for fire suppression or other emergencies. With call volumes at historic highs, this results in more frequent coverage gaps, longer response times, and reduced capacity to manage simultaneous or complex incidents.

This growing mismatch between demand and available resources increases system strain, delays responses to life-threatening incidents, and weakens the department's resilience during major events. It also affects the department's ability to meet national response standards and maintain specialized capabilities such as technical rescue and wildland fire response.

In 2025, Bellingham's deployment model is built for flexibility across a wide range of emergencies. The department operates seven fire engines and one ladder truck, all cross-staffed with ambulances. Five engines and the ladder truck respond from City of Bellingham stations, while

two engines operate from Fire District 8 stations. Daily operations are overseen by a single on-duty Battalion Chief who provides command support for critical incidents.

The department also deploys four paramedic units that deliver advanced life support throughout the city and county. These units are supervised by a 24-hour EMS Captain who offers medical oversight, assists the Battalion Chief on structure fires, and supports field personnel. To further support medical response, the department operates two dedicated Basic Life Support ambulances (AT units), ensuring broader coverage for both routine and high-acuity calls.

When it comes to emergency response, time is everything. Every second counts because outcomes, whether saving a life or preventing catastrophic property loss, are directly tied to how quickly help arrives. Our performance is measured against two critical benchmarks: fire response and medical response.

For fires, the race is against flashover, the point when a room's contents ignite all at once. This typically happens within four to ten minutes after a fire begins to burn freely. Modern furnishings made of synthetic materials accelerate this process, leaving little margin for delay. Once flashover occurs, survival inside the room becomes impossible—even for firefighters in full protective gear. The fire spreads faster, burns hotter, and requires significantly more resources to control. Quick response is the only way to prevent flashover and protect lives and property.

Medical emergencies present a different but equally urgent challenge. In cases like cardiac arrest, the clock starts ticking immediately. If CPR begins within four minutes, a patient's chances of survival increase dramatically—up to four times higher than if intervention is delayed. Defibrillation further improves those odds. That's why every BFD responder is trained and equipped with lifesaving tools, including defibrillators.

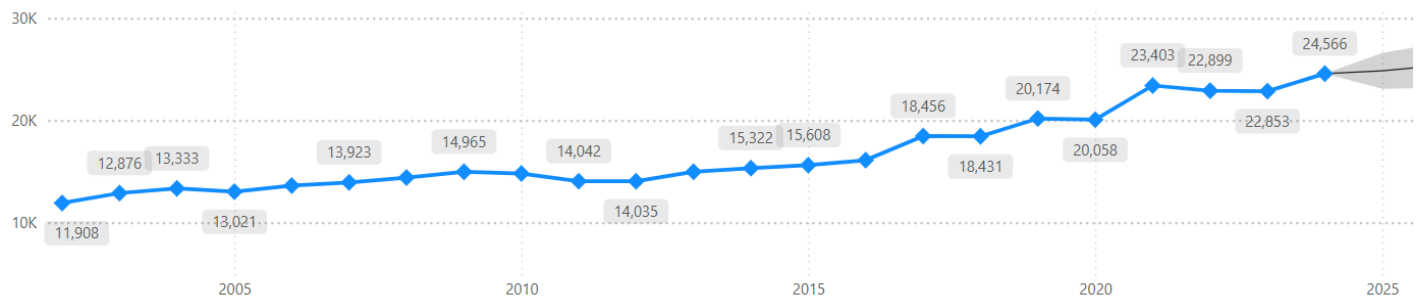
### *Incident Volumes*

The Bellingham Fire Department has experienced sustained and significant growth in incident volume over the past two decades. Call data dating back to 2002 shows a consistent upward trend, with detailed analysis from 2018–2023 confirming continued acceleration. From 2015 to 2025, call volumes increased by 35%, or nearly 9,000 additional annual calls, compared to a 17% increase—about 2,500 calls—in the previous decade (2005–2015). Overall, this represents more than a doubling of the rate of incident growth from one decade to the next. During this same period, minimum staffing increased only modestly, with the addition of two BLS ambulances and one ALS ambulance between 2023 and 2025. Core fire response resources—five engines, one ladder truck, and one battalion chief—remain unchanged since 1976 and are lower than pre-2008

levels, when a ladder company was removed due to budget reductions. In effect, call volume has grown by more than one-third in the last decade, while fire suppression staffing and unit capacity have remained essentially flat.

Incident growth reflects both population increases and the rising complexity of emergency service demands. Between 2018 and 2023, Rescue and Emergency Medical Service incidents accounted for nearly 75% of all call activity, ranging from welfare checks to critical medical emergencies. These calls generally require extended on-scene times, transport times, and hospital off-load intervals, keeping units unavailable for longer periods. In Bellingham’s cross-staffed model—where every fire company also staffs an ambulance—high EMS demand directly reduces available fire response capacity, increasing travel time to emergent events and elevating the risk of delayed intervention during time-sensitive emergencies.

**Figure 5: BFD Call Volumes by Year**



### Unit Availability

As call volumes continue to rise, fire and EMS units spend more time committed to incidents, reducing their availability for new emergencies. Between March 2023 and March 2024, cross-staffed fire companies averaged 88–90% availability, with some—such as Engine and Aid 6—dropping to 86% due to high workloads. A healthy fire and EMS system targets 90–92% availability to maintain reliable response times, and several Bellingham units are already operating at or below this benchmark. Increasing staffing would allow more units to be placed in service, reduce reliance on cross-staffing, and improve coverage during peak hours.

Compounding the issue is the growing complexity of emergency responses. Medical incidents increasingly involve patients with multiple chronic conditions, behavioral health needs, or prolonged on-scene care. Fire responses, too, often require more specialized tactics or

coordination. These more complex calls keep crews committed longer, further reducing availability even when overall call counts remain steady.

When unit availability falls, the closest company is often already on a call, requiring a more distant crew to respond. Longer travel distances directly increase response times, which can negatively affect patient survival and fire containment. Maintaining adequate unit availability is essential for timely, effective emergency response.

Increasing call volumes and complexity without proportional staffing has additional consequences. As more personnel are tied up on emergencies, it becomes harder for crews to complete required training. Firefighters and paramedics must meet extensive annual training standards to maintain medical certifications, stay proficient in fireground and rescue operations, and prepare for future leadership roles. Training typically occurs on duty and now competes more frequently with emergency response demands, reducing overall readiness. Maintaining sufficient staffing to support required training is not only an operational necessity but also a fiscally responsible strategy—well-trained personnel reduce long-term risks, improve service effectiveness, and help avoid the higher costs associated with preventable incidents, errors, and injuries.

Fire company availability also supports essential prevention and pre-incident planning. When companies are not committed to an emergency response they conduct pre-incident surveys, engage in public education, and complete community risk-reduction activities that help prevent emergencies. Rising call volumes and increasingly complex incidents reduce the time available for this proactive work, ultimately increasing long-term community risk.

To help relieve pressure on fire companies, the department began deploying two Aid Transport (AT) units in 2023 to handle lower-acuity medical calls. These units have improved system efficiency by several percentage points compared to 2022, allowing fire companies to remain in service for higher-priority incidents. However, they have not fully offset two decades of rising call volume, increasing call complexity, or the growing time crews spend committed to emergencies.

### ***Level of Service Metrics***

The City of Bellingham and the fire department have adopted response timeline goals from nationally recognized standards. These objectives guide performance evaluation, continuous improvement, and future resource planning. They reflect the time-sensitive nature of cardiac arrest, strokes, structure fires, and other life-threatening emergencies.

These target times are measured against BFD’s critical fire/EMS calls. Critical fire/EMS calls are defined as calls that are initially given a response level of “echo” or “delta” within the priority dispatch system.

**Table 2:** Target response times and compliance

	<b>Target: in minutes, 90% of the time</b>	<b>Incident count</b>	<b>Incidents meeting target</b>	<b>Compliance percentage</b>	<b>90th percentile time</b>
<b>Dispatch</b>					
Triage and dispatch critical calls	1:00	8289	1600	19.5%	2:19
<b>Turnout Time</b>					
Personnel will assemble and go enroute to a critical incident	1:30	4397	2646	60.1%	2:24
<b>Travel Time - first unit on scene to critical...</b>					
Fire/EMS calls within city	4:00	4037	2613	64.7%	5:57
First Medic arrival within city	8:00	3295	2894	87.8%	8:30
Fire/EMS calls within UGA	6:30	105	89	84.7%	7:24
Fire/EMS calls within rural	10:30	255	203	79.6%	7:24
<b>Total Response Time - first unit on scene to critical...</b>					
Fire/EMS calls within city	5:30	4053	2718	67%	7:24
Fire/EMS calls within UGA	8:00	105	87	82.80%	9:03
Fire/EMS calls within rural	12:00	255	197	76.90%	15:25

As evidenced by the metrics above, the Fire Department does not meet the level of service targets with its current staffing levels.

### Conclusion

The data is clear: Bellingham’s emergency service demands are growing faster than the department’s ability to absorb them under the current staffing model. To maintain nationally recognized response standards, ensure unit availability, and preserve essential training and prevention work, strategic staffing increases are not optional—they are necessary.

The addition of Aid Transport Units has been an important step forward, improving system stability and reducing workload on our busiest companies. However, we must remain vigilant. Before these units were added, several fire companies operated with availability in the mid-80% range—levels we consider unsafe and inconsistent with national standards. When availability drops below 90%, the closest unit is often unavailable, leading to longer response times and increased risk to both the public and our firefighters.

With continued growth in call volume, population, and EMS demand, additional staffing and resources are essential to prevent a return to those unsafe availability levels. Maintaining safe response times, ensuring adequate fireground staffing, and preserving the capacity for training, fire prevention, and pre-incident planning all depend on keeping unit availability at or above acceptable thresholds.

## Employee Participation Summary

Between September 3 and 12, 2025, Maul Foster & Alongi (MFA) facilitated 16 in-person sessions with 146 participants from the Bellingham Fire Department (BFD), including operations staff, dispatchers, office staff, union representatives, and leadership. These sessions were designed to gather input for the City of Bellingham Public Safety Strategic Plan through a structured SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) process. Over 500 comments were collected through live sessions, anonymous submissions, and email feedback.

Staff consistently identified personnel as BFD's greatest strength. Employees were described as motivated, caring, accountable, and well-supported by both administrative and union leadership. Nearly half of BFD's workforce has fewer than five years of experience, bringing fresh energy and modern best practices to the department. This influx of junior staff was seen as a valuable opportunity to evolve the department's culture. BFD's Fire Academy and Paramedic training programs were also praised, with some participants calling them among the best in the state.

However, career development and mentorship emerged as the most frequently cited weakness. Staff expressed concern over the lack of structured pathways for advancement, limited access to continuing education, and insufficient support for specialized training. Once probation ends, many felt that guidance and development opportunities diminish. This gap risks underprepared promotions and potential attrition. These same concerns were highlighted in a Workplace Climate Assessment conducted in 2023, reinforcing the need for strategic improvements across leadership, planning, and operational readiness

Additionally, participants noted that BFD tends to operate reactively, lacking a clear long-term vision. Poor planning in areas like facilities, staffing, and succession has led to budget overruns and strained capacity. The absence of technical rescue capabilities—such as water, rope, or confined space rescue—was also flagged as a critical limitation.

Looking ahead, staff identified several opportunities to strengthen the department. There was strong support for expanding internal and external training, mentorship, and specialization. Many advocated for learning exchanges with other departments and creating more shadowing opportunities. Proactive planning to meet Bellingham’s projected growth was also emphasized, including support for a seventh fire station and a more actionable strategic plan. Community engagement was another key area, with suggestions to increase outreach to schools, underserved communities, and the Lummi Nation, as well as to improve transparency between staff, leadership, and City administration.

Funding constraints were seen as one of the biggest external threats. BFD’s reliance on the City’s general fund and grants limits its autonomy and financial resilience. Participants suggested exploring the formation of a Regional Fire Authority and hiring a dedicated grant writer. Imminent retirements among senior staff pose another risk, with no formal process in place to transfer institutional knowledge. Additionally, BFD’s staffing, apparatus, and facilities have not kept pace with the city’s growth, leading to longer response times and increased strain. Burnout from forced overtime and staffing shortages was cited as a serious concern that could impact morale and retention.

Additional insights included strong support for BFD’s reputation; diversity, equity and inclusion efforts; and the value of aid transport units. Staff recommended creating a lessons-learned procedure to foster continuous improvement. Dispatch-specific feedback highlighted a tight-knit culture and specialized EMS training as strengths, while low staffing and limited career pathways were noted as weaknesses. There was strong resistance to combining dispatch services with the police department, citing concerns over service quality and cultural misalignment.

Recommended actions for the strategic plan include developing a comprehensive career development and mentorship program, institutionalizing knowledge transfer before retirements, pursuing a capital facilities plan, and enhancing community engagement. These steps aim to ensure BFD remains resilient, responsive, and well-equipped to meet the evolving needs of the community.

## Level of Service Improvements

Our overarching goals to maintain and improve BFD levels of service are listed below, followed by recommended improvements in each BFD division.

### Goals

- **Achieve Stated Levels of Service** Maintain and improve response capabilities to meet community expectations and operational benchmarks.
- **Be Responsive to Community Needs** Adapt to increasing call volumes and evolving service demands by aligning staffing, resources, and programs with community growth and risks.
- **Promote Diversity** Continue building an inclusive organization that reflects the community we serve and values diverse perspectives across all ranks.
- **Invest in Training & Succession Planning** Strengthen employee development across leadership, management, and supervision to ensure a prepared and resilient workforce.
- **Sustainable Funding Through Strategic Partnerships** Explore collaborative and sustainable strategies to stabilize long-term funding. This includes working with city leadership, regional partners, and community stakeholders to identify shared solutions that support operational needs, enhance service delivery, and ensure financial resilience for the fire department.
- **Advance towards a Class 2 WSRB Rating.** The Washington Surveying and Rating Bureau (WSRB) evaluates a fire agency's ability to prevent and respond to fires by assessing factors such as staffing, equipment, training, water supply, and emergency communications. The resulting community fire protection rating influences property insurance premiums for residents and businesses. Improving WSRB ratings can lower insurance costs community-wide, demonstrate strong service capability, and provide an objective benchmark for investment in fire protection and emergency response resources.

## ***Operations - Goals and Improvements***

The Bellingham Fire Department is committed to advancing public safety through strategic investments in personnel, infrastructure, and operational readiness. Based on historical call data, projected trends, response modeling, and input from Operations leadership, a comprehensive set of recommendations has been developed. By addressing identified gaps and opportunities, the department seeks to optimize resource allocation, enhance response times, and improve community safety. Achieving this requires not only strengthening frontline response capabilities but also ensuring an appropriate balance of administrative and support staff to sustain training, planning, logistics, and overall mission effectiveness.

At the same time, increasing call volume, rising incident complexity, and staffing constraints have begun to erode the department's ability to meet or maintain regional and national performance standards. Strategic investment is essential to prevent further loss of ground and ensure that Bellingham's fire and EMS services continue to align with best-practice benchmarks for response times, training, safety, and operational capability.

### **Operations Recommendation 1– Create a second 24-hour Battalion Chief (4.0 FTE)**

To ensure effective supervision, maintain a manageable span of control, and support the growing demands of our service area, the Bellingham Fire Department plans to add a second 24-hour Battalion Chief (BC).

Incident Command System (ICS) has been part of the U.S. fire service since the early 1970's. ICS was created to give incident managers a way to organize the oversight of emergency crews in an effective manner. Nationally it is recognized that the ratio of supervisor to employee should be one supervisor for 3-7 employees with a 1:5 ratio optimal. Currently, BCs have 9 direct reports.

Further undermining effective supervision is the size of the response area. Between the City and Fire District 8, the department covers over 50 square miles and travel time from one end of the coverage area to the other can be over 30 minutes. A second BC will allow the positions to split the geography and provide a timelier response. As call volumes increase, so do the number of times the department needs a BC to respond to complex calls. Currently the department cannot handle more than one complex incident at a time without calling in off duty resources.

Adding a second BC will provide better oversight and supervision of companies for incident command coverage and critical events while also decreasing the administrative span of control. This decrease of span of control allows for more frequent interactions between the BCs and the captains, allowing for more effective supervision, mentoring, and training. This additional

position will also provide the department with critical capacity as we contemplate adding other additional operations resources. As our community grows and emergency responses become more complex, this investment aligns with our commitment to safety, accountability, and high-quality service delivery.

*This recommendation is a tier 1 project.* The department cannot grow operations any further without this additional support.

### **Operations Recommendation 2 – Staff two additional dedicated BLS transport units (20.0 FTE)**

The cornerstone of the deployment strategy is the transition away from cross-staffing and toward a fully dedicated staffing model within city limits. Cross-staffing, once an efficiency measure, has reached the end of its functional life due to rising call volumes, increasing incident complexity, and sustained workload demands. The new model permanently assigns dedicated engine or ladder crews to each station while expanding Basic Life Support (BLS) capacity through additional Ambulance Transport (AT) units.

A third AT unit (AT502) will be deployed at Station 5, enabling Ladder 5 to operate with its own dedicated crew. Additionally, a fourth AT unit (AT602) will be deployed at Station 6, completing the transition to uncross-staffed operations across all city stations. These AT units—designated as Aid Cars—will serve as the city’s primary BLS ambulances and will respond alongside engine and ladder companies. They will also extend their coverage beyond city limits to support mutual-aid partners.

The addition of two BLS units, combined with uncross-staffed fire companies, will ensure that the appropriate resources are dispatched to each type of emergency. AT units will handle the majority of BLS and low-acuity medical incidents, allowing engine and ladder companies to remain available for fire suppression and high-acuity emergencies. By aligning unit capabilities with call types and reducing the need to reassign fire companies to medical responses, the department can improve overall response times and strengthen system reliability. AT units will be strategically positioned within their primary service areas, with response zones adjusted as needed to maintain effective coverage.

This strategic shift represents a major advancement in BFD’s deployment model. It aligns resources with community needs, replaces an aging and increasingly ineffective cross-staffing system, and positions the department for long-term operational reliability and excellence.

*The recommendation is both a tier 1 and tier 2 project.* To ensure an effective and sustainable rollout, one AT unit should be established first, immediately followed by the hiring and implementation steps for the second unit. The sequencing is based on available staffing capacity, but both projects should proceed in direct succession to avoid unnecessary delays.

### **Operations Recommendation 3 – Improve facilities to allow for expansion**

The Bellingham Fire Department faces urgent and growing infrastructure needs that directly impact its ability to train, respond, and operate efficiently. Many existing facilities have already been outgrown, limiting the department’s capacity to properly and strategically place resources where they are most needed. Several stations require significant upgrades—ranging from basic improvements like paint and HVAC work to full replacements—to safely and effectively house expanding fire, EMS, and administrative teams.

The department also lacks adequate apparatus bay space for its fleet, and only Stations 1 and 2 have enough living space for additional staffing, though neither requires new crews at this time. A dedicated public safety storage facility is also needed to support logistics, equipment management, and emergency response readiness.

Funding for these capital improvements, along with the administrative and project-management capacity to implement them, is essential for supporting operational expansion. Together, these priorities reflect the department’s commitment to building a safe, modern, and resilient fire service—one that meets current demands and positions Bellingham to confront the challenges of tomorrow.

*The replacement of Station 5 is a tier 1 project.* It is paramount to the department’s ability to add additional units and to provide flexibility for the other facilities to be remodeled. Once Station 5 is completed, the department will revisit the priorities for the other facilities.

### **Operations Recommendation 4 – Staff a new ladder company (14.0 FTE)**

As the City of Bellingham continues to grow in population density and call volume, there is a clear need to add an additional fire company in the Station 3 service area. This second company would share the workload with the existing Engine 3 crew, enhancing response capacity in one of the city’s most densely populated zones—including downtown and the Western Washington University campus. To maximize operational impact, this new company should be a ladder company, providing elevated access and critical support during emergency medical and extrication incidents.

Ladder companies are versatile assets that not only perform specialized fireground operations but also respond to a wide range of EMS calls. Establishing a second ladder company in the city will improve overall fire and EMS coverage, create depth in response capabilities, and positively influence the department's Washington Surveying and Rating Bureau (WSRB) score. This investment will strengthen public safety infrastructure and ensure the department remains responsive to the evolving needs of the community.

*This recommendation is a tier 2 project.*

### **Operations Recommendation 5 – Fund for fire boat replacement**

In 2015, the Bellingham Fire Department purchased a fireboat at a cost of approximately \$1 million, with a substantial portion of the expense covered by grant funding. However, because the vessel is not formally recognized as part of the department's standard fleet, no replacement fund was established to support its eventual renewal. While fireboats do not have a fixed service life, this vessel will inevitably reach the end of its operational capacity. The fireboat plays a vital role in waterfront fire suppression, search and rescue, and emergency operations throughout Bellingham Bay. As maritime demands continue to grow and the vessel nears the end of its service life, proactive investment is essential to maintain reliability and ensure continued protection of our shoreline, harbor, and waterfront infrastructure.

*This recommendation is a tier 2 project.*

### ***Emergency Medical Services - Goals and Improvements***

The Department remains committed to strengthening and sustaining its Emergency Medical program to meet the growing medical needs of our community. As a trusted partner with Whatcom County, we will continue to provide high-quality paramedic services across the region while providing top level first response and BLS transport services within the City and Fire District 8.

To ensure long-term stability and excellence, we are actively exploring efficiencies and partnerships throughout the Northwest. This includes maintaining accreditation for our paramedic school and development of training and support programs for our personnel. That's why we are aligning our training, mentorship, and career development efforts with the evolving needs of the profession—ensuring our staff are equipped, supported, and empowered to grow alongside the communities they serve.

### **EMS Recommendation 1 – Create a Division Chief of EMS Training (1.0 FTE)**

Creating a Division Chief of EMS Training will elevate the department’s clinical standards, ensure consistency across shifts and stations, and enhance overall patient care. This dedicated leadership role will oversee EMS education, certification, and performance improvement, ensuring that all personnel are equipped with current best practices and compliant with evolving medical protocols. The Division Chief will also have oversight of the department’s paramedic training program, providing focused leadership in EMS training, clinical quality assurance, and coordination with educational partners. As emergency medical services grow in complexity and demand, this position will reduce administrative burden on field staff, support long-term leadership development, and strengthen the department’s ability to deliver high-quality care across the community. EMS is over 75% of the department's workload and one of the areas of greatest potential risk for litigation.

*This recommendation is a tier 1 project.*

### **EMS Recommendation 2 - Create a second paramedic class instructor position (1.0 FTE)**

Creating a second paramedic class instructor position will expand the department’s instructional capacity, improve student-to-instructor ratios, and allow for a larger number of students in each cohort. As demand for EMS services grows and training requirements become more complex, a second instructor ensures consistent delivery of advanced life support curriculum, supports simulation-based learning, and provides more individualized coaching for students. This additional capacity also offers operational flexibility during peak training periods or instructor absences and strengthens clinical oversight across the program.

This expansion is especially important given the nationwide shortage of paramedics and the unique challenges faced in Washington State, where only a small number of paramedic training programs operate—and most are closed to outside students due to local demand. By increasing instructional staffing, BFD can broaden program capacity and open seats to regional partners, helping meet countywide workforce needs while generating additional program revenue. This positions the department as a key regional provider of paramedic education and supports the long-term stability of the EMS system across Whatcom County and beyond.

*This recommendation is a tier 1 project.*

### **EMS Recommendation 3- Create a second operational EMS captain (4.0 FTE)**

Creating a second operational EMS captain will enhance leadership capacity, improve span of control, and strengthen daily oversight of emergency medical services. The second captain would

support and expand quality assurance initiatives, including incident review, protocol compliance, and performance feedback, helping to maintain high standards of patient care. As EMS demand continues to grow, this position will improve operational resilience, support field crews more effectively, and ensure the department remains agile and accountable in delivering advanced life support services. While the current EMS Captain position allows for oversight and quality assurance for our ALS personnel, adding the second Captain position will allow to expand that oversight to our BLS units.

*This recommendation is both a Tier 1 and Tier 2 project.* The addition of a 40-hour EMS Captain position should be implemented first as a Tier 1 project to immediately strengthen operational oversight, improve coordination, and reduce risk. This 40-hour role should then be evaluated to confirm its effectiveness before moving directly into the 24-hour EMS Captain model, which is identified as the Tier 2 project.

### **Life Safety – Goals and Improvement**

The Bellingham Fire Department has identified Community Risk Reduction (CRR) as a significant service gap and a priority area for improvement. Strengthening the Life Safety Division is essential to reducing community risk, improving resilience, and supporting the department's long-term strategic goals. Enhancing prevention, enforcement, education, and risk-analysis capabilities will help the department better identify emerging hazards, intervene earlier, and support safer outcomes for residents and businesses. These improvements also directly contribute to raising the department's Washington Surveying and Rating Bureau (WSRB) score from Class 3 to Class 2, a benchmark that reflects strong, well-coordinated fire prevention and risk-reduction programs.

Expanding the Life Safety Division will improve our ability to reduce fire loss, ensure compliance with codes and standards, streamline new construction reviews, and help the community understand and address hazards before they become emergencies. This investment creates a more proactive, prevention-focused organization aligned with industry best practices.

#### **Life Safety Recommendation 1 – Create a second Senior Fire Inspector (1.0 FTE)**

#### **Life Safety Recommendation 2 – Create two additional Fire Inspectors (2.0 FTE)**

Fire inspectors perform a broad range of duties, including inspection of new fire systems, new construction, and existing occupancies to ensure compliance with fire codes and Bellingham Municipal Code requirements. When a fire occurs, they shift from prevention to investigation to determine cause and origin. Senior Fire Inspectors also complete plan reviews and serve as team

leads. Adding inspection and investigation staff will improve capacity to support new development, expand routine inspection programs, and provide timely, thorough investigations.

### **Life Safety Recommendation 3 – Add a Community Risk Reduction (CRR) Captain**

A CRR Captain would address the department’s most significant service gap by leading risk modeling, targeted public outreach, fire and injury prevention efforts, and wildland-urban interface mitigation programs. While inspectors focus on compliance and investigation, the CRR Captain uses real-time data to identify the underlying causes of emergency responses and develop programs to reduce those risks before emergencies occur.

### **Life Safety Recommendation 4 – Restore funding for Public Education Group**

The department once maintained dedicated overtime funding to support staff-intensive public-education activities such as school programs, safety fairs, and neighborhood outreach. Although a CRR Captain will strengthen coordination, additional personnel are required to fully deliver these programs. Restoring this funding will allow the department to staff high-impact educational events and expand prevention messaging.

### **Life Safety Recommendation 5 – Facility Improvement**

The Life Safety Division currently operates out of a former bank building owned by the city and slated for future redevelopment. As the department evaluates overall facility needs, a permanent and purpose-built location for Life Safety should be included. The future facility should accommodate office space as well as apparatus bays for the fire investigation trailer and related equipment.

#### *Tier Assignments*

- *Tier 1: Recommendations 1 and 4*
- *Tier 2: Recommendation 2*
- *Tier 3: Recommendations 3 and 5*

### ***Dispatch/Communications - Goals and Improvements***

The Communications Center is committed to continuous improvement and long-term operational excellence. In addition to its vital role in emergency response coordination and dispatcher support, the center is actively pursuing technological upgrades to enhance system performance, reliability, and efficiency. This includes monitoring emerging technologies, software platforms,

and operating systems to stay ahead of industry trends. Goals for the center also include improving interoperability with neighboring agencies, expanding data-driven decision-making tools, and strengthening backup systems for greater resilience. Investments in dispatcher training, mental health support, and professional development remain a priority, along with preparing for Next-Generation 911 capabilities such as text-to-911. Together, these efforts ensure the center continues to provide exceptional service while adapting to meet future demands.

### **Dispatch/Communications Recommendation 1- Increase minimum staffing (2.0 FTE)**

Current minimum staffing in the Dispatch and Communications Center is three dispatchers on duty from 10:30 to 22:30 and two dispatchers from 22:30 to 10:30. The department plans to increase minimum staffing to three dispatchers on duty 24 hours a day. This change is essential to maintaining timely, accurate, and effective emergency response across the City of Bellingham.

As call volumes rise and incidents grow in complexity, dispatchers must manage multiple radio channels, coordinate field units, and handle high-stress situations—often with limited personnel. Current staffing levels make consistent breaks difficult and contribute to fatigue, which can impact performance, health, and overall system reliability. Increasing minimum staffing will ensure dependable coverage, provide regular rest periods, and build a stronger, more resilient communications operation.

This adjustment also ensures that at least two dispatchers are present in the room at all times—a critical operational standard identified as a deficiency in the City’s Washington Surveying and Rating Bureau (WSRB) scoring. Addressing this gap will enhance public safety, strengthen emergency response coordination, and elevate the department’s overall service delivery.

*This recommendation is tier 1 project.*

### **Dispatch/Communications Recommendation 2 – Institute a Nurse Hotline**

Instituting a Nurse Hotline within the dispatch system remains a high-value initiative that was not completed in the 2020 strategic plan. We continue to see significant benefit in implementing this service, which would provide residents with timely clinical guidance for non-emergency medical concerns, reduce unnecessary EMS responses, and help relieve pressure on emergency departments. By enabling trained nurses to triage low-acuity calls and direct individuals to appropriate care resources, a Nurse Hotline would improve system efficiency, preserve frontline capacity for true emergencies, and align with national best practices for integrated mobile health and community care. Additionally, this initiative directly supports our strategic goal of sending the

right resource to the right call, enhancing our ability to match service demand with appropriate response levels and building long-term capacity within the system.

*This recommendation is a tier 1 project.*

### **Dispatch/Communications Recommendation 3- Create a Communications Operations Manager Position (1.0 FTE)**

Creating a communications manager position is essential to strengthening leadership and operational oversight within the dispatch center. This role would provide dedicated, day-to-day supervision of dispatch operations, ensuring consistent performance, robust quality assurance, and alignment with departmental standards. With increasing call volumes and growing expectations for transparency and responsiveness, a communications manager will enhance system reliability, improve staff support, and help ensure the dispatch center remains agile and effective in serving the community.

In addition, this position expands professional development and advancement opportunities for dispatch personnel—an organizational need highlighted in the 2023 Climate Assessment and reiterated during the employee engagement session—supporting a healthier culture and stronger internal career pathways.

*This recommendation is a tier 2 project.*

### ***Emergency Management - Goals and Improvements***

To strengthen our preparedness and resilience, the Bellingham Fire Department is focused on rebuilding its Office of Emergency Management (OEM) capacity by restoring positions lost through recent budget reductions. As the scope and complexity of emergencies continue to grow—from natural disasters to public health crises—having dedicated staff is essential to coordinate planning, response, and recovery efforts across the city. Reinvesting in Emergency Management will improve interagency collaboration, enhance community education and risk reduction, and ensure continuity of operations during major incidents. This effort supports our broader goals of building a safer, more resilient Bellingham and advancing toward fire department accreditation.

### **OEM Recommendation 1- Restore the Emergency Plans Coordinator (1.0 FTE)**

The Emergency Plans Coordinator position was eliminated in the 2026 budget. This position is essential to strengthening the city’s preparedness, response, and recovery capabilities. This role provides critical leadership in developing, updating, and exercising emergency operations plans

across all departments, ensuring alignment with local, state, and federal guidelines. The coordinator also plays a key role in hazard mitigation, continuity planning, and interagency coordination—functions that are increasingly vital as Bellingham faces evolving risks from climate events, infrastructure demands, and population growth. Restoring this position will enhance organizational resilience, improve training and readiness, and ensure the city is equipped to respond effectively to emergencies of all scales.

**OEM Recommendation 2 – Restore the Office Assistant Position (1.0 FTE)**

OEM had a full-time Office Assistant position at the beginning of 2025. Due to budget pressures, the position was reassigned to Paramedic Training to reduce strain on the General Fund and to meet an identified need within Paramedic Training that could be supported through the Medic One Fund.

The Office Assistant role within OEM had been a critical link in maintaining several essential databases, including tracking city-wide compliance with incident management training, updating contacts in the emergency notification system, and maintaining records related to hazardous materials facility reporting. This position also supported the maintenance of the Fire Department’s website and social media platforms.

**OEM Recommendation 3- Restore the Public Outreach Coordinator (0.5 FTE)**

The Public Outreach Coordinator position was eliminated in the 2026 budget. This position is essential to strengthening community preparedness, resilience, and trust in emergency management efforts. This role plays a critical part in developing and delivering public education campaigns, coordinating outreach to vulnerable populations, and ensuring timely, accurate communication before, during, and after emergencies. With Bellingham’s growing population and increasing exposure to climate-related and infrastructure risks, proactive engagement is more important than ever. Restoring this position will enhance public awareness of emergency plans, improve participation in preparedness programs, and foster stronger partnerships with schools, businesses, and community organizations.

*OEM Recommendations 1, 2, and 3 are all tier 1 projects.*

## ***Training Division - Goals and Improvements***

As the Bellingham Fire Department increases staffing to meet growing service demands, it is essential to restore the training positions lost through attrition in the 2026 budget and add additional personnel to ensure compliance with mandatory requirements and maintain operational readiness. Training is at the core of delivering a proper, effective emergency response, and dedicated academy staff are critical to providing a professional adult-learning environment that supports consistent skill development and reinforces operational excellence.

A stronger training division will support high-quality instruction, improve safety, and prepare firefighters to respond effectively across all disciplines. This investment also strengthens succession planning and leadership development, sustains specialty programs such as technical rescue and marine operations, and enhances documentation and performance tracking—critical components of a modern, high-performing fire service. Additional training staff will improve onboarding and recruit academies, foster regional collaboration, and position the department to pursue grant opportunities. Most importantly, it ensures our personnel are well-prepared, safe, and capable of delivering exceptional service to the community.

### **Training Recommendation 1 - Restore academy staff positions (4.0 FTE)**

Filling the vacant fire academy positions is essential to meeting the department's projected growth and maintaining a high standard of training and readiness. These positions were previously eliminated through attrition as part of the 2026 budget reductions. Based on ongoing attrition numbers and new positions identified in this plan, there is a need to onboard upwards of 24 new personnel annually. To meet that goal, restoring academy back to full staffing is critical. Academy staff provide foundational instruction, mentorship, and operational preparation for incoming recruits, ensuring they are equipped to meet the demands of modern fire and EMS service. Reinstating these roles will expand instructional capacity, reduce strain on existing trainers, and support consistent, high-quality onboarding aligned with the department's long-term workforce strategy. Without these positions the department would need to rely upon additional overtime to staff the academy.

*This recommendation is a tier 1 project.*

### **Training Recommendation 2 - Create a second Training Captain position (1.0 FTE)**

Creating a second Training Captain position is essential to supporting the department's expanding instructional demands and advancing our goals for increased mentorship and professional development. With growing emphasis on career progression, skill refinement, and operational readiness, an additional captain would enable more individualized coaching, stronger

coverage of specialized programs, and greater continuity in academy operations. This investment strengthens our internal leadership pipeline, enhances the capacity of the Training Division to deliver high-quality instruction, and reinforces the department’s commitment to excellence in service and preparedness.

*This recommendation is a tier 1 project.*

### **Training Recommendation 3 - Strengthen workforce readiness through enhanced education and training**

Increasing funding for mentorship, training, and education—both initial and ongoing—is essential to cultivating a highly skilled, resilient, and future-ready workforce across all divisions of the department, including office and administrative staff. As operational demands grow and service expectations evolve, a sustained investment in professional development ensures that every team member is equipped with the tools, knowledge, and support needed to perform at their highest level. Enhanced training programs foster leadership, improve retention, and promote a culture of continuous improvement. Expanding mentorship opportunities also strengthens internal collaboration, supports career growth, and builds institutional knowledge. This commitment to development is foundational to maintaining excellence in service delivery and preparing the department for long-term success.

*This recommendation is a tier 1 project.*

### **Training Recommendation 4 - Invest in a dedicated fire department training facility**

The Bellingham Fire Department faces significant facility challenges that directly affect our ability to train, respond, and operate efficiently. Our current training site at Station 12—a leased facility located in a neighboring fire district—requires substantial maintenance and does not have the capacity to meet the department’s expanding instructional and operational needs. This reliance on an external facility limits scheduling flexibility, constrains program growth, and creates long-term uncertainty for a core departmental function.

While regional solutions continue to be explored, the city must prioritize investment in a dedicated training facility within or adjacent to city limits to meet daily operational demands. A purpose-built space would support live-fire exercises, technical rescue training, EMS simulations, and classroom instruction, ensuring personnel are fully prepared for the increasing complexity of emergency response. This investment is critical to sustaining readiness, improving safety, and supporting long-term workforce development for the department.

*This recommendation is a tier 2 project.*

### ***Administrative Staff - Goals and Improvements***

As the Department continues to grow in both size and complexity, the need for additional general office staff has become increasingly critical. While recent efforts have focused on adding modest response personnel to meet service demands, administrative staffing has not kept pace. This imbalance creates challenges for the safe and efficient operation of a 24-hour emergency response system, where timely coordination, documentation, and support are essential.

Administrative personnel are the backbone of internal operations, supporting training coordination, records management, payroll, procurement, public communication, and numerous compliance-driven responsibilities. With rising call volumes, expanding programs, and increasing regulatory and reporting requirements, our current administrative capacity is stretched beyond sustainable levels.

Investing in additional office staff will ensure that operational and support divisions can function effectively, maintain compliance, and continue delivering high-quality service to the community. Strengthening this foundational support is essential to sustaining the department's momentum and meeting the needs of a growing city.

### **Administrative staff recommendation 1 - Restore vacant Assistant Fire Chief position (1.0 FTE)**

In July of 2025 one of the two Assistant Fire Chief positions was frozen to meet budgetary needs of 2025 and remained frozen in 2026 to meet budgetary requirements. Filling the vacant Assistant Fire Chief position is essential to restoring critical leadership capacity and ensuring strategic oversight within the Bellingham Fire Department. This position is critical to meet the demands of the department's continued growth in size, complexity, and service demands. The Assistant Chief plays a vital role in managing policy development, interagency coordination, administrative functions, and long-term planning. Reinstating this position will alleviate strain on existing command staff, improve organizational alignment, and ensure the department remains responsive, accountable, and well-prepared to meet the evolving needs of the community.

*This recommendation is a tier 1 project.*

**Administrative staff recommendation 2 - Create a Financial Manager position (1.0 FTE)**

The Bellingham Fire Department operates a complex, multi-fund budget that includes diverse revenue sources and the required oversight of Fire District 8’s finances. Despite managing a system that now totals approximately \$60 million annually, the department currently relies on just one Accounting Assistant and one Accounting Technician, whose work is primarily focused on accounts payable and receivable. Broader budget oversight, long-range financial planning, and forecasting responsibilities fall to Chief Officers who do not have specialized financial training or the capacity to maintain comprehensive, department-wide coordination.

Establishing a Financial Manager position would significantly strengthen the department’s fiscal oversight and strategic resource planning—needs that continue to grow as the department expands in staffing, scope, and operational complexity. A Financial Manager would provide expert guidance in managing operating and capital budgets, monitoring expenditures, forecasting future needs, and ensuring compliance with city and state financial policies. This role would also centralize grant management, cost-recovery efforts, and long-term fiscal planning, functions that are currently dispersed across multiple staff.

Creating this position will improve transparency, enhance decision-making, and ensure the department remains financially resilient and well-prepared to meet future service demands.

*This recommendation is a tier 1 project.*

**Administrative staff recommendation 3 - Create a Chief Administrative Officer position (1.0 FTE)**

Creating a Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) position is a critical step toward strengthening the organizational infrastructure and executive leadership capacity of the Bellingham Fire Department. As the department continues to grow in size, complexity, and service scope, the need for centralized administrative leadership has become increasingly evident. Serving as a key member of the executive team, the CAO would oversee essential support functions such as finance, human resources, policy development, data management, and strategic planning. This role would enhance interdepartmental coordination, improve compliance and reporting, and ensure that administrative operations are aligned with the department’s long-term goals. Establishing this position will allow uniformed leaders to focus more fully on emergency response while reinforcing the department’s commitment to accountability, efficiency, and organizational excellence.

*This recommendation is a tier 2 project.*

#### **Administrative staff recommendation 4 - Create a second Business Analyst position (1.0 FTE)**

Creating a second Analyst position is a vital step toward enhancing data-driven decision-making and operational efficiency within the Bellingham Fire Department. This role would also provide essential overlap and backup for our current Fire Analyst in maintaining key electronic systems and operational platforms, including our records management system, staffing software, and other mission-critical technology that supports daily emergency response and administrative functions.

As our services expand and become more complex, the ability to collect, interpret, and act on performance data is increasingly important for managing resources, improving service delivery, and supporting strategic planning. A dedicated Business Analyst would bring focused expertise in evaluating call volumes, response times, staffing models, budget trends, and program outcomes—translating raw data into actionable insights for department leadership and city partners. This position would also strengthen grant reporting, performance benchmarking, and continuous improvement initiatives across all divisions.

Establishing this role ensures the department remains informed, agile, and aligned with best practices in public-sector management. Partial funding for this position is anticipated through contracts for service with neighboring fire districts, making it both a strategic and fiscally responsible investment.

*This recommendation is a tier 3 project.*

#### **Administrative staff recommendation 5 - Create a logistics division (2.0 FTE)**

Creating and staffing a dedicated Logistics Division is essential to supporting the operational efficiency, readiness, and long-term sustainability of the Bellingham Fire Department. As our service demands grow, so does the complexity of managing equipment, supplies, fleet readiness, facilities, and inventory across multiple stations and divisions. We recommend establishing this division with a Division Chief and a Captain to provide strategic leadership and day-to-day operational oversight. This team would centralize and professionalize logistics functions, ensuring timely procurement, maintenance, and distribution of critical resources. They would also play a vital role in emergency preparedness, providing logistical support for EOC activations, and maintaining continuity during incidents or surges. Investing in this structure will reduce strain on frontline personnel, improve accountability, and enhance the department's ability to respond effectively and consistently to the needs of the community.

*The logistics Captain is a tier 1 project. The logistics Chief position is a tier 3 project.*

## **Administrative staff recommendation 6 - Facility improvement**

As with our fire stations, facility needs are also evident in our administrative offices, which require upgrades to accommodate current functions and future growth. The addition of new staff positions—such as a Financial Manager, Chief Administrative Officer, Business Analyst, and Logistics Division leadership—will further drive the need for efficient workspace, collaborative areas, and modern technology systems. These demands may necessitate remodeling existing facilities or acquiring new space to ensure our infrastructure supports expansion. Investing in these improvements will enhance productivity, support employee wellness, and reflect the department’s commitment to excellence and long-term service to the community.

*This recommendation is a tier 1 project.*

## ***New programs and initiatives***

The Department is committed to evolving its services to meet the growing challenges of a changing environment and an expanding community. Through recent assessments, we have identified several significant service gaps—particularly in rope rescue, wildland-urban interface firefighting, and surface water rescue—where current capabilities do not meet regional standards or reflect the risks present in our jurisdiction. We believe these gaps can be addressed by investing in targeted equipment and providing specialized training to our existing personnel, allowing the department to expand capabilities without major changes to staffing levels.

These three capability areas rise to the top as priorities for improvement. Each represents a known risk profile for the community and an area where the department’s current resources fall short of modern expectations and best practices.

### *Rope Rescue*

The department once operated a technical rope rescue program, which was eliminated in the late 2000s due to budget reductions. Bellingham’s diverse topography, including parks, trails, and steep terrain, regularly presents situations requiring high-angle rescue. When these incidents occur, crews must rely on volunteer search-and-rescue teams that often take hours to assemble. Reestablishing a rope rescue capability would allow for safer, timelier rescues and reduce dependence on external resources for time-sensitive emergencies.

### *Wildland-Urban Interface Firefighting*

Climate change has dramatically increased the threat of vegetation fires on the west side of the Cascades, making WUI preparedness a growing priority. Bellingham’s extensive parks and open spaces, many of which border residential neighborhoods, present conditions where fast-moving

wildland-urban interface fires could have severe impacts. While the department has begun initial steps—such as acquiring NFPA-compliant wildland PPE—additional training and equipment will be required to bring the department into alignment with regional standards of wildland readiness.

### *Surface Water Rescue*

Bellingham’s proximity to Lake Whatcom, Lake Padden, Bellingham Bay, and numerous rivers and creeks presents a wide range of water-related hazards, including swift water incidents, flooding, and submerged vehicle rescues. Current water-rescue capabilities are limited and do not fully match the risk environment or regional best practices. Strengthening this capability will improve service delivery, enhance firefighter safety, and support mutual aid contributions across the region.

#### **New Program Initiative 1 – Reestablish Rope Rescue Capability**

Reestablishing the rope rescue program would close a long-standing gap in emergency response. High-angle incidents require specialized equipment, training, and procedures that cannot be improvised on scene. Bringing this capability back will enhance firefighter safety, improve rescue timeliness, and serve as a foundational step toward broader technical rescue specialties, including confined space and swift water rescue.

#### **New Program Initiative 2 – Improve Water Rescue Capabilities**

Enhancing water-rescue operations would significantly improve responses in and around Bellingham Bay, Lake Whatcom, Lake Padden, and local rivers. Modern equipment and updated training approaches would strengthen the department’s ability to manage incidents such as near-shore rescues, flood emergencies, and submerged vehicles. Program expansion would also improve regional mutual aid strength and readiness.

#### **New Program Initiative 3 – Strengthen Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) Response**

The department currently provides only limited urban-vegetation firefighting and relies on the Washington State Department of Natural Resources for large-scale incidents. Building a robust WUI response capability will require multi-year training for all members, acquisition of wildland tools and equipment, and eventually procurement of a dedicated wildland response vehicle. These steps will bring the department more closely in line with regional expectations and emerging risks.

#### **New Program Initiative 4 – Expand Technical Rescue Specialties**

After rope and water rescue programs are fully operational, the department should consider expanding into additional specialties such as confined space and trench rescue. These

capabilities would further strengthen technical response capacity and enhance regional mutual aid contributions.

*All of the initiatives outlined above fall within Tier 2. The department must first meet all Tier 1 operational and staffing requirements to ensure it has the capacity to support expanded specialty programs.*

### **Cost Projections**

The following tables provide a summary of the preceding recommendations. The cost estimates are specified by the tier of priority and make certain assumptions about the ability to hire and train staff over time. The expenses are cumulative.

The fire department considers the tier one recommendations the most critical to improving service delivery and situating the department successfully for future growth.

### **Overview of tier recommendations**

**Table 3:** Recommended service additions by tier

<b>Tier</b>	<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Description</b>
1	Operations 1	2nd Battalion Chief
1	Operations 2	3rd Ambulance Transport Unit
1	Operations 3	Station 5
1	EMS 1	DC of EMS Training
1	EMS 2	2nd Paramedic Class Instructor
1	EMS 3	40-hour EMS Captain
1	Life Safety 1	Senior Inspector
1	Life Safety 4	Pub Ed group funding
1	Dispatch 1	2 additional dispatchers
1	Dispatch 2	Nurse Hotline
1	OEM 1	Plans Coordinator
1	OEM 2	Office Assistant
1	OEM 3	Public Outreach Coordinator
1	Training 1	Academy Staff
1	Training 2	2nd Training Captain
1	Training 3	Enhanced Training
1	Admin 1	Assistant Chief

1	Admin 2	Financial Manager
1	Admin 5	Logistics Captain
1	Admin 6	Facility Improvement
2	Operations 3	Station Improvements
2	Operations 2	4th Ambulance Transport Unit
2	Operations 4	Additional Ladder Company
2	Operations 5	Funding for Fire Boat replacement
2	EMS 3	3 additional EMS Captains to achieve 2nd 24-hour Captain
2	Life Safety 2	2 additional fire inspectors
2	Dispatch 3	Communications Manager
2	Training 4	Training facility
2	Admin 3	Chief Administrative Officer
2	New Programs	Tech rescue/wildland
3	Life Safety 3	CRR Captain
3	Life Safety 5	Facility Improvement
3	Admin 4	Business Analyst
3	Admin 5	Logistics Division Chief

Based on the tiers assigned to the various service improvements, annual costs for the recommended service additions are estimated as follows.

**Table 4:** Annual cost of recommended service additions, 2027-2036

	2027	2028	2029	2030	2031	2032	2033	2034	2035	2036
<b>TIER 1</b>	6,464,000	10,639,000	14,358,000	14,824,000	15,845,000	16,938,000	17,780,000	19,017,000	20,340,000	21,755,000
<b>TIER 2</b>	263,000	397,000	2,055,000	6,229,000	9,163,000	9,305,000	9,907,000	10,601,000	11,343,000	12,137,000
<b>TIER 3</b>	192,000	206,000	414,000	492,000	333,000	2,504,000	2,385,000	2,552,000	2,731,000	2,922,000
<b>TOTAL</b>	6,919,000	11,242,000	16,827,000	21,545,000	25,341,000	28,747,000	30,072,000	32,170,000	34,414,000	36,814,000

# Police Department Level of Service Evaluation and Recommendations

## Introduction

### *Mission and Vision Statements*

The mission of the Bellingham Police Department (BPD) is to ensure that Bellingham is a safe city to live, work, play, and visit. They achieve this mission through:

- A commitment to the community through proactive and reactive policing that serves to protect the vulnerable from harm.
- Building strong partnerships that ensure public trust.
- Providing education to both the community and our employees to ensure the highest level of professionalism.

BPD's vision is to be a leader in public safety through professional policing, championing procedural justice and optimizing modern concepts and technology.

The following core values are foundational to BPD's work.

- **Respect:** Value the people we serve, our fellow employees and the importance of law.
- **Compassion:** Make decisions and take actions with empathy and consideration.
- **Collaboration:** Consider the views of all stakeholders when working together to achieve the shared goals of our community.
- **Integrity:** Act with courage, honor, and truthfulness to uphold the trust of our community members.
- **Innovation:** Apply creative solutions in order to provide effective services.
- **Accountability:** Demonstrate responsibility through our communications and actions.

### *Funding*

The Police Department receives funding for police operations from the general fund. Other minor funding sources include:

- Public safety dispatch user fees. County-wide dispatch services are managed by the department and funded entirely by the agencies that use the service.

- Special revenues from state and federal entitlements and forfeiture shares represent less than \$500,000 per year.

## Description of Programs and Divisions

The Bellingham Police Department has 130 commissioned full-time employees and 82 civilian employees. Civilian positions include administrative staff, police support services staff, and public safety telecommunicators (dispatchers).

The Department is organized between two divisions: the Operations Division and the Services Division. The Operations Division of the Bellingham Police Department consists of Patrol, Investigations, and Special Operations.

### *Patrol Division*

In 2026, the Patrol Division consists of 66 officers, which includes eight sergeants, eight corporals, six crime scene investigators (CSIs), and two traffic officers. The Patrol Division is staffed on a 10-hour 40-minute per day schedule where officers work five days on, four days off, five days on, four days off, five days on, and then five days off which completes the 28-day work cycle. With the longer days, it means officers work 15 days and are off 13 days in each 28-day work cycle.

Patrol is split into two teams, a Blue and a Gold Team. When one team is working, the other team is on days off. This schedule allows for two overlapping workdays per month. On these days, one team staff patrols and the other has a full day of training called a Flexible Resource Day.

The teams are divided into four shifts with staggered start times to maximize overlap during the busiest parts of the day. The shift times are as follows.

**Table 5: BPD Shifts**

Shift	Start Time	End Time
<b>1 Paul</b>	0620	1700
<b>2 Paul</b>	1020	2100
<b>3 Paul</b>	1620	0300
<b>4 Paul</b>	2020	0700

The shift begins 20 minutes after the hour. Each officer has ten minutes to set up their gear and car, and at 30 minutes past the hour, the shift gathers for a briefing and then goes out to handle calls. The outgoing shift has approximately 40 minutes to complete reports and finish their shift.

Each shift is staffed with a sergeant and a corporal as the supervision team, and six or seven officer positions. In some cases, CSI and traffic officers count toward the six or seven officer slots per shift.

BPD has three civilian Community Service Officers (CSOs) whose primary duties are to supplement patrol functions. CSOs work daytime hours, seven days per week. Their responsibilities include assisting with impounding of evidence, taking minor reports, reviewing online crime (?) reports, processing graffiti reports, and more.

### *Investigation Division*

The Investigations Unit consists of two sergeants, 11 detectives, and one part-time investigative assistant (an RNB civilian position.) The Investigations Unit is staffed primarily Monday through Friday, with two detectives and a sergeant on call during off hours, seven days a week. The detectives assigned to the unit investigate violent crime including murder, kidnapping, robbery, sexual assault, child abuse, felony level assaults, felony domestic violence crimes, financial crimes with a loss of at least \$50k, and some property crimes under special circumstances or that appear to have a high chance of being solved. Suspected Bias Incidents, such as suspected hate crimes, are also assigned to a detective for review and investigation.

Two detectives are assigned to the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force chaired by the Seattle Police Department. Cyber tips for all such investigations in western Washington north of Everett that are received by Seattle PD are forwarded to the two detectives for investigation.

Child Protective Service (CPS) referrals received by BPD are screened and reviewed before being assigned for investigation. All CPS referrals involving allegations of sexual assault are investigated. If evidence of a crime is found, the referral will be assigned to a detective for investigation.

Missing person and juvenile runaway reports are assigned to the Investigative Assistant for an initial search of databases, and jail/hospital search to see if they can be located. If the case is suspicious, then it is assigned to a detective.

The Investigative Assistant also assists detectives with reviewing records of financial crimes and reviewing other data that may be of importance to the investigator.

In addition to the 11 detectives, two digital forensics officers are assigned to the Investigation Unit. Their job is to examine electronic devices for digital evidence.

A Video Forensic Officer and a Cellular Analysis Officer are also assigned to the Investigation Unit. The Video Forensics Officer locates, downloads and transfers video evidence while the Cellular Analysis Officer examines evidence on cellular phones to geolocate the phone to assist in evidence gathering. Digital Forensics, Video Forensics, and Cellular Analysis Officers use several different software programs to assist with the examination of this evidence.

### ***Special Operations Division***

The Special Operations division provides structure and supervision for full time positions such as bicycle officers, K9 Unit, and drug task force officers, and those who hold ancillary duties such as crisis negotiation, Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT), Hazardous Devices Unit (HDU), K9, Honor Guard, Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS), and the Public Order team.

#### **Bicycle Patrol Unit**

The Bicycle Patrol Unit consists of four officers and a sergeant. They work on two teams assigned to the patrol shift schedule to ensure coverage for the downtown area during the morning and daytime hours. The Bicycle Patrol Unit proactively responds to crime and other quality of life issues, specifically in the downtown core.

#### **K9 unit**

The K9 Unit consists of four officers, plus 4 dogs. Three of the K9s are patrol trained and cross trained in drug detection. One K9 is a trained explosive detection K9 with responsibilities of screening the premises of special events. The explosives K9 and drug detection K9s also screen property of travelers using the Alaska Marine Highway System.

#### **Northwest Regional Drug Task Force**

One sergeant and one officer are assigned to the Northwest Regional Drug Task Force, which is led by the Whatcom County Sheriff's Office. The Task Force members work with representatives of other local and federal law enforcement agencies to enforce laws related to the trafficking of narcotics in Whatcom County.

## **Ancillary Teams**

The SWAT team is an ancillary duty and consists of 14 operators and four marksmen. Two additional SWAT positions are held by Western Washington University Police Department officers. The SWAT team is trained to respond to high-risk situations such as barricaded subjects, high risk search warrants, and hostage situations.

The Crisis Negotiator Team is trained to respond and communicate with those in crisis with the goal of a peaceful result. There are 12 crisis negotiators assigned to both the Patrol and Detective Units.

The Public Order Team is trained to respond to public events and demonstrations to preserve and protect the rights of those assembled and to ensure the events remain peaceful. Membership on the Public Order Team is also an ancillary duty and consists of members of the Patrol Unit. The team is divided between the Mobile Response Team and Bicycle Response Teams.

The Bellingham Police Department has 12 Unmanned Aerial System (UAS) pilots who can fly any of the four UASs used by the Department. They are frequently used to provide real-time information during in-progress investigations. This information can assist in determining the proper response from our resources.

The Bellingham Police Department has a four-member Hazardous Devices Unit (HDU), trained to respond to calls related to explosive devices or suspicious packages and render them safe. Equipment they have available to them is an HDU robot, an x-ray machine, radiation detection devices, and a bomb suit. The HDU Team is the only hazardous devices team north of Marysville to Canada.

The Honor Guard consists of 6 team members who represent the Bellingham Police Department at funerals and memorials for fallen officers and retired officers. They also attend special events and parades where they may provide color guard services.

## ***Services Division***

The Services Division consists of the Records Bureau, the What-Comm 911 Communications Center, Police Technology, and Evidence and ID Unit.

## **Records Bureau**

The Records Bureau provides 24-hour service, seven days a week and is the only 24-hour records bureau in Whatcom County. When positions are full, 13 Police Support Services Specialists staff the Bureau and perform tasks such as responding to public disclosure requests, performing background checks, entering warrants and court orders into WACIC and NCIC, validating entries, and assisting officers with information requests. There are two supervisors who provide guidance and supervision for the Police Support Services Specialists, ensuring the Bureau is staffed appropriately, and overseeing the retention and deletion of records. The Bureau recently added a new position of a public disclosure supervisor. Two Police Support Services Specialists staff the lobby reception four hours a day, four days a week.

## **What-Comm 911**

The Bellingham Police Department operates What-Comm 911, which is the Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP) for Whatcom County. All calls for fire and emergency services placed in Whatcom County are routed through the What-Comm 911 dispatch center. What-Comm 911 provides dispatch services for Western Washington University Police Department and all municipal police departments in Whatcom County. Calls for the Fire Department are transferred to the Prospect dispatch center located at the Bellingham Fire Station on Broadway St.

## **Technology**

Police technology is managed by the Police Technology Manager, a Systems Analyst, and a Technical Support and Training Specialist. This Police Technology team is tasked with ensuring technology systems used by staff are operational and secure.

## **Evidence and ID Unit**

The Evidence and ID Unit is tasked with the intake and storage of property and evidence impounded by officers. The unit is currently staffed with an interim Evidence and ID Supervisor and two Evidence Specialists. The Evidence and ID Supervisor is responsible for managing the flow of property and evidence into and out of the Department's custody, seeking and providing training opportunities to the CSIs, and ensuring the Department is adhering to policy and industry best practices.

## Current Level of Service

### **Staffing**

To serve our community, the Bellingham Police Department employs both commissioned and non-commissioned personnel. Within this responsibility is the What-Comm dispatch center that services 11 law enforcement agencies within Whatcom County.

The Police Department is currently allotted the following full-time employees for each section:

- 130 full-time commissioned personnel
- 44 What-COMM employees (includes IT, GIS, and accounting technician)
- 19 Records personnel
- 13 IT Personnel
- 4 Community Service Officers
- 1 Crime Intel Analyst
- 1 Public Information Officer
- 2 Warrant Officers
- 1 Code Enforcement Officer
- 1 Accounting Technician
- 1 Administrative Coordinator

### **Challenges in allocating FTE resources**

Training delays and projected retirements create a challenge for our organization when allocating FTE resources. While some positions may be filled, they may not be operational for a full year after being hired. Additionally, we are currently unable to fill projected retirements until those individuals submit paperwork with their intention and date of retirement. By keeping positions frozen, we only further delay the ability to get personnel fully operational so that we can allocate them in a different way to meet the needs of our city.

### *Commissioned Personnel Hiring and Training*

Commissioned personnel present a unique challenge when filling positions. There is an extensive hiring process that takes approximately three to five months.

Even when a position may be filled it requires nine months to a year to reach full operational capacity. During that time, these employees are in various stages of their training process, to include pre-academy, academy, post-academy, and field training.

The new employee must first attend the Criminal Justice Training Commission Basic (CJTC) Law Enforcement Academy. Despite the CJTC opening the north-end academy in Arlington, BPD continues to experience delays in getting newly hired employees to the academy, further extending the period before an employee is fully operational. It also causes a greater strain on our field training program as newly hired employees come back from the academy in larger groups.

### *Projected Retirements*

By the end of 2026, there will be 18 commissioned personnel who are of retirement age (53 or older). We are aware of at least three individuals who have made known their intent to retire in late 2025 or 2026.

### **Facilities**

The Police Department's station was built in 1992. It houses all employees except for those at What-Comm and two commissioned personnel assigned to the task force.

The current station lacks space for multiple needs within the department, requiring the department to rent space to house evidence and specialty equipment. In addition, the facility is not equipped with a gun range which requires the rental costs of using outside facilities.

What-Comm is in the process of building a new facility to house the dispatch center. The new building is projected to be completed in early 2027. The new What-Comm facility will be more resilient to natural disasters and continuity of operations. It also provides ample room for employee wellness and organizational growth.

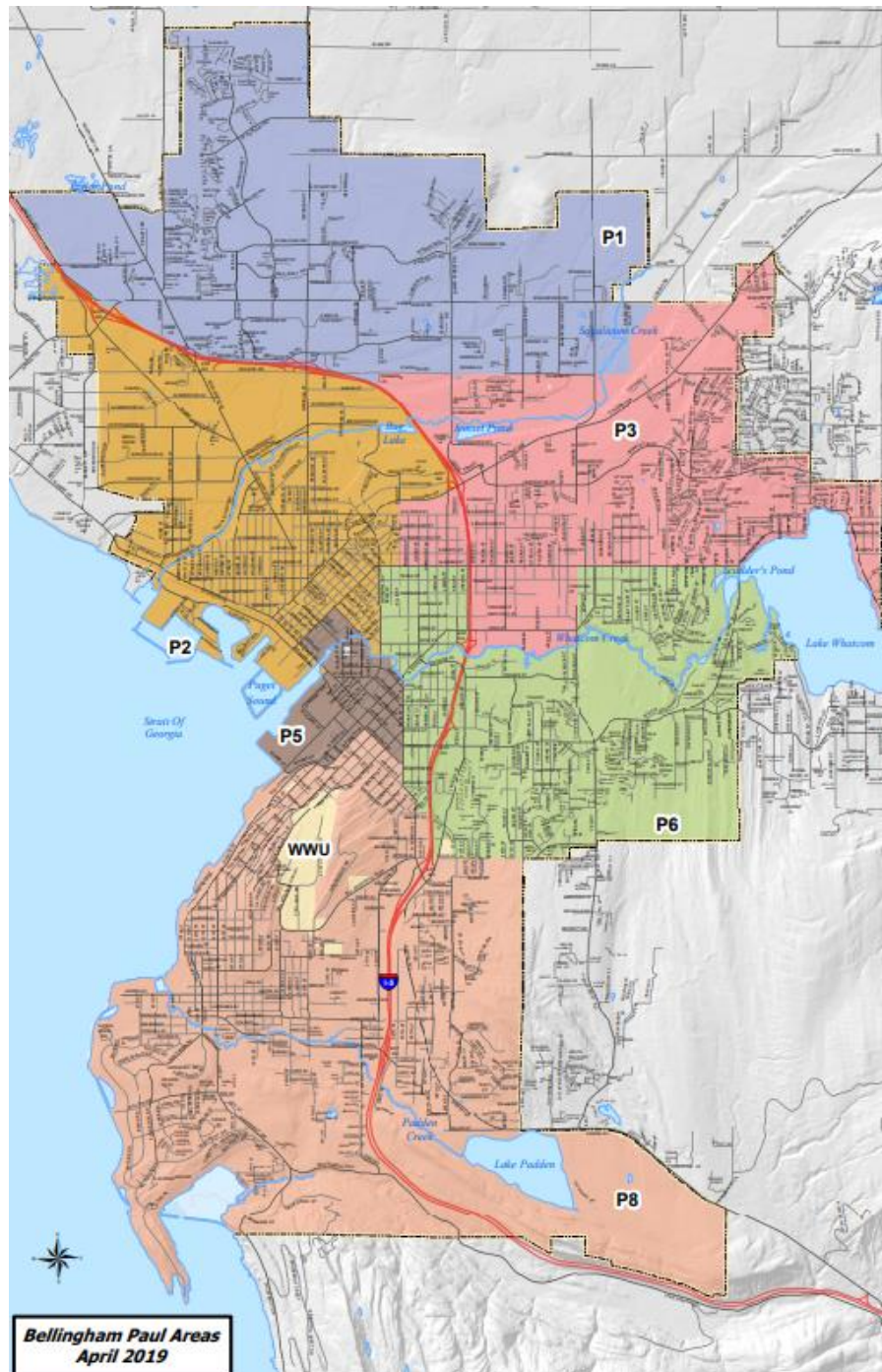
### **Assignment of Cases**

Criminal cases are reviewed and assigned by detective sergeants depending on the severity of the crime and staffing availability. Between January 1 and September 11, 2025, there were approximately 1,468 cases that involved a criminal element that were not assigned to an officer or a detective. Most of these cases pertain to property-related crimes, including theft, malicious mischief, burglaries, forgeries, and fraud investigations.

## Patrol Area Map

Our department has divided the city limits into six sectors that are designated as patrol areas. Patrol officers are responsible for responding to calls for service and patrolling their assigned area.

**Figure 6:** BPD Patrol Areas

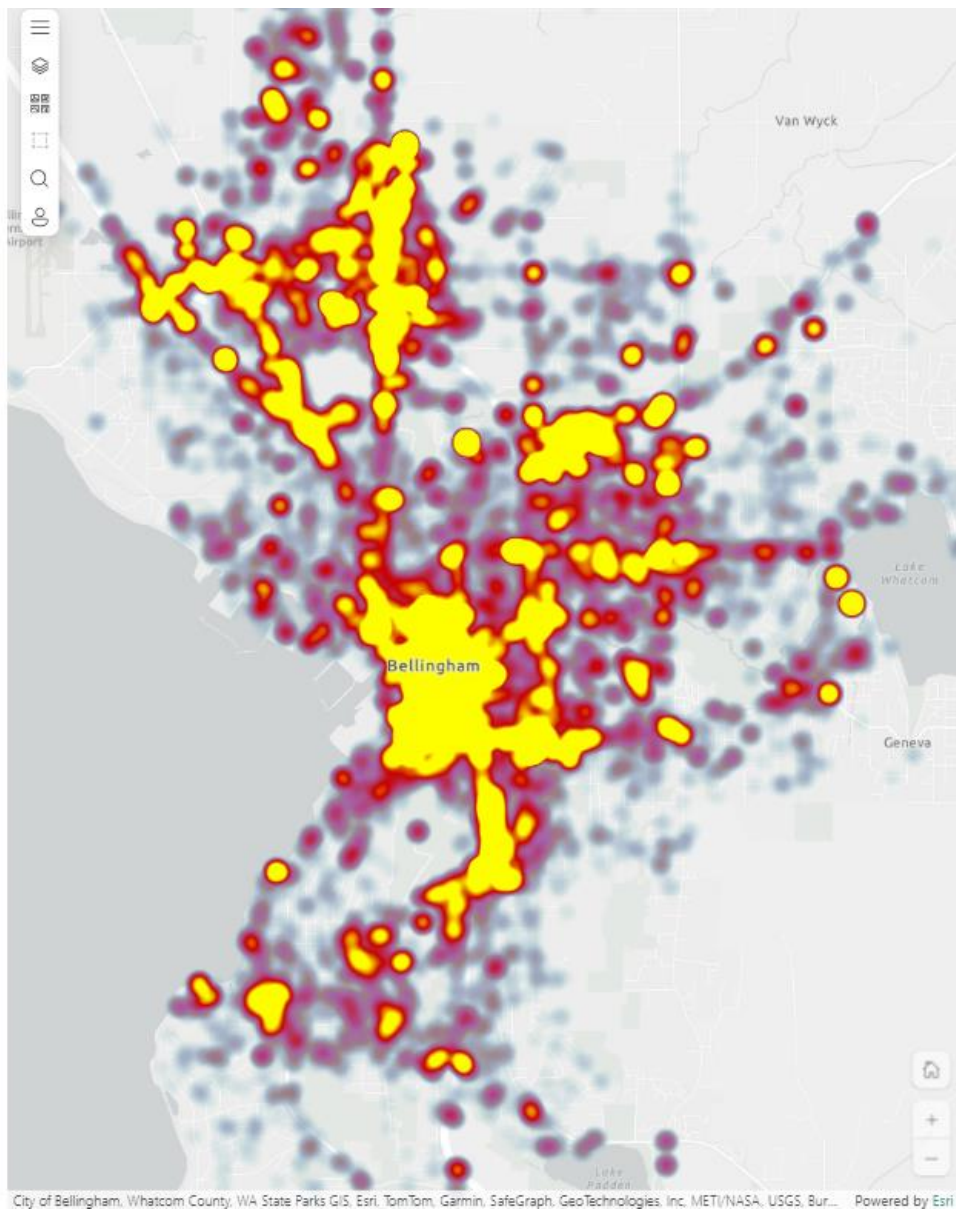


## 911 Call Volume

In 2024, officers responded to 53,267 calls for service, or an average of 146 calls per day. This number does not factor in the complexity between calls for service and the additional follow-up that many calls for service require.

The heat map below shows the concentration of calls in 2025 as of Mid-August 2025. The concentration of calls is highest in the downtown corridor and along major arterial roads where there is higher concentration of businesses.

**Figure 7:** Heat map of Bellingham Police Department calls for service from Jan-Aug 2025



## Call Response Times

911 calls for service are triaged and prioritized by dispatchers using a numerical system as described below. While response times alone are not a suitable metric for determining staffing levels, they do offer valuable insight into resource allocation and call volume trends.

In 2024, the following were the average response times by our officers from the time the 911 call was received by dispatch to when the officer(s) arrived on scene.

**Table 6:** Average response time by call priority level

<b>Call Priority</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Examples</b>	<b>Average Response Time</b>
<b>1</b>	Life-Safety Emergency or High-Risk Officer Safety Incident	Physical Domestic Violence, In-Progress Burglary, and Injury Traffic Collisions	7:08
<b>2</b>	In-Progress Emergency (Moderate life-safety factors)	Verbal Domestic Dispute, Neighborhood Dispute, and Theft	8:32
<b>3</b>	In-Progress Incident (No immediate life-safety factor)	Non-Injury and Non-Blocking Traffic Collisions, Drug Complaints, and Bicycle Theft	17:38
<b>4</b>	In-Progress Nuisance Incidents or Cold Incidents with Potential Evidentiary Value	Noise Ordinance Reports, Property Recovered Reports, and Surrender of Weapons	33:27
<b>5</b>	Cold Incidents (No suspect present and incident occurred more than 15 minutes ago)	Routine Cold Reports of Law Enforcement Incidents	34:41

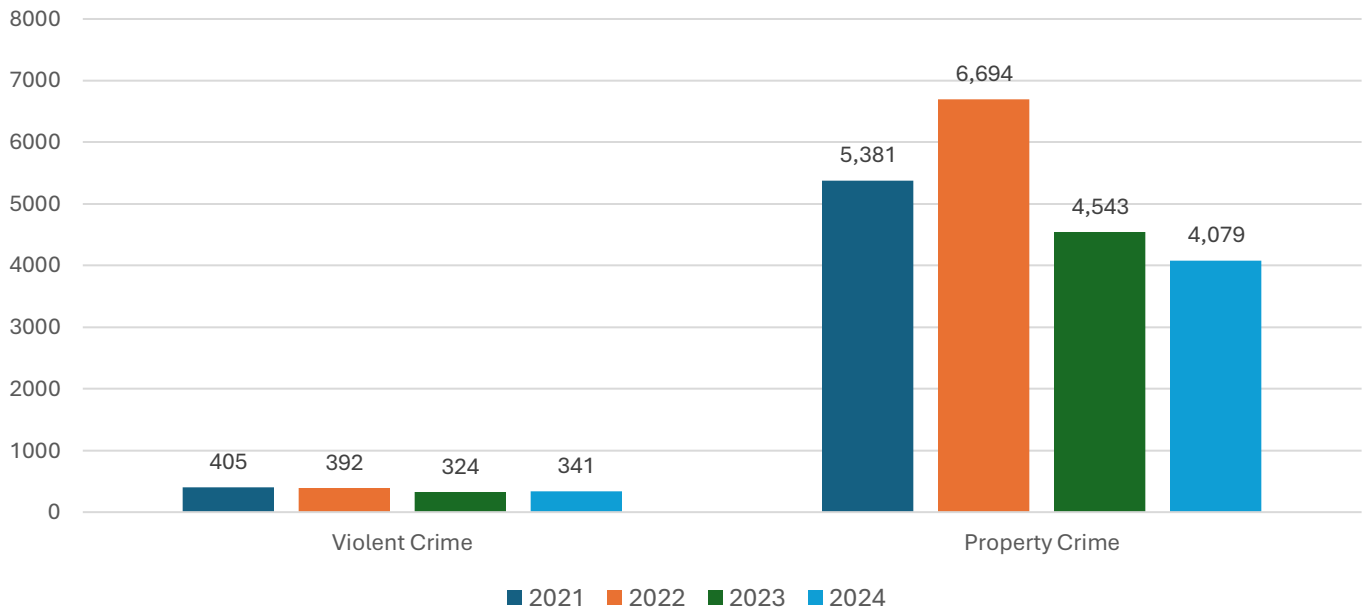
## Call Type Reported

The Bellingham Police Department provides crime statistics to the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) in the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) as part of the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program. The crimes are separated into two categories: violent crime and property crime.

The violent crime category includes murder/non-negligent manslaughter, negligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. The non-violent crime category includes burglary,

arson, motor vehicle theft, pocket picking larceny theft, purse snatching, theft from building, theft of motor vehicle parts, theft from motor vehicle, theft from coin operated machine, all other larceny, and shoplifting.

**Figure 8:** Number of calls by NIBRS type, 2021-2024



## Situational Analysis

### *Internal Employee Engagement*

The City of Bellingham hired Triangle Associates to engage police department employees to determine the department’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Key themes were brought forth, some of which are helpful to the strategic planning process. They can assist in guiding decision making for future planning.

### **Strengths**

#### *Quality team members*

The department prides itself on maintaining very high hiring standards to include an educational requirement. This hiring standard provides the best opportunity to hire the most qualified candidates who will uphold the values of the department.

During the engagement sessions, team members expressed strong trust and camaraderie with their co-workers. They also recognized the competency and effectiveness of our first-line supervisors.

#### *Training programs and professional development*

The department's unique patrol schedule provides for one full day of in-house training every month, which far exceeds the 24 hours a year required by the state. This ensures that our officers are provided with both classroom and hands-on training in a multitude of disciplines.

The field training program was recognized for maintaining high standards and organization.

#### *Technology and equipment*

Team members are provided with modern resources to help with doing their jobs safely. The department demonstrates a desire to adopt new technologies.

#### *Wellness programming*

Team members identified that wellness programming and Peer Support help to facilitate organizational health.

### **Weaknesses**

#### *The need for a stronger strategic direction*

While we recognize that our strategic plan has not been updated since 2018, we have maintained yearly goals ensuring that our agency is in alignment with accreditation standards. This document serves to provide a step toward improvement in this identified weakness.

#### *Inexperienced workforce*

A large portion of our commissioned team members have less than five years of experience. First line supervisors are being promoted earlier in their careers, and a large portion have less than two years of experience in their role. There is a recognition that there is a need for more robust professional development.

### *Insufficient staffing*

As shown by the workload assessment contained within this document and considering that most calls for service require two officers to enhance safety, current staffing levels are not sufficient to meet the needs of the ever-growing community. This sentiment was echoed by our team members.

### *Training and professional development*

Training and professional development opportunities were reported as both a strength and a weakness by our team members. This is likely due to the focus of the training more than the amount of training. There is an identified need to provide more training to supervisors, along with providing more professional development and mentoring opportunities.

## **Opportunities**

### *Pursuing additional funding sources*

Grants and federal funding are opportunities to help support the existing police department budget with new equipment and emerging technologies. Team members recommended that the department hire a full-time grant writer to assist in these efforts.

### *Investing in training and professional development*

Provide more leadership training opportunities for those in leadership roles and those aspiring to be a leader who are actively seeking promotion.

### *Investment in technologies to increase efficiency and effectiveness*

There are several existing and emerging technologies that could make departmental efforts more efficient and effective. These would take capital investment to implement.

### *Increase community engagement and public education efforts*

Build more trust and support from our community through more community engagement opportunities. Examples include engaging with neighborhoods, businesses and increasing our social media presence.

## Threats

### *Retaining team members*

There are several factors that affect the retention of employees, including but not limited to a lack of advancement outside of the patrol division, staffing levels, and compensation when compared to cost-of-living.

### *City budget and priorities*

Team members expressed concern that current budget allocations may impact the department's ability to operate at full capacity and adequately meet the evolving needs of the community.

### *Jail booking restrictions and judicial follow-through*

Booking restrictions placed on law enforcement by the jail's lack of capacity reduces the effectiveness of law enforcement to enhance public safety. Staff members reported a lack of judicial follow-through (charging crimes, release of individuals, etc.) that also reduce the effectiveness of law enforcement to enhance public safety.

### *Inadequate resources to effectively address the issues surrounding homelessness, drug addiction, and mental health*

There are inadequate and/or ineffective resources to address homelessness, drug addiction, and mental health issues. With a lack of adequate resources, law enforcement is left as the main resource available to address these issues.

## **Projected Growth**

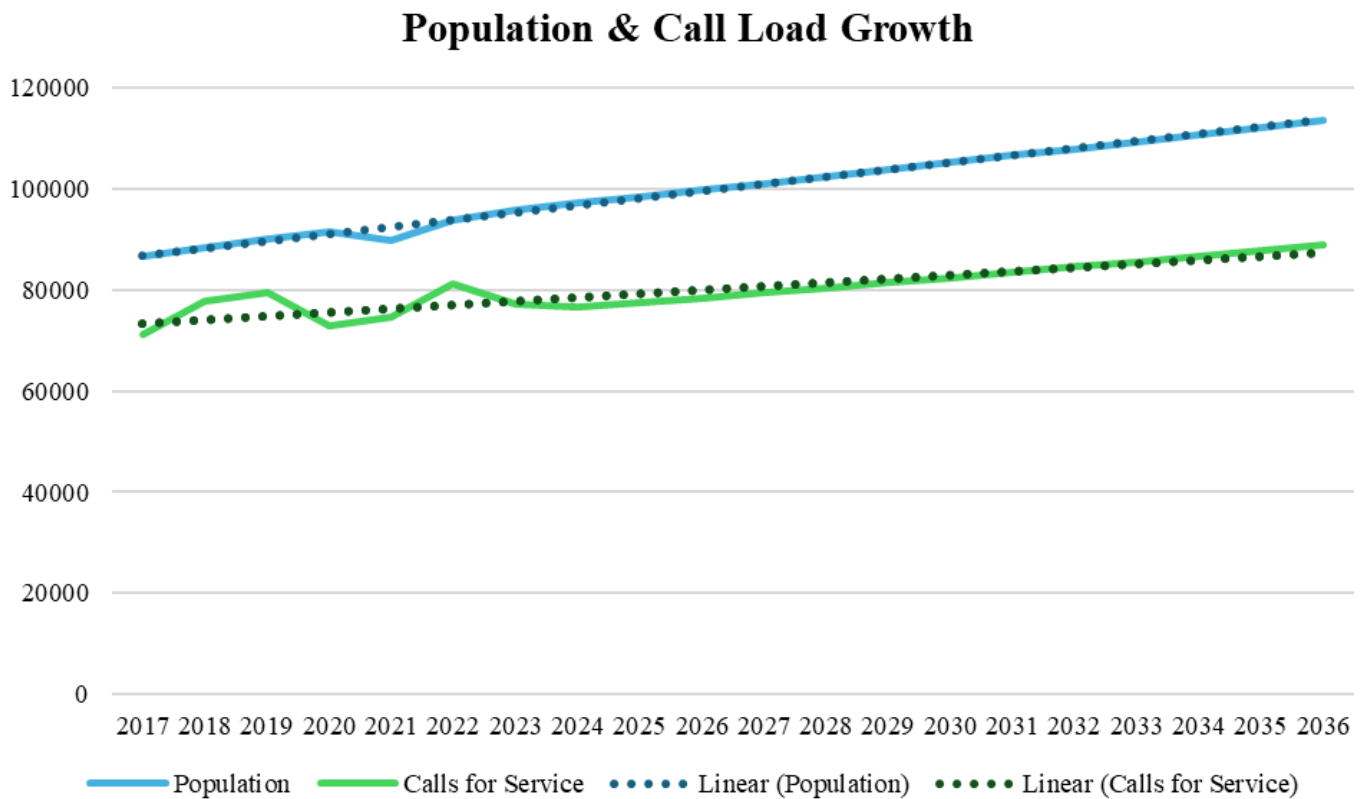
Based on growth projections referenced earlier in this report, by 2036, the City's population is projected to be approximately 112,158 people, with 53,306 housing units in the city.

Figure 9 projects the increase in calls for service based on population growth through 2036. The total Computer Automated Dispatch (CAD) case numbers in 2025 were 76,460. CAD numbers represent both 911 calls for service and self-initiated activity by the officer, together representing the total call volume for BPD. It should be noted that officers do not respond to every call assigned a CAD case numbers. These calls are of varying degrees of complexity that require a different number of staff to respond depending on the call for service. Most calls for service require at least two officers to respond to enhance officer safety.

An analysis of CAD data from 2014 through 2024 indicates an average annual growth rate in calls for service of approximately 1.25%. Applying this historical trend as a projection model suggests that call volume will continue to increase at a similar rate, with the annual call volume projected to reach approximately 88,900 by the year 2036. This is an imperfect methodology for assessing the impact of population on call loads, but changes in data collection practices prior to 2017 make longer term assessment impractical.

The increase in population and inevitable increase in call volume will require the police department to grow to meet those additional needs.

**Figure 9:** Bellingham population and calls for service, historical and projected, 2017-2036



However, the trendline may not be as linear as projected above based on the projected increase in population density.

### **Population Density Considerations**

The City projects that growth in the next 10 years will be a higher density, with the focus on multi-unit and middle housing infill properties such as apartments, duplexes, and accessory dwelling

units (ADUs). Specifically, the City expects an annual increase of 300-400 multi-unit properties (apartments, condos, duplexes), 150-200 infill properties (ADUs, subdividing an existing plot into two) and 40-50 single-detached homes.

This change in growth strategy creates a challenge in projecting call load volume in the future. As Bellingham experiences growth through denser development, we expect there will be an increase in demand for police services. As seen in Figure X, call load growth can be illustrated in a relative linear increase. However, the development of multi-unit housing is expected to generate a disproportionately higher call volume due to population density and shared spaces that create a higher potential for interpersonal conflict.

### ***Key Community Partnerships and Call Volume***

Several key partnerships with other organizations help to alleviate some of the call load for BPD. These partners include, but are not limited to, the Alternative Response Team (ART) and Ground-Level Response and Coordinated Engagement (GRACE) program.

ART is designed to response to specific non-violent behavioral health 911 calls. ART is currently staffed Monday through Friday, 0830-1730. One of their staff members located in What-Comm to help determine which 911 calls can be diverted to ART. Of the 911 calls for service between October 2024 – October, 1,502 calls were diverted from BPD to ART.

The continued expansion of ART would have a positive impact on the workload of the police department by diverting even more non-law enforcement calls to the appropriate response, reducing the need for a police officer to be involved. This would allow for more police department resources to be devoted to calls and follow-up that are criminal in nature.

GRACE provides intensive, coordinated services to people who are high utilizers of the emergency and criminal justice systems. GRACE case managers work with clients to provide services that reduce the utilization of emergency services by their clients. According to statistics gathered by the GRACE program, those enrolled in the program have a reduced number of jail bookings. GRACE also helps to reduce the number of non-law enforcement calls for service through their work.

### ***Workload Assessment***

A recent workload assessment was conducted using a nationally recognized staffing model developed by the International Association of Chiefs of Police. This model helps determine how many officers are needed to effectively meet the demands of the community.

The model calculates how many hours a single officer is available to work in a year, factoring in typical hours worked per shift and accounting for time off. We used a sample of officers from each division to estimate average time off, which gives us a more accurate picture of actual working hours.

This process results in a number called the “relief factor,” which accounts for how much coverage is needed to ensure that staffing levels remain consistent even when officers are off duty.

Next, the model looks at how many calls for service the department receives and how long, on average, officers spend on each call. These figures, along with other operational factors, are used to calculate how many officers are needed to handle the workload.

Based on this assessment, additional staff are needed to meet current needs.

- **Patrol Division:** The analysis showed that, at current call volumes, the patrol division should be increased by 11 officers, bringing the total to 77 officers. This includes sergeants, corporals, traffic officers, and crime scene investigators.
- **Investigations Division:** The model recommended an increase of 8.5 detectives, for a total of 19 detectives (not including supervisory staff). In 2025, we took a step toward this goal by adding 2 full-time detectives to the division.

## Level of Service Improvements

### *Departmental Goals and Focus*

When casting a vision for the future of the department, we consider not only areas for improvement and growth, but also the areas where the department performs well both in staffing allocation and focus. The department must maintain consistency in those areas that are strengths, such as:

- Maintaining our high hiring standard to ensure that the most qualified candidates are selected.
- A continued focus on applicable training through both in-service and outside training, within budgetary parameters, to ensure that our officers are at the forefront of best practices.

- Continuing to support the efforts of enhancing public safety in the Central Business District through the bicycle unit and participation in the drug task force.
- Ensuring that emerging technologies are explored and implemented when feasible.
- Ensuring that the wellness and safety of our team members is a priority through the support of programming.
- Maintaining our status as an accredited agency.

We set the following goals to provide organizational focus, allowing us to maintain successful existing programs and achieve new initiatives.

- Increase community engagement by our team members.
- Increase traffic safety in the community.
- Increase the sense of safety in the Central Business District.
- Increase investigation capacity to ensure that there is support for victims and accountability of suspects.
- Increase professional development for police department employees to ensure that the organization is innovative in our approach and adhering to best practices.

These goals are reflected in both the short-term and long-term plan for the department's structure and initiatives. Officer safety must remain a foundational priority in all future strategic planning efforts, and it should be a guiding principle when evaluating and determining appropriate staffing allocations, ensuring that operational decisions consistently support the well-being and security of personnel. This plan will provide a roadmap of how the department intends to achieve these goals through both programming and staffing allocation.

## ***Staffing Allocation***

### **Framework for Staffing Allocation**

The allocation of staffing resources must be guided by our mission – to ensure that Bellingham is a safe city to live, work, play, and visit – and our vision – to be a leader in public safety through professional policing, championing procedural justice and optimizing modern concepts and technology.

To that end, resource allocation decisions must be responsive to the evolving needs and unique challenges of our community. These challenges may be addressed either through enhancing existing units or the development of new, specialized units. Thoughtful consideration is necessary when determining how to address the challenges our city faces now and in the future.

Equally important is the prioritization of the wellness of our team members. This includes appropriately staffing already existing units prior to initiating new ones and ensuring that existing units are equipped with the tools, training, and technology necessary to effectively operate.

The staffing models outlined below serve as a foundational framework for current operations; however, they are intentionally designed to remain adaptable. Unforeseen community needs, emerging public safety challenges, or innovative ideas from within the organization may necessitate adjustments to existing roles or the creation of new positions or units. Our team members are uniquely positioned to identify evolving issues and propose solutions that enhance service delivery. As such, this plan emphasizes the importance of flexibility, ensuring the department can respond proactively and effectively to both internal insights and external demands.

## ***Staffing Allocation Models***

### **Modeling Framework**

Based on the workload assessment above, we start with the premise that our current staffing levels are inadequate to meet the needs of the city. As stated previously, our patrol division is divided into two teams. Each team has four shifts with staggered start times to maximize the overlap during the busiest parts of the day. The following is the minimum staffing for patrol based on the hours throughout the day:

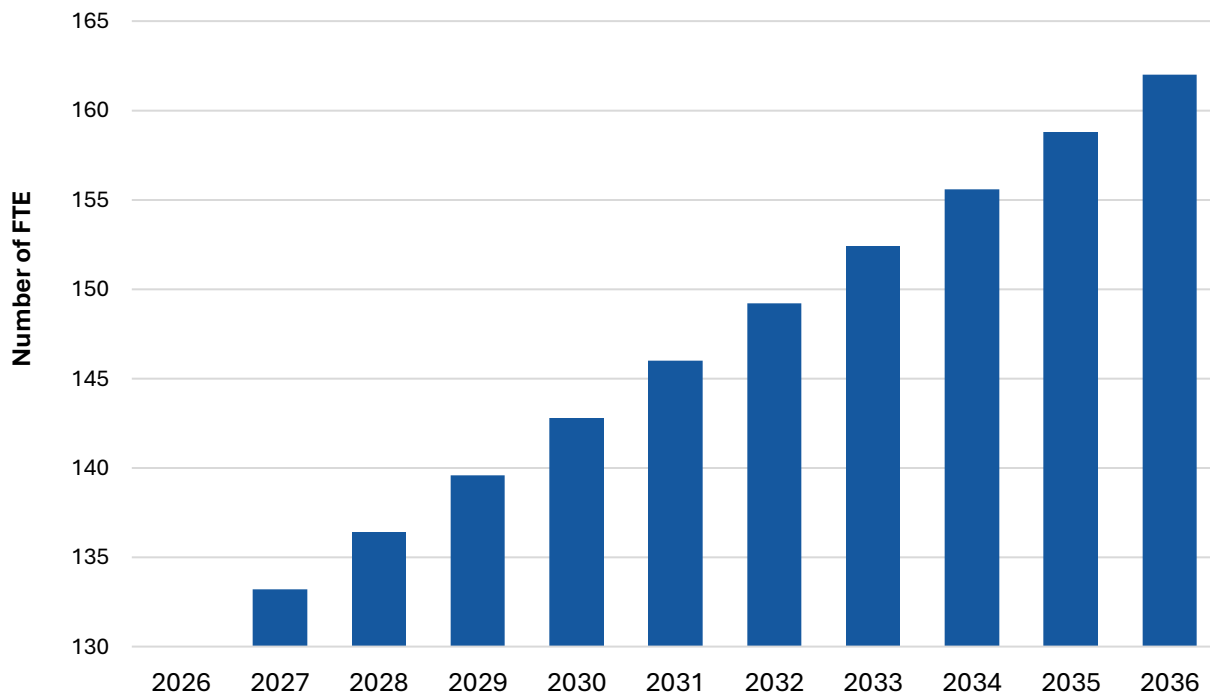
- 0300-1020 - Five officers (to include a supervisor)
- 1020-0300 - Ten officers (to include two supervisors)

This minimum staffing level is not sustainable as our city continues to grow. Adequate staffing would include each of the six patrol areas being staffed on every shift. This would allow for adequate coverage and distribution of officers across the city, thus reducing call response times because when there are gaps in the coverage of patrol areas, officers are required to respond from different sectors of the city. Having each area covered would also provide more opportunity

for community outreach and provide more time to conduct proactive police work, such as investigative follow-ups, extra patrols, and traffic enforcement.

The realistic, desired future organization would be an increase of 32 officers in the next 10 years, to 162 commissioned personnel. This is a growth of 3.2 FTE per year.

**Figure 10:** Recommended increased in commissioned FTE



There is an inherent challenge in forecasting the City’s general fund and any additional funding sources to supplement the police department’s budget over the next 10 years. Thus, this plan provides three staffing models per milestone year for commissioned personnel.

*Comprehensive Impact Model*

This model represents the ideal organizational structure assuming dedicated and sustained funding. It projects an annual growth of 3.2 commissioned personnel over the next decade, for a total of 162 commissioned personnel in 2036. This model provides the highest level of services to enhance public safety.

### *Strategic Progression Model*

This model projects a more moderate budgetary forecast, which would require a reduction in services when compared to the Comprehensive Impact Model. It projects annual growth of 2.3 commissioned personnel over the next decade, for a total of 153 commissioned personnel in 2036. The specific trade-offs in services and operational impacts are detailed in the section below.

### *Foundational Readiness Model*

This model represents a constrained fiscal environment in which services are only minimally increased over the next decade for a total of 143 commissioned personnel in 2036. It projects an annual growth of 1.3 commissioned personnel. The specific trade-offs in services and operational impacts are detailed in the section below.

### *Assumptions*

These models represent additions to full-time equivalent staff (FTEs) with the assumption that all 130 allotted FTEs are fully operational, which they are currently not. The growth will be phased in as allotted FTEs become operational, with the focus on increasing patrol staffing. The growth is in ranking order of priority.

Each year's model is compared against the previous year's model in the same classification (i.e. 2028 Model A is compared against 2027 Model A). This presumes that the growth that occurred in the previous year(s) has occurred.

### **2027 Comprehensive Impact Model (commissioned personnel)**

The Comprehensive Impact Model for 2027 is an annual growth of 3 FTEs for a total of 133 FTEs. The growth would allow for the implementation of the following:

- Increase the CSI division from **four to six**
- Increase in patrol staffing from 65 to 75 (two assigned as traffic officers)
- Increase in detective division staffing from **12 to 14 detectives**

## 2027 Strategic Progression Model (commissioned personnel)

The Strategic Progression Model represents moderate growth in the budgetary forecast. This model represents an annual growth of two officers for a total of 132 commissioned FTEs. The moderate growth would allow for the implementation of the following:

- Increase the CSI division from **four to six**
- Increase in patrol staffing from 65 to 74 (two assigned as traffic officers)
- Increase in detective division staffing from **12 to 14 detectives**

## 2027 Foundational Readiness Model (commissioned personnel)

The Foundational Readiness Model represents the most constrained budgetary scenario. This model represents an annual growth of one officer for increase to 131 commissioned FTEs. This minimal growth would only allow for the implementation of the following:

- Increase the CSI division from **four to six**
- Increase in patrol staffing from 65 to 73 (two assigned as traffic officers)
- Increase in detective division staffing from **12 to 14 detectives**

**Table 7:** Model Staffing Comparison, 2027

	2027 Commissioned Personnel		
	Comprehensive Impact	Strategic Progression	Foundational Readiness
Chief	1	1	1
Deputy Chief	2	2	2
Patrol LT	1	1	1
Patrol Lt	1	1	1
Investigation Lt	1	1	1
Spec Ops Lt	1	1	1
Services Lt	1	1	1
OPR Lt	1	1	1
Patrol Sgt	8	8	8
Patrol Cpl	8	8	8
Patrol Ofc	59	58	57
MCU Sgt	1	1	1
MCU Det	7	7	7
HUD Det	1	1	1
SVU Sgt	1	1	1
SVU Det	7	7	7
Forensic Det	4	4	4
EVID/ID Sup	1	1	1
EVID/ID Ofc	1	1	1

<i>CSI</i>	6	6	6
<i>Traffic Ofc</i>	4	4	4
<i>K9 Supervisor</i>	1	1	1
<i>K9 Ofc</i>	3	3	3
<i>Bike Sgt</i>	1	1	1
<i>Bike Ofc</i>	4	4	4
<i>Task Force</i>	2	2	2
<i>Training Sgt</i>	1	1	1
<i>Training Ofc</i>	1	1	1
<i>Range Ofc</i>	1	1	1
<i>ROC</i>	1	1	1
<i>Outreach Ofc</i>	1	1	1
	133	132	131

### 2027 Comprehensive Impact Model - What-Comm

What-Comm has spent the last five years catching up from an outdated number of Public Safety Telecommunicators (PST). This increase in PSTs working at all hours, coupled with the recognized importance of routine PST supervision in nationwide best practices, necessitates sufficient supervisors to ensure 24/7 What-Comm supervision. What-Comm currently has four Dispatch Supervisors. Six Dispatch Supervisors are required to ensure 24/7 supervision of What-Comm's operations. One supervisor will remain the Training Supervisor. The following is the ideal growth of What-Comm in 2027:

- Increase Dispatch Supervisors from **five to seven**

### 2027 Comprehensive Impact Model - Records Division

When the commissioned personnel positions grow, there will be a need for the support staff to grow as well. The following is the idea growth of the Records Division in 2027:

- Increase Records Specialists from **12 to 15**
- Increase Records Supervisors from **three to four**

### 2027 Comprehensive Impact Model - Technology Division

Technology is an integral aspect of supporting the police department's work, both in technology upgrades and technology personnel. We have identified a need for crime analysts. The following is the ideal growth of the Technology Division in 2027:

- Implement Tactical Crime Analyst

**2028 Comprehensive Impact Model (commissioned personnel)**

The Comprehensive Impact Model for 2028 is an annual growth of 3 FTEs for a total of 136 FTEs. One should note that there is a strategic decision to reduce the patrol staffing level from the 2027 model. This is to allow for the implementation of other needed positions. The following would be implemented as a result of the growth:

- Implement a Forensic Sergeant
- Implement an Administrative Sergeant
- Decrease patrol staffing from **75 to 74**
- Increase in detective division staffing from **14 to 16 detectives**

**2028 Strategic Progression Model (commissioned personnel)**

The Strategic Progression Model represents moderate growth in the budgetary forecast. This model represents an annual growth of two officers for a total of 134 commissioned FTEs. The following would be implemented in this model:

- Implement a Forensic Sergeant
- Implement an Administrative Sergeant

**2028 Foundational Readiness Model (commissioned personnel)**

The Foundational Readiness Model represents the most constrained budgetary scenario. This model represents an annual growth of one officer per year for a total of 132 commissioned FTEs. The following would be implemented in this model:

- Implement a Forensic Sergeant
- Implement an Administrative Sergeant
- Reducing patrol staffing from **73 to 72**

**Table 8:** Model Staffing Comparison, 2028

	<i>2028 Commissioned Personnel</i>		
	<b>Comprehensive Impact</b>	<b>Strategic Progression</b>	<b>Foundational Readiness</b>
<i>Chief</i>	1	1	1
<i>Deputy Chief</i>	2	2	2
<i>Patrol LT</i>	1	1	1
<i>Patrol Lt</i>	1	1	1

<i>Investigation Lt</i>	1	1	1
<i>Spec Ops Lt</i>	1	1	1
<i>Services Lt</i>	1	1	1
<i>OPR Lt</i>	1	1	1
<i>Patrol Sgt</i>	8	8	8
<i>Patrol Cpl</i>	8	8	8
<i>Patrol Ofc</i>	58	58	56
<i>MCU Sgt</i>	1	1	1
<i>MCU Det</i>	8	7	7
<i>HUD Det</i>	1	1	1
<i>SVU Sgt</i>	1	1	1
<i>SVU Det</i>	8	7	7
<i>Forensic Sgt</i>	1	1	1
<i>Forensic Det</i>	4	4	4
<i>EVID/ID Sup</i>	1	1	1
<i>EVID/ID Ofc</i>	1	1	1
<i>CSI</i>	6	6	6
<i>Admin Sgt</i>	1	1	1
<i>Traffic Ofc</i>	4	4	4
<i>K9 Supervisor</i>	1	1	1
<i>K9 Ofc</i>	3	3	3
<i>Bike Sgt</i>	1	1	1
<i>Bike Ofc</i>	4	4	4
<i>Task Force</i>	2	2	2
<i>Training Sgt</i>	1	1	1
<i>Training Ofc</i>	1	1	1
<i>Range Ofc</i>	1	1	1
<i>ROC</i>	1	1	1
<i>Outreach Ofc</i>	1	1	1
	136	134	132

## 2028 Comprehensive Impact Model - What-Comm

Building on increases in 2027, the increase in Dispatch Supervisors will necessitate a long-overdue adjustment to What-Comm's leadership. The Deputy Director has handled all administrative matters, and the workload is neither sustainable nor advisable from a standpoint of span of control or continuity of operations.

We will create two manager-level positions: one to oversee day-to-day operations and another to oversee training, compliance, and administration. This will better align with our current organizational structure, which currently contains one manager overseeing Information Technology.

After this, What-Comm will have three manager positions: Operations, Training, and Information Technology. The three managers will report to the Deputy Director, whose job classification shall change to Director. The following is the ideal growth of What-Comm for 2028:

- Increase the Manager position from **one to three**
- Increase Public Records Specialist from **.05 to 1**
- Re-Classify the Deputy Director to Director

### **2028 Comprehensive Impact Model - Records Division**

When the commissioned personnel positions grow, there is a need for the support staff to grow as well. The following is the idea growth of the Records Division in 2028:

- Increase Support Services Specialists from **15 to 17**
- Increase Records Supervisors from **four to five**

### **2028 Comprehensive Impact Model - Technology Division**

Technology is an integral aspect of supporting the police department's mission. This is both in technology upgrades and technology personnel. There has been an identified need for crime analysts. The following is the ideal growth of the Technology Division in 2028.

- Implement the Intel Crime Analyst

### **2031 Comprehensive Impact Model (commissioned personnel)**

To effectively progress toward our envisioned organizational structure in 2036, it is essential to establish clear benchmarks and prioritize key staffing milestones along the way. Based on the commissioned growth chart, we have identified an increase in FTEs to 145 by the year 2031 as a critical midpoint toward achieving our long-term goals.

Most notably there is a structural change in the leadership of our organization through the implementation of Captain positions. This structural change will allow the Chief to be more outward facing and the Deputy Chief to be more operational. One of the current Deputy Chief positions would be converted to a Captain position to allow for the implementation of three Captain positions. Each Captain would oversee one of three divisions – patrol, investigations and services.

This growth will be strategically phased after achieving our goals in the 2028 model, with resource allocation guided by the following priorities:

- Implementation of the **Captain** positions (add two Captains and convert one Deputy Chief position)
- Increasing the patrol division from **74 to 79**
- Increase Forensic Detective positions from **four to five**
- Increase of Detective positions to from **16 to 17**

**2031 Strategic Progression Model (commissioned personnel)**

The Strategic Progression Model represents moderate growth in the budgetary forecast. This model represents an annual growth of two officers for the next five years for a total of 140 commissioned FTEs. The following would be implemented:

- Implementation of the **Captain** positions
- Increase the patrol division from **74 to 76**
- Increase Forensic Detective Position from **four to five**
- Increase detective division from **14 to 15**

**2031 Foundational Readiness Model (commissioned personnel)**

The Foundational Readiness Model represents the most constrained budgetary scenario. This model represents an annual growth of one officer for the five years for a total of 135 commissioned FTEs. The following would be implemented:

- Implementation of the **Captain** Position
- Increase the patrol division from **72 to 73**

**Table 9:** Model Staffing Comparison, 2031

	2031 Commissioned Personnel		
	Comprehensive Impact	Strategic Progression	Foundational Readiness
<i>Chief</i>	1	1	1
<i>Deputy Chief</i>	1	1	1
<i>Captains</i>	3	3	3
<i>Patrol LT</i>	1	1	1

<i>Patrol Lt</i>	1	1	1
<i>Investigation Lt</i>	1	1	1
<i>Spec Ops Lt</i>	1	1	1
<i>Services Lt</i>	1	1	1
<i>OPR Lt</i>	1	1	1
<i>Patrol Sgt</i>	8	8	8
<i>Patrol Cpl</i>	8	8	8
<i>Patrol Ofc</i>	63	60	57
<i>MCU Sgt</i>	1	1	1
<i>MCU Det</i>	8	7	7
<i>HUD Det</i>	1	1	1
<i>SVU Sgt</i>	1	1	1
<i>SVU Det</i>	9	8	7
<i>Forensic Sgt</i>	1	1	1
<i>Forensic Det</i>	5	4	4
<i>EVID/ID Sup</i>	1	1	1
<i>EVID/ID Ofc</i>	1	1	1
<i>CSI</i>	6	6	6
<i>Traffic Ofc</i>	4	4	4
<i>K9 Supervisor</i>	1	1	1
<i>K9 Ofc</i>	3	3	3
<i>Admin Sgt</i>	1	1	1
<i>Bike Sgt</i>	1	4	4
<i>Bike Ofc</i>	4	1	1
<i>Task Force</i>	2	2	2
<i>Training Sgt</i>	1	1	1
<i>Training Ofc</i>	1	1	1
<i>Range Ofc</i>	1	1	1
<i>ROC</i>	1	1	1
<i>Outreach</i>	1	1	1
	145	139	135

### 2031 Comprehensive Impact Model - What-Comm

With the increase in commissioned personnel, both at BPD and throughout Whatcom County, a fourth 24/7 radio frequency will be required to maintain appropriate, safe, and sustainable workloads for What-Comm staff. Staffing a radio frequency 24/7 requires six personnel. It also requires additional support personnel. The following is the ideal growth of What-Comm in 2031:

- Increase Public Safety Telecommunicators from **31 to 37**
- Implement a What-Comm Systems Analyst

### 2031 Comprehensive Impact Model - Records Division

When the commissioned personnel positions grow, there is a need for the support staff to grow as well. The following is the idea growth of the Records Division in 2031:

- Increase Support Services Specialists from **17 to 20**
- Increase Records Supervisors from **five to six**

### **2031 Comprehensive Impact Model - Technology Division**

One should note that the Technology Division model for 2031 also has a structural change to their leadership and positions. The following is the ideal growth and structure of the Technology Division in 2031:

- Implement a Forensic Crime Analyst
- Implement a Technical Support Specialist
- Re-organize the System Analyst to a Technology Supervisor

### **2036 Comprehensive Impact Model (commissioned personnel)**

The Comprehensive Impact Model represents the realization of optimal growth for 10 years. This would allow for the implementation and expansion of several units to meet the needs of our city. One will note a decrease in our patrol division to allow for the implementation of units. Those units will reduce the workload of patrol, allowing for the reduction of patrol staffing. In this model, commissioned positions will have grown to 162 and the additional personnel will be implemented in the following way:

- Implementation of a traffic unit (a sergeant and six officers)
- Implementation of a night Bicycle Unit (a sergeant and four officers)
- Implementation of an Anti-Crime Team (a sergeant and four officers)
- Implementation of an Outreach Division (a lieutenant, sergeant, and three school resource officers)
- Increase in Forensic Detectives from **five to six**
- Increase Training Officers from **one to two**
- Decrease of the Patrol Division from 79 to 78
- Elimination of Administrative Sergeant (position converted to one of the above units)

### **2036 Strategic Progression Model (commissioned personnel)**

The Strategic Progression Model represents moderate growth in the budgetary forecast and growth of 2.3 FTEs annual for a total of 153 commissioned personnel. One will note the decrease in patrol staffing when compared to 2031 Strategic Progression Model. This was a strategic

decision to implement new units that will help to reduce the call load of patrol. The following would be implemented in this model:

- Implementation of a traffic unit (adding a sergeant and removed from patrol)
- Implementation of a night Bicycle Unit (a sergeant and four officers)
- Implementation of an Anti-Crime Team (a sergeant and four officers)
- Implementation of an Outreach Division (a lieutenant, sergeant, and three school resource officers)
- Increase Forensic Detectives from **five to six**
- Increase the Detective Division from **15 to 16**
- Decrease of the Patrol Division from **76 to 74**
- Elimination of Administrative Sergeant (position converted to one of the above units)
- Conversion of Outreach Officer to Outreach Sergeant

**2036 Foundational Readiness Model (commissioned personnel)**

The Foundational Readiness Model represents the most restrained budgetary scenario with a growth of 13 officers in the next decade. This model does not allow for the implementation of several specialty units that would provide a more focused attention to community needs.

It is of note that some units may be higher in Foundational Readiness Model when compared to Strategic Progression Model (traffic officers and patrol officers). This was a strategic choice to increase those units prior to implementing any new units based on the limited resources provided in Foundational Readiness Model.

- Implementation of a Traffic Unit (adding a sergeant and removed from patrol)
- Increase Forensic Detectives from **four to five**
- Increase the Patrol Division from **73 to 76**
- Increase the Detective Division from **14 to 16**

**Table 10:** Model Staffing Comparisons, 2036

	2036 Commissioned Personnel		
	Comprehensive Impact	Strategic Progression	Foundational Readiness
<i>Chief</i>	1	1	1
<i>Deputy Chief</i>	1	1	1
<i>Captains</i>	3	3	3

<i>Patrol LT</i>	1	1	1
<i>Patrol Lt</i>	1	1	1
<i>Investigation Lt</i>	1	1	1
<i>Spec Ops Lt</i>	1	1	1
<i>Outreach Lt</i>	1	1	0
<i>Services Lt</i>	1	1	1
<i>OPR Lt</i>	1	1	1
<i>Patrol Sgt</i>	8	8	8
<i>Patrol Cpl</i>	8	8	8
<i>Patrol Ofc</i>	62	58	60
<i>MCU Sgt</i>	1	1	1
<i>MCU Det</i>	8	8	8
<i>HUD Det</i>	1	1	1
<i>SVU Sgt</i>	1	1	1
<i>SVU Det</i>	9	8	8
<i>Forensic Sgt</i>	1	1	1
<i>Forensic Det</i>	6	5	5
<i>EVID/ID Sup</i>	1	1	1
<i>EVID/ID Ofc</i>	1	1	1
<i>CSI</i>	6	6	6
<i>ACT Sgt</i>	1	1	0
<i>ACT Ofc</i>	4	4	0
<i>Traffic Sgt</i>	1	1	1
<i>Traffic Ofc</i>	6	4	6
<i>K9 Supervisor</i>	1	1	1
<i>K9 Ofc</i>	3	3	3
<i>Bike Sgt</i>	2	2	1
<i>Bike Ofc</i>	8	8	4
<i>Task Force</i>	2	2	2
<i>Outreach Ofc</i>	1	1	1
<i>ROC</i>	1	1	1
<i>SRO</i>	3	3	0
<i>Training Sgt</i>	1	1	1
<i>Training Ofc</i>	2	1	1
<i>Range Ofc</i>	1	1	1
	162	153	143

### 2036 Comprehensive Impact Model - What-Comm

With the increase in commissioned personnel, both at BPD and throughout Whatcom County, and the expected population increases, additional Public Safety Telecommunicators will be required to support the increased workload, especially during What-Comm’s peak hours. The following is the ideal growth of What-Comm in 2036:

- Increase Public Safety Telecommunicators from **37 to 40**

### 2036 Comprehensive Impact Model - Records Division

When the commissioned personnel positions grow, there is a need for the support staff to grow as well. The following is the idea growth of the Records Division in 2036:

- Increase Support Services Specialists from **20 to 22**
- Increase Records Supervisors from **six to seven**

### 2036 Comprehensive Impact Model - Technology Division

The technology division believes that it can remain consistent with its staffing from 2031 to 2036.

### Cost Estimates

Using the three baseline growth rates in the staffing allocation section, the table below provides estimated annual cost of increased commissioned officers over a ten-year period. It does not differentiate the roles described in the narrative which would have incremental impact on costs.

**Table 11:** Commissioned staff costs, 2027-2036

MODEL	2027	2028	2029	2030	2031	2032	2033	2034	2035	2036
<b>COMPREHENSIVE IMPACT</b>	525,000	1,118,000	1,746,000	2,411,000	3,114,000	3,857,000	4,642,000	5,470,000	6,344,000	7,265,000
<b>STRATEGIC PROGRESSION</b>	403,000	830,000	1,282,000	1,760,000	2,266,000	2,801,000	3,366,000	3,962,000	4,591,000	5,255,000
<b>FOUNDATIONAL REDDINESS</b>	228,000	469,000	724,000	995,000	1,281,000	1,583,000	1,903,000	2,240,000	2,595,000	2,970,000

In addition, the Comprehensive Impact model includes significant increases in non-commissioned staff.

**Table 12:** Non-commissioned staff costs, 2027-2036

	2027	2028	2031
<b>COMPREHENSIVE IMPACT</b>	714,820	1,627,420	3,527,671

## Facilities

As previously noted, the police department's current facility, constructed in 1992, no longer adequately supports the operational and spatial needs of a modern and growing law enforcement agency. Over the past three decades, the department has expanded significantly, resulting in limited capacity for functional workspaces and constrained infrastructure to support future growth.

While the existing facility was engineered with the potential for expansion, both in physical footprint and second-floor office space, there are increasing demands that exceed its current capabilities. Secure parking must be expanded to accommodate a growing fleet aligned with projected increases in full-time staffing.

In addition, the City needs additional secure evidence and equipment storage.

## Financial Considerations

The City of Bellingham is a full-service first-class city. In addition to public safety services, it manages water and sewer utility systems, parks and recreation, libraries, a transportation network, and numerous other services. During the 2026 budget development process, the City's Finance Department identified a \$10 million deficit in the general fund due to increasing labor and equipment expenses paired with declining real (inflation-adjusted) revenues. The City addressed this shortfall by implementing a new one-tenth of one percent sales tax and making broad-reaching cuts.

Public safety costs are a significant driver of expense for the City. In 2026, approximately 60% of the City's general fund will go towards public safety. Labor cost growth in the Police and Fire Departments outpace those in other departments due to existing labor contracts and a large number of employees who are eligible for annual step increases.

In the current financial climate, existing levels of service may be unsustainable. As part of the package to balance the 2026 budget, it was necessary to eliminate four firefighter positions through attrition among the approximately 40 positions eliminated citywide. Without new revenues or an improved macroeconomic outlook, the City may have little choice but to further cut staff and services in 2027.

Given the city’s inability to maintain services at existing levels, any expansion of services as outlined in this assessment will require new funding sources. The following section of the assessment evaluates a number of potential funding sources that could either directly pay for all public safety services or could be leveraged to supplant existing general fund for public safety purposes.

## Current Cost of Service

City expenses have increased dramatically since 2019. In that year, the City general fund spent \$87 million on operations. Of that, \$28.7 million was spent in the Police Department and \$23.2m was spent in the Fire Department. In 2024, the general fund total was \$119.8 million<sup>1</sup>, with the Police Department accounting for \$36.9 million (29 percent increase) and the Fire Department \$36.1 million (56 percent increase). These two departments represent 64 percent of general fund cost increases over that five-year period.

At current staffing levels, with no increase in levels of service, the Fire and Police Departments are expected to cost a minimum of \$1.5 million more per department per year. By 2030, the combined expense will likely be at least \$100 million, a 36 percent increase over the 2024 amount. Historical trends suggest general fund revenues will increase approximately 20 percent over the same time frame, further exacerbating the City’s financial challenges.

## Other Public Safety Level of Service Considerations

### *Public Defense*

In June 2025, the state supreme court issued an order that will dramatically change public defense standards in Washington State beginning in 2026. Previously, each public defender could handle no more than 400 misdemeanor cases per year. The new standard reduces that limit to 120. The court granted agencies up to ten years to reach that standard, phasing a ten percent reduction annually.

The City contracts out public defense services. In 2026, the City will pay \$1,063,553 for its primary contract, plus additional amount to conflict attorneys. Assuming the current contract provisions and a moderate increase in case counts annually, the City can expect costs to double by 2029 to over \$2 million, be over \$3 million by 2033, and likely cost at least \$4 million for full implementation in 2035.

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<sup>1</sup> This number excludes one-time American Rescue Plan Act expenditures

The State Supreme Court will review the standards in three years. Most observers of public defense, including the City’s public defender and the County public defender, believe the level set by the court is beyond what is necessary for quality public defense services. In addition, there are concerns state-wide that there are simply not enough defense attorneys in the state to meet the requirements. Given those factors, it is possible that the court will temper the standards when it reviews them in three years. However, the city must plan for the standards as written.

### ***Jail Costs***

Whatcom County is the primary provider of jail services to the City. In 2025, the City saw jail costs increase from \$2.8 million to \$4.1 million as booking restrictions were lifted and per diem rates increased. In November, the Sheriff notified the City that per diem rates would increase by over 25 percent for 2026. The City is making efforts to mitigate these cost increases but anticipates jail costs for 2026 will exceed \$5 million.

Additionally, the County is designing a new, modern jail with improved services and a trauma-informed design. Staff expect the new jail will further drive increases to jail costs as services are improved. This cost will not be borne until after 2030.

### ***Alternative Responses***

The City and County have made significant progress over the last five years to change the landscape of alternative responses and alternatives to incarceration. This work is ongoing, in many cases being led by the Incarceration Prevention and Reduction Task Force and Whatcom County Health and Community Services. This section considers those programs the City invests in directly. Expansion of these programs could support further development in providing the right services our community members need when they are in crisis. Expansion of other programs or creation of new programs is outside the scope of this project.

#### **Alternative Response Team (ART)**

Launched in January 2023, this program sends two behavioral health specialists to respond to specific non-violent behavioral health 911 calls. It benefits people having mental or behavioral health challenges, and it benefits our police personnel, allowing them to respond to other emergent calls requiring law enforcement intervention. ART works to de-escalate tense situations and engage someone experiencing a crisis in a non-judgmental way. They also focus on enhancing community safety through strengthened partnerships between first responders and community services.

ART works closely with other programs within our mental health system, including the [Mobile Crisis Outreach Team](#) (MCOT) operated by Compass Health and [What-Comm 911](#) dispatch to ensure the right response is deployed into the community.

ART is funded jointly by the City, the County and the State. It is available 10 hours a day, five days a week and the total cost is just under \$1 million per year. Approximately half is paid by the state, and the remaining amount is split between the County and the City. Expansions to additional days would require additional staff and funding.

### **Ground-Level Response and Coordinated Engagement (GRACE)**

The GRACE program is a community-based effort to find solutions for individuals who are high utilizers of emergency and criminal justice systems. The aim is to offer intensive, coordinated services to these “familiar faces” whose needs span beyond any single agency.

Intensive Case Managers support service providers in working with the complex needs of GRACE members. The GRACE Team works within fire departments, law enforcement agencies, and emergency medical services, making it simple to connect clients to care. With support, GRACE members reduce reliance on emergency systems and gain access to effective care that helps build a more stable, independent life.

GRACE serves people often dealing with multiple and complex issues and who are frequent users of EMS. This includes disabilities, medical problems, mental or behavioral health needs, substance use and unstable or no housing. Participants join GRACE through community partner referrals. Referrals come from many programs, including paramedics, law enforcement, hospital workers, jail and social services.

The GRACE Program provides intensive case management and coordination of services for people once they become a GRACE member. GRACE Intensive Case Managers work in a team, drawing from the services provided by community partners. They develop a Community Support Plan for each GRACE member to ensure members get coordinated services and ongoing support.

Front-line program staffing includes five full-time care coordinators and five intensive case managers, two embedded with the Fire Department, two embedded with the Police Department and one in Ferndale.

The City and the County jointly fund GRACE. In 2026, the total program cost will be just over \$1 million, and the City will contribute \$355,000. The current staffing levels allow for approximately 75-100 high-utilizers to receive intensive case management at any given time.

## Potential Funding Sources

### Available Funding Sources

#### *Regional Fire Authority*

Under RCW 52.26, any city in Washington may form a regional fire protection service authority with at least one other local jurisdiction within proximity, defined as a city, town, fire district, port district, municipal airport, regional fire protection service authority, or Indian tribe. For the City of Bellingham, Fire District 8, which has all its services delivered by the City, is an obvious partner.

Unlike the other funding mechanisms described in this section, a regional fire authority (RFA) is a new special purpose taxing district. With its creation comes a new governing board and ultimately all the administrative responsibilities associated. Consequently, this approach represents not just a new funding source, but also a new form of governance for the delivery of fire and emergency medical services

Funding for RFAs is primarily provided by property tax levies up to \$1.50 per \$1,000 of assessed value, which does impact the general fund levy rate for local jurisdictions. Currently South Whatcom Fire Authority (SWFA) is the only RFA in Whatcom County. SWFA was established in 2009 and serves the Chuckanut, Lake Samish, Yew Street, Geneva, and Sudden Valley communities (former fire districts 2, 6, 9, and 10).

Using 2025 assessed valuation, an RFA contiguous with Bellingham's boundaries could raise up to \$34 million in property tax. Alternatively, or additionally, revenue could be raised through a fire benefit charge. However, if an RFA assesses a fire benefit charge, its maximum property tax levy is reduced from \$1.50 to \$1.00. Creation of an RFA requires a simple majority vote. However, if the RFA plan includes the imposition of a fire benefit charge, the threshold is raised to a 60 percent majority.

While an RFA represents the most significant investment in time and effort to implement provides the most stable, flexible long-term funding.

## ***Ambulance Utility Fee***

RCW 35.21.766 authorizes cities and towns in Washington state to establish an ambulance utility fee to fund ambulance transport services. The governing body of the city or town is authorized to set and collect rates and charges in an amount that is sufficient to regulate, operate, and maintain an ambulance utility. Prior to setting the ambulance utility fee structure, cities and towns must take a series of steps under state statute to determine the costs necessary to make the ambulance utility successfully function, excluding capital construction costs. Like any other utility, there is not a cap on what this source can raise, however, rates must be tied to the actual cost of providing service.

As part of the City's participation in the Ground Emergency Medical Transport (GEMT) program, which provides federal funding to fill the gap between the actual cost of ambulance transport and what Medicaid reimburses, we calculate the total cost of our medical transport system annually. This total amount is likely an effective proxy for what an Ambulance Utility would raise. Using that methodology, in the year from July 2024 through June of 2025, expenses related to Basic Life Support medical transport totaled \$26 million.

Unique among funding options, an Ambulance Utility Fee can be set councilmanically. It can set the fee to any amount needed to recoup expenses for ambulance services. This fee can be assessed in a number of ways. Typically, it is a fixed amount added to all residential and commercial municipal utility customers. This fixed fee model makes the ambulance utility fee the most regressive option available since people of all wealth levels pay the same rate.

## ***Fire Benefit Charge***

Under RCW 52.18, fire protection districts and regional fire authorities are the only forms of local governments that may impose fire benefit charges, with approval of voters in their district. Unlike property tax based upon the assessed value of property, the formula for determining the fire benefit charge can vary based upon a variety of factors that may impact service needed for fire response to a property, such as square footage of buildings and structures, type of structure, zoned use, the presence of flammable or hazardous materials, and the number of staff needed to respond to a fire incident.

RCW 35.13.256 authorizes cities that have annexed all or part of a fire district since 2006 to impose a Fire Benefit Charge. The City meets this requirement as it has annexed portions of both Fire District 8 and Fire District 4 since 2006. The charge must be approved by 60% of the voters

and is authorized for up to six years. In addition, the charge cannot exceed 60% of the department's operating budget. In 2026, 60% of the department's operating budget equates to approximately \$35 million.

### **Property tax levy**

Washington state uses a budget-based property tax system, meaning that local jurisdictions establish the amount of property tax revenue to fund their budget, called the levy amount. The levy amount is comprised of the total amount collected from taxpayers, and the assessor in each county calculates the levy rate necessary to raise that amount of revenue by dividing the total levy amount by the assessed value of taxable property.

The Washington State Constitution limits the annual rate of property taxes that taxing districts, including cities, may impose on parcels of property to 1% of its true and fair value. The rate cannot exceed \$3.60 per \$1000 of assessed value. Additionally, taxing districts are restricted to a 1% annual limit on the amount they can increase the property tax levy amount unless the public votes for a greater increase, commonly referred to a levy lid lift.

The City's 2025 levy rate was \$1.39, leaving approximately \$2.21 available. With the 2025 assessed value, approximately \$50 million dollars of capacity remains. For reference, the Greenways Levy was \$0.41 cents and raised \$9.5 million in 2025. Levy lid lifts can be temporary or permanent. They can also be fixed amounts, limited to the statutory 1% or designed to increase over time.

### **Other Unavailable Revenue Sources**

These sources are either already in place, are not available to cities, or do not offer enough long-term revenue to support these on-going costs (i.e., grants).

### **911 Sales and Use Tax**

RCW 82.14.420 authorizes counties to impose a sales tax of up to 0.2% for emergency communications systems and facilities with voter approval. The City of Bellingham could not impose this tax on its own. However, revenues from this tax could raise approximately \$10 million county-wide. Dispatch services provided by the City of Bellingham are distributed to all user agencies. All local governments with public safety services participate. In 2026, the City's user fees for the service will be \$2.3 million, which represent the total savings the City would have from imposition of this tax.

### ***Public Safety Sales Tax***

Under RCW: 82.14.450, any city or town can implement a public safety sales tax of up to 0.1%, with a minimum of 1/3 of this revenue required to be used for criminal justice purposes (as defined in RCW 82.14.340) and/or fire protection purposes. This sales tax requires approval by a simple majority of voters and may only be considered by voters during a primary or general election. If a city does impose a public safety sales tax, the city must share 15% of the revenue with the county in which it resides, and the city retains the remaining 85% of the revenues.

Cities and towns may only implement this tax if the county in which it resides has not previously implemented a 0.3% public safety sales tax. Whatcom County has already imposed the maximum amount of 0.3% public safety sales tax, making Bellingham unable to leverage an additional public safety sales tax. As required by state law, 40% of the public safety sales tax collected by Whatcom County is distributed to cities within the county, including Bellingham, on a per capita (population) basis.

### ***Criminal Justice Sales Tax***

Under RCW 82.14.340, any county in Washington state may enact a 0.1% sales tax for specific criminal justice purposes as defined by RCW 70.123.020, such as domestic violence services and legal advocates. This tax may only be implemented by counties, not cities, and this tax does not require voter approval, although it may be subject to possible referendum. Whatcom County has already implemented this sales tax and is required to split 90% of the revenue generated between the county and cities within the county, including Bellingham, on a per capita (population) basis.

### ***Community-Law Enforcement Partnership Program (CLEP)***

Washington state's Community-Law Enforcement Partnership (CLEP) was terminated on June 30, 2025, due to budget cuts and is no longer available. This program was created by the Legislature in 2021 and was previously available to public agencies and non-profit community-based organizations through the Department of Commerce for the purpose of mobilizing community participation in public safety efforts and strengthening lines of communication between law enforcement and local residents, such as through neighborhood organizing, law enforcement and community partnerships, youth mobilization, and business engagement.

### ***Justice Assistance Grant (JAG) funding:***

The Justice Assistance Grant Program (JAG) is a source of federal funding to state and local jurisdictions administered through the Washington State Department of Commerce. The purpose of the JAG program is to increase community safety and improve the outcomes and operation of

the criminal legal system across Washington state. To maximize the impact of awards, Commerce dedicates available federal JAG funds to a limited number of initiatives that have potential statewide applicability. For example, Whatcom County received an award of funding in 2024 to collect, analyze, and publicly communicate criminal justice system data to increase transparency, make better decisions and improve outcomes for individuals involved in the criminal legal system. Given the unpredictability of federal funding at the time of this writing, it is unclear the level to which JAG funding for local jurisdictions will be available into the future.

### ***New State Legislation to Improve Public Safety (House Bill 2015):***

During the 2025 legislative session, the Washington State Legislature passed HB 2015, a bill designed to improve public safety throughout the state that went into effect in July 2025. The bill creates new pathways for local governments to grow their public safety funding and establishes a state grant program administered by the Criminal Justice Training Commission (CJTC) to recruit new local law enforcement officers and fund broader law enforcement and public safety efforts.

**Local Sales and Use Tax Authority:** This legislation grants cities and counties the authority to implement a 0.1% sales and use tax by June 30, 2028 to fund broadly defined criminal justice purposes, including diversion programs, reentry programs, alternative response programs, and mental health crisis response. The sales and use tax authority under this bill is councilmanic and does not require a vote of the people. However, a city or county may not impose this change if voters in that city or county have rejected an increase in the local criminal justice sales and use tax or the local public safety sales and use tax within the previous twelve months. If a city or county has not adopted a resolution or ordinance to impose the tax by June 30, 2028, the jurisdiction has the authority to submit a proposition to its voters at a primary or general election to impose the tax. Under this legislation, the collection of the new sales and use tax may only occur if and when the city or county receives a CJTC Local Law Enforcement Grant, which is outlined below. Bellingham imposed this tax on January 1, 2026.

**New Local Law Enforcement Grant Program:** A new grant program is created under this legislation to increase community policing and public safety by providing direct support to local law enforcement agencies in hiring, retaining, and training law enforcement officers. The grant program includes \$100 million in state funding and will be administered by the CJTC. This legislation establishes a series of requirements that local law enforcement agencies must meet to qualify for the grant and requirements for how grant funds may be used, including providing up to 75% of salaries and benefits for newly hired law enforcement officers for a maximum of three years. The grant program expires June 30, 2028.

## Funding Summary and Conclusions

The table below summarizes the potential funding sources discussed above.

**Table 13:** Comparison of potential funding sources

<b><i>Mechanism</i></b>	<b><i>How raises revenue</i></b>	<b><i>Implementation requirements</i></b>	<b><i>Potential revenue</i></b>	<b><i>Other considerations</i></b>
<b><i>Property Tax Levy</i></b>	Increases property tax levy temporarily or permanently	Simple majority public vote	Up to \$50 million	Either requires reoccurring renewal or will be difficult to keep up with inflation (1% property tax growth)
<b><i>Ambulance Utility</i></b>	Creates new fee; cannot exceed cost of delivering ambulance services	Council majority	Up to \$26 million	Permanent; most regressive; depending on implementation, burdens utility rate payers; could impact GEMT revenues.
<b><i>Fire Benefit Charge (FBC)</i></b>	Creates new fee; cannot exceed 60% of total department budget	60% majority public vote; renews every 6 years	Up to \$35 million	Flexible, but must be renewed every six years; typically places less burden on residential and more on business/large structures
<b><i>Regional Fire Authority (RFA)</i></b>	Creates new taxing authority with or without an FBC	Simple majority public vote for property tax; 60% majority with FBC	Up to \$60 million with property tax and FBC	Permanent; allows fire service to partner with other fire districts for efficiencies; limits City's financial exposure to increasing fire and EMS costs; reduces the City's property tax capacity.

After the 2008 financial crisis, the City undertook a process to identify tools to establish fiscal stability. One such tool was an RFA. A formal planning process was undertaken in 2017 and significant work was done to evaluate viability. Eventually, leadership decided that revenues were keeping up with expenses and an RFA was not needed.

As was the case in 2017, an RFA offers the most permanent solution for fiscal stability. It provides high levels of service delivery for the community and the greatest flexibility and financial security. Creating an RFA would mean the City no longer provides fire or EMS services. Future cost increases in delivering those services would not impact the City's ability to deliver the other critical services for which it is responsible.

In addition, because the City did much of the work towards an RFA in 2017, that documentation can be used to facilitate a new evaluation. Many mid-sized communities in Washington are looking towards RFAs as fire costs become larger portions of cities' expenses.

The 2025 net impact of the Fire Department on the general fund is over \$24 million. An RFA would free up those resources. Options for those resources could include funding other public safety needs identified in this document, reducing taxes, investing in the city's capital facilities, increasing reserve balances in accordance with financial policies, or other priorities.

**For these reasons, staff recommend undertaking a new RFA planning process with District 8.**

Should the City choose to pursue this recommendation, implementation would require the following steps:

1. Formation of an RFA planning committee by the Bellingham City Council and District 8 Commissioners, comprised of three elected officials from each entity.
2. Development of a formal RFA plan by the planning committee.
3. Certification of plan by both City Council and District 8 Commissioners for voter approval.
4. Public vote on RFA formation.