WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCIL

SPECIAL COUNCIL MEETING
AS THE
HEALTH BOARD

10:30 a.m. Tuesday, October 6, 2015
Council Chambers, 311 Grand Avenue

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PUBLIC HEALTH
ALWAYS WORKING FOR A SAFER AND
HEALTHIER WHATCOM COUNTY
BACKGROUND:
There is growing awareness that health is influenced by the interaction of many factors, and not simply by genetics, individual behavior, or access to medical care. It is now widely accepted that health is also determined by social and economic factors and opportunities including the availability of resources and supports in homes, neighborhoods and communities-at-large.

Many policies and plans that are outside the traditional health sector have significant impacts on health opportunities. For example, land use, transportation, economic development, housing, education, and public safety policies and plans have implications that are critical for health and well-being.

For the past several years, Whatcom County Health Department staff and Public Health Advisory Board (PHAB) have taken steps to integrate a health perspective into some of these community planning and policy development processes. Health Department staff have been involved in several transportation planning projects and are currently providing health recommendations to the County’s Comprehensive Plan update process. In July 2015, the Health Board received a briefing on this work, and acknowledged the importance of considering health in planning processes. The idea of a “Healthy Planning” resolution was introduced and the Health Board requested that a draft resolution be brought forward for consideration.

IMPORTANCE:
While much attention has been paid to transformation of our current medical care system which primarily focuses on preventing and treating illness, there are great opportunities to promote and improve health in Whatcom County through transformation of other systems and environments through planning and policy development. Some opportunities include increasing access to safe places for physical activity, ensuring availability of affordable healthy food options, prioritizing access to stable affordable housing and living wage jobs, and promoting access to quality early child care and education.

ANALYSIS:
Adoption of a Healthy Planning resolution would require ongoing investment of Health Department staff time and resources, active involvement of the Public Health Advisory Board, connections with other County departments and executive leadership, and engagement of the Health Board/County Council.

REQUESTED ACTION:
The Public Health Advisory Board recommends that the Health Board adopt a “Healthy Planning” resolution, demonstrating the County’s commitment to consider health impacts of planning and policy decisions.

Attachments
1. Draft Health Board Resolution
2. PHAB letters to City of Bellingham and County Planning Commission

Our mission is to lead the community in promoting health and preventing disease.
RESOLUTION NO. ______

COMMITTING WHATCOM COUNTY TO ADOPT A “HEALTHY PLANNING” APPROACH

WHEREAS, the health and well-being of the residents of Whatcom County are critical for a prosperous and sustainable Whatcom County; and

WHEREAS, health starts—long before illness—in our families, neighborhoods, schools, and jobs; and

WHEREAS, there is growing awareness that health is influenced by the interaction of many factors, and not simply by genetics, individual behavior, or access to medical care. It is now widely accepted that health is also determined by social and economic factors and opportunities including the availability of resources and supports in homes, neighborhoods and communities-at-large; and

WHEREAS, all people in Whatcom County should have the opportunities to make the choices that allow them to live long, healthy and productive lives regardless of their income, education, or ethnic background; and

WHEREAS, data show that people living in poverty, or who have limited education, or who live in isolated areas in Whatcom County, or who experience racial or ethnic discrimination or other social stresses are more likely to report poor health status and have lower life expectancy; and

WHEREAS, data also show that people who have greater access to economic resources, social supports and healthy community amenities such as quality affordable housing, safe places to walk, bike, play and connect, and places to get affordable healthy foods for their families are more likely to experience good health status; and

WHEREAS, plans and policies implemented by Whatcom County outside of the traditional health sector significantly affect access to health opportunities. These plans and policies include those related to land use, food access, housing, transportation, public safety, education, parks and recreation, water and air quality, criminal justice, and economic development;

WHEREAS, increasing health opportunities can lead to improved health, reduced health disparities, reduced health care costs, and reduced criminal justice costs;

WHEREAS, a “Healthy Planning” approach involves inclusion of health criteria in the development and adoption of community plans and policies; and
WHEREAS, by adopting a “Healthy Planning” approach, Whatcom County demonstrates its commitment to address health as a community priority and increase health opportunities; and

WHEREAS, the Whatcom County Public Health Advisory Board serves in an advisory capacity to the Health Board and to the Whatcom County Health Department;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that it shall be the policy of Whatcom County to apply a “Healthy Planning” approach to Whatcom County’s community planning processes and decision-making; including but not limited to the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Whatcom County Public Health Advisory Board working with the Whatcom County Health Department and other city and county departments will identify and recommend tools, processes, and opportunities to integrate a health perspective in community planning processes and decision-making;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that topics of consideration in community planning may include, but are not limited to: access to health care services; affordable, safe and healthy housing; active living and transportation; access to healthy food; clean air, water and soil; parks, recreation, and green spaces; economic opportunity; safety and violence prevention; and support for children, families, and other vulnerable populations; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Public Health Advisory Board will make initial recommendations to the Health Board regarding a “Healthy Planning” approach on or before January 31, 2016; and

BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED that the Health Board will review this policy on an annual basis to evaluate progress

APPROVED this _____day of _____________2015.

ATTEST:

WHATCOM COUNTY BOARD OF HEALTH
WHATCOM COUNTY, WASHINGTON

______________________________  _________________________________
Dana Brown Davis, Clerk of the Board   Carl Weimer, Health Board Chair

APPROVED AS TO FORM:

______________________________
Karen Frakes, Civil Deputy Prosecutor
June 10, 2015

Whatcom County Planning Commission
Attn: Becky Boxx
5280 Northwest Drive
Bellingham, WA 98226

RE: Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan Update – Chapter 7, Economics and Chapter 8, Resource Lands

Dear Commissioners:

Across the nation, the public health system increasingly recognizes the importance of policy, along with programs, to meet public health goals. In 2013 and 2014, the Whatcom County Public Health Advisory Board (PHAB) worked with Whatcom County Health Department staff to (a) better understand the connection between public health and long-range community planning and (b) to provide recommendations to Whatcom County Planning & Development Services (PDS) to integrate health-promoting policies into the 2016 Comprehensive Plan Update. This was done, in part, to assist Whatcom County PDS in meeting the Growth Management Act (GMA) requirement to consider urban planning approaches that promote physical activity (RCW 36.70A.070(1)). In addition to reviewing the plan for opportunities to promote physical activity, the PHAB also considered other aspects of public health: access to healthy food, mental health, safety and injury, and social well-being. The PHAB reviewed best practice policies and local data to get to final recommendations that we felt were relevant to Whatcom County, as opposed to large urban areas.

While Whatcom County is generally among the healthiest counties in Washington State, the 2011 Community Health Assessment revealed that this is not the case for all segments of our community. Three of the top four leading causes of death in Whatcom County are conditions that develop over time and are associated with health behaviors such as obesity, poor nutrition and physical inactivity. There is a growing body of public health and planning literature that demonstrates the connection between these health risk factors and aspects of community design/planning, as well as comprehensive plan policies that help address them. We appreciate PDS for considering this as part of the 2016 Comprehensive Plan update process. Below are the PHAB’s comments on specific aspects of the Economics and Resource Lands chapters that we feel the Planning Commission should consider as you review and make recommendations.

Economics Chapter:

• **Policy 7H-1:** This policy helps preserve our County’s agriculture industry, and continuing to strengthen our local agricultural system supports access to sources of nutritious food.
• **Policy 7K-7 & 7K-8:** Similar to Policy 7H-1, supporting agricultural diversity by encouraging development of our local food system offers not only economic benefits, but also public health benefits. Several of the strategies listed in this policy are ways to improve delivery of healthy food to Whatcom County families (e.g. farmers markets, niche markets for local products). Additionally, attracting and retaining local food processing, wholesaling and distribution businesses can help make that healthy food even more accessible, making it easier for families to find and for large institutions, like schools, to purchase. Indeed, we would suggest calling this out specifically in the policy.

• **Policy 7K-9:** Shorter commute times can be good for health in a number of ways. Specifically, and to the point of the GMA requirement referred to above, shorter commutes are more likely to be made by walking or biking, thus incorporating more physical activity into everyday activities.

• **Policy 7K-10:** Proximity to a healthy food retailer, such as a grocery store, is associated with better eating habits and reduced risk for obesity and diet-related diseases like type-2 diabetes. Comprehensive plan policies that support development of healthy food retailers in “food deserts” (a term coined by the USDA that refers to census tracts that lack a grocery store) are increasingly being recognized as part of a suite of strategies that promote the public’s health. In many rural communities across the U.S., policies and programs that support healthy food retail also provide economic benefits in the form of job creation and reinvestment in the local economy.

**Resource Lands Chapter:**
As mentioned above, preserving Whatcom County’s agriculture industry, and the land necessary to support that industry, is linked to improving the accessibility of healthy food. PHAB supports policies within this chapter that are consistent with agricultural land preservation and of policies that promote the agricultural products industry as it relates to expanding healthy food access. Specifically, PHAB supports: **Policies 8A-1 through 8A-9; Policies 8B-1 through 8B-3; Policies 8C-1, 8C-3, & 8C-4, and Policy 8D-10.**

We appreciate the opportunity to provide comments and hope that you will consider the implications to the health of our community as you engage in this process.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Ben Scholtz, Chair
Public Health Advisory Board
c/o 509 Girard Street, Bellingham, WA 98225
August 19, 2015

City of Bellingham Planning & Community Development
210 Lottie Street
Bellingham, WA 98225

RE: Integrating Health Perspective in the City of Bellingham’s Comprehensive Plan

Dear Mr. Sepler:

Public health research over the last two decades clearly demonstrates linkages between the health of a community and features within its physical or built-environment. A safe, clean environment that provides access to healthy and affordable housing, healthy-food, recreational opportunities and that limits exposure to harmful substances is important for maintaining and improving community health—helping make healthy choices the easy choices. As a result, public health agencies and their partners across the nation are increasingly involved in community design and planning efforts, as well as working with local communities to support targeted environmental changes, such as park or trail development. This way of working is a key part of the strategy to improve community health and reduce health disparities.

The Whatcom County Public Health Advisory Board (PHAB) has been working with staff from Whatcom County Health Department to provide recommendations to COB Planning & Community Development staff to integrate health-promoting policies into the 2016 Comprehensive Plan Update. This was done, in part, to respond to community health needs identified in the Whatcom County Community Health Assessment and Community Health Improvement Plan and to assist the City in meeting the Growth Management Act requirement to consider urban planning approaches that promote physical activity (RCW 36.70A.070(1)). In addition to reviewing the plan for opportunities to promote physical activity, the PHAB also considered other aspects of community health priorities: access to healthy food, mental health, safety and injury, and social connectedness. The PHAB reviewed best practice comprehensive plan policies in combination with local data to create final recommendations that are relevant to Bellingham, and a full assessment was provided to Planning & Community Development staff. Below are the opportunities we wish to highlight as being of particular importance for consideration as new comprehensive plan chapters are being drafted.

- Include language that links planning with desired public health outcomes in the plan’s vision and throughout the plan’s chapters. The comprehensive plan’s vision is an ideal place to incorporate language that explains how the City’s policies for growth and development can create conditions that support community health and well-being, as well as addressing disparities in health outcomes. The City’s plan already includes
several vision statements that are good for health, including a section on community health, welfare and safety. Further calling out the health benefits of sections in the vision chapter that aren’t traditionally associated with health, such as transportation, emphasizes the value of these policies to the community’s health. Additionally, including language about health and specific public health priorities in the overarching plan vision can provide the rationale for incorporating health data or language in other chapters of the plan.

- **Highlight stable, quality, affordable housing as a foundational public health issue.** Everyone deserves to live in a safe affordable healthy home. Stable housing is the foundation upon which people build and improve their lives. It is the foundation for good health, positive educational outcomes, reaching one’s economic potential, and for community development. The City is already doing much to address housing through rental inspections, implementation of the Consolidated Plan, and the Bellingham Home Fund. In light of potential impacts on community health, we believe that City’s comprehensive plan should also include policies that protect and promote affordable housing options at a range of income levels. We also urge the City to consider policies that can ensure health-promoting neighborhood conditions are equitably distributed, and that as desirable neighborhood enhancements (such as parks, transit access or other health-promoting features) are built in existing neighborhoods or as new development occurs, low- and moderate-income individuals aren’t displaced to neighborhoods that lack those resources.

- **Incorporate policies that enhance access to healthy foods.** A goal of the Whatcom County Community Health Improvement Plan is to enhance access to and promotion of healthy foods in neighborhoods and communities. Review of the current COB comprehensive plan suggested a number of opportunities to add policies that support healthy food access.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide comments and look forward to ongoing dialogue between the City and WCHD staff on this topic. While no single policy can address the systemic issues that impact our community’s health, we believe that planning with health in mind can help move us in the right direction.

Sincerely,

Ben Scholtz, Chair
Public Health Advisory Board
c/o 509 Girard Street, Bellingham, WA 98225
September 24, 2015

Whatcom County Planning Commission
Attn: Becky Boxx
5280 Northwest Drive
Bellingham, WA 98226

RE: Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan Update – Chapter 3 Housing

Dear Commissioners:

As we learn more about the connection between public health and the built environment, public health practitioners are paying greater attention to how to promote better health through the policies that govern how communities are designed and built. The public health system increasingly recognizes that health-promoting policies, along with programs, are essential to achieving public health goals.

This update of the Housing Chapter of the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan offers the opportunity to include those kinds of policies. Stable, quality, affordable housing is fundamental in achieving the best health outcomes for everyone in our community. It is the foundation upon which people build and improve their lives - the foundation for good health, positive educational outcomes, reaching one’s economic potential, and for community development. Research shows several connections between housing and health:

- Housing quality affects physiological health (through exposure to harmful substances such as mold, radon, or lead), psychological health (through exposure to noise or inadequate light) and safety (through injuries in falls or fires).
- Unaffordable housing affects health when a household’s income is diverted from other essentials, like food or healthcare, to manage housing costs, or when a household is forced to move or to double-up in crowded housing conditions to avoid homelessness. These kinds of conditions can lead to mental health problems, developmental delays and complications with chronic physical illnesses.
- Physical and social attributes of a neighborhood affect individual and community health, and affordable housing sited within a health-promoting neighborhood context can lead to better mental, social and physical health outcomes.

The Public Health Advisory Board (PHAB) believes that the Planning Commission should carefully consider these potential health impacts as you review and make recommendations for the Housing Chapter. Below are the PHAB’s comments on specific aspects of the chapter that are of particular importance:

- **Goal 31 and Policies 31-1 – 31-4**: These policies protect our citizens from health hazards without putting undue burden on housing providers. Adding these policies to our Comprehensive Plan demonstrates a commitment to quality housing for all citizens, regardless of their income level and especially for those who are most vulnerable to
health hazards. We also suggest considering the following additions, which describe specific actions that can be taken to protect and promote healthy housing:

- Review, revise, and update zoning and subdivision codes, as well as other plans, laws, procedures, rules, regulations, guidelines, programs, templates, and design manuals, where necessary, in order to promote healthy housing quality.
- Establish or support abatement assistance programs that help residents eliminate common pollutants from their homes, such as providing free or subsidized supplies to test and monitor indoor air quality and providing grants to remediate indoor air pollution problems in low-income homes or affordable rental units.

**Policy 3G-5:** This policy commits the County to considering inclusionary zoning as a tool to expand affordable housing. It provides the opportunity to explore how this affordable housing policy can best be applied in Whatcom County, allowing the County to study and develop inclusionary zoning incentives or requirements that are appropriate to a community of our size. The Housing Chapter states, “Looking ahead, the incomes of working people in Whatcom County will make affordability one of the County’s biggest challenges”. As part of a comprehensive housing strategy to address this challenge, we urge you to retain this policy that dedicates us to the continued development of tools that best serve the needs of our growing community.

**Goal 3F & Policies 3F-1 – 3F-5:** Again, these policies provide a guide for creating a mix of affordable housing incentives we can use to make sure that as Whatcom County grows, a healthy home doesn’t become beyond the reach of lower income families. We support the decision to move these items from an action plan to policies that can drive an affordable housing strategy for our future.

Including policies in Whatcom County’s Comprehensive Plan that support quality housing for everyone reinforces the guiding value that everyone deserves to live in a safe, healthy home. We appreciate the opportunity to provide comments and hope that you will consider the implications to the health of our community as you engage in this process.

Sincerely,

Ben Scholtz, Chair
Public Health Advisory Board
c/o 509 Girard Street, Bellingham, WA 98225