



Ferndale team group shot. Courtesy photo.

Local leaders weigh in on AltaGas/ALA Energy project at Cherry Point as new challenges arise



Dann Mead Smith

As Business Pulse mentioned in a cover story at the end of 2024, the future of energy is changing, and thanks to AltaGas/ALA Energy, Whatcom County is at the forefront.

AltaGas/ALA Energy has submitted permit applications for two new environmentally and economically beneficial projects that reduce volatile organic compounds and greenhouse gas emissions at the company's new Ferndale Terminal. These flare and waste gas recycling projects would include permanent positions and create around 700 direct and indirect jobs from the construction of the facility.

However, these projects are now facing a challenge from some members on the Whatcom County Council and environ-

mental groups who want to revisit what already was approved and is moving forward.

Over the past two and a half years, AltaGas has conducted comprehensive environmental analysis as part of the application process, confirming through independent third-party experts that there have been no significant adverse impacts. The county completed a rigorous review of these materials and appropriately issued a mitigated determination of nonsignificance to conclude the State Environmental Policy Act process. These determinations document the decision that a proposal is unlikely to have significant adverse environmental impacts.

ALA Energy has offered voluntary mitigation measures to address community concerns and has demonstrated a commitment to transparency and environmental stewardship, but it is important that these conversations are grounded in facts, science and law.

“Contributing to the strength and eco-

nomic success of Whatcom County is something we take great pride in at AltaGas,” said Chris Prokop, senior vice president of business development at AltaGas. “Our ALA Energy Ferndale Terminal plays a critical role in ensuring safe and reliable energy delivery, both locally and globally, and that success is driven by the dedication of our team at the terminal. We are committed to operating safely and responsibly and believe strongly in the importance of local partnerships and relationships. Stable jobs and a business-friendly environment are foundational for strong communities.”

Several other business and local government leaders shared their thoughts about AltaGas and this project for this column.

“As a long-time Whatcom County business and employer deeply involved in industrial, energy and infrastructure projects across the region, Mills Electric has had the opportunity to work

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closely with a variety of companies operating in the Cherry Point industrial zone — including AltaGas,” said Josh Huntley, vice president and operations manager at Mills Electric. “We’ve seen firsthand both the challenges they’ve faced and the responsible, forward-looking approach they’ve taken to building and operating their facilities. The AltaGas project at Cherry Point represents an important step in sustaining and modernizing the county’s energy and industrial base. Like many companies operating in this sector, they’ve had to navigate a complex permitting and regulatory environment, as well as significant uncertainty in timelines and approvals. For these reasons, we believe it’s critical that the council and executive stand by their original approval and reaffirm Whatcom County’s commitment to support responsible industrial growth. Companies like AltaGas and the countless number of local businesses that contribute to their success depend on a stable, predictable environment in which to invest, innovate and employ our local workforce.”

Lance Calloway, northern district manager at Associated General Contractors of Washington, noted the time taken to get to this point.

“AltaGas’ permit applications at Cherry Point represent a commitment to both environmental stewardship and economic vitality for Whatcom County,” Calloway said. “The Cherry Point Amendments were not hastily written — they were the product of years of collaboration among environmental advocates, industry leaders and local authorities. This agreement was carefully crafted to balance ecological protection with the need for responsible economic growth. Supporting AltaGas’ permits means honoring the process, protecting our environment and ensuring Whatcom

County remains a place where responsible investment is welcomed — not penalized.”

Greg Hansen is the mayor of the nearby city of Ferndale.

“Industry at Cherry Point is a part of the Ferndale community’s DNA,” Mayor Hansen said. “Cherry Point industries, and the businesses that compliment them, have put bread on the table for Ferndale families for decades and are an incredibly important part of our community.”

Lynden mayor Scott Korthuis stated that a growing county needs a stable workforce and new job opportunities.

“We need more industry in Whatcom County,” he said. “The comp plan process shows that we are planning to grow our population. With that growth we need new jobs. AltaGas is one answer to this needed job growth. We all know the county is having financial issues. Any development of this size brings economic benefit to most, if not all, of the county and its cities. Construction will bring extra sales tax. Once the project is completed, there will be additional property tax. Then there are the new jobs, which creates economic activities in the cities where these individuals live. There is a tremendous economic benefit related to a project of this scope.”

Barbara Chase is the executive director of the Whatcom Business Alliance, which publishes Business Pulse magazine.

“At the Whatcom Business Alliance, we believe investment in our community is the single largest driver of prosperity and growth,” Chase said. “We focus our efforts on facilitating that growth through advocacy, research and education and supporting the creation of living wage jobs in this region. The development of the AltaGas \$1 billion regional green hydrogen hub for Whatcom County will directly support local industrial jobs and indirectly support dozens more local contractors. Our community must come out in support of AltaGas as it navigates the burdensome processes that threaten to deter companies from making vital investments in Whatcom County.”

Guy Occhiogrosso, president and CEO of the Bellingham Chamber of Commerce, said this project offers much-needed, good-paying jobs.

“Our business community, or any business community, needs reliability,” he said. “When a cross section of stakeholders came together more recently than our last comprehensive plan to thoughtfully and collaboratively craft a compromise

regarding Cherry Point, this about-face from a few voices creates more distrust in our systems. As we lean into energy diversity, we will not require less energy, we need more, and projects like this help us transition. And as a community, we need more good-paying jobs, and this project offers those too.”

Mayor Korthuis had this to say about revisiting something that has already been discussed, reviewed and approved and what this means for other businesses that might be looking at Whatcom County for expansion or a new location: “Businesses need clarity. Once something is approved, the assumption is the project can move forward. It is disheartening and disappointing to see outside interest come to the table late in the game and throw up roadblocks. This is not a business-friendly move. If we’re not growing, we’re dying.”

Calloway from the AGC also weighed in on this topic: “When businesses know the rules won’t change midstream, they invest confidently — creating jobs and strengthening our economy.”

Huntley of Mills Electric said the reconsideration of this project could have negative consequences for the county down the road.

“It’s also important to note the broader message that county leadership sends to potential employers and investors. When a project like this is revisited or politically reconsidered, it undermines confidence in the permitting process. Future employers evaluating Whatcom County will take notice. Unpredictability in project approvals discourages investment, limits job creation and can drive capital to neighboring regions that demonstrate clearer consistency and partnership with business and labor alike.”

The next step for this project will be that the Whatcom County Hearing Examiner will be hearing the new appeal in the coming weeks as we start 2026. The Whatcom Business Alliance will continue to keep you updated so you can make your thoughts known about why this project needs to continue moving forward.

For additional info on the ALA Energy Ferndale terminal, visit altagas.ca/alaenergy. ■

Dann Mead Smith is the co-founder and co-director of Project 42. He is the former president/CEO of Washington Policy Center and has been writing for Business Pulse for three years. Dann lives part time in Birch Bay and Seattle.