



Lodging Tax Advisory Committee
2025 Funding Allocation Meeting
March 17, 2025
Draft Minutes

COMMITTEE MEMBERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Satpal Sidhu, County Executive (Chair)
(TR) Tera Lorimer, *Luxury Getaways via Zoom (TC¹)*

Drew Schmidt, *San Juan Cruises (TR)*
Dylan Deane-Boyle, *BWC Tourism (TR)*
Guy Occhiogrosso, *Whatcom Chamber (TR)²*

STAFF PRESENT:

Tawni Helms, *WC Administration*
Jake Logan, *WC Administration*

APPLICANTS PRESENT

Events and Community Organizations:

- Seafeast (Kevin Coleman, Tatiana Stone)
- Race Week (Schelleen Rathkopf)

Welcome and Call to Order:

The meeting was called to order with a quorum established.

2025 Budget Review:

The committee reviewed the 2025 budget and compared it to the 2024 budget. The committee expressed concerns about potential decreases in lodging occupancy and its effect on budgeting and collections, emphasizing the importance of fiscal responsibility with funds.

Discussion on Canadian Visitor Concerns:

Dylan Deane-Boyle raised concerns about declining Canadian visitors and when lodging tax projections for 2026 might be available.

Executive Sidhu acknowledged the seriousness of the issue, noting:

- The situation is particularly severe for Point Roberts, characterized to him as "worse than COVID"
- Uncertainty and fear around border crossings
- "Boycott America" sentiment among Canadians
- Planned meetings with local leaders to address these concerns

¹ TC – Tax Collector

² TR – Tax Recipient

- A full picture of impacts would take approximately 6 months

Tera Lorimer noted the Vancouver Sun is running ads discouraging border crossings and shared that she is offering specials to Canadians to counter these concerns. She also mentioned reduced visitor numbers at Mount Baker due to Canadian clients' fear of crossing the border.

Executive Sidhu mentioned his interview with CBC about cross-border relations and emphasized that border counties feel these impacts differently, more harshly than places like Seattle or Washington DC. The committee discussed the potential long-term effects on revenue and tourism, particularly in Point Roberts and at the Bellingham airport.

Confirmation of November 4, 2024 Minutes:

Dylan Deane-Boyle motioned to approve the minutes, MegAnne Offredi seconded. Motion carried unanimously.

Funding Deliberations - SeaFeast Application:

Tawni Helms apologized that this application was inadvertently left out of the previous meeting.

Dylan Deane-Boyle praised the festival and the year-round work of Kevin Coleman and Tatiana Stone, noting they have strong data on lodging occupancy. He invited other committee members to share their thoughts.

MegAnne Offredi asked about their county-wide impact beyond Bellingham.

The SeaFeast team emphasized their year-round activities and efforts to support the local community while promoting sustainability. They highlighted the success of their events and potential for further growth and expansion.

Dylan Deane-Boyle confirmed SeaFeast had received funding from Bellingham's LTAC. MegAnne Offredi asked for evidence that these smaller events create a tourism nexus that puts "heads in beds." Tatiana highlighted their unique "Beautiful Bivalve" event, noting they are running ads and growing these distinctive events that aren't commonly found elsewhere.

Funding Deliberations - Race Week Application:

Schelleen Rathkopf introduced Race Week as a 10-year-old sailing event expanding to Bellingham. She provided the following details:

- The event attracts avid racers primarily from Western Washington, but also from Oregon and Vancouver/Victoria
- Features certified race committee and judges
- Has been established for many years and is well-known in sailing circles
- Previously held in Oak Harbor and Anacortes
- Moving to Bellingham allows the event to grow
- Will occupy all available commercial moorage spots at the port, filling up all of Gate 5

- Date: July 21-25, 2025

MegAnne Offredi asked about past lodging impact.

Schelleen Rathkopf explained:

- In Anacortes, hotels would reach maximum capacity for the full week
- Crews often bring families who plan vacations around the event
- The event maximizes hotel stays for a week, not just a weekend
- Expected significant impact on local lodging, with hotels and restaurants fully booked
- They are bringing back a kid's camp in partnership with Bellingham Yacht Club, teaching water safety, boat techniques, and knot tying

MegAnne Offredi asked if they had applied for Bellingham LTAC funding; Schelleen Rathkopf indicated they had not, citing application deadline constraints.

Kevin Coleman expressed support for Race Week, with Schelleen Rathkopf noting Kevin's help connecting them with the local maritime community.

Committee Discussion on Applications:

Tera Lorimer expressed skepticism that Race Week would benefit county-wide lodging, particularly East County rentals, though she acknowledged waterfront hotels would likely fill.

Dylan Deane-Boyle appreciated the week-long nature of the event and data showing many/most participants come from 40+ miles away. He supported the event, emphasizing its potential to increase occupancy during peak season, but acknowledged challenges in providing quantifiable data on the impact of lodging in the county versus Bellingham. He noted events rank lower on the committee's priority list and suggested Bellingham LTAC as a more appropriate funding source.

Executive Sidhu offered a long-term perspective:

- The event puts Bellingham and Whatcom County on the map for the sailing community
- Visitors may explore the wider county (including Mt. Baker) and return later

- Suggested helping the event establish in the area without committing to permanent funding
- Noted potential for generating more attention for Whatcom County from the boating community
- Emphasized the event could attract large numbers of families, increasing visibility and potential tourism

Dylan Deane-Boyle raised concerns about setting a precedent for accepting applications outside the grant cycle.

Tawni Helms clarified:

- Historically they've maintained a contingency fund for exceptions
- This differs from Bellingham LTAC's approach
- Both applications (SeaFeast and Race Week) represent legitimate exceptions
- Currently, the committee has more budget authority than contracts
- Such exceptions have been made in the past

Guy Occhiogrosso discussed funding priorities and consistency in application evaluations. He emphasized the need to consider the original intentions of the funds and the parameters of the events they had previously approved, suggesting that changing rules now would require reopening consideration for all applicants.

Dylan Deane-Boyle suggested reviewing previously funded items and the logic behind decisions, referencing events like Bellingham Bells, Ribs and Roof Barbecue Competition, Polar Plunge, Cascade Mountain Ascents, North Cascades Bluegrass Festival, Scottish Dance Society, Strings and Things in Point Roberts, Whatcom Events, Wings Over Water, and Sustainable Connections.

Guy expressed concern that funding these applications would be unfair to previously denied applicants like Allied Arts and Northwest Tune-Up, which were deemed too Bellingham-centric.

Kevin (SeaFeast) indicated they would face significant difficulties without funding, emphasizing the economic impact of the current situation. MegAnne Offredi referenced her previous suggestion for partial funding for SeaFeast to allow the project to gather data and demonstrate its impact on the county.

Motions and Funding Decisions:

Guy proposed funding both applications at \$10,000 each, comparing this to other events in municipalities.

Schelleen Rathkopf noted Race Week previously received \$25,000 from Anacortes LTAC, emphasizing they're a new event and have proven success.

Tawni Helms mentioned the committee had funded Cascade Mountain Ascents for similar activities. Executive Sidhu suggested that he could send a letter of recommendation to Bellingham LTAC regarding Race Week.

A friendly amendment was suggested by Executive Sidhu and accepted by Guy Occhiogrosso, it increased the funding amount to \$15,000 each.

Final Decision:

- SeaFeast: \$15,000
- Race Week: \$15,000

Executive Sidhu indicated the committee should communicate with Bellingham LTAC about these decisions. The committee approved the funding with the understanding that Race Week should seek additional funding from Bellingham in the future. The committee also discussed the importance of collaboration between different funding bodies to maximize community benefits.

The meeting was adjourned.

Respectfully Submitted,

Jake Logan

Whatcom County Executive's Office
(360) 778-5211

CONVENTION CENTER - HOTEL/MOTEL TAX FUNDS - 2025

Requesting Agency	2025 Requests	Committee Approved
2025 Budget	\$1,109,000.00	\$1,109,000.00
Chamber VIC or Tourism Bureau		
Bellingham Regional Chamber of Commerce	\$30,000	\$30,000
Bellingham/Whatcom Co. Tourism - operations	\$250,000	\$250,000
Birch Bay Chamber of Commerce - VIC + temp restrooms	\$230,000	\$230,000
Mt. Baker Foothills Chamber/Visitor Center	\$226,000	\$226,000
Point Roberts Chamber of Commerce	\$26,000	\$26,000
Chambers & Tourism SUBTOTAL	\$762,000	\$762,000
Whatcom County Parks Glacier Restrooms cc: 14131	\$34,500	\$34,500
Whatcom County Parks Guide cc: 14131	\$6,500	\$6,500
Allied Arts	\$17,000	\$8,200
Bellingham Bells (New)	\$35,000	\$0
BIAWC - Ribs & Roofs BBQ Competition (New)	\$20,000	\$10,000
BB Polar Plunge 2026	\$25,000	\$25,000
Birch Bay Waterslides (New)	\$90,000	\$0
Cascade Mtn Ascents (New)	\$44,957	\$7,500
Cascadia Film Festival	\$12,000	\$0
Jansen Art Center	\$32,275	\$15,000
NW Tune UP	\$50,000	\$0
Race Week	\$15,000	\$15,000
Parks Foundation North Cascades Bluegrass Festival	\$30,000	\$30,000
Scottish Dance Society	\$18,000	\$18,000
Seafeast	\$30,000	15,000
Strings & Things Pt. Roberts Int'l Music Festival (New)	\$30,000	\$30,000
Sustainable Connections	\$45,000	\$45,000

Upfront Theater (New)	\$15,473	\$0
Whatcom Events	\$40,000	\$40,000
Wings Over Water NW Birding Festival (New)	\$10,000	\$10,000

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