



# Community Focus Group

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June 22, 2017 Notes/Take-Away

## What does success look like?

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- Rochester has a good sidewalk system and good street crossings that allow safe passage for kids and area residents.
- Rochester continues to be a family-friendly community with access to a community park and the ability to safely walk to area businesses like the grocery store.
- Rochester businesses can be successful and grow.

## Transportation, Safety, & Mobility

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### Concerns

- US 12 is a short cut for a lot of people, including freight and truck traffic.
- Congestion in the Rochester/Grand Mound area occurs because of I-5 and drivers headed to the beaches on the coast.
- Many businesses lack easy access to Highway 12. Even if a business is on the highway, it's hard to access – especially during rush hour.
- The volume of truck traffic makes it uncomfortable for bicyclists and pedestrians. Even at Mill's Diner, traffic feels large and loud, and it goes too fast.
- There are a lot of conflict points on the corridor between through-traffic and kids crossing the street.
- There is nothing that separates pedestrians from highway traffic.
- Right now, people feel too comfortable crossing US 12 anywhere between Albany St and Bend St – this isn't safe.
- Getting into and out of Bailey's IGA is challenging due to traffic on US 12.
- Getting into and out of Rochester Middle School is challenging when school starts and ends for the day.
- Parents frequently drop their kids off at Rochester Middle School because students would otherwise face long bus rides (an hour or more) to and from their homes.
- When road construction is necessary, WSDOT should work to avoid causing businesses to close because of transportation challenges.
- People walk along the railroad tracks because it's safer than walking along US 12. Even moms with strollers will use the tracks.
- Stormwater management is problematic. Streets and road shoulders flood, making it difficult for pedestrians to walk along the road when there aren't sidewalks.
- If you aren't in your car, travelling in the study area is challenging because there are too many barriers.
- At 183<sup>rd</sup> and US 12, trucks entering the highway must sit far back from the intersection because of the railroad tracks. Makes it difficult to merge into traffic on the highway.

- People don't understand how to ride the bus and what transit services are available to them (ex: Dial-a-Lift).
- Rochester needs better street lighting. It's difficult to see kids on the street at night (think winter afternoons when the sun sets early). The Chehalis Reservation has seen more pedestrian activity after installing street lights and pedestrian facilities.

### **Strengths**

- The safest place for pedestrians to cross US 12 in the study area is at the Albany/US 12 stop light. Stop lights make it safe to cross the highway.
- The rail line is essential for the pole yard's operation.
- The Chehalis Tribe has a shuttle service between the Reservation and Grand Mound for employees and tribal patrons. This is in addition to Rural & Tribal Transit (RT) that serves South Thurston County.

### **Possibilities**

- Safety on the study corridor could be enhanced by upgrading crosswalks, improving street lighting, and establishing a continuous sidewalk system.
- Highway shoulder enhancements would allow bicyclists and pedestrians a safe place to walk when sidewalks are not present/not appropriate.
- RT should coordinate with Grays Harbor Transit since both have routes that come through Rochester and the Chehalis Reservation.
- Variable message signs that display the speed limit should be allowed on state highways.
- A stop sign or roundabout at US 12 and Denmark St. (east of study area) would be good.
- In Grand Mound, a roundabout at the Key Bank intersection (Old Hwy 99 & 198<sup>th</sup>) would be good.
- RT needs to do better about branding, identifying stop locations, and getting the word out about its service.
- Continuous sidewalks on both sides of US 12 that make it safer for pedestrians and motorists. This would also be a community amenity.
- Rochester needs a dedicated parking area in the commercial core.
- A stoplight should be established at US 12 & 183<sup>rd</sup>.
- Alleys are a good way to get around Rochester when the streets are busy.
- Rochester needs more investment in crossings. Examples include:
  - Installing LED Flashers
  - Using stamped concrete for crosswalks (gives it a sense of place and is a visual cue for drivers)
  - Better signage that enhances safety
- A roundabout at Bailey's IGA could help with traffic as well as welcome people to Rochester.
- Rochester needs an alternate route (not on US 12) for kids to walk home to the neighborhoods on south side of highway.
- It would be great if there was expanded transit service between Rochester and Grand Mound – perhaps Intercity Transit could provide a grant to help get this off the ground.
- Having travel training focus on Rochester could mean more people use RT.
- Rochester needs a Park & Ride– the Grand Mound Park & Ride is full.
- Have a shared trail for bikes and pedestrians that is separated from the highway.
- Rather than improving the highway, perhaps efforts should be concentrated on improving side streets so that people have an alternative to walking along US 12.
- Establish a pedestrian overpass for US 12.

## Placemaking

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### Concerns

- US 12 is both a benefit to Rochester and a problem for Rochester. Lots of people come through the study area, but there is nothing to get people to stop here. Creating a “jumping off point” would benefit the community.
- Proximity to I-5 is both good and bad. It’s a quick trip to get on the freeway (5-8 minutes) and connection to Centralia, Olympia, and Tumwater, but it also means easy access to crime associated with the freeway (ex: drugs).
- Developing a truck stop in Grand Mound could bring drug activity to the area.
- Rochester needs more “street appeal” to enhance its sense of place.
- Rochester isn’t Grand Mound. Rochester can and should develop in a different manner.
- Rochester used to attract families looking for affordable housing and was an “up and coming” area. Has the community lost that?
- There’s not much to attract people to Rochester, and there’s no reason and no place to stop.
- Donation stations (such as those at the IGA and fruit stand) encourage dumping.
- Rochester hosts a lot of cycling events, but cyclists do not stay in the area because there is little to do.
- Are there enough people in the community to support businesses?
- Buildings (like the old tavern) are in disrepair.
- Rochester needs more street patrols on the side roads. Some areas around Rochester can be scary at night.

### Strengths

- There’s a local paper in Rochester.
- Agriculture is a big part of Rochester’s identity. There is a wide variety of agricultural endeavors in the area including organic farms, chicken farms, lettuce farms, etc. Every year, Independence Valley hosts its annual Chicken Races.
- The following are all things that draw people to the Rochester area:
  - Lucky Eagle Casino
  - Confederated Tribes of the Chehalis Reservation
  - Prairies
  - Rafting on the Black River
  - Cycling events such as the Independence Valley Road Race
  - Organic farms
  - South Sound Speedway (east side of I-5)
  - Wide open spaces
  - Rochester’s schools
  - Bountiful Byway (2 or 3 area businesses are currently on the map)
  - Capitol Forest/Evergreen Sportsmen’s Club
  - Historic buildings in the area
  - Ft. Henness
  - Scatter Creek Wildlife Recreation Area
- The following are all things that give Rochester a sense of place:
  - Rochester School District and the school district’s reader board
  - Independence Valley Chicken Races
  - Swede Day and Swede Hall
  - The abundance of meat

- Visual cues that you've entered Rochester:
  - Briarwood farms sign (not in study area)
  - Fruit stand (but it needs a better store front)
- The IGA (west) and fruit stand (east) both act as gateways to Rochester

### Possibilities

- Types of amenities Rochester needs:
  - Better park with improved upkeep and maintenance
  - More facilities for sports practice (Hoss Field in Grand Mound is great but also expensive)
- Things that could improve Rochester's sense of place and attract more visitors:
  - Having unique, local shops that are homegrown and hometown.
  - Installing public art
  - Allowing four-story apartment complexes (with elevators). Benefits the community by allowing long-time area residents to age in place.
  - Strong and steady farmer's market
- Ways Rochester can develop the desired "street appeal":
  - Establishing covered sidewalks
  - Installing benches along the sidewalks
  - Improving facades
  - Encouraging property owners to voluntarily use a theme (look to the town's historic "western" architecture). Note that this does NOT mean the county should make design standards mandatory – they should be voluntary.
- Improvements in Rochester signage could help give the community a sense of place, act as a "brand," and give visitors a visual stamp that says you're here.
  - Look to the Chehalis Tribe for branding examples and its effect on the community
  - A lot of area businesses are named after the highway. This may be a good branding theme/opportunity.
  - Installing "Welcome to Rochester" signs. Potential locations include intersection of US 12 & 183<sup>rd</sup>, in front of the pole yard, or in front of Bailey's IGA.
  - Wayfinding signage for community attractions (such as Swede Hall) can help bring people to area businesses.
  - The community likes having flags out along the street during Swede Day festivities.
- Rochester is losing its Swedish identity, but there's a lot of growth in Rochester's Hispanic community.
- Rochester should take advantage of views of Mt. Rainier.
- Rochester needs to better define its business core to build a sense of place.
- Rochester could be:
  - A hub for outdoor activities – biking, rafting, hiking, and even farming
  - A "bike friendly community." Rochester would need bike stands, repair shops, and bike paths
  - Like the Hawthorne district in Portland
- Street lighting encourages residents and businesses to take care of their street front.
- Land next to Swede Hall can't be developed for residential uses. Owner has offered to sell land to Swede Hall for outdoor events.
- To improve safety and reduce crime in the area, Rochester could establish a volunteer patrol. Area businesses could provide more eyes on the street.

## Economic Vitality

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### Concerns

- There's a lack of tourism – people blow through town without stopping.
- Mason Dixon Restaurant isn't inviting. Is it open? Is it closed?
- Fruit stand can't expand due to permitting requirements. Can the community come together to fix it up?
- Developing a safe commercial center should be easy, but development isn't encouraged in Rochester. There are too many barriers, and even development grants cost too much money. Examples of barriers to development include the following:
  - Processes in place for protecting the Mazama pocket gopher make it difficult to even obtain a septic permit.
  - Having to be on a septic system is a deterrent to new businesses/new construction in Rochester and makes it difficult for existing businesses to have full-service hours.
  - Businesses can't operate without permit, but it can be very difficult to obtain one. This is a big barrier to opening a new business in Rochester.
  - Permitting costs are too high.
- Rochester doesn't have enough parking in its downtown core. Developing a public parking lot could alleviate this but everything in the commercial core is built out and there's no place to put one.
- Living in Rochester is a challenge for people with disabilities/medical needs. There is only one medical provider in town and no pharmacy. This means people must travel outside the community for appointments and to pick up prescriptions.
- Rochester residents pay taxes for wastewater services, but the community doesn't see a return on this investment.
- It's not appropriate to zone everything residential. Rochester needs to maintain a commercial core.
- Traffic negatively impacts the economic vitality of the area.
- The County needs to make it easier to move through regulatory process. This is one of the reasons people don't want to buy in Thurston County.
- Sidewalks are needed throughout the commercial core.
- Rochester's commercial area isn't compact enough – it's too linear.
- Blight is a problem in Rochester. Everything's run down.
- People leave Rochester to shop in Chehalis. Bailey's IGA is expensive. It does take less time than driving to Chehalis, but people typically make lists of things they need when they go to "town."
- There are already six restaurants at the Lucky Eagle Casino. Would evening dining be successful in Rochester?
- Transportation is what makes economic development in Rochester difficult. Traffic is too fast and there is no parking.
- We need to get ahead of retail/economic trends. Before we can do that, we have to fix the look of the community.
- Lands zoned commercial are limited, and there's no place to expand area businesses.

### Strengths

- Thurston County Sheriff's Office has a limited ability to respond to calls in the Rochester area. The community's residents and businesses really appreciate Tribal police responding to calls. Even though they may not have jurisdiction, by responding to calls they help keep the community safe and protect everyone's economic interests.

- Draws for visitors:
  - Casino
  - Restaurants/great wolf lodge
  - School district
  - Bailey's IGA
  - Weyerhauser
- Rochester has lots of people capital
  - public/private partnerships.
  - Will it diminish over time?
  - Need low maintenance, very low time commitments to engage people long-term.
- Rochester has a lot of home-based businesses.

### **Possibilities**

- The County should explore establishing a STEP (septic) system for businesses along the study corridor. This will encourage development of a thriving commercial center.
- It would be nice to have more agricultural businesses in the community. If the fruit stand at the east side of town hosted a farmers' market, it could be a draw for the community.
- More businesses should be established along US 12.
- Rochester needs a place for businesses to start and grow, and we're not just talking home-based businesses.
- A cute main street that makes people want to stop. If Rochester gives them a reason to stop, MAYBE they will explore:
  - Places to eat (ice cream and coffee shops are a way to introduce people to the area without a big \$ commitment)
  - Places to shop
  - Places to spend time
- Types of businesses Rochester needs:
  - Mom and pop shops
  - Papa Murphy's
  - food and drink establishments
  - Bed and breakfasts
  - Hotel
- The Mennonite church has a bakery and snack shack on Forstrom Road – could be an amenity if it had store front in Rochester. They would gain support from visitors and already have support from locals.
- Tap Tribal businesses – small construction offices and other businesses that cause people to come and do business.
- Johnny's auction (east of study area) could be an opportunity for economic growth.
- We need to identify what the most lucrative business for a pass-through community like Rochester is.
- Rochester needs an information kiosk and places for walking.
- The south side of US 12 is the best location for businesses in Rochester. Rochester needs pedestrian-friendly storefronts with good crossings so that people can safely walk from neighborhoods on the north side of the highway.

### **Other Comments**

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- Rural character and community are both important.

- In an ideal world, it would be nice to move the pole yard to another location in the area. This isn't because the community doesn't want them here in Rochester – Rochester just needs more space for commercial development.
- For agriculture operations, the County should increase the building permit exemption threshold – 200 square feet is too small.
- Allow windmills without a permit – they could become iconic and add to a sense of place.
- Look to the Chehalis Tribe as an example when it comes to planning.
- We need more trades training.
- Rochester and the surrounding lands have a unique geology, drainage, and aquifer.