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Lake Whatcom — a lake large enough to spend the afternoon sailing across and for Bellingham and Whatcom County — 66,000 users strong — to use as drinking water.

It has served as a multiple-use lake pleasing recreationalists, the Public Works Department and land developers alike — until recently.

The requirement of future housing developments in the watershed to conform to the Growth Management Act combined with evidence of declining water quality have stirred both politicians and environmentalists. The issue has become technical, complex and litigious as city and county councils are caught between big-money land developers, private land owners and local activists.

Ask anyone involved — preserving the water quality in Lake Whatcom is the objective. The conflict is arising as groups — the government, environmentalists, land owners — each make separate stances regarding development, logging and recreation.

This environmental issue has a direct consequence for us, one of our basic needs is at stake. It is not often that we are offered such an obvious glimpse at our connection to the environment and still have the option to change our actions. As residents of Bellingham and Whatcom County we have an opportunity to influence the sustainability of our water source. How our community deals with this will demonstrate our ability to acknowledge our impact on the environment and look beyond monetary gain.

Ultimately, the debate surrounding Lake Whatcom is an environmental issue on a small scale, affecting only this geographic region. Our decisions here show our potential to resolve conflicts with the environment on a scale greater than Whatcom County.

Maintaining the quality of Lake Whatcom will mean discontinuing some of its current uses. The lake will still be large enough to sail across — but not to build housing developments on and drink from at the same time.

-anita white
Average number of gallons used per day per person for residential water consumption in Bellingham in 1997: 100

Estimated number of homes to be built in the Lake Whatcom Watershed in the next 20 years: 4,500 to 7,000

Number of lakes, streams and estuaries that did not meet the Environmental Protection Agency's water quality standards in 1998: 636

Times water consumption is increased in Bellingham during the summer months: 1.5 to 3

Number of gallons of water Bellingham stores in lake Whatcom in the spring for use during summer months: 6,500,000

Average number of gallons of water used per minute in a shower: 2

Number of gallons of water used to produce one automobile: 100,000

Average number of gallons of water used per minute during the watering of a lawn: 10

Number of gallons of water in a day that can leak through a 1/16 inch hole: 800

The average number of gallons used for daily water consumption in Bellingham for 1997: 9,500,000

Peak day for 1997: 19,240,000

Number of gallons of water used to produce one Sunday newspaper: 280

Estimated number of years it would take Bellingham to purchase undeveloped land surrounding Lake Whatcom: 75

Average number of gallons evaporated and consumed by plants and trees per year within the Lake Whatcom watershed: 16,700,000

Average number of gallons used per day by Georgia-Pacific Corporation: 38,000,000

Number of feet of impervious surface associated with typical single-family home: 5,000

Number of gallons of water used to produce one pound of grain-fed beef: 800

Miles of water main used in Bellingham: 330

Average number of gallons of water used in a washing machine per load: 60

Number of water and sewer accounts in Bellingham: 21,679

Number metered: 6,217

Percent of potable water in Bellingham used by residential customers on an average day: 15

Percent of potable water in Bellingham used by residential customers on a hot summer day: 65

Sources: Bellingham Public Works Department; Washington State Department of Natural Resources; United States Geological Survey; Bellingham Herald
We don't want to return Lake Whatcom to its original purity.

We just want to be able to drink it.

— the planet staff
Lake Whatcom

by matt williams

On the outskirts of Bellingham lies an oversized, Italy-shaped puddle that doubles as a swimming pool and triples as a collector of gasoline, oil and sewage, all which are excreted into its watershed — our drinking water.

It is comprised of three giant potholes etched into the face of the earth as if to say "Fraser was here."

Fraser was the name of the latest in the series of glaciations that covered the land where Lake Whatcom now resides.
A slab of ice nearly one-mile thick crawled across the land and stretched as far south as Olympia, leaving in the wake of its northward recession Lake Whatcom, with a 28.5-mile shoreline and 5,095 acres of surface area.

Approximately 12-miles long and up to 1.5-miles wide in places, it contains an estimated 243,107 million gallons of water.

Lake Whatcom is quite a puddle.
The three potholes that combine to form the lake are known as sub-basins.

Number three, the southern most sub-basin, contains 95.9 percent of the lake's water with a maximum depth of 328 feet.

The City of Bellingham drains water through an underground wooden pipeline and tunnel from the west shore on the northern end of the sub-basin 2 near the Geneva area.

The water travels to the screen house and filtration plant for processing. From there the water goes out to approximately 66,000 residential customers as well as commercial customers. One such commercial customer, Georgia Pacific Corp., uses an average of 38 million gallons per day.

In 1962, Bellingham began diverting water from the nearby middle fork of the Nooksack River to feed the lake. Coincidentally, the water diverted equals the amount of water that Georgia Pacific uses in a day. The water is diverted to Mirror Lake and then drained via Anderson Creek into the southwestern tip of Lake Whatcom.

Lake Whatcom serves as a reservoir, which supplies water to toilets, showers, faucets and a giant of a pulp mill.

According to the Whatcom County Planning Department, seven permanent tributaries enter the lake year-round and a single creek exits.

Whatcom Creek drains water to Bellingham Bay from the northwest corner of the lake, while Austin, Beaver, Brannian, Carpenter, Fir, Olsen, Smith and Anderson creeks join forces with direct precipitation to feed water into the lake.

Austin and Beaver Creeks merge 1.5 miles before emptying into the third sub-basin in the south shore of Lake Whatcom. Both begin in the eastern uplands of Lookout Mountain. Brannian Creek's headwaters are to the southeast and flow into the lake near the Lake Whatcom Fish Hatchery.

Carpenter and Olsen Creeks enter the second sub-basin of the lake near Agate Bay on the north shore and begin in the northwest portion of Stewart Mountain. Also originating on Stewart Mountain, Smith Creek enters the third sub-basin near the southeast end of Northshore Road.

Fir Creek, the smallest of the tributaries, trickles its share of water into sub-basin three at the southeast end of the lake.

Together, the seven permanent tributaries drain 25.53 square miles of land — the equivalent of traveling on a two-lane road across the Atlantic Ocean from northeast Brazil, returning and putting around South America for another 466 miles — into the lake.

The water cycle, via a network of streams and creeks, filters everything that enters the lake's watershed into the lake and therefore into our water supply.
Posters of travel destinations make up for the lack of a window. Scenes from Venice and France, a snowy castle in Germany and a black-and-white picture of Multnomah Falls adorn one side of the blue-carpeted cubicle.

Amidst the scene is the main attraction — a late night disc jockey who dreams of travel.

Scott McKinnon, 27, spends his days in Bellingham as a water meter reader for the Maintenance Planning Division. The vehicle McKinnon drives on his route looks like a combination postal carrier and ice cream truck, with big crashing waves detailing the sides.

by kayley mendenhall
"People are always chasing me down, trying to give me their mail," McKinnon says, with a laugh. "I have considered carrying fudge-cicles with me. I could probably make a profit."

Water meters are an interesting topic in Bellingham. The inconspicuous metal boxes placed discreetly within the city pavement could ultimately cause a stir if and when they become mandatory for all city homes.

McKinnon says he feels metering the entire city would be an important move, as people with water meters tend to think about saving the resource more than those without.

"When most people first get a meter, their next bill is really big. It's more than they expect," he says. "I suspect that when we are all metered, water consumption will drop. Besides, it's job security for me."

Now, the city only requires businesses, duplexes and apartment complexes to meter their water use. Single family residences, however, do not have to follow this regulation.

There are 21,679 water and sewer accounts in Bellingham; of these, only 6,217 use meters, says Tony Seman, superintendent of utilities, Bellingham Public Works Department.

Homes without meters pay a flat rate of $84.50 every two months for water and sewer services. Homes with meters are charged the same amount unless they use more than 2,400 cu. ft., in which case they are charged an additional 95 cents per 100 cu. ft. One cubic foot of water is equal to 7.5 gallons and weighs 62.5 pounds.

On average, non-metered single family homes in Bellingham use 102 gallons of water per day, per person, Seman says. He explains that in newer toilets, each flush is about one-and-a-half gallons. If a person flushed the toilet 68 times in a row it is equivalent to the amount of water most people use in a day.

"The city is at the moment preparing for a time when we are entirely metered, but it's hard to say when (that) will be," Seman says. "The initial cost would be about $5.5 million for installation and cost of meters alone for 14,000 single family homes. That's a big expense and the city hasn't justified that expense yet."

Sherilyn Wells, president of the Clean Water Alliance, doesn't agree with this assessment of the financial situation involving water meters.

"We rarely do a full cost analysis of our issues in this area," Wells says. The city tends to weigh the monetary costs of actions higher than the environmental benefits of those actions.

"We have 21 routes we read bi-monthly, one we read monthly and one every two years," McKinnon said. "It's the perfect amount of work for two people."

If the city ever becomes entirely metered there will be a total of 80-90 routes. This would require at least one more employee to read meters and another vehicle as well, Seman said.

"I love the field work," McKinnon said. "I just love being outside walking around with all the sensations ... the wind against my face. It keeps me in good shape and it's nice to bump into people."

Both the field and the office work each require specific areas of expertise and present different elements of danger.

"The three things to watch out for in the field are traffic, dogs and spiders," McKinnon says.
"In the office, you have to watch out for other things like Carpal Tunnel Syndrome — I'd rather worry about the dogs."

The idea of city-wide water meters is scary for some local residents as they see dollars flushed down the drain.

"I worry that it would penalize us. Five individual people doing loads of laundry, washing dishes, taking showers ... ," says Nicole Murphy of Bellingham, "even though we are environmentally conscious."

According to the Public Works Department on indoor water use, toilets are swallowing up the most liquid at 28 percent, washing machines are a close second with 22 percent and showers take the bronze medal at 21 percent. Faucets, baths, toilet leaks and dishwashers are cited as major factors of water consumption within the home.

McKinnon worries that many Bellingham residents will dislike the change because they will have to watch their water usage more carefully and may discover problems unaware of before.

"A lot of the buildings in Bellingham are old," McKinnon says. "There are probably a lot of leaks that will show up when people get their water meters."
A leak that is only 1/32 of an inch can waste up to 6,167 gallons of water per month, according to the Bellingham Public Works Department. That is nearly enough to fill the average garage, McKinnon says.

Leaks are relatively easy to detect on metered accounts, McKinnon says. On each water meter gauge there is a red needle that spins around if a leak is present. The average consumption for each account is logged onto a computer system. If this number changes dramatically, a leak is suspected.

“When we get leaks, usually they’re toilets,” McKinnon says. “Or, in older homes they could be in the pipes or in the line that runs from the street to the house.”

Toilet leaks can silently waste up to 50-gallons of water a day. Homes without meters have no methods of detecting these types of problems.

According to Bellingham Works Department, since 1993, the City of Bellingham’s water main leak detection program has saved about 217,000 gallons of water per day.

“I think people who are not metered probably use more water,” McKinnon says. “When they realize how much water they’re using, it will change. People in Bellingham are cool like that.”

A goal of the Bellingham Public Works Department is to educate people on water consumption and the need to conserve, Seman says. They put a box in the Bellingham Herald every day during summer months explaining how much water was consumed, compared to last year’s level of consumption and a tip on how to save the resource. Two years ago, the Public Works Department handed out more than 4,000 conservation kits which included shower heads, faucet aerators and an inflatable bag for the toilet tank.

“People have been really great in responding to water conservation,” Seman says. “In the last five years we’ve really seen a lot of conservation. The city has grown a lot and we’ve still seen consumption drop.”

“I’ve lived here all my life and I’ve seen the expansion of growth and houses in Bellingham,” says Kris Smith of Bellingham. “There are too many people in the Greater Whatcom area. (Water conservation) is a problem everywhere. It’s a national epidemic.”

“We aren’t exactly at the levels of California,” McKinnon says. “We need to be careful so we don’t get to those levels.”

In his two years as a meter reader, McKinnon has dealt with some interesting people and frightening experiences.

Once, McKinnon had the lid of a meter box slip off the end of his metal pick and crash into the box, breaking the connection on a fire main.

“There was a torrent of water,” he says. “I personally was responsible for taking water away from a couple hundred people.”

“I run into people from high school and they ask me what I’m doing,” McKinnon continues. “When I tell them I read water meters they always get this look on their face like, ‘Really, that’s too bad.’ What they don’t understand is that this is a really swank job.”
About 50 million gallons of clear, fresh water are drawn out of Lake Whatcom for use in Bellingham everyday.

To quench the combined thirsts of all local residents, businesses and most industries, 9.5 million gallons are piped to the filtration station at Whatcom Falls while the Georgia Pacific pulp mill alone sucks down 38 million gallons. That is 80 percent of the water used in town going to a single industry.

“It just falls out of the sky,” said Orman Darby, of GP's water use. Darby, the public relations official for GP, explained that most of it is used in steam form.

“Steam is our main source of heat energy,” he said. He described how steam is used to cook wood chips before they are made into pulp and for heating the rollers which dry the finished pulp sheets and tissue paper. Their water arrives on site in GP's own 48-inch pipe straight from the lake.

We know 38 million gallons is a huge amount, but it is difficult to imagine with any accuracy.

“That amount would fill a swimming pool the size of a football field, 50 meters deep,” explains Jeff Ovall of Western's math department. GP drains a pool of these proportions everyday.

Anybody for a swim?

Probably not. While GP uses 80 percent of our city's clean water resource, they produce 219 tons of chlorine each day.

The pulp and paper mill, a Bellingham centerpiece for 73 years, has never been easy on the bay floor. In fact, the bay is already under investigation by the Departmant of Ecology, Army Corps of Engineers, City of Bellingham and GP officials for a mercury-sludge clean-up to repair damage done by "historic industry."
corporate thirst

But December 31, 1999 has people thinking about making changes along our waterfront. This is the day GP's 20 year, 50 million-gallon-per-day water contract with the city runs dry.

"I think this is an important time with real potential for change," said Erin Kennedy, a community member who is working to organize residents to discuss the end of the current contract. "I don't think GP has practiced corporate responsibility and I don't think our town is as dependent on them as they'd like us to think."

As city council and community members weigh GP's water consumption against the benefits of having a mill in town, many consider the appeal of the high-paying jobs it offers.

"GP employs almost 870, but that number changes daily," Darby said.
Dave Merrifield of Western's business department explained the process of figuring a company's total contribution to an economy from its payroll.

"It's simple. You basically take the total payroll of the company and times it by 1.5 or 2," he said. "The 1.5 or 2 is a multiplier, it adds in all groceries and goods bought by an employee after he or she has been paid."

A rough estimate of Georgia Pacific's total payroll is $32 million. Multiply this by two and you get $64 million — about 3 percent of Bellingham's local $3 billion economy.

Lisa McShane of the Northwest Ecosystem Alliance isn't sure that a 3 percent economic contribution justifies GP's water consumption.

She dug some skeletons out of GP's closet with the help of the Environmental Protection Agency's Toxic Release Inventory, naming GP the top polluter and contributor of birth-defect and breast-cancer causing dioxins in Bellingham. The inventory states that in 1995, the corporation dumped 812 thousand pounds of poison into Bellingham Bay.

"I've got friends who work there and they've got good jobs with health care and benefits to support families," she said. "But in the long run, how much should the rest of us pay for them to have health care? They've been a bad corporate neighbor."

As council and community members struggle with weighing a 3 percent economic contribution with the guzzling of 80 percent of the clean water resource, other factors are looked at in deciding whether or not to sign another 20-year contract.

"I'd like to see them close down the chlorine plant and shift the entire production to totally chlorine-free," said Robin du Pre of Resources. "The city is not going to just cut GP off, but as long as they're here we need to demand that they offer safe jobs and clean production."
She explained how the company got a permit to produce chlorine on-site by arguing that it would be too dangerous to ship chlorine in by rail. Once the permit was acquired, she said, the plant began making 219 tons of chlorine a day.

"The mill uses about 20 percent of that," she said. The rest of it is shipped by rail to other GP mills and to make pool care products. Chlorine-free pulps have already been made in test batches at the local plant, Darby explained. A shift to strictly tissue production, a chlorine-free process, is anticipated.

"I'm not in the position in my company however," he said, "to set down any dates on when this could happen but it would be sooner than later."

"You can feel it down here," he said, describing recent changes at the plant. "You can feel the whole change in attitude — the newer workers at the plant can't see the difference but those of us that have been around for a while have seen huge changes since we started."

As Bellingham awaits changes in chlorine production and water contract negotiations, some things remain the same.

"The other big issue surrounding Georgia Pacific being downtown is the god-awful stink," said AJ Lear, a Bellingham resident and morning jogger. "I see those smoke columns through my window when I wake up and when I go out my front door the wet-ham hits me in the face and makes me want to gag."

"I call it a dish-rag smell," Darby said. "Some call it a burnt-coffee odor or a tuna-fish odor but I call it dish rag."

"I smell it on warm, low-tide days," he continued. "But there is definitely a shoreline smell in there. So there is no purity in blame on the plant because it is the combined smell with the shoreline odor in there that is so intrusive."

he continued. "I believe truly that over time the smell will go away."

As December 1999 nears, community members and plant employees wonder if over time the water-thirsty pulp plant too will go away.

It would seem most people would like to trade in the pulp mill's 3 percent economic contribution, chlorine and dioxin production and odor for a green waterfront park and the other 80 percent of our clean water, but it is hard to say what will happen next. One thing is for sure, however, Lisa McShane said: "The more people who get involved and actually make requests, the more carefully the contract renewal will be looked at."

Like the second law of thermodynamics states, "an object in motion will continue in the same direction until a new force acts upon it."

Concerned citizens can act and listen during weekly city council meetings at the Courthouse on Lottie Street or contact Robyn du Pre of Resources at (360) 733-8307.
Over the next 20 years, Whatcom County has plans to add between 4,500 and 7,000 new homes to the 12,000 that already surround its drinking source. From automobile oil and lawn chemicals to pet feces and the pavement that carry them to the water, each new home further threatens the water’s quality.
It has been a turbulent eight months for Jaime Berg who, along with her neighbor Linda Marrom, has been thrust to the forefront of Whatcom County politics. For Berg, it began in early March and on a recent blustery afternoon she appears tired yet exudes positive determination.

"We heard the huge blasts of dynamite," Berg says, of the first clue that something "big" was going on just above the homes off Lake Louise Road in Sudden Valley where she resides. After a few days of research, Berg and Marrom discovered that the Department of Natural Resources was preparing the road around Austin Flat, a 212 acre lot, for a timber sale.

Initially concerned only about the logging traffic in their residential neighborhood, they took time out of their lives to become a voice for the people of the area. They've since accumulated 3,000 signatures for a petition asking the DNR to postpone the sale of the Austin Flat area, made frequent visits to Olympia and spent countless hours on the telephone lobbying. Their concern has escalated.

Troubled over the implications of clear-cutting one of the most sensitive areas in the Lake Whatcom Watershed, Berg and Marrom...
have made great efforts to deter the possibilities of serious flooding, degradation of native fish habitat and pollution of the public's drinking water supply. Centralized in their tight-knit community that organizes flu shots and weekend pancake breakfasts, the dedicated suburban mothers have become public figureheads in the movement to stop the clear-cut of Austin Flat.

Sitting on the back porch of her home on the lush green slopes above Lake Whatcom, Berg said she has a lot to be thankful for. "My kids are growing up in a place I always dreamed about," says Berg, a native of Louisiana who is still adjusting to the abundance of the Northwest. "You have the trees, you have the water and the fish. . . . You have a nice, happy place to live."

But the DNR's proposed clear-cut of the Austin Flat area, including a section of Austin Creek, one of the largest tributaries flowing into Lake Whatcom, makes her question the safety of the forest, the fish and her neighbors — the very things she cherishes.

The Austin Flat area is a small parcel of the 11,000 acres within the Lake Whatcom Watershed that the DNR has set-aside for future timber harvest. The land that comprises Austin Flat was part of the biggest public land swap in the history of Washington State.

The Trillium Corporation traded over 9,000 acres in the Lake Whatcom Watershed with the DNR. Austin Flat is administered by the DNR using a system called the Forest Board Transfer trust, which mandates that the DNR manage the acreage much in the same way as state forest lands.

According to Resources, the DNR newsletter, the distinction of the Forest Board Transfer Lands is that 75 percent of the profits from the acreage go directly into the home county purse. Almost three-fourths of the proceeds from the clear-cut of the Austin Flat timber sale will go directly to Whatcom County to help fund roads, hospitals, libraries and fire districts.

Berg and Marrom question whether the profits from the sale of Austin Flat are worth the possible damages that might come from clear-cutting the land within the county's most important watershed.

Berg and Marrom have seen the results of a DNR clear-cut firsthand in the photos of Joanne Dellen's home in eastern Washington near Colville. The flooding that ravaged Dellen's land is evident in a collection of snapshots that illustrate the costly damages to her property. Mud, small trees and other landslide debris cover the area that was once her yard. The family car, a grey mini-van, hangs precariously over the chasm left where a large chunk of the concrete driveway was washed from its foundation to reveal enormous naked culverts. A sign, propped up against the mess left by the flood, proclaims in bold letters, "Landscaping Provided by the DNR, et. al."

"The road up to our house was almost completely lost in the flood," says Dellen, who has since sold her home in eastern Washington to relocate to Bellingham.

Dellen believes the intensity of the flood that inundated her property was a direct result of the DNR clear-cut above her land. She contacted Berg and Marrom because she didn't want the DNR to make the same mistake again.

Clear-cutting the Austin Flat area has the potential to be just as destructive as the logging above Dellen's home, according to the Lake Whatcom Watershed Analysis. Composed by the DNR, the analysis says, "The land within our watershed [which includes the Austin Flat area] has an inherent natural instability and forest practices have exacerbated naturally unstable conditions."

In January of 1983, about 8 billion gallons of water and 65 acres of timber debris flowed into Lake Whatcom from the slopes around the lake. Homes and local roads were decimated by the torrential flows. The county declared the situation a disaster area and the flooding eventually cost the county $8 million. Previous logging was held responsible for severity of the flood and forestry
companies, including the DNR, were slapped with heavy lawsuits. Without the stabilization and absorbency provided by tree roots, precipitation percolates through the sandy soil and flows directly above the smooth, impregnable bedrock. Even the smallest amounts of rain or snow can result in flooding, landslides and the erosion of stream banks.

Austin Creek is an important spawning ground for native species of fish like cutthroat trout and kokanee salmon. For years, Lake Whatcom has been a nursery for these native fish, a "mother source" that produces fish to seed other lakes. This tradition may be coming to an end soon, says Jim Johnson, a fisheries biologist for the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife.

"The last primary spawn of native cutthroat trout was 10 percent of what it was in 1987, and there has been an entire elimination of native kokanee spawning," Johnson said, at a recent public meeting. He worries that logging near the section of Austin Creek in the Austin Flat area might further degrade the critically impaired aquatic system.

Austin Creek holds other important considerations. The creek flows directly into Lake Whatcom, which provides drinking water for 66,000 people — nearly half the residents of Whatcom County. Though Lake Whatcom currently provides the county with relatively clean water, there has been alarming speculation about the rapid deterioration of the lake's water supply.

"We need to preserve (our) streams and tributaries. We have to take a look at if the Nooksack Diversion is reduced, the tributaries will play a larger role in the water quality of the lake," Berg said.

Currently, the diversion of water from the Middle Fork of the Nooksack River into Lake Whatcom acts like a "flushing system" bringing pure water into the lake. However, with recent developments in the Endangered Species Act, tribal water rights and problems with low flow in the Nooksack Basin, the future of Lake Whatcom's source of clean, fresh water has been questioned.

As more development has occurred on Austin Creek, water samples have shown increasing levels of fecal coliform and cryptosporidium. Clear-cutting around the creek would only magnify the water quality problems on the tributary that plays an increasingly important role in determining the condition of the County's drinking water.

The Department of Ecology reports that one of the single largest causes of water quality problems throughout the state is the elevated aquatic temperatures occurring most often by harvesting timber on lands near water sources.

"Granted, Lake Whatcom clear-cutting or forestry is not the big culprit in the water quality issue, like development, but it is another one of those cumulative effects," Berg said. "Why not eliminate one effect when it is so easy to pinpoint its source?"

At a recent community meeting, Bill Wallace, northwest regional director of the DNR, acknowledged past forest practices near Austin Flat area have "degraded stream and riparian conditions while creating unstable slopes."

To offset the sensitivity of the Austin Flat area, he spoke of some of the DNR plans created by government experts to minimize the impact on the area within the Lake Whatcom Watershed. Using the guidelines proposed in a Habitat Conservation Plan, the DNR hopes to protect the viability of the public land for the next 70- to-100 years. The current HCP devised by department scientists specifies that loggers must leave a 100-150 foot buffer around the sensitive periphery of Austin Creek.

Another DNR strategy to minimize the
impact on the Austin Creek is the Watershed Analysis, which Wallace says addresses the cumulative effects of logging and develops reparation plans for all forest lands in the Watershed. The DNR had originally hoped to sell the Austin Flat area for timber harvest last June but has postponed the sale until next year.

Despite the DNR's attempts to minimize the impact on the Austin Creek area, Berg and Marrom were not won over by the agency's promises. The more they found out about the DNR's plans, the more intent they are in stopping the timber sale.

With the help of experts such as Johnson and Professor David Wallin of Huxley College, Berg and Marrom compiled information to substantiate their reservations about the DNR's clear-cut of the Austin Flat site.

“Normal people don’t listen to the scientists,” Berg said. “They listen to two women or they listen to two common people who have gone through recent information and who give it to them in layman terms.”

Involving and educating the community is the foundation of Berg and Marrom’s quest to halt the sale of the Austin Flat area. As their petition to the DNR made its way throughout Whatcom County, circulating everywhere from their quiet Sudden Valley neighborhood to the bustling campus of Western Washington University, the activists publicized the plight of the Austin Flat in articles and editorials in the Bellingham Herald.

In an effort to recruit local support, Berg and Marrom invited some of the most influential people in local politics to tour the steep topography of Austin Flat. County Executor Pete Kremen, Bellingham City Council Members Louise Bjornson and Barbara Ryan, Senator Harriet Spanel and State Representative Jeff Morris participated in the forestry walk. It was a success.

“I believe Austin Flats has some unique characteristics that make it questionable that this could go forward,” said Kremen, of the timber sale.

Jennifer Belcher, head of the DNR, said in a recent community meeting that she has little choice when it comes to stopping forest practices around Lake Whatcom.

“The state must generate money from land dedicated to forestry,” Belcher said. Excluding the purchase of property by the county or some other entity, state law mandates that the Austin Flat area be harvested.

“To those that want to stop timber harvesting, I would say I don’t have a good answer for you,” she said.

Belcher’s response was not good enough for the many local officials who have decided to pursue the Austin Flat issue.

Recently, the City of Bellingham, Whatcom County, Mayor Asmundson, Watership 10 and the Whatcom County Council announced they are in the process of appealing the permit for Austin Creek at the Forest Practices Board in Olympia.

“If the appeal does not get Belcher’s approval, then the matter is likely to become an issue in the courts,” Berg said. “We’ve still got a long way to go.”
outside the room, a steady October rain falls. Through the windows the audience watches as percolating sheets of water chase gravity down the streets, down sidewalks and into sewer and storm drains. A random assortment of uncomfortable chairs, occupied by uncomfortable people, line the back of the room. As the audience members wait they talk, organize notebooks and steal glances at the clock.
When Judge Micheal Bobbink enters the room, he chooses the best seat in the house — the one with his nameplate in front of it — and taps his microphone.

"CUP 98-0031, Continuation of Public Hearing on September 9 and September 16," Bobbink says.

The audience inside the Whatcom County Courthouse Annex are here to address the debate about a Conditional Use Permit (CUP) for installing a new sewer line "interceptor" in the Lake Louise Road area of Lake Whatcom. The real debate here is not only about sewer lines, however, but about the large housing development that this particular sewer line would "intercept."

Whether the land is used for sewer lines, logging, recreation or housing developments, the meaty core of the issues of Lake Whatcom's Watershed revolve around land use decisions.

Swimming in Complexity

The Growth Management Act, State Environmental Protection Act, Land Use Planning Act, Clean Water Act, Shoreline Management Act, Endangered Species Act, Forest Practices Act and treaties with local tribes are just some of the federal laws applicable to Lake Whatcom. Add our city and county zoning regulations into the mix — with attendant rules for roads, sewers and other facilities — and it is easy to see how battles over land-use decisions proliferate.

If only one thing has been proven from the hundreds of meetings and years of legal entanglements involving Lake Whatcom, it is that land use issues are complicated.

The shores of Lake Whatcom splash against both City of Bellingham and Whatcom County properties. Austin, Brannian, Fir, Anderson, Smith, Olsen and Carpenter are creeks that feed into the lake. A pipeline occasionally "flushes" the lake from a separate watershed surrounding the Nooksack River. There are various logging properties or housing developments, which drain into the lake's three water basins.

Lake Whatcom supplies water to more than 66,000 residents. Since the watershed occupies more than 35,000 acres, land uses within its border have many overlapping impacts. Logging above houses, for example, may threaten those homes by erosion while simultaneously increasing the amount of runoff in the area.

The debates may stem from land use issues, but the real issue involves clean, fresh drinking water.

The County v. Growth Management Act

The Growth Management Act was enacted in 1990, with strong support from conservative republicans. The GMA was designed to mitigate urban planning pitfalls.

Despite the inherent complexities of land use laws, the GMA has some simply defined goals for counties to meet. The primary purpose of the Act is to encourage Urban Growth Areas in ways that reduce sprawl and protect natural resources.

After designing a 20 year land use strategy, counties then submit their plans before hearings boards. In Whatcom County, the review board was the Western Washington Growth Management Hearings Board.

When Whatcom County submitted its plan for urban growth around Lake Whatcom, the board rejected it as invalid. There are three levels, compliance, non-compliance and invalid. In essence, the Board gave Whatcom County's plan a failing mark.

In 1995, the board's report noted that efforts made by planners had "Established Whatcom County's failure to even consider attempts to comply."

"Another egregious example of the interim UGA lack of analysis is demonstrated by the 'Geneva' area of the Bellingham interim UGA. The record demonstrated that water resources and watershed impacts in the Geneva area had reached critical deficiencies. . . . Nonetheless, the area was designated for urban growth through an 'interim' growth area ordinance," the board said in 1996.

The county council was wrestling with a dilemma at the time. There were already people living in the watershed and many property owners had purchased land in the region.

"They bought that land with the expectation that they'd be able to build," says Robert Imhof, county council member. "Unless we want to come up with the hundreds of millions of dollars to buy them all out, which would be the alternative, the next best thing is to put regulations in place that will safeguard the water."

County Planner Sylvia Goodwin believes that designating the Geneva neighborhood as a UGA would meet the goal of the GMA to prevent urban sprawl.

"Our argument is that since it's already there, sub-divided and partially developed, it makes more sense to include it in the city's UGA so that urban level stormwater management, police protection, roads, sidewalks — all of those things that cities are well
set for — can be provided." Goodwin says. "That's why we put Geneva in the City of Bellingham because whatever you call it, its going to be urban. It already is urban."

There are some people, however, who don't want Geneva to become Bellingham's responsibility.

City v. County

"It's a well know fact that urban development has a negative impact on the lake," says Louise Bjornson, city council member. "Seattle has a watershed that you can't even walk in. We not only walk in ours, we also play in it, build in it, lots of things which put heavy metals, pesticides and herbicides into the water. We even have an airport right in the watershed."

Bjornson worries the designation of Geneva as an UGA will put additional stress on both the lake and the city's tax dollars.

This area would put roads — which means more impervious surface area, more people, more housing — in an area that would be very difficult for the City to provide services for," Bjornson says.

Goodwin, however, says she believes that further development in the Geneva UGA would be less costly than the alternative of buying houses. Her argument echoes the opinions of Imhof and others on the County Council.

"You also have to look at the future of your drinking water supply," Bjornson says. "We already have a very expensive water filtration plant cleaning the water from Lake Whatcom but as more urban development happens around the lake we need to ask what kind of expenses are we going to have to add to that filtration plant, because you still can't take out pesticides and herbicides."

Dr. Robin Mathews and Dr. Richard Horner, both of whom are experts in lake studies, have testified that urban runoff is currently threatening the safety of our drinking supply and that increasing urbanization could dramatically threaten water quality.

Even the people testifying in favor of sewer lines or property rights concede that some negative impacts will unavoidably result from increased development.

Back to the Sewers

The hearing for CUP 98-0031 is where the legal and political wranglings filter down to the citizens.

Sherrilyn Wells's name tops the list of parties involved at the sewer hearing. As president of the Clean Water Alliance she has been at the forefront of citizens' concerns for the future of Bellingham's water supply. Wells has been criticized for her tenacity on watershed issues. Some believe she files appeals simply to stop development. Wells, however, notes that her arguments have been well supported by the legal system.

"The fact that we prevailed again last time, on so many things, ought to be a red light to folks who have been tracking this thing," Wells says. "The county's plan has to be so incredibly bad for them to still find invalidity — especially in this political climate."

"She's taken it upon herself to decide there should be no building here," says Vincent D'Onofrio, a Sudden Valley resident.

"I think that the county and the city, recognizing that the lake is the water supply for 66,000 people, can allow development within the GMA," he continues, "and not step on the rights of the people who already own the land."

Wells and the CWA do not question the rights of property owners to build on their lots. What concerns these environmentalists is the location and scale of the county's UGA in the watershed.

The numbers can fluctuate wildly and nobody claims to know them for certain, but the estimates from the County's plans range from 4,500 - 7,000 new homes in the watershed in the next 20 years. At this rate, upwards of 20,000 additional residents will be living, driving, using fertilizers and pesticides and building new roads and sewer lines within the watershed.
D'Onofrio has lived in Sudden Valley for eight years and he currently heads the Architectural Control Committee for that private neighborhood of 1,720 homes. D'Onofrio claims that Sudden Valley, which borders Geneva, has even more stringent environmental guidelines than those required by the County zoning.

"Sudden Valley has been getting a bad rap for a long time," D'Onofrio says. "This is the only community on the lake that requires a stormwater detention system around every house. No lots can have more than 50 percent of the permeable soil covered by construction and our covenants demand that every tree that is cut be accounted for by the Control Committee to make sure the lots are not defoliated."

Despite these environmental considerations, D'Onofrio still has not been allowed to build houses. The debate over sewer lines has resulted in a six-year building moratorium. This has stymied D’Onofrio’s plans to put houses on five lots.

"My plan was to build houses, rent them out and eventually sell them as a nest egg for my retirement," D'Onofrio says. "I've had to sell two lots because the plan went down the tubes. In effect, there's about $250 thousand that won't be in my retirement fund."

"Whoever it is that wants to stop the building in Sudden Valley," he continues, "have them come out and buy the lots at a reasonable price. That's the only right way to do it."

This may be the only point that both Wells and the property owners agree on.

"I would say we should start buying the undeveloped land now," Wells says, "most particularly around Geneva and Sudden Valley. Then, after that, I would withdraw homes from the watershed. Buy 'em [and] tear 'em down."

Wells believes that protecting our drinking water is important enough to warrant such an approach, even though she is a resident in the watershed.

"If Lake Whatcom is genuinely the sub-regional water supply for the discernible future," Wells says, "then we should treat it like one. We need to treat public health and safety like it's something to take seriously instead of treating it like (local officials) are now, which is that we are all just a bunch of guinea pigs for God-knows-what being dumped in our water."

A Watershed Action Plan materialized in October and involves all concerned parties around the lake. If some resolution can be found through this plan, compromises between city, county, environmentalists and property owners may be possible.
Bonded by a common concern, three Bellingham residents have joined together to change the fate of what they feel is the city's most precious resource — Lake Whatcom.

Current plans concerning the Lake Whatcom Watershed and protection of Bellingham's drinking water include clear-cutting forested land surrounding the lake, which would inevitably depreciate the quality of the water.

Marian Beddill, Tim Paxton and Larry Williams formed The Initiative Group, an organization dedicated to preventing this plan from happening.

To accomplish this goal, they have formulated a proposal for the city to purchase the remaining undeveloped land in the watershed.

Many Bellingham residents are unaware of future plans for development of the watershed. A key goal of TIG is to educate the public with the expectation that a vote to begin a long-term buy up of land will be passed.

The purchase would be expensive, however, requiring residents to pay an additional $10 tax on their monthly water bill. To avoid a negative response to this tax, the group has worked diligently to inform voters of the benefits of the purchase.

TIG has spoken to a number of civic and citizen groups, aiming to draw attention to the matter, engage people in discourse and give residents the tools to make informed decisions.

"The move toward a general public feeling that this is the right idea and the best idea, is moving forward," Beddill said. "Our immediate principal objective is to bring the question to the voters."

To achieve this primary goal, two routes may be taken. A government agency — in this case, Bellingham's City Council — must declare an issue be placed on the ballot, or a citizen signature initiative must be initiated. So far, both are on track, Beddill said.

"By far, the simplest, most straightforward, most effective route is for the council to say the voters should decide," she said.

Unfortunately, this is easier said than done. The proposal, brought before the City Council at a Sept. 14 council meeting, has been met with hesitancy from council members and the mayor.

But Beddill claims this hesitancy has provided an opportunity to clarify the proposal. "I personally am very pleased at the questions and considerations that have been raised by the council as a result of the questions we have asked them," she said.

Because the plan translates into a tax increase for Bellingham residents, council members must consider the idea and its importance in comparison to other issues facing the city. TIG feels the concept of the plan has already been accepted, but that there remains a reluctance to implement and materialize its contents.

City council member Leslie Richardson said she believes too little has been done to limit growth around Lake Whatcom in order to protect water quality. Although a more intensive water treatment plan to ensure the safety of the city's drinking water is a possibility, she feels this is not the smartest solution.

"The first choice is to protect our drink-
ing water at the source rather than at the treatment plant," Richardson said. "Prevention is less expensive in the long run and it also protects the lake as a habitat and recreational resource."

Council member Barbara Ryan agrees.

"Development in the watershed poses a huge risk to the quality of our water in the future," she said.

"While limiting development will be very expensive, it will be less expensive than the alternative of locating a new source of water and reservoir capacity."

The decision before the city council is whether or not the purchase of the land is a feasible plan for Bellingham to execute.

TIG is prepared to continue its efforts, even if the council decides not to bring the vote to the ballot.

"At that point, we will begin a citizen signature initiative," Beddill explained.

Three thousand signatures are needed to override the council's vote and place the initiative on the ballot.

This would begin the next step in the process — voter approval. TIG hopes that Bellingham voters will choose to follow in the footsteps of other area cities that have taken the initiative to protect their water supplies. The process is long; it could take anywhere from 50- to 100-years to complete the land acquisition, Paxton said. It is not unusual, though. Both Seattle and Redmond have purchased their watersheds in an effort to protect their drinking water.

TIG feels that if properly informed, the citizens of Bellingham will do the right thing and vote to purchase theirs as well.

Alternative solutions have been sought, however, none would adequately provide the necessary actions to protect the Lake Whatcom Watershed.

"All three of us agree there really is no other permanent long-term solution," Beddill said. "This is it."

The group has taken extensive measures to ensure that if placed on the ballot, the plan's voters will be informed as to what it means. A clear and up-to-date website has been designed to explain the effectiveness and validity of the proposal. Complete with an explanation of the proposal and answers to frequently asked questions, the site, www.nas.com/tig/, effectively conveys the points of TIG's plan.

Aware of the financial burden the acquisition would place on the City of Bellingham, the group attempts to explain in detail through a question-and-answer format how and why residents should join the movement toward purchasing the watershed.

"By not budgeting resources to go into the future, economic well-being is being wasted," Williams said.

According to the proposal, the $10 per month water user fee will enable the city to provide management for long-term protection of the watershed and will prioritize land purchases to provide the best environmental return on investment.

The common goal among the members of TIG and its supporters is to protect the safety of Bellingham's drinking-water supply permanently and at the most reasonable cost. The proposal is not set in stone.

"People really have a chance to give their input and have their say," Beddill said.

As of yet, the TIG hasn't found another alternative. They are, however, open to consideration of new ideas. Any proposal offered must cover an important array of topics. It must protect the drinking water and the ecosystem of the lake, share financial burdens fairly and minimize risk and costs of natural disaster recovery.

In the meantime, the group will continue its efforts to raise awareness and encourage activism on this issue.

"Six years ago, a set of 21 goals concerning what needed to be done for Lake Whatcom were stated by the city council," Beddill said. Twenty of those goals have been accomplished. The 21st, however, has not. It is this 21st goal that includes protection of the Lake Whatcom Watershed. "Our group has taken the initiative to achieve the completion of this goal."

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the planet 25
by jenni long

filtration situation

Tucked away a half-mile from Lake Whatcom Falls Park is the City of Bellingham Water Treatment Plant. This brick building looks like any other public facility in the city — with its large concrete sign and lush green lawn — until you step inside.

Huge cement pipes cover the walls, ceiling and parts of the floor. Voices echo in the massive facility and the temperature is cool.

Bellingham uses about 10-million gallons of water a day, explains Bill Evans, the Water Treatment Plant Operator. In the summer, it can reach as high as 30-million gallons, but this summer Evans says “brown lawns are in” because Bellingham only used 20-million gallons of water a day.

The Bellingham Water Filtration Plant services 66,000 Bellingham residents.

The water from the lake undergoes many changes at the filtration plant to remove bacteria before it is usable in homes, schools and the workplace.

The water travels two-thirds the length of the lake to the north until it reaches the city’s intake pipe in the Geneva area. The Geneva area is located at the end of Lakeway Boulevard, almost reaching the Sudden Valley area.

The intake is 1,200-feet from shore in 36-feet of water. From there, the water travels through an underground wooden pipeline and tunnel to the screen house. The screen house is similar to a big colander and is in Whatcom Falls Park.

Once the water is in the screen house, fish and debris are removed, a small amount of chlorine is added and the water is channeled through a pipe 66-inches in diameter to the filtration plant for treatment. A small person, an inch or two above five-feet tall, could stand up inside this pipe.

By the time the water reaches the filtration plant almost all the chlorine previously added at the screen house is gone; essentially, the water is raw again.

A smaller pipeline, 48-inches in diameter, carries water to Georgia Pacific Corporation for pulp and paper making.

As the water leaves the plant, it flows through a 72-inch pipeline. Several pumping stations located throughout the plant deliver water to one of 14 covered reservoirs at higher elevations.

From these reservoirs the water flows to homes and businesses throughout Bellingham’s 330 miles of water pipes. The pipelines stretch from Larabee State Park in the South all the way to Cordata Parkway in the north.

Alum and polymer, which cause the microscopic impurities to clump together, are added to the water. Alum and polymer act as magnets to the impurities in the water.

“We don’t actually strain out the particles; the filters are a reactor where the particles attach themselves to the sides of the filter particles,” said Bill McCourt, operation superintendent at the filtration plant. “A physical chemical reaction occurs. The particles are pretty fragile and don’t stand up to things like strain-

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ing very well. They break apart pretty easily."

The final step is disinfection. The filtered water flows into a reservoir where chlorine is added for disinfection.

Chlorine and screening are effective against viruses and other health concerns.

Chlorine tends to break down as it works to kill the bacteria in the water. The water chlorination at the filtration plant is the main disinfectant. The amount of chlorine used at both the screen house and the plant is low; it can be compared to .6 of one penny in a million.

Evans says he believes the amount of chlorine added to Bellingham’s water is lower than normal.

After the chlorine is added, the pH of the water is then adjusted with soda ash. Water quality is tested again before it leaves the filtration plant. For taste and odor control, powder activated-carbon is occasionally added — so Bellingham residents don’t have to drink chlorine-flavored water.

“Most people don’t realize our chlorine levels are generally much lower than other communities; it’s simply that there is something in their other drinking water that masks the taste of chlorine,” McCourt said.

Bellingham’s water has no comparison to other cities”, he added. “I don’t think the community has any real appreciation for Bellingham’s water; the biggest issue is the chlorine taste and odor in the water.”

If the taste of Bellingham’s water is unappealing then commercial water filters like Brita may remedy that.

Brita water filters claim to reduce the chlorine, lead and copper and enhance the taste and odor of water.

“I don’t notice a taste difference [with a Brita], but it does keep my water cold in the fridge,” said Steve Scharf, a Western student.

McCourt said there is no reason to use commercial water filters for health reasons in the city of Bellingham.

One potential health hazard found in water is cryptosporidium, a bacteria derivative of the stomachs of warm-blooded animals and carried by humans.

Cryptosporidium is a spore and can be thought of as a bacteria with a hard shell around it, said Derrick Bullock, a lab technician at the filtration plant. The chlorine is less effective against cryptosporidium than on other bacteria. However, cryptosporidium tends to ride on other debris — such as sticks, leaves and weeds and is easily filtered out at the screen house, he said.

In Lake Whatcom, the pet population is the source of most cryptosporidium, said Sherilyn Wells, president of the Clean Water Alliance. Pets get rid of their waste usually in open fields that tend to run-off into the water.

Cryptosporidium creates a gastrointestinal disease; if you have a healthy immune system, you’re just miserable for a couple of weeks,” McCourt said.

As more people move into near the watershed, the risk of cryptosporidium surfacing in Bellingham’s water is.

It is possible for this bacterium to be found in the water, however only “one detect was found in the raw, untreated water all of last year,” said Peg Wendling of Bellingham Public Works.
Because of the screen house and the chlorine put into the water no traces of cryptosporidium were found in the drinking water and no one contracted the bacteria.

Things like cryptosporidium don’t tend to be in chronic levels, McCourt said. “We would expect to see cryptosporidium cured in the water.”

Bellingham is starting a program to give ozonation water to people with serious illnesses. Ozone is a form of oxygen with a strong odor formed by an electrical discharge in the air to and acts as a water purifier.

In Las Vegas, the water was considered very good until 25 people died from it, Wells said. The city of San Diego owns about 20 percent of its water supply and is designing a system to treat their waste water and raise its “standards” so it can be pumped into a reservoir and reused, Wendling said.

In Bellingham we boat on, swim in and build around our water source. If we aren’t careful, one day we won’t have a water source.

Education is a critical step in making people aware that Lake Whatcom is Bellingham’s only water source. The water is good now, but what about the future? If residents continue to boat on, bathe in and build around Lake Whatcom, the current high standards of the lake may go down the drain.
When we envision our favorite stereotype of an environmental activist, we picture hairy youths chaining themselves to trees, or the tweed sweaters, sandals and beards of the more refined advocates. Pretty much anything with nappy hair and a tie-dyed T-shirt, surely, fits the stereotypes that most of us cling to. But does a 44-year-old mother of four leap to mind as an environmental activist? No? Well meet Sherilyn Wells.

Chances are, if you get involved in protecting Lake Whatcom at any level then you will meet Wells.

She has been a prolific fighter for preserving our drinking water. Since 1990, she has kept the torch for Lake Whatcom burning through the Watershed Defense Fund and the Clean Water Alliance.

When activists first approached her, Wells was not immediately convinced of her leading role in the campaign.

"They called me and asked if I wanted to be their representative," Wells says. "And I said, 'Do you know who you're talking to? I'm a stay-at-home mom. I've got a 7-month-old baby ...' and I went through this list of why I was a terrible choice. But it didn't seem to phase them."

Wells credits her children as a prime motivational force in her environmental work.

"My life totally changed when I had children," Wells says. "I mean, I've always been an environmentalist but in terms of caring, really caring about the future, in that it is our legacy to our children, I was suddenly able to put my hand on the Bible, the Koran or any other religious literature and say, 'I swear before God, that this I now care deeply about.'"

"Before that," Wells adds, "I did it for the critters."

Wells' job as president of the CWA is a full time endeavor. She puts in 60 to 80 hour work weeks as she splashes through the ocean of legal papers, scientific studies and organizational challenges of keeping CWA afloat. In an average week, she is going to court houses, City and County halls and attorneys offices.

While doing all this she is also keeping residents up to date through informal coffee sessions in various kitchens around the lake.

Wells is not a lawyer — as some of her critics are quick to point out — but over the years she has learned how to move through the technicalities of a bureaucracy like a shark.

"I learned from watching," Wells says. "One of the first appeals I ever filed I just cringe when I think about how amateurish it was. We were able to recover, but yes, I made major blunders." Today, after eight years of learning the ropes, Wells can cite arcane legal jargon off the top of her head and knows all the players who are in various skirmishes over Lake Whatcom's future.

Wells has seen a lot of changes over those years. During the early '90s, battles were extremely heated and there was a very active campaign for property rights in Whatcom County because of a backlash against environmental regulations like the Growth Management Act. As Wells became more involved in protecting the lake she also became a target of property rights advocates who portrayed her as the primary threat to their constitutional right to develop their land.

"They don't go after you on the issues," Wells says, "they always get personal."

Many people dropped out of environmental campaigns as the debates got "too hot," but Wells persevered.

Without the efforts of activists like Wells and organizations like the CWA, we may all be drinking bottled water right now. These efforts, however, have not been a complete success. The campaign to protect Lake Whatcom has recently climaxed as various court battles and technical studies spiral higher into the legal system.

"This litigation is expensive," Wells says. "It is incredibly expensive, so the only way we are ever going to succeed is if a whole lot of people help out — even if it's just a little — but on a constant basis. People can look at their contribution as their tithing to their community, their tithing to have a legal defense for the issues that they care about."

Wells may not fit the stereotype of an environmental activist, but then there is nothing about Lake Whatcom's water issues which are not surprising and unique. If we can make any generalizations about the fight to protect the watershed it is a safe bet that Wells will be there, making every tax dollar — and, every drop — count.
Lake Whatcom