

Bellingham, WA

Mayor Mark Asmundson

Bellingham/Whatcom Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and Western Washington University's Small Business Development Center

In May 1999, the Bellingham/Whatcom Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and Western Washington University's Small Business Development Center (SBDC) approached the City of Bellingham with a problem - the business community was not getting the kind of support they needed. The problem was threefold. First, the existing businesses needed more technical assistance with their businesses. Unfortunately, the waiting list at the SBDC was up to 8 weeks long; hence, for every business that received technical assistance through the SBDC, there was one business that was turned away. This was causing a higher than average business failure rate in the area. Secondly, for businesses wanting to relocate to Whatcom County, there was no central place for them to go to get all of their business questions answered. They were left to fend for themselves, trying to find the different agencies and resources without much direction or assistance. Finally, downtown Bellingham was in need of revitalization. The downtown merchants had been pleading with the City to get more support for the local businesses. The lack of any one agency that could address these issues made it difficult for any one agency to try to solve the problems. More importantly, none of the existing agencies had the funding or the personnel to meet the increasing requests and needs from the community for technical assistance and referral resources.

The Chamber and the SBDC, through feedback and their work with the business community, were able to identify these gaps in the community and took action. In July 1999, a partnership between the Chamber, WWU's SBDC, and the City of Bellingham was formed, and the "Bellingham Business Service Center" was established. The Bellingham Business Service Center is a one-stop business center, co-located with the Chamber in the downtown business core. With funding from the City of Bellingham, the Center is staffed with a director and a business development specialist. The mission of the Center

is to coordinate and provide community resources to new and existing businesses in order to enhance their ability to grow, prosper, and provide new jobs in Bellingham. The Center offers business assistance and resources including financial resources, site location support, business permits/regulations/licenses information, business resource library, business consultation, meeting room access, short-term office space, computer access, local phone access, business plan assistance, workforce database, and loan packaging.

The Business Service Center offers many benefits to the community. First, it operates as a one-stop business center tailored to Whatcom County businesses. Using a seamless, business friendly approach, the Center provides information, resources, and technical assistance to business customers in a centralized and accessible location. New businesses and existing businesses now have a place to go for all of their business needs. Downtown businesses have direct access to the Center and their input is continuously solicited for making improvements to the Center. A business advisory committee made up of local business owners directs an educational component of the Center, hosting business seminars that focus on local business issues. Whether it is temporary office space, or permit questions; international investment support, or bringing federal and state programs to the local level, the Center strives to meet the ongoing needs of local businesses and the Partnership continues to monitor the progress made and the impacts measured to ensure the community is benefiting from the Center.

The Center has been operating for almost a year and a half. In that time, the Center has assisted more than 500 employers. Through direct technical assistance, the Center has helped create/retain over 250 jobs, and has generated over \$10 million in new investments in Bellingham. Business failures have also been declining. These outcomes are remarkable and have indicated that the concept and partnership are working.



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"Our Small Business Development Center has served to re-energize our downtown and provide a significant city-wide role in business retention."

Program has been running one year

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In short, creating a partnership between the City of Bellingham, the Chamber of Commerce and Western Washington University's Small Business Development Center offers strengths that any single agency did not have. First, opportunities to help the business community are defined and acted upon in a timely manner. Issues are resolved through partner collaboration and understanding. Also, varied resources and expertise are available to draw upon from the partners and their organizations. Furthermore, responsibility and accountability are shared. The success of the Business Service Center could not have happened without the commitment, collaboration, and balanced contributions to the partnership, by each of the partners. Economic development of new and existing businesses has accelerated in Bellingham due to the innovative approach of creating a one-stop Bellingham Business Service Center.