

Q & A: The Birch Bay Drive and Pedestrian Facility Project

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The Northern Light invited three individuals who are closely involved with the Birch Bay Drive and Pedestrian Facility project to answer questions about the project and what it means for the community of Birch Bay.

Roland Middleton is the special projects manager for Whatcom County Public Works who is overseeing the project. Kathy Berg and John Gargett are on the Birch Bay Waterfront Group.

TNL: Can you give me a brief history of the project, and why the waterfront group calls it the "Wolf's Beach Restoration Project?"

KB: In 1975, the Whatcom County Planning Commission asked Wolf Bauer, a renowned shoreline dynamics scientist, to do a report on the hydro-geologic function of the Birch Bay shoreline. That report is online (www.co.whatcom.wa.us/publicworks/engineering/BirchBayDriveandPedestrianFacilityProject.jsp), and it shows how the shoreline works and what the benefits of a berm would be, both in erosion control and flood control. That was that, I believe, until the storm of 1982, which was a big deal. People had logs on their front lawns. At that point, they dusted off Wolf Bauer's report and said, "Hey, we can do something about this." In 1984 or '85, they restored a portion of the bay from Terrell Creek to as far as they could get easements – about the south edge of Jacob's Landing. They restored that, and then the plan went on the shelf again.

About 1998 the Birch Bay Chamber of Commerce got interested in the project again as a way to improve economic conditions for the businesses along the bay. We got a grant to study it again under the new shoreline regulations. That report is on the website as well, with an alphabet soup of agencies that came together to determine, can this be done? That's when I met Wolf, and he said, "It sure can be done," even under the new regulations. We've been working at it ever since.

TNL: Why would this project be good for businesses along Birch Bay?

JG: It would be good for business on a multitude of levels. Visitors would be able to access the beach without scrambling over riprap. Another benefit is it would attract people to visit. When White Rock restored their beach, tourism went up. So it's a tourist attraction, it's a safety feature and it's also a flood control measure that minimizes the impacts of floods to businesses.

TNL: Are there any other benefits the community can expect to come out of this project as a whole?

RM: The comprehensive plan for Birch Bay called for a safe walkway along Birch Bay Drive, and to repair that section of the drive where the water is right up against the road. So not only is there the economic benefit that John was just talking about, but it will make it safer to walk and bike along Birch Bay Drive. I don't know how many stories I've heard of people who won't let their grandkids walk down the street. Lowering the speed limit to 25 mph doesn't make it safe if there's not enough distance between pedestrians and vehicles. There are also storm water issues that the project will address. We want to make sure the roadway is properly constructed with enough small outfalls so that the storm water can flow through. All water runoff, even if it just runs off your roof and into a pipe, carries pollutants with it, and since the bay is an important shellfish harvesting area, we want to ensure the health of the bay. Another

benefit is the aesthetic issue, and the under-grounding of utilities. Every business owner that I've talked to has been grateful that that is a part of the design. It's important to note that this isn't a typical Whatcom County Public Works project. This is Whatcom County Public Works implementing a Birch Bay community project. The road itself gets damaged from storms every year, and Whatcom County repairs and maintains the road every year. The replacement of the hard surfaces – the riprap, the seawall – with the soft barrier of the berm, will take care of those maintenance issues by preventing flooding and erosion. So this has really been a community-driven effort.

TNL: How will the soft barrier of the berm be more effective at preventing floods and surf damage than a seawall and riprap?

RM: A seawall stands vertically and directly opposes the force of the wave. So when a wave comes up against a seawall or riprap, the wave hits it at full force. It doesn't begin to break until it's already smashing into the concrete. You may think that a bunch of water doesn't do much to a chunk of concrete that's a foot thick, but it doesn't take long for that to blow through. It may take a matter of years, but in a community's time frame it doesn't take much time at all. It also causes problems because the force of the wave isn't dissipated. Rather it extends outwards to the edges of the wall and erodes land beyond the wall. Anyone who has a neighbor with a seawall or bulkhead knows exactly what I'm talking about – their land gets eaten away every winter.

When you put in a soft shoreline barrier, which is essentially a natural beach, it's a seven-to-one slope or so. The water rolls up that slope and pushes sand and gravel up that slope, then rolls back down bringing gravel and sand with it. As the next wave comes up, the gravel coming back down the slope hits it and slows it down. That reduces the energy of the wave, as does the fact that it's going gradually uphill. A gradual slope dissipates the slap of the wave.

TNL: How long will construction take?

RM: It depends on if we do all phases of the project. There are a few different goals that are identified in the community plan. One is to protect Birch Bay Drive by removing the hard surfaces and restoring the beach profile. The second is to put a walkway on top of that and the third is to continue that walkway all the way up from Alderson up past Schintaffer to where the Coast Millennium Trail designation comes down. Another is to upgrade the sewer lines and another is to underground the utilities. To do all of that, we're looking at probably four to six years. We could also do it much quicker than that, but it would be a much larger disturbance to businesses and homes. It's a very large project. If we end up breaking it up and only doing one element at a time, it can be parsed out over several years.

TNL: Is there the potential for negative effects to businesses along Birch Bay Drive, and how are you preparing for that?

JG: Obviously construction will be an impact. The question is how to minimize that impact as much as possible, and there are a couple extremes. Some communities shut everything down. Pender Island in B.C. shut everything down for a year. They asked businesses how much they make in a year and paid them each that sum so construction could get done. It has its advantages – the impact on businesses is negated, because while businesses aren't making more money than they usually would, they aren't losing it either, and construction can get done very quickly. The impact to tourism is lower, because if a construction project is drawn out over several years, tourists say, "Oh, there's all that construction going on, I don't want to go to Birch Bay." Another option is to do it in a series of small sections. A third option would be to

separate the project into phases. So you underground all the utilities at once. The road gets patched up, but it's not a finished road. Then you do the berm. Then you finish the road. You could do it sequentially that way over a couple of years. There are peak seasons where construction could be phased down, but there are also natural resource impacts and considerations such as the salmon season that need to be taken into account. The construction season could be longer, too. Most businesses I've talked to would prefer to have it done as quickly as possible and get on with their business.

TNL: Could the project affect property values along Birch Bay Drive?

JG: I don't think there's any question it will increase property values. The property values will go up as a result of an increase in tourists saying, "Hey, this is a place I want to be." It happened in Fairhaven.

TNL: Do you think that plays into some of the reservations people have expressed about the project?

KB: At least one person I've talked to is not excited at all about having more tourists. However, we've already got them. Witness what happens on the Fourth of July, and we are not at all prepared to serve that many people. We don't have restrooms, we don't have trashcans.

JG: Based on the people I've talked to, I don't think people fear property values going up. In fact, I've already seen people who are interested in buying property on the speculation that it will go up.

TNL: Regarding the issue of right of way, some landowners seem concerned that the project jeopardizes their property. Isn't that a legitimate concern?

JG: My family and my wife's family have both owned property on Birch Bay Drive since 1929, and there's never been any question in the family's mind where the right of way was. I don't speak for others, but there was no surprise when they staked out the 60-foot right of way. I think anyone who says that they were surprised by the 60-foot right of way probably hasn't been here for decades.

RM: There was a right of way established for Road 22 that was 30 feet in 1877. After that, Road 46 established the right of way at 60 feet. It was notified in the Whatcom Reveille, it was platted in 1916, it was monumented in 1930 and hundreds of surveys out there have all shown 60 feet. The county's position is not that it's claiming a 60-foot right of way, it's just saying that's what it is and there's not really any debate about that. The confusion is over whether we're going to plow up 60 feet of land for this project, which we're not.

If anything, this project will preserve land for the landowners on Birch Bay Drive. Every time we repair that road, we're creeping further and further away from the incoming tide and towards the landowners, because the water erodes and degrades the seaward side of the roadbed and road surface. The road itself is getting closer to the eastern edge of that 60-foot right of way in some places, and the center of the road is not the center of the right of way.

The people I've met out there are worried that I'm going to rip up their landscaping, but in each case I've shown them how we're planning on arranging the infrastructure around – not through – people's property.

I have offered to meet with any individual and any group, and I'll go to their property, listen to their needs and their concerns, and bring those to the design team.

TNL: What will the berm look like from across the road?

RM: It will be about two and a half feet higher than the road surface.

TNL: What can Birch Bay residents expect to see next?

JG: They can expect to see more information coming out and more requests for public involvement, including surveys from Whatcom public health.

I think many people lose sight of the fact also that this isn't just a Birch Bay project. Birch Bay is also the waterfront for Blaine and everything north of Ferndale. There aren't many beaches left for those residents to visit. It's actually a fairly big regional project for being able to attract people. It has a complete Whatcom County benefit.

Roland Middleton encouraged anyone with questions or concerns about the Birch Bay Drive and Pedestrian Facility project to contact him directly by phone at 360/676-6876 or by email at rmiddlet@co.whatcom.wa.us.