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CULTURAL HERITAGE TOURISM ASSESSMENT: BELLINGHAM/WHATCOM COUNTY

Prepared for:

City of Bellingham Planning & Community
Development Department

By

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City of Bellingham/Whatcom County: Cultural Heritage Tourism Assessment

Cultural Heritage Tourism Assessment

Cultural heritage tourism consultant Cheryl Hargrove visited Bellingham and Whatcom County March 1-3, 2017 to meet with local stakeholders, provide insights during a presentation to the community, and visit key attractions and communities interested in or already engaged in cultural heritage tourism. This report provides an assessment of the tours, observations about the visitor readiness and uniqueness of authentic cultural heritage.

General Impressions

While outdoor recreation and nature-based activities may be a primary motivator for most visitors to Bellingham and Whatcom County, the historic and cultural fabric of the destination are catalysts for attracting visitors year round – and encouraging them to spend more and stay longer, or return often.

Many of the cultural and historic assets are visitor ready, offering distinctive experiences certainly in season (May – September) if not year round. However, some museums and related attractions – especially in the county – have limited hours or days open, and experiences for Sunday-Wednesday visitation are lacking. The Lummi and Nooksack culture presents a unique educational opportunity for visitors, yet must be cultivated with respect for and directed by the tribal leadership. In particular, visitors would be interested in several Lummi traditional arts including Cedar bark weaving and story pole carving.

Some issues may negatively impact overall growth in tourism, such as lack of signage and transportation. These two issues will not be covered in this assessment as Roger Brook's July, 2015 Assessment Report (see Appendix) defines and discusses specific strategies to address the infrastructure and wayfinding needs.



Issues and Opportunities

Other Stakeholder Comments, Concerns and Requests:


- Homeless in downtown Bellingham creates a challenge to sell safety to visitors.
- Communication among the cultural and heritage community with tourism officials is important and needed.
- Engagement with the tribal communities is desired, and identification of ways to work together is a priority. Local partners seek thoughtful dialogue with and better understanding of the Lummi cultural tourism goals to move a destination-wide cultural heritage tourism strategy forward respectfully.
- Demonstrating the value of cultural heritage, especially in relation to recreation, is important to sustainable tourism development and marketing.
- Agritourism or culinary tourism may be a potential opportunity to link the county assets with Bellingham, Fairhaven, Ferndale and Lynden experiences to extend reach and visitor engagement.

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Next Steps:

1. Market profiles: include Religious Tourism (for Lynden Pioneer Museum); educational travel market (Whatcom Museum)
2. Prioritize the assessment based on visitor readiness, marketing potential, and collaboration opportunities
3. Review consumer research to identify other observations and recommendations from visitors; what do they reveal as to priorities/needs?
4. Consider how this assessment impacts the Bellingham/Whatcom Cultural Heritage Tourism SWOT Analysis and Strategic Plan.

Respectfully submitted,
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Specific Observations/Assessments:

Downtown Bellingham: This charming coastal town has a vibrant downtown, although also a large homeless population that at times (it was mentioned) creates safety concerns for some visitors. The cultural district is spread out but walkable, and events such as Art Walk bring attention (and visitors) to the vibrant arts community. The numerous micro-brew pubs offer great food, drink and energy for local residents and visitors alike.

Pickett House: Operated by the Daughters of Pioneers, this historically significant site is hard to find and has limited access (only open the third Saturday of the month). Maintained by the Daughters of the Pioneers, the Pickett House appears to have tired exhibits and is in need of repair (one window was boarded up). Only a few parking spaces are available in the lot adjacent to the building. The site is accessible via the Old Village Trail; a map of this pedestrian path is available online at the City Parks Department.

Territorial Courthouse: This incredible brick building is the oldest in Bellingham, and sandwiched in the industrial section of town between Parberry Environment Solutions and the commercial waterfront. While not located in the most attractive part of town, this building is important in telling the gold rush story. More investigation should be made as to how this site can be a contributing asset to the Bellingham heritage story.

SeaFeast: This new festival, held for the first time last September at the waterfront, affords an opportunity to celebrate the community's fishing heritage. Understanding who will fund, organize and grow this event in future years, and how the festival can foster other heritage activities year-round is important to sustainability.

Mount Baker Theatre: This is a wonderfully restored historic theatre offering more than 450 events a year. The performing arts center hosts 115,000 visitors annually in three different venues. (Biggest competition is the casino, as they can more affordably bring in major entertainment.) Almost a third (30 percent) of visitors come from outside Whatcom County, with the core of out-of-town visitors from Canada to King County. A goal is to expand this regional corridor market. Growth opportunity is to cultivate attendance during parents' weekend at Western, formalizing "behind the scenes" and other special interest tours (ghost tours). A strong education program attracts 15,000-18,000 students annually from a five-county region. This outreach is important, not only for cultural development but also to cultivate future patrons. New marketing efforts, such as the call-in radio program, raise local awareness and cultivate customers. The passport is a clever and user-friendly way to present the schedule of shows. This asset, both icon and attraction, offers great opportunities for partnerships with other cultural sites and regional activities to grow cultural heritage tourism in the county.

Whatcom Museum: The accredited museum is going through an amazing transformation, with the addition of a new orientation theatre offering a permanent history exhibit and video on the first floor, and an incredible interpreted aviary display on the second floor. It is apparent this museum has an incredible collection and talented staff; what is disappointing is not more visitors. Relevant changing exhibits – such as the Chicano Art and Katrina photography – should appeal to a broad range of both residents and visitors. The Old City Hall is a spectacular icon for the community, worth the visit even if the collections weren't of importance – but they are, and presented in engaging, informative formats.

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The Lightcatcher building suffers from a lack of curb appeal. The drab exterior does not do justice to the quality art exhibits, excellent museum store (with a superb collection of art and objects) and hands-on interactive gallery for kids (and adults). An exterior upgrade – different color, bold public art, light show on facades or some interesting treatment to make a more visual statement – could help draw attention to downtown pedestrians and create a “must investigate” attitude.

Another challenge may be to identify how to establish/brand a museum campus, where visitors recognize the value of visiting all three facilities. With its vast collection of artifacts, creating pockets of interest – such as the maritime history exhibit as told through photographs – may be a way to keep content fresh and visitors returning on a regular basis. As weather was mentioned as competition – particularly in summer, when people want to be outdoors – perhaps having more late night or happy hour programs can help “fill in the cultural gap” of a recreation-based experience. Cultivating and targeting special interest groups – such as Audubon clubs, retired Coast Guard, educational tours – may also help increase visitation. Luckily, the museum leadership is enlightened, innovative, and customer-centric. Working with other cultural attractions (such as the theatre), hotels and tourism partners may provide opportunities for packaging and promoting multi-site experiences.

Pickford Theater: What an incredible gem for downtown, Whatcom County and visitors seeking evening entertainment. The varied art movies, “community living room” space, and local amenities (brews and concessions) make this an appealing attraction for residents and visitors alike. Attracting younger demographic (particularly families) is important to sustainability (current demographic is over 50). Summer roof series, children’s film festival and other events (Human Rights Festival) help draw new audiences and have increased ticket sales.

SPARK Museum of Electric Invention: The museum’s main attraction is the Mega Zapper Electrical Show, drawing sell-out crowds on weekends and also wide spread publicity. The museum includes an incredible historic radio collection as well as diverse artifacts related to electricity – such as an original Edison light bulb and several sizes of “zappers”. Unfortunately, there are so many items on display, the average visitor may have trouble identifying the “don’t miss” artifacts and also understand their individual importance and/or significance. A new guide helps provide a key to locating specific items of relevance, and is a good first step for helping the visitor interpret the value of the collection on a self-guided tour. The collection is really brought to life when toured with Tana Granack, guide extraordinaire. With his enthusiasm, wit and extreme knowledge about the entire collection, Tana makes the artifacts relevant to an audience of any age. However, with so much packed into two floors, and an abundance of cranks and handles, this museum is not suitable for children under five and requires supervision. Even the upstairs needs “bullet-proof” interactive exhibits.

The museum relies on admissions and grants for operations; with limited hours (Wednesday – Sunday 11am-5pm) and few docents, the growth potential is nominal in its present format. Identifying ways to rotate exhibits (and encourage repeat visitation), to expand the number of electrical shows for groups, and extend days/hours of operation to offer year-round experiences will help enhance the revenue and collaboration potential.

Breweries: Certainly a draw any time of year, the quantity and quality of breweries in downtown – and their local engagement – sets a great stage for offering unique dining experiences to enhance the cultural scene. Boundary Bay was the original, and still attracts year-round crowds. Other microbreweries have established their own brand and brews. With the boom in culinary tourism, particularly focusing on breweries and distilleries, Bellingham has a great opportunity to promote its unique collection of brewpubs and related events.

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Railroad Avenue/Depot Market Square: This seasonal farmers market, with retractable garage doors and convenient parking adjacent to the structure, is designed for optimal use. Open 10-3 on Saturdays April – December, and third Saturday January – March, the space affords opportunity to showcase Bellingham and Whatcom’s agricultural bounty. The location across from Boundary Bay maximizes the opportunity for promoting agritourism/culinary tourism!

Allied Arts: This non-profit arts corporation coordinates successful events (including studio tours and five-week Holiday Festival, now in its 38th year) to connect local artists with potential customers and enhance awareness of the vibrant local arts community (more than 200 individual organizations, 400 members). The organization’s headquarters on Cornwall Street doubles as gallery/exhibition space and includes an Art Supply Thrift Store in the back. The front window is not visually appealing (there were bolts of fabric and tables in front) although this may be due an exhibit transition.

With the abundance of working artists in the community (mentioned six buildings offering reduced rates for artist studios), the organization works with the city to promote its members. The organization publishes a brochure for placement in all local hotels (10,000 distribution). The current visitor on studio tours is 60+; the holiday market attracts women 50-60, with multiple visits to the festival; slightly younger audience buys artwork. A goal is to reach people located 50 + miles away; this market matches the Tourism Bureau’s primary target audience and should be a great partner for the organization.

Allied Arts has also conducted its own economic impact studies (with Americans for the Arts) and also Cultural Vitality Index with Western States Arts Federation. Desired outcomes of the strategic planning process are a more cohesive list (of stakeholders, partners), tools to give visitors, resources to improve marketing (such as list of historic homes) and integration of the historic and cultural component (involved tribes, if possible).

Fairhaven: The compactness of the commercial district makes this an attractive retail and dining destination. Fairhaven’s murals enhance the interpretation of place, and help tell the story of this unique community. Great galleries and shops offer a collection of handmade objects (many from local artists) in various mediums (pottery, glass, jewelry, painting, etc). Clothing, home décor, books, toys, music and sports provide browsers and buyers a range of retail options. Good Earth Pottery, Village Books, and ArtWood exemplify the quality of distinctive merchandise available at the independent retail establishments downtown. Stones Throw Brewing Company, Keenan’s at the Pier, several pizza and coffee shops, and other dining establishments complement the variety of retail, providing visitors an array of ways to spend time and money in Fairhaven.

Bellingham Cruise Terminal: This modern facility is where the Alaska Marine Highway and other leisure sightseeing ferries depart. An information kiosk plus other service counters ensure visitors can easily learn about local offerings. The Amtrak station and Greyhound bus station are located nearby; both terminals are short walking distance to downtown. (Alaska Ferry check in for cars is between 10-12 on Fridays; ferry boarding is at 4pm, providing enough time for visitors to explore Fairhaven shops or lunch, if desired. Amtrak has morning and afternoon departures, allowing visitors to build in time to enjoy the region before or after boarding.

There are great interpretive panels outside the terminal to help educate visitors about the history of the region, particularly maritime and fishing; additional interpretive markers are located in the sidewalks leading to Fairhaven. Identifying ways to connect downtown Fairhaven with the cruise terminal is important, as right now the visual path is not very attractive so visitors don’t necessarily know what quality and diversity of shops and restaurants await them in Fairhaven.

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Village Green: This historic corner has been reclaimed as an outdoor gathering space, with grapevine arbor, grass lawn, decorative benches and movie screen on side of building for outdoor shows in summer. An information kiosk/gazebo serves as an anchor to the corner of the lot.

Firehouse Café & Performing Center: This converted firehouse now operates a cozy coffee diner on one side with a performance space on the other. Easily retractable seating affords optimum flexibility for space use and minimizes need for storage. A portal for the grand piano allows for convenient set up for concerts. The intimate setting is ideal for community functions, small staged events, and year-round use. The center is currently for sale; it is hoped the new owners will value the space's current usage and importance to the community.

Old Fairhaven Association: This volunteer organization organizes events, fosters strategies for growth of independent and locally-owned businesses downtown, focuses on marketing and branding, and cultivates positive experiences for both residents and visitors. Parking continues to be an issue for merchants, visitors and the association; three hours appears to be the desired length of time for complimentary visitor parking in Fairhaven.

Strategic planning outcomes include how to maintain the authentic historic character of place while stimulating sales year-round; increase hospitality to and education of visitors (greeter program?); and incorporate mountain biking into business-friendly environment. Building a stronger connection to Downtown Bellingham, particularly its cultural assets, is an opportunity to explore (such as a Whatcom Museum satellite center, orientation in hotels, etc.). The desired audience is affluent mature baby boomers located in Seattle/King County as they are empty nesters with discretionary funds and time to travel/shop.

Woodstock Farm: Nestled in a pristine cove along Chuckanut Drive at the city's southern border, Woodstock Farm is Cyrus Gate's former country estate. Owned by the City of Bellingham Parks and Recreation Department, the grounds are open to visitors from dawn to dusk, and is connected to Fairhaven by the Interurban Trail. The historic home, farmhouse/barn and chicken coop are not currently open to the public. Limited parking is available on premise (four spaces and one handicap), although parking is accessible across the highway. The house, barn, chicken coop and main lawn area are used in the summer for weddings. The house needs both interior and exterior restoration; the condition of the barn and chicken coop could not be determined.

Chuckanut Drive: This scenic drive is dotted with beautiful vistas, great landscapes and a superb gallery with distinctive arts and crafts for both interior and outdoors. It also provides access to a state park, Woodstock Farm, hiking trails and exclusive residential homes.

Ferndale: this community of 13,300 is one of the fastest growing cities in the county. Unfortunately, it does not have a lot to offer visitors currently. Historic Main Street is only 50% occupied (lots of absentee owners). The Chamber would like to see local (Bellingham) enterprises such as Avenue Bread open shop on Main Street. The Lodging Tax Advisory Committee has pledged money to promote area including updates to website and map; the City's Parks Board is seeking funds for wayfinding. A 2017 goal is to have kiosk on Riverwalk; add incubator office space; focus on tribal heritage (recognition for who they are and contribution to the county – currently, the story pole has no interpretation). The Chamber is open to having Lummi exhibits/interpretation in the Pioneer Pavilion Community Center (former skating rink converted to meeting space); another story pole is in storage but needs reconstruction before erecting. The Chamber is also open to having historical markers in town, to formalize walking tour – perhaps using historical photos to interpret?

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There are also four artisan cheese facilities all producing various cheeses – Gouda (third generation farm with shop, cafe); large dairy farm producing Italian style cheeses; watch-it-made Blue Cheese; and tiny raw milk cheese producer. The Chamber is interested in encouraging shopping in area; they promote a “shop local” campaign in December. Chamber hoping to attract microbrewery and bakery; wine bar is pending. Could an agritourism trail be created?

Pioneer Park: This four-acre site, located adjacent to the Pioneer Pavilion Community Center, comprises a collection of historic cedar log buildings moved to the site by the Old Settlers Association to interpret as a living historic village. Now managed by the 120-member Ferndale Historical Society, Pioneer Park has limited hours/days of operation (closed November – February). Grounds are locked when docents are not on premises, which is a deterrent for visitors (according to the Chamber). The organization hosts an Old Settlers Picnic each summer with costumed interpreters and heritage demonstrations, along with activities during the holidays.

While the buildings are incredibly important, the fact they were moved diminishes the authenticity of the site.¹ The location next to the repurposed skating rink – a warehouse-style structure and large parking lot – does not provide the most inviting entry. Lack of interpretation (other than guided tours) and curatorial standards for the interior artifacts needs to be addressed for this site to be a stronger contributor to the cultural heritage experience. Documentation of the preservation activities, architectural significance of the structures, and new adult education programs may enhance visitation. Expanding expertise (either via grants, scholars in residence, or new younger professional members) will help the current leadership service the multitude of needs on the property. Revamping the inventory of items for sale to include more local and related objects (such as a coloring book of the historic buildings, forged items from picnic, etc.) may help increase sales and contribute to the overall integrity to the site. Changing the name from Pioneer Park to Pioneer Historic Homes Park is perhaps not as important as adding human/financial resources for upgrading the current experience and expanding the days the site is open to the public.

Hovander Homestead Park: This county-owned property is expansive, yet has limited access; the historic house is only open on Friday, Saturday and Sunday Memorial Day to Labor Day. Master Gardeners Association plans demonstration gardens in front lawn. Last Labor Day initiated a three-day Bluegrass Festival; and formally used for Civil War Reenactments, the Scottish Highland Games and a Hot Air Balloon Festival. The Fragrance Garden at Tenant Lake could also attract visitors, especially if interpreted.

Lynden: This Dutch influenced community has a dynamic Main Street, with varied shops, distinctive local-sourced restaurants (ex: Drizzle), plus historic and cultural attractions. The Dutch themed architecture detract from the original historic building stock, but a new historic preservation commission is dedicated to preserving authentic traditions and existing community character. The restoration and revitalization of the Waples Building – a significant anchor now home to popular Bellingham stores – elated and galvanized local merchants into a thriving commercial district.

Lynden Pioneer Museum: This three-floor, 28,000 square foot facility located on Main Street includes the largest collection of horse drawn carriages west of the Mississippi, spanning from early settlement to the 1950s (second in the nation only to The Henry Ford Museum in Michigan). The non-profit Lynden

¹ Moving historic structures was commonplace in the early 20th century, especially if the sites were endangered of demolition. However, current preservation practices encourage keeping buildings on their original location to retain a sense of place and context with the landscape.

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Heritage Foundation has a contract with the city to operate the museum; the city owns the building and provides a professional services fee to curate the collection (technically on loan to the museum.) Admissions, membership, gift shop sales, endowment, fundraising and city services represent the six financial pillars for general operations. With only 2.2 employees, the museum relies heavily on its 120 volunteers to keep the museum open to visitors.

The museum hosts approximately 17,000 visitors per year (both adults and students), with plans to increase local outreach and educate Lynden through in-school programs about the museum/heritage. There are five large galleries: 1) daily life; 2) carriage (downstairs); 3) rotating exhibit (WWI in June); 4) mechanized power; and 5) Main Street. The strength of the museum is its transportation history, although the exhibits are cramped due to limited space. Currently, the museum attracts four types of heritage visitors: 1) international visitors from England, Japan, Germany, France, Holland; 2) Dutch visiting friends and relatives; 3) domestic visitors from the west coast; and 4) domestic visitors from the southwest (snowbirds in Lynden). They have a lot of visitors from Northern Midwest – Michigan, Iowa, and states with Dutch family connections. A new \$1.6 million endeavor to build out the Transportation Museum (to include the tank behind the current facility) and rename the museum is the primary goal for the organization in the next five years. The museum is also seeking to relocate its entrance to be more visible from the street.

Another goal is to see community embrace cultural heritage tourism as a favorable form of community/economic development, rather than the current more negative impression of recreation tourists and associated crime. The Strategic Planning process is an opportunity to convince local merchants and elected officials about the opportunities associated with cultural heritage tourism.

Jansen Art Center: This cultural asset has a wonderful gift shop, interesting rotating exhibits, classes and café. The great Main Street location and attractive curb appeal should cultivate walk in customers. Unfortunately, the time to tour was limited and staff was otherwise engaged in conversation during visit.

Blaine: This waterfront town of 5,000 is the closest to the Canadian border and therefore has a lot of cottage industries (such as mail box rentals). The 200-room Semiahmoo Resort is the primary lodging facility and host to a number of annual events, including Wings Over Water (15th annual WOW birding festival attracting 1000-1500 people daily over three days). The community still has an active fishing fleet, and generations of fisherman still live here. The Plover passenger ferry is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Peace Arch State Park, also listed on the National Register, includes a sculpture exhibit open May – October. Scouts and Girl Guides regularly attend events here.

The Visitor Information Center currently gets 5,000 visitors annually. With the appeal of the waterfront (seven miles of shoreline), the need now is more businesses downtown – to establish Drayton Harbor as the Northwest Necklace – and also to help businesses look at both front and back access/aesthetics. What happens in Canada affects tourism here, and the interstate also impacted Blaine (cut the town in half). With the water quality improvements over the past decade, the advent of oyster harvesting has catapulted Blaine to be one of the Top 15 Small Towns with the Best Food. There is a great new Oyster House (Drayton Harbor Oyster Company) that is attracting a strong local and regional clientele, and is very popular with visitors as well. Canadians visit for Edaleen Ice Cream, dairy and milk year-round. Broadening tourism as an economic development strategy, and moving away from reliance on the Canadian market, is important for Blaine's sustainability. Art is becoming more of a priority, and at one time the city considered a sculpture trail to enhance the waterfront. Several arts events are scheduled May, October and December to attract visitors and their spending. Mid-priced lodging could help stimulate visitation year-round.

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Western Washington University Cultural Campus – Gallery, Performing Arts Center, Outdoor Sculpture:
The contemporary outdoor sculpture collection is world class; it has twice been recognized in the Top Ten Collections for Universities. The University can and does provide guided tours with an art educator – at no cost – as a way to further the mission to teach people. Unfortunately, the WWU website does not make it clear or convenient to request tours (and from whom). A new website is in development to be more user-friendly, provide learning materials and include classes featuring sculpture. The exhibition space was used last summer to provide more context and education about the sculpture. The gallery is currently open Monday – Saturday noon-4pm; Friday 10am-4pm, although the department relies on students to keep the gallery open.

Parking is the greatest deterrent to access, and often precludes (or frustrates) many visitors due to lack of free and convenient parking on campus. Weekends are free, and afforded the University an opportunity to host Saturday bicycle clubs and other ad hoc groups.