

FEATURE STORY
MAY/JUNE 2017

Marysville Mayor
Jon Nehring and Parks
Director Jim Ballew on
the stage of the historic
Marysville Opera House



Culture Club

WASHINGTON
CITIES INSPIRE CIVIC
ENGAGEMENT BY
RESUSCITATING,
REINFORCING,
AND IN SOME
CASES REDEFINING
COMMUNITY IDENTITY.

BY TED KATAUSKAS

In 2015,

on the eve of its quasiquintennial anniversary, Marysville was a city on the rise. With a population of 66,773 and an annual growth rate of 2.5 percent, Marysville had distinguished itself as the fastest-growing city in the state, a phenomenon fueled largely by tech workers priced out of the stratospheric Seattle real estate market, where the \$620,000 median price of a single-family home was nearly double that of an equivalent home in Marysville.



“When I started on city council in 2002, we were 27,000, and today we’re almost 67,000,” says Mayor John Nehring, who notes that over the past two years the city’s median income also has grown—by \$14,000 to \$64,328, eclipsing Everett’s just across the Snohomish River. “There’s been a huge influx of families with good-paying jobs down south who can’t afford to live there.”

Along with affordability, Marysville offered Seattle refugees freshly minted subdivisions and commercial strips, a new high school, and a plethora of outdoor recreation opportunities including a new summer spray park, a skate park, nature trails, playgrounds, ballfields, and a disc golf course. But in terms of developing signature civic amenities like the Emerald City’s Pike Place Market, Olympic Sculpture Park, and dynamically evolving waterfront, Marysville lagged far behind. A decade earlier, the city had dedicated Ebey Waterfront Park, a six-acre urban oasis with a marina, a boat ramp, and a picnic pavilion that been resurrected

“This waterfront is really an opportunity to create a gateway identity for Marysville that’s not defined only by the freeway signs,” councilmember Michael Stevens told a reporter from the North County Outlook community newspaper, adding: “No one can really point to the heart of Marysville, because the city had never really established one.”

In April of that year, citizen feedback affirmed strong support for a revitalization plan that would connect the city center with its waterfront, with respondents ranking access to public recreation opportunities on Ebey Slough as the most critical element of any such proposal. Two years later, the city was poised to break ground on the \$1 million first phase of the Ebey Waterfront Trail, a paved path from Ebey Park to the Qwuloolt Estuary, the potential endpoint—or starting point—of the Sky to Sound Water Trail, a planned 84-mile kayaking route that promised to put Marysville on the map as an ecotourism destination.



from the ruins of a shuttered lumber mill on the Snohomish River delta’s Ebey Slough. But the renaissance hadn’t spread north to the city’s stagnating central business district, isolated from the city’s newest park by Marysville Town Center, a suburban-style shopping mall featuring two square blocks of asphalt and forbidding concrete walls.

As a potential remedy, in 2009 Marysville’s council had adopted a downtown master plan that included a Seattle urban planning firm’s recommendation to redevelop the mall as a mixed-use pedestrian-oriented urban village with a daylighted creek, pocket parks, and other amenities like Dutch-style woonerfs, boulevards where pedestrians and cyclists have priority over cars. But a sluggish economy and lack of interest from the mall’s Los Angeles-based corporate parent shelved that proposal. So Marysville drafted an alternate revitalization plan that sidestepped the mall, unveiled at a council meeting in January 2013: a linear park of wetland trails and elevated boardwalks along miles of publicly owned waterfront property, stretching from Ebey Park to a tribal estuary under restoration.

Still, a yawning gap remained: what would tie the waterfront project to downtown? Enter Court Williams, owner of the Marysville Opera House, a historic landmark on the southern threshold of the business district just two blocks from Ebey Park that his wife had been running as a special events space for weddings and private parties. The Williamses wanted out of the wedding business; the city needed a catalyst. Thus began a unique public-private partnership.

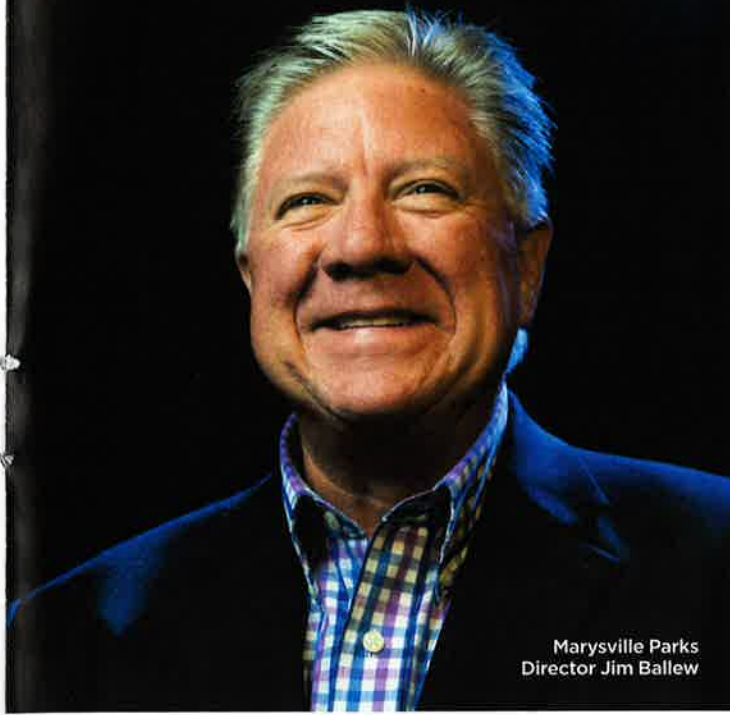
“One of the thoughts we had when we decided to lease out the opera house and work with the current owners was to activate an area of our downtown as a key entry point to the city,” explains Marysville Chief Administrative Officer Gloria Hirashima. “We thought one way to invest in that was for the city to start providing arts and culture for the community.”

The only city property on the National Register of Historic Places, the Marysville Opera House was dedicated by the Independent Order of the Odd Fellows in 1911 as a replacement for a predecessor that had burned to the ground. One of the first buildings in the county constructed with poured concrete—with walls 18 inches thick—it was engineered to withstand another conflagration, as well as the ravages of time. Over the decades, the opera house stage attracted a variety of vaudeville acts, silent movies, and crooners (including a young Bing Crosby); it variously served as a meeting hall, a roller rink, a shooting gallery, and a teen dance hall.

“It’s a special building,” adds Hirashima. “So many communities have many, many buildings on the historic register. When you have only one, it’s important to cherish what you have. When you walk into the opera house, you really feel like you’re transported back in time. It has a sense of time, a sense of place, and we are trying to pay tribute to that history.”

When developers Court and Ken Williams acquired the Marysville Opera House in February 1998, however, the building had sat vacant for nearly a decade and was on the verge of being razed.

“It was a beautiful building, but it had a million problems,” Court



Marysville Parks
Director Jim Ballew

“ WE LANDED A PHOENIX. WE TOOK THIS OLD BUILDING AND TURNED IT INTO SOMETHING FORWARD-FOCUSED.

—JIM BALLEW, MARYSVILLE PARKS DIRECTOR

Williams recounts. “Even though the walls were pink and the window frames were light blue and the windows were boarded up and the basement was flooded, my dad, who had developed more than 700 homes in Marysville, could see the end result.”

After tens of thousands of dollars of materials and labor, the Williamses reopened the opera house as a special events space, where Court’s wife, Sherri, had hosted 600 weddings over the years, all the while searching to find some economically viable way to return the property to its original use as a public performing arts venue.

“This is what Dad and I wanted from the beginning, but we were stuck because weddings paid the bills,” says Williams. “Now the idea is to create a part of the city that is user-friendly. I had gone to several senior city administrators to discuss the idea of a rental over the years, but they got more interested in it after they put together a long-term plan for the park by the river.”

To Williams, who had worked as a certified public accountant

SOUL REPAIR Q&A ALECE MONTEZ GRIEGO

Alece Montez Griego, director of programs at the Orton Family Foundation, talks about how her organization helps America’s small and rural cities stimulate economic development by strengthening local social fabric.



What is the Orton Family Foundation?

We’re an operating foundation that works with small and rural communities, typically towns of fewer than 10,000 people. We like to say that we make hope happen by helping communities re-engage and build relationships so they can thrive socially, culturally, and economically.

What’s the usual situation when a town or city calls you for help?

They lack connection to each other. Towns and cities typically focus on things that towns and cities care about: safety, education, leadership, local economies. But typically things that don’t get a lot of attention are the social offerings, how open and welcome your community might be, your community’s civic involvement or social capital.

What’s your definition of social capital?

It’s the networks between disparate groups, between groups that don’t often interact with each other. A lot of times we talk about where divides may be, but you’re not just working to

build bridges across those divides; you’re actually working to close the divides and bring people together.

How does that factor into economic development?

Not long ago, the Knight Foundation did a three-year study called “Soul of the Community” and found that cities with the highest levels of attachment—the emotional connection between residents and their communities—had the highest rate of GDP growth. Typically when we don’t have a lot of money, social programs that create those connections are the things we cut first, and that actually undercuts the overall GDP of the community.

How does Orton help local governments establish and strengthen those social connections?

Primarily through a program we call Community Heart & Soul. It started with wanting to give more people a way to have a say in land use decisions, but what we realized was that that’s really a downstream outcome. In order to effect change, you need to get further

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before going into business with his father, the idea of entering into a public-private partnership with the city, though unconventional, was a no-brainer.

"My argument to the city was that if you just break even on it financially, the nonpecuniary benefit would be tremendous," he explains. "You have a community that uses it, and so long as people get a lot out of it, as long as the city recoups enough revenue to pay its bills, you have this tremendous public benefit. It brings people together, and beyond that it provides an experience you can't get anywhere else."

That calculus made perfect sense to Jim Ballew, director of Marysville's Parks, Culture and Recreation Department.

"We're believers in arts in the community: what can we do for our families and for growth," he says. "A lot of this is about branding our community. We decided to brand ourselves: we changed our name from Parks & Rec to Parks, *Culture & Rec*."

The timing also was right: what better way to debut the cornerstone of a new long-term economic development plan than with a grand reopening on the city's 125th anniversary? Once the lease was signed—three years, at \$5,000 a month—in late 2015, the city had just four months until its March 20 sesquicentennial celebration, committing \$30,000 (with the Williamses pitching in another \$80,000) and city employee labor to make improvements that included new restrooms, catering kitchens, a green room, plush carpeting, comfortable chairs for 245, professional LED lighting, a movie screen, a sound system, and curtains for the stage.

At Ebey Park on March 19, the city hosted a full day of 1891-style activities, from pie eating contests and quilting competitions to horseback rides and a lumberjack show. Then on the afternoon of March 20, 2016, a crowd of more than 100 filled the Marysville Opera House for the Mayor's Gala, which opened with a skit starring a high school actor in period costume playing the role James Comerford, the town's founder and first mayor.

"That weekend was our coming-out party," says current Mayor Nehring. "The whole 125th anniversary celebration was a neat way to get people reacquainted with their waterfront and the opera house, and with our roots and our history."

Ballew puts it a bit more poetically.

"We landed a phoenix," he says. "We took this old building and turned it into something that from that point on was forward-focused."

At around

the same time, Waitsburg, a Walla Walla County community of 1,300 in the

foothills of the Blue Mountains, celebrated its sesquicentennial (in 2015) with its own downtown revitalization that had been more than a decade in the making. In 2007, after six years of debate and public input and with grants totaling \$533,000 from the state transportation department and the Port of Walla Walla, the city put out to bid an ambitious curb-to-curb reconstruction of its historic Main Street.

Along with structural improvements that included angled parking and ADA-compliant curb ramps, the plan, developed with community input, called for cosmetic enhancements like replacing conventional streetlights with historically appropriate decorative lamps, along with street trees, pavers, flower planters, hanging baskets, a welcome sign, and the *pièces de résistance*: two bronze statues, one dedicated to the founder of the city's library, another to Waitsburg's three founding fathers. After the lone bid was deemed too high, the project was tabled. By the time construction commenced the following June and neared completion three months later, even after the city had anted in \$50,000, escalating costs of concrete and steel had forced it to eliminate the flower baskets and public art; street trees were salvaged only after a citizen came forward with a \$10,000 donation. Over the years, the city added flower baskets and planters, but with no experience with public art, it failed to find funding for the missing pieces of its streetscape.

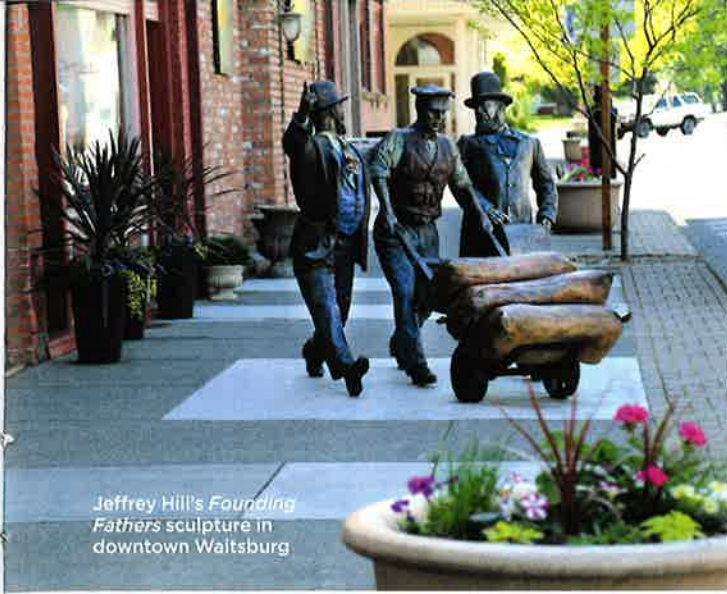
In 2014, with feedback from Sherwood Trust, a Walla Walla nonprofit public art funder that had denied the city's 2013 application for \$50,000, Waitsburg hired a public art consultant to oversee the entire project, appointed a public arts commission to jury the selection process, and targeted its grant application to the city's upcoming 150th anniversary in 2015, asking for triple its original request. This time, the trust approved the grant, earmarking \$125,000 for two statues coupled with a \$30,000 contribution from the city.

"From our perspective, we've seen the vitality that comes from creative place-making," explains Sherwood Trust CEO Danielle Garbe. "Arts and history and culture all contribute to a diverse local economy. Having vibrant downtown spaces is particularly important in small towns."

Waitsburg couldn't have agreed more: the award electrified the city. The selection process was chronicled breathlessly in the local paper, and council meetings discussing the project attracted crowds. In August, the public was delighted when the city announced that the library commission had been awarded to Walla Walla sculptor Wayne Chabre, who planned to cast a life-size rendition of library founder Fanny Weller seated across a table from a little boy: Edward Bruce, the infant son of Waitsburg pioneers who drowned as a toddler in a local creek and was the first resident of



The restored interior of the Marysville Opera House



Jeffrey Hill's *Founding Fathers* sculpture in downtown Waitsburg

the city's cemetery. Inlaid in the tabletop would be a unique board game (with a spinning dial, plus game pieces that can be checked out from the library) referencing local landmarks and historic events, with two empty chairs at the table reserved for anyone wishing to play—or just sit and watch the world go by.

The commission, however, created a bit of a kerfuffle with its other decision. Bucking clear public preference, it announced it had selected Walla Walla sculptor Squire Broel's *Waitsburg Monument*, a 10-foot-tall obelisk modeled after the Washington Monument with three sides depicting geographical landmarks below busts of the city's founding fathers and a fourth honoring present-day citizens, over Walla Walla sculptor Jeffrey Hill's *Founding Fathers*, a whimsical but realistic depiction of the city's gregarious patriarchs marching down the sidewalk pushing a hand truck laden with bags of wheat.

During the public comment period, after a local professional artist who had served on the commission defended Broel's work as "the most elegant and eloquent" of the two choices, the former chair of the Waitsburg Revitalization Committee reminded the council that over three community input sessions during the streetscape planning process, citizens had made one thing clear: "They wanted some kind of sculpture of the founding fathers that would be life size and interactive—something that would allow people to mingle with the sculpture." In the end, after the council approved the commission's selection, City Administrator and Clerk-treasurer Randy Hinchliffe oversaw a fundraising campaign that eventually raised another \$73,400 to fund Hill's *Founding Fathers*, a third Main Street sculpture deemed "the people's choice."

"It brought the community together," Hinchliffe says.

And that it did. As the sesquicentennial approached, the city managed to land a fourth piece of public art when a local fertilizer company restored a water turbine that had been recovered from the ashes of a fire that had claimed Waitsburg's historic grist mill in 2009. It was installed at a new Waits Mill public park.

In a public outreach campaign, Kate Hockersmith, a local musician who had served on the arts commission and coaches a bluegrass band for local teens, invited Chabre and Broel to talk about their work at the city's public schools. And the public came

upstream, where you get people caring about one another. It breaks out into four phases—all done by the community, not by us.

What's phase one?

It's very much about building your team. You're looking at census information, really trying to figure out who exists in your community and who isn't represented. If you put an announcement in the newspaper or in a water bill flyer, you're going to get the same people over and over. Who don't you reach? The elderly, the economically disenfranchised, ethnic minorities, and youth in particular.

So phase two becomes outreach to those who typically don't have a voice in the community.

This is where the rubber hits the road, where you're making those connections. We have a big emphasis on storytelling, to gather input and engage people on a very personal level. Sometimes that's through art. In Galesburg, Ill., their team asked fifth graders at a local elementary school to draw murals that depicted the places that mattered most to them in their community. One little girl drew a Target store. And they asked her, "What about this matters to you? Do you like to shop?" But that wasn't it at all. Her mom worked there, so for her, Target was this essential place in the community.

What do you do with that information?

The culmination of phase two is when the town identifies and articulates their common cause. They have usually five or six state-

ments that say, "These are the things that we care about and will work collectively toward in the future."

That leads to phase three; what happens then?

It's about identifying the actions that the community needs to take and making decisions. Now you have the community saying, "This is what we think we want." ... They are making these decisions with you, so that when the time comes to make a decision, you don't have the community coming out in droves because they don't agree.

And phase four?

It's taking action. It's where they get out there and start implementing. What we find over and over again is that you have people coming out of the woodwork because they can see their fingerprints on what's happening. There's a different sense of ownership. Groups are willing to reach out to people they've never met.

What would you say to those who might see this work as frivolous and argue that local government should be run like a business?

I think we've gotten really poor at running many of our businesses in America; we don't reinvest in them. I think we need to treat our communities like a big extended family. If we're going to stay strong and balance those attributes of social capital, we have to engage, we have to have fun times together, we have to celebrate, so that when we have those hard times we can actually work together and across those divides.



Allison Bond (Arts Commission member), Randy Hinchliffe (City Administrator and Clerk-treasurer), and Kate Hockersmith (Arts Commission and city councilmember) gathered around the Waitsburg Monument

“ THE PUBLIC ART HAS HELPED BRING AROUND THE IDEA THAT EVERYBODY IS VERY PROUD OF THEIR TOWN.

—KATE HOCKERSMITH, WAITSBURG CITY COUNCILMEMBER

bronze flour sacks and take selfies with Hill’s founding fathers. “Our metal people weren’t cold all winter,” marvels Kate Hockersmith, who in April was elected to a second term on Waitsburg’s city council. “They all had scarves and hats. Somebody came down and put a muffler on Fanny Weller and a hat on the little boy. It was kind of darling, seeing people take care of them.”

And each other, and their city. “This town is a little old fashioned, and it doesn’t change very fast—even though some people would like it to,” Hockersmith adds. “The public art has helped bring around the idea that everybody is very proud of their town and kind of likes it the way it is. We have people saying we need to grow, but when you look at the records, Waitsburg has been 1,200 people since World War II. Maybe we don’t need to change that fast.”

to support Broel’s obelisk after he unveiled his concept for the fourth panel: thumbprints of Waitsburg’s citizens. At the artist’s invitation, more than 600 Waitsburg residents, from a six-week-old infant to teenagers to seniors in their 90s, filed into an elementary school cafeteria over two nights to press their thumbs into malleable clay that would be bronzed.

“The idea was that while founding fathers might be the most recognized people in this community, we understand that it takes everybody to make it grow,” Broel explains. “I wanted to create something that even a child growing up in Waitsburg who didn’t look like the founding fathers could interact with and think about what it means to be a part of a community.”

On May 16, 2015, at the culmination of Waitsburg Days, a weekend of antique auto shows, pancake breakfasts, beer and bluegrass, and ATV races and other events, the city paused for a moment of reflection as the statues were unveiled on Main Street. Lt. Gov. Brad Owens addressed a crowd that had gathered for the public art dedication.

“These things that add beauty to our lives don’t just happen,” he said. “They come from hours and hours of hard work, so we need to say a big thank-you to the artists for making our community and our world a better and more beautiful place.”

Nearly two years later, the energy of that weekend persists all along Waitsburg’s Main Street, with children and adults stopping to press their thumbs into the obelisk or spinning the dial at the library game table, and with visitors parking their cars to pose on

That’s a sentiment

that resonates as far away geographically and demographically as fast-growing Marysville, where this past April 22 a crowd gathered on the city’s waterfront and applauded as their mayor cut the ribbon on the first 1.8 miles of the Ebey Waterfront Trail, declaring, “Today we’re celebrating the real return of public access to our waterfront!”

“And public access to Marysville’s historic opera house, which has stood the test of time. In the first year of the new public-private partnership, the OH, as the landmark is now known to locals, hosted 94 events, from a *Phantom of the Opera*-themed high school prom and senior citizen socials to family-friendly screenings of classic movies and midweek happy hours at which city employees mingle with locals and tourists. With 170 events planned for 2017, including a Seattle Opera debut this past March, Marysville is doing more than just breaking even on its investment.

“The payoff is: we’ve accepted the challenge to repurpose our downtown into a thriving entertainment and arts district that’s adjacent to a new waterfront that’s creating a new identity and an opportunity for residents and also our visitors,” concludes Ballew, Marysville’s Parks, Culture and Recreation director, the city’s ambition shining through in his syntax. “It’s on the horizon, so close that we can see it.” 🌟