

North Whatcom Poverty Task Force

2020 Final Report

Recommendations and Next Steps



Photo credit Custer, WA - 2018

Introduction

On any given day, there are over almost 1,000 people in Whatcom County¹ that are homeless or unsheltered, with many more one misfortune away from poverty. As our community grows, it is essential that the City looks forward to addressing the concerns of our most vulnerable.

In February of 2019, the Ferndale City Council formed the North Whatcom Poverty Task Force, a temporary advisory body tasked with exploring the needs for the greater Ferndale community and presenting a set of recommendations to the Ferndale City Council that will address the impacts of income inequality, homelessness, food insecurity and rising housing prices.

This is the first time the City of Ferndale has formed a group to explicitly tackle the issues of poverty in the community and is born out of a need to establish a clear plan for these challenges. The city, through means of their comprehensive plan, address many of the macro concerns with growth – the impact to

¹ 2019 Whatcom County Annual Report on Homelessness, Point-in-Time Homeless County. Available online at <https://www.whatcomcounty.us/DocumentCenter/View/41863/Results-of-2019-Point-In-Time-Count-of-Individuals-Living-Homeless-in-Whatcom-County>

the roads, utilities and business community - but for those experiencing the sudden fluctuations of poverty, there is little solace in long-term plans. This body of work is intended as a compendium of ideas and projects, recommendations for building a community where all can thrive.

The Task Force was composed of representatives with experience in social services, health care, the business community, and direct experience with poverty. It included residents from within Ferndale, as well as from the greater Ferndale area.

Membership of the North Whatcom Poverty Task Force:

Michelle Beck

Councilmember Kate Bishop

Tom Black

Jim Carr

Owen Cool (Vice-Chair)

Autumn Cunningham (Chair)

Councilmember Ali Hawkinson

Sarah Koehler

Mark Kreutzkamp

Sara O'Connor

Shaiyeda Silverwolf

Riley Sweeney (City Staff)

The goal was to examine the experience of poverty in North Whatcom County and draft a list of recommendations for the Ferndale City Council that addresses these issues. The recommendations would look at immediate, short-term and long-term solutions to poverty.

Poverty is a systemic challenge with a wide array of causes, symptoms and solutions. To be the most effective, the task force was narrowly focused on what changes the City of Ferndale could enact, although poverty does not stop at the city limits.

Over the last year, the Task Force met monthly with subject matter experts to delve into different dimensions of poverty. The recommendations in this document owe much of their background and suggestions to our subject matter experts, and the City is thankful for their participation in the process.

Subject Matter Experts Who Contributed to This Work:

Greg Winter, Executive Director of the Opportunity Council

Suzanne Nevan, Director of the Ferndale Food Bank

Maureen McCarthy, Community Relations and Marketing Manager with Whatcom Transit Authority

Tim Wilder, Planning Director with Whatcom Transit Authority

Kevin Turner, Police Chief with the Ferndale Police Department

John Gargett, Deputy Director with the Whatcom County Sheriff's Office, Division of Emergency Management

Frances Burkhart, Program Specialist with the Whatcom County Sheriff's Office, Division of Emergency Management

Emilio Vela, Jr., Executive Director of Northwest Youth Services

Steven Gamage, School Resource Officer with the Ferndale Police Department

Gina Barrieau, Workforce Coordinator with WorkSource Whatcom

Samya Lutz, Housing and Services Program Manager, City of Bellingham

Ann Beck, Human Services Supervisor with Whatcom County Health Department

Terri Temple, Coordinator for the Ferndale Community Resource Center

James Valdez, Research Intern with the University of Washington



State of Poverty in North Whatcom County

By the Numbers

- In Whatcom County, there are **approximately 700 residents experiencing homelessness**²
- **36.4% of households** in Whatcom County are **housing burdened**, spending more than 30% of their household income on housing. Of those, **65% of renters** in Whatcom County are housing burdened³
- **16.7% of households** in Whatcom County are **severely housing burdened**, spending more than 50% of their household income on housing⁴
- In Ferndale, approximately **1,078 residents received SNAP/Food Stamp benefits** in the past 12 months.⁵
- **14.4% of Ferndale residents live below the Federal Poverty threshold** (\$24,600 a year for a family of four), which equates to approximately **2,016 people**.⁶

There is a common assumption that poverty is only a problem in the big cities, however poverty in the smaller cities is an ever-growing issue - it just takes different, less visible forms.

In terms of homelessness, there are few residents actually living on the streets of Ferndale, but many are living in their cars or in places not suitable for habitation (tool sheds, barns and attics). Historically, the cost of living was lower out in the county, but as of 2019, the average rental price in Whatcom

² Whatcom County Homeless Strategies Task Force Homelessness One Sheet, Jan 2020.

³ Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies, <http://harvard-cga.maps.arcgis.com/apps/StorytellingTextLegend/index.html?appid=18d215ddb20946a4a16ae43586bf0b52>

⁴ Ibid

⁵ American Community Survey, US Census, 2017, available online:

<https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF>

⁶ Ibid

County is \$1,850 per month, which is identical to the rental price within the City of Bellingham⁷. The median home price in Whatcom County is actually higher than in Bellingham and is rising at a faster rate⁸.

Although it is rare to see a panhandler on the streets of downtown Ferndale, one in six Ferndale residents use the Ferndale Food Bank⁹ to meet their basic needs, and many families struggle to secure quality, nutrient dense food on a regular basis.

For those unable to afford a vehicle, transportation can be a major challenge in Ferndale. It takes over an hour to travel from Ferndale to Bellingham by bus, making it difficult to retain employment.


Even the youth of Ferndale are affected. According to a report by the Opportunity Council on youth in crisis, 3.5% of students enrolled in the Ferndale School District experience a housing crisis during the school year¹⁰. That is approximately 120 students, and while not all of them reside within the City, they clearly rely on the services available in Ferndale.

The immediate impacts of poverty on a growing community can be devastating. Increasing crime rates, drug abuse, and truancy are some of the symptoms, but the ongoing damage is that the community will become unaffordable and inaccessible to the people who have lived, worked and grown up here for generations. There is a pressing need to plan not just for our growth, but for our most vulnerable to ensure that Ferndale remains the city of opportunity for all.

Organization of Recommendations

To help organize the broad array of possible solutions, this report is divided by category with a brief introduction to the challenges in each sector. There is no silver bullet for solving system-wide challenges, however with a concerted effort and approaching the problem from multiple fronts, the impacts of poverty can and will be mitigated over time.

Obviously, each solution will need to be weighed on its own merits, however as a whole, this document represents a substantial step forward in solving these challenges.

Finally, there were a few recommendations that the Task Force felt were absolutely essential to making progress in our community. They are highlighted with a green button (like this: )

⁷ "Incomes can't keep pace with rapidly rising housing costs", Bellingham Business Journal, 03/20/19. Available online at <http://bbjtoday.com/blog/incomes-cant-keep-pace-with-rapidly-rising-housing-costs/36846/>

⁸ "Whatcom Housing Rental Rates rising faster than Seattle's", Bellingham Herald, 04/02/2018

⁹ Suzanne Nevan, Director of the Ferndale Food Bank speaking to the NWPTF on 07/06/19. Available online at https://www.cityofferndale.org/PTF/LS_70399.wav

¹⁰ "A Home for Everyone: Whatcom County Coalition to End Homelessness 2018 Annual Report." – Youth Homeless Count. Available online at: https://www.oppc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/FINAL-Whatcom-2018-homeless-count-report_06292018.pdf



Homelessness

“The number one cause of homelessness is not having a house to live in. Period.”

- Greg Winter, Executive Director of the Opportunity Council

When considering the challenges of poverty, the conversation naturally turns to homelessness which can be the most visible symptom of poverty. People picture panhandlers on street corners and people sleeping under bridges, but this hides the diversity of the challenges for those experiencing homelessness.

Homelessness can take many forms. It can be sleeping on the street, but it can also be sleeping in a car or sleeping on a couch or in a garage for a few weeks at a time, unable to secure a permanent address.

According to a recent U.S. Conference of Mayors study, people remain homeless for an average of eight months. While many are homeless for only a short period of time, about 20% are homeless for long periods of time or cycle in and out of homelessness.

For the work of the Poverty Task Force, it was essential to zero in on the causes of homelessness and especially the residents who are struggling to get by, being only one turn of bad luck from losing their place to live.

According to the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty¹¹, the leading causes of homelessness are lack of affordable housing, mental illness and financial challenges.

Each of these are complex and multifaceted challenges and many of the efforts to combat homelessness are focused on the countywide level. The City does not have the need nor the resources for a homeless

¹¹ “Housing and Homelessness in the United States”. Available online here: http://nlchp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/UPR_Housing_Report_2014.pdf

shelter like the Lighthouse Mission or a mental health triage center like the one being built in Bellingham, however, there are some concrete steps the City can take to improve conditions and provide upward mobility for those experiencing homelessness.

According to evidence-based best practices for tackling homelessness, the most effective steps the City can take are preventative. In terms of financial cost, keeping people in their housing is far more effective than mitigating the impacts of homelessness. For more information on preventative steps, review the recommendations under “Lack of Affordable Housing.”

However, for those already experiencing homelessness, there is little to no support from the City of Ferndale and there are meaningful steps the City can take to mitigate the difficulties relating to being homeless.

Recommendations for 2020



Establish Cold Weather Protocol for Opening a Daytime Warming Station

A daytime warming station is a facility where residents can get out of dangerously cold weather and stay during the daylight hours. Currently, there is not a warming station established outside of Bellingham, meaning that those without heated shelter must spend their nights and days in Bellingham rather than staying in the community where they have roots. A daylight shelter requires a willing partner, a policy that establishes a temperature-based trigger point when it is opened, and communication with partners throughout the county to ensure residents know that it is open and available. In terms of an overnight shelter, the County currently serves anywhere from 125-196 residents each night in their overnight shelters during the 2019/2020 winter. At this time, an overnight shelter in Ferndale is not desired as the County has established enough capacity to meet the current need.

Utilize the Homeless Outreach Team (HOT) in Ferndale

Currently, the Bellingham Police Department works with the Opportunity Council to develop the Homeless Outreach Team, a team of volunteers that make one-on-one connections with those living on the streets to help connect them with services and provide an interface that is not necessarily law enforcement. The Task Force recommends that the City develop a similar, smaller-scale program here with a focus on reaching those living in non-habitable situations (sheds, outhouses, broken RVs, etc.). This outreach will help target future anti-poverty efforts in the City of Ferndale.

Identify a Location and Partner, Update City Code to Allow for “Safe Parking” in Ferndale

For many experiencing homelessness in Ferndale, it means living in their car. While not ideal, it can provide some shelter from the elements and limited privacy. However, with limits on the amount of time a car can be parked in any one place, there is a need for “Safe Parking,” which includes a specified location, a partner organization that can provide access to a bathroom, and clearly defined rules to

prevent abuse. When implemented in other communities, it can provide those living in their vehicles some modicum of protection from theft and harassment while they work to improve their condition. Traditionally, this effort is taken on by a religious organization but there may be a possible partnership/synergy with the Food Bank/WTB. No matter the host, there will need to be changes and updates to the City Code to allow for a program like this in Ferndale.

Build a Ferndale Social Services Directory (Housing, Service Providers, Resources, Events, etc.)

One of the major barriers preventing those in need from receiving help is information. Even those tasked with assisting those in need are at a loss as to who to contact and what resources are available. Most of the materials the Poverty Task Force reviewed were Bellingham-based despite speaking with several Ferndale-based service providers. The City, in consultation with the Ferndale Community Resource Center, should develop an up-to-date directory of local resources and distribute it to service providers in the City.

Meet and Greet with Social Services in Ferndale

Several of our subject matter experts noted that many of the service providers have not met one another or are unfamiliar with the minimal social services structure in Ferndale. There are often questions about who to call for what, and those in Ferndale have expressed similar confusion. With the recent opening of the Unity Care Northwest facility on Portal Way, there is a fresh opportunity to connect service providers. Therefore, the City is moving forward to host a meet and greet for all interested in September and is currently working with the Opportunity Council to make that happen.

[Recommendations for the next six years](#)



Provide Full-Time Staffing at the Community Resource Center

Currently, the Ferndale Community Resource Center is only open for limited hours (Tuesday-Friday 9:30 am to 12:30 pm, Monday 2-6:30pm and one Saturday morning a month). It is staffed entirely with volunteers who are passionate, but not necessarily trained or certified in social work.

The Ferndale Community Resource Center is a critical link in the social safety net for those experiencing poverty in Ferndale. The Center provides clothing, job search assistance, toiletries, food, bus vouchers, laundry vouchers and a warm place to stay.

With a full-time employee, the Community Resource Center could expand services. This would allow the Resource Center to be eligible for several grants, bringing the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) to conduct visits with clients and provide training opportunities for the County Health Department and other expanded services.

A full-time employee could coordinate better advertising for the Community Resource Center so those in need know that these resources are available. They could provide the staff to utilize the resource center as a small cold weather shelter.

Finally, a full-time employee could work to enact many of the recommendations of the North Whatcom Poverty Task Force, becoming an essential link in our social services community.

This work would require a full-time staffer and a dedicated funding source. The Community Resource Center is finalizing a job description but would need a funding source for this position. Early estimates place this cost at approximately \$120,000 a year for salary, benefits and support for a full-time position.

Work with Homeless Outreach Team and Ferndale Community Resource Center to Establish Better Communication with Vulnerable Populations

One of the largest challenges in an emergency is getting information out to the public and that is additionally difficult for vulnerable populations that may not be receiving online updates. Building these communication networks is essential. The City should invest the time and outreach to ensure there are good methods of communication with this population in the event of an emergency.

Establish a Cold Weather Overnight Shelter in Ferndale

Currently, all the cold weather shelters are in Bellingham, meaning that residents need to travel during cold and icy conditions to check in to those facilities. A Ferndale-based overnight shelter during cold nights would allow them to stay in their community even during dangerous temperatures. Similar to the warming station described above, a clear cold weather policy would need to be established in conjunction with opening a shelter. This shelter should be developed as part of the unified response to cold weather needs in Whatcom County and be tailored to fill in both geographic and demographic gaps.



Lack of Affordable Housing

"You can't focus on school or do well at work without a safe place to sleep. That's step one.

- Steven Gamage, Ferndale Police Department

Ferndale and the greater Whatcom County area have experienced continued population growth over the last thirty years. However, residential construction has not kept pace with the demand. This has impacted both homeowners and renters. Since 2000, the median home value in Whatcom County has increased by 137%, the median rent has increased by 72%, while the median household income has only increased by 46%¹².

The impact of this disproportionate growth is devastating. 36.4% of households in Whatcom County are housing burdened, spending more than 30% of their household income on housing. Of those, 65% of renters in Whatcom County are housing burdened.¹³

Even more troubling, 16.7% of households in Whatcom County are severely housing burdened, spending more than 50% of their household income on housing.¹⁴

With housing costs consuming a larger portion of a household's income, the result can be poor nutrition, decreased health or the chance that one bad event - a broken-down car, an injury or illness - can push a household into homelessness.

There needs to be a dramatic effort to increase housing supply and specifically affordable housing in the City of Ferndale. While the recently approved Catalyst projects will provide market rate housing, this will be inaccessible to those struggling to get by.

To address this issue, the North Whatcom Poverty Task Force recommends the following actions:

Recommendations for 2020



The City Should Place an Affordable Housing Levy on the November 2020 Ballot

Utilizing the funding opportunity available to the city under RCW 84.52.105, the City may place on the ballot an affordable housing property tax levy for consideration by the public. If passed, the levy funds would be used to increase the supply of affordable housing in Ferndale, provide housing related services such as eviction prevention and landlord outreach, and assist low income households in becoming homeowners to promote stability in our neighborhoods.

Other communities in our area such as Anacortes, Bellingham, Jefferson County, Ellensburg, and Olympia have passed similar measures. This measure would be preventative, working to keep housing

¹² Department of Housing and Urban Development

¹³ Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies, <http://harvard-cga.maps.arcgis.com/apps/StorytellingTextLegend/index.html?appid=18d215ddb20946a4a16ae43586bf0b52>

¹⁴ Ibid

affordable in Ferndale rather than dealing with the consequences as people are pushed out of their homes.

Local funds approved by the public and allocated by the City can have a direct and measurable impact on the challenges of affordable housing within the City of Ferndale. By passing a local levy, this would ensure that the funds allocated are spent in the most effective manner possible to support our community.

These funds could then be leveraged as matching funds for grants from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Department of Agriculture, the Washington State Housing Finance Commission, and numerous other public and private sources.

The council will need to take a vote to put the measure on the ballot. It would then need to pass with 50% plus one vote to go into effect. The Poverty Task Force recommends that the measure be placed on the ballot for the 2020 General Election in November.

At a following meeting, the North Whatcom Poverty Task Force will present their proposed Affordable Housing Levy measure and related documents for consideration.

Recommendations for the next six years

Utilize a Portion of Michael Moore Park for Development into Affordable Housing



One of the challenges for affordable housing is locating the housing within an existing neighborhood without changing the character of that neighborhood. Currently, the city owns Michael Moore Park which is underutilized in its current configuration.

Originally conceived as a possible loop trail, the park was never developed beyond the playground and is both the least known and least used park in the City of Ferndale.¹⁵ It is flush with another neighborhood and has easy access major road arterials which would make it a natural place for affordable housing.

¹⁵ Parks, Recreation, and Trails Advisory Board Annual Recreation and Park Usage Survey (2018, 2019, 2020)

Align City Zoning and Policies to Allow for Density within City Core

There is a need to dramatically increase the number of available housing units and adding density will help accomplish that goal. Continued effort to expand ADU programs and provide flexibility for developers to add more housing units to developments help meet the goals of providing more housing.



Hunger

"Food is absolutely essential to our human experience. Without quality, nutrient-dense food to eat, we simply cannot go on."

- Suzanne Nevan, Executive Director of the Ferndale Food Bank

At any given time in Whatcom County, one in every six residents does not have enough nutritious food to eat¹⁶. Economic pressures have pushed more residents to experience food insecurity while budget cuts at the federal level, including government shutdowns, have impacted services here in Whatcom County.

On April 1, 2020, an estimated 75,407 residents in Washington State will lose access to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) which is commonly known as food stamps. This is compounding similar cuts that occurred in 2018. That, plus the continued economic pressures of rising housing costs, have caused visits to the Ferndale Food Bank continue to increase at an average of 14% each year over the last four years.

The Ferndale Food Bank is an essential link in providing nutrient dense food to all who need it. They utilize partnerships with the Community Garden, local farmers, and businesses, but they are limited by volunteers and resources. They do weekly distributions both onsite and at remote locations for needy populations.

¹⁶ Whatcom County Health Department, "Hunger in Whatcom County" 2018

Hunger takes many forms, including students without lunches in the schools, families skipping meals or eating empty calories because they are cheap.

In the United States, healthy food is expensive. Fresh produce can get pricey, while heavy calorie junk food is cheap. For those living near the edge of poverty, residents may find some food that gets them through the day, but it has long-term impacts on their health.

Similarly, good food takes time to prepare. Instant food is often high in salt and preservatives. Cooking meals can be a luxury if you are working two jobs and raising a family.

Sometimes, there are simply no locations to purchase quality food. Bellingham was recently confronted with this situation when Albertsons closed in the Birchwood neighborhood, shutting down the only grocery store within a three-mile walking distance. This forced residents without transportation to rely on convenience stores, dollar stores and other non-grocery locations for their food, which drastically impacts the quality of their diet. This is called a food desert.

Here in Ferndale, we have two grocery stores, however, both are on the south side of the river. If there was a large-scale emergency that impacted the bridges, the north side of town would have to travel quite a distance by car to purchase food. The Quick E-Mart on Portal Way has some produce, but not a large variety of groceries.

Recommendations for 2020

City works with Ferndale Food Bank to Recruit Volunteers, Internships and Expand Existing Partnerships

One of the main challenges the Ferndale Food Bank faces is having enough consistent volunteers to facilitate food distributions. The City could use their communication channels to help recruit more long-term volunteers and raise awareness about resources available through the Food Bank.

Recommendations for the next six years

Continue Support for the Ferndale Friendship Community Garden

The Ferndale Friendship Community Garden is an essential component of the Ferndale food system. It allows residents without space to grow their own food for minimal cost and utilizing less than a quarter of an acre, they provide more than 8,000 pounds of produce to the Food Bank each year. Currently, the City provides the space for them adjacent to the Bergsma House, however, they need a new coordinator and have some ongoing maintenance needs. The City should continue to explore ways in which they can support this vital program, including providing funding for the coordinator position.

Second Community Garden at Oxford Park

Currently the City provides space for the Ferndale Friendship Community Garden that helps grow produce for the Ferndale Food Bank (approximately 8,000 pounds annually). In an effort to augment

these efforts, the City has discussed installing a second community orchard/farming space at Oxford Park in conjunction with Vista Middle School, the FFA or another community organization. This project is part of the City's Parks, Recreation, and Trails Master Plan and would need to be added to the Six Year Parks Capital Projects list.

Encourage Food Gardens/Community Gardening Space to be included in New Developments

With smaller lot sizes and more density in our residential development, there is less space for residents to grow food. Currently, the City allows developments to utilize some of their common space for community gardening spaces. The City should encourage this practice in cooperation with Homeowner Associations to ensure the maintenance and upkeep to these spaces.

Capital Facilities Needs for the Ferndale Food Bank

The Food Bank will need a larger location at some point – a combination facility that has distribution on one floor, offices for social services on another floor and low-income housing on the third. The first step would be identifying a location and developing a site plan/grant application. This could be done in combination with the Ferndale Community Resource Center.

Funding Needs for Food Education

Food education is a critical component of fighting hunger and ensuring a healthy population. The long-term impacts of unhealthy eating can be devastating and lead to expensive health costs later on in life. The federal government continues to reduce the funding for adult and youth food education services which are a critical component in fighting systemic hunger. This funding directly impacts programs in Ferndale through the Ferndale Food Bank. With better food education, residents can prepare more nutrient dense food rather than prepackaged nutrient poor food or fast food.

The City should lobby the state and the federal government to expand and not defund these programs.



Transportation

“Our mission is to continue to provide safe, reliable and efficient service for all of our residents.”

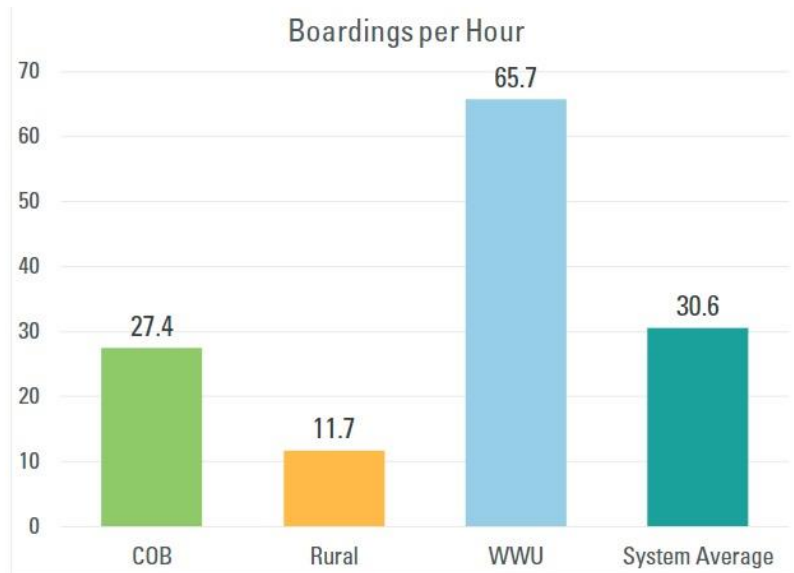
- Maureen McCarthy, Outreach Director for WTA

No examination of poverty would be complete without looking at the transportation system. For those struggling to get by, a car is a lifeline to employment, services and a place to sleep. Public transit can be a replacement, but if it is to be successful, it needs to be rapid, frequent and used by more than just the working poor.

Furthermore, transportation involves more than commuting or stepping on a bus. It encompasses ADA compliant buildings and sidewalks, a system of bus stops and bus terminals located close to both origin and destination points for the riders, and transit schedules aligned with the rider needs. In short, people need to be able to get to and from their housing, work and resources without sinking hours into travel.

The Whatcom Transit Authority (WTA) and Lummi Transit are the bus service providers in North Whatcom County and the only public transit system accessible outside of Bellingham. In 2018, residents took more than 4.5 million trips on WTA buses, an average of 30.8 boardings per hour.¹⁷

¹⁷ WTA 2018 Annual Performance Report. Available online:
<http://www.ridewta.com/Published%20Docs/2018%20-%20Annual%20Performance%20Report.pdf>



Service to the City of Ferndale starts at the Cordata Station in Bellingham and arrives at the Ferndale station at 6:35 am, does a loop up to Thornton, Church and then back down to Cordata again, arriving at 7:30 am. This route continues every hour until the last round at 9 pm.

The result of this route is that there is very little opportunity for residents to utilize the WTA to travel within the City of Ferndale without precise timing or long delays. For those needing to travel to Bellingham and back by public transit, it would require almost two hours of travel time, the equivalent of driving to Seattle by car.

Despite these limitations, the Ferndale route (Route 27) remains one of the most productive routes in the WTA system in terms of usage versus passenger miles.

		Boardings per Hour		
		Less than 50% (0-15.2)	Between 50-74% (15.3-22.9)	75% & Above (23.0+)
% of System Average	100% & Above (87.6+)	26 Lynden 71X E/N/S 72X Kendall 75 Blaine/Birch Bay 80X Mt. Vernon	27 Ferndale	11 WWU 190 Lincoln St 232 Cordata/WCC 331 Cordata/WCC
	Between 75-99% (65.6-87.5)	NONE	3 Airport/Cordata 50 Gooseberry Pt 512 Sudden Valley	14 Fairhaven 107 WWU/Samish 108 Samish/WWU
	Less than 75% (0-65.5)	4 Hospital 48 Bakerview Spur 49 Bakerview Spur 65 Everson/Nooksack 533 Yew St	5 Fairhaven 525 Electric 540 Sunset	1 Fairhaven 15 Cordata/WCC 24 Cordata 92 WWU

There was a cross-county route that connected Lynden, Ferndale and Everson that was funded for a year as a pilot program, but it did not have the ridership to justify continued use and was discontinued at the start of the summer last year. While ridership is an important metric used by WTA to justify routes, the North Whatcom Poverty Task Force believes that there are legitimate questions where some current or previously established routes had low ridership because the routes were simply not convenient. Is the lack of ridership due to lack of demand or rather the significant amount of time that must be dedicated to ride WTA to get from one Ferndale location to another or the lack of access to origins and destinations within Ferndale?

If a resident qualifies based on the American Disabilities Act (ADA) for paratransit service, the WTA will help transport that person throughout their service map. WTA utilizes a van designed to assist those with disabilities that cannot make it to the fixed routes, either because it is too far to the bus stop or the bus stop is too far from their final destination.

Beyond public transit, there are accessibility needs throughout the city. Whenever the City or a private land developer updates a piece of infrastructure, there is an opportunity to update the infrastructure to be updated to be compatible with the ADA. This can mean accessible sidewalks, crosswalks, bathrooms, doors, ramps and more.

While there are legal requirements for ADA improvements, the City also needs to be vigilant about unintended consequences. For instance, in 2016, the City passed rules allowing for sidewalk dining for restaurants downtown. As those businesses added outdoor seating, it began to add obstacles to those navigating our sidewalks and requires constant monitoring by City staff to ensure those walkways are clear for those who need it.

For vulnerable populations in Ferndale, it is essential that they are able to easily move through the city, whether commuting, recreating or shopping. The city and the community have a responsibility to ensure that everyone has the access they need.

Recommendations for 2020



Assess WTA Ridership as Unity Care NW on Portal Way

Currently, WTA ridership does not justify more routes to the City of Ferndale, but assessments were last undertaken before the opening of the new Unity Care NW facility on Portal Way, the addition of another 100 residences, and new commercial/industrial developments opening in 2020/2021. As this will surely impact ridership, the City should work with WTA to expand bus access to the City.

Recommendations for the next six years

Continue to Support Transit Friendly Multifamily Development

The most impactful thing the City can do to lower barriers to people using the bus is to encourage multifamily development next to other multifamily developments. This allows the WTA to target bus routes where there are the most users. Design standards and plan review should be utilized to

encourage multifamily development where it is close to the street, providing quality sidewalks and accessible ramps. Continue the City goals of dense multifamily development in the urban core and full street improvements adjacent to multifamily developments.

Investigate Free WTA Ridership Program for Ferndale-based Events

Currently, the WTA offers free rides the entire week of the Northwest Washington Fair in Lynden, providing a substantive boost to bus use for that community. The City should advocate for a similar free ride day for Ferndale-based events, possibly the Old Settlers Weekend or the Ferndale Street Festival, to help expand ridership and transit use in Ferndale which will lead to more service being provided.

Provide a Shuttle to Cold Weather Overnight Shelters in Bellingham

When the cold weather overnight shelters are activated in Bellingham, there is little opportunity for residents in the North County to get to Bellingham in time to check in. Providing a dedicated shuttle would ensure that those who need it can utilize the resources available in Bellingham.

Install/Expand Access to More ADA Compliant Public Restrooms

Accessible bathrooms can be a serious issue for those with mobility and transportation challenges. The City should expand access to their ADA public restrooms at the Riverwalk and Star Park, including longer hours and continued maintenance.

Involve Ferndale Community Emergency Response Team in Local Emergency Response Drills

Ferndale has an active Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) which provides the public with training and organization on how to best assist in a crisis. When a disaster strikes, those with transportation challenges are often impacted the hardest. The City should coordinate with the Ferndale CERT team on the best ways to facilitate evacuations and support during emergency situations for those with mobility challenges.



Youth in Crisis

“It is the hardest when poverty prevents someone from completing their potential”

- Emilio Vega, Jr, Executive Director for Northwest Youth Services

In 2018, the Whatcom County Health Department, the Opportunity Council and the City of Bellingham teamed up to study homelessness with a focus on youth¹⁸. In that report, they identified 150 youths counted as being literally homeless in Whatcom County. This accounted for 18% of the total homeless population. Beyond that, they counted an additional 46 youth households that were unstably housed (couch surfing with friends or relatives on an interim basis to avoid becoming homeless).

The Ferndale School District also tracks their youth homeless population and identifies 3.5% of their student population as experiencing a housing crisis during the year. This is defined as being unable to stay in their current residence for more than two weeks. This accounts for approximately 120 students.¹⁹

This issue is compounded when looked through the lens of our Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender or Questioning communities. 35% of homeless youth in Whatcom County identify as LGBTQ, while nationally, 20-40% of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ.²⁰

¹⁸ Available online here: https://www.oppc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/FINAL-Whatcom-2018-homeless-count-report_06292018.pdf

¹⁹ WA Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Homeless Education Student Data by District, 2017-2018. Available online here: <https://www.k12.wa.us/student-success/access-opportunity-education/homeless-education/homeless-education-student-data>

²⁰ Building Changes, Non-profit focused on youth homelessness in Washington State, report 2018. Available online: <https://schoolhousewa.org/data/analysis/academic-outcomes-for-students-experiencing-homelessness-are-far-worse-than-those-for-housed-students/>

Of those LGBTQ youth, 40% attempt suicide before the age of twenty-one due to the trauma they are experiencing.²¹

Youth homelessness is a rapidly evolving challenge especially in Washington State. Washington had the sixth highest number and eighth highest rate of students experiencing homelessness in the 50 states and the District of Columbia.²² Students experiencing homelessness are in every grade level. Grade 12 has the largest number of any grade, and about half are in kindergarten through Grade 5.

Extending beyond homelessness, hunger and poverty has an extremely detrimental impact on student performance. Poor student performance leads to disengagement with peers, truancy and crime and other community-wide impacts which may contribute to a vicious cycle that could prevent these individuals, as adults, from gaining access to services, jobs, housing, and education as an adult.

In terms of resources, the Ferndale School District has a designated Homeless Liaison²³ and family community coordinators assigned to each elementary school. They work on a case-by-case basis to keep kids stable throughout their academic career, including providing transportation, food and additional support.

The Ferndale Police Department, in partnership with the Ferndale School District, also provides a School Resource Officer that works in the schools to build relationships with youth in crisis.

The other critical resource in our community is Northwest Youth Services, which is a non-profit organization serving young people ages 13-24 experiencing homelessness in Whatcom and Skagit Counties. Northwest Youth Services offers housing, street outreach, help finding a job or enrolling in school, connection to mental health services, support for LGBTQ youth, restorative justice for juvenile offenders, and referrals to other services in the community.

Currently, Northwest Youth Services provides a drop-in center in downtown Bellingham for youth that helps connect them with services and provide shelter during cold weather. There are on-site vocational counselors and housing specialists working to improve their situations while they come and have something to eat and warm up. However, because it is located in Bellingham, it may be challenging for youth to utilize their services, especially in light of sporadic bus service to and from Bellingham (see Transportation above).

The City of Ferndale contributes \$4,000 a year to the Northwest Youth Services Teen Court as part of its organizational grant program.

²¹ Ibid

²² Building Changes report on Youth Homelessness, available online here: <https://schoolhousewa.org/data/analysis/academic-outcomes-for-students-experiencing-homelessness-are-far-worse-than-those-for-housed-students/>

²³ More details on this program from the Ferndale School District: <https://www.ferndalesd.org/student-services/homeless-support>

Recommendations for 2020

Expand Youth Recreational Activities in Ferndale

One of the essential elements in keeping youth engaged in school and crime-free during difficult times is participation in group activities with their peers. Offering free, teen-centric activities in the City can help keep youth engaged in positive interactions, form connections with their greater community and drive down drug abuse and depression rates. The City should expand their recreational programming to include teen outreach. This could also include partnerships with music and theater programs based out of Bellingham that can run a satellite program in Ferndale.

Recommendations for the next six years



Train Front Line Staff in Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES)/De-escalation

ACES is the latest in de-escalation and trauma-informed care, and the model for best engagement with youth that are experiencing difficulties. Instead of asking, “What is wrong with you?” it teaches people to ask, “What happened to you?” Providing this training to all city staff (especially the Ferndale Police Department) that have contact with the public will help improve interactions and ensure that encounters with law enforcement are as positive as possible for those youth in crisis. This training should also be offered to members of the public.

Build and Support a Recreation Center/Skate Park/Performance Space

Providing room for teens to engage with each other outside the school or home is essential to youth in crisis and will go a long way towards reducing truancy, youth homelessness and drug use. For those dealing with trauma in their homelife, a performance space for youth and theatre, a skate park or a recreation center can be an invaluable lifeline and even provide skills for future employment. Youth should have input on this space and help establish rules and norms.

Continue City Support and Participation in the Ferndale Community Coalition

The Ferndale Community Coalition is a partnership between the Whatcom County Health Department, the Ferndale School District and local service providers aimed at creating safe and healthy environments where youth and families can thrive. They host trainings, coordinate workshops and provide services for youth and families struggling with equity, safety and substance abuse issues. The City should continue their involvement and support of this organization’s activities.

Support Family Planning Services in the City of Ferndale

Family planning services are an essential component of keeping youth on a positive trajectory for our community. Currently, there are no family planning service providers operating in the City of Ferndale beyond the general pediatricians at Unity Care Northwest. The City should support a family planning clinic, satellite office or services being expanded in Ferndale.

Expand the Supply of Housing in Ferndale

The largest challenge facing youth in a housing crisis is the lack of affordable housing. See recommendations in that section.



Employment

“The difference between someone’s life falling apart and someone getting things on track is almost always a good job.”

- Gina Barrieau, Workforce Coordinator, WorkSource Whatcom

If not having a home is the primary cause of homelessness, then not having a job is the primary cause of poverty. Here are some of the barriers facing employment seekers who are struggling with poverty.

Lack of a permanent address: For those without a permanent or reliable address, gaining or retaining employment can be difficult. Almost all job applications ask for a permanent address and leaving it blank can raise red flags. An address is required for background checks, for W-4s and most importantly, where to send the paycheck.

While a PO Box can resolve some of these problems, it is not a fix-all. Similarly, while a service provider or relative can serve as a mailstop, picking up mail in a timely manner can be a challenge.

For those without reliable access to bathrooms or laundry facilities, being presentable for work can be a significant challenge to obtaining, and more importantly retaining, employment. Some job sites include

shower facilities and even laundry facilities, but those are few and far between. When a laundromat closes, it can have a big impact on local employment.

Getting ready for the workplace can also be a barrier for those without funds to purchase quality shoes or work appropriate attire.

Mental and physical health is also a key factor in employment. A workplace injury can drastically impact your ability to be hired and for many workers – independent contractors, tradespeople and those working under the table – one injury could change their entire financial situation.

Add to that less visible challenges – ongoing health issues that can flare up suddenly or mental health challenges that impact work performance. In Washington State, close to 5.1% of all adults live with serious mental health conditions including schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and major depression²⁴, for the homeless and nearly homeless, these numbers become even more drastic. As these health issues are not immediately visible, employers can be less forgiving for these issues than physical impairment.

Childcare can also be a major obstacle to employment. Costs for childcare continue to rise; currently the average cost of childcare exceeding that of a college tuition on a per-day basis²⁵, leaving many of those living in poverty simply unable to afford to work. For those able to work out a solution with family members or unlicensed providers, they can be at the whim of cancellations, or in worst cases, abuse and neglect.

In 2019, a major childcare provider in Whatcom County was facing financial challenges and was considering closing down, which the City of Bellingham estimated would impact 800 employees at local businesses. Since then, a solution has been worked out, but it shows the impact even one childcare provider can have on a community.

Recommendations for 2020



Expand Funding for Laundry Voucher Program

Currently, the City provides a non-profit grant to the Ferndale Community Resource Center to provide laundry vouchers for those in need. As the new laundromat in Ferndale has recently opened, that program should be assessed and expanded if necessary, for the 2021 budget.

Provide Funding for the Community Resource Center to Provide PO Boxes and Voicemail for Residents in Need

The Community Resource Center should provide PO Boxes and voicemail for those without a steady address, removing some of the barriers for employment. The cost for this service would be minimal and could be addressed through a city grant.

²⁴ Washington State Division of Behavioral Health and Recovery (BHA). Fact sheet available online: <https://www.rtor.org/directory/mental-health-washington/>

²⁵ Fortune Magazine, "Childcare Costs More Than College Tuition in 28 U.S. States", available online: <https://fortune.com/2018/10/22/childcare-costs-per-year-us/>

Recommendations for the next six years

Market Ferndale as a Key Location for Future Businesses

Ferndale has a unique market advantage, being centrally located on the I-5 corridor with a skilled workforce and developable land. The City should aggressively market to new businesses to bring family-wage jobs to the community. This needs to be implemented hand-in-hand with increased residential development, as one of the barriers to businesses relocating to Ferndale is the lack of housing availability.

Establish WorkSource Events in Ferndale

In the past, the Bellingham/Whatcom WorkSource center has held a job fair once a year in Ferndale. The City should work with their partners such as the Ferndale Chamber of Commerce to expand the WorkSource offerings in Ferndale to provide more opportunities for job seekers to gain interviews and skills.

Support Childcare Facilities in Ferndale

Childcare, as an industry, is struggling with new regulations and requirements. The City should work with local childcare providers to ensure that they are meeting these standards and provide the support necessary to connect people with the childcare they need.

Conclusion



"Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity, it is an act of justice."

- Nelson Mandela

Poverty is as old as the invention of cities and it can seem like a huge, intractable problem. But it is a man-made problem and there are real, concrete steps local government can take to ease the impacts for the most vulnerable. While the scope of poverty is broad, for someone experiencing homelessness, or struggling to get to a job without a working vehicle, it can be acute and devastating.

This report will hopefully provide a roadmap for future City action to mitigate these impacts, working to prevent problems with poverty long before they become a crisis. There is no one piece of these recommendations that is a silver bullet; however, it is also true that even implementing a few of these recommendations will make measurable progress in Ferndale. They are to be taken as a to-do list for future council and staff action.

The City also hopes that the North Whatcom Poverty Task Force can be a model for other small communities in Whatcom County to base their future anti-poverty efforts. In many ways, the measure of our community is not to be marked by an individual business or metric, but by the quality of life for all who reside here. It is our hope and desire that we as a community will use the tools available to us to improve conditions for all. This is a roadmap - not an end, but a beginning of the next steps of that work.

Let us do it together.

- Signed,
The North Whatcom Poverty Task Force, February 2020.