

Freeland Water and Sewer District

Public Involvement Plan

Freeland Sewer and Water Reuse Project

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1.1 Introduction

Public involvement is a key component of the Freeland Water and Sewer District's (FWSD) preliminary and final design activities for the Freeland sewer and water reuse project. By drawing input from a wide range of interested parties FWSD maximizes the prospect of an appropriate project design and stakeholder commitment.

This Public Involvement Plan (PIP) provides FWSD with a guide to conducting public outreach and obtaining public input. It identifies key stakeholders and planned or recommended public involvement activities for project phases, including planning, grant/loan application process, Preliminary Engineering Report, Local Improvement District (LID) formation, treatment facility design and construction. While details of public outreach are not included for latter stages of the project, ideas are included in this document. It is suggested that updates to the PIP be made for the design and construction phases.

Implementation of the PIP is intended to provide FWSD with an understanding of the public's questions, concerns and sentiment about the project and outline approaches for addressing community concerns. As guidance, FWSD should see this as a dynamic document that will need to be modified as specific situations present themselves. Nonetheless, this document should provide FWSD with the basic tools, approaches and schedule for public outreach.

1.2 Project Overview

A sewer and water reuse system is being designed to address current wastewater contamination issues and preserve the rural character of Whidbey Island by focusing growth in the Freeland area. The development of sewer capacity is a key component of Freeland's status as a Non-Municipal Urban Growth Area (NMUGA). A public sewer is necessary to support future urban growth.

The Freeland sewer and water reuse system would replace septic systems with a pressurized collection system, a water reclamation facility, and a reuse area located on property owned by the FWSD. This system is the start of a water recycling utility that will benefit local groundwater supplies.

It is essential that the sewer plan be fiscally as well as environmentally sound. Major grants and low interest loans are being sought to reduce the financial burden on property owners. Options for local funding, such as the formation of an LID, will be explored with property owners who would be served by the sewer system.

1.3 Expected Benefits

Building a wastewater system could help the Freeland area:

- Improve water quality in the urban drainages and Holmes Harbor
 - Remove septic contamination from the Holmes Harbor Shellfish Protection District
 - Reduce or eliminate the potential for groundwater contamination in the Freeland basin from the high concentration of septic systems
- Provide a framework for residential and business growth in the Freeland area
- Allow for the development of higher density affordable housing within walking distance of Freeland’s services and parks

1.4 Project History

To preserve the rural character of Whidbey Island while meeting Washington’s Growth Management Act (GMA) obligations, Island County’s 1998 Comprehensive Plan designated areas where growth should be concentrated. It limited growth in the non-urban areas of the county thus protecting the island from unchecked urban sprawl. Freeland is one of the designated growth centers.

After adopting the countywide Comprehensive Plan in 1998, Island County initiated the process of developing a Comprehensive Sub-Area Plan for the Freeland Area. A group called the Freeland Sub-Area Planning Committee was appointed to work with Island County Planning and Community Development. The committee worked over the course of four years to produce the Draft Sub-Area Plan. The plan’s land use element is based on the Island County’s “Buildable Lands Analysis,” upon which future zoning and detailed infrastructure plans for new sanitary sewer systems are based. Currently, almost all of Freeland’s population is served by septic systems.

In 2002, Island County contracted with Tetra Tech/KCM to prepare the Freeland Comprehensive Sewer Plan and Facility Plan/Engineering Report, (Freeland CSP) a single document that meets the Washington Administrative Code requirements for comprehensive sewer plans and engineering reports. The Freeland CSP also meets the requirements for facility plans established in the Code of Federal Regulations. In December 2005, the Freeland CSP was approved by the Island County Board of County Commissioners. The Washington State Departments of Ecology and Health approved the Freeland CSP in 2006.

Additional activities since the completion of the Freeland CSP include:

- A financial analysis was prepared for project funding and construction
- A Memorandum of Understanding for sewer plan implementation was agreed upon by FWSD and Freeland Chamber of Commerce
- Properties have been purchased for a wastewater treatment plant and reclaimed water reuse site

- Island County and Washington State granted FWSD \$3.5 million for project planning and property purchase
- Additional federal and state grants and loans are being pursued
- Options for local funding are being explored
- Environmental review documents have been submitted to federal and state environmental agencies. These have been approved and a Finding of No Significant Impact was issued for the project
- A report updating and revising the Freeland CSP was completed. That revision has been approved by federal, state and county agencies

1.5 Service Area

The original sewer plan envisioned five phases for development of the sewer system, with Phase 1 centered primarily on the business core of Freeland. The project evolved from this phasing to a two-phase project in order to address environmental and land-use issues and as a cost-saving measure.

Freeland has a persistent and difficult to correct water pollution problem. There are many poorly performing septic systems in Freeland. The Island County Health Department and the Department of Ecology both agree that the only long-term solution is to replace the septic systems with sewers in both the residential and commercial community. Correcting the situation requires a large-scale implementation that includes older established residential neighborhoods, particularly in the shoreline areas.

In addition, expanding the sewered area better accomplishes the vision for land use planning outlined in the Freeland Sub-Area Plan. Without sewers in place, the zoning regulations that support the land use designations in the Freeland Sub-Area Plan cannot be implemented. Higher density in Freeland is not possible with septic systems.

Finally, by expanding the service area, FWSD is able to maximize grant/loan opportunities, thus minimizing the cost to property owners.

For these reasons, FWSD determined that it would establish just two phases for the system and include a much greater area for the initial phase.

The revised Phase 1 sewer area includes the core business district, other business areas adjacent to the core area, and residential areas, especially those that are adjacent to Holmes Harbor. Anticipating the public's desire to provide input on the revised service area boundaries, FWSD scheduled two public meetings in advance of its grant/loan application to the USDA RD (June 8 and July 6, 2010).

1.6 Funding

In addition to pursuing federal and state grants, FWSD is exploring the use of a Local Improvement District (LID) as a mechanism to recover costs and pay back loans incurred during the design and construction process. A public hearing on LID formation has been scheduled for May 24, 2011. In advance of that public hearing, FWSD will provide stakeholders with information about the LID process and project costs and solicit public input.

Forming an LID would:

- Send a clear message to outside financial backers that the community supports the project
- Better support a grant or loan application to federal and state financing sources
- Create a local funding mechanism to pay back potential loans
- Guarantee a payback of low interest construction loans over a long period of time
- Provide for loan funding for sewer and on-site connections to the sewer system

2 Goals and Guiding Principles of Public Involvement

The FWSD is actively enlisting the input of citizens, local government officials, business and interest groups to develop a cost effective sewer system that will comply with the requirements associated with Freeland's Non-Municipal Urban Growth Area (NMUGA) status.

2.1 Goal

The goal of public involvement is to allow residential and commercial property owners within NMUGA boundaries to make informed choices about developing and funding a sewage collection and treatment system.

Additionally, public involvement is a requirement for the state and federal environmental review process, the Washington Department of Ecology water quality programs, and as a requirement for forming an LID.

2.2 Guiding Principles

- Public involvement includes the promise that the public's input will influence decisions
- Public involvement activities will be aligned with specific stages of the planning process and will have a clearly articulated focus for participation
- Participants will be provided with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way
- All participants will be treated with respect and dignity

3 Stakeholder Groups

3.1 Primary Stakeholders

Primary stakeholders are defined as those who would be directly affected by the Freeland sewer and water reuse project and/or those who have significant influence on the project.

- FWSD commissioners and staff
- Homeowners/residents and residential property owners inside the proposed LID
- Commercial and industrial property owners inside the proposed LID
- Local government officials of Island County
- Board of County Commissioners (BOCC)
- USDA Rural Development
- WA Dept. of Ecology
- WA Dept. of Health

3.2 Secondary Stakeholders

Secondary stakeholders are defined as those who are interested in or play an intermediary role in the project.

- Neighboring businesses and residents
 - Property owners inside the NMUGA, outside the proposed sewer service area
 - Homeowners/residents and business/property owners outside the NMUGA
 - Those who live or work adjacent to the proposed facility locations, including the treatment plant site, treated water reuse site, pump stations if any, and along sewer collection/interceptor lines
- County Agencies
 - Island County Public Health Department and Environmental Health Services
 - Island County Planning and Community Development
 - Island County Planning Commission
 - Island County Council of Governments
 - Island County Public Works Department
 - Island County Public Health Department
 - Island County Assessor
 - Port of South Whidbey
- State Agencies
 - Puget Sound Partnership
- Local Associations
 - Freeland Chamber of Commerce

- Whidbey Environmental Action Network
- Whidbey Camano Land Trust
- Friends of Freeland

- Public
 - Any citizen interested in the Freeland sewer planning process
 - Property owners on Whidbey Island whose interests and property values are protected by the Freeland NMUGA land use planning that reduces sprawl.
 - Residents and visitors who benefit from improved water quality in Holmes Harbor
 - Citizens who will benefit from the economic opportunities created by the project
 - Citizens of Washington State who will benefit from improving the environment and water quality of Puget Sound

3.3 Database of Names and Stakeholder List

The Sewer Project Team will maintain a contact list of email addresses for primary stakeholders as well as secondary stakeholders who have provided email contact information. As appropriate, persons, organizations, and agencies on this list would receive notices of public meetings, fact sheets, newsletters and other public information materials.

4 Strategies for Encouraging Public Involvement

To convey information related to the Freeland sewer and water reuse project, respond to questions and solicit input from the public, an array of outreach strategies will be used:

- ..1 Primary and Secondary Stakeholder Group Briefings
- ..2 Public Input
- ..3 Media Relations
- ..4 Informational Documents
- ..5 Project Web Site
- ..6 Public Meetings
- ..7 Public Notices and Hearings
- ..8 Meeting Announcements
- ..9 Responding to Public Comment

4.1 Primary and Secondary Stakeholder Group Briefings

Briefings with national, state and local government officials and/or neighborhood/civic groups, business groups, or other interested groups or organizations will be used to keep stakeholders informed and respond to questions, suggestions and concerns. Such meetings help maintain a continuous line of communication between FWSD and stakeholders.

Briefings may be held at the request of the stakeholder group or may be initiated by members of the Sewer Project Team. For example, a civic group may request a briefing to get a status update on funding scenarios.

Informal neighborhood meetings are an excellent way to share information and hear concerns. Usually organized by a community member who invites neighbors and project leaders to his or her home, the meetings offer the kind of personal, comfortable environment conducive to good conversation. Neighborhood meetings are a good way to connect with people who are not likely to attend public meetings. The sewer or LID project team can support neighborhood meetings by encouraging individuals to host a meeting and schedule a representative to attend.

We recommend stakeholder briefings be held in connection with key project developments, such as the possible USDA RD grant award, LID formation, design and construction phases, and LID assessments.

4.2 Public Input

Public input refers to the process of gathering the opinions and ideas of individuals and groups that have an interest in Freeland's wastewater management. Opportunities for public input provided by FWSD include, but are not limited to, the following:

One on one interviews: Early in the planning process, phone interviews were conducted by a neutral third party with a sampling of Freeland area residents and business owners. The feedback was then shared, in aggregate form, with FWSD. As a result of that feedback, FWSD was able to anticipate and address stakeholder questions and concerns in subsequent public meetings and informational materials.

Surveys: Surveys may be developed to gauge public opinion on specific issues related to wastewater treatment planning. Survey content, timing, method of distribution, and geographic target area will be dependent on the specific issue being addressed.

Meetings: Every meeting, whether an informal gathering, a public meeting or an official public hearing, is an opportunity to solicit and listen to stakeholder concerns. Reports from public meetings, including information presented, public comments and Q&A, will be posted on the New Sewage and Collection System website: www.freelandwsd.com/FreelandWSD_Sewer_Collection.html

4.3 Media Relations

Local newspapers are a key tool for reaching stakeholder audiences. The Freeland area is served by three local newspapers; the South Whidbey Record is the newspaper of record for the Freeland Water and Sewer District. It is based in Coupeville and is published on Wednesdays and Saturdays. It has a circulation of approximately 4,300. The Whidbey Examiner is also based in Coupeville. Its primary focus is Central Whidbey Island although it does cover Island County governance issues and matters of county-wide concern. The Whidbey News-Times primarily covers central and north Whidbey Island although it will also cover county-wide environmental and governmental issues.

Official public notices will be sent to the South Whidbey Record since it is the newspaper of record for FWSD.

General press releases, public meeting announcements should be sent to all local media including:

- South Whidbey Record
- Whidbey Examiner
- Whidbey News-Times
- KWPA radio

Additionally, an editorial board meeting will be requested with the South Whidbey Record and possibly with the Whidbey Examiner and Whidbey News-Times to provide an update on the sewer project, projected costs and funding options.

Press or editorial coverage can be given wider exposure by e-mailing the article, or link to the article to members of the stakeholder database noted in Section 3.3 above.

If deemed appropriate, contact may be made with major media outlets in Western Washington (i.e. Seattle Times, Everett Herald, Bellingham Herald, and Seattle PI.com). Potential story angles include 1) the sewer project as a means of addressing environmental concerns, 2) planning for growth while retaining rural character, 3) Freeland as an example of Recovery Act-aided community development, and 4) how Freeland's infrastructure investment is making the area more attractive place to live and work.

Social media (blogs, Twitter feeds, Facebook pages and the like) are a potential avenue for public outreach. Although blogs or web forums such as the Freeland Community Forum have been used in the past by Freeland residents organizing around various issues; currently there does not appear to be an active online hub serving the Freeland community.

For social media sites to be successful, they need to be updated regularly, which requires time and resources currently beyond the Project Team's means. Therefore, while a social media strategy may be worth exploring at some point, we do not presently recommend it as part of the PIP.

4.4 Informational Documents

To provide answers to some of the most frequently asked questions (FAQs) posed by the public; FAQ and fact sheets will be prepared.

An overall FAQ document is in development. It is a dynamic document that will expand as public input and new information are obtained.

Informational documents will be distributed by any or all of the following methods:

- Posted on the project website
- Hardcopies inserted into FWSD billing statement envelopes
- Hardcopies available as handouts at briefings, public meetings and other public involvement events.
- Hardcopies available at FWSD offices
- Emailed to the stakeholder distribution list
- Emailed to local media
- Posted at various popular business establishments such as grocery and hardware stores, cafés, the recreation center, churches, the community center, gas station, etc.

Our recommendation is to produce one or two informational documents (newsletter and/or FAQ/fact sheet) for each of the various phases of the project (e.g. LID formation, design phase, construction phase).

4.5 Project Website

A project website has been set up by FWSD to help keep the public informed about the project and provide another avenue for public input. The website for the project will be updated as needed with public meeting and public hearing announcements, public hearing transcripts, informational materials, maps, and other pertinent information that becomes available. We expect that updates in the planning and funding phases of the project will be necessary every two-three weeks because activities will be occurring frequently. After that it might be acceptable to update the website on a monthly basis for other phases of the project through construction.

A project website will provide timely information to interested stakeholders and provides contact information so stakeholders can send an email directly and their questions/comments can be properly routed. While a website can be made to be interactive with the community, we are not recommending that at this time because the volume of traffic to the site does not warrant the time and staff resources needed to create and manage an interactive website.

4.6 Public Meetings

Public meetings are informal opportunities for the public to learn more about an issue or component of the project, and ask questions and share comments with staff and other interested members of the public.

From initial planning through construction, various forms of public meetings will be held to inform and involve interested parties in project planning, funding, design and construction. Independent, professional facilitators will be used to ensure full participation and productive, focused discussions.

The purpose of involving the public early and often in the planning, funding, design and construction phase of the project is to 1) help project planners identify and take into account the concerns of those who would be served by the Freeland sewer and water reuse project, 2) keep community members informed, and 3) help build a sense of ownership and shared accountability for Freeland's future.

The FWSD sponsored public meetings on June 8 and July 6, 2010 at the Trinity Lutheran Church. The meetings provided an overview of the proposed sewage collection and treatment system, an update on planning and funding activities—specifically the formation of an LID—and responded to questions and comments from community members.

A public hearing (section 4.7) on LID formation has been scheduled for May 24, 2011. Prior to that meeting there will be two community open houses where property owners can get preliminary estimates of LID assessments, ask questions and provide input.

To ensure that the full range of issues related to the sewer and water reuse project are identified and taken into account, comments and suggestions will be solicited from all interested parties. All comments will be reviewed and incorporated as appropriate.

4.7 Public Notices and Hearings

Public notices and public hearings are statutory requirements. A public hearing is a formal opportunity to gather information from the public on a proposed action. A record is kept of the proceedings and all comments, whether presented orally or in written form, become part of the hearing record. The public hearing is not an opportunity for general discussion.

4.7.1 Public Notice and Hearing on LID Formation

A public hearing on LID formation has been scheduled for May 24, 2011. Prior to holding this public hearing, FWSD must publish a notice in at least two consecutive issues of the newspaper of record (in this case, the South Whidbey Record) with the date of the first publication being at least 15 days prior to the public hearing. In addition, notice of the public hearing and a preliminary assessment will be mailed to property owners within the proposed LID.

4.7.2 Beyond the LID Public Hearing

The process of forming an LID is complex and sometimes contentious. It is recommended that questions and objections property owners have about an LID be brought forward well in advance of the required public hearing. A comprehensive public involvement strategy should include informational materials, stakeholder briefings, and public meetings. We recommend LID workshops where property owners can hear focused presentations about LIDs, ask questions and hear responses, and meet one on one with someone who can help guide community members through the LID process. FWSD will need to develop a clear set of guidelines for responding to property owner questions.

4.8 Meeting Announcements

The following provisions will be made to inform the public of upcoming meetings:

- Meeting announcements posted on FWSD website (to include meeting agenda or summary of topics to be covered, meeting time and location).
- Announced in a press release
- Inserted into utility bills
- Announced in flyers and posted in public gathering spaces, including but not limited to:
 - Grocery stores
 - Banks
 - Library
 - Schools
- Formal notices mailed to the property owners of record.
- Posted at the meeting location with a meeting agenda or summary of topics to be covered, meeting time, and meeting address
- Meeting summaries will be posted on the district website.

4.9 Responding to Public Comments

The project proponents and consultants responsible for preparation of project documents will review all comments received through the public involvement methods listed above. The objective of this process is to gather relevant and diverse input to improve the quality of the recommended wastewater treatment and funding plans. Once comments are received from the public and key stakeholders, FWSD with the assistance of the consultant team will consider and respond to questions and concerns. It is recommended that for the LID process, the project team prepare written responses that will then become part of the public record.

Comments emailed to FWSD via the project webpage or other means will be routed to the appropriate authority. All email comments and questions should be responded to so that the sender knows the comment was received.

The FWSD (and consultant team as delegated) will evaluate and consider all public input and be open to making adjustments as merited.