

Bellingham Public Library: Bridge Strategic Plan | 2026–2027

Purpose of the Bridge Plan: The Bellingham Public Library (BPL) Bridge Strategic Plan 2026–2027 provides a focused path forward between major planning cycles. Building on the goals of the 2020–2025 Strategic Plan, this two-year plan highlights key priorities that strengthen our facilities, enhance public access, and ensure sustainable funding for the future.

As the Library prepares for a new long-term strategic plan, these priorities reflect both our ongoing commitments and the opportunities ahead — to modernize our spaces, align services with community needs, and secure a stable financial foundation.

This plan also recognizes that Bellingham’s size and the needs of our neighbors experiencing homelessness make it clear that our community requires more than one reliable indoor public space for adults seeking safety and stability during the day. As we navigate the Central Library renovation, BPL will collaborate with City, County, and community partners to support progress toward a long-term day shelter solution, affirming that the Library is welcoming to everyone while advocating for a broader, compassionate community response.

Strategic Priorities

1. Renovate the Central Library (2026–2027)

Goal: Complete the full interior renovation of the Central Library to create a modern, flexible, and welcoming space that reflects the evolving needs of our community.

Background: Following the success of the main floor renovation completed in 2021, the Library is entering its next major phase of renewal. The upcoming Central Library renovation will enhance accessibility, sustainability, and usability — ensuring that Bellingham’s downtown library continues to serve as a vital community hub for decades to come.

Key Milestones:

- Complete design and construction of the Central Library renovation, including updates to the children’s and teens’ areas, public service points, staff workspaces, and building systems.
- Engage the community throughout the renovation process with clear communication about project timelines, impacts, and milestones to maintain trust and transparency.
- Manage service disruption during the Central Library closure by expanding open hours and services at the Barkley, Fairhaven, and Bellis Fair branches, ensuring continued access to core library services throughout construction.
- Reopen a renewed Central Library that supports inclusive programming, collaboration, learning, and connection — a flexible, welcoming space designed for the future of our community.

2. Advocate for a Community Day Shelter (2026)

Goal: Work collaboratively with City and County stakeholders to advance planning and support for a long-term day shelter for people experiencing homelessness.

Background: BPL is open to everyone and remains committed to providing a welcoming space for all. However, Bellingham’s size and the scale of community need make clear that the Library cannot be the only indoor public place consistently available to adults seeking safety, warmth, and stability during the day. The temporary closure of the Central Library for renovation will intensify this need — and offers a critical moment to redirect communitywide attention toward durable, compassionate solutions.

Key Milestones:

- Partner with City and County leaders to support and advance planning for a dedicated day shelter.
- Engage the Library Board of Trustees, Friends of the Library, and community partners to elevate this need with local elected officials in a unified, compassionate voice.
- Ensure the public conversation centers on long-term solutions, not merely managing the temporary service shifts created by the renovation.
- Communicate clearly that while BPL welcomes everyone, the community needs a broader system of daytime support.

3. Update Level of Service Standards for Open Hours (2026)

Goal: Review and update the Library's Level of Service (LOS) standards for open hours to ensure equitable, convenient, and responsive access to all patrons.

Background: Building on the 2020-2025 Strategic Plan commitments to "Welcome & Include" and "Access & Opportunity," the Library will evaluate how its open hours across all locations align with current and future community needs. This work will consider population growth, usage data, and best practices to define consistent, sustainable standards for public access. The updated LOS will establish revised expectations for open hours that balance equity, demand, and operational capacity – ensuring that library services remain accessible and relevant to everyone in Bellingham.

Key Milestones:

- Conduct a comprehensive analysis of current open hours, population estimates, usage data and best practices.
- Develop and communicate a revised LOS framework with low, medium, and high service standards.

4. Develop a Sustainable Funding Model (2026)

Goal: Establish a long-term, dependable funding approach that supports BPL's operations and services.

Background: Building on the 2017 BERK study on Library Services and Funding Models, BPL will refresh its analysis of current and future operational funding needs. This work will explore mechanisms that provide stability while aligning with community expectations, evolving municipal planning efforts, and BPL's level of service standards.

Key Milestones:

- Revisit findings from the 2017 BERK study and conduct an updated assessment of projected operational funding needs.
- Develop a recommended funding framework that positions BPL to make timely, well-supported decisions in coordination with the City.
- Initiate phased next steps, supported by continued evaluation to ensure a sustainable and adaptable funding approach.

Looking Ahead: The Bridge Strategic Plan 2026–2027 positions the Bellingham Public Library to enter its next decade with renewed strength and vision. By modernizing our Central Library, advocating for compassionate community infrastructure, improving access, and securing sustainable funding, we continue our longstanding mission to connect our community with each other and the world.

The work outlined in this plan honors the progress made through the 2020–2025 Strategic Plan and prepares the Library to launch its next strategic planning process in 2028. As One City, together with our community, we will build a library system that is welcoming, resilient, and ready for the future.