

Crucial choices have to be made regarding Edmonds' future

By Bob McChesney, Executive Director, the Port of Edmonds

At a recent Port Commission meeting the executive director of the Snohomish County Economic Development Council, Deborah Knudson, presented a report on economic development in Snohomish County.

In the past, her periodic reports have highlighted the entire county's business climate. This time was different. She focused primarily on the greater Edmonds/Woodway community and offered the latest demographic, business development and tax base information. The economic realities were not always pleasant to hear.

In summary, she suggested that the Edmonds community needs to engage these realities and come up with a workable vision that is practical from a development perspective, without changing the essential character of the city.

It is an exercise in simple arithmetic, but one that is shrouded by complex economic realities and competing visions. Municipalities and other public agencies in Snohomish County pay their bills from revenue collected, and that comes from property taxes and sales taxes (and other business-generated taxes).

The report made it clear that—compared to other communities in Snohomish County—Edmonds has great upside potential for expanding its tax base, but it needs a plan; it needs development; and it needs to execute.

There is a Catch 22 here. As Knudson noted, Edmonds is not on any company's or major developer's radar screen as a place to start or relocate a business. One reason, commercial realtors tell her, is that Edmonds doesn't have the retail businesses and other support services that employers seek for their employees.

As one commercial realtor stated, Edmonds needs to create a reason for businesses to come here. The operative word is *create*. *Create* a reason for businesses to want to come to Edmonds.

Knutson also pointed out some realities about Edmonds' population. Right now 26% of the population is over 60 and in just four more years that will jump to 30.4%. Nearly a third of Edmonds population will be at or near retirement age.

The obvious conclusion is that there will be tax consequences for doing nothing. Unless broad-based community support for some type of meaningful economic development can be developed soon, those consequences will no doubt become reality.

The first step is public involvement. The Port is scheduling a series of public input sessions, specifically on the future use of Harbor Square. This is perhaps the most viable parcel for the kind of development that can help avoid an over-dependence on property taxes.

Ms. Knudson's point was abundantly clear, it is time to bring the public to the table, to reframe the discussion about economic development, and—if not consensus, at least a broad agreement—on how to move forward.

It seems that everyone has the same goal of keeping Edmonds a strong, beautiful, livable and viable community, but there are many different ideas about how to get there. Watch this column for news of the first Harbor Square public meeting. And prepare to come and participate. Our future is up to you.