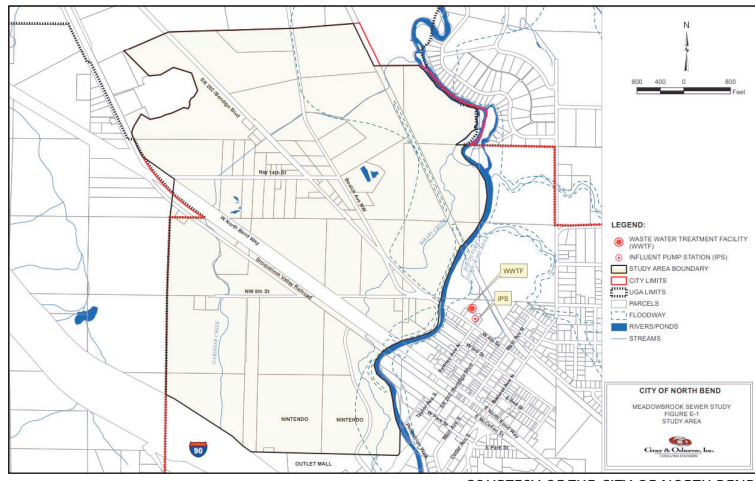


SNOQUALMIE VALLEY RECORD

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North Bend delays vote on joining Meadowbrook ULID



Map of the Meadowbrook ULID.

By CONOR WILSON
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The long saga to bring a sewer system to North Bend's Meadowbrook neighborhood met a slight roadblock Nov. 16, as the city council voted 5-2 not to join the Utility Local Improvement District (ULID) until after more questions are answered.

The proposed motion was not to form the ULID, but rather a vote if the city, which owns roughly one-third of the land in the neighborhood, would vote yes in joining the petition.

"This is not voting on whether the ULID is being created or not," said

North Bend Mayor Rob McFarland. "It's simply voting if the city will join the ULID."

In order to bring the sewer system to the neighborhood, a majority of property owners must sign a petition agreeing to the change.

A recent petition effort, excluding city owned properties, found that 52.78% of property owners by land area wanted the ULID, while 47.22% either opposed it or did not respond to the petition.

For years, some private property owners have been attempting to extend the public sewer system into the neighborhood. Properties in the Meadowbrook neighborhood currently have septic tanks.

Wende Miller, who started the petition, is the owner of Bendigo Properties LLC, which owns land in the neighborhood. She said she has been trying to develop her property for 17 years.

"This area has a potential to be an economic powerhouse for the city, and it's been largely untapped due to the city's code restrictions," Miller said. "If you have no sewer, you can't develop, you have no economic use for your property."

However, the success of the petition is largely dependent on the council's vote. The city owns 10 parcels of land in the neighborhood,

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Lack of transit, housing crisis and pandemic fuel local labor shortage

There are nearly 3,000 unfilled positions in the Snoqualmie Valley

By CONOR WILSON
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Staffing numbers have been OK the past few months for Tony Persson, general manager of the Ace Hardware in North Bend.

Although nearly 10% of the store's positions remain vacant, Persson has managed to wrangle together enough high school and college students to pick up needed hours and prevent his store from closing like it did early in the pandemic.

"It's really been a lifesaver for us that these young people have been willing to work while they're in school," he said. "Without them, I don't know what I would have done."

Ace Hardware is one of dozens of businesses in the Snoqualmie Valley feeling the effects of a nationwide worker shortage that has hit the Valley particularly hard.

There are an estimated 3,000 vacant positions across the Snoqualmie Valley, with fears that businesses will close or move out if labor is not found soon.

"We heard from the very beginning when COVID started that businesses were desperate for people to work," said Kelly

Coughlin, the executive director of the Snoqualmie Valley Chamber of Commerce. "It is the most important time to support mom and pop stores. It's critical now more than ever."

A month after the pandemic broke out, the Washington unemployment rate more than tripled, reaching 16%, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

As of September, the state's unemployment rate is at 4.9%, the lowest it's been since Feb. 2020. However, the actual employment rate is likely much higher because it does not count those who have stopped looking for work.

Impacts on Valley businesses have been wide-ranging over the past few months, with some only needing to make minor adjustments for being short staffed, while others have had difficulties remaining open.

Coughlin said several restaurants, including coffee shops and fast food, have closed indoor dining because they lack extra staff to check the vaccination status of their guests, which is required in King County.

"If you drove through Fall City Saturday, most restaurants didn't seat tables or have enough staff



Tony Persson, general manager of the North Bend Ace Hardware.

CONOR WILSON / VALLEY RECORD

to be open," said Angela Donaldson, the president of the Fall City Community Association. "We need to drive more applicants into town."

Jay Blucher, owner of Farmhouse Market, an independent grocery store in Fall City, said he is down to 16 employees and could easily hire four more workers. Recently, he said, his new hires have been more college-aged than in prior years.

"Most of the success we've had [in hiring] is people who already live here," he said at a meeting of Fall City business owners. "We had plenty of applicants two years ago. Since then, we've really had to get creative without a lot of success."

Even large businesses have felt the impact of the labor shortage. The Snoqualmie Casino, one the largest employers in the Valley, has struggled to find workers, according to Maria Boggs,

the casino's director of human resources.

The casino currently has 70 open positions. In October, the casino hosted a job fair in Maple Valley. Although the casino has participated in off-site job fairs before, it was the first off-site fair the casino held itself. Boggs said they did not get as much traffic as desired, but they received applications from half of those who attended.

"Unfortunately, I know in speaking with fellow HR colleagues that we are not alone in this struggle," she said. "Our overall numbers are about the same as this time last year. We are not quite back to pre-COVID employment numbers quite yet."

Causes of the shortage

The Valley has had a hiring problem for several years,

particularly for cooks and wait-staff. High housing costs and a lack of incoming public transit have all served as barriers for low-income workers.

However, the situation has been more dire in the past two years.

"Before the pandemic, we were having shortages of people as well, but it's nowhere as bad as it is now," said Coughlin of the SnoValley Chamber.

Although the Valley is not an urban employment center, it has a high demand for service workers, partially due to its dependence on the tourism industry.

There has been speculation about the cause of the labor shortage. Boggs of Snoqualmie Casino said it seems like there is hesitancy from candidates to return in-person work. Some have said the problem has been exacerbated

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Man killed by Snoqualmie Police officer was homeless

By CONOR WILSON
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The 33-year-old man who was killed by a Snoqualmie police officer late Nov. 16 was homeless and living in his car, according to a spokesperson with the independent investigations team.

Bellevue Police Major Debbie Christopherson, who is part of the Independent Force Investigation Team (IFIT) for King County, provided more details about the first officer-involved shooting in Snoqualmie Police Department history during a press briefing Nov. 17.

The shooting occurred at 11:15 p.m. Nov. 16 at Torguson Park in North Bend. Snoqualmie officer James Acquire was on routine patrol when he passed the park and noticed a car in the lot, Christopherson said.

She said that because it was after hours, Acquire investigated the situation and found a 33-year-old man outside of his car. Acquire allegedly asked the man to leave. The man refused, leading to a physical altercation.

Acquire was allegedly knocked to the ground, sustaining a slight arm injury, and the man reached for the officer's weapon, according to the investigations team. Acquire then regained control of the weapon and fired one round, killing the man, according to the investigations team. Acquire was placed on leave.

Christopherson said the man had been sleeping in his car and was not from North Bend. She said it appears the man had been in the area for a while, but had been traveling through several states.

The man is not believed to have had any previous interactions with Snoqualmie police, nor does

he have a criminal record, Christopherson said. The name of the deceased man was not released as of press time.

Acquire has been with the Snoqualmie Police Department for the last five months. Before that, he worked three years at the Clarkston Police Department. Acquire was born in Seattle and raised in Blaine. He graduated from Blaine High School and started his law enforcement career at the Blaine Police Department in 2013. He has no disciplinary record.

There is no camera footage of the event because Snoqualmie police do not wear body cameras. There is, however, footage after the event from responding county sheriff officers' body cameras.

Initial reports said the officer approached a group of people in the park, but through additional investigation, this was found to be

untrue.

The investigation will continue through the IFIT.

The IFIT was created in response to state legislation that went into effect at the beginning of 2021. It requires an independent investigation for officer-involved shootings that result in injury or death. Thirteen local law enforcement agencies belong to IFIT, including the Snoqualmie Police Department.

The Snoqualmie Police

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Labor

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because of increased unemployment benefits.

“What we’re finding as a management team is nine out of ten people we call aren’t looking for work, they’re just looking to collect,” said Tony Persson of North Bend Ace Hardware.

Unemployment benefits were extended by the passage of the American Rescue Plan Act in March. The bill extended benefits to those who had not previously qualified and provided \$300 in weekly payments. Federal unemployment benefits ended Sept. 6, with 120,000 Washingtonians losing their benefits, but September job gains were modest.

Washington added 17,600 jobs in September, according to a preliminary report from the Washington State Employment Security Department. That is 1,200 more jobs gained than in August, but significantly less than gains made in prior months. In June and July, for example, the state added over 25,000 each month.

Coughlin said workers in the Valley are being stretched thin. Workers have also been heavily criticized for complying with the state’s COVID-19 vaccine mandate, she said, which requires those in most indoor spaces to be vaccinated or have a negative test within 72 hours.

“These workers are only getting five minute breaks, they’re working seven days

a week, and then people are coming in and being hateful,” she said. “Right now it’s a nasty environment for our workers.”

Some have said the labor shortage can be more accurately described as workers escaping often demanding and low-paying environments. Perhaps no industry has experienced this to a greater degree than the childcare industry, which saw huge numbers of workers leave the industry during the pandemic.

“There’s a lot of factors. The pay is very low, the hours are long and now with COVID, children can’t be vaccinated, which makes it even harder,” said Nela Cumming, the executive director of Encompass NW. “Some staff will say, ‘hey I don’t want to put myself at risk with this low pay.’”

Low-income workers have been hit particularly hard by the pandemic, according to a study by the Pew Research Center. Employment among these workers fell by almost 11% between Feb. 2020 and Feb. 2021. That is more than double the fall of middle-income workers.

In August, a record 2.9% of the nation’s workforce quit their jobs, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, including 6.4% of those in leisure and hospitality positions.

Residents also left the Valley in record numbers during the pandemic, which could be contributing to the problem. There were an estimated 700 new residents on the Snoqualmie Ridge alone. There was also high turnover in North Bend and Fall City.

When the pandemic struck, lots of residents moved out, Coughlin said, in favor of more affordable housing elsewhere. She said this included many families with working age children and many low-income workers who had been sharing or renting out rooms. They were replaced by primarily high-income families.

According to a 2019 Snoqualmie Valley Community Needs Assessment report, those living in the Valley who made between \$25,000 and \$43,000, just below \$21 an hour, were burdened or severely cost-burdened by housing prices 91% of the time.

A 2020 study from the University of Washington that looked at self-sufficiency wages, defined as how much a person needs to make to cover basic living expenses, found that a single adult in King County needed to make \$17.61 an hour to get by, well above the state average of \$10.86.

In east King County — the richest region of the state — a single adult needs to make over \$21 an hour, and a single parent with a baby needs at least \$39 an hour.

Cynthia Crass, a consultant hired by the Fall City Community Association to address the worker shortage in Fall City, said many of the businesses she spoke with while doing a needs assessment also said their hiring problems began prior to the pandemic, but had become worse.

“Every single person I talked to started with a sigh and you could sense

the overall discouragement,” she said. “There’s a lot of discouragement, but we realize there’s no silver bullet, there’s no easy solution, but it’s not a good idea to sit and do nothing. We need to do something.”

The transit barrier

One of the main problems for businesses in the Valley is that those who work low-income jobs are not living near their employer.

“When you look at the people you pay \$15 to \$16 an hour, those people can’t afford to live here. That means you need buses from areas outside,” said Amy Biggs, the executive director of Snoqualmie Valley Transit (SVT). “When we talk about [low-wage] jobs, it’s not local people. We get local people to local jobs.”

The majority of low-income workers in North Bend and Snoqualmie travel in from other cities like Auburn, Kent, Covington and Maple Valley, where housing is more affordable. The main transportation barrier for these workers is the lack of service between the Valley and South King County along the State Route 18 corridor.

Without a car, it is nearly impossible for these workers to reach the Snoqualmie Valley. Even during peak weekday hours, the bus trip between Auburn to North Bend takes around eight hours. To Biggs’ knowledge, there has never been a bus along Highway 18.

Over the last several decades, King County Metro has slashed most of its bus services to the Snoqualmie Valley in favor of more highly populated, dense urban areas.

Bus 208 is the only Metro bus route to Snoqualmie and North Bend. A 2019 report found this route only connects the Valley to the Issaquah Transit Center every two hours. The report also found service outside of weekday peak hours is nonexistent.

Snoqualmie Valley is 512 square miles, which is one quarter of the land in King County. Most of its homes are spread out and in unincorporated areas that often lack sidewalks and street lights. All of these produce difficulties for effective public transportation.

Biggs said there is a lack of geographic equity in the county, as the cash-strapped county Metro allocates funding based on ridership numbers, a metric that heavily favors urban areas over rural ones.

“The challenge we have with people trying to get jobs is quite frankly we’re not urban or an employment center,” Biggs said. “What we’re asking of our transit system is to get people here. This is the opposite of what we currently have, which assumes everybody wants to go somewhere else to work.”

In 2017, to address challenges in the Valley, the county started the Snoqualmie Valley Mobility Coalition, a partnership between all six Valley jurisdictions, the Snoqualmie Tribe and other regional partners.

An initial survey from the coalition in 2017 sent to all Valley households found that 82% of people were dissatisfied or extremely dissatisfied with their current transportation options. A 2019 assessment found low-income Valley residents were spending more than 25% of their income on transportation.

“We knew at that point there was a gap,” said Staci Sahoo, director of mobility management for the King County Mobility Coalition. “People need to get to employment, to school, the grocery store and we’re seeing how transportation is part of that solution. When we think of success, we see residents coming into the Valley and transportation isn’t a barrier to everyday life.”

So far, the commission’s biggest work is a five-year transit plan it published in 2020. The plan includes

several policy proposals such as the launch of a shuttle pilot program along Highway 18 between South King County and North Bend.

“There was a lot of advocacy from the business community for that connection,” said Salwa Raphael, coordinator of the Snoqualmie Valley Mobility Coalition. “There are no reliable services to get employees from their South King County residences to the Valley.”

Raphael and Sahoo said one of the commission’s biggest successes has been pulling the six Valley jurisdictions, and their city planners, together.

“Where the coalition adds the most value is we work with folks on ground and synthesize that information into readable formats for city staff and transit providers,” Sahoo said.

In March 2021, the mayors of Carnation, Duvall, North Bend and Snoqualmie, alongside the Snoqualmie Tribal Chairman, sent a letter to King County calling transportation a lifeline and asking King County Metro for better services in the Valley.

“The measurement for efficiency in a rural area cannot be compared to urban areas, as this measurement system has caused our largely rural area to lose connection for residents and businesses,” the letter reads. “This is especially so anytime we experience an economic downturn. Service in the rural area is always the first to be cut.”

Biggs said Metro responded that it did not have the funds to support additional transportation in the Valley. However, in recent years, she said Valley city officials have been much more invested in transportation solutions.

“For the first time since I started doing this, cities are involved and talking about transit with the people who can fund it, which is King

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Labor

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County Metro," she said.

Moving forward

As the busy winter holiday season approaches, there is fear that Valley businesses will see high turnover, particularly in the restaurant industry, which has already been stretched thin.

"Some restaurant owners I've seen have been crying. They didn't know how they were going to survive," said

Coughlin of the SnoValley Chamber. "I'm surprised we haven't had more closing because they're barely hanging on."

In the short term, the Chamber has been working with the Empower Youth Network and is hoping to encourage more high school students to work, particularly during school breaks when tourism in the Valley is at its highest. However, a more long-term solution is needed.

Coughlin said a Chamber member looked into the shortage of workers in the Valley and found that,

in 1990, the area was facing a similar issue with a lack of available housing for its workers.

To remedy this long-standing issue, Coughlin said she is continuing to advocate for a Metro bus line to the Valley along Highway 18. She is also hopeful that more funding will come through to help expand Highway 18 to reduce congestion for those driving to the Valley.

"We're trying desperately to send Metro a big push," Coughlin said. "If we're going to get any help, it's going to have to be the ability to get people here."

Shooting

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Department will not be involved in the investigation because all officials on the team are required to have no relationship with the officer involved.

"The purpose of the [investigation team] is to provide transparency and be independent of the police department involved," Christopherson said.

It is unclear what de-escalation tactics were used by the officer to prevent the shooting.

"In all my experiences when officers contact people, we have conversations and tell them what we want them to do," Christopherson said. "De-escalation is very important at this time. Officers need to be doing that. I assume that's what the officer did."

ULID

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roughly 20%, enough to sway the vote.

If the council votes yes and the city signs the petition, 73% of property owners would then be in support. If the city does not sign the petition, then only 35% are in support.

Several council members said although they supported the ULID, they had concerns about the city joining the petition without looking at cost impacts for residential property owners.

Councilmembers

Jonathan Rosen and Brenden Elwood said they went door-to-door after realizing a majority of property owners who did not vote on the petition were in the residential portion of the neighborhood. Both expressed concerns that some residents were unaware and won't be able to afford the cost of the ULID.

"There's a lot of folks out there who feel they're going to be forced out of their home," Rosen said. "They're not interested in developing their property. This is their forever home, this is their retirement home. I don't want to see us put a burden on these folks."

Several councilmembers

said they felt communication about the process could have been better. They also had questions about whether the project could be split between residential and commercial property owners.

"I do believe this is good for commercial [property owners], but I don't want to see residents and senior residents be impacted," Councilmember Alan Gothelf said. "We have to come up with something on the residential side."

Benefits of a sewer system in Meadowbrook

The implementation of a sewer system could have several economic and environmental benefits for the city and property owners. Adding the sewer system is anticipated to grow the combined property value of the neighborhood by \$11,617,000, a 64% increase.

At an August ULID town hall, city Public Works Director Mark Rigos said the benefits of a sewer system include that public sewer is managed by the city, requiring less involvement from residents, and public sewer would also be less likely to overflow and pollute groundwater than a septic system.

Several of the septic systems on Meadowbrook properties are old and in violation of current King County health department standards, but because they were installed decades ago, they have been grandfathered in. However, there is no known pollution.

The ULID project is expected to cost just below \$7.5 million, according to an appraisal by a private firm. This would require property owners, including the city, to pay back the cost over a 20-year period at a 2% to 2.5% interest rate starting around 2025.

The amount owed by each property owner would be proportional. A large chunk of the payment, about 30%, would be dealt to Nintendo America, which owns two properties in the area.

"As some of [the council] noted at last week's work study meeting, it does seem unfair to ask Nintendo to pay the lion's share of costs for sewer improvements that Nintendo does not want or need," said Megan Lin, a Nintendo spokesperson.


Voting to join the petition would not itself form the ULID, but would move the process along. The formation of the ULID would require a separate vote of the council.

The council, excluding Ross Loudonback and Heather Koellen, ultimately voted to take the proposal to another work study meeting in order to learn more about ways the ULID could be financed to reduce the impact on residential families.

"There's a willingness to get this done, but there's some information we need," Rosen said. "Let's find a solution to this project for these residents. That's my primary concern."



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