

City of Bellingham Candidates

Local citizens, with expertise in relevant issues, provided these questions. *Whatcom Watch* conducted the survey.

Candidates reviewed their statements before printing.

Responses were not edited by *Whatcom Watch*.

Background: Some people see infill development versus retaining significant urban tree retention as a binary choice. They pit one goal against the other. This issue will surely come up after the City's Urban Forestry Management Plan draft recommendations are released early next year.

What are your specific ideas for how Bellingham can balance the need for new infill housing with retaining large, mature trees that provide climate resilience and urban wellness/livability?

Background: Of 850 households experiencing homelessness in Whatcom County in 2023, 84 (10 percent) reported residing in vehicles not suitable for habitation. This subgroup is often concentrated in mixed residential/industrial neighborhoods where garbage, personal possessions, and biohazardous waste often encroach on traffic lanes and sidewalks. Owners are regularly cited by parking enforcement and forced to move, often at significant expense to the public, and cited owners through fines and the risk of law-enforcement contacts.

As the number of homeless individuals continues to outpace housing availability, what actions would you take to ensure those living in vehicles receive the basic essential services?

Background: In 2000, the Bellingham City Council increased water rates by \$5.00 per month to be used to purchase land around Lake Whatcom. It created the Lake Whatcom Watershed Advisory Board to purchase the land. The city asked Whatcom County to join in the land purchases, but it declined.

This year, the City Council dissolved the Lake Whatcom Watershed Advisory Board and land purchases became part of the new Water Resources Advisory Board.

Would you favor the creation of a joint city/county Watershed Advisory Board with the sole purpose of purchasing property around Lake Whatcom?

Mayor of Bellingham — four-year term



Seth Fleetwood

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Environmentally, socially, increased density is good. We need Bellingham to be equitable and sustainable. Inspired design will get us there. As a long-term member and former chair of multiple Greenways levy campaigns, I am deeply committed to environmental infrastructure that is green and teeming with life. Through creative design, we will achieve the balance of retaining trees, planting many more trees, and increasing infill housing. We need all three. We can achieve everything we need with creative design, informed by work we are doing right now developing the Urban Forestry Management Plan, and Tree Protection Ordinance. The work is underway.

For starters, we solve our nation's homeless crisis by building more permanently subsidized homes. Bellingham dedicates \$10,000,000 annually to our many needs for affordable housing from sources including the Bellingham Home Fund, which I drafted and sponsored as a Bellingham City Councilmember.

For people living in vehicles, we are working to create a safe parking program, with a secure location and sanitation, including toilets, sinks, garbage collection. These services require trained operators. Our efforts to find operators to date have resulted in no takers. This effort remains a priority, however. We continue to seek proposals with promising recent interest.

In 2000, Bellingham City Council imposed a \$5 surcharge on water rates for Lake Whatcom acquisitions. In 2012, as a City Councilmember, I proposed, drafted and won adoption of a \$7 increase. This brought in additional millions, supercharging our acquisition fund. We presently have multiple joint boards between the City and the County regarding Lake Whatcom. We don't need another board. We need increased funding from the County, which doesn't yet have a dedicated acquisition fund. Direct advocacy from the City, with the public pushing the County to create more land acquisition funding, is what is needed.



Kim Lund

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This is a critical question - we must balance our need for new housing with retaining mature trees, especially heritage trees, whenever practical. Our affordability crisis and the climate crisis require us to manage both. As we revise our Comprehensive Plan and implement an Urban Forestry Management Plan, we can codify this need into our master planning documents. Specific ideas include establishing incentives or credits for development that prioritize nature-integrated designs, including mature tree retention. We can also implement best practices to provide more flexibility for siting structures on-site including reducing parking requirements.

Using parking laws to "move these people along" is an inadequate response. At the same time, some camper communities present unacceptable impacts on surrounding businesses, neighbors and schools.

We must:

1. Create safe, supervised areas where individuals and families who use cars or RVs as their primary residence can access facilities and there are on-site service providers linking them to employment, housing, and services.
2. Use every possible means to keep people from falling into homelessness.
3. Implement short, medium and long-term actions to Bellingham's affordability crisis. This requires reviewing every aspect of city policy that affects housing affordability.

As Mayor, I will make relationships a priority with all our partners. The County governs 97% of the watershed - we need to work together to accelerate strategic purchases while aligning our policies and programs to ensure the protection of our drinking water. A diverse and knowledgeable Water Resources Advisory Board needs to advise the city on programs and policy needs regarding Lake Whatcom and other critical water issues. As Mayor, I would set clear, measurable goals to ensure that land acquisition is a key focus of the new WRAB and isn't lost in their expanded scope of work.

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Background: The Whatcom County Council is required to approve all contracts (bid and RFP) exceeding \$40,000, with a few minor exceptions. The Port of Bellingham Commission is required to approval all contracts for \$300,000 or more. All contracts below \$300,000 are reported at commission meetings. The Bellingham City Council only approves bid contracts. Negotiated Request for Proposal (RFP) contracts of any size do not require City Council approval.

Would you favor adding Request to Proposal (RFP) contracts for \$300,000 or more to the consent agenda?

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City Council — At-Large — two-year term

Jace Cotton

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Mr. Cotton did not acknowledge receipt of the questions or three follow-up messages left on his answering machine.



Russ Whidbee

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Bellingham is at a crossroads of livability and environment. We can have both, through smart urban planning and valuing our natural environment. As a current Bellingham Planning Commissioner, this is one of the key ideas driving my decisions. If elected to City Council, I will prioritize regulations that allow our city's needs of increased density, to accommodate the reality of Bellingham's popularity and state-mandated growth planning, while also recognizing the importance of the natural environment. I believe bringing back the city's Public Development Authority can develop a process whereby the city leads on this issue while creating more affordable housing.

Yes. One of the key jobs of the Bellingham City Council is budgetary authority. It is important for the City Council to be involved in budgetary matters. RFPs can have significant impacts on long-term municipal financial health, hence the importance of City Council oversight. As a 20+ year financial manager, and also an accounting instructor at Whatcom Community College, I will bring strong and sound fiscal management experience and education to our City Council. Current City Council member Lisa Anderson has endorsed me, in no small part because of the need for better transparency and oversight of our city's finances.

The prioritization of protecting our drinking water source cannot be overstated. We need to ensure that all parties are contributing their fair share of resources and commitment to protecting the drinking water for both Bellingham AND County residents. If a joint city/county board is the avenue for increased EFFECTIVENESS of purchase expenditures, then I would support it. Whatever avenue our government takes, we need to ensure that we are using our tax revenues for the best impact. That is the lens of financial management, with a fiduciary responsibility that I will bring to our City Council. Effective fiduciary capacity!

City Council — Ward 1 — four-year term



Eamonn Collins

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Climate change is an existential threat to humanity; meanwhile, the lack of affordable homes in Bellingham is fundamentally destabilizing. We can most effectively reduce our carbon emissions locally by increasing housing density within Bellingham to reduce traffic and limit sprawl into woodlands and wetlands (with their significant CO2 sequestration capacity). We should prioritize affordable housing within the urban growth area, while establishing guidelines to protect significant individual trees on private property, encourage appropriate native species for climate resiliency, and focus new planting in areas with low canopy cover to reduce the urban heat island effect and improve equity.

Yes. It makes sense to bring city RFP policies in line with the Port. Having these items on the consent agenda improves oversight of city spending without much additional administrative burden.

Yes, I support the creation of a Watershed Advisory Board. The Lake Whatcom Watershed covers 36,000 acres, the overwhelming majority of which are outside the boundaries of Bellingham in Whatcom County.



Hannah Stone

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I believe the solution requires a balance that prioritizes both the development of infill housing and the preservation of large mature trees. Climate resilience and urban livability are vital as infill increases housing density in the city. The Urban Forestry Management Plan will provide strategic direction for the maintenance of a healthy urban forest in Bellingham, and our assessment of best practices and community values will contribute to the development of this long-term management plan. As a result, policy makers and developers will need to be more creative and flexible as we all work together to strike the best balance.

I favor adding Request for Proposal (RFP) contracts for \$300,000 or more to the consent agenda. With that said, it's my understanding that the evaluation of proposals is conducted by a committee formed by the city and the committee ranks proposals based on the evaluation criteria outlined in the RFP. Upon completion of this evaluation, I understand it's the city's intention to enter into a contract with the proponent who received the highest score. Through the consent agenda, council review would likely be akin to its review of bids. The proposal would be accepted without modification, or all proposals rejected.

I'm in favor of the city and Whatcom County purchasing additional property around Lake Whatcom to protect the watershed. However, I am not certain a joint city/county board would be the most appropriate structure to advance this work. In 2001, the city began a land acquisition and preservation program to purchase land around Lake Whatcom using watershed fees. As of June 2022, the city has purchased more than 2,400 acres and protected an additional 164 acres through conservation easements or restrictive covenants. The city has a healthy reserve to purchase additional properties, and the main limitation is identifying willing sellers.

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City Council — Ward 3 — four-year term



Liz Darrow

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I support form based codes, which allow for livable, walkable, workable communities. We have to protect mature trees because they store so much CO2 and also provide shade cover which mitigates the impacts climate change. We also need to approach shade trees and right of way tree cover in an equitable way. North Bellingham has far fewer shade trees than other areas of Bellingham, and has also lost a significant amount of shade cover to development. I support the Greenways Levy 5 because it looks at mitigating climate change impacts and protecting trees and green spaces with an equity lens.

Yes. City Council needs the opportunity to look more closely at contracts that are approved at the executive level. Additionally, adding these contracts to the consent agenda gives the public the opportunity to research things that otherwise they might not already know about. Transparency in spending is critical. There is a difference between the amounts that are approved in the budget and the amount that ends up getting spent. The public and city council members should have the opportunity to look closely at every budget line item as it is spent.

Yes. 90% of the Lake Whatcom Watershed is outside of the city of Bellingham. I think that the county and the city should enter into an inter-local agreement to protect this critical resource. We already know that water quality in the Lake Whatcom Reservoir is suffering from over development and recreational use. We have the data from years of water quality testing. What we need is a measurable, actionable plan to acquire and preserve land for restoration to try to bring the lake back into ecological balance.



Daniel Hammill

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We can address our climate goals, including retaining large mature trees, by following our Urban Village model of infilling in specific areas of Bellingham. This kind of infill puts people closer to jobs, recreation and services and has the potential to increase bike and pedestrian trips.

I favor adding Requests for Proposals over \$300,000 to the consent agenda.

Right now, the City purchases land in the County and City that is contained in the watershed. I support creating a joint City/County Watershed Advisory Board, however I would expand its role to include stormwater protections and invasive species mitigations.

City Council — Ward 5 — four-year term



Lisa Anderson

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We must balance the need for increased growth and our ability to mitigate the impacts of climate change. I have been a strong advocate for urban villages to create high density walkable communities. A green canopy will be critical to prevent heat domes as we increase density. Education and outreach to property owners that trees in the right-a-way belong to the city. Too many of our city heritage trees have been taken down with no repercussions. It is essential to have stronger enforcement. We can offset increased density impacts by planting trees on city owned property including easements and right-a-ways.

I would not be opposed. Even though RFP's can be evident during the budget sessions and councilors can ask questions to decide approval, it may not be transparent to the public a year later when an RFP is issued. The only other means to be informed is if there is an interlocal agreement listed in the agenda. Our goal should be providing clear transparency for the public to keep track and provide input regarding services. Listing RFPs in the consent agenda would make such contracts easily accessible in a timely notification. It would increase transparency of services and funding.

Yes and no. We need to do more together than purchase watershed land. Bellingham has invested millions to purchase land and prevent further development. The city and county need to partner to redo the landscape plan so intact habitat like Bessie Sorts is never again threatened. We need to work together to address the increasing threat of wildland fires that interface with homes. The county needs to reexamine zoning that allows additional development in this watershed. So yes creating a joint watershed Advisory Board would be ideal, but I would like it to focus on more than just purchasing property.