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Bellingham public market property to become new bus station, housing

WTA will initially rent out parts of property, while planning development

Oct. 2, 2025 2:09 p.m.



The Whatcom Transportation Authority board approved the purchase of the Public Market property on Cornwall Avenue in Bellingham. The WTA plans to build its new Bellingham station at the site.

(Finn Wendt/Cascadia Daily News)

By CHARLOTTE ALDEN

General Assignment/Enterprise Reporter

The old Public Market property in downtown Bellingham is on track to become the site of a new bus station — plus some.

On Thursday morning, Whatcom Transportation Authority's board authorized the purchase of the property at 1522 Cornwall Ave. in downtown Bellingham for \$6.2 million, with an expected closing date of Oct. 20.

WTA's vision for the property includes workforce and market-rate housing, retail and office space, and potentially child care, and could be up to 10 floors. Amenities for bicycles and pedestrians would be worked into the project, too, said Maureen McCarthy, WTA director of community and government relations.

In the coming months, WTA will make some improvements to the property before renting out some of the space while the authority undergoes a planning process for the new development.

For about four years, the property was used as Lighthouse Mission's homeless shelter, Base Camp. The shelter relocated to the **Mission's new building** in Old Town Bellingham last fall.

In 2022, the WTA conducted a "visioning study" to see what community members wanted to see in a new bus station. Many of those priorities are reflected in this development plan.

"When the Public Market property became available, our Board of Directors saw the opportunity to combine all of these uses in a true Transit Oriented Development project," McCarthy said.

The WTA is working with the City of Bellingham and Whatcom County, who are adjacent property owners, to see if they could include any of those parcels in the project.

As for a timeline, much of the next year and a half will be spent identifying public and private partnerships, with community engagement, scope and design worked on between July 2027 and September 2028. Construction could start by 2030, McCarthy said.

WTA will immediately begin working on small improvements to the site, mainly renovating the bathrooms and erecting partitions so some of the spaces can be used for offices, McCarthy said. Some WTA staff will likely work in part of the space, while other tenants rent out the rest.

McCarthy said WTA has been "thinking creatively" about how to attract people to the property while design for the larger project is ongoing. They explored setting up a pickleball court inside but found it didn't meet the interested group's needs, McCarthy said. Another idea is bringing in some food trucks to the outside space.

As for the current Bellingham Bus Station, McCarthy said no decisions have been made yet for what to do with the property. But she said the developer that WTA selects to build the new station may be interested in developing the old site as well.

"We're securing WTA's ability to expand with growth in the future," McCarthy said of the project. "What it allows for in terms of improved bus service as Bellingham grows and becomes more urban is really exciting, too."

Charlotte Alden is CDN's general assignment/enterprise reporter; reach her at charlottealden@cascadiadaily.com; 360-922-3090 ext. 123.