

## EXECUTIVE'S OFFICE

County Courthouse  
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Bellingham, WA 98225



**Jack Louws**  
County Executive

***Bellingham Herald Op Ed, submitted by Sam Ryan, Planning and Development Services Director***

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### Code Compliance Enforcement

Planning and Development Services (PDS) wears many hats in its service to Whatcom County. Enforcement of the various land use codes, critical area and life safety regulations is a part of our duties seldom mentioned. PDS is placing a focus on compliance this year and we are working on some very positive changes and programs for 2015.

Our first area of overall enforcement improvements is in response to public comments received by the County Council last year. Council and the Executive provided support for an additional compliance officer last year. A new compliance officer was hired in November 2014 and continues training which is making a positive impact on the enforcement case load. Existing staff has crafted a new draft Code Enforcement Ordinance which consolidates land use, critical areas (excluding shorelines) and life safety codes. This new code will streamline and clarify the enforcement process and penalty assessments. Like all legal actions, everyone is entitled to due process during enforcement actions, which means the process is not always quick; however, PDS continues to make every effort to keep the process moving and provide a faster case turnaround. PDS will be working with the County Council on the new code compliance ordinance in the next few months. PDS is trying to approach the area of compliance productively and develop tools to assist the process. A new tool being proposed through the code amendments is to file unresponsive violations with the Auditor's Office. If approved, this will place a violation tag on the property parcel record. The tag would alert potential buyers of the problems on the property. This hopefully will serve as a deterrent to owners and encourage them to comply. Once compliance is achieved then a letter of compliance can be issued and the owner can file it with the County Auditor's office, removing the violation tag. We encourage the public to participate with staff and the Council through the code amendment process to ensure any concerns with the code enforcement process is heard and community solutions are accomplished.

Community involvement can be of great help to achieving code compliance. For instance, currently in the Foothills area, a local group of leaders and residents meet on a regular basis with a PDS compliance officer. They identify the ten most egregious violations in their area. The compliance officer then follows up with site inspections, takes pictures, researches the parcels in question and then sends out notices of violation, followed up with penalties if necessary. At the next meeting he updates the group on results, including problems encountered or successes. The meetings educate the local folks, which can include the Health Department and the Sheriff's representative, all in a collaborative effort to get non-compliant sites into compliance. Some of the cases are heartbreaking, caused by unemployment, substance abuse, and/or mental illness. PDS' staff strives to do their best to get sites into compliance in a caring fashion.

Another example of how the PDS enforcement team is exploring methods of better serving the community is our work in Point Roberts. Since Pt. Roberts is a geographically unique area and limited by crossing two international borders, the team is working with the Pt. Roberts Community Advisory Committee (PRCAC) on finding better ways to prioritize cases to meet their specific community needs. For example, we recently received several Code Violation Reports (CVR) for signs constructed in Pt. Roberts that were not reviewed by the PRCAC for compliance with the Pt. Roberts Character Plan. Under our current policy, these particular signs would not pose a significant or probable threat to public safety, property, and/or the environment. Therefore, they would be given a low priority under our current policy. The enforcement team has realized the visual impacts of a particular site may pose a more severe impact to the community than how we are currently prioritizing these impacts. Our goal is to meet with the PRCAC to explore the ability to utilize them as a resource to help us analyze what violations the community sees as serious impacts to Pt. Roberts.

Additionally, the Whatcom County Executive and Council are also placing an emphasis on improving water quality throughout Whatcom County in 2015. This is in response to recent increases in fecal coliform pollution from humans and animals resulting in the closure or restriction of shellfish harvesting along our shores. To provide additional staff resources to this issue, a full time PDS Natural Resources Enforcement person will be hired with a background in water quality and land management. The County will be working to find the sources of pollution and working with landowners to get them the help they need to correct these problems; however, PDS will use enforcement when necessary for cases where landowners refuse to make corrections and come into compliance with County code.

PDS encourages dialogue from citizens regarding their concerns about compliance issues. If you have a compliance issue or concern, you can contact PDS Enforcement Staff by phone or leave a message on our Compliance Hotline at 360-676-6907. Compliance staff reviews the messages and return phone calls promptly. You can also file a Code Violation Report (CVR). The CVR forms are available on the PDS website under [www.whatcomcounty.us](http://www.whatcomcounty.us), click on Planning & Development Services then click on Code Enforcement.

In reality there are certainly more compliance cases out there than PDS can effectively handle at one time. However a focus on Community-based code enforcement- to include good communication and cooperation- will go a long way toward solving many of our compliance issues. PDS prefers to work with citizens to resolve issues in a caring manner, but when that does not work, enforcement will be used to ensure compliance with our rules and regulations for the benefit and protection of the community we all enjoy.

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