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# The future of BURLINGTON

Studies envision cohesive, walkable, livable city

By **RACHEL LERMAN**

[@Rachel\\_SVH](#)

**BURLINGTON** — Situated at the intersection of two major highways, in a bend of the Skagit River, surrounded by farmland, Burlington is in a special location. With a historic downtown and a bustling retail core, it has a unique vibe.

But the location and business activity also present challenges, such as housing and pedestrian walkability.

The city is working on a planning process to rezone and redevelop parts of the city, particularly the downtown, to make it a more cohesive, walkable and livable center.

After soliciting public input through workshops and comment periods last year, two reports were released on the city's planning, one by University of Washington's Green Futures Lab and the other by the Urban Land Institute.

They had encouraging news. The city needs to attract more full-time residents and improve public gathering spaces and connectivity, but its historic downtown and commercial center make it well-positioned for a successful future.

The Urban Land Institute study says freshening the view from Interstate 5 needs to be a priority, and suggests the city not rely on vertical mixed-use buildings. Housing needs to be a priority to support the existing retail businesses downtown. Burlington Planning Director Margaret Fleek said she is relieved with the results of the reports, as she worried they would suggest the city entirely redo its retail area.

Instead, the studies give ideas, a lot of ideas, for how the commercial core could look. Three main topics are targeted: increasing connections throughout town and the region, addressing environmental and waterquality concerns and creating a walkable downtown.

## Pedestrian-friendly Gages Slough

Gages Slough provides many ecological benefits, the Green Futures study says, and it needs a trail alongside it for bikers, walkers and runners.

Green Futures pictures such a trail connecting with the Highway 20 trail and to Gages Lake, as well as eventually south to the Kulshan Creek Trail in Mount Vernon and north to the Bellingham Interurban Trail.

The city is working on implementing a walking path along the slough that would allow people to safely cross under I-5 west of Cascade Mall, said City Administrator Bryan Harrison.

The study includes ideas for how green storm-water infrastructure can be implemented all over in the form of trees, vegetated roofs, rain gardens and wetlands.

"Burlington does well with those; we have good soil for that," Fleek said. The city has a few existing rain gardens, including at the Visitor's Center.

## Walkable downtown

The study suggests adding residential housing downtown, as well as public gathering places to create a "compact, walkable, vibrant downtown."

The city is about 4 square miles, and because of its position on the floodplain and surrounding farmland, it can't get any bigger, Fleek said. But the city needs more workforce housing, especially due to the high population of people who work at retail stores within the city, so it must find creative ways to increase residential capacity.

"For Burlington, new housing and overall economic development are closely intertwined," the Urban Land Institute reported.

The study suggests a few options, including adding two-story housing development within the existing downtown, complete with green infrastructure such as rain gardens. Or perhaps a combination of three- and four-story buildings behind two-story mixed-use buildings on Fairhaven Avenue.

The historic downtown is a big part of Burlington's heritage, Fleek said, and one of its strongest assets. The Planning Department is working with a futures task force committee to come up with ideas of how to rezone downtown to fit more residents and preserve its character. The planning framework needs to be there so any future changes can take place, Fleek said.

"We hope to rezone quite a big section," she said.

She wants to create a uniform feel for downtown, from Burlington Boulevard to Anacortes Street, including a "complete streets plan," which means making streets accessible for walking, biking and driving.

When the city adopted street standards in 1980, it was pretty much curb, gutter, road, Fleek said. But what about trees? Bike paths? Wide sidewalks?

Revitalizing downtown is already in progress. The Burlington Chamber of Commerce is working on installing 14 new benches and planning summer activities such as a farmers market and outdoor movies. Since opening the new visitor's center in 2012, visits have increased by 160 percent, said chamber President and CEO Linda Ferguson.

The city could see an internal shopping street near the vacant Thrifty Food site, or perhaps large sculptures at each entry to town, or maybe gardens growing on top of every apartment roof.

"We've got more ideas than anything else," Fleek said.

What's next

Fleek will address the City Council on March 13 to hear input on how the council wants to move forward, be it in a committee, workshop or through the planning commission.

Meanwhile, the two people in the planning department are working hard to make plans for the long-term success of the city. One of the best ways, Fleek said, is by "stealing from the rich" — legally, of course.

She has been looking over the public records of other cities, including Bellingham and Portland, Ore., to get ideas for Burlington.

The city will release an environmental impact statement later this year studying options for a city plan. The public will have a chance to speak and comment on the proposals.

The goal is to get the new planning framework in place by year's end.

Reporter Rachel Lerman: 360-416-2145, rlerman@skagitpublishing.com, Twitter: @Rachel\_SVH, facebook.com/RachelReports

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Photos by Scott Terrell / Skagit Valley Herald

ABOVE: A man pedals southbound on the sidewalk along the east edge of Burlington Boulevard past Gages Slough. One land-use study suggests a trail along the length of Gages Slough to tie it to other trails. TOP: Downtown Burlington.

## Where to find the studies

■ View the Urban Land Institute and University of Washington Green Future's reports on what Burlington could look like at [ci.burlington.wa.us/DocumentCenter/View/508](http://ci.burlington.wa.us/DocumentCenter/View/508) and [ci.burlington.wa.us/DocumentCenter/View/509](http://ci.burlington.wa.us/DocumentCenter/View/509)