



# PUGET SOUND BUSINESS JOURNAL

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# INSLEE VS BRYANT

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## SPECIAL REPORT: KITSAP

## OUTLOOK

# The Kitsap opportunity is a marketing opportunity

## FAST CHANGE BRINGS A FRESH PERSPECTIVE

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Kitsap County has a reputation: It's a gateway to the Olympics, home to the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard and Bangor Submarine Base, and a mostly blue-collar workforce.

It's time, says Sound West Group developer Wes Larson, to change that.

"There's a perception and a stigma about Kitsap that exists – not just from Seattle, but within Kitsap itself," Larson said.

The reality, though, is quickly changing.

Olympic College has added four-year degree programs that are training the next generation of workers for jobs at the big defense contractors that service the base. That's allowing people who grew up in Kitsap County to stay there for college, and increases the likelihood that they'll go on to high-paying jobs nearby.

CHI Franciscan is expanding its hospital in Silverdale, which will add

last 10 years, getting businesses that are more tech-based and working together as a business community," said Julie Tappero, president and CEO of West Sound Workforce, a staffing agency in Poulsbo and Gig Harbor.

Business leaders in Kitsap County have begun to see themselves as part of the booming Puget Sound economy, she said, which has reduced the feeling of isolation.

"We're seeing ourselves as players in that growth," she said. "That's been a big help."

The region is still heavily reliant on the military – about 50 percent of the jobs are connected to military and defense – and the population only increased 1.2 percent from 2010 to 2014, compared to 5 percent statewide.

But as Seattle gets more crowded, people will seek other options. The bulk of the region's growth has happened in Bremerton, which is selling itself as a great place to live.

Bremerton's school district is one of the best in the state, which may help convince new residents to move to the area. A proposal on this November's ballot would add a fast ferry service and cut the commute time in half, something many think will make the region even more desirable.

jobs for construction workers during the project and hospital workers once it's completed.

Meanwhile, housing prices remain relatively low in the county, which is attracting attention from people who have been priced out of King County.

"We work with international investors, primarily from Asia, and when they go to Kitsap County, they get it," Larson said.

They see a region on the brink of change, he said, and are looking to get in early.

"We've been growing up in the

"Bremerton and the peninsula are, without question, the best-kept secret in this region," said Brian Flaherty, senior vice president of Columbia Hospitality Group, which runs the convention center in Bremerton. "The opportunity before the peninsula is a marketing opportunity."

Like Seattle, Kitsap County is not great at shouting its strengths from the rooftop. As a result, though, the blue-collar perception persists.

"I just don't think the region is aware," Flaherty said. "More folks are discovering it, but it's an incremental process."



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*"Bremerton and the peninsula are, without question, the best kept secret in this region."*

**BRIAN FLAHERTY**, senior vice president of Columbia Hospitality Group