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Sunday, December 19, 2004



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Putting a cap on sprawl



A NEW CITYSCAPE: Spokane consultant Bill Grimes, who wrote the city's "urban village" growth plan, envisions a transformation at the intersection of James, North State and Iowa streets. He says new two-story buildings, with stores and offices on the ground floors and residences above, would help connect the neighborhood. *MAME BURNS HERALD PHOTO*

'Urban village' plan aims to create new communities within Bellingham

Aubrey Cohen, The Bellingham Herald

Bellingham's civic leaders envision fitting most of the city's growth through 2022 into "urban villages" that mix homes, stores, offices, schools, churches, public space, frequent transit and other amenities.

"An urban village is a community that provides for the needs of the people on all levels," said Kathleen



NEIGHBORS: Silver Beach Grocery owner Carol Smith shares a laugh with regular customer and Silver Beach-area resident Chuck Neff on Friday morning. Silver Beach is an

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J. Hill, an architect who has worked on several recent buildings in Fairhaven.

neighborhood. **PHILIP A. DWYER**
HERALD PHOTO

"I think that the urban village is far more than just walkable shopping," she said. "It's about living in a place where people can be connected to each other."

Sprawl has isolated people, spurring obesity, depression, divorce and illness, Hill said. "Nobody's walking anywhere because they're all driving because they have to because everything's so spread out."

The growth strategy calls for putting most of the 14,100 homes needed for the 31,600 people Bellingham is projected to gain by 2022 into 23 urban villages spread around the city.

By making it more attractive for people to live closer together, urban villages could reduce the amount of development in rural areas, Bellingham planner Greg Aucutt said.

The growth strategy calls for some new homes in established neighborhoods, mostly as accessory homes on existing lots, and leaves some homes to be put outside the city in an expanded or reconfigured growth area.

In supporting the plan at its Dec. 13 meeting, the City Council authorized Planning and Community Development Director Jorge Vega to work with Whatcom County officials to find places for more homes outside of the city.

The plan lays out other recommendations, including increasing community involvement, providing neighborhood amenities with density, bringing in institutions like schools and churches, adding staff training and design guidelines, creating tax incentives for infilling, and increasing high-frequency transit corridors.

Many people lauded the idea of urban villages at recent hearings, but the plan also drew objections.

Darcy Jones, of Jones Engineers, told the City Council that, by not providing for more traditional single-family homes, the plan would fail to stem rural sprawl.

Lawyer Bob Tull said urban villages in the city would take a lot of time, effort and money to work, in part because of fragmented land ownership.

"All it takes (to stall a project) is one holdout, one person who isn't ready," Tull told the City Council last week. Tull represents the owners of Larrabee Springs, a proposed development



To download the city plan, [click here](#). (3MB, PDF)

Four types of 'urban villages'

Urban villages are compact neighborhoods and towns where everything people need is within walking distance, including shops, restaurants, movies, services and public squares, according to Newurbanism.org.

In his Bellingham growth plan, Spokane consultant Bill Grimes calls for four types of villages:

THE CORE VILLAGE is the Central Business District, or downtown. It is the area's primary financial and commercial center, and the seat of city, county and regional government, and features intense transit, parking structures, public spaces and art and tourist attractions.

DISTRICT VILLAGES, such as Fairhaven and Barkley Village, are 10 to 20 acres, serve the entire community, and have offices and banks mixed in with stores, housing, frequent transit, public spaces, and other services and amenities.

NEIGHBORHOOD VILLAGES, such as the Fountain District and Old Town, are five to 10 acres, serve those living within one to two miles, with stores, services, offices, frequent transit, public spaces and a mix of higher-density housing. Business in these areas include supermarkets, pharmacies, restaurants, medical offices and others.

POCKET VILLAGES, such as

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outside the current city and growth area at Smith Road and Guide Meridian.

Melinda Cooper, who lives in a house her grandfather built just outside of Fairhaven, fears urban villages will mean "apartment farms" that bring traffic, noise and parking problems.

"Bellingham's a great place," she said. "I just don't want it to lose the little bit of charm it has to all this growth."

In supporting the growth plan last week, the City Council also endorsed a Planning Commission recommendation to write detailed plans for two urban villages in 2005.

Getting some villages in place could reassure people who are worried about the concept, Aucutt said.

"I think there's this sense that an urban village means some commercial and lots of apartment buildings," he said. "That's not what's envisioned at all. If you look at the successful ones, they're a mix of uses and housing types."

City officials will go back to the council early next year with cost estimates for the planning work and suggestions for the first villages, Aucutt said.

Old Town is an obvious candidate, because of earlier planning work and efforts that will be going on nearby along the waterfront, Aucutt said. He said the Ohio Street area, Fountain District and Barkley Village are other possibilities.

Spokane consultant Bill Grimes, who wrote the growth plan, recommended prioritizing development of urban villages in Old Town, the Fountain District, the central waterfront and the Ohio Street area.

Getting two plans done next year will depend on the city hiring outside help, despite the city's tight budget, Aucutt said.

"It's conceivable that we could get two plans done," he said. "I think one is probably more likely."

Reach Aubrey Cohen at aubrey.cohen@bellinghamherald.com or 715-2289.

strip, are half an acre to two acres, serve the immediate vicinity, with small grocery stores, cleaners, restaurants, churches, transit service and other amenities.



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