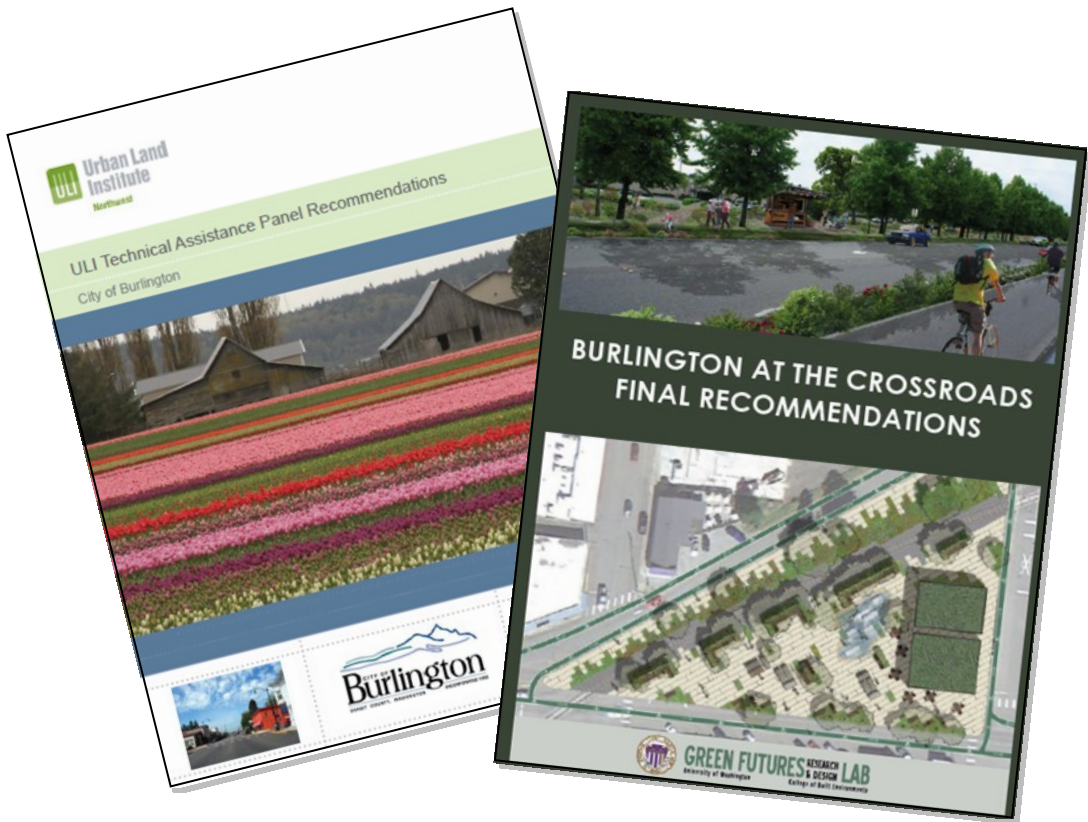


Burlington Plans for the Future

2013 might be called “The Year of Big Ideas” for the City of Burlington. With city planning director Margaret Fleek and many citizens charging forward, 2014 is shaping up to be the first big “Year of Implementation”—with many more to come.

In 2013, Burlington invited the Urban Land Institute Northwest (ULI) and the University of Washington’s Green Futures Research and Design Lab to work with city staff, elected officials, businesses and residents to conduct two major planning studies.



Two recent reports developed by and for Burlington with Skagit County support:
ULI Tech Assistance Panel Recommendations, and *Burlington at the Crossroads*

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The focus of the ULI work was enhancing the economic health of the Burlington Boulevard commercial area, providing new in-city housing opportunities to enliven the downtown, and improving peoples' ability to move about among the town's many civic, commercial and recreational amenities.

The UW shared these interests, but added an extra focus on "green stormwater infrastructure," or non-traditional ways to use or mimic nature that can greatly improve the quality of stormwater runoff. These include techniques such as green roofs, rain gardens and permeable pavement.

The ULI and UW recommendations "reinforce everything we need to get where we want to go," Fleek says. The UW team, led by Associate Professor of Landscape Architecture Nancy Rottle, began its research early in the year, working with Fleek, interviewing civic leaders, gathering mapped data and augmenting that data with field explorations of its own. This culminated in March 2013 with a well-attended Listening Session with Burlington residents to hear their hopes and concerns about the city as it is and could be.

Results from this work were shared with a Technical Assistance Panel sponsored by ULI, which included development, housing, stormwater and transportation experts. The panel met on May 1 and 2—touring the city and meeting with business owners, staff and elected officials—to develop its recommendations for how the city might move forward. Over the remainder of the year, the UW took the ULI recommendations and developed them in greater depth, focusing on development strategies for the downtown and commercial core, enhancing connections throughout the city, and improving water quality and public access along Gages Slough.



Burlington residents share their visions for the city at a March 2013 listening session

The Big Picture

The ULI panel began by stressing, "Remember, it's not broken." Burlington has great strengths to build on:

- It is a rural town with a large tax base.
- In Fairhaven, it has an intact historic main street.
- At the crossroads of I-5 and Highway 20 and surrounded by farmland, it connects with world-class scenic attractions.
- Housing is affordable.

"It was great to be reminded that we have huge potential," Fleek says.

The recommendations nicely complement a wide variety of efforts already going on in the community, including the work of the Burlington Community Task Force, the Downtown Futures Task Force, and

an Affordable Housing Committee. Recommendations from these efforts include:

- Complete Street improvements (streets designed for safe access by all users, including pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists and transit riders of all ages and abilities),
- Low-impact development standards,
- Better connections between downtown and the retail core,
- Improvements to Railroad Park, and
- More downtown residential opportunities, including a potential showcase affordable housing development along Fairhaven Boulevard advanced in partnership with local churches.

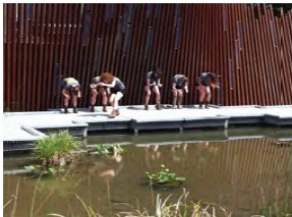
Downtown Development

Fleek hopes to make significant progress with the City Council in 2014 updating the City's comprehensive plan, incorporating key recommendations from the UW, ULI and the community. Related to this, she hopes to undertake what is known as a Planned Action Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), which was a top recommendation of the ULI and UW studies and a priority for local developers.

In a Planned Action EIS, the City would clarify the sort of development it is seeking in key areas, mostly in the vicinity of Fairhaven and some nearby blocks along South Burlington Boulevard. By performing the related environmental review systematically, instead of placing the responsibility on developers project by project, the city would reduce both cost and uncertainty for new development to proceed.

The end result could include zoning changes to allow for two-story mixed use (commercial and residential) buildings along Fairhaven Avenue, and three and four-story residential buildings in surrounding blocks. The ULI study advises, "If the old downtown center is cared for and the pedestrian and retail environment there is enhanced, housing will more naturally follow in nearby blocks." Fleek is excited about new community activities that may be coming to downtown and Railroad Park, including outdoor movies, music and family events.

The UW's downtown development recommendations aim "to foster a vibrant, walkable downtown 'life' that will serve a new and essential downtown residential community. Initial and continued investment in a compact downtown core where residents can live, shop, socialize, and work will promote healthy growth and community sustainability."



Park Performances



Water-Play Feature



Green Boulevard



Complete Street

Streetscape improvements can enhance the attractiveness and economic vitality of historic downtown Burlington

Connections

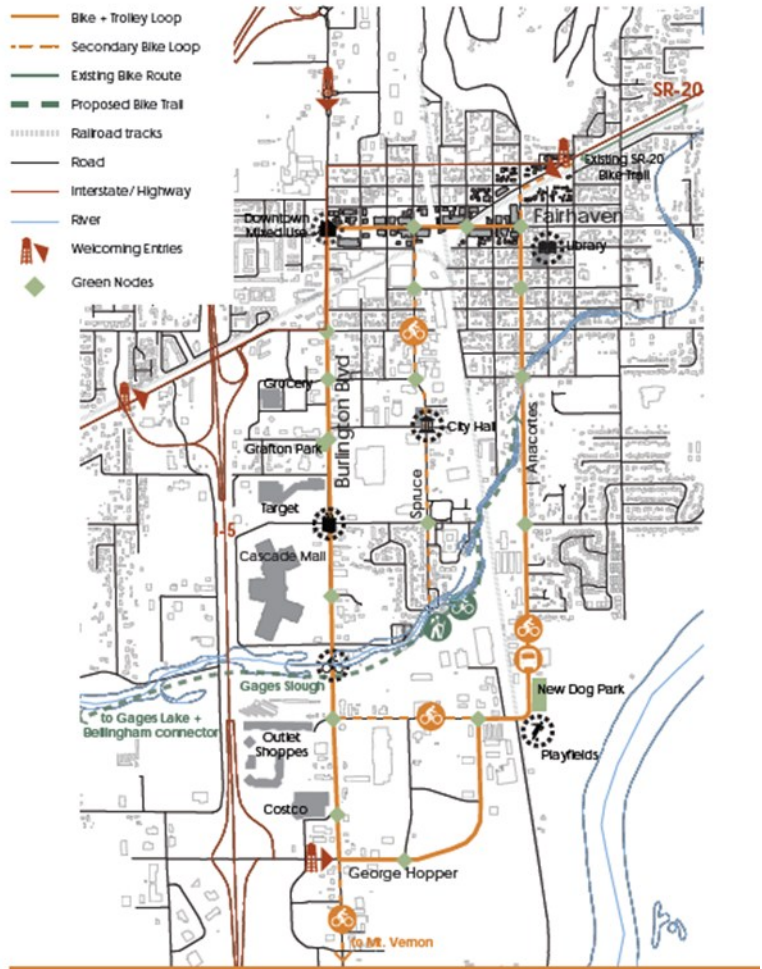
The UW report provides a wealth of recommendations for improving connections within Burlington and between Burlington and surrounding areas. A bike and pedestrian trail constructed along Gages Slough could connect to the Highway 20 and Cascade trails to the east and trails to Gages Lake and Bellingham to the west. The City already owns much of the land needed for this trail.

The UW also recommended:

- Welcoming entry points to the City that might build off of the existing farm silo sculpture at the City's northernmost exit from I-5;
- Enhanced civic spaces at Skagit River Park, City Hall, Cascade Mall, and the downtown area;
- Enhanced pedestrian spaces at an even larger number of locations across town; and
- A trolley line that could run on weekends and holidays, circling Burlington Boulevard, Fairhaven, Anacortes Street, Skagit River Park, and George Hopper Road.

The ULI report recommended pedestrian and car overpasses for the Burlington Northern Railway tracks that cut through the middle of town. In addition, the report noted that Burlington could become "an athletic center for the region," building on its extensive

playfields and tradition of hosting regional, multi-day tournaments. Competitive sports that might be added could include skateboarding, Ultimate Frisbee and lacrosse. Vacant big box retail buildings could be repurposed for indoor sports and recreation.



UW recommendations for improving connections within Burlington

Gages Slough

Cutting diagonally through the city from the northeast to the southwest, Gages Slough provides not just a natural connecting link, but also a potentially important natural amenity for the city. As the ULI report says, “Although it is largely hidden from view, the Slough is scenic, well protected, and could be a key element in a natural drainage and water quality system. Perhaps most importantly, it is already known and loved by Burlington residents,” as was emphasized at the March 2013 Listening Session.



Gages Slough is an underappreciated environmental and recreational asset

The UW report includes detailed recommendations for improvements to both riparian vegetation and public access across four different reaches of Gages Slough: from its western confluence with the Skagit River to I-5; from I-5 to Anacortes Street; from Anacortes to Highway 20; and from Highway 20 east into unincorporated Skagit County.

Water quality in Gages Slough is poor, with high levels of bacterial pollution, nutrients and zinc and low levels of dissolved oxygen, making it an unhealthy environment for some aquatic life and unsuited to human recreation. Since much of the rest of Burlington drains into Gages Slough, stormwater improvements across the City are necessary to significantly improve its health. The UW report provides details on a wide variety of green stormwater infrastructure, such as rain gardens and permeable pavement, and prioritizes them for different parts of the City depending on their soils, high water tables and severity of stormwater issues.

Skagit County Support

The work of the ULI technical panel was supported by funds from the Envision Skagit 2060 project, a major initiative led by Skagit County and a Citizen Committee, which focused on the challenges of maintaining and enhancing quality of life in the county in the face of a projected near-doubling of the population over the next 50 years. The UW’s work was supported by funds from a separate grant that Skagit County received to consider implementing a **transfer of development rights** (TDR) program, which was a priority recommendation from Envision Skagit.

Burlington, which already has provisions for transferring development rights in its code, will examine ties to a County TDR program in its environmental impact statement this year. Increases in development potential beyond the current citywide cap of 14 dwelling units per acre could be conditioned on purchasing development rights from farm or forest lands in the County that have been prioritized for conservation.



1 Apartments Above Retail



2 Townhomes



3 Senior Housing



4 Live-Work Units

Integrating a variety of housing types, from the UW Green Futures Lab report

“Participating in the project offered the community the opportunity to see a broad range of perspectives and fresh, positive ideas from experts in this region. With the UW Green Futures Lab providing a framework of in-depth ‘before and after’ work using the talents of knowledgeable and enthusiastic grad students, Burlington is rich with great ideas to keep the city successful, healthy and vibrant for generations to come.”

— Burlington Planning Director Margaret Fleek

“Skagit County is pleased to help the City of Burlington and its residents and businesses plan for the future.

“We also appreciate the city’s willingness to consider how it might play a role in a county transfer of development rights program to help conserve farm and forest lands important to our resource economy and overall quality of life.”

— Skagit County Commissioner Sharon Dillon



Rendering of downtown development from UW Green Futures Lab report



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