

Birch Bay Healthy Communities Assessment

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Editors Note: The following was submitted by Melissa Morin, Community Health Specialist with the Whatcom County Health Department, who is conducting this community assessment.



Beautiful beaches, places to stroll or ride a bike, and spots to sit and take in the scenery are important parts of active, healthy, vibrant communities. Paths, parks and trails make it easy for people to physically active by providing inexpensive – often free! – places to get regular exercise. They can also be used for daily transportation from home to school, work or retail services, and serve as community amenities that foster economic development. They are connecting spaces in the community, offering points for family, friends, neighbors and visitors to bump into one another, gather together, or relax in solitude with nature. We intuitively know this. We can feel the difference that beautiful public spaces make in our communities. But what if we could *demonstrate* the effect that paths and parks have on a community?



Perhaps we can. Birch Bay is one of five sites selected to test a tool for assessing the benefits of trails and parks on a community's health. With assistance from the [National Parks Service Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance program](#), the Whatcom County Health Department (WCHD) is leading a team of community members to participate in a national pilot with the goals of:

1. gathering baseline data on the community's health, public safety and economy/tourism;
2. bringing various community members and agencies together to prioritize community health, safety and economic concerns and opportunities, and to make recommendations for pedestrian trail design and possible programs to enhance the health, safety and economic benefits of the project;
3. tracking and evaluating the benefits of the trail through post-construction data gathering and comparison;

4. informing long-term planning to promote safer and healthier communities. Public health evidence shows that our health is affected by where we live, including whether or not our neighborhoods have safe places to walk, bike and play. Still,



it's important to be able to know and to create solutions for the specific concerns of local communities. That's why the WCHD's Healthy Communities Team is partnering with Birch Bay residents on this project. It is a unique and exciting opportunity to not only study how safe, inviting environments for recreation and physical activity impact people, but also to involve the Birch Bay community with public health and Whatcom County Public Works in seeing that the Birch Bay Drive and Pedestrian Facility Project fully realizes these benefits.



Birch Bay Sunset (Photo credit: mtsvancouver)

In the coming months, the Birch Bay Healthy Communities Assessment Team will be gathering local data and using it to contribute to the design of the pedestrian facility along Birch Bay Drive. The team is looking at existing health, safety and economic data, as well as collecting some of their own data through community surveys. The team is also creating a plan to gather more data once the project is complete, so that by comparing before and after data, we can better understand what the impacts are for the community. In the end, we hope to be able to show off the results of an even better Birch Bay.

For more information on the Birch Bay Healthy Communities Assessment, contact Melissa Morin, Community Health Specialist with WCHD's Healthy Communities Program (360-676-6724 ext. #32027; mmorin@whatcomcounty.us).