

Interview: Whatcom Council of Governments (WCOG) Smart Trips Coordinators

Online Meeting: Friday, June 10, 2022 – 8:30am to 9:30am

- Kiersten Wert (**KW**), Smart Trips Program Coordinator, Whatcom Council of Governments
- Michelle Grandy (**MG**), Smart Trips Outreach Coordinator, Whatcom Council of Governments
- Chris Comeau, Transportation Planner, City of Bellingham Public Works

Guiding Questions

- **Your experience of biking and walking in Bellingham:**

- How does your work intersect with biking and walking?

KW: New infrastructure and street markings help. Routes have changed and improved. More bicycle classes post-pandemic, street marking really help new riders. Idea: Create short videos showing that bicyclists should be focused and looking ahead for conflicts at driveways, alleys, side streets, and intersections and less concerned about vehicles approaching from behind.

MG: New walking and biking infrastructure makes it easier for Smart Trips to recommend routes for people/clients.

- How does it affect your ability to accomplish goals at your organization?

KW: My experience biking helps me recommend routes for people. Not all streets are comfortable for riding but there is usually a good way around certain spots. Pointing out new infrastructure really helps people realize that biking now isn't the same experience they might have had 10 years ago. It's not perfect but getting better all the time.

MG: Walks a lot (bikes too). Nice to see more crosswalks on busy streets. The increase in sidewalks, crosswalks, and bike lanes appears to be attracting more people to bike; there are more people biking on the streets for many different purposes (Commuting, shopping, leisure, recreation, etc.). I've noticed many more e-bikes, especially with older residents.

- **Barriers to walking and biking:**

- What barriers do you face for walking/biking?

KW: Interstate 5. Car-culture in general leading people to believe that they need to own cars and drive everywhere. Fear of others, such as homeless people, panhandlers, etc. leading people to not want to walk downtown or on trails.

MG: Perceived safety around cars, transients, homeless, residents of Basecamp, etc. Parental fear of allowing kids to walk and bike to school. Example: Trail bridge over Whatcom Creek between York and Ellis is commonly a daytime hang-out spot for homeless people, which BHS has identified as a major barrier for school kids to walk between school campus and downtown WTA bus station, etc.

- What would be the most important changes to make Bellingham better for walking/biking?

KW: Better differentiation of speed limits for arterials and neighborhood streets by lowering speed limits on neighborhood streets. It makes people pay less attention to speed limits when some arterials like James, Alabama and Northwest are 25 MPH but everyone flies because these streets are designed for more capacity and higher speeds...so speeding in general becomes normalized. Our one way downtown street grid also encourages speeding by design and encourages more folks to bike on the sidewalk when they are going against traffic. Expensive change to make everything two way for downtown I know, but speeds downtown have really increased through the pandemic.

- **Your vision for a walkable and bikeable Bellingham:**

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

KW: Traffic cops back will help with excessive speeds. Lower or remove minimum parking requirements. We are just inducing demand by providing so much free parking. Charge the real cost for parking - \$1.00 per hour isn't nearly enough. Educate people about the cost of automobile infrastructure. I was just in BC and they had price tags listed by all their roadwork. People here don't have a clue how much all this costs. If car parking is required for new development then covered bike parking should be required too. Incentives for landlords to provide covered bike parking for existing structures...think of the Trader Joes complex, Fred Meyer's or Sunset Square. More protected bike lanes by swapping the parking and bike lane. Will prevent drivers from double parking in a bike lane and help get bikes out of door zones. Let's put a little more of the traffic exposure on the drivers.

MG: Better enforcement of bike lane infractions. N. State Street bike lane is commonly blocked by vehicles parking in the bike lane, waiting to drop-off or pick-up a resident of Stateside apartments or especially by delivery vehicles with packages or food. I've had some very negative encounters and confrontations with drivers who do this and they just do not seem to understand that it is illegal to park in the bike lane.

- If you walk/bike regularly, what are the trips you take most frequently? If you mainly drive, which trips could be feasible for walking/biking?

MG: most of my walking and biking trips are to work, grocery shopping, and leisure activities (eating out, drinks with friends, movies, mt biking). We chose to buy a house in the Lettered Streets because of the proximity to downtown. We never drive anywhere downtown because we're so close. The concept of Walk Score is so enlightening. How do we engage folks in considering this concept when choosing where to live? I find it interesting that folks move to King Mountain area and then are angry that the City doesn't install sidewalks, etc. asap. Do folks not consider this when moving? I know everyone doesn't always have a choice, but many do. How do we get folks who live in UGA to understand that Bellingham takes pride in being a walkable and bikeable place, but that work takes time?

- Can you talk a bit more about specific destinations where you'd like to see better walking and biking access?

KW: Lakeway/ I5 exchange is probably the most consistent barrier I have to help people with for bike routes and some of the alternatives still aren't great. If you go under the freeway on Lincoln north of Lakeway, you still get dumped onto State street to approach downtown and that isn't a great spot to be on a bike. It feels extra far to bike over toward the high school to use the trail to get downtown. All the City parks should have ample bike racks, right now there are many with little to no bike parking.

- **Ongoing Communication and Engagement**

- How best can the City engage the community even after the plans are updated?

MG: We all often hear the rhetoric that the City doesn't care when it comes to transportation related efforts or that they're not working on the projects some folks think need to be prioritized. Of course, all of us that work with the City know that this isn't the case so there's an opportunity to find ways to update community members on the projects that are in the works and why/how they are prioritized. I agree with what you said, Chris, that we need to encourage folks to be more engaged and care more about civic engagement. Perhaps there's a campaign or some method for keeping folks informed and engaged. Maybe project updates or more exposure to info gleaned from the TIP. The messaging needs to be really interesting, or hopeful, or fun... Signage about costs of projects and where the funding comes from (give folks an idea of what it really costs)? Signs sharing future plans? "Future home of the City's best new roundabout...widest sidewalks...protected bike lanes..."

KW: More targeted education to neighborhoods where improvements have been made. More bike rides celebrating new infrastructure - cake and a ride with a celebrity or team or hosted by a local group that can get people to turn out.

- What do you hope to get out of this plan?

MG: I'm interested in reviewing the feedback that's being gleaned from the community. I'm guessing some suggestions or concerns folks have can be addressed with education. Not only can we learn what projects/work need to be prioritized for the planning process, we can learn what folks don't know or understand. Where are the gaps in local knowledge? What are the most common concerns? Can some of them be resolved with education?

KW: Better connectivity for bicycle routes; more bicycle infrastructure; fewer intersection conflicts, mark continuous bike lanes through intersections. More marked neighborhood street connections; implement the [2016 Bicycle Wayfinding Plan](#).

- What are your and your constituents' primary concerns?
- What are your and your constituents' goals for this project?
- How does current active transportation infrastructure work well?
- How could active transportation infrastructure be improved?
- How do you think biking and walking can be made safer?

MG: Driver education and law enforcement. Yes, bikers and walkers can put themselves at risk, but drivers can kill people. I'd also like to see even more traffic calming on our wider and busier streets. Can we decrease speed limits in neighborhoods to 15 miles per hour? Remove more parking, preventing folks from driving around in circles.

MG: Long shot of an idea, but I'm really digging the model some communities are taking and closing streets around schools during pick up and drop off time so it's safer for kids to walk and roll to school. Perhaps change or upgrade what "School Zone" means prioritizing the pedestrians, not just monitoring speed limit?

- How do you incorporate supporting biking and walking into the work your agency/organization does?

KW: I like the idea of working more with Neighborhood Associations if we have bandwidth to do that. There would be a good synergy with the work at schools I'd also like to see us do.