The evening of June 10, 1999 will be forever ingrained in my memory.
John Watts – Former Bellingham City Council Member

That was the time, just after 5PM, that my entire house was severely shaken by a large explosion that occurred only a minute two after I had entered the front door. Looking out my north-facing windows, which I was surprised did not break, we saw a large, black smoke column rising rapidly to over 10,000 feet from a point roughly northeast of where we were.

A few minutes following the initial blast came a series of about 6 smaller explosions, happening at intervals that spread steadily to the west, until they stopped just short of the Interstate Highway I-5. This indicated to me that flammable petroleum hydrocarbons had somehow entered the creek and were being carried downstream until repeated ignition sources were encountered. And, from the size of the initial blast, the quantity of hydrocarbon had to be much, much more than a truckload!

After the noise came the quiet, and the concerned wonderment of people who fretted about what had happened and why, and whether still more scary stuff was to come. But, there was also the confused cacophony of blather from the local radio station, which was clueless and given to some weird speculation in the absence of credible information. This was abetted by the failure of government communications systems, which was largely limited to police and fire radio systems and inadequate for this unexpected situation. Add to all this the inoperability of regular phone service, both land-line and cell, due to overloaded circuits, and you have the ingredients of the temptation to panic.

Living 3 blocks uphill and south of Lakeway Blvd, I was about a mile from what proved to be ground zero - just east of Woburn Street and, upstream in Whatcom Creek. It was hard to imagine feeling the percussion of the blast from that distance, but we did, as did many others living even closer to it.

I decided to investigate by walking down the hill toward the creek, then carefully making my way east. As I left, charred leaves and debris began raining down on my roof, deck and yard. We still keep some of those blackened leaves as tangible reminders of that dark day.

Eventually, I was able to verify my suspicion that the case of the initial explosion and the subsequent smaller ones had their origins from within Whatcom Creek itself. A City fire truck was stationed to block Woburn Street, just south of the bridge over the creek, and the
fireman on the scene was able to communicate more of what happened using information from his colleagues who were searching the area.

There was also a Herald reporter present, in full commuting bicycle gear.

As more information slowly became available, the shock felt by citizens and witnesses became replaced by sympathy for the three young men who were the only fatalities, and concern about this catastrophe repeating itself.

Fortunately, our community's healing process in the aftermath had some positive benefits, including strengthened pipeline safety regulations and oversight, a degree of reparation for the 3 deaths, and funding for restoring Whatcom Creek and establishing a pipeline safety oversight organization headquartered locally. Punishment, in the form of fines, jail time for those responsible, and a major, unanticipated loss of revenue from not being able to operate the pipeline, were also experienced.

Reopening the pipeline eventually required some 18 months, during which time local, state and federal representatives worked hard to determine unsafe practices and establish better guidelines to maximize pipeline safety in the future. Resisting the pressure to quickly allow rebuilding the pipeline, the City of Bellingham took a firm stand to insure the new pipeline design was adequate, using the principles embodied in OSHA Process Safety Management practices for petroleum refineries and similar hydrocarbon processing facilities. Essential to this accomplishment was the City's decision to hire competent consultants for expert advice.

We can be thankful for the results achieved, even though they came -as too often happens -at a high cost. Bellingham can be rightfully proud of its determination to insure that something of lasting value came out of this disaster.

June 10, 1999 is a date that will remain permanently fixed in my memory, and that of many others as well.

May that event never happen again!