Winter 1996

The Planet, 1996, Winter

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I moved to Washington for the first time in the early '80s. We lived in the last house on a dead-end street in Redmond. I moved a lot as a kid, but never before had I lived in a place thriving in green. I was captivated by the forests, ferns and pastures. Life in Washington seemed to go at an old-fashioned pace. Even our neighbors were more laid back than the people we had known on the East Coast or in Germany.

Seattle was a marvel. My family packed into my dad’s car one Sunday, and we drove downtown. Seattle was the quietest city I had ever visited; it was as if the serenity of Lake Washington permeated the city itself. I was in love.

Unfortunately, our move was a few years preceding the time everyone and their mother decided Washington was the place to be. Roads replaced the trees my brothers and I climbed. They paved over the place where I buried a dead mouse I once found on a walk. Quickly the roads metamorphosed into shopping malls, cloned housing developments and mile after mile of beige condos. The pasture where I fed picked grass through the fence to a herd of horses was converted into huge, blockish office buildings. It was the same everywhere on the Eastside.

Construction moved faster than forethought. Private property was held as the almighty, and everyone who did not own land did not have a say. I was a child; I was left out of the process.

We moved yet again, and when I returned to Washington in the late '80s, what I had loved was gone. The changes were achingly familiar. Redmond looked like everywhere else I had been. People were noticeably cooler and in a perpetual rush. Areas that were once unique, clothed in the greenery of the surrounding trees and pastures, became stripped bald, flattened and covered in boxy, cement structures. Each of the sterile developments with golf course lawns were ironically named after what was once there — Alder Grove, Eagle View and Heritage Hills. I felt betrayed.

When I moved up to Bellingham for college, I fell in love again. A community feeling entwines this small city with its many greenways to walk and enjoy. The Saturday Market on the weekends, the tasty cafes and the varied landscape make Bellingham a special place.

Lately, however, I see the glaring warning signs of growth, and I am scared. The forested lands on the hill above Lakeway Drive are coming down and roads are going in. A trail I used to walk along with my dog has been completely cleared for houses. New developments and potential roads sprout everywhere. The county is in a flurry of flagging. Growth is coming, and it will affect us all.

Presently, Whatcom County has a population of 147,752, and in 20 years that number is expected to increase to 208,783. While two-thirds of the county is set aside for national forests and parks, most of that land is too inaccessible for bulldozers and trucks. Surely if humans could build more, we would.

People treat the topic of growth similar to that of cancer. It is avoided in conversations, and when the issue of development does come up, we look down and mutter something about its inevitability. But we do not have to allow this county to turn into Everywhere, U.S.A. Whatcom County is singular. People here care deeply about the community and the natural environment. We can plan for the long term and choose our route of change.

The winter issue of The Planet pins down the generally-avoided topic of population growth. The first section of the magazine, Politics of Growth, looks into the economic impacts of growth, gives a summary of the state regulations meant to protect us from sprawl and provides a view of Western Washington University’s plan for the future.

Earth, Air and Water explores the implications of development on our life-sustaining, elemental resources: land, air and water.

Sustainable Solutions offers the reader alternatives through the examples of others. Simple living, sustainable communities, environmentally responsible housing and preserving natural areas are some ways we can maintain our high quality of life in Whatcom County.

Contacts and phone numbers follow many of the articles to help you participate in the planning process. Support organizations such as the Whatcom County Land Trust, which works to preserve land for wildlife habitat and recreation. Vote for City and County Council members who place a high priority on the public acquisition of land. Get involved — volunteer, write letters to the Bellingham Herald and to your local representatives and simplify your own life. Individual decisions affect the community. We need to make the right choices now.

DeAnna Woolston
Editor
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"Something interesting happened here long ago"*

For centuries, Americans held an unquestioned belief that growth is good. From the founding of Jamestown, Va., in 1607 to sudden fortunes of Silicon Valley, Calif., this nation was raised on the legend of El Dorado and the lure of boom towns. Tens of thousands of European settlers swept across North America to dig, farm and harness the continent's riches and seek the promise of the next boom town. Expansion, wealth and jobs seemed to always appear together.

Following World War II, however, two decades of unprecedented expansion, wealth and job opportunities exposed serious problems with growth. The new cities were filled with noise and foul air. They were expensive to run and ate up tax revenues. The hidden costs of growth, such as huge tax increases, could no longer be ignored. A backlash prodded governments to investigate the social and economic drawbacks of growth.

What Is It Going to Cost?

In 1974, the Real Estate Research Corporation published a study titled The Costs of Sprawl. This study set a standard for thoroughness and for methods of analyzing growth. It is one of the most frequently cited growth studies. "The Costs of Sprawl is well accepted by planning professionals," said Gary Pivo, professor of Urban Planning at the University of Washington.

The conclusions of the report are simple: "Sprawl is the most expensive form of residential development in terms of economic costs, environmental costs and many types of personal costs," the authors wrote. They emphasized that the same number of people live less expensively when they live closer together.

James E. Frank, associate professor of Urban and Regional Planning at Florida State University, reviewed The Costs of Sprawl. His 1989 report shows the costs of constructing a sprawling, low-density community were nearly $48,000 more per dwelling than building a planned, high-density community.

What is sprawl and why does it cost so much? Sprawl is disorganized, unplanned growth at the edge of urban boundaries. Typical features of sprawl are low housing density, large lots and an emphasis on automobile transportation.

Not Rocket Science

Simple physics explains many of the costs of growth and sprawl. As a city grows, the distances between homes and work places and shopping tend to grow as well. Pipes, wires and roads that connect homes, stores and utilities become more expensive.
because they have to be longer.

Suburbs with large house lots compound the problem of distance. Fewer people live in each square mile, yet municipal services must reach each home. Garbage trucks, for example, travel more miles in a suburb to pick up the same amount of rubbish.

The Costs of Sprawl and other studies revealed that careful planning saves money at the time a community is built and every year thereafter.

Driving Us Crazy!

Planning and growth management can reduce many problems of growth. But the huge price of urban transportation based solely on automobiles is difficult to fix. According to the Washington Coalition for Transportation Alternatives, 40 to 50 percent of the land in major cities is devoted to cars. In Los Angeles, 66 percent of the land is used for cars, and that is still not enough to avoid serious congestion.

“In Los Angeles, congestion has reduced the average freeway speed to less than 31 mph; by the year 2010 they are projected to fall to 11 mph,” the World Resources Institute said in a report titled The Going Rate: What it Really Costs to Drive. Look at it this way: an 11-mile drive to work would take two hours each day.

Besides driving time and operating expenses, insurance rates rise dramatically along with the population. “The major factor insurers use in auto rating is zip code,” said Robert Bales, an independent insurance agent. “In large cities, the rates are four times higher or more than smaller places.” A driver in Los Angeles will spend more than $100,000 more on insurance during his or her life than a driver in Whatcom County.

On average, a middle-income Californian will spend more than a quarter of a million dollars on automobile transportation during his or her life, according to the report Beyond Sprawl: New Patterns of Growth to Fit the New California.

The list of problems due to cars continues, but the point is that every effort to reduce the reliance on cars has a great payback.

Why Pay More?

Why is unplanned and uncontrolled growth so common? Beyond Sprawl lists several beliefs that make sprawl appear attractive, including automobile subsidies and the perceptions that suburbs are safer and cheaper. Automobile and highway subsidies hide the true price of car travel, thus encouraging longer commutes. When they are new, freeways often provide quick, pleasant transportation. Also, housing in distant suburbs is frequently more affordable.

Growth, however, is not the bargain it appears to be. A common justification for growth is jobs. People believe boom town growth means well-paying jobs. “Development does not increase real wages for any particular job,” said Julia L. Hansen, associate professor of economics at Western. In Whatcom County wages have plummeted while the population has risen.

While growth and the suburban pattern of development do provide benefits, many costs are either put off until the
You spend a chunk of your life in a car. What if you drove a little less and could somehow save up that extra time. How long of a vacation would it be equal to?

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<thead>
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<th>Reducing your daily driving by:</th>
<th>Is equivalent to this much vacation time each year:</th>
<th>You'd also save this much money each year:</th>
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<td>4.5 weeks</td>
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<tr>
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<td>9 weeks</td>
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<td>18 weeks</td>
<td>$4,800</td>
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The Costs of Sprawl estimates unplanned development adds 1.44 hrs per day of driving for each adult. In many cities the additional driving is greater.

future or indirectly paid by both suburbanite and inner-city inhabitants. Eventually, someone will pay the full price for development.

"The natives have to move — they cannot afford the taxes"*

In June 1978, after decades of raising property taxes, Californians approved Proposition 13 to reduce property taxes and place a cap on future tax increases. "Tax revolts are, ironically, an indirect acknowledgment that current patterns and rates of development are simply not sustainable," said Kevin Kasowski in Developments, the National Growth Management Leadership Project newsletter. Growth was meant to bring wealth — instead, tax burdens rose year after year.

In the early 1990s, Dalip Bammi, director of regional planning for DuPage County, Illinois, drew a more direct conclusion. He realized rapid growth in DuPage County led to steadily increasing taxes rather than lower rates that were promised as justification for development. Bammi and his staff investigated the connection between growth and taxes. "Growth was encouraged by residents and political leaders with the firm belief that it would bring about a higher quality of life. Taxes on new development would pay for better schools, public services and roads," said Bammi in Public Investment. "The results (of Bammi’s study) indicated that there was a significant relationship between increasing non-residential development and increases in property taxes in DuPage County."

How does growth increase taxes?

Three types of expenses consume county and city revenues: capital improvements, operating costs and maintenance. In many states, local governments charge developers a tax known as an impact fee to offset the price of new capital improvements such as roads, sewers and school buildings. Impact fees place the costs of growth on those who profit from growth — the developers. But each local government must decide whether to charge developers impact fees. "It's not likely we'll do that here, other than for roads," said Carl Batchelor, a senior planner for Whatcom County. Developers do not like impact fees, so everyone in Whatcom County will help pay for the improvements through higher taxes.

State law allows impact fees only for capital improvements. All citizens must share the tax burden for operating expenses and maintenance. Again, developers do not need to worry about whether the cities they create are expensive to operate. They expect someone else to pay.

Most losses caused by growth benefit no one. A developer may make a one-time extra profit of $20,000 per house or store, but the total cost in money and time to each person in the area can easily reach $100,000 and 30,000 hours of wasted time. Ironically, people in the development industry must pay this price, too.

Finally, once growth has occurred, little can be done to reverse the damage. Every future generation, even the children of people who profit from development, will pay through higher taxes, insurance and lost time.

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Referendum 1996

Shall the crime of ignoring the principles of good urban planning be punishable by a fine of no less than $100,000 and 2 years confinement in an automobile?

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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"Maybe your town will be the new boom town"*

In the last century, when the prosperity of one boom town faded, people often moved to the next boom, leaving only ghosts behind. But we no longer have the option to just walk away from our new cities. If the cities become too costly, we will have no choice but to stay and pay the price.

On the other hand, if we spend a little time and money now to plan our cities, we will save immense amounts of time and money. In the long run, everyone — including developers — benefits from the wealth saved by forethought and planning.

* from the song, "Boom Town," by Greg Brown
Politics of Growth

THE LAW OF THE LAND

Good Times, Bad Times for Washington's Growth Management Act

by Greg Friedman

cartoon by Chad Crowe; photo by Paige Renee Pluymers

Mention Bellingham's Guide Meridian and most people will conjure up the same mental image: a jumbled mass of retail shops, parking lots, strip malls and snarled traffic. The Guide is an oasis of unbridled development in a county that is still one of the most beautiful and unspoiled in all of Washington. Thankfully, this mecca for the shopping crowd is concentrated in a relatively small area.

Now imagine what Whatcom County might look like if there were no laws governing growth. Picture Mt. Baker Highway with Guide Meridian-scale development, the fields and forests along the scenic road replaced by Wal-Marts and Pizza Huts. Envision the county's remaining wetlands dredged and filled to make room for sprawling housing developments.

The state Legislature passed the Growth Management Act (GMA) in 1990, in part as a way to help communities avoid the nightmare scenario described above. The act requires all fast-growing counties, and the cities within them, to plan for growth 20 years into the future.

Dave Schmalz, vice president of the North Cascades Audubon Society, has worked on growth management issues for Audubon since the inception of the GMA. He said Washington's citizens were the driving force behind passage of the act.

"The Growth Management Act," Schmalz said, "was the fulfillment of the wishes of the people of Washington state, who said, 'hey, our resources are being trashed. We're losing wetlands; we're losing forests; we're losing fisheries; we're building in flood plains; our water is polluted — what can we do?' So the Legislature responded by creating the GMA."

The intention of the GMA is not to halt development but to plan for it intelligently. Schmalz said the fundamental idea behind the act is to accommodate growth without destroying the environment.

"We have a finite natural resource base," Schmalz said. "If we as a society are always taking away from that base and not replenishing it, restoring it or conserving it, then we're just robbing future generations."

Cities and counties planning under the act must meet 13 goals, which include: reducing urban sprawl and encouraging compact development; creating affordable housing, efficient public transportation and open spaces for recreation; and fostering economic development, environmental protection and property rights.

Dan Taylor, a visiting lecturer at Western and former director of Land Use and Economic Planning for the Whatcom County Planning Department, said the act requires cities and counties to meet the 13 goals, but it does not mandate how they must do so.

"The Growth Management Act was adopted as a bottom-up approach to dealing with growth," Taylor said. "Local governments had to meet the state's goals, but they had the autonomy to do it their way."

The state established three Growth Management Hearings Boards to oversee compliance with the GMA: one for Eastern Washington, one for the central Puget Sound region and one for Western Washington. The boards hear petitions on whether agencies, cities and counties are acting within the guidelines of the act. The board also hears grievances and settles disputes.

Implementation of the GMA has at times been difficult and contentious. Growth
management is a polarizing issue; on one side are those who see an important role for government in ensuring environmental quality of life, and on the other side are those who view environmental regulations as an attack on individual and property rights.

In Whatcom County, this ideological clash over land use policy has made enacting an important component of the GMA — the Critical Areas Ordinance (CAO) — a drawn-out and painful affair.

The first requirement for counties planning under the GMA was to create an ordinance that identified and protected wetlands, wildlife habitat and other sensitive lands. Whatcom County enacted its CAO in 1992.

Although many viewed the ordinance as a carefully worked out compromise between environmentalists and developers, others felt it afforded too much protection for the environment and not enough protection for property rights.

Skip Richards, President of Citizens for Land Use Education (CLUE), said that among other things the ordinance violated the 5th Amendment’s protection against the illegal taking of private property.

“There were several problems with the original Critical Areas Ordinance,” Richards said, “the first of which is that it would have taken large amounts of private property without just compensation.” Richards also complained that a fiscal impact study had never been conducted to measure the economic consequences of protecting critical areas.

Richards mounted a referendum campaign in 1992 to put an amended version of the ordinance on the ballot. The county, however, only allows those wishing to change an ordinance by referendum to delete material from it — they cannot add anything new.

“We couldn’t have added a provision for compensation,” Richards said, “and we couldn’t have added a requirement for a fiscal-impact study.” So with pen in hand, Richards crossed out selected language from the ordinance and produced a version that was missing many of the regulatory environmental protections in the original. “We took an ordinance that was bad, and we just cut it back. We didn’t make a good ordinance out of it, we just reduced the bad stuff.”

Richards said the “bad stuff” was excessive regulation. “If we had a system to regulate traffic flow the same way (the ordinance) regulated land use, we’d have to have a traffic cop every 100 yards,” he said.

To the dismay of the original CAO supporters, voters passed the referendum version. Schmalz said that because so much text had been removed from the original ordinance to produce the referendum version, it was nearly incomprehensible.

“The language had become very unclear and ambiguous,” Schmalz said. “One thing was clear, however: we were going to have much less protection for our natural resources and our environment.

“Opponents of the original Critical Areas Ordinance,” Schmalz continued, “seem to believe that the ordinance has this onerous government control over anything anyone might want to do with their property.

The fact is, in Whatcom County less than 15 percent of building permit proposals even have to undergo a critical areas review.” Schmalz said of those that do need to be reviewed, the majority are resolved in negotiations with the property owners, and very few permits are completely denied.

Since the referendum passed in 1992, both the Washington Supreme Court and the Western Washington Growth Management Hearings Board have issued rulings on appeals that challenged the referendum version of the ordinance. First, the Supreme Court ruled that using a referendum was an inappropriate way to decide an issue as complex as the CAO. Then, in December, the hearings board ruled that the ordinance does not provide adequate safeguards for the environment. The hearings board gave the county 120 days to come up with a new ordinance.

Schmalz said he hopes the county will adopt an ordinance that offers environmental protections similar to those in the 1992 ordinance. “More than anything I’d like to see the county depart — once and for all — from the referendum version of the Critical Areas Ordinance,” he said, “and at least go part way towards the original CAO.

“What has happened with the Critical Areas Ordinance,” Schmalz continued, “is a microcosm of what’s happening locally, and even nationally. It is a struggle between those who think there is an endless supply of natural resources and that no environmental price is too high to pay for continuous development, and those who
want a clean, livable environment for themselves and their children.”

Ironically, Richards also sees Whatcom County’s struggle with the CAO as indicative of what is happening nationally — only for different reasons. “This whole trend of trying to over-regulate people’s lives is symptomatic of what’s happening nationally. It’s not just the Critical Areas Ordinance, it’s not just Whatcom County, and it’s not just in the environmental area. We’re being buried in regulations.”

This struggle over land use policy is also manifesting itself in Chelan County. In fact, the county feels so strongly about managing its own land use affairs without interference from the state government that it has taken the state straight to the Washington Supreme Court over the GMA.

The problem in Chelan County, as in Whatcom County, began with the CAO. The Growth Management Hearings Board in Eastern Washington ruled that the county’s ordinance was not in compliance with the GMA. Chelan County then claimed that the state, through the GMA, was preempting the county’s freedom to make land-use decisions.

David Brickland, a Seattle attorney representing several citizens groups in growth management cases, said Chelan County perceives the hearings board as mandating county land-use policy. However, he said the board is not dictating policy, it is merely ensuring the county stays within the act’s guidelines.

“What the hearings board is doing,” Brickland said, “is telling Chelan County ‘if there’s 10 ways in which you can comply with the requirements of the act, we’re not going to tell you which of those 10 ways you have to choose. But if you choose an eleventh way that is not consistent with the act, then we will tell you you’re not in compliance.’”

Brickland said Chelan County has flaunted the intention of the GMA by adopting ordinances that are not even close to meeting the act’s requirements.

“They’re simply not used to having anybody telling them that there are limits to what they can do in the area of growth,” Brickland said, “so when the hearings board tells them they are way outside the lines, they react as if the hearings board is doing something improper — which it is not. All the board is doing is enforcing the growth management principles established in the GMA.

“What Chelan County really wants,” Brickland continued, “is to be in a position where they can say, ‘urban sprawl? That’s OK. Chew up our critical areas and natural resources? That’s OK.’”

Brickland said if the Supreme Court embraces the broader interference from the state government, it would dismantle the Growth Management Hearings Board’s ability to issue binding final orders.

Brickland said this would not discourage public participation.

“What has happened with the Critical Areas Ordinance is a microcosm of what’s happening locally, and even nationally. It is a struggle between those who think there is an endless supply of natural resources and that no environmental price is too high for continuous development, and those who want a clean, livable environment for themselves and their children.”

Dave Schmalz, vice president of the North Cascades Audubon Society

Recalcitrant counties are not the only foes of the GMA. Other opponents are attacking the act through several bills introduced in the state Legislature. Two of these bills would eliminate the Growth Management Hearings Boards’ ability to issue binding final orders.

Brickland said the legislators backing these bills are trying to kill the hearings boards because the GMA is too popular to attack directly. “Instead of going after the substance of the act, they’re trying to take the teeth out of it by going after the boards,” he said.

If the bills are passed, disputes that are now resolved by the hearings boards would instead be handled by the state’s superior courts. Brickland said this would not only slow the dispute resolution process down, it would also make it more expensive. Worst of all, he said, it would discourage public participation.

“Most citizens are unfamiliar with the process of proceeding in court,” Brickland said, “whereas the hearings boards are a much more citizen-friendly arena, where people can represent themselves and do a good job of it.”

Brickland said another problem with moving disputes into the superior courts is that the courts are not as familiar with land use problems as the hearings boards. “Very few superior court judges have much background in growth-management issues,” he said.

“To put technical, growth management land-use issues in front of them is asking for results that are less sophisticated and less well informed than those that you get out of the experts on the hearings boards.”

Schmalz said the fate of the GMA is in the hands of Washington’s citizens. “No law or concept that the government is forcefully imposing on people works out,” Schmalz said. “If growth management is going to work, it’s going to work because we as a people say, ‘Yes! We still believe in the things that caused the Growth Management Act to be passed in 1990.’”

“The question we should all be asking,” Schmalz continued, “is, ‘What’s the alternative?’ Does anybody really believe we can endlessly spread out across the landscape? There isn’t an endless landscape to spread out over.”

Whether or not Washington embraces the GMA will ultimately determine how Whatcom County — and the rest of Washington state — develops over the next 20 years. Somewhere between the neon and concrete of Guide Meridian and the pastoral beauty of Mt. Baker Highway lies the path to our future.
Walking across Western Washington University's campus is a piece of cake — just follow the red brick road. Fortunately, Western is a small college, which can easily be described as "pedestrian friendly." It is a scenic 10-minute walk from one end of campus to the other.

This short walk is one of the things that induced me to apply to Western in 1993. This small university's views of Bellingham Bay, Sehome Hill Arboretum and the North Cascade Mountains are unbeatable. I also wanted to go to a college that offered smaller class sizes so one-on-one time with teachers and students would be viable. These elements are key to a higher quality of learning.

So far, Western has not let me down. But the noises of new construction and increasingly congested parking lots threaten the qualities that make this campus special.

On my way to school, it often strikes me how fortunate we are to have a conservatory like Sehome Hill so accessible and close to a growing university. Seeing people I know on the way to class adds to Western's charm. Larger universities do not always offer this luxury.

However, according to Jack Cooley, director and vice president of Western's budget office, Western may not remain cozy for long. The university is expected to grow at a rate of about 125 to 150 students per year. Western will require more faculty and facilities. Can we maintain our pedestrian-friendly campus and our quality of learning with these changes?

Dr. George Pierce, vice president of business and financial affairs at Western, says the answer is yes. Pierce used the Campus Master Plan to unveil a possible future for Western. Parking will be moved further south of the main campus, and some roads will be converted to green space. Three new buildings are shown on the CMP, including a new physical education facility. Any new non-teaching facilities will be built at the south end or off campus.

The CMP is in the process of finalization. Pierce said the CMP needs the approval of both the university board and the city board. The plan may be passed in early 1997.

"We go through this process to make sure the plans of the city have been incorporated," Pierce said. Because Western's campus takes up a large part of Bellingham, both city planners and residents must be part of the decision-making process.

The CMP takes into consideration campus growth from the year 2000 and beyond, Pierce said, showing me a large cardboard draft of the plan. "We are probably not anticipating everything, but we are taking a good crack at it," he said.

One aspect of the CMP is the Pedestrian Transit Mall. The mall will be located on the section of High Street that is closed to through traffic during the day. Plans for the mall include: removing the campus section of High Street; visually enhancing and reducing the separation caused by the road by paving in brick; removing temporary buildings such as High Street Hall and the Stearns House and improving access for the disabled.

Both the Viking Union and the student bookstore will be enlarged. Wilson Library and Haggard Hall will be connected by bridge so the library can expand into Haggard Hall. In addition, a bus zone will be set up behind Haggard Hall. This roadway will be used only by the campus transit and emergency vehicles.

As interest in higher education increases, space and funding allocation present a quandary for the university. The state does not provide enough of either. It is also important to take the quality of learning at Western into consideration.

Although most department heads I spoke with said their departments will be harder to get into with a growing student population, the university itself cannot do anything but accept the number of additional students the state Legislature requires. No one really knows how much Western will grow within the next few years or the amount of funding it will receive to compensate for that growth.
“Maintaining a high quality of learning (with Western's population growth) becomes increasingly difficult without an increase in faculty size,” said Floyd McKay, journalism department chair.

Journalism professor Tim Pilgrim said smaller classes of about 20-30 students are ideal. “If students can get to know an instructor, they are more compelled to learn,” he said. “There has to be a limit to the amount of students (the state Legislature) crams into Western. When class sizes increase students become less knowable to professors, and vice versa. A danger is there.”

With building plans and expected growth, one of my main concerns as a student is tuition. Although most building will be funded by the State Bonding Authority (bonds that the state sells), funding for professor’s salaries and the maintenance of facilities comes from student tuition.

“Historically, tuition goes up every year,” said Karen Copetas, director of admissions at Western. “Generally the funding for buildings (such as the new science buildings) comes out of a totally different pot of money than the money we are using to pay faculty or provide academic support for you as a student.”

Even though the state allocates the number of students admitted into Western on a quarterly basis, admissions at Western have fluctuated between 9,000 and 10,000 students in the past 10 years. These fluctuations are caused not only by state cutbacks but also by the number of students interested in pursuing a college education.

“In the 1980s the state tightened its funding, so colleges made conscious decisions to cut back on their students,” Copetas said. “Also, the number of high school graduates in the state of Washington dropped by several thousand students, so there weren’t as many students wanting to get into higher education. Western’s admissions peaked in the early ’80s, then dropped by almost 1,000 students in the mid ’80s, and it’s been steadily increasing by about 150 students in the last five years.”

A petition for appropriations from the state Legislature for Western’s expected needs within the next 10 years is included in the CMP. “The state Legislature has the total statewide enrollment for four year institutions increasing by about 15 percent within the next 15 years,” Cooley said.

Unfortunately, Western’s anticipated population growth will exacerbate the need for more parking. Parking and Transportation Coordinator Carl Root said other avenues, such as the Campus Express Shuttle, Whatcom Transport Authority (WTA) bus passes and the creation of carpool/vanpool passes, have all helped open more spaces in the previously filled lots. In the beginning of winter quarter, about 3,700 students were riding the shuttle, and 287 vehicles were issued car/van pool passes. Despite these efforts, the Parking and Transportation Department issued about 4,100 parking passes this quarter.

How will growth affect the parking situation? My fear is new parking lots will replace valuable green space.

Wallace said making new spaces where the Recycling Center used to be on 21st Street may solve the problem of full commuter lots. However, additional parking facilities depend on government funding, which has not yet been granted.

Luckily, Root sees the importance of preserving Western’s greenways. “The answer is not just to go out and add more parking,” Root said. “Western is lucky to have open green space ... you cannot buy that kind of space.”

Root said there are other options, including expanding Campus Express routes, setting up more car/van pools and continuing to work with the WTA.

Although I will graduate from Western in 1997, I am concerned about the ability of the university to maintain the qualities I, and many other students, find attractive.

It is somewhat comforting to know that the beauty and serenity of the greenways and the red brick path through campus were taken into consideration when planning for potential growth at Western. Reassuringly, the university’s planners and educators are not willing to sacrifice the quality of education for growth.

For the sake of Western, I hope our government will take these things into consideration, too, so Western students can continue to enjoy their walk along the red brick road.
loedel-Donovan Park, once the site of a bustling lumber mill and now the hub of summer recreation on Lake Whatcom, seems oddly still today. The rain pours down on a few dedicated fishermen docking their boats. To the north, roads crawl up the hill to meet an expanse of homes. The forested slopes to the southeast are intermingled with bald spots — like the hair of a young child who just discovered scissors.

I stop to read the interpretive sign by the dock. “Everyone is responsible for our watershed: homeowners, boaters, swimmers, hikers, loggers and fishermen all have a role in protection.” Protection? I read further. Oh, I did not realize this is my drinking water!

Compelled by my visit to find out more, I discovered that Lake Whatcom has been Bellingham’s sole drinking-water source since 1892. Every day it provides about 11 millions gallons of drinking water to more than 60,000 city residents, as well as to county residents in Geneva and Sudden Valley. Half of the population in Whatcom County drinks Lake Whatcom’s water.

Local industry also depends on the lake. Georgia Pacific, Bellingham’s local pulp mill, uses more than 35 million gallons per day for pulp and paper production. The Whatcom Falls Trout Hatchery would be obsolete without water from the watershed.

Many drinking-water reservoirs stay locked behind chain-link fences rather than host a variety of uses. I am not surprised that managing this resource has been a struggle since the 1920s. Each use of the lake brings unwelcome side effects:

- Limiting lake fluctuations, which protects lakeside properties and hampers flood control.
- Transportation and storage of hazardous materials could result in a spill (as Lake Samish experienced last year), making direct water withdrawal a health hazard and hurting fisheries.
- Poor forestry practices increase erosion into streams and can lead to massive mudslides during storms.
- Pesticides, fertilizers and other chemicals used for homes and lawns increase production of algae.
- Heavy metals, oil residue and other contaminants from roads, construction sites and boating also decrease water quality.

These uses and their impacts will be multiplied as Whatcom County grows. “Availability of water is the major factor in determining where and how much growth can occur in Whatcom County,” said Carl Batchelor, senior planner for Whatcom County. The lake is the only feasible drinking water source for the city of Bellingham, and the demands placed on this resource are increasing.

“We have supply problems in the rest of the county and will need to use the lake for more people down the road,” said Sue Blake, water resource manager for Whatcom County. Unfortunately, we cannot predict when down the road will be.

In the meantime, current zoning will allow up to 20,000-25,000 new residents in the watershed. That is almost the equivalent of four Ferndales!

Urbanization and development, to accommodate this inevitable growth, will undoubtedly have the most severe affect on water quality. Runoff from developed areas fertilizes the lake, causing it to age. “A lake will naturally age over thousands of years, but we are speeding up the process considerably,” said Dr. Robin Matthews, director of Huxley College’s Institute for Watershed Studies.

Annual monitoring reports from the institute are beginning to reveal a decline in water quality in basin one (see map) — where homes, apartment complexes, roads and convenience stores fight for space along the shores.

In the institute’s 1993 report, bacteria, such as coliform and streptococcus, were measured in high concentrations around the Park Place storm drain in the Silver Beach area (see map). The report warned that Silver Beach Creek and the nearby sections of Lake Whatcom should be investigated as possible public health hazards.

In 1990, Bellingham contracted with the institute to study storm-water runoff. Landslides in the steep southern portions of the watershed and the quality of streams and drains in residential areas were major con-
The city owns the second senior water right on the Nooksack issued by the Washington State Department of Ecology (DOE) and uses up to 70 percent of the river's flow. With mounting pressure from native fisheries and agriculture, the DOE may determine that less water is available for diversion into the lake.

Whether we can manage Lake Whatcom in a way that will provide safe drinking water for the future remains to be seen. Acknowledging the results of scientific studies and taking action to protect the watershed are two different things. Management proposals, water quality reports and other studies mean nothing if they sit on a shelf.

As I discovered with each new person I spoke with, how to manage the watershed is a sensitive, emotionally charged and complex political struggle.

I asked Becky Peterson, commissioner for Water District No. 10 (WDIO), what she thought was the best way to manage growth. "In an ideal world, you would down-zone the large undeveloped tracts or put them into public ownership," she said. But a recent down-zone proposal by Whatcom County lost 5-2 in the County Council vote. Council Chairman Ward Nelson does not favor down-zoning because of potential economic loss to property owners.

Another option is putting land into public ownership. Relatively large undeveloped areas exist on the north shore, but the county has not attempted to acquire them. Money must come from somewhere to compensate property owners — are we willing to tax ourselves for this cause? Even if we are, acquisition becomes nearly impossible once an area is platted and lots are sold, as in Geneva and Sudden Valley.

Sudden Valley is already home to almost 3,000 residents with zoning for 2,800 more homes and 200 condominiums. A lawsuit filed against WDIO (over their new sewer line proposal) resulted in a moratorium on sewer hookups, temporarily halting development there since 1992. "Utilities have historically been used in attempts to stop growth," Blake said.

Unfortunately, the Sudden Valley dilemma has become a lose-lose situation for everyone involved. "We are an easy target because you can’t build a house without water or sewer," Peterson said. WDIO has been forced to increase rates to existing customers to cover their costs, and Sudden Valley property owners grow increasingly angry over paying taxes on empty lots.

The evergreen slopes that surround the southern basin add to the complexity of the watershed issue. Seventy percent of the watershed is zoned for forestry — a use that can be a double-edged sword. While it provides enough income on its own to prevent further development, it also degrades water quality.

At the turn of the century, my visit to Bloedel-Donovan Park would have landed me in the midst of lumber production. My view of Lake Whatcom would have consisted of tug
boats, mill waste and murky water. Common forestry practices included cutting on steep slopes, shorelines and stream banks; careless road construction and clear-cuts without replants.

The Washington State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is working toward preventing some of these practices. Lake Whatcom is the first area of study under the DNR’s watershed analysis, a scientific process set in place by the Washington State Forest Practices Act. This analysis includes studies of soil erosion, riparian conditions, fish habitat and the cumulative effects of forest practices.

Despite this progress, clear-cuts and erosion are still evident. Tom Murley, DNR landscape planner, said there are few rules regulating the type of cutting allowed as long as stream buffers are left. “It is important for people to understand that we (the DNR) can’t rewrite policy,” Murley said.

Changing regulations is a slow and challenging process. But regulation is only one way to get people to do the right thing. Education and incentives are also necessary components in the plan to protect Lake Whatcom.

Education helps us understand the impacts of our own actions in the watershed and inspires us to get involved. Joy Monjure energetically heads the city of Bellingham’s educational efforts, including the Lake Whatcom Water Festival, providing water-testing kits and a slide show for schools and civic groups. The city has tours of the water treatment and waste water plants for elementary school students and a curriculum to promote responsible action.

The Whatcom Watershed Information Network (WWIN), a grassroots organization formed four years ago, focuses on watershed education within Whatcom County. Their accomplishments include a weekly radio show on KQMI and a biweekly newspaper column to answer water-related questions. The second edition of their newsletter, Water Whys, is now available.

The city is also working on an incentive program to carry education into action. Watershed residents would pledge to reduce their impacts by selecting one or more items from a list, such as better septic maintenance, making less trips into town or using no fertilizers on the lawn.

Wells, a veteran advocate for Lake Whatcom, is developing a Watershed Defense Fund to protect, conserve and reserve watersheds through legal channels. Her sustaining donor fund will allow people who may not have time or resources to get involved through donations.

Community groups, such as the Lake Whatcom Watershed Forestry Forum, give citizens an active voice in watershed decision-making. “I think the forum has resulted in a significant change in the way we handle forestry in the watershed,” said former Bellingham mayor Tim Douglas, founder of the forum. It allows citizens to voice their concerns to the DNR on forest-practice applications. The forum hopes to focus on smaller, private applications and incentives for landowners to keep their property forested in the future.

In addition to education and incentives, citizens need to be aware of the management process. “Many people don’t take citizenship seriously,” Wells stated. “They tend to be reactive instead of proactive.”

I asked Monjure what the most crucial aspect was regarding the future of Lake Whatcom. “People need to know that the decisions about this watershed are in the hands of their elected officials,” she responded.

Elected officials often politically tie the hands of those trying to manage and protect the watershed. In 1992, the mayor of Bellingham, the county executive and the manager of Water District No. 10 formed the Lake Whatcom Management Committee to work on cooperative lake management. After the councils jointly adopted the committee’s draft goals, team coordinators developed programs and budgets for eight priority goals. But the County Council approved only $31,000 of an estimated $275,000 needed for implementation and let a year lapse with no action.

The management committee met recently to resume this planning process. And as concerned citizens, we need to let our local representatives know that we favor timely action to protect the Lake Whatcom watershed.

When I watch water flowing in and out of the lake, I am reminded of an ancient Hopi legend: “Each mountain is a person. The water courses are their veins and arteries. The water in them is their life, as our blood is to our bodies.” Water pulses through the blood stream of the land, giving it life.

We must realize that whatever we put into the water system will be distributed throughout it, and throughout us. Will we poison the blood of this watershed, possibly instilling a terminal disease? Or will we choose to nurture the waters which sustain us?
In this region saturated with rain, a water shortage seems unlikely. However, Whatcom County relies solely on the Nooksack Watershed to supply its demands. Our projected growth could lead to just that—shortages.

The Nooksack controversy has appeared a simple case of over allocation of water rights, but the possibility of a water shortage has many contributing factors. We demand water for consumption, industrial and agricultural uses. Fish and other wildlife depend on the natural fluctuations of the river flow. Someone is always crying out for more and it is up to the Department of Ecology (DOE) to appropriate water in a way that will benefit the community.

Would this controversy exist, and would we face a possible shortage if we took better care of the water we depend on? In the upper watershed, siltation and sedimentation, as a result of abandoned logging roads and logging practices, contaminates water. Dirty water is expensive to purify and adversely impacts the watershed ecosystem. The loss of riparian vegetation increases water temperature, making it unlivable for fish. Non-point source pollution from farms defiles water.

The rural lowlands are polluted from agricultural runoff and failing septic systems. Toxic contamination associated with major industrial facilities, combined with non-point source problems due to run off, affect the urban corridor along I-5. In the Nooksack River watershed, 33 water bodies fail to meet federal water quality standards.

"We are currently working with local governments to determine how much water is available, and further determine how much water is being used," Joan Pelly of the DOE said. A water right is issued allowing the holder, use of a certain quantity of water, called "paper water." The DOE's job is complicated because, there is no way of monitoring exactly how much water the permit holder is using.

Illegal water consumption presents another problem for the DOE. "We know we have numerous illegal water users in this county," Pelly said. "We would like to figure a way to get them into the system legally and honoring the environmental requirements. We're not interested in closing down companies and putting people out of work; it's kind of a delicate balance right now.

"Western water laws, can essentially be summed up in the phrase, first in time—first in line," Pelly said. The DOE, the federal government and the Lummi Nation are currently negotiating ground water needs for the Lummi Reservation. Because only half of the residents of the reservation are native, deciding the amount of water entitled to the Lummi is difficult.

The Nooksack River watershed "study area" encompasses about 1,250 square miles and contains more than 1,000 miles of rivers and streams. Water use is classified as "out of stream" or consumptive, and "instream" or non-consumptive. Out of stream uses include: commercial, domestic, industrial, irrigation, mining and municipal. Instream utilization's are: fish and wildlife habitat, aesthetics, pollution dilution, recreation and cultural/ceremonial.

Water use is also broken up into ground water and surface water. Sixty-six percent of the ground water allocated goes to irrigation, equaling 168,000 gallons per minute. Commercial and industrial users make up 42 percent of surface water consumption, amounting to 185,527 gallons per minute. In Whatcom County, households ingest 11 percent of allocated consumption of ground and surface waters.

The Department of Ecology (DOE), has set up shop, in Bellingham and put together the 21-member Nooksack Watershed Task Force in an attempt to unravel the conflict. Rather than transfer the problems from one department to another, the DOE is attempting to solve the water dilemma and work out long term goals to sustain all of us.

The Nooksack Watershed Task Force was started in May of 1994. It is a diverse group of people representing our community, including tribal, local, state and federal governments. "Ecology is really relying on this group, to help us figure out how to better manage environmental resources," Pelly said. Sometime in October, Pelly expects the task force to have an idea of how much water can be diverted, while maintaining habitats, and how much water is being consumed.

The task force has meetings every two months, which are open to the public. If you are interested in receiving notice of meetings, call the Department of Ecology at (360) 738-6250. Task force members are listed on the back of the Nooksack River Watershed Initiative of winter 1996 available at the DOE.
The future of air quality in Whatcom County is turning dark as smoke and smog continue to outpace regulations. Seventy-five percent of the air pollution in Whatcom County is produced by private citizens. It stands to reason that as the county grows, so must individual participation in clean air standards.

Air pollution is often not a visible problem in the Northwest because air currents create quick dispersal. This lack of eye contact with the problem has led to complacency, and standards have suffered. Experts agree that while industry has a significant effect on our air, it is the combination of transportation, wood burning and construction air pollutants that create the biggest threat to local air quality.

The Northwest Air Pollution Authority (NWAPA) monitors air quality in Whatcom, Skagit and Island counties. Axel Franzmann, an air quality control specialist with the authority, admits that violations to regulations are common.
Franzmann met with me at Huxley College to discuss air quality in Whatcom County. He pointed out the complexity and expense of regulation enforcement in an area where winds are quickly dispersing pollutants.

"We frequently get calls on construction dust and wood smoke," Franzmann said. "These activities create a lot of particulate matter in the air. In terms of human health, particulate matter in the air is becoming the big problem. An impact of development on air quality definitely exists, but who knows how much because you have so many factors."

Most construction workers should be wearing respirators, but regulations do not call for it. Construction pollutants create a cumulative effect in the air. Indoor emissions from paints, carpets, carpet pads, glues, particle boards and cleaners can combine to form serious indoor air pollution, said Tony Basabe, a faculty member and research associate for Huxley College.

I have worked in construction on and off for the last 20 years. Most construction workers laugh at the fact that they can get away with burning almost anything in new developments. It is much cheaper to burn piles of scraps and debris than to dispose of them at the dump. Due to loosely enforced regulations, contractors get away with burning tires, tar paper, insulation, particle board, treated woods and other toxic materials.

Automobile pollution is probably where the most violations occur. Whatcom County has no plans to install check points for inspecting emissions control systems in automobiles. While the newer vehicles are running much cleaner, a lot of older vehicles take advantage of relaxed regulations on automobile emissions. The state of Washington does have a toll-free hotline to allow citizens to participate in the enforcement of regulations for vehicles.

"Automobiles are clearly the biggest factor in air pollution," said Bill Wilson, professor of chemistry at Western. "The mentality of citizens is the greatest factor in mass transit. Most people still like to drive their car and do not use mass transit."

In a free-enterprise system, incentives need to be established to encourage clean air practices. At present, no incentives are offered by the state of Washington to encourage alternative fuels for transportation. The number of cars on the road in this state is increasing three times faster than the population. The additional roads, needed to accommodate these cars, release their own set of poisons in the air.

"The more roads we build, the more silica and other dust forms there are in the air," Basabe said. "Roads are a huge source of carcinogenic particulate matter."

Despite the many violations committed by automobiles, the biggest issue of public concern for air pollution right now is for easily seen pollutants such as wood smoke. "Automobile smoke is not as visible as wood smoke, so it is more likely to go undetected than a smoky woodstove," Franzmann said.

In the past, it was not as important to monitor particulate matter in Whatcom County because people were dispersed. When you compare one woodstove per five acres to three or four per acre, the particulate matter concentrations are higher. Greater density, if no pollution reduction measures are taken, inevitably means greater pollution.

Wood smoke causes more than 80 percent of the airborne particles present in the winter air. Certified woodstoves produce less smoke and pollution, but only 15 percent of wood stoves in Whatcom County are certified. Woodstoves and other household wood-burning devices are the number one emitters of soot and tiny particles that can be breathed deep into the lungs.

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<th>Pollutant</th>
<th>Major Human-made Sources</th>
<th>Related Health Problems</th>
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<tr>
<td>Carbon monoxide</td>
<td>Transportation industry</td>
<td>Acute: headache, dizziness, death</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Stationary combustion sources, Industry, Transport (fueling),</td>
<td>Chronic: cardiovascular stress</td>
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<td>Painting</td>
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<td>Hydrocarbons</td>
<td>Stationary combustion sources, Industry, Transport (fueling),</td>
<td>Acute: dizziness, death</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Painting</td>
<td>Chronic: cancer, brain damage</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nitrogen oxides</td>
<td>Transportation, Stationary combustion sources</td>
<td>Acute: lung irritation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Particulates</td>
<td>Stationary combustion sources, Industry</td>
<td>Chronic: bronchitis</td>
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<td>Photochemical</td>
<td>Transportation, Stationary combustion sources</td>
<td>Irritation of respiratory system, cancer</td>
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<td>oxidants</td>
<td>Stationary combustion sources, Industry</td>
<td>Acute: respiratory and eye irritation</td>
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<td>Sulfur oxides</td>
<td>Stationary combustion sources, Industry</td>
<td>Chronic: emphysema</td>
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<td>Acute: respiratory tract irritation</td>
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<td>Chronic: emphysema, bronchitis</td>
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Another local point source for ash and particulate matter in the air is the incinerator at Recomp of Washington, Inc., a waste disposal company in Ferndale. Recomp’s incinerator burns mostly municipal waste. The smokestacks at Recomp were updated with a $1.7 million acid-gas scrubber in 1990, said Frank Moscone, president of the company.

“I would like to think that we have all of our emissions under control,” Moscone said. “We deal with acid gases, particulates, heavy metals and some others. The acid-gas scrubber takes care of all the emissions.” Recomp is servicing more people as the area grows, but fortunately regulations are developing also. Actually, the business is much cleaner than it was in 1974, when it began. Moscone said Recomp has no plans at this time for expansion or updating the facility.

I asked Wilson about the incinerator as a source of air pollution, and he confirmed that industrial developments have a big effect on Whatcom County’s air quality. “It is very expensive to monitor pollutants adequately, and so most industries simply comply with government regulations. Good examples of this are the heavy metal emissions from incinerators, which would take a lot of lab work to monitor,” Wilson said.

Regulations for air-pollution control required for a new industry are very strict, Franzmann said. Smokestacks have computerized monitors built into the stacks. Depending on the circumstances, a violator can be fined up to $11,000 per day for violations. The monitors are watched daily and audited occasionally. Studies reveal that most concentrations of sulfur dioxide and other industrial air pollutants are found in the immediate area of the particular industry emitting them. However, most studies stop at the fence line, so it is difficult to assess.

When I asked Franzmann about smog drifting in from Vancouver, he told me that NWAPA had a camera positioned in the Bellingham area to monitor what was visible. On certain days in the summer, high-pressure systems bring in some air pollutants from the north through the Fraser River Valley. Most problems, however, are localized to the areas of discharge, he said.

When I mentioned Canadian smog to Basabe, his take on it was, “Air pollution has become a global problem that must be considered in context of the big picture. One of the biggest problems with air pollution is that it is so interrelated. This makes studies of the specifics very difficult. Almost everything relates to air pollution in some way.”

Basabe’s revelation had the ring of a “whole-earth” approach to the problem. People must learn to deal with air pollution as members of the planet and as part of this smaller community — Whatcom County.

“You will seldom have a source and a victim in the same area,” he said. “The clouds around Bellingham are studied for pH, and the numbers are going up. Plant life in Whatcom County indicates high air pollution levels.”

Studying the health effects of air pollution is difficult because individuals have a range of reactions for each pollutant. One person may develop bronchitis from bad air quality, and another may not. People with existing respiratory conditions are the most likely to be affected by air pollution. This makes the passage of new regulations difficult as well.

Reducing pollutants by even one percent can make a difference for those people.

“If even one person has to go in the hospital for respiratory problems caused by the air, then air pollution has gone too far,” Basabe said.

Good air quality is essential to human health. I saw a man walking in downtown Bellingham who was wearing a respirator. People looked at him as though he was out of his mind. Perhaps he knows something others are not yet aware of.
Versions of Vision
People see different things when looking at undeveloped land.

by Elissa Torres

We got new neighbors late last summer. And after the rain started, we got a new run-off pond, too. The wooded hillside above Emerald Hill Stable, on the outskirts of Bellingham, revealed no signs of its imminent development before the day the road went in. The people at this stable comprise a small community, and we all felt a keen attachment to the nature at our back gate.

We knew that we were seeing something all too common around Bellingham. With growth, this place people value for natural beauty is losing ground to progress. We watched tensely as everything changed on the hill that had worn dozens of different shades of green in the spring, had grown lush in the summer and caught fog in its hair in the fall.

The new road gave access for the heavy equipment to cut its way too quickly up our hill, now their hill. The people who bought the acreage on the ridge saw “great home sites” and “spectacular views.” We saw a piece of nature valuable for itself. These differing views spark heated debates about what should be done with undeveloped areas in Whatcom County.

An emotional development

If you live in Whatcom County, you could have hardly missed the turmoil brewing around another recent development site. “Selective” logging and “partial” development is proposed on 115 acres of timberland between I-5 and Lake Padden Park. Whatcom County land developer Stephen Brisbane and Lakeridge Partners are jointly purchasing the land. Pending approval, they will build the new Hillcrest Chapel campus and a 45-acre horse ranch for Brisbane and his family on this land.

“All forest plans in the city are assumed to be a conversion [to development],” said Chris Spens, senior environmental planner for Bellingham’s Planning and Community Development Department. “That puts the city planning department in the driver’s seat.” Spens has worked closely with Brisbane and his partners in the application process for the Lake Padden site.

But this proposed action involves more than just the applicants and planners. Protests from residents in nearly every part of Whatcom County have made the newspapers, reached Spens’ desk and resulted in public meetings. A few neighbors formed the Padden Creek Gorge Committee to protect the vulnerable creek zone. “Some areas,” said committee member Dave Scoboria, “are so special that they require special protection. This is one of the largest undeveloped areas in the city; it’s Bellingham’s front door.”

The cut hill behind our stable and the Padden site share the same developer: Brisbane’s New Whatcom Improvement Company. They also exemplify the link between people and nature, and the growing concern felt for the potential loss of this link.

“I wish I was half as crafty as they say.”

I pulled up to Steve Brisbane’s impressive three-story house on an oak-lined Fairhaven street at 7 a.m. He stood shoeless just inside the kitchen doorway, and I immediately thought, this was not what I had expected. We shook hands, and Brisbane sat on a stool at the counter. Brisbane is a tall man in his mid-thirties with a long, red-blond mustache that he probably twists around his fingers. I noticed his boots, tall and heavy caulks, standing ready by the coat rack. I took a seat on another barstool.

His wife, Laura, went about cooking breakfast for their four children. Brisbane said he hopes to build a horse farm on the 45 acres he purchased near Lake Padden, though Laura likes living in town. Brisbane is not a Whatcom County native; he grew up in Olympia. A job brought him north and he decided to stay and finish his degree in philosophy and theology at Fairhaven College.

“I’m kind of their bastard child, I think,” Brisbane said with a small smile. “Actually, they’ve had me back a couple of times to talk about development and growth. I was the token developer, to represent all the raping and pillaging of the environment.” He keeps an old Viking helmet on his desk in his downtown Fairhaven office; he dons it when anti-development outcry grows particularly strident.

Brisbane is very conscious of the attention he receives. He has been a developer in Whatcom County for nearly 12 years. According to Brisbane, the most hostile attacks come from people who do not know him nor take time to under
stand what he does. “I take great pride in trying to make it very hard for people to hate me on a personal level,” he said. “I wish I was half as crafty as they say.

“I take a functional view of land management,” Brisbane said. “I think of what is the highest, best use for an area. Most good forestry ground is tied up in timber production. Others are wooded areas by default, not purpose.”

One of those areas left natural by oversight was the hillside behind the stable. Brisbane pointed to its shallow soil and its inability to be a commercial timber site. “It grows trees and it’s pretty and all that,” Brisbane said, “but from a commercial point of view, it’s never going to be viable. Those are the areas we want to target for growth.”

Ironically, the first time Brisbane looked at the Lake Padden site, he turned it down as a development project; he said it was not feasible. Only after his church began to pursue the possibility of building a new campus did he get involved. “In order to provide the 20 acres for the church,” Brisbane explained, “we had to buy the whole piece of property. A group from the church formed, called Lakeridge Partners, and together we bought the entire piece.”

The plans for the site include roughly 20 acres for the church, 45 acres for Brisbane, a steep section of about 22 acres in Padden Creek Gorge and a large tract owned by Lakeridge Partners that will be selectively logged. Though they have no immediate plans to develop this land, Brisbane and his partners believe it will be the site of about 200 homes in the future. For now, they hope to cash in on some of the area’s trees.

“The logging is a commercial venture,” Brisbane said. “Lakeridge Partners is trying to get a return on what they’ve paid for.” The group is negotiating to sell or trade the gorge area to the city. The city’s Greenways program, created in 1990 to move natural areas into public preservation, has long had this area on their “wish list.”

“Whatcom County is going to double and triple and quadruple in growth,” Brisbane said. “But I think when we get done with it all, we’ll have something here that we can be pretty proud of. Handle the growth, and yet make it livable. I’m pretty optimistic about it.”

Not everyone shares this optimism, or sees it as reason to relax the vigil for preservation.

**Broomsticks and the Spokes of Progress**

While I spoke with Chris Spens in his downtown planning department office, his arthritic heater pinged and thumped in an effort to keep ahead of the chill outside. Spens is a Western Washington University graduate who found his way back to Bellingham after working elsewhere in water quality and land-use planning. He has been a Bellingham planner for five years.

“It just so happens that this is a huge site,” Spens said of the Lake Padden proposal. “It’s our gateway to the city. It’s what makes people feel good when they drive back from Seattle. They turn the corner and it’s like, ‘whew!’”

He described the application process Brisbane and Lakeridge Partners are undergoing for the Padden site. As senior environmental planner, Spens has to monitor what goes on.

“There’s no conundrum about whether or not we can regulate the harvest, require studies and render a management decision,” Spens explained. But the initial application had problems. Spens said it lacked consistency and completeness; it contained insufficient information to undergo the State Environmental Protection Act evaluation.

“By the time we’re done turning the screws on this thing, it will have substantially less harvest than the first application stated,” Spens said. The 115 acres will likely be broken into smaller management units, with clear detail of the ownership and topography of each. The application will have to show how much timber will be cut in each area, what logging method will be used and how timber will be removed.

Another problem arose when workers at the Hillcrest Chapel site cleared brush and small-diameter trees too close to Padden Creek, invading the mandated 100-foot buffer zone. It spurred more letters, calls and dark speculation about the developer’s intentions.

“There was a written requirement, clear as can be, that they maintain the setback from the creek,” Spens said. “There’s an inference [from nearby residents] that they did it intentionally or deliberately to set precedence for using those areas. That precedent won’t work.”

Forest practices regulations were not intended for areas inside the city. They were set for harvests on larger tracts of land, away from housing and development. “One or two acres is a big deal in the city,” said Spens. “But we have to provide for some reasonable use. What we can’t stop outright, we’ll try to defer until we exhaust our remedies.”

Public input can be helpful to the planning process. Spens had a fair idea how people would react to the application that Brisbane and Hillcrest Chapel submitted. He allowed the letters and outcry to alert the applicants of the
Some people have a certain pessimistic outlook that, what’s one voice in the night? Well,” Spens said, “it’s quite forceful at times.”

Some of the letters and comments Spens received regarding the proposal for the Padden site have contained personal attacks. But they do not deter him from trying to keep certain natural areas intact. Even while he uses the available tools to plan carefully and preserve when possible, he allows for personal differences. “The fact that Mr. Brisbane has his own vision and version of what should be, and it sharply contrasts with a lot of other people’s, doesn’t mean he’s a bad guy,” Spens said. “It’s just his version of vision.”

Spens said the general rule of being a planner is coordinating and facilitating sensible growth. He also said promoting growth in cases like the Padden site is difficult. “Every once in a while I go to the back closet, pull out the broomsticks and throw them in the spokes of progress,” he said. “That’s sort of a conflict with our mission statement. So be it. It’s the right thing to do.”

“This is in the city. Isn’t that just amazing?”

Another frosty, early morning, and I stood at the door of Linda and Greg Brown, whose home abuts Padden Creek Gorge. Theirs were among the many “voices in the night” raised in concern about the proposed action near Lake Padden. The Browns moved to this place a year ago, though they were not convinced to buy this house until they walked out the back gate and into the gorge. “We knew that this was home,” Linda Brown told me as we stood not far from that very gate.

The Browns took me on a walking tour of the area in question to show why people feel so strongly about its future. The weather was perfect — cold, sunny, with mist that burned off before the morning grew old. Tall, slender and active, they set a brisk pace on a trail right above Padden Creek.

“We walked this area with Chris Spens, too,” L. Brown said, “because it’s along our property, because we’re concerned.” She and her husband also arranged to take a group from the Greenways program through the site. “They’re trying to figure out what the city already owns and what will be considered a buffer anyway,” she explained. “That way they can buy the minimum land to achieve the maximum preservation.”

The Browns were careful when they spoke of the value of this place. They seemed to find more strength in arguing about slope stability and stream protection, though their more emotionally based concerns were evident. “Look at this place,” L. Brown said. “This is in the city. Isn’t that just amazing?” Both of them stressed that their concerns, like others in the area, encompass more than personal impacts development will cause.

“People don’t trust that the site won’t be completely cleared,” L. Brown said. “If you take out so many trees, what’s to keep the rest from being so damaged they die anyway?” People were also distrustful of the encroachment of the creek’s buffer, the absence of a storm water permit and the amount of “brush clearing” that has already taken place. Piles of alder logs were stacked about the church site.

Dale Nachreiner of the Samish Neighborhood Association was also wary. “We’re interested in the fairness of the process as well as the outcome,” he said. He has worked to facilitate meetings between concerned residents and the developers. “All those letters were not a planned action,” Nachreiner said. “I think maybe it’s natural.”

The Browns have found getting involved to be natural, too. Linda Brown said she did not know her neighbors well until they came together to protect the wooded area near Padden. “I can’t imagine going back to doing nothing,” she said. “I know we’ll be active in things going on in other places now. Once you start, you can’t just sit back anymore.” This attitude could be one of the last lines of defense for our remaining natural areas.

No prior knowledge prepares a person for the sight of an area “under development.” Both the Padden site and the ridge behind Emerald Hill Stable bore striking alterations.

I wondered what the name of the stable should now be as I finally hiked the rutted, frozen logging road. Winding upwards, it hid its secrets for a short while. At the ridgetop, it opened up to shocked slopes and piles of logs. My mind cramped at the scene, and I looked down for a moment to adjust. Raccoon prints overlaid a bulldozer’s huge treadmark.

I tried to reconcile the image before me with the one in my memory. A solitary maple bore little resemblance to the one that had marked the lush trail we used to ride on. The ridge was chewed up, scarped raw and blasted into a more “appropriate” shape. Great views. Prime home sites.

Growth is inevitable. But how we choose to manage it will make all the difference for this community. We are a part of the land we change, and cannot avoid affecting each other when we make those changes. We need to find — and save — some common ground. The conversion of forest land to residential sites is about more than applications, regulations and permits.

Those are just starting points.
I expect a rustic cabin with a solar panel roof, or maybe an adobe home built into the side of a mountain. But as I turn into a normal looking cul-de-sac, all I see are normal-looking houses. Construction workers are finishing the skeleton of a new house on the corner. The scraps lying next to it make me think of the 2.5 tons of waste that result from the construction of an average, single-family home.

I stop on the snow-covered road in between the two homes. Stepping out of my Subaru, I inspect the white, two-story house camouflaged by snow. The left side has bay windows from top to bottom, and the right has a modest two-car garage. I double check the address: 3758 West Hills Pl. This is no cabin, I think to myself. I would have never guessed this beautiful, conventional-looking house was made of recycled, super-efficient materials.

A small white car pulls into the driveway and a man with wire-rimmed glasses and wind-blown hair steps out. I nervously walk over and shake hands with Rob Staveland, a pioneer in the design and building of resource-efficient, healthy homes. Staveland leads me through the front door of the second home he designed and built from scratch.

As I walk in, I admire the “flow” and “layout” of the entrance and living room. Both are terms I despised growing up touring homes with my real estate agent mother. She dragged me from house to house, comparing the spaciousness, design and mood. I became a reluctant expert.

As we pass the stairs on the right and settle in the kitchen to chat, I notice the quality of the workmanship. Staveland has thought of everything, from the highest quality range and dishwasher to the well-made recycled pop-bottle carpets. He explains how everything in the house from mirror adhesive to carpet pad is either very low or non-toxic. He points out the “no smell” of the house. It’s true; the house smells clean, but it does not have that knock-you-back smell most new homes and cars have.

In Staveland’s new homes, he incorporates human well-being while considering the earth. “I address whatever environmental concerns I can and automatically use recycled content and techniques,” he said. “However, I’m most concerned with indoor air quality with energy efficiency right up there.”

Staveland is dealing with a problem most people have not even thought about. Everyone needs a home, but the current building trends place looks and size above efficiency and resource use.

Americans’ wants are surpassing our needs, turning our natural landscapes into cul-de-sacs of the American Dream. “Everybody wants a media room, a home office, an exercise room, three bathrooms, a family room, a living room and a huge, beautiful, eat-in kitchen that nobody cooks in,” said Gopal Ahluwalia of the National Association of Home Builders in the United States.

Contractors and developers, catering to these wants, cash in on our ignorant greed. They build in the same old way with inefficient products and techniques that cost the buyer and the environment. These practices are not going away on their own; it is the consumer’s job to be informed and to demand superior, resource-efficient techniques and materials.

Sue Neaton of Bellingham's Ernst and Neaton, Inc. Architects has dealt with numerous contractors and customers. The biggest problem she sees is size. “The American family size has shrunk 50 percent since the ’50s, but our house size has doubled, with most of the space taken up by bathrooms, closets and garages,” she said. “People need to build smaller with higher quality and efficiency.”

Staveland’s homes are a prime example of what we should do to save our resources and protect ourselves. “Resource efficiency is using materials effectively,” Staveland said. “This means...
Rob Staveland in his toxic-free, energy-efficient kitchen.

looking at the by-products of the manufactured materials; the amount of energy used in creating these materials, as well as the impact on the air quality of the house and the impact on the basic energy usage to keep the house warm.”

Each part of the kitchen falls within Staveland’s definition. The floors are not ordinary plastic. Instead, they are a swirl of taupe and cream made from natural linoleum. This combination of linseed oil, sawdust pine resins, cork, chalk, and jute produces a low-toxic, 100 percent biodegradable, anti-bacterial floor that is likely to outlast other types of floors.

Cabinets and counters made with toxic formaldehyde are nowhere to be found. Instead, Staveland uses EnviroSafe cabinets. This Canadian company’s products lack chemicals commonly used in house construction, such as toxic solvents and urea formaldehyde. These kitchen cabinets are white-painted wood built with excellent craftsmanship.

The linoleum swirl spills into an open area with breakfast table potential and stops at the carpet of the dining room. The warm, beige carpet made from yesterday’s pop bottles surrounds us. Enviro-Tech carpets are made from low-toxic, 100 percent recycled PET plastic bottles. These carpets keep more than 50 million pounds of soft drink and ketchup bottles out of landfills each year. They are stain resistant and durable to withstand heavy traffic. Carpet pads, hidden below, are also made of 100 percent recycled fibers.

Standing in the curved archway separating the living and dining room, I am faced with a choice of windows: the big bay widow to the front or the sliding glass door to the back. The bright winter light surrounds us from all angles.

Windows can account for 30 percent of heat loss in a home. Low-E windows are double-paned with a metallic coating that keeps in heat to provide almost twice the performance of conventional windows.

Windows, Staveland says, are only one part of the complicated design of a home. “To design a home, you have to consider the site, view, solar position, and overall character of the visible lot, with respect given to the neighbors.”

Passive solar design includes a southerly orientation, low-E windows and a concrete slab subfloor beneath the house that provides a high thermal mass for storing heat. This technique eliminates crawl spaces under the home that can develop mildew and rot problems.

The way a home looks draws the buyer; however, buyers often overlook the threat of indoor air pollution, which can make owners of new homes sick. The “new-home smell” buyers love is a combination of toxic fumes from paint, carpet, carpet pads, insulation, all adhesives, cabinets and linoleum. VOC (volatile organic compounds) are toxic pollutants that cause cancer and contribute to the earth’s air pollution.

“If people knew what was going on, they’d be scared shitless,” Staveland said.

Karol Spangler could not spend more than five to 10 minutes inside a new home without getting a headache until she met Staveland. She now lives in his first home built in Wycliff Park. “Anyone can walk in and tell the difference — you don’t smell the toxic paints,” she said.

Staveland uses Best paint on all his walls and cabinets because of its low VOC rating. “When Best paint is applied there is a low odor for a few hours and that’s it,” Staveland said. “Generally, it takes a few weeks to a few months before latex paints finish drying, which is more toxic. After six months to a year, any latex paint is considered safe.”

Walking through the living room, we end up back at the entryway. Upstairs, the master bedroom nestled in between two others of average size. Sunshine streams in from the master’s north-facing bay window. A door to the left of the window leads to a small deck that awaits warmer evenings. Tucked away on the opposite side of the room is the bathroom area. The shower and toilet hide discreetly behind a door while the sink and mirror are open to the room. A walk-in closet made for two modest wardrobes (or one shop-a-holic’s) is reflected in the mirror.

Passing through another door by the stairs, the cold winter air hits like reality in a daydream. An unfinished bonus room above the garage stands naked, exposing Staveland’s framing techniques. Insulation lines the right wall like muscle tissue on the house’s bones. Staveland uses cellulose insulation, made from a minimum of 80 percent recycled products. Cellulose takes 100 times less energy to produce and is totally resistant to air infiltration (which typically accounts for at least 30 percent of a home’s heat loss). The insulation is also non-toxic, highly resistant to fire and repels insects and rodents.

Fiberglass insulation, typically used in homes, lines part of the right wall. Staveland assures me it is temporary while
they finish the room. He closely examines the bag the fiberglass came in. A small label reads, “May Cause Cancer.”

Reusable lumber holds up the walls. Smaller pieces made from waste wood and demolition make sturdy finger-jointed studs. Long, conventional, virgin lumber tends to bend in damp places. Staveland also places studs every 24 inches instead of every 16 inches like most contractors. By demanding less wood, he can focus on quality instead of quantity.

Staveland integrates recycled materials whenever he can and recycles what little leftover waste he generates. Many companies in the Bellingham area collect construction wastes that can be reused. Sixty percent of the construction debris for single-family homes can be recycled or reused.

Asphalt, concrete, glass, fiberglass, lumber, land-clearing debris, pallets, scrap wood and sheetrock are a few examples of what companies like the ReStore pick up. In addition, it is cheaper to recycle than going to the dump. For example, Barnes & Noble, on the corner of Guide Meridian and Bakerview, had a disposal budget of $2,000-3,000. The actual cost including labor, recycling and disposal came to $500.

Entering back into the world of heat, I notice just that — the heat. Radiant heating seeps up from the floors so the sights and sounds of air vents are unnecessary. Long, narrow, rubber tubes are concealed under the floorboards. Low-temperature water circulates through the tubes to produce a comfortable heat that warms the occupants, objects and surfaces in a room. The low temperature also helps reduce operating costs. This heating system has a 20-40 percent higher efficiency than conventional forced air.

As we head down the stairs to the garage, Staveland explained, “The problem with forced air is when you blow air into unheated spaces it causes energy loss, and air is drawn from unheated crawl spaces in attics complete with moisture, mildew, animal residue and insulation. Whatever is in there is being blown into the house.”

I cannot help but think of all the scary things circulating in the air at my house — dust bunnies, animal hairs and unseen creepy-crawly things.

On the right wall of the garage sits a big, fat furnace — the 94 percent efficient heart of the house. With the use of a heat exchanger, the hot water furnace provides hot water and space heating. Water is separated and sent through the radiant heating system before returning to the furnace to be reheated and reused.

Forced air systems have a net efficiency of 70 percent even when they start with a 90 percent efficient furnace. Heat is lost during transportation through crawl spaces and heating ducts. “Most conventional homes in this area have 75 percent efficient furnaces combined with forced air, giving it a net efficiency of 50 percent,” Staveland said.

Staveland, excited as a school boy with a new toy, explains just how good his house is. “With my insulation twice as good and the heating system at least twice as efficient, I use half the energy as any other house in the subdivision.”

Spangler has lived in a Staveland home for almost a year and has seen her heating bills cut by 50 percent. “In the summer, hot water and gas usually costs $5 a month, and in the coldest of winter, $50,” said Spangler on a freezing February day. “Right now I’m in shorts and a T-shirt with the house at about 72 degrees; I haven’t turned on the heat yet.”

With the listing price $173,900, about the same price as other houses in the neighborhood, why aren’t more contractors building this way?

“Construction is a fast, competitive business, and most contractors don’t have time to search for new sources,” said Fred Miller of the Next Step Association, a local nonprofit group that develops markets for recyclable goods. Staveland often works with Miller to publish information on recycling in construction. They hope to make it easier for contractors to find out about recycled-content materials and how to reuse items often thought of as waste.

However, Staveland still runs into brick walls. “I’ve been trying to feed this to other contractors for years, but they’re not interested,” he said. “You can’t force it on them.”

The Bellingham City Building Department has not encouraged contractors to use new techniques. Staveland has taken numerous files of information to the Building Department, only to find they have been thrown away. Building officials have the ability to approve alternative techniques, but they are not using it to our advantage.

“Most officials say, ‘This is great, I agree with you, but I won’t sign it,’” Staveland said. “They are not promoting environmental building.”

As the conversation heats up, we both notice the time. Walking out the door, the last bit of conversation lingers in my head. If the city is not helping and contractors are too stubborn, we only have one chance left: ourselves.

Overwhelmed and amazed, I return to my cold car and drive to my old, leaky house with the hope of one day living in a Staveland home.

“If people knew what was going on, they’d be scared shitless.”

— Rob Staveland
Fenton Wilkenson is a dream weaver. He carries an invisible wand that he gives to others and asks, “If you could wave this wand and make your dreams come true, what would they be?” Fenton wants to help everyone live his or her dream. It seems an unreal vision, but he believes people’s dreams are their gift to the earth, and each person should be able to live their passion.

Driving down Mt. Baker Highway with the sun casting brilliant light across the landscape, I felt blessed to live in such an incredible place.

I turned off the highway toward Sumas Mountain and Fenton’s home. Five minutes later, I arrived at the row of trees signaling his property. Although it was dark when I pulled in, I knew my surroundings were beautiful. Fenton’s daughter came out of the house and pointed me toward his “office in the back.” All I could see was the outline of a barn. My eyes adjusted and I noticed huge trees, a marshy stream and a funky tree house. The distinct smell of horses hung in the air. “I could live here,” I thought. “I could move now and stay for the rest of my life.”

As I got closer to the barn, I saw light beaming from the top floor and realized it was from Fenton’s office. He greeted me on a floor of hay, and we walked up a narrow staircase to his office. Fenton is a small man, gnome-like in appearance, who radiates an abundance of energy. As the executive director of Sustainable Options, a non-profit organization he started eight years ago, his energy is well spent. Fenton is trying to facilitate the shift to sustainable human existence in Whatcom County.

“People can only plan on what they think is possible,” he said, “and people generally think what is possible has already happened.” This philosophy does not limit Fenton.

“We need to recognize that there is a different way of approaching our relationship with nature and with each other,” he said. He chooses sustainability as his model, realizing it is the key to prosperity without growth.

“We are trying to sustain a world that is fit for human habitation,” Fenton said. “Given that nature is interconnected, three things need to be focused on: the environment, social justice and economics.” He described sustainability as a stool with each of the issues as the legs. Together, the environment, social justice and economics support the platform of sustainability. All three legs carry equal weight.

As Fenton speaks, his hands move wildly. He conveys his ideas with such excitement that I felt inspired by his words. “We’ve looked outside ourselves for answers,” he said. We have spent our lives having other people tell us what to do, making us dependent on others for answers that only we know.

Fenton asks the simple question, “What is your dream?” to help people choose what they really want to do with their lives. “Internal guidance is fundamental to the new paradigm,” he said. Talking with Fenton was as much a spiritual reminder as it was an interview.

Fenton has found his passion and is living it, but his life was not always so directed. He graduated from law school in Washington, D.C., then served with the U.S. Department of Justice for four years. He later received a masters degree in tax law and moved to Seattle to work for a large law firm, doing transaction work. He got into law to help people, but one day he realized he was working in the wrong direction.

“In a number of different ways, I knew I was dying,” Fenton said. He claimed he was reaching for an illusionary brass ring and finally realized it was not attainable. In 1982 he quit and spent the next year detoxifying his mind from the attorney mentality. With a wry smile, he told me he was still a “recovering attorney.” In 1985, he moved to Whatcom County and began cultivating his ideas.

Fenton spends most of his time working in his office behind huge windows overlooking his home. Surprisingly, the stark white walls bear few decorations. His desk sits in the middle of the room before a large red leather chair — the
kind you would find in a lawyer’s office. He said a friend from his old firm gave it to him. When Fenton sits in it, his small frame is consumed.

Seven years ago, Fenton created The Whatcom County Project and began working toward the goal of transforming Whatcom County into a sustainable community through demonstration. He wrote a comprehensive packet to explain the steps needed to make Whatcom County a sustainable community.

The idea of a sustainable community is not new. During the 1930s Depression it was the model for efficiency. But, Fenton told me, no one is studying the potential for such a community. “People are focusing on education, environment or economic development,” he said. “But there is nobody else out there that I’ve been able to find that is looking at this whole systems perspective at the community level.” Because each part of a community is interconnected, acting on one part affects the others. However, all facets must be addressed concurrently if community change is to occur.

“The fundamental social, political and economical entity of humankind will be the community,” Fenton said. “Whatcom County is the size of a basic socio-economic political unit; it is big enough that we can become relatively self-sufficient in a number of areas and small enough that we can communicate with each other and deal with the problems and issues.”

Saying Fenton’s life is busy is a true understatement. I am amazed at the number of projects he juggles. He started Sustainable Options from his own cash supply and has kept the business going out of his commitment to healthier living. His hours of devotion go unpaid and Fenton is frequently hard-pressed to pay his bills.

Fenton spends most of his time working on The Whatcom County Project. Like the model of the stool, it consists of all aspects of sustainability. This includes a community-based food system, true sustainable forestry and education.

Fenton received a grant in 1994 from USDA’s Western Regional Sustainable Agriculture Research Education Program. The study considers the economic feasibility of a sustainable community food system. The plan is based on using current organic farms and subsidized farm land to produce more of Whatcom County’s food base.

In 1990, farmers received 11 cents of each food dollar spent by consumers. Almost all revenue lost by farmers goes to food marketing. This makes it almost impossible for family farms to continue their traditional operations. Fenton said the creation of a community food system would cut the marketing costs drastically, helping to generate a stable local economy. It would also add to the general prosperity of the community.

According to Fenton, we pay the school districts to buy processed food from California and Colorado and ship it to Whatcom County. We also come up with tax dollars to support farmers whose farms are not making it. “It doesn’t make sense,” he said. “Why not take the tax dollars we are paying to the schools and buy food from the farmers?”

Fenton is talking with local organic farmers about a sustainable food system and working with Backyard Abundance, a local grassroots group already trying to create a sustainable community food system.

In addition to producing food, Fenton is preparing to set up a small processing plant and a system of distribution. This would create stable, long-term employment. Fenton spends much of his time on the phone, contacting food systems people all over the country and researching the costs and effectiveness of small scale processing.

Fenton is also working with a group of individuals in a cooperative called Natural Balance Forestry Cooperative to create certified sustainable forest-management plans.

“The cooperative was born out of a deep commitment to protecting, regenerating and maintaining naturally healthy, biodiverse forest ecosystems,” reads the project outline. According to Fenton, not only has there been significant deterioration of forest ecosystems, but the economic conditions of the people involved in forestry has declined as well. This decline is primarily due to mechanization and raw log export.

Together with the Department of Natural Resources and private interests groups, Fenton draws guidelines for a landscape planning project. The plan recognizes that forests are a complex ecosystem and incorporates a forestry scheme calling for logging within the natural laws of the forest.

Eco-conscious forestry has proven economically viable in a number of instances both in the United States and Canada.

He has been contacting large, national non-profit organizations, urging them to buy forest land. “I’m trying to get major non-profits to practice and teach by design rather than blaming and telling other land owners what to do,” Fenton said.

continued on page 27
The daily routines and habits — the lifestyles — of almost everyone in this affluent society need to be individually examined if social ecological change is to be achieved. In the view of Arne Naess, the Norwegian philosopher who coined the term deep ecology, "If we want to transform society in an ecological way, we must profoundly transform ourselves."

It has been only a year and a half since I realized the effects of my lifestyle on the quality of the earth's air, water and soil; on the health of the plants, living things and people coexisting with me. Before this realization, I was a product of American culture, encouraged to find happiness by way of overconsumption. I was taught to disregard the ecological destruction caused by my own actions.

The Olympian recently put overconsumption into context: "Picture a medium-sized bedroom filled with garbage. That's the amount of waste generated by every person in one medium-sized county in Washington every year."

Awareness and concern are growing for the earth's limited capacity to process the massive garbage and pollution we create. Locally, nine other people and I have formed a communal household dedicated to simple living. We believe not only must corporations or government change to "save the planet" — so must the individual.

For most Americans, 11 people living in a three-bedroom house sounds like either poverty or chaos. But with few material possessions and a common respect for each person, living communally is a rich experience. It is also more organized than many living situations involving only two people.

Chad, one of the 11, said our house made him think of the word *blithe*, which means cheerful and glad. So we call ourselves the Blithe Family or the Grant Street House.

Erin and Ned have lived together the longest. Since the summer of 1995, first Abel, then Jeremy, Keir, Chad, myself, Leif, David and Mason Kale have drifted into the Grant Street House.

"We are reconnecting with the natural systems and our wild roots," Erin said when we were discussing why it is that we have all come together to learn and practice this alternative way of living.

Erin and her partner Ned had a baby girl during the snowy days of February. They named her Mason Kale, and...
her arrival was excitedly awaited by each of us. It was as if our
own child was being born. At the beginning of her pregnancy,
Erin chose to have a home birth. The midwife came to assist
in the birth at around 3 a.m.; we all awoke and someone built
a raging fire in the woodstove to make the house plenty warm
for the birth. Music from our drums and flute welcomed
Mason Kale into this world.

However, an average day is not spent sitting around the
fire waiting for a baby to be born. Everyone usually awakens
in intervals. Around 11 o’clock, if you are not up, you will
probably be awakened by the laughter and aromas coming
from the kitchen. Jeremy may be cooking potatoes, onions
and garlic in the big cast iron pot Tia got for Christmas; she
told her parents she only wanted something she could use.
Keir and Leif are probably eating “goat meal,” organic rolled
oats with a bit of miso. Erin is most likely infusing raspberry
leaves, nettles or maybe Yerba Mate for morning tea.

We share all of our food. At the beginning of the month,
each person puts $50 into the food fund. Everybody under­
stands that this money is to be spent only at local businesses.
We shop at the Food Co-Op or the Farmer’s Mar­
tet when it is open. Also, a friend supplies us with
eggs and milk from her free-range chickens and

goats.

Rather than make it
one person’s specific
duty to do the shopping,
we have an unspoken
agreement that whoever
has the time will buy food
when needed. Somehow
it always works out. We
are never without food.

We all make an ef­
tort to walk or bike to the Co-Op, but I sure am tempted to
drive when it is below 40 degrees. Before going, someone
makes a list of what we need and gathers enough empty
plastic bags to hold the vegetables and bulk food. Reusable,
clean containers are used for such things as oil, maple syrup
or tahini. Whoever shops also takes a backpack or larger bag
to carry everything back home. We buy bulk foods, reuse
bags and containers and avoid driving to cut down on waste
and pollution caused by food packaging and transportation.

Buying and eating organic food is also important to our
way of living. Commercially grown foods rapidly strip the
soil of nutrients because they are grown on a massive scale.
Pesticides, herbicides and insecticides kill pests, but at the
same time they form carcinogens in our own bodies. Why
would anyone choose to support a food-growing system with
deadly long-term effects when we have alternatives? Organic
food is not too expensive. We have as much organic food as
we need with our $50 per person a month. It can be done.

In our household, eating is not a chore or something to
rush through. It is a time for talking, singing, dancing,
laughing and sometimes crying with one another. We must
eat, so why not make it a joyful, healthy experience? Since we
buy bulk food, we have to prepare meals from scratch. This
calls for creativity in combining foods to make a tasty meal.
When one person kneads dough for bread, and someone else
peels and chops garlic and veggies, the 50-minute wait for a
pot of brown rice does not seem very long. Eating is the
central factor that brings us together so often. Having 11
bodies gathered in the kitchen is never boring.

We all share bedrooms. The living room is divided by
sheets to allow Keir and Abel sleeping space on one side
while the woodstove and couches occupy the other. Chad and
Dave sleep on the couches, but they do not pay rent, so they
are not complaining.

Rent is $106 per person, and including bills plus food-
fund money, our living expenses total less than $200 per
month per person. The less money I need to live on, the less
I must work to support myself. Hence, I have more freedom
to do the things I love instead of working a job I dread to pay
for things I do not need.

Open communication is essential for any
relationship’s survival; every­
one in our house real­
izes we must communicate
with each other if our com­

dunity is to work.

Every Monday night we
get together for a house
meeting. Over dinner, we
voice our way through a
list of issues. Throughout
the week, anyone with
something to discuss
writes a word or two about
it in the red family log
book. We discuss some topics much longer than others, with
conflict sometimes arising. We talk through any difficulties
in hopes that even if we do not always understand one
another, we will respect and accept each person’s differ­
ences. Erin is often the principal mediator during these times.
We must remember that we cannot have community without
communication.

Ultimately, we would like to live in a way that works
with nature, not against her. We spend our lives trying to
honor the earth and each other. But we realize that we are part
of modern-day society, and modern-day society is not keen
on harmonizing with nature.

“We must continue to be aware of how our lifestyles are
often hypocritical, to not feel guilty about it, but see this as a
challenge to work with,” Ned said during one of the many
discussions we have about how our daily lives still affect the
earth in contrary ways.

Another challenge is learning how to make our own
clothing. Our goal is to do without clothing from stores that

March 30 and 31, Fairhaven College,
conference on sustainable communities,
with talks on community-supported agri-
culture, permaculture and many other top-
ics including a workshop on building cob
(earthen) houses and ovens. Contact Dean
Fearing at 733-1006. For information on
community dinners at the Old Town Cafe,
contact Jennifer Banawetz at 715-8536.
are motivated by profit and are not concerned about the environmental damage caused by spraying fields of cotton with poisons or converting petroleum to nylon.

We have bags of wool given to us from friends. As Tia says, "It just comes to us." We card it, which cleans the wool and aligns the fibers; spin it, using either a spinning wheel or drop spindle; and then knit the wool into hats, scarves and other things. Erin and Tia used walnuts and an iron pot as a mordant (fixer) to naturally dye some of the wool a golden brown. Tia and I each have a loom in our room and are learning how to weave. We are gradually discovering different ways to create and color clothing, but it is a lengthy process. These skills do not come overnight.

My entertainment these days comes from the spoken thoughts and spontaneous actions of the beautiful people I live with. Anything could happen at any moment. Maybe we will break into singing the Macedonian national anthem and sing until we do not want to sing anymore. Or maybe we will pass the pipe around and share interesting conversations.

People are always coming over to eat, drum, knit, see the baby, talk, dance, sauna and whatnot. It is amazing how empty the house feels when only four people are in it.

The guys in the house are really into juggling, so lately they have been sewing scrap materials together and filling them with mung beans to make more juggling balls. Tia carved a spoon, leading many of us to work with wood. We are carving spoons, chopsticks and bowls from fallen maple, wild cherry or Douglas fir collected on walks.

There are so many useful ways to entertain ourselves. We have made a couple of batches of herbal soap, melting the scraps for use as dishwashing liquid and detergent. We even make our cats' food from scratch — which is not the most fun thing to do.

In March, our household will move to 16 acres on Lopez Island for the growing season. We will grow all kinds of food; enough to feed ourselves, to share and to sell at the Farmer's Market. We will also plant herbs, trees, gourds and flowers. For a dry, warm shelter, we will either build a temporary wood structure or live in a yurt. In the summer months we will sleep in tree beds or underneath the stars. We will be without electricity and plumbing, sacrificing "conveniences" for what we believe is the greater good: the health of the earth.

Working toward what we believe in so strongly infuses each day with a sense of purpose and happiness — the two feelings humans constantly try to fulfill.

We are stewards of this planet, not owners. We see that the earth is our mother; without her, we will not survive. This has been said a million times and will continue to be said until individuals everywhere see the connection between lifestyle and the earth's degradation. In the Blithe Family we are willing to live simply for this cause.

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Fenton believes the best way to create change is through proving and demonstrating that there is a healthier alternative to current practices. "I think the quickest way for somebody to change their action is to give them an option to meet their needs," he said, adding that if we can get people involved in these issues, change can occur quickly. "If we just get it together as a community, the possibilities are wonderful," he said.

This facet of Fenton's philosophy makes the most sense. He refuses to draw lines between people and is adamant about creating situations that work for everyone.

Along with other complex and time-consuming projects, Fenton is working on a proactive business development program and has created community education and engagement programs.

When Fenton has any free time, he spends it with his wife and two daughters. They enjoy riding their horses in three-day event competitions, which include cross-country jumping. He also relishes skiing, sailing and deems himself a "voracious reader."

Leaving Fenton's, I realized there are concrete ways to shift toward a healthy, sustainable lifestyle. Fenton has created a tool for change and has presented the possibility for us to live in harmony with the earth and with each other.

All of Fenton's projects are happening now. He needs volunteers. Many organizations in Whatcom County are working toward the necessary sustainable shift, and there are many ways people can get involved.

"Environmentally regenerative, personally satisfying, economically sustaining opportunities are there — it's not a myth," Fenton said. "They don't exist in the future, they exist right now."

If you would like to find out more information, or would like to help Fenton as an administrative assistant, please contact:

Sustainable Options
(360) 966-2504

Other Contacts:

Natural Balance Forest Cooperative
(360) 966-2504

Backyard Abundance
738-1056

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Along walk down the interurban trail was my first experience in Bellingham. At the time, I did not know the names of the places I was seeing or even where the path would lead me. But, from that first encounter, I learned a great deal about what people in this community value.

Whatcom County has a great tradition of protecting park land. This county was home to the first state park in Washington and has continually made parks and preservation a priority. As our community grows, safeguarding undeveloped land within parks becomes increasingly important. Other communities have shown that if we do not set aside land now, the rising tide of growth and development may quickly consume it.

The history of parks in the county began in 1915, when local residents Cyrus Gates and Charles Larrabee donated 20 acres of land to the state for preservation. Small actions can have big results; today, Larrabee State Park spans more than 2,600 acres of coastline and forest. Its creation set a precedent in Whatcom County, uniting citizen involvement with government organization.

In 1965, the county government took an additional step to ensure the conservation of park land. In response to the development of certain scenic areas, the county commissioners created the Whatcom County Parks Board. The mission of the parks board reads, “to provide the highest standard possible in park, recreation and open spaces that deliver challenging and creative leisure opportunities to all citizens of Whatcom County, as a vital ingredient of a quality life.”

Whatcom County has spent more than $5.7 million to establish new parks since the board was created. Together with the city of Bellingham, the county has created parks on Lake Samish, Lake Padden and Silver Lake. A natural history center at Tennant Lake provides access to a preserved wetland. The interurban trail and an on-going Greenways project are also results of the county and city’s efforts.

Again and again, the citizens of Whatcom County have shown their support for the parks system. Voters have passed bond initiatives on several occasions, allocating public
money for the expansion of park land. On May 22, 1990, voters passed a $7 million levy to fund the expansion and improvement of the parks system. This "Greenways referendum" passed with 68 percent of the votes and has created a number of trails that bring outdoor recreation into the heart of the city.

Residents realize the important role parks play in sustaining a high quality of life. These preserved lands enable us to get away from the routines of the city and enjoy the outdoors without having to travel far. But as growth in the region escalates, so does the danger to our parks.

Local resident Dav- ell Seversen has been visiting Larrabee for more than 40 years. She has witnessed many changes in the park. "Over the years, more people have come to use the park, bringing with them more trash and conveniences," she said. "It is up to each of us to act responsibly. Our parks need respect."

Park usage has almost doubled in Whatcom County since 1984. More than 20 million people have made use of county park land; every year, that number grows.

With more people using the parks, we risk losing the element of solitude that makes the outdoor experience special. One solution is to further expand the parks system to provide the same recreational opportunities we enjoy today for the population of Whatcom County tomorrow.

In 1990, the same year we passed the Greenways levy, the state of Washington passed the Growth Management Act (GMA). One aspect of the act requires growing communities to preserve open spaces in their planning.

In response to the GMA, Whatcom County adopted the Natural Heritage Plan. This plan is designed to conserve large tracts of forest, agricultural and natural lands near the city.

The committee designing the plan specified certain areas suitable for park land expansion. Chuckanut Mountain, located just south of Bellingham, was at the top of the list.

Attorney and Fairhaven professor Rand Jack spent three years negotiating for the acquisition of land on Chuckanut Mountain. A landmark deal was finally made in 1993 between the Trillium Corp., the city of Bellingham, the state’s Department of Natural Resources and Whatcom County.

"These park lands provide crucial habitat for animals," Jack said. "The need for new parks will become even more important as Bellingham grows, to preserve areas for recreation and solitude."

During the year since my first encounter with Whatcom County’s parks, I have realized how important these places are to this community. Al Nickerson, the assistant manager of Larrabee Park, explained it perfectly:

"Parks allow people to break away from the humdrum of residential life; they afford them some tranquility to get out on the trail and away from the developed areas, to enjoy the beauty of the woods and the wonders of our coast. Our parks enhance the quality of life in this region."

Our parks enable us to get outside and feel the wind in our faces. They are places to watch the sunset along the rocky coast, or walk quietly in the trees. In our parks, we preserve the essential ingredients for a high quality of life. As Whatcom County grows, I hope we continue in the spirit of Charles Larrabee and Cyrus Gates and preserve the beauty that makes our region so special.
George C. Dellinger and his daughter, Harriet, on the Guide Meridian Plank Road in the late 1890s.
The Galen Biery Collection, Whatcom Museum of History and Art, Bellingham, WA