

BLUEPRINT UPDATE REPORT: TRANSPORTATION

This report was compiled to inform the community work session on the Aging Well Blueprint focus area of Transportation, one of the six focus areas of the Aging Well Whatcom Blueprint. The purpose of the work session, held March 31, 2022, was to engage organizational partners and community members in reviewing and revising strategies for the 2022 edition of the Blueprint. Work session participants provided additional information, which was added to this report.

Transportation and Older Adults in Whatcom County

What has changed?

1) Bellingham Transportation Fund Renewal

In November 2020, voters chose to renew the [Bellingham Transportation Fund](#), extending the existing sales tax of 0.2% sales tax on dollars spent within Bellingham’s city limits. With the renewal of this funding, transportation efforts are focusing on three primary categories: continuing non-motorized improvements and enhancing multimodal transportation, arterial resurfacing, and local climate action and transportation planning.

Information sources for **What has Changed** section: Community partner survey and discussions regarding older adults and housing (Nov 2021); interviews and other communication with housing partners; website and report review; data review (specific sources noted).

2) Lynden Hop Mobility On-Demand Pilot Project

In June 2021 Whatcom Transportation Authority (WTA) launched a pilot project called the [Lynden Hop](#), an on-demand, shared-ride van service within Lynden. Fares are the same as regular fixed-route services, service is available seven days a week, and vans are equipped with a wheelchair lift. WTA 2040, the agency’s long-range plan adopted in February 2022, identifies Ferndale, Birch Bay, and Blaine and areas for possible future on-demand service.

3) Population growth in outlying communities

High housing costs in Bellingham are prompting more people to move to outlying communities where housing is more affordable. This increases transportation needs, since the majority of the county’s shopping and services are located in Bellingham.

4) Americans with Disabilities Act Transition Plans for Pedestrian Facilities in the Public Right-of-Way

ADA Transition Plans have been developed for the first time ever by both the City of Bellingham and Whatcom County (see the “Other Assessments and Strategic Plans” section). The Transition

Plan is a required element of the federally mandated ADA Title II, which requires that government agencies provide equal access to programs and services they offer. While the ADA applies to all aspects of government services, these plans focus on pedestrian facilities in the public right-of-way. And while improvements in these facilities will benefit people of all ages, they will be especially helpful for increasing access and walkability for older adults.

5) Move Ahead Washington

In 2022, Washington State legislators passed the [Move Ahead Washington](#) Transportation Package, a 16-year transportation package which includes increased funding for transit operations, grants for buses and bus facilities, and bicycle and pedestrian projects, amongst many other things. Opportunity: Move Ahead WA has more funding for transportation projects and programs.

6) Transportation budget proviso

[Nondriver study P. 17 – SECTION 204 \(8\)](#) to determine the number and demographics of nondrivers in Washington state. “The joint transportation committee is directed to conduct a survey, conduct research, develop a dataset, and conduct analysis on the nondriving population of Washington state.” The study report is due to the legislature by February 1, 2023.

7) Expanded virtual services

COVID has prompted many services and activities to be available virtually, from medical appointments to book group meetings, eliminating the need for transportation to attend. While many of these activities will likely transition back to in-person, some may continue to be available virtually for people who want or need to access them that way.

Challenges

In the 2021 Aging Well Whatcom Older Adult survey, transportation was the most frequent response to the question, *“If you could add or change one thing that is available for older adults and their families in Whatcom County, what would that be?”* (The other top-three responses were housing and healthcare.)

Respondents identified a range of transportation-related changes they would like to see:

- “Ready access (safe, efficient transportation) to appointments (including medical), events, stores and such.”
- “Having a working car.”
- “Free transit options for seniors to decrease driving necessity.”
- “A public transportation system that makes it cheaper and easier than traveling by car.”
- “Easier transportation (quicker) for those that cannot drive!”
- “More frequent and more convenient bus system in Whatcom County.”
- “Covered bus stops to allow for more mobility for seniors and those with disability to more independently access health care, shopping, social events, etc.”

Information sources for **Challenges** and **Opportunities** sections: Community partner survey and discussion regarding older adults and housing (Nov 2021); Aging Well Whatcom Older Adult Survey (Nov 2021), and listening session with Elder Service Providers (Dec 2021).

Items in quotes are survey responses as written by the respondents.

CHALLENGE 1: WHATCOM COUNTY HAS MANY LOW-DENSITY AND RURAL AREAS

- Whatcom County is made up of one large city, six small cities and unincorporated rural areas. About 40% of the county's population lives in Bellingham (29 square miles), while the other 60% is spread across the remaining 2,000+ square miles in smaller towns or unincorporated areas. As noted above, cost of housing in Bellingham is leading more people to live in outlying areas.
- Our dispersed population increases needs for transportation both within and between communities.
- Whatcom County's two communities with the highest portion of residents over age 65 – Blaine and Lynden (24% and 21% respectively) – live in incorporated small cities.

CHALLENGE 2: TRANSIT SERVICE LIMITATIONS

➤ **Schedules**

- "Wait times for bus or paratransit are an issue."
- "Some older people say transportation is available, but [it's] very time consuming."
- "Evening and weekend hours are limitations."
- "Availability of public transportation [is needed] day and night."

➤ **Routes to smaller communities/rural areas**

- "Better access on a regular schedule to public transportation to all areas of the county."
- "Public transportation in the county outside of Bellingham. If I were no longer able to drive, I would be isolated and would have to quickly move."
- "Better access to Whatcom transportation - they only come out once a week where I live [98248]."
- "Public transportation that serviced the outlying communities."

➤ **Access to bus stops**

- "I no longer take the bus. I can't walk as far to where the bus stops are."
- "Bus service closer to my home."
- "Better public transportation. There is not a bus stop near me."
- "[We need to] shrink the average distance from home to a bus stop."

➤ **Safety/Perceived safety of public transportation**

- "Some don't feel safe on public transportation."
- "[There is] increased fear and anxiety in being 'out and about,' including public transportation, due to COVID."

CHALLENGE 3: DRIVING LIMITATIONS

➤ **Night driving**

- "[We need] good street lighting so we can drive safely at night."
- "[I am] unable to drive at night and I feel unsafe in an Uber or Lyft."
- "I do not want to drive at night, so that leaves me out of winter [evening] gatherings..."

➤ **Cost of vehicle ownership**

- "[The] older I get, I can't afford car repairs and maintenance."
- "Some older adults in outlying areas get really cut off when their car doesn't work. How about a trustworthy mechanic who would come to them?"

- “One of the last controls we have over our lives is the freedom driving brings & having to pay for parking is a huge hit on our already stretched fixed incomes. So no parking [fees] where we live would be a huge help.”

CHALLENGE 3: PEOPLE BICYCLING AND WALKING

- “Bellingham is not a very bike-able city, despite the changes made with more bike lanes. It’s still quite challenging to bike here.”
- “Bike riders seem to have a lot of power in the City of Bellingham. Pedestrians should be treated equally. It seems to be socially acceptable for bicyclists to weave fast among the pedestrians on the trails without sounding any warning bell or horn.”
- “More sidewalks for walking, separate trails for bicycles.”

CHALLENGE 4: LACK OF HOUSING WITHIN WALKING DISTANCE TO SERVICES

- “[I’d like to] be able to NOT have to drive to get out and about.”
- “If there were places that met my needs close by, driving wouldn’t be as important.”
- “I enjoy living within walking distance to a grocery store, library, book store, and restaurants. I do not drive so being able to walk allows me to be independent.”

CHALLENGE 5: TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM COSTS

- Developing transportation infrastructure and operating services is expensive. Because building transportation systems requires large investments, they are relatively slow to develop.
- In general, the more convenience the transportation offers (e.g., on-demand service, door-to-door pick up and drop off), the more costly it is to operate. There is an inherent cost-convenience trade-off.

Opportunities

OPPORTUNITY 1: ENHANCE PEDESTRIAN INFRASTRUCTURE

- “I live off James Street and there are no sidewalks as cars speed past. There is also NO shoulder!!!”
- “Good sidewalks to walk on.”
- “More places to sit.”
- “Senior accessibility in public places.”
- “More benches in downtown and Fairhaven areas. “

NOTE: The City of Bellingham is working on updating its bicycle and pedestrian plans in 2022.

OPPORTUNITY 2: EXPAND ON-DEMAND OPTIONS

- “Access to special taxis for short distance - adults my age should not be driving.”
- “Improve the public transportation so precious time wasn't used sitting on a bench at a grocery store.”
- “WTA is looking at Ferndale and Blaine/Birch Bay as next places to implement on-demand van service, because they have fewer regular bus route services.”
- “WTA could consider if Paratransit services become more like the Lynden Hop.”

- “I would like to get rid of my car; could do it if confident that there would be transit options for errands, etc.”

OPPORTUNITY 3: PROMOTE OTHER KINDS OF CYCLES

- For people who don’t currently see biking as an option for any number of reasons, there are variations on the theme that could be promoted:
 - **Electric bikes** give riders the ability to go greater distances and/or manage hilly terrain more easily.
 - **Tricycles** are more stable than bicycles, making them an option for older adults for whom balance may be an issue.
 - **Pedi-cabs** (2-seat carriage bikes) can provide transportation for fun as well as function. The YMCA and Christian Health Care Center currently both own pedi-cabs.
 - Some people use bikes as a mobility aid (Disability Rights WA).
- People may be understandably hesitant when they are not familiar with these options. There’s an opportunity to close this gap by helping elder community members to experience non-motorized transport with events such as e-bike and pedi-cab demonstrations, rides, etc.

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OPPORTUNITY 4: EXPLORE PARTNERSHIPS FOR TRANSPORTATION

- WTA may not be only option for providing shuttle services. Some schools have vans that go unused some of the time, and many assisted living facilities have vans but may not have frequent service. Some churches provide van service/shuttles for their members. Any of these groups could be potential partners in creating new transportation options.
- “[I] would like to see organized carpooling e.g., Theater Guild could have one night a week of a show with van service provided. ‘Culture Hop.’”

OPPORTUNITY 4: “TAKE TO” MODELS

- COVID has prompted more delivery to older adults’ homes in an effort to reduce their need to leave home. Under the emergency order, WTA, the YMCA, and food banks were involved with distributing food to people’s homes. This approach could be expanded to other situations, such as bringing heating kits to people’s homes rather than requiring people to go to central heating center in inclement weather.
- In some cases, delivery is an option e.g., getting a prescription delivered from pharmacy vs. going to pick it up.
- For an elder who doesn’t have ready transportation, someone coming by a few times a week could allow them to stay in their home. Cleaning, replenishing food.

OPPORTUNITY 5: ACCESSIBILITY INITIATIVES

- The City of Bellingham and Whatcom County are addressing accessibility via their ADA transition plans (see “Other Assessments and Strategic Plans.”). However, advocacy may be needed to ensure these plans are carried out, as there is no requirement or deadline for executing them, and resources may or may not be allocated to implementing the many changes they outline.
- WTA has a goal to make all WTA stops ADA accessible by 2040.

OPPORTUNITY 6: INNOVATION: “THINKING OUTSIDE THE BUS”

- WTA is forming an “innovation team” in 2022 or 2023, to identify how to creatively solve some of the community’s transportation gaps.
- Other communities in the US and around the world have different car/transit cultures, and provide many examples of innovative programs and best practices.
- The current WTA fare model is being evaluated in 2022. Some communities have fare-free public transportation systems that are tax funded, with no point-of-service costs (fares). WTA’s current system is funded by 80% sales tax, 5-10% grants, and only small portion from fares.
- The Bellingham Transportation Fund and recently approved Move Ahead Washington Transportation Package may be able to fund pilot projects or program innovations.

OPPORTUNITY 7: ELECTRIC VEHICLES

- “Provide supports to older people to switch to electric vehicles.”
- “How fast are our housing projects adding electric vehicle charging stations so seniors can switch to electric vehicles? Are we subsidizing the switch for seniors in their homes? Are we adjusting energy subsidies to include charging their electrical vehicles so they can remain independent of public transit?”
- Electric bikes represent another kind of electric vehicle that could help people switch from fossil fuel car transportation. Support for using electric bikes could include information about what/how to shop for e-bikes, financing/rebates, or group buys.

Other Assessments and Strategic Plans

Several other community assessments and organizational strategic plans include aspects of housing for older adults:

The **Whatcom Transportation Authority's** [WTA 2040 Long Range Transit Plan](#) focuses on the "Three E's" as key priorities: Equity, Efficiency, and the Environment. WTA has added Equity, Efficiency, and the Environment as focus areas. The Equity aspect of the plan is unique in its explicit inclusion of older adults, as well as low-income riders, people of color, and people with disabilities. Several aspects of the plan are especially relevant to older adults. First is WTA's intention to investigate expanding on-demand services. This includes an assessment of the Lynden Hop and the feasibility of its continuation, as well as exploring on-demand service in Ferndale and the Blaine/Birch Bay areas. Second is exploring needs regarding paratransit in the Blaine-Birch Bay area. And third are WTA's plans to improve ADA-accessibility, designating funds for improving pedestrian access such as sidewalks and crossings to better connect people to transit, and expanding the number of benches and shelters at bus stops across the system.

The **Whatcom County Health Department** [2018 Community Health Assessment](#) focus groups identified walkability as a key issue, including "injuries and fear for safety related to insufficient sidewalks and poorly maintained public spaces."

The **City of Bellingham's** [ADA Transition Plan for Pedestrian Facilities in the Public Right-of-Way](#) 2021 points to the "...opportunity for Bellingham to eliminate barriers to accessibility and create mobility for all." It includes recommendations for ADA compliant design standards and physical modifications at specific locations (curb cuts, sidewalks, cross walks, push buttons, bus stop access, ADA parking spots, etc.). The plan's timeframe is 30-50 years, "depending on level of investment COB puts towards the effort." The plan is intended to be a living document with annual updates.

Whatcom County also developed an [ADA Transition Plan Within the Public Rights of Way](#) released in 2021. It states that the County should create a "barrier removal program" and outlines recommendations similar to those in the City of Bellingham's plan for for ADA compliant design standards and physical modifications such as curb cuts, sidewalks, cross walks, push buttons, bus stop access, ADA parking spots, etc. This plan will be "used to help guide future planning and implementation of necessary accessibility improvements" throughout Whatcom County.

The **NW Regional Council's** [Strategic Plan 2020-2023](#) calls for maintaining its current services as Medicaid Transportation broker, linking individuals with transportation needs to access services. Goals are also to leverage NWRC's transportation brokerage and network capabilities to meet additional transportation demand, analyze current brokerage and network capacity, identify and fill gaps, and seek additional funding sources for transportation services.

[Whatcom Mobility 2040](#), the **Whatcom Council of Governments'** plan with a 2017-2040 timeframe, includes a wide range of infrastructure projects such as traffic lights, bike lanes and trails, street/road/ intersection upgrades, WTA bus replacement. Some projects, such as cross-walk and sidewalk improvements, would especially benefit older adults. One of the [Environmental Justice Maps](#) shows the percentage of residents age 65+ by census block.

The City of Bellingham is working on updating its bicycle and pedestrian plans in 2022.