



December 2023 | Message from the Mayor, A Year in Review

Dear North Bend Residents,

Four years ago, you gave me the great honor and privilege to serve as your mayor. I am thankful for the opportunity to serve in this capacity, and thankful also for a community of engaged citizens who are invested in our highly livable mountain town. Since taking office in 2020, my focus has been on community engagement, environmental stewardship, and partnering with organizations to work together toward common goals that both bolster and improve our small-town way of life.

The beginning of my term in 2020 was not the easiest as I quickly found myself contending with a severe snowstorm, subsequent flooding, and the introduction and onslaught of the COVID pandemic. And yet, as I leave office this winter, I am at ease with what we accomplished. Together we have achieved a great many things and laid the framework for a support system where you can continue to feel safe; where most can afford to live where they work and play, and where you are invested in your community.

In January, I will retire, and Councilmember Miller will be sworn in as North Bend's 21st mayor. I am confident that the programs, plans, and the organizational structure now in place to meet demands, along with and most importantly, the superior professional staff working for you at the City, will seamlessly transition to work with the new mayor, and significantly new council, to take advantage of all the good work we have accomplished.

It is in this vein that I share with you some of the highlights and milestones of this past year in this last of my quarterly reports to you, our constituents.

Community Development

Since 2020, we have welcomed more than 40 new storefronts to North Bend. Approximately 17 of those opened this year alone. Seventeen! That is a huge number of new businesses for a small town and I see that as a testament to our ability to foster a healthy local economy that we managed to sustain during the pandemic shutdown and grow as we came bursting out of it.

What creates this environment, where businesses are encouraged to thrive? A symbiotic relationship, combining business owners who cross-market and grow together, local government both cultivating and investing in a business-friendly ecosystem and the infrastructure needed to support it, and citizens who get involved, investing of themselves in their community.

One example of this is our local business-centered nonprofit, the North Bend Downtown Foundation. A recommendation I made in 2021 that came to fruition this spring was Council's approval of \$250,000 funding support from the City's American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds as seed money for the Foundation. Their primary responsibility in consideration for this funding support is to achieve Main Street Community accreditation in support of expanded downtown revitalization. They are off to a good start having hired their first ever executive director (a Mainstreet requirement), opened an office in the train depot with easy access to our downtown

businesses, and seamlessly conducted several key downtown community events (Block Party, Trick-or-Treat Street and Holly Days) all formerly staffed by the City directly.

Another top goal coming into office was to secure North Bend's first official hotel. With the imminent groundbreaking of the a dual-brand Wyndham hotel we will finally provide more access for visitors to shop and dine in town and extra space for family and friends visiting you! The 121-room full-service hotel will be located at the North Bend Premium Outlet Mall, and we anticipate seeing the project rise from the ground next summer.

Planning for the Future

So much of our work relies on planning well into the future. In 2020 we were frankly behind the curve on planning for the future, but with the help of council, commissions, and a great staff we visioned and executed several studies to guide key policy decisions down the road. In addition to the once-a-decade update to the City's Comprehensive Plan, they include an Economic Development Action Plan, our first broad Community Survey (which indicated the public's #1 need is economic development), a Housing Needs Plan, a "Complete Streets Plan" (for redesign of North Bend Way from a highway look to an inviting small-town corridor) and a Fiscal Impact Analysis. You will read more about each of these plans throughout this report.

Forward momentum continued this year toward the 2024 year-end required update of the City's Comprehensive Plan. So far Council's approval of Plan elements (chapters) for Critical Areas, Shoreline, and the Parks and Open Spaces were accomplished. Staff is now fully consumed working on the Housing and Land Use elements with the Planning Commission which will provide their recommendations to Council in later 2024.

In September, Council approved the City's first ever Housing Action Plan. This grant-funded plan serves as a policy document that identifies our diverse housing needs, analyzing projected needs in accordance with the Growth Management Act (GMA), and identifying ways to meet these needs. While some councilmembers are uncomfortable with the results and obligations under GMA, the plan is supported by data and public input collected this year, and strategies from the plan will need to be incorporated into the 2024 Comprehensive Plan Update.

Equally important to a well-rounded community are diverse housing options to serve people of varying income levels. Housing for all income levels, in turn, supports the healthy economic diversity sorely needed in our city. To no one's surprise, the Housing Action Plan showed a significant gap in lower cost housing. Just this past month Council took a step toward reducing this gap when they approved a resolution authorizing me to sign the purchase and sale agreement of land for local affordable housing; yet another goal high in my top goals when taking office. That purchase has now closed. Looking forward, putting this land in the "bank" gives the new administration the opportunity to invite affordable housing builders to bid on a project to build out the site with needed homes for local workers and thereby ease the workforce shortage. The target discussed was a project where all homes would meet the 60 percent or lower AMI (Average Medium Income) level. Used in conjunction with other tools, this acquisition will help ensure long-term affordability with the least administrative burden for the City. This visionary goal is now within attainable reach.

Council's approval of the City's first Economic Development Action Plan in June is another pivotal step toward ensuring our future for a healthy local economy. An interactive process that involved Council, our consultants, Place and Main Advisors, the Economic Development Commission and staff began in 2020. The process illuminated a need for a holistic plan to foster sustainable investment, create family wage jobs, and provide more goods, services, and amenities to better meet residents' needs. This plan provides guidance toward that goal.

Grant Work

Grants from external sources fuel local infrastructure and parks projects, brings new ideas to life, and reduces the direct financial burden from our residents. Often described as "other people's money" or OPM, I prefer to identify it more correctly as taxes and fees that were extracted from our community to the federal and state government being brought back home and put to local use. It's a system that requires good relations with the elected and staff at other governing levels, a lot of hard work, and is underpinned by adhering to meeting responsibilities set, such as GMA, at the state or regional level. I am proud to share that during my administration we successfully received grant awards totaling nearly \$11M that is flowing into North Bend parks, transportation, beautification, and community recovery since 2020. And just days ago we received notice of nearly another \$1.3M toward planning, sidewalk connectivity projects, and work to improve Taylor Park and McClellan Avenue. This is the result of hard-working staff, as well as regional partners who recognize our commitment to meet the needs of our community. We have other grant applications in the works and I hope the next administration will take the opportunity to capture those dollars for you.

Increasing support for social and human services was a critical need when I took office and I am pleased to be able to report that I was able to secure a near threefold increase in this support from Council over the past few years. Determining who and how to allocate scarce funds to these needed services in an objective way is a challenge as well. Taking a positive step toward more objectivity along with better evaluation and insight, I appointed a Human Services Grant Task Force to assist the mayor in forming recommendations. Members of this committee first developed a comprehensive application and evaluation tool to guide nonprofit agencies in their grant funding requests. As the applications came in, they then provided valuable analysis toward forming recommended support. The objective was to provide advice on agencies that were best addressing the priority human service needs in North Bend. The final recommendations of the mayor were brought to the city council in October for consideration along with the rest of 2024 budget recommendations.

Customer Service and Citizen Engagement

I set out many goals as your mayor; one of which was to further engage and grow participation in the public process here in North Bend. A big step, planned originally in 2020, was brought to life with the first ever [North Bend Citizens Academy](#), a seven-week interactive course that guides participants through city operations. With this course we are offering a new avenue for civic engagement and growing participation in the public process here North Bend. The inaugural 2023 Citizens Academy was very well attended, and in fact, of those graduates, we saw two run for council positions, two appointed as new city commissioners, one is a new school board member, and one joined the Human Services Grant Task Force. Applications for the 2024 Citizens Academy are being taken now (click the link above).

Accessibility to the public is important. In March we expanded our hours to the public at City Hall to better serve citizens throughout the day. The front desk is now staffed between 8:30am and 4:30pm, Mondays through Thursdays, and 8:30am through noon on Fridays. Please stop by and connect if you need a permit, help with utilities or with questions. We are here to help.

Speaking of our great staff, I am very pleased to report that the City earned its 13th Association of Washington Cities WellCity award. This recognition is earned through continual efforts to commit to city employees' health, and, as you know, a healthy workplace culture leads to happy, healthy, and productive staff that are fully engaged in serving their communities.

Complimenting the Citizen's Academy and expanded office hours, we also held more subject specific, open-houses, public hearings, public input sessions, and surveys in 2023 than has ever been done before. Together with the increased frequency and communications platforms used by the city for outreach, we have brought transparency and awareness to a level not seen before.

Successful, durable democracy in our representative government at all levels depends on the active involvement of our citizens. Here are two examples of how we are doing locally. In April, I had the pleasure of honoring local resident Ron Crouch with a Recognition of Service certificate, where we acknowledged his extensive volunteer work at Meadowbrook Farm, Tollgate Farm, being on the credit committee of the Sno Falls Credit Union, and Ron's 50-year tenure on the Meadowbrook Farm Preservation Association Board. Ron is emblematic of so many local citizens who have stepped up for their community.

My second example is a measure of what citizens are thinking of how we do our job. This past spring we launched our first city-wide randomized, scientifically valid [Community Survey](#) to you, our residents, to get your feedback on essentially every aspect of delivery of service from the City. Your responses were overwhelmingly positive overall with residents giving North Bend high marks for quality of life, including recreational opportunities, a place to raise children, emergency services, parks and recreation, and police services. If you haven't already, I encourage you to click the link above and see the results.

Public Safety

Public safety continues to be a top priority for the city. In fact, well over half of general fund revenues are spent on police and fire services. In November, Interim Snoqualmie-North Bend Police Chief Bryan Lynch was appointed the permanent Police Chief. While our contract for police services does not include decisions in hiring, both the City Administrator and I were on the interview panels for this critical role. With more than 20 years of law enforcement experience and three years as the Commander of the Coalition of Small Police Agencies Major Crimes Task Force, as well as emergency medical experience, I am confident Chief Lynch will be a great leader in protecting the communities of North Bend and Snoqualmie.

Additionally, we have taken local action to provide a greater deterrent to the crime wave that retail and private citizens have been experiencing. In April Council adopted an enhanced vehicle trespass ordinance that will allow a suspect who has been found to have entered or attempted to enter a vehicle not belonging to them, to be criminally charged with a misdemeanor offense. This is part of an overall effort to address theft by making it a major misdemeanor at our Municipal Court level due to the King Co. Superior Court declining to prosecute.

Back in December 2022, Council approved an ordinance amending the City's Fireworks Code. The ordinance bans the personal use of aerial fireworks within North Bend city limits, and matches closely with our neighboring city, Snoqualmie as well as aligning with King Co. and nearly 100% of other county jurisdictions. This ordinance goes into effect December 21st, this year, per the State of Washington's requirement that fireworks ordinances such as these must wait a period of one year after adoption to take effect. While personal use of aerial fireworks will be prohibited within city limits, the ordinance allows for community fireworks events in town, such as the fireworks show held during the Festival at Mt. Si.

Parks and Recreation

In January, we participated in the groundbreaking of Tenant Trailhead Park, a forested, 32-acre trail system for all levels of mountain bikers and hikers. The success of this project is the result of partnerships between Si View Metropolitan Parks District, the City of North Bend, the Evergreen Mountain Bike Alliance, King County Parks, and so many volunteers. Construction of the parking area and restrooms is well underway and are expected to be complete in spring of 2024. The next phase of this park – between 2024 and 2026 – will connect it to Rattlesnake Ridge, Tiger Mountain, and beyond.

City partnerships with the Washington State Department of Natural Resources and King County Parks are bringing to our community the four-acre Dahlgren Family Park next year. Construction is now underway for playground equipment, trails, a picnic shelter, a sand volleyball court, a restroom, and trail connection to King County's existing Tanner Landing Park.

Another long-term goal of mine coming to fruition was to redesign and upgrade our major downtown park, the street running alongside it, and the railway tracks between them. Years in the making, residents have played a big part in creating conceptual plans for a big revisioning of two existing parks in town: Taylor Park, a downtown grassy place to picnic that also is home to the North Bend Train Depot, and Riverfront Park, a four-acre, protected river riparian corridor with a multi-use trail on the South Fork. This fall, after multiple public workshops, an online survey, and Council review, a beautiful set of conceptual plans were approved. The community's vision of a plaza, native plantings, a holiday tree, and a splash pad or interactive fountain are examples of amenities being planned for Taylor Park, with viewpoints, trails, native plantings, and more connectivity planned for Riverfront Park. And I am very pleased to report that just this month we confirmed we now have grants over \$1.2M toward this work. Acceptance of these awards will be in front of Council for a decision in January.

In June, Si View Metro Parks, the city, and project partners celebrated the completion of the new Tollgate Farm Park barn and site improvements at the farm. Where once remnants of an old barn stood, now stands a new operational barn. Community programming launched this summer, and plans continue for farm-based experimental learning opportunities that include vegetable farming and growing small livestock, u-pick opportunities, classes, workshops, and a farm stand.

The Tollgate Farm Agriculture Project was recognized by King County, receiving the John D. Spellman Award for Exemplary Achievement in Historic Preservation in December. I am immensely proud of this achievement, and grateful always for quality partnerships such as the one we have with Si View Metro Parks.

Infrastructure Improvement

Our commitment to maintaining North Bend's small-town character while enhancing your quality-of-life shines through all city projects. One of the ways we do this is by investing in critical infrastructure. These past four years have seen huge strides in some of our biggest projects.

In June, Council approved a resolution authorizing an agreement for the wholesale supply of domestic water to Sallal Water Association and mitigation water to the City of North Bend. This came after more than 16 years of work on the part of the City and Sallal. Two water interties will soon serve as a means to share water, provide mutual support in emergencies, and most important, give both purveyors the ability to supply water to all property owners in their service areas as is required by state law. We anticipate that this project will be operational by 2025. Reaching this agreement was my #1 goal coming into office and while not universally appreciated or supported, it was necessary and the right choice for our citizens.

In that vein, North Bend has led the region by actively pursuing water conservation through ongoing customer conservation education, distribution system leak reduction efforts, water fixture efficiency requirements, and in 2020, the Water Conservation Ordinance (WCO). These conservation efforts have resulted in reduced water usage, even with a growing number of water customers. In 2009, the City of North Bend had approximately 1,700 water meters, which grew to over 2,400 in 2020. In 2009, the City produced 230 million gallons of water to serve customers. In comparison, in 2022 – 13 years later, and with several thousand new residents – the city had reduced water production to 190 million gallons.

Perhaps as a reflection of our success (and the obvious growing awareness and need), other organizations such as Seattle Public Utilities and the Cascade Water Alliance joined in on water conservation efforts, too. This now includes the Sallal Water Association who adopted their own water conservation measures this past month! Their intention is the same as North Bend's - to protect their customers and the Snoqualmie Watershed, ensuring that existing and future water customers have access to this finite, natural resource. Bravo to them.

Last summer, Council approved an ordinance authorizing the formation of the Meadowbrook Sewer Utility Local Improvement District (ULID). Construction is expected to begin in 2025. Public sewer in the western portion of the City will provide property owners with development opportunities that better align with zoned uses in this area, promoting a robust commercial tax base and environmental support, with less reliance on aging septic systems.

After years of construction the Wastewater Treatment Plant improvements are nearing completion with a new headworks facility installation, a 2nd concrete oxidation ditch, and continued staff and system safety improvements being finalized. In addition to meeting new treatment legal requirements and better serving existing customers, the plant can now accept new capacity such as the Meadowbrook ULID. This \$35M+, multi-year improvement is a long-term investment in North Bend's critical infrastructure, and we anticipate completion in early 2024.

We are in the process right now of transforming pedestrian connectivity on North Bend Way, via the Complete Streets approach. North Bend Way serves as the primary route for many locals navigating through town. The Complete Streets approach creates an integrated transportation network that is accessible, safe, and convenient for people of all ages and abilities to get around town while providing a much more human-scale feel and

aesthetic look. Thanks to ample public participation in multiple open house events and a survey held in June, we are that much closer to designing a significantly enhanced North Bend Way corridor. This transformation will not happen overnight and will in fact be years in transition and rely heavily, I expect, on regional and state grant awards. We will be eligible for this type funding as we meet requirements under our Comprehensive Plan. Just this past week I was notified by the state Department of Commerce that we have been awarded a \$50,000 grant toward work on our Comprehensive Plan.

In June, Council approved the 2024-2029 Transportation Improvement Plan, and in November, Council approved the 2024 – 2029 Capital Improvement Plan. These plans feed into our overall Comprehensive Plan and plans such as these provide guidance, laying out a map to restore, improve, and expand infrastructure such as roads, sidewalks, trails, storm drainage, parks, facility capital projects, and more.

Connectivity means a lot to your city. Just in December we also received another grant of over \$120,000 toward connectivity. We have made many strides in our work to improve multimodal transportation throughout our historic community this year, with:

- A new, developer-funded RAB at 136th St. and 436th Avenue
- Push-activated light-up crosswalks on Cedar Falls Way, at the intersections of Maloney Grove and Stilson Avenue
- Rehabilitated/added approximately 3,100 linear feet of sidewalk in Forster Woods and New Si View, while also preserving several well-loved street trees that line the New Si View neighborhood
- Rehabilitated/added approximately 1,200 linear feet of trail, part of which involved a community donation from local business, Rainier Asphalt
- Rehabilitated/added 7,600 linear feet of roadway

Fiscal Responsibility

In November Council adopted the 2024 Property Tax Levy which included a 0.95% allowable percentage increase, equal to approximately \$23,000, that will help support crucial city services such as Police and Fire. No one likes tax increases yet we must keep in mind that with all other costs going up by double digit percentages, the less than 1% we are allowed is far from keeping up.

Council also passed a budget amendment to cover multiple changes since 2022 that primarily reflect spending commitments Council passed earlier in the year. The additional appropriation of \$7.23 million, that includes a \$2.45 million increase in transfers out to other funds within the City, would be supported by approximately \$3.87 million in unaccounted for revenue such as unrecognized grants awarded during the year and transfers in from other funds within the City, and approximately \$3.36 million in fund balances the City carried forward from the previous biennium.

I'm sure I lost you there; municipal budgeting is a complicated activity due to accounting and state reconciliation rules. But help is on the way. Following Council's approval in August of the administration's request authorizing a contract with FCS Group to conduct a long-term fiscal sustainability analysis for the City, staff have been working together with FCS to collect data and policy impacting finances. This information will be used to identify strategies for long-term city economic development and fiscal sustainability. This study will in part build on other forward-looking work in assessing housing needs, such as our Community Survey and our Economic Development Action Plan that was approved by Council in June.

Thank you for the opportunity to reflect on this past year and, in many ways, reflect on a year where we have witnessed the culmination of several initiatives and goals set in motion four years ago (or more). We – I, Council, staff, and especially you, our citizens – have accomplished much together. I am amazed by how productive our professional city staff have been in converting council policy into action that results in improvements for you. There is still more to do, such as the follow-through to see Taylor Park and Stilson Avenue rebuilt. If Council stays the course, you should see these improvements along with many more connectivity and overall public enhancements in the next few years.

It has been an exhausting year and term for me and I am looking forward to a good rest. Once again, thank you for allowing me the honor to serve you these past four years.

Sincerely,
Mayor Rob