

# Our Stories



Kitsap County Community Assessment

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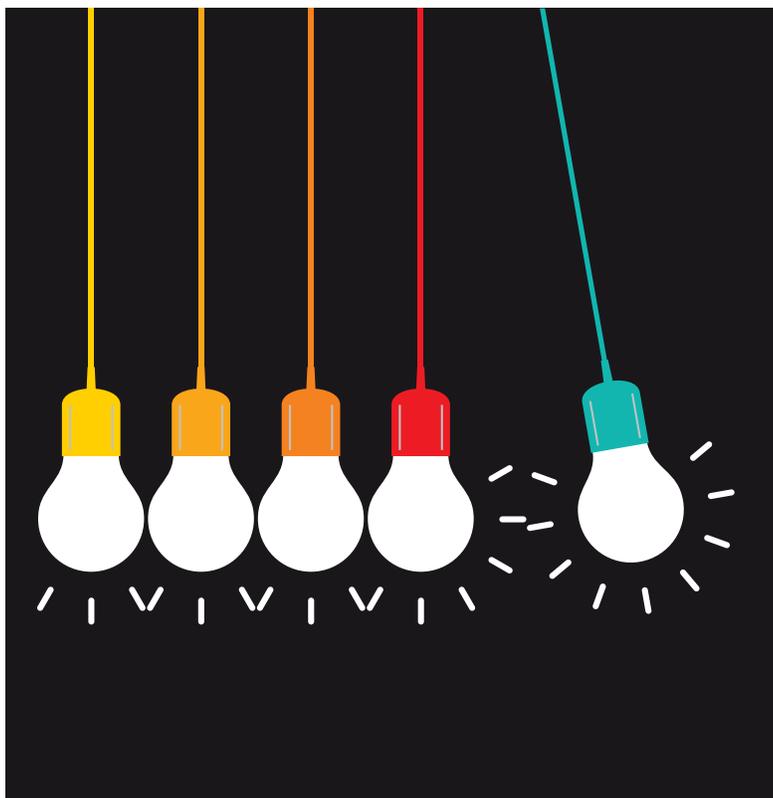
# Our Inspiration

What kind of community do you want to live in? Over the past year, Kitsap Regional Library has asked this question of dozens of groups and individuals around the county. We listened to your aspirations, your challenges, the changes you want to see in your community and who you trust to help make them happen.

If you find yourself wondering why the Library would take this on, the answer is: for you. Our mission is to inspire you to dream more, learn more, do more and be more. When we know what you care about, we'll provide the tools you need - books, classes, databases, one-on-one help from a librarian and more - to bring your own ideas to life.

Whatever your dreams are, the Library is uniquely positioned to help you make them a reality. Want better sidewalks or bus service in your neighborhood? We don't pour concrete or drive Ubers, but you might be surprised at how well a librarian can help you figure out how to make your voice heard in local decisions.

And the best part is we don't keep this knowledge of community aspirations for ourselves. Libraries share information. That's especially true when we have uniquely local



information, like the data analysis of Kitsap communities that kicked off this project, or the compiled results of dozens of conversations with your neighbors about their hopes and dreams. We make sure the impact goes further than the Library doors. That's why we're sharing this report with you.

**Once we know about our community's dreams, what can we do together to help make them a reality?**

# Our Community

To hear what people care about most in Kitsap, we held 65 conversations with groups and individuals around the county. Based on a study of our community's demographics and institutions (full report at [KRL.org/ourstories](https://www.krl.org/ourstories)), we reached out to a variety of organizations and asked to hear more.

Critically, we wanted to make sure we didn't only hear from Library users. So when we held a conversation with an organization, they invited their own members and we met in their spaces. The organizations represented in our conversations, either by groups or individuals, include:

- Bainbridge Arts and Crafts
- Bainbridge Island Community Members
- Bainbridge Island Downtown Association
- Bainbridge Island Metro Parks & Recreation District
- Bainbridge Island Senior Community Center
- Bainbridge Island Teens
- BARN – Bainbridge Artisan Resource Network
- BE\$T – Business Education Support Training
- BKAT – Bremerton Kitsap Access Television
- Boys & Girls Club of North Kitsap
- Bremerton Chamber of Commerce
- Bremerton Citizens Auxiliary Patrol
- Bremerton Community Members
- Bremerton Police Department
- Bremerton Yacht Club
- Central Kitsap Schools
- Christa Shores – A CRISTA Senior Living Center
- Downtown Bremerton Friends of the Library
- Fetu Ta'iala Project Board
- Hansville Helping Hands/Hansville Ladies Aid
- Indianola Beach Improvement Club
- KACE – Kitsap Adult Center for Education
- KCR – Kitsap Community Resources
- Kingston Christian Church Homeschooling Parents
- Kingston Marina Liveboard
- Kitsap County Parks Department
- Kitsap Credit Union
- Kitsap Historical Society and Museum
- Kitsap Pride Network
- Kitsap Regional Library
- Kitsap Transgender Community Group
- KYP – Kitsap Young Professionals
- Little Boston Community Members
- Little Boston Mahjongg Group
- Manchester Friends of the Library
- Manchester Community Members
- Manchester Walking Club
- Manette Business Association
- Manette Neighborhood Coalition
- Military Veterans
- Mountain View Middle School PTA
- Housing Kitsap – Nollwood Apartment Community
- Navy Spouses
- New Day Ministry
- North Kitsap 99%
- Office XPats
- OurGEMS – Our Girls Empowered Through Mentoring and Service
- Pathways to Success, a program of OESD Olympic Educational Service District
- Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe
- Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe Early Childhood Education Center
- Port of Kingston
- Port Orchard Chamber of Commerce
- Port Orchard Community Members
- Port Orchard Government
- Poulsbo Community Members
- Poulsbo Friends of the Library
- Q Center
- Rotary Club of East Bremerton
- Rotary Club of Port Orchard
- Rotary Club of South Kitsap
- Silverdale Community Members
- Suquamish Tribe
- View Ridge Elementary PTA
- Village Green Foundation Board
- Village Green Golf Course
- Village Green Metropolitan Park District

**Note:** The number of bullet points is different from the total number of conversations. In some cases individuals are grouped together by region (i.e., Bremerton Community Members). Other conversations included representatives from multiple groups.

The diversity of viewpoints in this list is a great start! Of course, our work isn't done. We are still identifying gaps and will continue to go out in 2017 and beyond to hear from more voices. Would you like us to talk with you? Please let your Kitsap Regional Library know. Visit [KRL.org/locations](http://KRL.org/locations) for your location.

## Our Data

What do we already know about our community? In early 2016, our librarians analyzed existing County data to establish a firm foundation of knowledge about our community. That way, when we reached out to start conversations, we would already have a sense of what we needed to learn more about and who we needed to hear more from.

We divided the county into eight sections to research:

1. Bainbridge Island
2. Bremerton
3. Kingston
4. Little Boston and farther north
5. Poulsbo and North Kitsap
6. Port Orchard and South Kitsap
7. Silverdale and Central Kitsap
8. An entire County overview

The analysis delved into a wide variety of sources including census data, school district data, city and county comprehensive plans, state and local government documents, and business and nonprofit sources. In brief, here's the picture the data painted for us.

Demographically, Kitsap County is largely racially homogenous, with most areas at least 75 percent white. The Hispanic population is

## Kitsap County Data Regions



smaller than we anticipated (usually around 6-8 percent), but some signs point to a growth trend in this group.

The average age varies significantly throughout the county, though Kitsap is older than the state average. Bremerton is particularly young, while Bainbridge has an older average age. Kingston, Poulsbo and Silverdale, often seen as primarily family areas, had a higher than expected number of seniors. Market segmentation data portrays our sizeable Baby Boomer population as middle to upper middle class, with conservative financial habits and an interest in the environment and community involvement.

At first glance, incomes appear largely middle and upper middle class across the county, but wide disparities lie beneath the averages. South Kitsap especially contains significant income diversity, with extreme poverty and wealth in the same zip codes. There are also pockets of very high or very low incomes throughout the county.

In terms of employment, a few industries dominate most communities: military and defense, healthcare, education and service/retail. Kitsap overall has a surprising gender imbalance in employment; much more of the workforce is female than male.

Geographically, Kitsap has densely, moderately and sparsely populated regions. South Kitsap has the largest regional population overall, followed by Central Kitsap and then the City of Bremerton. The Central Kitsap area around the base is particularly densely populated.

Each community has its own favorite gathering places, but overall churches, service clubs like Rotary and Kiwanis, farmers' markets and restaurants are among the most common spaces to get together. The Kitsap Mall, Bremerton Fairgrounds and Central Market draw people from all around the county.

The geography of each region is similarly unique, influenced by both natural and human factor but, a few common themes affect many of our communities:

- Strong neighborhood identities
- Tension between development and preservation
- Traffic and transportation as a significant issue

Social, educational and recreational opportunities vary around the county. The county itself provides many social services, but these can be difficult to access for those in outlying communities. Even supplemented by local and nonprofit efforts, in many places more services are needed to meet the demand. Recreation is provided mostly at the local level, by parks departments and private organizations. Kitsap has five public school districts for K-12, in addition to multiple private

schools. College and vocational level programs are offered around the County, primarily by Olympic College in Bremerton and Poulsbo.

Looking to the future, the Kitsap County Comprehensive Plan governs unincorporated areas of the county. Incorporated areas and tribes generally have their own plans. A few frequent themes found among long-term goals and challenges for each community were:

- Preserving local character while encouraging smart development
- Protecting the natural environment
- Providing more housing options for low and middle income residents
- Improving transportation, including pedestrian options

Overall, Kitsap is made up of people who love the semi-rural nature of the county and want to preserve it, while also wanting better infrastructure, transportation and services. We are the home to two tribal communities, which have a distinct nature and importance. County statistics show a fairly racially homogenous but economically diverse population, and an economy largely dependent on the military. People who live outside of Bremerton or Silverdale have limited access to services and have to drive to most basic necessities, even as all parts of the county are experiencing surprisingly high levels of poverty and homelessness.

This effort left us with a solid understanding of the basic demographic, geographic and social makeup of our community but, the final step was to recognize that we all have stories that data just can't tell. For each part of the county, we ended the report by asking ourselves: Given what we know now, who do we need to talk with in order to develop a broader and deeper understanding of the community we serve? This became the starting point for identifying community partners for our conversations.

*To view the full report, including the county overview and an analysis of seven specific regions, visit [KRL.org/ourstories](https://www.kitsapcountygov.org/ourstories).*

# Our Stories

Our next step was to hold a series of community conversations. We reached out to many of the groups identified in our data analysis to begin learning about their dreams and challenges. We used a tried and true method called “Libraries Transforming Communities,” developed by the American Library Association and the Harwood Institute. Read more about the process at [KRLorg/ourstories](https://www.krl.org/ourstories).

Here’s what you told us.

From all the individual ideas and comments, we found three overarching, interconnected themes that resonated throughout the county, across all kinds of different locations and groups.

We want a community that is **connected**, **engaged** and **sustainable**.



## Connection

We define connection as a sense of belonging. We heard again and again that people want to feel at home in their neighborhoods. They want to feel welcome and that there's a place for them. As one Bainbridge Island resident put it: "I like it when people are valued for their unique traits as well as their common humanity and generosity. Also when people have the feeling of being included, welcomed and seen for who they are, not how they fit in."

### **People want to feel connected to each other and their community, especially in their neighborhoods.**

Getting to know their neighbors requires feeling safe to go out, knowing about opportunities to connect around topics of interest for themselves and people of all ages, and having easy transportation to access those opportunities.

People identified their desire for connection by saying they wanted to live in a community "where people can get together and talk to their neighbors," "where people can rely on each other," and "a small tight-knit community where people say 'hi' to those you know. It makes me feel welcome, not like an outsider; part of something."

When "people are disconnected from each other, they stay in their pockets and aren't able to break into new circles," one Bremerton resident told us. "If people are disconnected, it is harder to make and maintain friendships, to build a strong community and to implement change."

Being able to walk around your neighborhood played a key role in this feeling. A Kingston Village Green advocate said her ideal community was "a safe place to walk and



gather to meet others," and a Hansville volunteer wanted a neighborhood "where children go trick-or-treating." Feeling safe to walk outside alone or with children, casually run into neighbors and visit local parks and downtowns was closely tied to a sense of connection.

Knowing about opportunities to connect, both for themselves and others, was also essential. When asked about his dream community, a Manchester father said that access to recreational activities for his family was what made him feel at home here. "The community I want already exists! We moved here from San Diego. Here we found activities for kids."

This doesn't extend only to youth. Others hoped for a community that has something for everyone to do and meaningful engagement across and throughout the age span. Summing it up, one Bremerton professional said, "I want everyone to know where the fun is and that our citizens can be connected to what they love."

Of course, people need transportation to

reach those activities or they continue to feel disconnected. “I can’t drive and that makes it very difficult to get around in Silverdale and surrounding area. No buses. No taxis. No sidewalks,” said one woman. “And, the few sidewalks we do have are a tripping and falling hazard because they are uneven.”

### **But, they’re concerned that local resources aren’t consistently dedicated to supporting these types of connections for the long term.**

As they talk more about these concerns, they talk specifically about a lack of social services to address drug, mental health and homelessness issues; lack of transit infrastructure, especially related to walkability; and a need for shared, trusted information sources to find out what’s going on locally.

In a world with so many options for information, people feel like they are missing out on activities and opportunities that could help them connect. They worry they are not hearing about the same events as their neighbors. “The center of information used to be local newspaper, but this doesn’t really exist in the same way anymore,” remarked a Bainbridge business owner.

Even once they know about an opportunity, people may lack safe access to convenient transportation. A military spouse summed up the inter-related barriers this way: “I will not walk because I do not feel safe, because there are no sidewalks and sometimes questionable people walking around. My family only has one car, so when my husband has duty I am pretty much stuck.”

This doesn’t just apply to structured activities; it can also prevent people from connecting just

by walking around their neighborhoods. People said they needed wide, well-kept sidewalks with adequate lighting. “Newly developed neighborhoods have no lighting and no sidewalks,” said one Silverdale resident. “I moved into a brand new neighborhood that was just built this year and it has no street lights. I don’t understand that.”

Feeling safe to travel requires social infrastructure as well as physical. Participants frequently expressed concern about the increasing visibility of people in crisis, especially related to homelessness and drug addiction. In some cases, people said they went out less because this made them feel unsafe. “I live across from a park,” said one South Kitsap father, “and I would like to be able to let my ten year old go there alone.”

At the same time, people were concerned for the safety of their neighbors facing hardship; they expressed concern that there were not enough services available locally to support drug, mental health and homeless issues. “Every number is a person who has a story,” said a social worker. With the right support, “most families can get back on track” – but Kitsap’s current system “can’t support everyone who needs services.”

### **They believe we need to focus on:**

- Building enriching opportunities to connect, both in their own neighborhoods and across the county, that interest and engage people from multiple generations.
- Creating tools that help to identify opportunities to connect.
- Making it possible to access easily the opportunities available.
- Providing robust social services locally.

# Engagement

Engagement means being able to make a difference in your community. While connection is about a feeling, engagement is about action. When people feel a sense of connection to their community, they want to participate in keeping it strong and making it better. A Bremerton resident summed it up perfectly: “I want a community where people want to be involved.”

**People want to know that there are a wide variety of groups and individuals engaged in civic and community activities.**

They believe it’s important to make sure it’s not just one voice and one point of view heard across the community and the County.

Engagement can be political, but it doesn’t have to be. Active participation in an organization like a church, service club or sports league is still seen as investing in the community. I want “a community that’s engaged in civics,” said a Suquamish tribal member. “An educated community aware and cognizant of the community’s history, its challenges and how they can participate.”

And people are not interested in these opportunities only for themselves; they want to know that others have them too. Said one Kingston resident, “There are lots of caring people at every meeting I attend, but it is the same people at every meeting.” Others echoed this perception, wondering about ways to get new, younger or more diverse voices involved and speculating about barriers, like time and transportation, that might exclude them.



**But, they’re concerned that it’s too hard to get involved, which sometimes leads to a lack of trust or a passivity about civic issues.**

As they talk more about these concerns, they talk specifically about a lack of easy access to clear information about how to get involved, a lack of civility, and a belief that this results in just a few voices having an impact.

“Community apathy and an unengaged population stifles development, making it difficult to get voting issues to pass – or even to get voters to turn out,” said a Port Orchard resident. But it doesn’t start with apathy; often that lack of engagement stems from high barriers to involvement. “A lot of people with ideas are

never heard,” a business owner reflected.

One of the biggest barriers we heard was the difficulty in finding clear information about what’s happening. It’s hard to even get started when you don’t have a trusted, comprehensive source of information about what’s going on. “We don’t know what we don’t know,” stated a community member in Bremerton.

Once people know how to be involved, incivility can prevent them from speaking up. We need to “find a way to have conversation rather than debates. Let’s have a conversation where both sides have a chance to be heard.” Admitted one person, “I have felt clueless at times about how people feel in other parts of the county. Whether it is about gay marriage, immigration, whatever it is.” As one Poulsbo artist put it, we need a place “where different voices can actually hear each other and people holding differing opinions can interact.”

### **They believe we need to focus on:**

- Making sure people know and can see that what they do matters and can make a difference in the community. People need to see that the activities they engage in are carefully considered and have a demonstrable impact.
- Creating “safe” spaces for engagement and learning from each other. Safe spaces rely on trusting relationships and a knowledge that what is said or enacted within the space will not be ridiculed or lead to harassment.
- Funding for creating the environments and access to those environments that allow for engagement across the county.
- Creating an understanding of how to participate in these activities. Ensure that information, training and resources are available in order for people to understand easily the ways in which they can participate meaningfully within their community.

# Sustainability

Sustainability has three pillars:

- Economic
- Environmental
- Social

People want a community that is thriving in all these aspects and that will continue to be a good place to live. “I have children,” said one mom, “and I want them to grow up in a great place.”

**People want to live in a community that is thriving and feels as though it will continue to prosper.**

A thriving community is environmentally, economically and socially sustainable.

A vibrant economy includes active downtowns populated by local businesses and good jobs available locally. It is made possible by a well-supported educational system with diverse opportunities for people of all ages, including those who do not pursue traditional higher education.

A sustainable environment preserves our natural resources for future generations and means our community will be green and walkable.

Social sustainability means that people see this as a good place to live and want to put down roots here.

Overall, people want a variety of large and small employers, in both military and private sectors, so that people who live here can work here. “There needs to be diversification in the economy so more jobs can be available for community members,” said a Port Gamble S’Klallam tribal member. People value a downtown core populated with local businesses.



“Create young entrepreneurs. Don’t wait!” a business owner exclaimed. At the same time, a longtime Bremerton resident noted that we need to attract “not only local, small businesses, but businesses that can create real change and employ great numbers of people.”

To attract and retain good jobs, we need employees educated to fill them. People want universal access to high-quality K-12 schools and further education that includes vocational training and apprenticeships. “Education is key,” said an employee in Port Orchard. Even at the college level, people want to see more options - a holistic approach that values arts and humanities alongside technical fields. “Success is more than STEM [science, technology, engineering and math],” concluded a Bainbridge teen.

People want to balance economic growth with preserving and stewarding our environment. “This is a beautiful area, with lots

of water and the mountains. It is a good place to live,” one resident told us.

“People need to get more engaged about the impact their daily lives have on the environment and habitat. Even I could do better,” said a Suquamish Tribe member. “We should support more research and development on environmental issues, like storm water treatment.”

Social sustainability makes these long-term investments in our community possible. “We need people to live and work in Bremerton, to put roots here, to invest in our community,” said a resident. “If people see Bremerton as a temporary residence, they will not invest their time and resources into building it up. If people see Bremerton as ‘home’, they are more willing to work to make it a better place.”

### **But, they are concerned that development can be in tension with sustaining the character of their existing communities.**

As they talk more about these concerns, they talk specifically about whether or not we invest enough in our infrastructure to support and plan for the future, that local education and job opportunities are too narrow, that affordability is declining and that all of these are barriers to diverse, long-term residence in the county.

As Kitsap County grows, people are worried that we may not develop in an intentional way. They see a lack of funding for schools, transportation, safety and social services, and the environment, causing gaps that negatively reinforce each other. “Most community is about now,” noted a Manchester resident. “We need to be deliberate about future plans.”

We need a thriving, stable economy to generate the resources to invest in future-focused infrastructure, but people are anxious that we don’t have enough diversity in jobs and education. “Bremerton has one predominant employer – the Department of Defense. What would happen if they decided to move or downsize?” someone asked. They worry that our educational opportunities do not support current and future jobs. “A strong education system is the bedrock of a community,” said a South Kitsap resident. “We’ve let ourselves down.”

As the cost of living in Kitsap rises, families without these jobs and education are pushed out. Declining affordability prevents people from putting down roots, hampering long-term investment in the community. One social worker told the story of a two-income family still living in their car. “Despite trying so hard, with one person working night shift and the other day shift, the gap was just too big to afford housing.” Even teens notice the affordability gap, because their friends have moved away. “It’s hard for low and middle income families to live here,” said one.

Yet, if we try to grow economically without considering our natural resources, we damage not only our environment but our economic and social viability as well. A Suquamish Tribe member told us that “from when I used to go fishing in the 80s to now, there are more problems with water quality and climate change. There are less fish and less diversity of wildlife. It’s harder for people who fish now; they don’t have as much opportunity.” We must be cognizant of “the limits of our natural resources,” said a waterfront property owner, and “leave natural areas natural.”

### They believe we need to focus on:

- Creating diverse opportunities for education that support the employment needs of the County.
- Developing and supporting viable and vibrant local businesses.
- Developing infrastructure to ensure that community members can access the economic opportunities available.
- Creating green spaces in our neighborhoods and stewarding natural resources and beauty.
- Encouraging long-term investment, future-focused planning and positive citizen engagement that will help those living in Kitsap see it as a good place to stay.

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## A Self-Reliant Community

In each conversation, we asked people who they would trust to participate in achieving their dreams and overcoming their challenges. We expected each group to name a few key organizations or stakeholders specific to the need they identified. Instead, almost every group gave us a variation of the same answer.

They said: We trust each other.

**If neighbors came together, with support from a coalition of local government, public, private and nonprofit groups working together towards a common goal, folks will be more likely to trust the work and step forward.**

Kitsap residents are self-reliant. We trust our neighbors, our communities and ourselves to do the hard work of creating change. People said they believe in solutions that are “grassroots and driven by the people that live here.” We are ready to dig in together.

Certainly, we want the support of various community and government organizations, even though trust in them isn’t always strong. We recognize that big change doesn’t happen alone and doesn’t even happen only with the organizations people already like and trust. People want their community to be a place where “the different organizations combine forces for common good.” People are willing and eager, to work together when regular people - citizens, residents and neighbors – have a leading role in the solutions.

As one person said, “We need each other.”

# Community Starts Here

Kitsap County contains many unique communities, based not only on geography but also on identity and interests. But despite the apparent differences among them, this process shows us that we are more united than divided. When we asked people about their core hopes, dreams and challenges, we were amazed to hear the same themes again and again.

People in Kitsap County want to live in a community that is **connected, engaged** and **sustainable**. We believe in the importance of feeling that we belong here, taking action to make our community a better place, and building economic, environmental and social prosperity for the next generation.

We face challenges as we try to achieve these dreams. People worry about safety. We may feel limited or isolated by inadequate transportation, local services and infrastructure. We don't always know where to turn for information about what's going on. We feel pulled between development and preservation. But when we face a barrier, we trust our neighbors and believe everyday citizens can work together to create positive change.

Our successes are as real as our challenges. Many people told us their ideal community is the

one they live in right now. "I feel blessed here," said one senior citizen. "People CARE about this place; it's important to them," said another person. Their dream is to keep and expand the connection, engagement and sustainability that make Kitsap County a great place to live. "What kind of community do I want to live in?" asked one Kitsap County resident. "One like this!"

Now, knowing what kind of community Kitsap wants to be, how do we move forward? The Library is going to spend the next year (and beyond!) adjusting our services to make sure they help people achieve their dreams and rise to their challenges. Libraries already connect our patrons with people and resources to allow them to engage with a topic, activity and their neighbors, while striving to sustain these opportunities for every member of our community from infant to senior. With these community stories in mind, we can take those impacts to the next level. We'll share what we heard with everyone who wants to make a difference in our community. And we'll never stop learning.

Have something we should hear? Give us a call. That's our mission at work. What's yours? How can we help you achieve your dreams?

KITSAP REGIONAL  Library

Inspiration starts here.