

**Whatcom Museum**  
**Vision for renewal and integration**

**January 25, 2013**

In November 2012, staff and stakeholders of the Whatcom Museum took part in a visioning session facilitated by interpretive planner Alice Parman and her colleague, exhibit designer Alan Ransenberg of The Alchemy of Design. During their site visit, Alice and Alan also interviewed staff members and toured the exhibits, collections, and facilities. The purpose of these encounters was to imagine how three separate buildings – Old City Hall, the Syre Center, and the Lightcatcher—might be orchestrated to create a seamlessly integrated visitor experience. This document distills an emerging vision for the Whatcom Museum: to share our region’s rich heritage with people of all ages and backgrounds, through the museum’s exhibitions, programs, and collections. We envision the Whatcom Museum as a unifying symbol, hub, and gathering place for Whatcom County and beyond.

***Connecting past, present, and future***

Overlooking Whatcom Creek, the museum is situated near the origin and heart of a dynamic, vital community. The Whatcom Museum honors our region’s deepest roots with an outstanding collection of Native arts, and documents centuries of change in storerooms filled with yesterday’s technology, precious heirlooms, and a bonanza of some 200,000 historic photographs.

Our intent is to connect these records of our shared history with our region’s vibrant present and potential futures. To this end, the Whatcom Museum will partner with artists, elders, chroniclers and historians, practitioners of trades and professions, collectors, teachers, scholars, and many others with knowledge and skills to share. With their collaborative participation, exhibits and programs will be responsive to ideals, dilemmas, and hot-button issues that enliven our communities today.

The museum is already a convivial place. Friends meet at the Lightcatcher for coffee or a meal, and people from all walks of life assemble in the Rotunda Room to listen, learn, and enjoy. Our aim is to enlarge the scope of these gatherings to include ongoing, facilitated community conversations where we can explore alternatives for today and tomorrow, together.

***Where are we?***

The Whatcom Museum serves people from all walks of life, who bring experience and traditions from throughout the nation and the world. We invite participation by those who have lived here for many generations, and those who are newly arrived. And we welcome guests who are passing through and who want to know: Where are we? What is this place all about?

To make the museum a magnet for all who live in and visit Bellingham and Whatcom County, it will be essential to integrate and unify the disparate structures that house the

Whatcom Museum. We envision a constellation of buildings, serving complementary functions. They are linked by visual and conceptual threads of architectural and interpretive elements, guiding visitors from one set of experiences to the next. An overlay of symbolic and programmatic connections weaves history and art into a magical, engaging sequence of shared experiences. On special occasions the street would transform into a pedestrian plaza, an expansive setting for celebrations of arts, culture, and heritage.

Our goal is to shape the elements of the Whatcom Museum—Old City Hall, the Syre Center, and the Lightcatcher—into a campus with a distinct entity, integrated with the Arts District. Connecting threads would be layered onto the existing commercial streetscape as signage, sculptural elements, hardscaping, and more. Changeable media—banners, window decor, apps, sandwich boards—allow the connecting overlay to morph as needed, drawing visitors toward events and exhibits in each of the three buildings. Paid admission to any of the buildings admits visitors to all three, denoted by a wearable token—perhaps a recreation of a historic key? Members and volunteers receive a special, more durable symbol, in recognition of their commitment.

***What roles could each building play in an integrated Whatcom Museum?***

**• *Old City Hall***

Old City Hall, majestic and striking, dominates downtown Bellingham. Once it housed council chambers and jail cells; now it belongs to the people, who have embraced it in spite of its inconveniences. Old City Hall is a community icon, a popular choice for logos and advertisements. It stands for Whatcom County in the minds of residents, and is the most visible building in the urban core. Old City Hall is a compass point of community life.

The main floor of Old City Hall is the perfect place for an *orientation gallery* that expresses the essence of Whatcom County. Enduring installations of cultural patrimony and artistic creativity, drawn from the collections, are complemented by changeable elements, programmed collaboratively with community partners.

In the orientation gallery, a relief map or projection of the region is keyed to the cardinal points. Around the tabletop visual, a photo/graphic reader rail with inset objects introduces Whatcom County's diverse communities. History, landscapes and resources, occupations, festivals and events, visitor attractions, and fascinating facts acquaint visitors with each town's unique character. Bellingham has its own display, centered on a retro-style map; cartoon drawings and lettering reveal the city's origin as four distinct communities whose qualities continue to flourish.

Another layer of exhibits, along the gallery's perimeter, adds art to the mix. Paintings, photographs, and ephemera evoke the region's scenic landscapes: farmland and forest to the north, the Salish Sea and the Pacific Ocean to the west, Chuckanut Drive to the south, and Mount Baker and the Cascade range to the

east. Display systems are secure, while allowing access for staff to rotate objects, ephemera, and artworks. Graphics are designed for ready change-outs.

A mini-theater offers a selection of brief, visitor-activated programs. A timeless introductory piece blends work by local photographers and videographers with images of artworks and historical objects from the collections, defining the region historically and geographically. Changing “insider” features, produced by students, journalists, and other community members, tell stories of people whose vision and creativity make Whatcom County such a special place to live in and visit. Tying the present to the past and future, these vignettes often make use of the museum’s collections, relate to changing exhibitions, or grow out of a community conversation.

Adjacent to the lobby, two galleries will showcase the vibrant past and present cultures, continuing traditions, and living arts of the Lummi Nation and the Nooksack Indian Tribe. Tribal members will curate these dynamic exhibitions, assisted by the museum’s exhibit design staff. Potential resources include the museum’s object and photograph collections, loaned items from tribal departments, and related collections from the Smithsonian Institution, where the Whatcom Museum is an Affiliate.

On the second floor is the Rotunda Room, whose warmth and architectural unity make it a congenial gathering space for community conversations and other programs. Like the adjacent *Alsop Gallery*, the *Rotunda Room* also features changing displays drawn from the museum’s vast collections of photographs and ephemera, supplemented by community-based components. Exhibits produced by guest curators alternate with new and recycled in-house shows. Flexible display systems give staff and community members the ability to mount informal, temporary exhibits in conjunction with Rotunda Room programs.

The third floor is slated to become the new venue for *the museum’s founding collections of birds*, reinstalled and reinterpreted as a doorway into the region’s natural history.

Photomurals of varied Whatcom County habitats are backdrops for the bird mounts, with each species displayed in a setting where it is most often seen. Shoreline and open sea; rivers, lakes, and wetlands; forests and fields, and mountain slopes and peaks are represented. Special features call visitors’ attention to migratory species glimpsed overhead, and to birds around a backyard feeder.

Interpretive graphics, developed in collaboration with Audubon Society members and educators, awaken interest in one of the nation’s most popular outdoor activities: birdwatching. (Note that prior to reinstallation, the bird specimens will be cleaned and repaired; because old taxidermy mounts contain arsenic, they must be displayed behind glass.) An informal bulletin board posts notices of classes and field trips, unusual bird sightings, bird counts, threatened and endangered species, and more. A rotating poster show features current research by scientists at

Western Washington University, NOAA, US Fish & Wildlife Service, and other partner institutions.

Interactive exhibits engage visitors with the wonder and science of flight, and the fascinating private lives of birds. Inquiry-based, hands-on activities focus on birds as evolutionary and environmental case studies. How do birds' bodies equip them to fly? What special adaptations help birds live in deep or shallow water, raise their babies (and teach them to fly) on a cliff face, prey on fish and rodents, and journey thousands of miles each year along ancient migratory routes? What is the prehistory of birds in the Pacific Northwest? How are climate change and habitat loss affecting birds in our region today? A webcam, mounted at an eagle's nest or offshore sanctuary, is a popular feature. Current observations by backyard birders and waterfowl hunters, changing images of birds and other local species by Whatcom County residents and visitors, new fossil finds, and updates from habitat watchdog and restoration groups keep these displays fresh for return visits.

Major renovations to Old City Hall are long overdue. While new exhibits are being planned and installed, the beloved structure will be brought up to date in terms of fire suppression and other needed improvements.

- ***Syre Center***

Jam-packed exhibit cases in the Syre Center will be replaced by *Time Machine*, a history discovery gallery. Interactive exhibits and open storage collections challenge visitors to connect the dots that link past, present, and future. Creative predictions, imaginative problem-solving, and speculative sleuthing—all based on evidence—make Time Machine a fun and rewarding place to visit and revisit. Here visitors learn to think like historians, and in the process may ignite a lifelong love of history.

In an informal, lively, and experimental setting, youth and adults experience history, close up and hands-on. Selections from the object, ephemera, and photo collections, programmed and installed for periodic change-outs, show visitors how people have met their basic needs, and led rich and meaningful lives, through many generations—including our own. Considering evidence, using inquiry methods to explore real questions, visitors of all ages learn that history is alive everywhere in Whatcom County, if we keep our eyes, ears, and minds open.

Exhibit development for the Syre Center is ongoing, based on collaborations with people whose vocations and avocations link past, present, and future. Some examples: artisans who work with wood to combine form with function; fishermen, boatbuilders, and canoe carvers who know how to design and build for seaworthiness; professionals entrusted with people's health and wealth; craftspeople whose artistry and skill make our everyday lives more beautiful; mechanics who understand how things work and how to keep them working.

Drawing on the collections, exhibit development teams work with versatile stage-set platforms to set the scene: a workshop, an office, a home, a retail

establishment, a social event. Fragile, one-of-a-kind artifacts are protected, while replicas and donated expendables are open to experimentation. Visitors can find out firsthand how things work, what they're made of, and who made and used them.

Opened up and expanded, the Syre Center classroom becomes an inquiry-based resource center and state-of-the-art programming space, where people of all ages can drill down into history-related topics. Combining an inquiry-based approach with the Scottish storyline method of creating in-depth moments in time, themes and activities in the history discovery zone and classroom are planned collaboratively with educators. School classes at all levels can meet multi-disciplinary state and national standards through on-site tours and workshops. Pre- and post-visit materials, field-tested curriculum units, and self-guided materials are available on the museum's website. Family groups, home-schoolers, youth organizations, and independent scholars from middle school through higher education find invaluable resources here. A lively program of small-scale performances and demonstrations brings history to life through the arts, and showcases today's practitioners of time-honored crafts.

In the upcoming interpretive planning phase, museum staff and stakeholders will collaborate with educators, curriculum specialists, and other community partners. Together we will identify interpretive themes to help visitors relate Whatcom County's past to the present and future. Some possibilities:

- *The Forest*: Wood as the most readily available building material since time immemorial; tools and methods for harvesting and shaping wood to create structures, containers, vessels, and so much more; the art of carving; preserving finite forest resources
- *Cornucopia*: Nature's bounty in field and forest and along the shoreline; traditional methods for tending and harvesting plants for food, baskets, clothing, and medicine; tools and methods of farming and animal husbandry; preserving finite resources of soil and water; tools and methods of food preservation, storage, and cooking; culinary arts of all cultures
- *The Salish Sea*: Whatcom County watersheds that flow into the Sea; fish, fishing, and restoration of salmon runs; transport and trade; our place on the Pacific Rim, with ties to Asia and beyond
- *Community Gallery*: Turned over to consortia of artists, scholars, activists, tribal members, and other experts who submit vetted proposals for changing exhibits on topics of community interest. For example, people from neighboring towns in Whatcom County and Canada might propose a *Borders* exhibit, focused on divisions imposed by the boundary, and connections that persist in spite of it. Visitors could experience a border crossing from both directions, and compare viewpoints and experiences re politics, economics, consumer culture, arts and music, and more.

Time Machine can be imagined as a variant on the dynamic and popular Family Interactive Gallery. Like the FIG, Time Machine has an appealing and unified aesthetic,

significant hands-on and interactive elements, and a strong component of participation and contribution by community partners. Aimed at multigenerational audiences, Time Machine promotes shared experiences and lively conversation, acquaints visitors with other museum resources such as the photo archives, and serves as a prime recruiting ground for museum members and volunteers.

The FIG would not have attained and maintained its level of excellence without the services of a well-qualified, imaginative staff member. Time Machine is no different. To plan and realize this groundbreaking exhibition and learning laboratory, the Whatcom Museum will create the position of Curator of Public History. Requirements include credentials as a research historian, familiarity with material culture collections, and commitment to a dynamic, participatory approach to exhibit development and design. A future campaign will seek funding to endow this curatorship as a Foundation employee position.

• *The Lightcatcher*

The Lightcatcher building continues its vital roles as an architecturally stunning showplace for regional and national artists, a popular gathering space, an appealing shopping destination, and an invaluable resource for small children and their adults—the FIG. The Lightcatcher’s second-floor gallery will continue as a flexible space, enabling the museum to mount large-scale art exhibitions, and telling important community stories through compelling interdisciplinary exhibits.

*A vibrant museum campus*

Wherever visitors begin their experience, exhibits, programs, and visual cues make them aware of the other three buildings, their interrelationships in space and time, and the opportunities afforded in each—now, or during a future visit.

With three venues extending over a two-block area, linked together visually and programmatically, the Whatcom Museum takes its place among the foremost metropolitan museums of the Pacific Northwest.