

November 2, 2025 Election

Port of Bellingham Commissioner Voter Guide

ON THE BALLOT: TWO COMMISSIONER SEATS

Tuesday, November 2nd, every Whatcom County voter will have a say in filling two Port of Bellingham Commission seats representing Districts 1 and 2. The winners will join sitting Commissioner Bobby Briscoe on the three-person Commission. Each district nominated their own candidates to run for their district's seat in the primary election. The top two candidates in each district then progressed to the general election. In the upcoming general election, every Whatcom voter casts their ballot for all district seats. *The Working Waterfront Coalition does not endorse candidates.* Rather, with equal space and neutral posturing, we have prepared for you an introduction to all three candidates.

As a nonprofit association of more than 150 maritime companies, organizations, and individuals, our stated mission is to "promote the vitality and economic benefits of our working waterfronts for the people of Whatcom County." The importance of this mission is clear, as studies have shown that our maritime sector provides or supports 6,300+ jobs, mostly living-wage, about 4.2% of the entire County workforce. Only 2 percent of the average Whatcom County property tax dollar goes to the Port of Bellingham, but that 2% has a large effect on our community and its future. The Port of Bellingham makes critical decisions impacting all of us, making this election important to the continued well-being of Whatcom County.

Attached are candidates' answers to nine questions central to our mission. We provided each candidate with a standard word count limit with the option of one answer of their choice to run longer. In District one, Michael Shepard is running unopposed. Ken Bell and Carly James are running for District 2. Please read their responses carefully to guide your decision on your November ballot.

Bellingham Port Commissioner Candidates 2025

DISTRICT 1



Michael Shepard *(running unopposed)*

It has been a privilege to serve as a commissioner for the Port of Bellingham these past 8 years. I ran for office because I know that Whatcom County is an amazing place to live, but increasingly it has become a hard place to afford for many. The Port is responsible for county-wide economic development, and that has been my focus. In my time in office, I have developed a deep appreciation for the people and businesses that make up our maritime trades workforce. I recognize that maintaining a working waterfront does not happen by accident, given all the pressures for development of waterfront property. I am committed to continued efforts to support, maintain, and expand our working waterfronts in Fairhaven, Bellingham, and Blaine. Thank you for your support.

DISTRICT 2



Ken Bell

We learned a lot of lessons the last few years and with those lessons came change. We begin with a new Executive Director and possibly a new commission structure. All designed to provide better communication, a new vision and a concentrated effort to keep the waterfront working. It is my intent to prioritize the Shipping Terminal and Airport Industrial Park. This is where the Port of Bellingham can provide the most value to the citizens of Whatcom County. We secured a rail connection and now we must make the most of these opportunities. I also believe the Airport has been forgotten for its Free Trade Zone and economic possibilities. This year my wife and I became grandparents, three in all, and I continue to be the CEO of an expanding contaminated-soil clean up company. I fully understand what it takes to make businesses successful. Time to go to work.



Carly James

I am a small business owner, accountant, artist, and musician who's lived and worked in Whatcom County for over two decades. I own and operate a successful shop with locations in downtown Bellingham and on the waterfront at The Granary, where I have seen firsthand the challenges and opportunities facing our local economy. I understand how important it is to balance growth with protecting the jobs and heritage that define our waterfront. The Port's decisions today will shape our community for generations, and I am committed to ensuring it remains a thriving, working waterfront that serves both our maritime industries and the public. My strength as a leader is listening. Together, we can deliver long-overdue progress on the waterfront redevelopment, airport, shipping terminal, and county-wide infrastructure improvements.

1. RESISTING GENTRIFICATION

Upscale condominiums, shopping or retail can be placed anywhere around a town - but our economically vital maritime trades can only be located near the water. Given the trend of waterfront gentrification forcing maritime trades outside our county, how would you address the growing demand for mixed-use development while adhering to the Shoreline Management Act and its provisions that prioritize water-dependent and water-reliant use?

DISTRICT 1

Michael Shepard:

One thing that I have learned in my time as a Commissioner is that ensuring we retain and grow a robust marine trades economy in Whatcom County does not happen by accident. It requires active work and actionable policy. The Port recognizes the value of marine trades to our local economy, culture, and future.

DISTRICT 2

Ken Bell:

Gentrification is a threat to water access. We cannot allow the one thing capable of bringing real economic growth to our region from being threatened. We will continue to limit the area designated for mixed use to the downtown waterfront area. All other areas must be reserved for work.

The shipping terminal is our number one priority. With the addition of rail service and the rebuilding of infrastructure we will ensure that we have the proper tools to make our terminal successful. We need to make sure we have enough property around the terminal to ensure this property can be utilized to its fullest potential. By putting in appropriate stormwater and environmental controls we will keep the bay protected.

To make it successful it will require an appropriate buffer between residential to heavy industrial areas. Those buffers should also be for work. Light industrial areas make great buffers.

Carly James:

We are a city connected to the Salish Sea and when we push maritime trades aside, we lose a part of our soul. First Nations were seafaring boat-builders; the first settlers arrived by water. The very first cargo shipment to leave Puget Sound sailed from here, and our community thrived because of its deep connection to the water. Waterfront land is irreplaceable, and the SMA is clear that water-dependent uses come first.

We need to safeguard the industrial areas we have while creating buffer zones so maritime trades and public access can coexist. A healthy, working waterfront doesn't exclude mixed-use. It balances it. The same people who enjoy a cold IPA at Trackside should also be able to afford to live here because we've protected family-wage jobs tied to the water. Whatcom County is strongest when we honor our maritime roots while planning for the future. We owe it to past generations, and to our kids, to keep our waterfront working.

2. COMMERCIAL FISHING

Commercial fishing vessels face many hurdles, from limited local dock space to increasing costs associated with insurance, gear, permits and vessel maintenance. As more fishing families and companies search outside major urban bases for an affordable homeport, what can the Port of Bellingham do to welcome and encourage additions to our local fleet?

DISTRICT 1

Michael Shepard:

The Port of Bellingham is proud to be the home harbor to a large commercial fishing fleet, including the largest tribal fishing fleet in the country. The Port supports our fleet with quality facilities, affordable rates for moorage, direct market opportunities, and respect.

Two Port sponsored initiatives that support our fishing fleet are Dockside Market and Seafeast. Both of these events celebrate our fishing community, create direct sales opportunities for seafood to the public, and educates consumers on ways to include local seafood in their diet.

DISTRICT 2

Ken Bell:

I believe that the Port of Bellingham will become the epicenter for commercial fishing as gentrification pushes more of this activity into our area. We need to continue the effort to bring the Blaine marina back to its glory days and continue to support the innovations in Squalicum harbor.

Continuing our efforts to rebuild and maintain the north, south and sawtooth piers is of utmost importance. The Blaine marina should have all the amenities that any shipyard or fishing community needs. By working on dry dock storage for small pleasure craft, we can open up more slips for commercial use and we should work toward that end.

Carly James:

Adding dock capacity is a step in the right direction, because it takes pressure off Squalicum Harbor and keeps moorage rates stable for working boats. I support redeveloping the ASB into a space specifically for larger commercial vessels so we're not forcing the working fleet to compete with recreation for limited slips. But we can't ignore deferred maintenance. Infrastructure that's been under-managed for the past 30–50 years needs real investment if we're going to attract and retain a strong fleet.

The WWC has shown how much can be done when partners step up—advocating for small, independent fishers getting help with marketing, cold storage, or fish processing. I want to see the Port Commission continue in that spirit, as a reliable partner that listens, invests, and manages wisely. We can turn our harbor into a place of stability, where the next generation of fishing families knows they have a lasting livelihood here.

3. FAIRHAVEN SHIPYARD FUTURE

The Port currently plans to initiate cleanup of the old Fairhaven Shipyard site, and a stated goal is to ensure it remains relevant to our marine trades. If a well-financed developer made a lucrative offer to the Port that would lead to a major condominium/retail project and dedicated moorage for very large yachts, would you be for or against this proposal? Why?

DISTRICT 1

Michael Shepard:

I would oppose the described proposal. The Fairhaven Shipyard property is a location for high wage marine trades employment. We do need more housing in our community, but we also need quality employment opportunities.

DISTRICT 2

Ken Bell:

Wow, what a question. Given the potential for greater economic benefit at the Shipyard site, I would be very hesitant to agree to that usage. I continue to believe that if you build housing, it is a short lived job opportunity. Housing brings jobs for the construction period only. The benefit of such a proposal would be for the job created by servicing large boats. I believe that a more productive use of this location could be found. This is an area ripe for tourism through a cruise terminal which would bring thousands of people to the area. That effort would also benefit the airport by bringing people to the area.

I can also see that area as another location for more cold storage, dry dock storage or more ship building. I would not want to be short sighted in managing one of our most valuable assets.

Carly James:

When a developer shows up with money in hand, we should welcome their interest. But investment alone isn't enough. We have to ask the hard questions. Will this project protect water-dependent uses, strengthen our maritime trades, and meet our environmental standards? Does it align with the long-term vision our community has for its working waterfront? Too often, the Port has failed to do that diligence, leading to lawsuits and stalled progress.

As Commissioner, I'll hold developers to a higher bar and look for partners who share our values—keeping the waterfront essential for marine trades, respecting our environment, and honoring our maritime heritage.

Prioritizing luxury condos and superyachts over fishing boats and shipyards doesn't reflect those values. I will only support projects that strengthen our community, protect our shoreline for water-dependent uses, and leave us with something our children and grandchildren will thank us for.

4. C-STREET MARINE TRADES ZONING

The Port has committed to reserving the entire C. St. marine trades area, including the ASB lagoon and surrounding land, to marine-related uses. Current City of Bellingham zoning for that area permits a number of non-marine-related uses, including parking facilities, churches, private clubs, and nurseries. The Port owns the lagoon and almost all of the land. Would you join the Coalition in supporting an appeal to the City to amend the zoning to eliminate the non-marine uses from the zoning ordinance, thus affirming the commitments of the Port and the City to codify exclusively marine uses for this area? Why or why not?

DISTRICT 1

Michael Shepard:

Plans for the ASB lagoon involve a significant environment cleanup and redevelopment for marine trades job creation expansion. The Port is the property owner and developer for this property and will retain control of development. The Port already has identified this property for marine trades use in our site plans and harbor improvement documents. I support keeping this area for marine trades lands and am unsure if further regulatory zoning restrictions are beneficial.

DISTRICT 2

Ken Bell:

Yes. This is industrial land and should remain so. The non marine uses are in direct conflict with the noises, hours and activity of a working waterfront.

Carly James:

The C Street Marine Trades Area and the ASB lagoon should be secured for marine uses. Since the Port already owns nearly all of the land, no formal appeal is necessary—the Port can simply request the City to rezone. While the Port has already committed to marine uses, the request would build trust with our maritime community and create a shared vision with the City.

Fun fact: this site has always been central to Bellingham's story. Once upon a time, it generated over 10% of the City's budget as the red-light district. Later, boats would pull into the Whatcom Waterway because the toxic water there killed barnacles on their hulls. That history reminds us how far we've come, and how much responsibility we have now to get it right. Redevelopment should mean additional moorage, safe and secure stormwater management, and a permanent home for marine trades.

5. WHATCOM WATERWAY MOORAGE

With condominium construction well underway, there are tentative plans for guest moorage in front of the condo units. Moorage at this location would provide easy pedestrian access to downtown for boaters and vessels visiting Bellingham. Do you think this is important? Why or why not? What would you do to promote guest moorage as a strategy to boost visitor activity both downtown and in Fairhaven?

DISTRICT 1

Michael Shepard:

I would like to see a return of guest moorage in the downtown waterfront. This requires collaboration with our Tribal partners, as this is an active treaty fishing zone.

DISTRICT 2

Ken Bell:

This has always been a part of the plan and should remain so. We are an area that thrives on tourism. I am always in favor of outside money coming into our economy. Everyone benefits. We should be promoting activities that attract customers to our already struggling retail areas. These moorage opportunities also offer an opportunity for increasing maintenance and related commerce.

Carly James:

Guest moorage on the Whatcom Waterway is important and long overdue. When boaters can tie up downtown, they don't just visit the harbor; they support local restaurants, shops, and small businesses. That's good for the Port, good for our economy, and good for building the kind of vibrant waterfront culture we all want. But moorage alone isn't enough. To make this work, we need safe pedestrian routes, bike parking, clear wayfinding, and year-round activity that connects the waterfront to the heart of downtown and Fairhaven.

The Port must lead a coordinated plan with the City and local businesses to ensure this investment delivers long-term economic returns. Guest moorage is not just an amenity; it's an economic strategy. Done right, it strengthens our working waterfront by bringing more people to see and support the industries, jobs, and culture that make Bellingham unique.

6. FOOT OF CORNWALL DEVELOPMENT

The new Salish Landing Park will soon break ground near the foot of Cornwall Avenue. The Shipping Terminal is also looking to expand operations and develop a rail spur. The current maintenance building at the edge of the Shipping Terminal may be considered for changes in those developments. What would you propose for the area at the head of Salish Landing and the edge of the Shipping Terminal to engage the public and tie the new park into Bellingham's maritime culture?

DISTRICT 1

Michael Shepard:

It is important to create connectivity for walking and biking trail infrastructure. We want people to easily get from the new park to the downtown waterfront, and beyond. I believe this needs to be accomplished without infringing upon operations of the Shipping Terminal. The Port's maintenance building may eventually be located elsewhere, but I expect this site will be used to support terminal operations, rather than recreation. We will need to maximize the existing bike lanes, sidewalks, and trails for connectivity.

DISTRICT 2

Ken Bell:

This is a building and area of the port that will not see its true value until the shipping terminal has been operating at a higher capacity for a period of time.

I believe this area will become incredibly useful for work. I would not want to impede the value created by using those structures or that area for anything else until we knew what was needed.

That being said it is imperative that we connect Fairhaven to the city center. We need to approach this in a measured manner.

Carly James:

This area is a wonderful opportunity to connect the public with our maritime culture. I support creating a space that engages people—through a maritime museum, a boating hub, or interactive experiences that help visitors understand the vessels and industries at work in our harbor. I'll make sure this redevelopment delivers both cultural and economic value. That means wayfinding and storytelling that highlight our maritime history, and safe public viewing areas that build appreciation for the work being done at the Shipping Terminal. When people see the value of our working waterfront, they become stronger advocates for protecting it.

We already have the pieces—history, culture, active industry, and a community eager to connect. What we need now is leadership with vision to tie them together, so Salish Landing becomes more than just another park, it's a place where people truly experience Whatcom County's maritime culture.

7. BELLINGHAM SHIPPING TERMINAL

The Bellingham Shipping Terminal is being modernized with new stormwater systems, pier piling support work and other modifications to allow more and varied cargoes to utilize the terminal. How do you propose promoting the Terminal's increased and expanded use to the community?

DISTRICT 1

Michael Shepard:

Our first task is modernization of a facility that was not adequately upkept for decades.

We are spending over \$50 million to revitalize that facility, including a \$20 million federal grant to reconnect rail to the terminal. We also have a dedicated terminal marketing manager who works to secure cargo. Importantly, the Port has learned to thoroughly vet new cargo proposals to ensure they meet our high environmental standards and facilitate our goal of being a good neighbor. This facility has great potential and I am committed to its success.

DISTRICT 2

Ken Bell:

The Port should continue to do the city and neighborhood outreach so that everyone understands what to expect. Town meetings to discuss impacts should be held often and with as diverse a stakeholder group as possible. The City and Port should both be promoting a joint vision for work on the waterfront at every possible opportunity.

Carly James:

Promoting the modernization of the Shipping Terminal is an opportunity to build trust, create jobs, and strengthen our economy. To our neighbors in South Hill: transparency matters. You deserve to know what the Port is planning, what investments we're making, and how we're ensuring that it is a safe operation. Clear communication builds confidence, and the Port has a responsibility to keep you informed every step of the way. To our working families: the Shipping Terminal means good-paying jobs that can't be outsourced.

Our working waterfront fed four generations here, and it can once again provide opportunities for people to build a future in Whatcom County. To the greater business community: you can count on a Port committed to making Bellingham a competitive, reliable place to work and invest. Handled right, the Shipping Terminal can become the symbol of a new era for the Port—transparent, dependable, environmentally responsible, and committed to good jobs and a resilient economy.

8. EXPANDING THE COMMISSION

The Port of Bellingham has put on the ballot for this November to expand to 5 commissioners, from 3. Do you feel this expansion is necessary? How will this either help, or hamper, commissioner and community discussions?

DISTRICT 1

Michael Shepard:

I support an expansion of the commission. I believe it will improve our capacity for good governance, transparency, and representation.

DISTRICT 2

Ken Bell:

I do think it is necessary. It is truly a mixed bag but the inability to have one on one conversations with other commissioners has been difficult to navigate. The structure of the commission requires that all communication be funneled through the executive director. This is an inefficient mechanism.

Communication is always best face to face. We are also a diverse port and to have members come from the current 5 districts would give us a broader county wide representation.

The downside is that there are more people to manage and more opinions to hear but I do believe that could be a positive.

Carly James:

I support expanding the Port Commission from three to five members. The people have made clear they want a stronger voice in Port decisions, and it's time we listened. Whatcom County has grown since the Port's founding, and three commissioners no longer provide the breadth of oversight and perspective needed to meet today's challenges. Five commissioners will bring diversity of thought, healthier debate, and decisions that better reflect our community.

The Open Public Meetings Act prevents discussions outside public meetings, which means institutional knowledge rests with staff or special interests. Expanding the commission distributes that knowledge among elected representatives. I welcome this change, and I look forward to sitting at that table of five. More voices mean stronger decisions for Whatcom County's future.

9. PORT'S FUTURE

As a Commissioner, you would have input into the strategic direction of the Port of Bellingham. Describe the Port's facilities, business activities, and initiatives that you would like to see looking ahead two decades to the year 2045.

DISTRICT 1

Michael Shepard:

We have a specific mission for countywide economic development. To me, this happens by supporting retention of our existing businesses, supporting existing business expansion, and recruitment of employers that would be successful here. At the same time we would to address pressing challenges to our local economy.

Working to address the lack of affordable housing is one solution that I believe is important. I also believe it is important to clean up past environmental pollution and invest in environmental sustainability. These core beliefs guide the work of staff and commission.

DISTRICT 2

Ken Bell:

The Shipping Terminal should be our primary focus. We need rail service to the waterfront so we can maximize our transportation options for commodities.

By prioritizing this terminal, we will bring real revenue to the community. The introduction of Rotainers will give us the capacity to ship from anywhere to anywhere with minimal impact on neighborhoods.

The Airport Industrial Park also needs our attention. It has not seen significant activity for some time. The Port must engage stakeholders to the north and west of the airport to create industrial tracts.

This will require infrastructure and a clear plan. Mitchell Way is ready right now for us to take to the marketplace, and we should be actively searching for partners to develop this under-utilized thoroughfare.

(Answer continued on back page)

Carly James:

By 2045, I want Whatcom County to be a place where people can live, work, and build their future with confidence. The Port should be known for stability, strategic investment, and a community-driven vision that lasts for generations.

I want to see Bellingham's waterfront shaped by cooperation. Industry will be thriving alongside safe, welcoming public spaces. The Bellingham Airport will be recognized as the region's reliable choice—no one north of Everett even considers driving to SeaTac because our airport offers travelers a smooth experience that gets people where they need to go, when they want to go.

Whatcom County is a place where you can grow up and build a life if you choose, because industrial lands remain protected and supported by modern infrastructure, sustaining the jobs that keep families rooted here.

(Answer continued on back page)

REMEMBER TO VOTE BY TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 2, 2025

Answers Cont:

Ken Bell - *(cont. from question #9)*

The waterfront is ready for a new coordinated effort. We are, in many ways, starting over with the former GP property. Coordinating with the City to create a gateway to Bellingham's downtown core will only bring more revenue and business activity to both areas.

Tourism is also key to keeping people and revenue flowing through the county. We live in a special place, and we need to show it off. I would like to see more resources devoted to bringing visitors here to experience our incredible scenery and outdoor activities. Cruise lines, day moorage, and enhanced and publicized Amtrak routes will all help attract more people through our airport. This means more airlines, more routes, and more investment in the areas around our transportation hubs.

Finally, a new executive director will bring fresh vision, a new management style, and the expertise needed to bring all this to fruition.

Carly James - *(cont. from question #9)*

New ventures succeed alongside legacy industries because Port support for entrepreneurs and small businesses is available through incubator programs and targeted grants.

I want to see our shoreline and waterways healthier than they've been because the Port has completed long overdue cleanups and habitat restoration.

Finally, I want to see Port assets and resources utilized to benefit and uplift all of Whatcom County.

About the Working Waterfront Coalition of Whatcom County

Mission

To promote the vitality and economic benefits of our working waterfronts for the people of Whatcom County.

Goals

- Communicate with one voice to improve understanding between maritime businesses and public entities.
- Educate the community about the value of the economic contributions, diversity, and heritage of Whatcom County's working waterfronts.
- Share ideas to mutually preserve, promote, and enhance maritime businesses.
- Claim for maritime businesses a place at the table in the waterfront planning and development process.
- Promote a healthy shoreline through appropriate infrastructure and sustainable practices.

This 2025 Port Commissioner Voter's Guide is provided by the Whatcom Working Waterfront Coalition, a registered 501 c-6 Non-Profit.

Thank you to our members who support our programming and outreach. Not a member? Learn more about the Coalition and become a sustaining part of your working waterfront at:

www.whatcomworkingwaterfront.org/membership

