



DECK CHAIRS ON THE TITANIC: Amid raging speculation she was an alternate for a cabinet position in Barack Obama's administration, Gov. Chris Gregoire cancelled a press conference this week and mysteriously disappeared... only to reappear a few hours later in Iraq, where she was reportedly visiting National Guard troops along with fellow governors from New Jersey and Texas. ("I made it clear early on I would not accept an appointment," Gregoire said of the rumor she was being considered for a post in the Oval Office). Also mysteriously AWOL but less likely to turn up later is a big piece of the state budget, a yawning chasm that keeps growing each time it is analyzed by state budget managers—now it could loom as large as \$7 billion.

As the governor furiously cuts costs, Bellingham Mayor Dan Pike last week learned one of the items trimmed from her proposed budget was a \$5 million state grant allocated to help defray costs on a project to move the BNSF Railway that currently carves through the middle of the old Georgia-Pacific mill site on the city's central waterfront nearer to the bluffs at the perimeter of the site.

The city snared the ticklish agreement with Burlington-Northern to move the rail line in mid-November, just days before Port of Bellingham commissioners fired off their angry letter declaring the days of cooperation between the agency and the city on the central waterfront were over.

"It may be the port's 'thermonuclear letter' moved the agreement off the governor's funding priorities list, because the agreement with BNSF and then the letter happened almost on top of one another," Pike speculated. He said he was working with Sen. Mary-Margaret Haugen, influential chair of the senate's Transportation Committee, to get project funding restored. "It's taken a year and a tremendous amount of staff effort to get this agreement," he said.

The abrupt loss of funding for the \$12 million project puts in jeopardy other financing opportunities as well, including \$7 million in federal funding pledged by Congressman Rick Larsen, Pike explained.

"I have confidence we can get this back on track and get the funding restored," Pike said. "It's a project that will improve freight transport though our area by about 40 percent, at a time of rising fuel prices and concerns about global warming. It has statewide significance," he noted.

Yet the mayor may be similarly rocked by news circulating among insiders at the state Dept. of Ecology that, in order to stem the budget deficit, the governor is considering tossing MTCA dollars into the gaping hole of the state's general fund for environmental projects. Bellingham's central waterfront was once a lead candidate for clean-up dollars from the state's Model Toxics Control Act, approved by voters in 1998 as an initiative to replace the defunded federal Superfund program. The Act raises funds from petroleum company operations and applies them to clean up contaminated sites around the state.



views

OPINIONS ↔ THE GRISTLE

BY DAN WARNER

How Big?

POPULATION PROJECTIONS CONTINUE TO DOMINATE POLICY QUESTIONS

PROBABLY NO issue has such long-range significance for our quality of life as the size of Whatcom County's future population. We know that the pro-development folks (with vested interests) urge the county to plan expansively, even though poll after poll shows most of the citizens do not want expansive population growth, and think the growth we've had is too much.

There are two problems with the present population-projection numbers: (1) they are technically flawed and seriously dated, and (2) the number now identified was chosen without any policy analysis or public discussion taking place first; that's backwards.

The County Council can choose any population projection that falls within the low/medium/high range provided by the Washington State Office of Financial Management. Any projection within this range is acceptable according to state law. Which one to choose is, therefore, a policy question. Certainly choosing a low number does not magically make the population growth rate decrease. At least let us recognize the down-side to population growth: King County and Los Angeles County once had populations the same size ours is now. We do not want to be like those places.

The point is not simply to choose a low number, but simultaneously to adopt policies that slow population growth to get us what we want. For example, we should have:

- Economic development programs that provide good jobs for people



already living here, rather than simply increasing the number of jobs.

- Adequate impact fees that do not require existing residents to subsidize new growth (which might not be wanted in the first place).

or suburban development. Whatcom County loses rural lands to sprawling developments at a rate of about 1,200 acres a year.

If we want the benefits of slower population growth, it is not enough to pick a number and pretend that's what we'll get. If we want to reduce sprawl, protect our rural areas, promote the prosperity and general happiness of the vast majority of citizens, retain our communities' character, and allow us to pass on to our grandkids a place as nice as we have enjoyed, we need to do two

IF WE WANT TO REDUCE SPRAWL, PROTECT OUR RURAL AREAS, RETAIN OUR COMMUNITIES' CHARACTER, AND ALLOW US TO PASS ON TO OUR GRANDKIDS A PLACE AS NICE AS WE HAVE ENJOYED, WE NEED TO DO TWO THINGS: PICK A LOWER POPULATION-PROJECTION NUMBER, AND ADOPT POLICIES TO ACHIEVE IT.

- Higher water quality (in, for example the Lake Whatcom and Nooksack River watersheds) by appropriate constraints on new construction.
- Local officials unwilling to allow reduced levels of public service, especially traffic congestion, associated with new construction.
- Policies that identify the acres needed for agricultural and forestry viability, with firm lines guarding against encroachment by urban

things: pick a lower population-projection number, and adopt policies to achieve it. Futurewise Whatcom recommends a population projection for 2031 of about 220,000.

Dan Warner is a professor of Business & Economics at Western Washington University and serves on the steering committee of Futurewise, a public interest group working to promote healthy communities and cities while protecting farmland, forests and shorelines. ☺