

Our Top 15 stories from past 15 years



Mauri Ingram, center, Larry Farr, left and Mike Kimmich, right, from the Downtown Renaissance Network, are shown here in a photo from our March 2001 issue. The accompanying story discussed the challenges and triumphs of redeveloping downtown.

Heidi Schiller

Pop quiz — what year did a group of angry “pit protesters” take over the cement remnants of the Mason Building downtown, demanding an urban garden?

What was the original name of the Hotel Bellwether — was it A) The Bellwether Beacon, B) The Harbor Lights or C) The Bayside Inn?

How many times have business owners decried the ineptitude of the city's permitting process in the pages of The Bellingham Business Journal? (For this one you can round off to the nearest fifty).

The most avid BBJ readers — those who have read the paper since its first issue in November 1992 — should get an A plus on this test. For those who haven't been studying, read on, because after 15 years, 180 issues, a cornucopia of staff writers and columnists, and a panoply of coverage, we have narrowed down the major stories of our time to the top 15.

From the rebirth of downtown to the greening of local businesses and developments, we scoured our pages for the stories and trends that have had the most impact in Bellingham.

1. Downtown revitalization

By far, downtown's metamorphosis from a dreary collection of empty buildings and desolate streets into a thriving urban center occupied the most page space of any story in The BBJ's past 180 issues.

In our October 1994 story, "Downtown on the rebound, but questions remain," downtown business owners opined about the state of the city center post-Bellis Fair. Developers had begun snapping up buildings, restaurants and retail shops opened again, but "for sale" signs and empty buildings still reigned.

"It takes 10 to 15 years to fix a downtown," said Mike Brennan, then the executive vice president of the Bellingham/Whatcom Chamber of Commerce and Industry, in the story.

Brennan's predictions seem to be right on target.

The past 15 years have seen an enormous amount of investment in downtown from developers, business owners and new residents, and The BBJ covered it all.

Whether it was during the Morris Piha, the Bob Hall, or the Doug Tolchin eras, property owners sold, bought and refurbished buildings.

In 1998, the Downtown Development Workshops brought 160 downtown stakeholders together to identify priorities and timelines for downtown revitalization.

In a September 2000 story, "Is downtown turning a corner?" optimists said yes, while others argued that without the city's help getting more downtown parking and getting rid of one-way streets, that the corner could lead to a dead end.

In March 2001, The BBJ reported a new group called the Downtown Renaissance Network had formed to spruce up the area and promote revitalization, with Mauri Ingram at its helm, and over the next six years a flurry of development activity seemed to force the area out of its cocoon.

The whirlwind centered around the corner of Railroad Avenue and Holly Street, and involved the demolition of the Flame Tavern building in November 2001 (called in one BBJ story the "the poster child of decaying downtown structures,"), the "pit protests" over the old Mason Building site in summer 2001, and the city's condemnation threats to the Bellingham Inn in November 2002.

The corner became the keystone of downtown's upswing with the development of three mixed-use buildings.

More recently, downtown saw a rash of proposed condo projects — some of which have been built, like Rick Westerop's Morse Square Condominiums and Catholic Community Services Kateri Court. It remains to be seen whether the others — the 23-story Bay View Tower, the 18-story Morse Tower, or the 15-story Cornwall Place — will be able to get financing and break ground.

Not everyone has been entirely thrilled with aspects of downtown's revitalization. With all the redevelopment, some have voiced concerns about gentrification, and recently there have been clashes over noise and disturbances between downtown nightlife goers and new residents.

However, with the construction of Depot Market Square, the Railroad Avenue retail boom, and the establishment of restaurants like Giuseppe's, Nimbus and Fiamma Burger that have invigorated the taste buds of hordes of new downtown residents, it's hard to deny that this butterfly has sprouted wings.

The question remains whether the long-discussed parking garage will ever materialize to allow that butterfly to take flight.

2. Georgia-Pacific and the waterfront development

The saga of Bellingham's waterfront has been a blessing and a curse.

In March 2001, the Georgia-Pacific pulp mill closed due to high electricity and low pulp prices.

The event resulted in 400 layoffs and a gaping 137 acres of industrial land that many wanted to see cleaned up and redeveloped into a new city neighborhood.

After a partnership attempt between Trillium Corp. and G-P in 2002 to take on development of the site fell through, a more concerted effort to envision potential for the area began when the Port of Bellingham and the city formed the Waterfront Futures Group.

In January 2005, the port acquired the property in exchange for taking on the site's cleanup costs. Thus began what will become Bellingham's largest, most expensive, and possibly longest redevelopment project, 220 acres of waterfront property.

In October 2006, the port and city revealed a draft master plan that laid groundwork for the \$1.2 million project that would include the port's contested marina, Western Washington University's presence, a technology consortium, a marine trade center, parks, mixed-use development and a new TerrAquarium, as well as space for NOAA to possibly relocate from Seattle.

With WWU already heading to the waterfront to occupy a small office space, the EIS draft report being finalized, and G-P's recent announcement it will end its tissue mill operations at the end of 2007, the Waterfront District appears to slowly be taking shape. Stay tuned, because part two of this saga will likely get more and more epic.

3. Growth

In the last 15 years, there has been no question that Bellingham needs to adjust a few belt buckles. The debate has centered on whether to tighten or loosen those buckles, and by how many notches.

The state's Growth Management Act, passed in 1991, aimed to regulate city and county long-range planning. The BBJ's first report on urban land supply in January 1993 noted that until then, the issue of growth had been "relatively quiet" in these parts.

It's gotten louder ever since.

In 1996, in response to the GMA, the city of Bellingham adopted a comprehensive plan that identified urban growth areas. In 2001 The BBJ reported concerns from developers and landowners who felt the boundaries limited development options and increased land prices and development costs.

In 2002, the BBJ first got wind of Caitac USA's desire to develop more than 500 acres of land outside the UGA, north of Cordata Parkway, into a mixed-use neighborhood — a proposal now infamously known as Larrabee Springs.

Around the same time, the debate about how to expand the city became a five-year sparring session after population projects estimated the city needed to accommodate 31,000 new residents by 2022. No-growth proponents like Pro Whatcom and expansion advocates, such as Caitac and King Mountain representatives, stated their cases in public forums and in front of City Council meetings.

Words like infill, sprawl and urban village dominated the deliberations.

Finally, in spring 2006, after a lengthy and contested land supply analysis, the city recommended adding approximately 2,200 acres of county land into the UGA, including both Larrabee Springs and King Mountain. This year, the county recommended bringing in only 250 acres, mostly around King Mountain.

Both entities will enter into a reconciliation process this fall to determine the final UGA boundaries.

In these parts, it's all one big showdown over a belt buckle.



Village Books owners Chuck and Dee Robinson have graced our pages many times — in fact, they were featured on the front page of the BBJ's very first issue in November 1992. The above photo is from our July 2001 issue and shows Chuck and Dee on the property that would eventually become their new bookstore.

4. Fairhaven's redevelopment

From its bustling beginnings as a center for canneries and timber a century ago, to its quieter role as a humble hippie hangout in the '70s, little Fairhaven has turned into quite the sophisticated district.

When our coverage of its transformation began in May 1997, Ken Imus (known to many as Fairhaven's Godfather) had just revealed plans to build a hotel on 10th Street — what would eventually open as the Fairhaven Village Inn and come under the ownership of Gene and Connie Shannon.

The building boom really got underway in December 2002 when a relatively unknown developer, David Ebenal, entered negotiations to buy the "skeleton building" — an unfinished steel frame on the corner of Harris Avenue and 13th Street.

After that, Troy Muljat announced plans to build Harris and McKenzie Squares — large mixed-use condo projects — and Ebenal continued buying up and developing properties.

In February 2004 The BBJ reported that Ebenal, "a sudden force in Fairhaven," bought the Paper Dreams building and the new Village Books property (which he would eventually develop), and was in negotiations to buy the Waldron Building at 1300 12th Ave.

As if there weren't enough developers chomping at Fairhaven's bit, Ted Mischaikov and Rick Westerop proposed a large mixed-use building called Fairhaven Harbor on the corner of 8th Street and Harris Avenue, which has since gone through a design-review appeal and several incarnations and has yet to break ground.

Most recently, the neighborhood has witnessed a clash between commercial landowners and residents over height limits.

As tourists have flocked to the area and square-footage prices have ballooned, some have argued that the area has become gentrified and Disney-esque, while others maintain its historic fabric has fostered a healthy mix of successful, locally owned businesses.

In Fairhaven, the bustle seems to have returned.

5. The permit process

If there were a permit center back when Rome was built, chances are the Pantheon's builders would have complained about it.

It seems developers have never been satisfied with the process of permit review. As the BBJ first began cutting its teeth as a local rag, the age-old issue was one of the first it reported on back in September 1993.

In the story, Caitac USA blamed the city for hundreds of thousands of dollars in losses because of a slow permitting process for their planned motel/office/retail project on Meridian Street.

A few years later, a relentless wave of developers sick of the process compelled a BBJ reporter to write a story entitled "Tips to ease your case of permit-itis," in August 1999.

Things started to look up in 2004 when the city built a one-stop permit center, initiated by then planning director Jorge Vega, but even those improvements couldn't soothe the permitting headache.

This year, The BBJ reported on the city's effort to revamp the permit review process by adding a single city-appointed project manager to oversee a permit's review, but developers remain skeptical and think the problems are inherent in the city's code.

Will the wounds between the city and developers heal? Only time can tell.



David Syre, pictured here from the BBJ's January 1994 issue.

6. The rise (and a few falls) of Trillium Corp.

The names of Trillium and David Syre have been nearly synonymous in this community for many years, and both names have invoked strong and mixed feelings for many in town.

They have been vilified for their clear-cut logging practices in the 1980s and their development of Bellis Fair Mall, which created an evacuation of businesses such as J.C. Penney from downtown. On the other hand, they also were instrumental to the growth of the business core on the north end of town and have contributed a substantial amount of financial support to the community, as evidenced by such buildings as the Syre Education Center at the Whatcom Museum of History and Art.

The BBJ's coverage of this influential and controversial company has been extensive in the past 15 years. When Trillium purchased 250,000 acres of virgin forest in South America — the first of an eventual 850,000 acres of acquisitions in the region — it hit our front page. By 1997, the Trillium development and timber empire was worth \$450 million and stretched from Alaska to the tip of South America.

Trillium went on in subsequent years to continue to make big deals, including selling the Cordata Center and buying 800 acres on Cherry Point, both in 2000. But starting in 2001, Trillium was starting to show signs of trouble. They had lost 600,000 acres of their South American forest properties because of defaulted loans, had several building foreclosures in the United States, and were beginning to suffer from cash flow problems. The company began selling off properties from Denver to Bellingham to try to compensate.

In the past few years, Trillium has made headlines for getting back into the real estate game downtown with its purchase of properties such as the Boss Tweed site. The company and Syre also recently settled in court for its part in a 2002 real estate transaction in Spokane that led to thousands of investors losing multi-millions of dollars.

In August, David Syre announced the end of an era by passing leadership of the company over to his son, Jonathan. While this may signal a passing of the guard, it is unlikely Trillium will stop making headlines any time soon.

7. A hot housing market

"There's only one word to describe it — hot."

"Bellingham's housing market continues at a blaze."

"A house can be listed in the morning and sold by that afternoon."

Remember the days?

All of these quotes were used in various BBJ stories to describe what happened in Bellingham's housing market in the first part of this decade.

Beginning in 2001, buyers began snatching up houses and didn't really slow down until earlier this year.

In 2001, The BBJ reported that high-end homes saw the biggest growth in sales, and the biggest group of buyers were from out of town. The boom continued, with adjectives like "sizzle," "frenzied," "skyrocketing," and "condo-mania," gracing the paper's coverage.

The excitement began to wane, however, around the first quarter of this year, with reports of a national crisis in subprime loan defaults and foreclosures.

While the crisis hasn't hit Bellingham as drastically as it has other areas of the country — most real estate experts say the market here has stabilized into more normal figures — the slowdown has resulted in an increase in foreclosures and a decrease in agents, locally.

We hate to say it, folks, but the bonfire appears to be losing its heat.

8. Bellingham Airport ebbs and flows

The Bellingham International Airport has had its fair share of smooth landings and bumpy rides since The BBJ's first issue.

In January 2004 we reported on the Port of Bellingham's effort to attract a second major airline. At the time, Horizon Air had been flying to and from Seattle since 1987.

The port's wish was granted when Allegiant Air began service from Bellingham to Las Vegas in August 2004. Now, starved-for-sun Bellinghamsters can fly to Reno, Phoenix and Palm Springs on Allegiant as well.

In March 2006, the port signed on Delta, which began flights to Salt Lake City the following June. From there, the airport hit a bit of turbulence with two carriers — Western Air and Skybus — both starting and stopping service within this past year.

The port is still in the process of expanding its parking and making terminal improvements, and Allegiant is expect to announce a new destination next winter. The likelihood that the airport will continue flying high seems good.

9. Barkley Village development

The area known as Barkley Village was originally purchased by Bellingham's Talbot family to serve as an extension of its Bellingham Cold Storage facilities.

Instead, it has become one of Bellingham's rapidly growing urban villages, currently poised to get several new residential buildings.

It all began in 1994 when the Talbot Co. began construction of a new structure for Haggen. From then on, development fanned out from the grocery store and included new retail and office buildings.

In April 2006, The BBJ reported that construction on the Drake Building would begin soon, signaling a new phase of residential development in the mix.

And with several large pieces of land to go, the Barkley District still has a lot more growing to do in the future.

10. Bakerview development

Bakerview is another area that has transformed from a hinterland into a cross-section of retail, industrial and residential activity.

We first reported on the corridor's impending boom in an October 1997 story subtitled "Property owners preparing for metamorphosis of the area."

In 1998, 100 acres on the corner of E. Bakerview and Hannegan roads were annexed into the city, spurring on the growth of the Irongate industrial area.

Developments continued to crop up, including a slew of residential buildings such as Darby Estates.

In August 2005, The BBJ reported developer Morgan Bartlett had plans to build a large retail center called Bakerview Square, which just recently began its second phase of construction.

This year, Bartlett revealed plans for a 15-story hotel/residential tower at the intersection of W. Bakerview Road and Pacific Highway to cash in on the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, B.C.

The slope seems to continue upward from here.

11. Chuckanut Ridge/Fairhaven Highlands development

Possibly one of the longest-running development proposals in Bellingham history, the Chuckanut Ridge area south of Fairhaven has raised the ire of Fairhaven residents and conservationists as well as the support of infill proponents since 1990.

The BBJ's first story on the proposal, in April 1998, entitled "Fight Over Chuckanut Ridge still brewing," reported that residents protested the 85-acre, 739-unit development's potential effect on the environment and traffic congestion in Fairhaven.

In November 2004, Greenbriar Northwest, a joint venture between Greenbriar Construction owner David Edelstein and Horizon Bank, purchased the property for \$18 million from Madrona Development Corp. and applied to the city to move forward with the development in April 2005.

Now, the property is about to go through an environmental assessment and the battle rages on, with protests of Horizon Bank and the development carried out this October.

12. Canadian dollar

As the Canadian dollar hit parity with the U.S. dollar earlier this fall, it was hard to believe for many Bellingham business owners, who have seen the loonie dive and climb over the last 15 years.

In The BBJ's second issue in December 1992, cross-border shopping had leveled off since a peak in 1991, when the loonie was worth more than U.S. \$0.90. The loonie then declined to a low of 63 cents to the U.S. dollar, and hovered in the 70 cents range into the 2000s. At that time, experts predicted it was undervalued and would eventually get stronger. But because of post-9/11 border issues, they were unsure how it would affect Canadian consumers coming to Whatcom County.

With the loonie now worth slightly more than the U.S. dollar, local retailers say they are seeing a bump in Canadian customers. Now they are waiting to see how construction at the border crossing will affect that trend.

13. Big-box store moratorium

To Wal-Mart, or not to Wal-Mart?

That was the question Bellingham's City Council debated in September 2006 when it placed a six-month moratorium on construction of any new retail store of more than 100,000 square feet, commonly known as "big-box stores."

The ordinance was passed just in time to deter Wal-Mart's application to expand its Meridian store, and the major retailer soon gave up hope on ever doing so in Bellingham.

The decision opened a can of worms for Bellingham business owners, some of whom thought the city was making a mistake by losing out on big-box stores' tax revenue to other locales, and others who thought large retailers put smaller ones out of business.

The issue was officially resolved in February of this year when the council voted to ban big-box stores larger than 90,000 square feet, to the chagrin of some business owners and the praise of others.

14. Brown & Cole Bankruptcy

In November 2006, Bellingham's Brown & Cole Stores filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy because of several factors, including the rising cost of health care and competition from large grocery retailers like Wal-Mart.

Since then, the company announced a new investor, Hancock Park Associates, is in negotiations to take over the majority shareholder status of the company and invest enough capital to rescue it from Chapter 11.

While the transaction would allow the company's 20 grocery stores across the state to continue operating, it would mean curbing health care costs to employees.

The plan is contingent upon Seattle's Bankruptcy Court signing off on the deal, and so far local Brown & Cole customers and employees are crossing their fingers that all will go as planned.

15. Green and sustainable business

The greening of America has found no better community to grow in than Bellingham.

Bellingham has always had that crunchy granola edge. In 1994, The BBJ reported on the Community Food Co-op's move to its current location on North Forest Street from a much smaller space on N. State Street.

Since then, other organic-minded grocery stores, like Terra Organica, Bargainica and the Public Market, have opened and expanded.

But it wasn't until the last five years that sustainability, buying local and green building became important new business buzzwords.

Some might say the founding of Sustainable Connections in 2002 was the catalyst for the burgeoning green business market. Others might say the almost overnight rush to develop LEED and Built Green certified building projects heralded the new trend.

Either way, with businesses increasingly embracing "green" products, buildings and practices, the color green has a good chance of being more than just a fashionable trend in this town.
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