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Summer 2024

## Downtown Bellingham Partnership Intern

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# COLLEGE OF THE ENVIRONMENT



**Internship Title:**

**Organization Worked For:**

**Student Name:**

**Internship Dates:**

**Faculty Advisor Name**

**Department**

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**STUDENT SIGNATURE** \_\_\_\_\_

*Rebecca*

**DATE:** \_\_\_\_\_

Rebecca Cochran

August 2024

Internship Final Report

### **Sustainable Urban Practices**

I started working for Downtown Bellingham Partnership during my spring quarter in 2024 and began getting internship credits during the following summer quarter. I created a list of learning objectives to go with this internship and I fulfilled each one and more. I feel that this internship has given me lessons and insights that I will be able to carry on to my future life and career.

The learning objectives I wanted to complete for the summer quarter started with understanding sustainable landscaping and waste management practices. Downtown Bellingham Partnership (DBP) combines the two to benefit downtown. With cigarette butts being the most common form of litter that we see downtown they have an impact on Whatcoms watershed and the Bellingham bay. Cigarette butts are filled with microplastics, toxic chemicals, and can poison our local food web. DBP has over five cigarette waste containers called buttlers. These buttlers stop people from leaving cigarettes on the ground where they may leach chemicals like lead and arsenic into the soil. The buttlers are a safe disposal site, contrary to normal trash cans where throwing away a lit cigarette can be a fire hazard. This helps the health of the city's soil, water, and safety.

Rain gardens play an important role in preventing cigarette butts from impacting our bodies of water by stopping the runoff of cigarettes and the chemicals that can come from them. Rain gardens also stop other types of trash. This includes plastics, food wrappers, and other debris that can harm our water systems helping to maintain cleaner and healthier water

environments. The plant life in rain gardens provides a habitat for many creatures, supporting biodiversity. Tree wells and in-ground plant beds also contribute to creating these microhabitats, enhancing urban and suburban areas with pockets of nature. I've also noticed that trash collects in rain gardens and drainage systems making it easier to collect and dispose of. The upkeep gardens also create a more beautiful space making downtown more generally appealing.

We also recognize the role of native plants, such as Oregon grape, yarrow, asters, and various native fern species. Native plants are more resilient and well adapted to the local environment and can require less water than other plants as they can have deeper root systems that increase water storage within the soil and improve soil structure. This allows more water to be retained and reduces runoff. The plants also support biodiversity in urban areas where there are fewer green spaces. We put these native plants in the rain gardens and planting beds.

I have learned the impact of pollution as trash cleanup is a big part of what I do with DBP. The sheer amount of trash that gets accumulated downtown is surprising. Being an environmental studies major, I have always known the impact of people on the planet, but seeing the sheer amount of waste downtown is disheartening and eye-opening. How much of the trash downtown do we not catch? How much of it isn't in our service area? I've also wondered how we would be able to solve the problem of trash in our local area. All I can think of is integrating some sort of community engagement, which DBP has started, with volunteer groups, as well as being so open about what they do with the community that most of the people on the street know who we are and what we do. I think DBP is taking the first steps to make a cleaner and better downtown.

I also got to see a little how the city of Bellingham runs. I talk to some city people and I see them working every day. I see their values and the difference in culture from the Downtown

Bellingham Partnership. From the way that the city employees take care of the waste downtown to the way that they interact with the houseless people in the community. The city's employees do not share the same values as the Partnership. DBP cares how they leave the city and they want to leave it better than they found it. This is a value that I will continue to uphold throughout my career. Throughout my career, I plan to work in restoration, which may lead me to work for the government. Observing and engaging with city workers provides somewhat of a picture of how local government functions, which is valuable knowledge for any government role, while also keeping my priorities centered around community and environment.

DBP also has a strong relationship with the people in the community. The reason for this is, of course, prioritizing responsibility and care for the people, businesses, and plants of downtown, but also the events that DBP makes possible, such as Downtown Sounds, which is a free event where anyone can access music from local artists. DBP also has what they call “gallery alley” where local artists can paint a repurposed door and it's hung up in the alley between Bay Street and Commercial Street. We also have hanging flower baskets that attract quite a few compliments in the summer.

In conclusion, my summer quarter focused on understanding sustainable landscaping and waste management practices has been incredibly impactful. Through my work with the Downtown Bellingham Partnership, I have gained a deeper appreciation for the importance of these practices in maintaining a healthy urban environment. I have had a very hands-on experience working for DBP which, I think, will be important for understanding and knowledge about city and environmental systems.

## References:

Environmental Protection Agency. (n.d.). EPA.

<https://www.epa.gov/soakuptherain/soak-rain-rain-gardens#:~:text=A%20rain%20garden%20is%20a,reduce%20runoff%20from%20your%20property.>