Bellingham Station Transit-Oriented Development

Frequently Asked Questions

Brief project description: With its partners at Whatcom County, City of Bellingham, Port of Bellingham, and the Bellingham Regional Chamber of Commerce, Whatcom Transportation Authority (WTA) seeks to expand its existing primary transit hub, "Bellingham Station," while enabling a Transit-Oriented Development. This will serve as the northern gateway to downtown Bellingham on the former site of the Public Market on Cornwall Avenue.

Q: What is Transit-Oriented Development?
A: Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) is compact development near transit hubs. TOD usually includes new residential development, office or commercial space, welcoming facilities for walking and biking, and other amenities, all within a half mile of frequent transit.

Q: How might that look here in Bellingham?
A: Project partners describe it this way:

- A Gateway to Bellingham's Downtown and Waterfront
    - Point of arrival from Bellingham's neighborhoods, Western Washington University, and all of Whatcom County
    - Catalyst for multi-block economic development, density, vertical construction, and ongoing investment in an underdeveloped corner of downtown
- A Future Forward Transportation Hub
    - Safe, secure, and convenient transit that supports robust ridership
    - Able to scale as our community changes and technologies evolve
    - Amenities for safe, secure, and convenient walking and biking
- A Great Place to Live
    - Well-designed, high-quality housing
    - Active pedestrian environment including vibrant street frontage

Q: What are the community benefits?
A: This project would make efficient use of a major vacant property downtown. The Bellingham Station TOD will help address the housing availability crises, catalyze economic development, create jobs, and improve connections between Bellingham's city center and surrounding areas. By enabling Rapid Transit and collocating housing with transit, it will significantly improve the convenience of riding the bus, thereby creating demand for transit. Increased transit ridership has many additional benefits for the community.

Q: What is the size and scale?
A: While the site could support up to two multi-story buildings, and there are no height restrictions, the size and scale will be determined in large part by market conditions. Through collaboration with partners and through market studies, we'll need to determine a "sweet spot" with regard to how many units, and what type of units, the neighborhood can support.

Q: Why pursue Transit-Oriented Development?
A: TOD can deliver multiple community benefits and help project partners achieve their strategic objectives. For example, TODs increase the vibrancy and health of downtowns. They can increase the market for transit by making it easier and more convenient to ride the bus. They create jobs and stimulate economic activity. They increase the supply of available homes. And they expand people's ability to conveniently live, work, shop, and recreate downtown.

Q: When would the development occur?
A: WTA hopes to select a development partner in 2027. Construction could begin by 2029 or 2030.

Q: Why now?
A: Bellingham Station is at capacity. To meet community demand for additional routes or greater frequency, we need to increase the number of bus gates. Our plans to upgrade two GO Lines (where a bus comes every 15 minutes) to Rapid Transit Lines (where a bus comes every 10 minutes) depend on this expansion.

Q: Once an expanded transit station is built, what happens to the current transit station?
A: WTA needs only one (expanded) transit station downtown. The current plan is to locate it at the Public Market site. This would create an opportunity use our current site for redevelopment as well.

Q: Why is WTA the lead agency?
A: WTA is a county-wide agency governed by elected officials throughout Whatcom County. WTA's Board Members recognize how TOD's have been used throughout the country to 1) increase ridership by improving the convenience of taking the bus, 2) address the housing affordability crises, and 3) create jobs and stimulate economic growth.

Q: Is WTA acting as a property developer?
A: No. An experienced, professional developer will develop the property. WTA's role is to work with project partners and the community to develop project parameters, to select a development partner, and manage the contract with that developer, for design, construction, operations and maintenance of the facility.

Q: Is this a low-income housing project?
A: TODs generally include a mix of housing types. The exact mix will depend on community engagement and market studies.

Q: How will it be financed?
A: Project partners are exploring the possibility of a Public Private Partnership or P3. Public agencies around the country are using P3s to deliver major transportation infrastructure projects. A P3 is a long-term contractual arrangement between a public agency and a private partner to deliver assets and services to benefit the community. The private partner would assume responsibility for the design, construction, financing, maintenance, and operations. Public partners would set policy and objectives. Both parties would agree on performance metrics to be satisfied once the project is operational.

Q: Will WTA seek local taxes to construct the TOD?
A: No. Through the Public Private Partnership, the developer would design, construct, maintain, and operate the property. They would generate rental income over the course of the contract. The Washington State Legislature has committed to fund a portion of the transit station expansion. WTA has also received a Federal Grant for technical assistance in the pre-development phase.

Q: Who would own the property?
A: WTA would retain ownership of the land.

Q: How can I stay engaged with the project?
A: Watch for updates at engage.ridewta.com.