

Technical Review Committee (TRC) – Mercy Housing

Monday, June 13, 2022 - 3:30-4:30pm by telephone

Participants:

Lindsey Karas, Housing & Education Manager, Mercy Housing

Chris Comeau, Transportation Planner, City of Bellingham Public Works

Guiding Questions

Your experience of biking and walking in Bellingham and around Mercy Housing Sites:

- How does your work intersect with biking and walking, as well as affect your ability to accomplish goals at your organization?

Lindsay Karas has 12 years of experience working at Mercy’s sites on Sterling Drive, which is a residential street that has uneven surfaces, a lack of sidewalks, and a lack of street lights. Sterling Drive is also a dead-end street, which is disconnected and separated from East Bellis Fair Parkway, by the 10-feet of private property surrounding the Bellis Fair Mall property, also known as the “spite strip.”

Barriers to walking and biking around Mercy Housing Sites:

- What barriers do Mercy residents face for walking/biking?

Sterling Meadows is an immigrant community which is stranded in an access -limited area, due to surrounding busy and dead-end streets, as well as Interstate 5. The lack of any sidewalks on Sterling Drive is a very big concern because many vehicles speed on the long, straight stretch of Sterling, and some even speed around the “S” curves near Northwest Avenue. It should be noted that the Sterling Meadows and Senior sites did not construct the north side of Sterling Drive to City residential street standards, which includes curb/gutter, sidewalk, and street lights, when they were permitted in the early 2000’s.

When Mercy residents do walk to Bellis Fair Mall, it can be challenging to cross the busy street to and from the Mall. Some residents use the informal pathways in unimproved rights-of-way between Eliza Avenue and Sterling Drive. Many residents are transit-dependent and rely on WTA buses, which run every 15 minutes in each direction on Northwest Avenue (Green GO Line, Route 232). It is difficult for people walking and biking to cross Northwest Avenue at the roundabout, which serves as the on/off-ramps for the Northwest/Interstate 5 interchange. A few hundred feet further north on Northwest Avenue, there are WTA bus shelters and a marked crosswalk with a center refuge island, but as Northwest Avenue has become busier, this crossing has become more intimidating for people to use. It should be noted that the City and WTA have identified this crossing as a candidate for future flashing crosswalk improvements, but that it is not currently funded for construction.

Transient vehicle traffic and crime has also been an issue at the dead-end of Sterling Drive with homeless people camping, using drugs, and engaged in other behavior/activities out of view of residents. The kids do not feel comfortable or safe walking from Mercy to Bellis Fair Mall due to transients at the dead-end. Residents in general do not feel safe walking in their local neighborhood.

Younger children cannot walk or bike to school because they attend Alderwood Elementary School. While Cordata Elementary and Birchwood Elementary School may be closer to Sterling Meadows, neither is conducive to walking either due to both distance, traffic, and busy intersections and roundabouts. School children may be able to walk and bike to Shuksan Middle School, which is relatively close to Sterling Meadows, but it also requires navigating traffic and busy intersections and roundabouts. Not sure that pedestrian or bicycle infrastructure can change this.

Your vision for a walkable and bikeable Bellingham around Mercy Housing Sites:

- o What infrastructure and policies would allow you walk/bike more?

The construction of sidewalks would help residents feel safe and comfortable in their own neighborhood and would help to create a more cohesive sense of local community with people walking around and making connections with their neighbors.

A flashing crosswalk just north of Home Lane on Northwest Avenue would help residents cross to WTA bus shelters and to the west side to get to the Fred Meyer grocery store on West Bakerview Road.

The City could explore the possibility of working with Bellis Fair Mall to create a more formal pedestrian and bicycle connection between Sterling Drive and East Bellis Fair Parkway and possibly crossing improvements. The City could also explore making off-street pedestrian and bicycle connections in the unimproved rights-of-way that exist between Sterling Drive and Eliza Avenue.

If the City resurrects the Neighborhood Traffic Safety Program (NTSP) in coming years, then speed humps and traffic islands could help to slow vehicle traffic on Sterling Drive.

- o What type of trips do residents make from Mercy sites most frequently?

Residents primarily walk to the Mall, Fred Meyer grocery store, restaurants, and retail shops on West Bakerview. Northwest Avenue and West Bakerview Road have continuous sidewalks, but have limited crossing opportunities and are very busy roads, which are getting busier with more development occurring. WTA buses provide an important connection to the broader Bellingham community for residents of both Sterling Meadows and Sterling Senior Apartments. Most work/employment trips are vehicle-based due to location in rural/agriculture Whatcom County.

Ongoing Communication and Engagement

- o How best can the City engage Mercy Housing even after the plans are updated?

Mercy appreciates the City reaching out to be involved in this effort to update the Pedestrian and Bicycle Master Plans and looks forward to additional opportunities to improve walking and biking conditions around Mercy Housing sites in the future.

Each year in mid-August, Mercy holds a “Back to School Night” at Sterling Meadows and the City could work with Mercy Housing to participate in this event to get additional public input on the pedestrian and bicycle master plan updates.