



2021 Legislative Agenda

Local Lobby Day

Housing

In the WWU Center for Economic and Business Research's [2020 Bellingham Residential Survey](#), homelessness and housing affordability were listed as the top two most important issues in Bellingham amongst 1,500+ respondents. In a survey conducted by the ASWWU's Office of Civic Engagement, "Protections & support for people experiencing homelessness" was selected as the most important local issue amongst 75+ respondents. ASWWU recognizes that the events of the past year, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the increasingly dire state of homelessness locally, require a call for bolder solutions, more robust services, and a greater level of community care regarding our neighbors who are living unsheltered.

ASWWU Urges Policymakers to:

- **Redirect funds from the encampment sweeps budget towards permanent, no-barrier housing for people experiencing homelessness.**
 - On January 28th the city [spent nearly \\$75,000](#) to remove an encampment at City Hall and [\\$27,000 to clear the ensuing encampment](#) at Geri Fields on March 16th.
 - Spending on the removal of encampments is an irresponsible and short-sighted use of funds, as it fails to address the root causes of homelessness.
 - Encampment sweeps achieve the optics of a solution by removing people from sight, while actually exacerbating displacement, isolation, and danger faced by unsheltered individuals and families.
 - Bellingham needs to provide shelter and trauma-informed health and wellness resources rather than continually uprooting unsheltered individuals and chasing them into unseen corners of Bellingham. The only solution to homelessness is permanent housing.
- **Create emergency, no-barrier winter shelters that will double the current city-wide shelter capacity and stay open for a minimum of four months (November-February).**
 - In February, temperatures dropped below freezing for one week straight. A warming shelter opened at the Depot for only that single week, despite public outcries for emergency shelter since November and awareness at the city level of the danger posed to unsheltered individuals every winter.
 - With Pacific Northwest winters regularly involving emergency-level wind, rain, snow, and snaps of below freezing temperatures, failing to provide adequate warming shelters with hygiene facilities leads to preventable disease, injury, and death.
 - These shelters should also include access to physical and mental health providers, allow pets, and provide space to store belongings so as to not make guests choose between warmth and forgoing their possessions.

- **Legislate a permanent ban on encampment sweeps.**
 - It is clear from every angle that encampment sweeps are not a solution to the problem of homelessness, locally or elsewhere. Not only are encampment sweeps economically inefficient and wasteful, they can create traumatic experiences for houseless residents and their allies; create a culture of distrust and fear of police, public works, and parks department employees; result in lost or discarded personal belongings; and isolate people experiencing homelessness away from their communities, supporters, and caseworkers. There is absolutely no evidence that encampment sweeps decrease homelessness locally.
 - A ban on encampment sweeps would put a stop to the use of funds for an ineffective and traumatic practice and incentivize solutions that work to actually decrease homelessness.
 - Resource: [Why Cities Should Embrace Encampments - Seattle U](#)

- **Remove the current 'family' definition from municipal housing codes that would barr more than three unrelated people from living together.**
 - Repeal Bellingham Municipal Code 20.08.020 language concerning the definitions of "family" from "not more than three unrelated persons," to be instead in accordance with recommended safe occupancy limits. As ruled unconstitutional by: Yoder et al., v. City of Bowling Green, OH et al., U.S District Court, Case No. 3:17 CV 2321

Safety

ASWWU recognizes a basic understanding: our criminal justice system is broken. Numerous sources detail the disproportionate rate incarceration and policing affects people of color, the mentally-ill and low-income earners. Across the country and here in Bellingham, we have seen troubling trends of mass incarceration, inhumane jailing, identity profiling, and underfunding or underestimation of our drug addiction and mental health crises. We support alternatives to incarceration, justice for all, and increased advocacy for the most vulnerable in our communities.

ASWWU Urges Policymakers to:

- **Enable a non-policed community emergency response program by Jan 1st, 2022**
 - The Mayor and City Council have already expressed that creating a non-policed emergency response program is a priority, but have not created accountability by setting a date in which to launch this program. We urge the council to establish a plan, budget, and timeline for launch. This should be paid for by redirecting funds from the Bellingham Police Department.
 - Precedent: [CAHOOTS](#)

- **Enable a community police oversight board by Jan 1st, 2022**
 - In order to support the calls for police accountability from BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, unsheltered, and otherwise marginalized residents who are disproportionately affected by police violence, we urge the council to establish a plan, budget, and timeline for the launch of a community oversight board for the Bellingham Police Department.
 - This Civilian Investigative Panel must be created extraneous of the Police Department, with subpoena powers and independent counsel.
 - Model: [Chapter 11.5 of the Code of the City of Miami and Ordinance No. 12188 \("Ordinance"\)](#).

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion

ASWWU recognizes the injustices many people of marginalized identities face in Bellingham. Bellingham has a long history of white supremacy, from the colonial violence against Coast Salish peoples, to the white mobs and leaders that drove out Chinese families in 1885, Sikhs in 1907, and Japanese in 1942. The present-day racism directed against people of color shows that this is not an issue of the past. We also have a serious issue with too many people in our community experiencing poverty. We support the city's strategic commitments to 'Equity and Social Justice' and encourage the city to innovate robust policy and programs to back them up.

ASWWU Urges Policymakers to:

- **Pass a resolution in support of statewide endeavors to implement ranked-choice voting for all municipal elections within the City of Bellingham and enact upon passage.**
 - ASWWU believes that voting is a right and recognizes that many communities do not have the access they need to exercise this fundamental right. We believe the following recommendations will increase the amount of underrepresented communities and young people participating in elections and local governance.
 - Model: Washington SHB 1156 "Local Options Bill"
- **Establish a mandatory Anti-Racism and Anti-Bias Training for local government employees that is crafted by and integrates literature created by Black, Indigenous, and people of color.**
 - This training should also include local context and a review of the history of discrimination in Bellingham.
- **Establish Bellingham as a Sanctuary City to protect our Undocumented community.**

- The only two sanctuary cities in Washington are Marysville and Seattle. While Whatcom County states that it will not honor an ICE detainer, the continued presence of Immigrations and Customs Enforcement in our city creates anxiety and fear among our Undocumented community. The City of Bellingham has an opportunity to reaffirm the value of our Undocumented community members and their safety by designating Bellingham as a Sanctuary City
- **Partner with local non-profits and community organizations to ensure the undocumented community has access to COVID-relief as well as vaccines.**
 - Local governments with existing infrastructure in supportive state policy environments have been able to respond quickly, but immigrants in newer immigrant destinations or more restrictive policy contexts face numerous barriers to receiving COVID-19 support. This puts the health and financial well-being of often already vulnerable immigrant communities at greater risk.
 - Even in metro areas that have launched targeted support, not all immigrant communities have equal access, especially those residing outside city limits. In these situations, communities may not be eligible for city-led programs or have limited access to networks of community-based organizations and private resources.
 - Partnership strengthens government initiatives and improves access for communities with limited English proficiency, low digital literacy, and distrust of public authorities.

Environmental Justice

ASWWU recognizes that the people of Whatcom County and our environment are interconnected; each depends on each other for long-term success. As Whatcom County becomes more populated and our economy grows, we recommend innovative solutions for an economy that is compatible with our planet's climate and health. We must transition off of fossil fuels to clean energy, creating new green living wage jobs, especially for new graduates. In addition, we must support policies that protect our prosperity by protecting safe and clean drinking water, farmland, salmon and the people who depend on them, and honoring the highest law of the land, treaties with tribal nations.

ASWWU Urges Policymakers to:

- **Prioritize new and existing funds to jumpstart the technical work needed to lay a solid foundation for an adjudication of the Nooksack water basin and associated comprehensive discussions.**
 - The \$250,000 in funds allocated to Whatcom county for complementary water adjudication processes to continue and update technical work as opposed to facilitation or pre-settlement discussions. We believe that any needed technical

work must be identified by and initiated through consent and consultation with the Nooksack Tribe and Lummi Nation, in accordance with treaty law.

- We suggest that the Watershed Management Board, Watershed Management Team, and Planning Unit develop a process to outline the technical gaps and then prioritize work according to what is most needed to set the stage for an efficient and successful adjudication and collaborative process.
 - We believe that settlement discussions must take place under adjudication proceedings. Without court supervision, there is no accountability to keep parties at the table.
 - We urge the County to prioritize new and existing funds to jumpstart the technical work needed to lay a solid foundation for an adjudication and associated comprehensive discussions. The overarching reality of increasing climate impacts must frame any water resource discussions. It is imperative that all relevant, past technical work related to water resource management and planning must be reviewed and updated as necessary to account for and incorporate vulnerability to the impacts of climate change. The projected increase in droughts and floods, decreased snowpack and temperature rise will directly impact water resources.
- **Protect the Lake Whatcom Watershed and ensure quality drinking water for future residents and the health of the watershed.**
 - Lake Whatcom is a crucial clean water source for our community. We ask that the city take further steps to protect the health of Lake Whatcom by limiting tree removal on non-development properties. Trees are a natural filtration for our land pollution and before it reaches the water sources - pollution to drinking water is largely due to logging, new homes, the loss of native vegetation.
 - **Limit the potential for a disastrous introduction of invasive species such as zebra mussels by constructing a locked gate at the Bloedel-Donovan public boat launch and increasing awareness on boat-inspection procedures to private shoreline properties.**
 - The introduction of invasive species such as zebra mussels could cost millions of dollars to manage and ruin the quality of our drinking water.
 - **Approve the strongest possible policies for Cherry Point to limit the health and safety impacts on local residents, our environment and the climate.**
 - Xwe'chi'eXen (Cherry Point) has been a part of Lummi Nation's ancestral land and waters since time immemorial. It was – and is – vital habitat for salmon, herring (a vital food for salmon), and other species that Tribal and commercial fisheries need to exist.
 - The Cherry Point industrial zone hosts two oil refineries, an aluminum smelter, and three marine transshipment terminals. Our ask includes ending any increased shipments of crude oil, tar sands, fracked gas and coal through Cherry

Point's existing fossil fuel terminals. We are concerned that a gas-fired power plant could be built at Cherry Point.

- **Amend the City of Bellingham building code to prohibit the use of natural gas in new building construction.**

Any new buildings should be gas free. The City can promote building electrification by prohibiting the use of gas. This will save money down the line, since money will not be spent to incentivise transition away from gas.

- **Incorporate allowances into the Whatcom county land use code for wind energy turbines with protections for wildlife.**

- Our county demonstrates a need for more local renewable energy systems. This will also encourage new jobs in the renewable energy sector.

- **Regulate development on lake, river, marine, and wetland shorelines in the country in anticipation of sea-level rises and the harms caused to aquatic ecosystems by coastal squeeze.**

- Coastal squeeze is a phenomenon in which salmon and forage fish are losing their habitat and butting up with structures because of the rising sea levels and development along shorelines. Since we host the Southern Resident Killer Whales, it is crucial that Whatcom lead efforts to ensure long term shoreline food-system stability.

- **Stay ahead of State legislation regarding single-use plastics by updating the plastic ordinance by the end of 2021, and end the executive order allowing the distribution of plastic bags.**

- We now know far more on the science of COVID-19 and the ways in which it is transmitted. As grocery stores bring back paper bags, plastic bags remain available. We ask that the Mayor end the executive order allowing the distribution of plastic bags to get our city back on track for eliminating single-use plastics.

Food

- Develop an assessment of their city's food retail environment through focusing, planning, and implementing the assessment and communicating the findings. Assessment of the food retail environment is part of a comprehensive approach to undertaking healthier food retail initiatives.

Health

The ASWWU firmly believes that accessible mental health services on and off campus are a vital resource for students in higher education. There are still several barriers that hinder students from accessing mental health services, notably the lack of diverse counseling staff. Counseling centers at WWU are facing an increased demand due to COVID-19 and remote learning, and this is indicative of increased demand in the City of Bellingham. Knowing that many students in higher education choose to remain in the area after graduation, the lack of mental health services offered by diverse counseling staff is a major deterrent for members of the community that wish to remain in Bellingham. ASWWU want to highlight that undocumented students are unable to access the same mental health and wellness resources due to their exclusion from social programs and are therefore a high need population.

ASWWU Urges Policymakers to:

- **Create a Task Force on Expanding the Mental Health Workforce in Bellingham.**
 - We need the City of Bellingham to take active steps towards ensuring the public health of our communities. Convene a multi-sector collaborative to develop roadmap for community development to support recruitment and retention of behavioral health workforce.
 - Model: [Recruitment and Retention Recommendations for Oregon's Behavioral Health Workforce](#)
- **Create incentives for Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) mental health workforce members to locate their practice in Bellingham.**
 - This can include efforts by the city to facilitate career pipeline development, scholarships for undergraduates and stipends for graduate students, loan repayments and retention activities. Provide up to \$15,000 in student loan forgiveness to mental health professionals working in the mental health professional shortage area.

<https://www.bellinghamherald.com/article231171868.html>