

San Juan/Whatcom Community Conversation (Bellingham)

March 10, 2008

Community Conversation Summary

Meeting Purpose

The Puget Sound Partnership held a community conversation in Bellingham on March 10, 2008 and invited the public to share their comments and ideas about protecting and restoring Puget Sound. This event provided citizens an overview of the Puget Sound Partnership and the Action Agenda process, reviewed highlights from the afternoon workshop discussion, and concluded with an open community discussion.

Meeting Overview

Approximately 20 people attended the conversation from 5:30 – 7:30 p.m. at the Bellingham Cruise Terminal.

Meeting Summary

Pat Serie, meeting facilitator, welcomed participants to the meeting. Pat introduced Diana Gale, Leadership Council member, who provided an overview of the Puget Sound Partnership, its structure, and expressed sentiment about the uniqueness of the Sound. Diana introduced Scot Redman, Puget Sound Partnership staff, who discussed the development of the Action Agenda, and gave a summary of what was heard at the preceding workshop.

Those who had participated in the afternoon workshop were asked to begin the conversation with comments about the earlier session. The following is a list of those comments:

- There seemed to be a lot of talk about the lack of funding for programs.
- We need to be more explicit about the fact that the Sound means the whole Puget Sound, from the peaks to the estuaries.
- This afternoon's discussion was well informed and the action area is very well represented by smart and outgoing folks.

Open discussion was guided by these four questions:

- What do you love about Puget Sound?
- What are the biggest problems that are endangering the health of the Sound?
- Which problems should receive the most attention?
- What actions should we focus on first?

The following is a list of questions and comments regarding the four questions. Answers are indicated with italics.

What do you love about Puget Sound?

- I love diving and snorkeling, but I have seen the Sound deteriorate over the years. I don't see the Western Grebe anymore. I would like to see the Sound saved.
- I love Birch Bay and I don't want to see it go the way of the California coast. In particular, I want to save the shellfish in Birch Bay.
- Puget Sound shellfish are a prized food throughout the country and we need to protect that industry.

What are the biggest problems that are endangering the health of the Sound?

- Everybody values the Sound, but we don't know how to take care of it. New developments are using fertilizer with phosphorous. The County has said they will conduct septic inspections, but it hasn't happened yet. We need to educate the public about how to take care of the Sound.
- The City of Bellingham has a list of critical areas. Development has a negative effect on forest coverage and wetlands. Wetlands are being covered in the city and in the County. Wetlands are very important to our ecology and we need to consider the consequences of losing them.
- The problem is trying to accommodate a growing population. Critical areas are being degraded because the land use and zoning regulations have been grandfathered in and that ties our hands.
- We need to enforce the ordinances, but there aren't enough resources to accomplish this task.
- The Department of Education is missing in the Puget Sound Partnership structure. We need to pass on these ideas and values to our children. All of our ideas and actions are being moved up the chain to our leadership, when they need to go down and reach young people.
- Enforcement of the minutiae is very difficult. The Neah Bay rescue tug needs funding. The political will is not there even though the legislature wants to get involved. Policymakers are scared to lose their jobs to a voting public that doesn't fully understand the issues.

- There are new chemicals that we are just starting to understand. Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs) are a legacy chemical. Flame retardant chemicals that we are just learning about, such as polybrominated diphenyl ethers (PBDEs), are another one. We need the science to better understand the problems.
- We need to hold politicians accountable for their decisions or lack of action. We need to get more active politically. We need to enforce the laws in place. My neighbors are cutting their trees down, and then they have flooded basements. We need good regulations in place and then we need to enforce them.
- The technocrats use all kinds of jargon. They use infill as a champion for good planning, but there is bad infill and there is good infill. To develop areas that are not already developed is bad while reuse of already developed land is good. This language fools those who don't know better and bad development is allowed under the guise of infill. I think short moratoriums in sensitive areas are a good idea while we get our act together on the issue of development.
- It seems the Puget Sound Partnership Science Panel has a conflict about how local governments should deal with stormwater. Do you have any insight into this? *The first iteration of the Partnership, Puget Sound Partnership 1.0, did struggle over the stormwater issue. Stormwater and land use are likely to be the areas where we will have our greatest tensions. We will be holding a topic forum regarding stormwater in April. The question the community must ask itself is how much are we willing to spend to solve the problem.*
- Currently, a local developer plans to destroy 100 acres of forest land where sensitive undeveloped areas exist and the City of Bellingham tells us that we don't have any leverage as the land is private. We need some muscle when there is clear and present danger to fight these problems. We need resources (dollars) to fight these issues.
- The first iteration of the Puget Sound Partnership couldn't get enough money to move things forward because, on a good day, the Sound looks great. It's hard to make the public understand that there is a problem. A general understanding of the problem will incite political will because politicians will not be scared to act.
- We need to figure out how to get support and it needs to come from the bottom up. *One of the points in the legislation is to create a 501(c) 3 organization to raise money for public education. Before we can spend money on the Sound we need to launch a public education program to garner public support. A number*

of non-profits have started the Puget Sound Alliance, which will conduct an education and outreach program.

- We need more than just an education program; something more engaging.
- I am all for youth environmental education, but we need adults to understand what we have lost. We don't think about the fact that there were humpback whales, sea otters and Western Grebes in the Sound. I hope when you get the program running, it engages the public with historic images of what this place used to be like. We have lost more than we realize we've lost. Although I'm idealistic, when I think about the complex issues facing us and the tribes, I get worried. We need to be honest about what it is really going to take to get this done and not green wash the message. We need more edginess because 2020 is an ambitious goal and action is necessary now. *We are not going to fix it all by 2020, but we want to set up something sustainable by finding ways to induce behavior change (e.g. low impact development).*
- There is a wide range of ideas about how healthy the Sound is. How is the Partnership defining the health of the Sound right now? *For now, we are using the goals in the legislation.*
- When communicating with the public we use big ideas like "ecological breakdown" and "disaster." I would like to have a better answer from the scientists on where they stand on this question. As well, we hear a lot about a species-by-species approach but not a system-wide approach. *There has been a lot of discussion at the workshops about ecological services that we need to understand better in order to help answer these questions.*
- People need simple answers to complex questions. Scientists tend to talk over our heads.
- No need to form a new non-profit because many successful non-profits are already established and engaged throughout the Sound. Education does need to be a coordinated effort and the Educational Consortium would be the best way to make that happen. If we establish curriculum then the school districts and universities will pick it up. We need to make education about the Sound a legacy issue.
- A group will come up with a brochure or informational piece that is really good, but over time it is no longer available. We need to find some consistency of programs and need consistent funding. We can't keep changing the message and reinventing the wheel.

What actions should we focus on first?

- A moratorium on all development right now.
- Identify all sensitive areas right now, impose a short term moratorium, get things in order, and use this leverage as a tool down the line.
- We don't have a plan for the coming population other than the status quo – sprawling and building – there is no dialogue being started other than the GMA and we can see where that has gotten us. We need to recognize that.
 - *Do you have a local growth management plan here?*
 - That is a shaky house of cards with numbers that were pulled out of the air. We can't use this model for growth that has failed – it is very dangerous and we need to stop and think.
- Enforce existing laws and figure out how to place retroactive controls on existing development.
- I have a specific request of the Puget Sound Partnership. The development spoken of earlier (100 acres of forest land) needs help. This ecologically sensitive and pristine area should have been preserved through an analysis paid for by the City of Bellingham. Development will happen anyway and it will be devastating to the local ecosystem. There is an EIS process happening right now. I would like to request that the Puget Sound Partnership come to the hearing. As well, I would like a letter sent to the City, with Partnership letterhead, stating why the area should be preserved. Many people are fighting this and funding it from their own pockets. I would ask that the Partnership act and I would also like to know who I can follow up with.
- What happens in September after the Action Agenda is delivered? *Efforts continue, especially implementation. The Action Agenda will be a living document.*
- So the final product is a document then? *Yes and your area will be able to comment on a draft document. Once that is complete we will devise a funding plan and then an action plan, which will assign tasks out to the local, regional, and state agencies. The document may be used to protect still-functioning areas and procure funding for local issues and education programs.*
- How much will the aforementioned new development (100 acres of forest land) cost the taxpayer? The general public doesn't understand how much new

- development costs taxpayers. We need to educate people about things they have never thought about before.
- Puget Sound Partnership doesn't have regulatory authority except the power of the purse. *Once the Action Agenda is done we will start an accountability plan that works like the carrot and the stick analogy. We will be in a good position to take local actions.*
 - You have the expertise to make decisions that we, as the public, can't make or understand how to make. You will make decisions to prioritize actions based on scientific data, but how will I know what choices will help at my level? *The Partnership's Science Panel will look at these issues and find a balance between science and policy. We will be in communication with all local areas.*
 - What happens if the governor loses the next election? *The Partnership was passed by the entire legislature. The goal is to make this program sustainable. The public must also demand that programs like the Partnership stay in place because they are important.*
 - Does this agency have the power to intervene? *No, but we do have the power to make a lot of noise if people are not keeping their word. We can go public with the problem. Also, we work for the governor and that office has power.*
 - Did the idea of trans-boundary issues, or tugboats, come up in the earlier session? *Yes, there was talk about trans-boundary issues and the rescue tug earlier.*
 - There is one unifying factor in this area and that is the Fraser River.
 - When will we see you again? *There will be topic forum workshops in April and those dates will be posted on the Web site. We will do this kind of meeting again in May. Keep checking the Web site for more action area outreach events as they come up.*

Wrap up/Next Steps

Pat Serie closed by thanking everyone for coming and participating. She encouraged people to stay involved in this process by submitting comment forms, visiting the Web site, and attending future events.