

# Local Lobby Day 2023

## Housing Accessibility

### What's the issue?

Housing is incredibly expensive and exceedingly difficult to access for many people in Bellingham. [City data](#) shows the median Bellingham rent increased 41% without adjusting for inflation, from \$1,200 in 2018 to \$1,693 in 2022. [Cascadia Daily](#) writes that “Residents of Bellingham and Whatcom County are consistently more cost-burdened than other Washingtonians” (2022). 52% of rental households in [Whatcom County](#) and 58% in Bellingham spent more than 30% of their income on rent and utilities.

### Here's why we care.

Of the approximately 15,000 students that attend Western, [73% of students live off campus](#). With classes taking up 9-12 hours a week, and being expected to study about [2-3 hours](#) per each hour spent in class, it is impossible for many students to work an adequate amount to comfortably afford housing. Students spend an incredible amount of time stressing about, looking for, and working to afford housing. Without access to affordable housing, students have less resources to support ourselves and pay for other necessities like groceries, as well as other important items like textbooks and school-related materials.

### Let's do something about it!

- The ASWWU supports efforts like the funding of a Social Housing Initiative- Social housing is publicly owned and financed mixed-income housing intended to be permanently affordable.
  - o Example [I-135 in Seattle, WA](#): This measure was passed in February in a special election that will now create a public development authority (PDA) to develop, own, and maintain publicly financed mixed-income social housing developments. If Bellingham were to implement something similar, the city would provide start-up support for the PDA. The City Council would determine the amount of ongoing City support. Before it transfers any public lands for nonpublic use, the City would be required to consider a transfer to the PDA. The PDA's Charter would govern the election, composition, and duties of the PDA's Board of Directors.
- The ASWWU supports efforts like Inclusionary Zoning in Bellingham
  - o [Inclusionary Zoning](#) (IZ) is a tool to create affordable housing that can be used to require new construction of housing to include a set number of units that are affordable to those of low or moderate incomes. The City of Bellingham has stated that it will be conducting a feasibility study to determine if it could be used in Bellingham. We support IZ and encourage further efforts to create affordable housing via zoning.

## Mental Health Resources

### What's the issue?

Studies show that the mental health of college students has been clearly worsening across the board. The American Psychological Association found that as of the 2020-2021 school year, [more than 60%](#) of students met the criteria for at least one mental health issue. Campus services have limited resources and the number of mental health experts available on campus is not adequate for student needs. Only

about [20 therapists](#) and advocates are available through WWU, and while this is a good start, there is a need for resources beyond on-campus services for Western's 16,000+ students. Although there is limited data on the extent of unaddressed mental health needs in Bellingham, across the country there is a [consistent shortage of mental health professionals](#) to address the growing mental health crisis.

### **Here's why we care.**

WWU Students have reported healthcare accessibility and resources as one of the top issues that they would like to see prioritized. Experiencing issues with mental health can lead students to be unable to perform well academically, make it very hard to attend classes, and additionally make taking care of oneself a very difficult task. In the wake of the pandemic, students' wellbeing must be considered a top priority. In 2020, [the CDC reported that](#) 1 in 4 young people between the ages of 18 and 24 had considered suicide. Additionally, data shows that of college students that have dropped out, [64%](#) of them did so due to experiencing a mental illness. More extensive resources and responses to mental health crises are important to WWU students.

### **Let's do something about it!**

- The ASWWU supports efforts to fund broader and more comprehensive mental health resources in Bellingham.
  - While mental health services funding is often allocated at the state level, many cities, like [Denver](#), are now opting to allocate their own mental health funds to resources like mental health centers to make mental health care and experts more accessible. ASWWU supports drawing funding from BPD to finance these efforts.
- The ASWWU supports efforts to provide alternative responses to mental health crises via a separate emergency line
  - Although Bellingham and Whatcom County have already begun to implement the [Alternative Response Team](#) as an alternative to police response, ASWWU believes that providing a separate number for alternative response rather than filtering calls through 911 would help residents feel safer when calling for help. An example of a program like this would be Eugene, Oregon's CAHOOTS program, which is accessible through its own telephone line and aids with crisis counseling, suicide prevention, conflict resolution, substance abuse, and more. ASWWU supports an alternative response to mental health crises that operate separately from BPD.

## **Transportation**

### **What's the issue?**

While the buses and routes that run between the different areas of campus are relatively efficient, northbound routes and buses that take you further from campus are not as fast, reliable, or accessible. It is difficult to access less expensive grocery stores like Winco or to access healthcare facilities like PeaceHealth. Students have reported the buses as being late and unreliable. Additionally, most routes only run until about 7 and many students participate in extracurriculars that run later than this time or use campus facilities that are open until later hours. In consideration of other types of transportation, many students also bike to school and throughout Bellingham as a means of transportation. While many

streets in Bellingham do have protected bike lanes, many streets connecting housing areas with dense student populations to campus do not have protected bike lanes.

### **Here's why we care.**

ASWWU believes that improvement of our transportation is a necessary step to ensuring that Bellingham is safe, equitable, sustainable, and healthy. To have a thriving community, safe and accessible transportation is needed so everyone can easily access their needs and all the places that make Bellingham a great place to live. Only about [half of college students](#) have their own vehicle to rely on, so it is very important to the WWU student body that efficient, accessible public transportation is prioritized.

### **Let's do something about it!**

- The ASWWU supports the construction of protected bike lanes throughout Bellingham.
  - o New data shows that protected bike lanes can [cut injury of bikers in half](#). Additionally, data shows that protected bike lanes increase biking, as safer routes draw bikers who would otherwise be skeptical of biking near roads.
- The ASWWU supports the expansion of the WTA bus system, including later hours of operation and expanded routes
  - o Many Western students stay on campus after the hours that buses usually run for extracurriculars or to use campus facilities. Additionally, later running buses would benefit students and other Bellingham residents who work later hours.
  - o More routes that extend into areas of Bellingham off of Meridian would help make more of Bellingham accessible to students.

## **Sustainability**

### **What's the issue?**

In the fight against climate change the goal of sustainability has emerged as one of the most important ways to combat it. By moving towards a more sustainable community in the long run, the result will be a greener, healthier, and livelier future for Bellingham and Whatcom County.

One of the most effective ways to curb carbon emissions is reducing food waste through composting. Whatcom County currently has great composting infrastructure, but according to a survey completed in 2022 by the Western Washington University Students for Climate Action only 5% of off campus renters have the ability to compost.

### **Here's why we care.**

Our generation will experience the long-term effects of climate change, and in many ways are already experiencing them. We also recognize that climate change disproportionately affects historically marginalized communities, and that environmental justice is deeply tied to social justice. We believe that to plan for a healthy and equitable future, we must advance our efforts to protect our environment. The quality of our built and natural environments impacts student health and long-term well-being.

## Let's do something about it!

- The ASWWU supports future legislation similar to [The Climate Action Fund](#).
  - o In 2022 Bellingham council members proposed the Climate Action Fund as a ballot measure – this would take revenue from natural gas taxation and property taxes and use this money to support sustainability projects in Bellingham. These would include sustainable transportation, creating jobs in the sustainability sector and offering training, planning infrastructure for climate change impacts, and responding to other community needs.
- The ASWWU supports incentives for property management companies and property owners to compost.
  - o The City of Shoreline currently has a [Compost Incentive Program](#) for restaurants and food-service businesses. Through this program, eligible food service businesses may receive free compost service for up to one year.