

Arts and Culture Blog

I recently attended a workshop for some of the arts and culture leaders in Clark County. Put on by Inspire Washington a two hour conversation about art, cities, growth spoke to the need for arts and culture. There are surprisingly large economic valuations done by the US government that might turn a skeptics head. The “creative economy” is real and significant.

I heard consensus that there’s a lack of smaller venues for both incubator efforts and small established groups. That missing component, as well as needs for the visual arts, is slowing the growth and progress of the arts community. Attendees discussed the appeal of living on this side of the river, but missed the art vibe from where they had moved. Portland is less and less of a destination. I heard we need an arts and culture scene here in Clark County now and we need to be creative and passionate to develop it. What an inspiration it was to hear their visions!

This is just one more example of why we need a vision for Camas. We need a conversation about where we want to see ourselves when our kids and grandkids have grown up. It’s a vision that includes a vibrant arts and culture environment. It’s a vision of attracting quality growth to an area: arts and culture make a difference in relocation decisions. That’s well understood.

We lack that vision now. Exhibit 1 is the North Shore Plan. It is silent on key features, as are the draft Design Guidelines just released. They are being rushed through with little scrutiny. Public art is mentioned once, and that is to “accommodate” future public art. Yet there is nothing to require development worth potentially hundreds of millions of dollars of revenue to do any public art.

The plan calls for a public plaza of at least one acre to “allow for a variety of activities, including passive recreation and leisure, public art features and outdoor events.” Other than hardscape and landscaping, all without without clear definition of quality and design, there is nothing more about the this defining feature. A football field is 1.3 acres, and this smaller than a football field can have a road through its center.

We need look no further than Esther Short Park in Vancouver. its iconic Bell Tower and heavy use are an inspiration and example so future developers will know what our city expects. Esther Short is a five acre park. Camas is coming up short.

The North Shore, and Camas as a whole, deserve something great at the North Shore for all the impacts it will have. How about Camas’ version of Esther Short Park and iconic public art? Make it a requirement, and not a “nice to have.”

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Sadly, there's no discussion about a small theater venue, and how a large mixed-use development might encourage, and recognize the importance of this part of the arts community. This should be part of the DNA.

There's no discussion of the DNA of the North Shore, other than market forces.

Arts and culture, and successful developments don't just happen. The North Shore Plan assumes it will happen, and the draft Design Guidelines fail to ensure. The assumption appears to be that market forces will do it. How is that working across the country? How's that working locally? The North Shore Plan is a massive development, forever changing the character of Camas. There needs to be real public benefit.

There's still time to fix this. Per the city's recent response to the various Ward Town halls: "The City is currently working on revised zoning, tree preservation requirements, and design guidelines for the area that will encourage high-quality design to create a sense of place in the North Shore consistent with the community's vision." Great. Now let's actually do this.

The North Shore should have solid agreements on a "sense of place" described above and the means to achieve it. (Perhaps this agreement might mention some consideration of the millions of dollars of just purchased development rights we essentially gave to the developers.)

What's to stop public art from being defined as nicer street lights, rather than some artists' creation celebrating our emerging arts identity? Nothing in the current plan. We expect this to be corrected.

There's one more element for this arts and culture vibe: being able to get there and around. We all know the buildout of the North Shore, if it happens, will send massive waves of traffic towards downtown from its 8,000 residents and 1,400 jobs. Our residents are starting to understand this. This has been clear from the Everett Corridor workshops.

For well over a year I talked about an electric jitney as an alternative for consideration. Designed to be fun and popular to use, it would connect North Shore density centers and downtown. It could have stops for recreational trailheads and others that might be appropriate depending on the season. I made requests verbally and in writing that this be considered as part of the North Shore process. It was not. I brought it up again during the Everett Corridor study. Nothing. They act like it is a joke as they did for so many comments received from the public.

Imagine being at a small theater venue in the North Shore, and be able to hop a cool jitney to eat downtown and check out the latest at the galleries and

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shops. Pipe dream? It turns out there's a fantastic example: Estes Park, Colorado. This city has a similar geographical issue between downtown and popular, more distant destinations. The City of Estes Park actually runs five free electric shuttles five months a year. It is quite popular and helps brand the city and popular destinations. More importantly, it helps deal with over 4 million visitors each year in a city with only 2,000 public parking spots. Some of the routes are 6 miles long, far longer than the 3-4 miles needed for the North Shore to downtown. See for yourself. <https://www.visitestespark.com/plan/getting-around/free-shuttle-buses/>

It's also has the "wow" factor. Check out this couple posing with this shuttle as part of their weddings!



There's exactly one mention of "transit" in the proposed Design Manual stating "Compact development is encouraged to support transit and pedestrian travel." What does "encouraged" and "support" mean legally to a developer flanked by attorneys charging hundreds of dollars an hour? Nothing good for us. "Encouraged" and "support" mean nothing unless clearly defined.

Worse, there's no mention of a street system that accommodates the needs of a shuttle-type system. Not even the one-acre public plaza has mention of provisions for shuttle loading and unloading, and how that influences design.

Transportation and access are the final element to create this arts and culture vibe. This vibe needs to be defined and established now. Let's make North Shore development projects more attractive through public benefit. Attractive both to future residents and users, and attractive to others in Camas suffering the impact of unmitigated traffic. Does anyone actually think the tens of millions of dollars required to "improve" the Everett Corridor will be found when measured against so many other needs in our state? Camas can join the other cities in this country with roads that never materialized. Do we want to live with an Everett Corridor designed as a fast moving arterial road? Or traffic on a road that long ago couldn't handle it?

We can change that.

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An arts and culture vibe will be great for business. Arts and culture can be the draw for your first look at Camas. You can stay for the schools and other offerings. It is furthering a brand for Camas that we all can share the benefits of.

Beyond the North Shore, this is a Camas-wide issue. As a city we need to work with the arts and culture communities to understand their needs, and how to be a partner in helping building that community.

It takes vision and hard work. That's what Camas needs. What do you think?