



Food System Committee

February 20, 2024

4:30-6:00 PM

Hybrid: In-person at 509 Girard Street in the Health Department Admin Conference Room and via Zoom

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://us06web.zoom.us/j/82148495982>

Meeting ID: 821 4849 5982

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Topic	Presenter	Minutes
Land Acknowledgement, Roll Call, Determination of Quorum	Rhys	3
Approval of Minutes (January)	Whole	2
Public Comment	Public	5
Ag Innovation Center	Trevor	10
2025 Comprehensive Plan Review- Discussion of Major Concepts that Need to be Addressed	Cliff Strong	57
Retreat Planning/next steps	Rhys	10
Visiting Professor Next Month	Ali	3

Tribal Land Acknowledgement

"I would like to begin by acknowledging that we gather today on the ancestral homelands of the Coast Salish Peoples, who have lived in the Salish Sea basin, throughout the San Juan Islands and the North Cascades watershed, from time immemorial. Please join me in expressing our deepest respect and gratitude for our indigenous neighbors, the Lummi Nation and Nooksack Tribe, for their enduring care and protection of our shared lands and waterways."

DRAFT Letter of support for Ag Innovation Center

On behalf of the Whatcom County Food System Committee, I am writing to express our strong support for the Whatcom Agricultural Research Station project in Whatcom County. This initiative aligns closely with several key objectives and actions outlined in the Whatcom County Food System Plan, thereby contributing significantly to the advancement of our local food system.

The research station's commitment to advancing sustainable agricultural practices and soil health directly supports the plan's objectives under Goal 2: "Protect Agricultural land in Whatcom County and increase the acreage used for local and regenerative food production" and Objective 2.2: "Improve the health of our county's soils." This project aligns with action items such as 2.2.1, which calls for increased funding support for Washington State University (WSU) Extension and the Whatcom Conservation District to boost technical assistance and educational opportunities for growers.

Additionally, the station's focus on water conservation and efficiency aligns with Objective 2.3: "Conserve water and support water efficiency projects and policies."

The research station also aligns with Goal 3: "Increase the supply of local, sustainable food produced in Whatcom County," by supporting action 3.1.8, which encourages innovative methods to increase local food supply.

Furthermore, the educational and outreach components of the project support Objective 3.3: "Workforce development and readiness," particularly action 3.3.1, which involves funding and developing a county network of skilled workers to host the creation of skilled technical training and apprenticeship opportunities.

The Whatcom County Food System Committee recognizes the Whatcom Agricultural Research Station as a critical asset enabling us to meet the goals outlined in the Food System Plan. We are confident that this project will have a lasting positive impact on our local food system, enhancing sustainability, efficiency, and innovation.

We are grateful for your commitment to this important initiative and look forward to the contributions it will make to our community.

WHATCOM COUNTY
Planning & Development Services
5280 Northwest Drive
Bellingham, WA 98226-9097
360-778-5900, TTY 800-833-6384
360-778-5901 Fax



Mark Personius, AICP
Director

Memorandum

TO: Food System Committee
FROM: Cliff Strong, Senior Planner
DATE: December 14, 2023
SUBJECT: 2025 Comprehensive Plan Periodic Update

Whatcom County is commencing its 2025 Comprehensive Plan Periodic Update and Planning and Development Services staff would like to solicit recommendations from the Food System Committee on what amendments should be considered in the Agricultural Lands section of Chapter 8, Resource Lands, and the Local Food System section of Chapter 7, Economics. To this end staff will be leading discussions with the Committee in January and February to obtain the Committee's thoughts on what major concepts need to be addressed. Our consultant will then use these suggestions in developing text, adding new policies, or editing existing ones. PDS staff will then come back later in the year (July – October) to present what the consultant has developed and solicit feedback on their work, including specific edits to goals and policies.

Attached to this memo are five documents for your review:

- Letter from County Executive Sidhu asking the Committee to participate.
- County Council Resolution 2022-036 establishing the Council's priorities for the update.
- Advisory Committee Review Guidelines (gleaned from the Exec's letter and Resolution 2022-036).
- Agricultural Lands section of Chapter 8, Resource Lands
- Local Food System section of Chapter 7, Economics

We have a tight schedule for meeting the June 30, 2025, adoption deadline, so I ask that committee members be prepared to discuss your ideas at your 1/23/24 & 2/27/24 meetings.



Satpal Singh Sidhu
Whatcom County Executive



To: Advisory Committees
From: Satpal Singh Sidhu, County Executive
Date: November 28, 2023
Subject: 2025 Comprehensive Plan Update

The Growth Management Act (GMA) requires Whatcom County to update our Comprehensive Plan by June 30, 2025. Whatcom County has various advisory committees that provide both technical expertise and citizen perspectives on important issues. I value the work and recommendations from these committees.

Updating the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan will be a large, complex, and important effort. We have two priorities for the update:

1. *GMA Compliance* – The GMA is a state law and we must ensure our Comprehensive Plan meets the requirements of this law. This is necessary to address the critical issues of our day. It is also needed to ensure Whatcom County continues to be eligible to receive grant funding from the State.
2. *Council Priorities* – The Whatcom County Council approved [Resolution 2022-036](#) (also attached to this email) in August 2022 setting priorities for the update. Some of these priorities overlap with GMA requirements, but some are unique to our update.

County Planning and Development Services staff will identify Comprehensive Plan topics or chapters that each advisory committee will review. The process will proceed as follows:

- December 2023, SCJ Alliance (the consultant for the project) will contact and meet with committee chairs and lead staff to discuss the Comp Plan update.
- January – February, staff will bring relevant Comp Plan provisions to the advisory committees for review. The committees will review the applicable Comp Plan provisions and make general recommendations on how to meet the GMA requirements and Council priorities.
- February – June 2024, the County’s consultant will develop preliminary draft wording changes to the various Comp Plan chapters to address GMA compliance and Council priorities, with consideration of the advisory committee’s general recommendations.
- July 2024 – October 2024, the advisory committees will review the consultant’s wording changes and make recommendations on these changes.

Public participation is an important component of the GMA. Therefore, I am requesting that each advisory committee set aside time at your meetings to receive and consider public comment. Additionally, because of the state deadline for GMA compliance, I am asking each committee to focus on the two priorities set forth above: GMA compliance and Council priorities. There may be other issues that come up in your discussions, but we need to be focused on the large and important tasks at hand. Each committee can create a list of other issues that may be considered after the 2025 Comp Plan update process is completed.

Thank you for the time, effort, local knowledge, and expertise that you provide! Your work makes Whatcom County a better place. We look forward to engaging with you on the Comp Plan update process. Staff will reach out to you soon to start the review process.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Satpal Singh Sidhu". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Satpal Singh Sidhu
County Executive

RESOLUTION NO. 2022-036

ESTABLISHING PRIORITIES FOR WHATCOM COUNTY'S 2025 COMPREHENSIVE PLAN UPDATE

WHEREAS, the Washington State Growth Management Act (GMA) requires Whatcom County to develop a Comprehensive Plan for managing population growth and development, which was adopted in May of 1997; and

WHEREAS, the GMA requires Whatcom County to review urban growth areas (UGAs) under RCW 36.70A.130(3) to be able to accommodate population and employment growth projected for the 20-year planning period; and

WHEREAS, the GMA requires Whatcom County to periodically review and revise its Comprehensive Plan and development regulations under RCW 36.70A.130(1); and

WHEREAS, on August 9, 2016, Whatcom County adopted Ordinance 2016-034 updating the Comprehensive Plan; and

WHEREAS, Whatcom County should conduct an evaluation of the current Comprehensive Plan outlining progress made towards achieving goals and policies, and identify remaining areas of opportunity for improvement; and

WHEREAS, the GMA requires Whatcom County to review, and if needed, revise its Comprehensive Plan and development regulations on or before June 30, 2025, and every ten years thereafter; and

WHEREAS, the current Comprehensive Plan contains chapters on many intersectional issues impacted by climate change, equity, and economic security including Land Use, Housing, Capital Facilities, Utilities, Transportation, Economics, Resource Lands, Recreation, and Environment; and

WHEREAS, on November 9, 2021, the Whatcom County Council passed Resolution 2021-049, adopting the 2021 Whatcom County Climate Action Plan, which develops goals, strategies, and actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and build climate resilience related to buildings, energy, industry, transportation, waste, land use, water, fisheries, agriculture, forestry, and ecosystems; and

WHEREAS, Whatcom County has experienced increasingly severe and frequent effects of climate change including wildfires, smoke, heat dome, drought, and floods; and

WHEREAS, recent scientific reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change point out that time is running short for communities everywhere to mitigate and adapt to the worst effects of climate change; and

WHEREAS, the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan needs to more clearly integrate climate change, equity, and economic security throughout; and

WHEREAS, over the last several years, the Washington State Legislature considered several bills that address GMA and comprehensive planning including, but not limited to, HB 1099 (2021-22) and HB 1117 (2021-22); and

WHEREAS, legislation failing to pass during previous legislative sessions does not preclude Whatcom County from proactively and voluntarily incorporating these policy frameworks into the updated Comprehensive Plan; and

WHEREAS, in addition to climate change, Whatcom County has experienced significant socio-economic impacts due to the COVID-19 pandemic; and

WHEREAS, as early as 2019, the lack of affordable housing is recognized as an impediment to economic growth within Whatcom County by many in the community including the Business and Commerce Advisory Committee; and

WHEREAS, housing affordability continues to decline under unprecedented levels of national inflation; and

WHEREAS, historic growth trends may not accurately predict future needs and new methodologies may need to be introduced; and

WHEREAS, cities within Whatcom County have expressed concern that the traditional use of Urban Growth Areas (UGAs), and their associated restrictions, may incentivize development within unincorporated Whatcom County rather than targeted growth areas; and

WHEREAS, preservation of the Whatcom County's farmlands and agricultural industries is a common goal; and

WHEREAS, public input is a critical component to identifying priorities of the Comprehensive Plan; and

WHEREAS, The Whatcom County Council believes the updated Comprehensive Plan should reflect our shared values and address the current and future needs of Whatcom County; and

WHEREAS, the Whatcom County Council acknowledges that Whatcom County is a diverse landscape, home to a broad spectrum of cultures, and serving a wide variety of industries, and therefore recognizes that the solutions to the priorities identified here may take various forms throughout the County; and

WHEREAS, The Whatcom County Council looks forward to working collaboratively with the Executive, county staff, relevant Whatcom County boards, commissions, and advisory committees, seven cities, Native Nations, and stakeholders to adopt an updated Comprehensive Plan;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED by the Whatcom County Council that the following priorities be considered for incorporation into the updated Comprehensive Plan due on or before June 30, 2025:

1. Equity, environmental justice, and economic security should be guiding principles throughout all chapters of the Comprehensive Plan and associated planning and regulatory documents.
2. Engage government-to-government with Lummi Nation and Nooksack Indian Tribe in the development and implementation of the Comprehensive Plan, and work to ensure tribal treaty rights and sovereignty are considered and upheld in all aspects.

3. Incorporate climate change mitigation, adaptation, resilience, and greenhouse gas (GHG) emission reduction throughout the Comprehensive Plan.
4. Promote the protection and restoration of healthy habitats for fish and wildlife throughout the Comprehensive Plan.
5. Collaboratively work towards economic security and affordable housing without sacrificing environmental health and public safety.
6. Support a thriving local agriculture and food system economy and food security, considering the impacts of climate change on agriculture as well as equity and housing needs of farmworkers.
7. Build resilience to climate change in forests that enables both a thriving timber economy and healthy sustainable forest ecosystems for wildlife, carbon sequestration and storage, production and storage of cool, clean water, and environmentally safe recreation.
8. More thoroughly consider impacts of climate change, equity, and economic security in relation to natural hazards mitigation and emergency response.
9. More thoroughly consider how growth patterns may have been altered from historic patterns in light of socioeconomic changes, climate change, and housing affordability challenges and what impact this should have on future planning.
10. Analyze the use of, and restrictions to, municipal Urban Growth Areas (UGAs) within the County to avoid unintended incentives to build outside of UGAs.
11. Maximize the environmental benefits of wetland mitigation and consider opportunities to increase development yield in urban areas by establishing off-site wetland mitigations with rigorous monitoring and adaptive management requirements in areas outside of cities.
12. Consider equitable contribution from development within unincorporated Whatcom County toward public and park infrastructure with the implementation of an impact fee program.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, by the Whatcom County Council that the attached Exhibit A be considered as possible implementation strategies and actions that could help accomplish the priorities listed in this resolution.

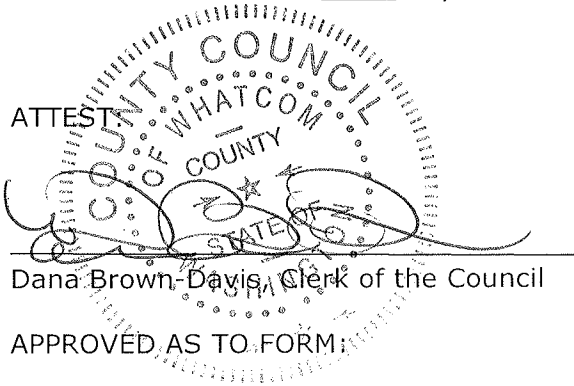
BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED, that the Whatcom County Council recognizes the importance of coordinating and collaborating throughout the planning process with the following governments and stakeholders:

- Whatcom County departments including the Planning & Development Services, Public Works, Parks & Recreation, Health Department, Finance Department, and the Emergency Management Division of the Sheriff's Office.
- Whatcom County boards, commissions, and advisory committees including, but not limited to, the Planning Commission, Climate Impact Advisory Committee, Flood Advisory Committee, Marine Resources Committee, Bicycle/Pedestrian Advisory Committee, Racial Equity Commission, Forest Advisory Committee, Agricultural Advisory Committee, Food System Committee, Child and Family Wellbeing Taskforce, Business and Commerce Advisory Committee, Housing Advisory Committee, and WRIA 1 Planning Unit.

- Native Nations including Lummi Nation and the Nooksack Indian Tribe.
- The seven incorporated cities of Whatcom County: Bellingham, Blaine, Ferndale, Lynden, Sumas, Everson, and Nooksack.
- The Port of Bellingham.
- The Public Utility District No. 1 of Whatcom County.
- Whatcom Conservation District.
- State government including local legislators, Governor, the Department of Natural Resources, Department of Ecology, Department of Fish and Wildlife, Department of Agriculture, Department of Commerce, and other relevant agencies.
- Federal government including local Congressional delegation, U.S. Forest Services, U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Interior, National Parks Services, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and other relevant agencies.
- Whatcom County residents, business owners, farmers, farmworkers, community interest groups, and nonprofits.

APPROVED this 9th day of August, 2022.

ATTEST



Dana Brown-Davis, Clerk of the Council

APPROVED AS TO FORM:

/s/ Karen Frakes (via e-mail 8/10/22) / JL
 Karen Frakes, Civil Deputy Prosecutor

WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCIL
 WHATCOM COUNTY, WASHINGTON

Todd Donovan, Council Chair

EXHIBIT A:
SUGGESTED IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES AND ACTIONS

<p>1. Equity, environmental justice, and economic security should be guiding principles throughout all chapters of the Comprehensive Plan and associated planning and regulatory documents.</p>
<p>Strengthen the “Diverse Cultural Composition” section of the Land Use chapter to include both equity and sovereignty.</p>
<p>Incorporate relevant components from SB 5141 (2021-22) the Healthy Environment for all (HEAL) Act and the Washington Environmental Health Disparities Map.</p>
<p>Incorporate the Whatcom County “Healthy Planning” approach established by resolution 2015-038.</p>
<p>Consult with the Whatcom County Health Department, Racial Equity Commission, Child and Family-Wellbeing Taskforce, and organizations representing farm workers, farmers, low-income families and children, and other groups disproportionately impacted by climate change, environmental injustices, and economic insecurity.</p>
<p>Prioritize actions in overburdened communities that equitably enhance climate resilience and avoid or substantially reduce the adverse impacts of climate change in people, property, and ecological systems using best available science and climate projections.</p>
<p>Consider impacts to economic security and incorporate into relevant chapters.</p>
<p>2. Engage government-to-government with Lummi Nation and Nooksack Indian Tribe in the development and implementation of the Comprehensive Plan, and work to ensure tribal treaty rights and sovereignty are considered and upheld in all aspects.</p>
<p>Follow the framework established in HB 1717 (2021-22), concerning tribal participation in planning under the growth management act.</p>
<p>3. Incorporate climate change mitigation, adaptation, resilience, and greenhouse gas (GHG) emission reduction throughout the Comprehensive Plan.</p>

Mitigate and adapt to climate change, reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and build climate resilience by implementing the recommendations of the Whatcom County Climate Action Plan .
Change the title of the Environment chapter to "Environment and Climate Resilience"
Add goals of climate change mitigation and adaptation, and include measures to mitigate the adverse impacts of climate change on people, property, infrastructure, and ecological systems.
Consider and plan for how population growth and development impacts climate projections and associated risks and adverse events, and vice versa.
Add language to encourage a natural climate solutions approach to climate mitigation and resilience.
Use the best available science associated with climate change and biodiversity.
Transportation Chapter
Incorporate measures aimed at reducing transportation related emissions, including adding a goal to reduce vehicle miles traveled (VMT) by enhancing bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure, encouraging the use of public transportation, and improving coordination between development and transportation systems.
Enhance access to safe active and alternative transportation modes by implementing the recommendations of the Whatcom County Pedestrian and Bicycle Plan , the Regional Trails Plan, and Route Map proposed by the Bicycle/Pedestrian Advisory Committee.
Accelerate the transition to a low- or zero-emission transportation system (bicycles, cars, trucks, buses, and ferry) and associated infrastructure, per Resolution 2022-033 . <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a plan to transition the county fleet, including passenger vehicles, ferry, and other equipment, to electric, hydrogen, biofuels or other low- or zero-emission technologies.
Identify areas throughout the County, including the small cities, which may be feasible locations for transit-oriented development.

Capital Facilities Chapter

Assess and analyze the climate impact of existing County facilities, outline specific actions and secure funding to improve energy efficiency, health, and safety while reducing GHG emissions and harm to people and the environment.

- Identify and replace outdated County facilities, such as the current jail, that become noncompliant with State Building Code standards, and present other health and safety concerns; ensure county facilities are a safe and dignified space for staff and all residents.
- Retrofit County buildings where feasible to increase energy efficiency and install electric heat pumps.
- Increase renewable energy generation and storage in County facilities.

Consider climate change impacts to critical infrastructure and Whatcom County facilities.

Evaluate the climate vulnerability and risk of existing infrastructure in Whatcom County.

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Facilitate the construction of publicly accessible electric vehicle charging infrastructure at County facilities such as buildings, parks, and other community spaces like schools, libraries, and senior centers.

Ease existing barriers by updating relevant development regulations and land use and building codes such as updating parking requirements to require or incentivize parking spots to be EV-ready on all new industrial, commercial, and residential multi-family construction.

Design and build new county facilities in a sustainable way including net zero energy use, increasing energy resilience, utilizing local, sustainably sourced building materials, enhancing microgrid capabilities, and developing at locations that increase accessibility to public and alternative transportation modes.

Conduct an economic analysis for current county infrastructure, buildings, and transportation that factors in externalities of climate change to inform replacement prioritization and timeline.

Utilities Chapter

Work with public and private utilities to further reduce greenhouse gas emissions, increase renewable energy resources, and modernize the energy grid to build community and climate resilience.

Support the evaluation of Whatcom Public Utilities District #1 to expand renewable energy production, water, and broadband throughout the County.

Support Universal Broadband Access as a foundation for energy transition and digital equity.

- Establish a goal to achieve symmetrical gigabit broadband throughout the County.
- Support efforts to establish and increase municipal/public broadband.
- Incorporate a coordination, or "Dig Once", policy for all new road construction projects, utility installations, and in planning for new residential, commercial, and industrial development.

Enhance goals to reduce fossil fuel consumption and increase access to renewable energy resources.

- Review, and consider repealing, the moratorium and other restrictions on new wind energy systems, and updating any relevant wind energy code.
- Evaluate potential for geothermal and hydrogen energy in Whatcom County.
- Assess opportunities to modernize the energy grid and other technologies and infrastructure necessary to deploy renewable energy and increase efficiency and energy security.
- Work with privately or investor-owned utilities to support their transition to more renewable energy.
- Incentivize a methodical transition away from natural gas and other fossil fuels while supporting a transition to electrification or other zero-emission alternatives.

Set goals to further improve water quality and quantity.

- Fully implement the outcomes of the Nooksack Adjudication and "Solutions Table" process to ensure legal use of water that supports water use efficiency, salmon recovery, agriculture, and drinking water for all residents.
- Update policies and take action to further protect Lake Whatcom watershed.
- Explore water infrastructure and technology solutions that can help store, conserve, improve efficiency, and alleviate the high demand during times of limited supply.
- Incorporate recommendations and priorities from the Whatcom County Drought Contingency Plan.
- Ensure the Coordinated Water System Plan is consistent with the comprehensive plan and development regulations, confirming current water supply and water systems can support future growth.

Quantify and reduce greenhouse gas emissions from waste management and septic systems in the county.

- Implement the strategies in the Comprehensive Solid and Hazardous Waste Management Plan.

- Promote and incentivize composting (food and yard waste) and the recycling of building materials.

4. Promote the protection and restoration of healthy habitats for fish and wildlife throughout the Comprehensive Plan

Add a salmon recovery goal.

Implement the actions outlined in the Water Resource Inventory Area (WRIA) 1 Salmon Recovery Program and Salmonid Recovery Plan.

Incorporate recommendations and priorities from the WRIA 1 Watershed Management Plan.

Identify and update regulations that protect wildlife corridors and habitat connectivity, protect, preserve, and restore healthy habitat and biodiversity, and protect fish and wildlife populations from human activities and structures.

- Identify and map wildlife corridors and connectivity throughout the county.
- Evaluate what lands are best for wildlife corridors and habitat restoration based on a cost-benefit analysis.
- Develop and expand voluntary programs that work with and compensates participating landowners.

Land Use Chapter

Work with the State to evaluate a framework and strategy for achieving net ecological gain of salmon and other aquatic species habitat for all public projects and a voluntary incentive driven framework and strategy for private projects.

Coordinate land use policy with water supply goals.

Transportation Chapter

Include an updated culvert inventory and prioritized list and proposed schedule for the elimination of identified fish passage barriers in coordination with the Tribes, State, Cities, and private landowners.

5. Collaboratively work towards economic security and affordable housing without sacrificing environmental health and public safety.

Housing Chapter

Outline specific goals and policies to ensure housing development meets current and future housing, equity, climate, and economic needs.
<p>Ensure adequate housing and services for seniors and people with disabilities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Services to include housing support, assistance with daily living, transportation, recreation, accessing healthcare and assistance at a person-centered level. • Comprehensive Plan must include zoning allowances for residences, compliance with ADA, and transportation component appropriate to this population.
Add a goal that everyone, at every income level, has access to affordable housing, as defined by a household spending 30% or less of its income on housing costs.
Provide permanently affordable housing and home ownership opportunities in all neighborhoods for individuals earning between 50% to 120% of AMI.
Provide a full range of affordable housing types ranging from multifamily apartments, condos, and duplexes to detached single family homes, ADU's, and tiny homes.
Target an average rental vacancy of 5%, and available housing supply of 4-6 months, for all income levels.
Update, strengthen, and streamline land use codes, housing regulations, and permitting processes that further encourage, and where appropriate, require more affordable, dense, sustainable, low impact, and energy efficient development.
<p>Support building and energy codes that incentivize a strategic transition to all-electric new residential construction, ensuring that our communities are sustainable, affordable, equitable, and healthy now and in the future, while addressing resiliency and vulnerabilities to climate change disproportionately impacting rural and low-income communities in Whatcom County. To help facilitate a strategic transition:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • recognize and assist residents still dependent upon access to wood, natural gas, diesel, and other fossils fuels for backup energy when homes have limited, or no access, caused by such things as power outages, severe weather, or location. • prepare for emergencies and build community resilience and self-sufficiency by working with our state and federal partners on energy grid modernization, investing in underground utilities, and access to affordable and reliable electricity for all communities.

Support incentive programs that promote solar panels, electric heat pumps for space and water heating, and weatherization for existing residential and commercial buildings.
Consider permitting and land use policies that increase affordable housing such as sustainable development incentives, expedited permitting and fee reductions, form-based building codes, transit-oriented development, infill development, density bonuses, clustering subdivisions, urban villages, and farmland trusts.
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Consider County acquisition of land for permanently affordable housing development such as a community land trust or land bank model.
Expand availability and development of housing, especially mixed and middle housing options, near transit and employment opportunities to reduce travel needs and vehicle miles travelled.
Invest in wetland mitigation throughout Whatcom County and explore off-site wetland mitigation as a strategy to increase development capacity.
In development regulations, protect critical areas by strengthening mitigation requirements including requiring net gain in pervious surface area and tree canopy cover.
Economic Chapter
Promote a more diverse, equitable, sustainable, and climate resilient future economy.
Support living wage job creation in green industry, commerce, forestry, and agriculture.
Support a just clean energy transition for workers and communities.
Invest in robust economic and workforce development at all levels, including in climate-resilient and green energy related fields.
Support supply chain resiliency.
Increase access to quality and affordable childcare by implementing the recommendations of the Whatcom County Child and

Family Well-Being Action Plan.
Work with the Port of Bellingham and Whatcom PUD to increase access to quality and affordable high-speed broadband.
As Whatcom County continues to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, assess the impact the Comprehensive Plan had/has on supporting the local economy, business models (such as streets turned into outdoor dining for restaurants to reopen), the working population, the basic necessities and logistics for our community, and incorporating lessons learned.
6. Support a thriving local agriculture and food system economy and food security, considering the impacts of climate change on agriculture as well as equity and housing needs of farmworkers.
Resource Lands Chapter
Consider the impacts of climate change, water resources, and flood control on agriculture and agricultural workers such as rising temperatures, more severe and unpredictable weather events, flooding, air quality, water quality and quantity, and soil health.
Work to provide secure and legal access to water for farmers all farmers with an end goal of water use efficiency to drive profitability for a diverse agriculture economy, recognizing that the “use it or lose it doctrine” of water rights does not promote water use efficiency. employing water conservation and water use efficiency principles.
Integrate water supply planning and land use planning to support Whatcom County’s goal of maintaining a minimum of 100,000 acres of agricultural land.
Promote opportunities to increase sustainability and climate resilience in agriculture and processing.
Enhance local food security and food sovereignty by implementing the recommendations of the Whatcom Community Food Assessment .
Improve wages, housing, and working conditions for food chain workers.
Ensure safe and affordable on-farm housing, transportation, and healthcare for farmers and farmworkers.
Increase demand for local food products and expand support networks for local agriculture product development.

- Increase capacity for local food producers to connect with local food enthusiasts by allowing processing and packaging infrastructure on-farm and elsewhere, in the size, scale, use and intensity of agriculture in Whatcom County.

Encourage research and development of drought- and heat- tolerant crops, and agriculture technologies that will reduce emissions, improve soil health, and increase efficient use of water.

Enhance flood control and drainage vitally important to protecting people, farm families, and infrastructure.

- If agriculture land is utilized for “overflow areas”, the county should also plan to facilitate drainage to enable the ability of the land to be productively farmed.
- Manage drainage areas, including wildlife control, to protect land intended to produce food and fiber, except where they have been placed in the conservation programs.

Encourage climate smart farming practices that protect and regenerate soil, water, land, and carbon sequestration.

Preserve productive agricultural lands across Whatcom County by implementing the recommendations of the Whatcom County Agricultural Strategic Plan and the 2019 Rural Land Study, considering rezoning opportunities (such as R5 to Ag 20 or similar), and increasing funding and staff capacity for the Conservation Easement Program in order to protect more agricultural lands from development pressure.

Expand allowable agricultural land uses to include non-traditional farming models.

7. Build resilience to climate change in forests that enables both a thriving timber economy and healthy sustainable forest ecosystems for wildlife, carbon sequestration and storage, production and storage of cool, clean water, and environmentally safe recreation.

Support a thriving local forest products industry and sustainable local resource economy including living wage jobs.

Encourage and incentivize working forest management practices that enhance ecosystem services such as healthy fish and wildlife habitats, forest and watershed health, clean water, climate resilience, carbon sequestration and storage, open green space, and sustainability.

- Develop Forest Management Plans for Lake Whatcom Park, Canyon Lake Community Forest, and Stewart Mountain

Community Forest with these values in mind.
Encourage research and development and the use of best available science in the evaluation and mitigation of potential adverse impacts from timber harvesting to peak flows, low summer stream flows, water quality, wildlife, slope stability and wildfire risk.
Engage and collaborate with forest management experts, practitioners, professionals and researchers to obtain well informed and broad understanding of issues in order to facilitate prudent decisions and formulate positions on forestry issues. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Examples include the Cooperative Monitoring, Evaluation, and Research (CMER) Committee (Forest Practices Board), DNR's Olympic Experimental Research Forest scientists and its research partners, and the Whatcom County Forest Advisory Committee.
Recognize the ability for sustainable forest practices to produce a wide variety of benefits, and identify opportunities to optimize the wood production and carbon storage capacity of forestlands in Whatcom County through the application of extended harvest rotations.
Consider opportunities to protect old and mature forests while also exploring ways to maintain harvestable forest land base, such as actively managing County owned lands and working with the federal government on harvest potential of federal lands.
Provide feedback into Environmental Impact Statements or State Environmental Policy Act on regulatory or policy changes to forest management during planning level analyses in order to influence and encourage climate considerations in decision making while providing certainty to industry and other proponents.
Encourage uneven-aged forest management practices through selective harvest and variable density thinning to enhance structural complexity, biodiversity, drought-tolerance, fire resilience, hydrologic function, and protection of fish-bearing and non-fish-bearing streams.
Expand carbon market opportunities that reward landowners who actively manage their forests to increase carbon storage and sequestration and enhance ecosystem services.
Evaluate the net loss or gain in carbon emissions and ecological function when rezoning forest lands for other uses.
Encourage reforestation, or afforestation, of previously cleared riparian and upland areas through providing funding, seedlings, expertise, and outreach.
Consider development pressures on working lands and work with partners on the possibility of establishing a Whatcom County

goal of maintaining a minimum number of working forest land that is required to sustain local forestry infrastructure.
Work with private landowners to support their investment in the environment and infrastructure, including road improvements, removal of fish passage barriers, and installation of fish-friendly culverts and bridges.
Increase funding and staff capacity for the Conservation Easement Program in order to protect more forest lands from development, particularly as a strategy to protect forest lands in the Lake Whatcom watershed.
Promote development of Whatcom Grown timber products that support climate resilience, the local timber economy, timber and forestry jobs, and reduce transportation-related emissions.
Support the forest industries and workers as they transition to more climate resilient forest harvest techniques, including any support needed to increase wages, benefits, and safety of workplace conditions.
Support environmentally safe recreation on working forests by adequately funding Whatcom County Parks and Recreation to actively manage recreation, mitigate any negative impacts, and develop and maintain existing county owned lands and infrastructure. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborate with all levels of government and other landowners in planning, development, maintenance, and habitat restoration as well as enforcement support. • Provide funding to support other landowners in managing public use impacts in recognition of the benefits forest recreation provides to the county and its residents.
Determine countywide reforestation opportunities in the built environment and expand and strengthen tree canopy requirements and retention in existing and newly developed areas of all sizes to enhance carbon storage, reduce ambient air temperatures, mitigate urban heat island effect, and lower the future cooling costs of residential and commercial buildings.
8. More thoroughly consider impacts of climate change, equity, and economic security in relation to natural hazards mitigation and emergency response.
Incorporate climate change into the Whatcom County <u>Natural Hazards Mitigation Plan</u> , and synchronize with <u>FEMA hazard mitigation planning</u> best practices and the comprehensive plan.
Incorporate climate change impact assessments and vulnerability and risk assessments to inform future development and preservation efforts.

Consider the impacts of flooding, increasing temperatures, heat domes, droughts, wildfire, and smoke to human health, the environment, natural resources, resource lands, and economic security.

Land Use and/or Environment Chapter

Enhance flood sections to help recover and mitigate against increased intensity and frequency of flood events.

- Conduct a comprehensive review of the systems, plans, policies, and current codes that must be changed or updated to better prepare for the next flood (such as UGA's in floodplains/floodways), and incorporate improvements based on lessons learned.
- Reduce flooding risk by fully supporting the implementation of recommendations and priorities from the most current and ongoing Whatcom County Flood Integrated Plans, including the Lower Nooksack River Comprehensive Flood Hazard Management Plan.
- Factor flood-related displacement of people and property into growth projections and urban growth areas.
- Restore, where possible, the environmental functions of rivers and streams.
- Improve flood plain water storage and infiltration capacities.
- Consider levee setbacks where appropriate.
- Better prepare for floods and consider the disproportionate impacts of flooding on rural and vulnerable communities.
- Support buybacks in designated floodways.
- Consider water storage options that do not include dams.

Build resilience to climate change while reducing flood risks by supporting efforts to increase tree canopy cover (particularly in riparian areas) and reducing impervious surfaces.

Enhance land use planning in the wildland urban interface (WUI) to reduce and mitigate the risk to people and property posed by wildfires.

- Reduce residential development pressure in the wildland urban interface area.
- Create open space buffers between human development and wildfire-prone landscapes.
- Protect existing residential development through community wildfire preparedness and fire adaptation measures.

Environment and/or Shoreline Chapter

More thoroughly incorporate coastal resilience to plan, prepare, build resilience to climate impacts, and reduce vulnerabilities and risks. Ensure consistent language is included in associated codes as well, including the Critical Areas Ordinance, Shoreline Management Program, and relevant sections of Title 20 zoning.

Plan for sea level rise, changing ocean conditions, storm surges, and floods, and its impacts on coastal residential communities, declining marine fisheries, shellfish beds, coastal infrastructure, and recreation areas.
Reduce development in current and projected future shoreline areas.
Capital Facilities Chapter
Consider establishing and maintaining County Resilience Centers during emergencies or disasters. These facilities could: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide controlled temperature shelter as well as food, water, and cots for disasters or power outages. • Prioritize under-served communities more vulnerable to disasters such as floods, wildfires, and prolonged heat/cold spells.
10. Analyze the use of, and restrictions to, municipal Urban Growth Areas (UGAs) within the County to avoid unintended incentives to build outside of UGAs.
Update policies on UGAs in light of current environmental regulation such as critical areas, shorelines, and stormwater regulations.
Update policies using current best practices for agricultural and protected watersheds.
Consider provisions for flexibility of municipal UGA boundaries to yield greater development densities, fewer environmental impacts, and more affordable housing outcomes.
11. Maximize the environmental benefits of wetland mitigation and consider opportunities to increase development yield in urban areas by establishing off-site wetland mitigation areas outside of cities.
Develop cooperative policies that preserve and grow natural areas outside of cities by allowing off-site mitigation in the County.
Update policies on wetland mitigation to allow lower quality wetlands with little to no habitat value to be mitigated off-site.
Increase capacity to steward and conserve natural resources on private property, including considering a mechanism by which rural, private property owners are able to derive monetary benefit from wetland mitigation initiatives or other environmentally beneficial activities.

2025 CompPlan Update – Advisory Committee Review Guidelines

Timeline/Process

1. County Planning and Development Services staff will identify Comprehensive Plan topics or chapters that each advisory committee will review.
2. December 2023: SCJ Alliance (the consultant for the project) met with committee chairs and lead staff to discuss the CompPlan update.
3. January – February: Staff will bring relevant CompPlan sections to the advisory committees for review. The committees will review unedited (existing) versions of applicable CompPlan elements identified by staff in #1 above. Each committee will make general recommendations, in the form of a memo, on how to meet the GMA requirements and Council priorities. The Committees will not make specific wording changes at this point in the process.
4. February – June 2024: SCJ Alliance will develop preliminary draft wording changes to the various CompPlan elements to address GMA compliance and Council priorities, with consideration of the advisory committee’s general recommendations.
5. July 2024 – October 2024: The advisory committees will review the consultant’s wording changes and make recommendations on them.
6. Public participation is an important component of the GMA. Therefore, each advisory committee will need to set aside time at meetings to receive and consider public comment.
7. Because of the state deadline for GMA compliance, each committee will focus on:
 - GMA compliance;
 - Council priorities (Resolution 2022-036);
 - Necessary grammatical changes; and
 - Modifying/updating outdated/incorrect information.

Priority Criteria for Making Changes

Updating the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan will be a large, complex, and important effort. Additionally, there is a June 30, 2025, deadline for completing the project. Therefore, amendments will be limited to the following:

1. *GMA Compliance* – The GMA is a state law and we must ensure our Comprehensive Plan meets the requirements of this law, including amendments made since our last update. This is necessary to address the critical issues of our day. It is also needed to ensure Whatcom County continues to be eligible to receive grant funding from the State.
2. *Council Priorities* – The Whatcom County Council approved [Resolution 2022-036](#) in August 2022 setting their priorities for the update. Some of these priorities overlap with GMA requirements, but some are unique to our update.
3. Changes to grammar that improve clarity.
4. Changes or updates to outdated or incorrect information.

There may be other issues that come up in the review process. A list of other issues may be developed for consideration after the 2025 CompPlan update process is completed.

Chapter Eight Resource Lands

Introduction

The growth and harvest of farm products, re-generation and harvesting of timber, use of marine resource lands for shellfish harvest, and excavation of minerals all shape Whatcom County's landscape and strongly influence the economy. Resource lands, which include agriculture, forestry, fisheries (RCW 36.70A.020), and mineral resource lands, also largely represent Whatcom County's cultural heritage. These natural resource activities have been major industries since European settlement began in the area, and the use of marine lands by our indigenous citizens far predates European settlement.

Chapter Organization

This chapter is divided into four sections: Agricultural Lands, Forest Resource Lands, Marine Resource Lands, and Mineral Resources.

Purpose

This chapter contains goals and policies designed to identify and protect the important natural resource lands found in Whatcom County as defined by RCW 36.70A. The development of these goals and policies is necessary to ensure the provision of land suitable for long-term farming, forestry, and mineral extraction so the production of food, fiber, wood products, and minerals can be maintained as an important part of our economic base through the planning period. Without protection of these resource lands, some of the lands could be inappropriately or prematurely converted into land uses incompatible with long-term resource production. The premature conversion of resource lands into incompatible uses places additional constraints on remaining resource lands and can lead to further erosion of the resource land base.

Process

Each section of this chapter includes a description of the process followed in creating that section.

GMA Goals and Countywide Planning Policies

The following goals and policies in this chapter have been developed:

- to be consistent with and help achieve the statewide GMA goals to "maintain and enhance" natural resource based industries
- to implement Countywide Planning Policies that express the desire for the county to become a government of rural lands and sustainable resource based industries
- to fulfill the citizens' vision of Whatcom County where resource based industries are widely practiced and encouraged

The Agricultural Lands, Forest Resource Lands, Marine Resource Lands, and Mineral Resources sections of this chapter address Goal 8 of the GMA, which reads:

"Natural Resource Industries. Maintain and enhance natural resource based industries, including productive timber, agricultural, and fisheries industries. Encourage the conservation of productive forest lands and productive agricultural lands, and discourage incompatible uses." (RCW 36.70A.020)

The goals, policies, and action plans of this chapter support the achievement of this goal by identifying, designating, and protecting productive resource lands from incompatible uses, thereby helping to maintain the county's important natural resource based industries.

Identifying and designating productive resource lands also helps implement the Countywide Planning Policies directed towards agriculture, forestry, mineral resources, marine industries, and other natural resources. In addition, land use policies that encourage best management practices are included within this chapter to support and maintain a broad based economy of productive timber, agriculture, mineral and aquatic industries in a sustainable manner. (CWPP I-9)

Agricultural Lands

Introduction

Purpose

The purpose of this section is to provide a clear set of guidelines that preserves the agricultural base in Whatcom County, prioritizes the human need for food, fiber, shelter and energy and ensures both the agricultural industry and the cultural heritage thrive in the years to come.

Process

In 1991 an Agricultural Resource Land Advisory Committee was formed to adopt Agricultural Resource Land Designations under the GMA. After 13 committee meetings and three public information meetings, the committee recommended adoption of refined goals and objectives and re-adoption of the existing Agriculture zoning and plan designations. Their recommendation was adopted by Council through Ordinance 92-013 Exhibit A to Ordinance 92-013 explains the locational criteria that were used to designate agricultural lands. The revised criteria are now found in Policy 8A-3.

Currently, approximately 86,000 acres are designated as agricultural lands of long-term commercial significance.

GMA Requirements

The Growth Management Act requires the identification of the "general distribution and general location and extent of the uses of land... for agriculture..." **Map 8-1** and **Map 8-2** show agricultural soils and existing agricultural zoning boundaries.

Map 8-1 shows prime agricultural soils, and the Agricultural Comprehensive Plan designation. Those lands designated as Agriculture in the comprehensive plan are designated as Agricultural Lands of Long-Term Commercial Significance as defined by GMA as agricultural lands that have the growing capacity, productivity, and soil composition of the land for long-term commercial production, in consideration with the land's proximity to population areas, and the possibility of more intense uses of the land." (RCW 36.70A.030(10)).

Prime farmland, as defined by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), "is the land that is best suited to food, feed, forage, fiber, and oilseed crops." Categories of prime soils depicted on **Map 8-1** are described as follows:

- Category I: All areas are prime farmland.
- Category II: Prime farmland if drained.
- Category IV: Prime farmland if irrigated.
- Category V: Prime if drained and protected from flooding or not frequently flooded during the growing season.
- Category VII: Prime if irrigated and either protected from flooding or not frequently flooded during the growing season.
- Category VII: Prime if subsoiled, completely removing the root inhibiting soil layer.

These prime soil categories are taken directly from the NRCS National Soil Survey Handbook Part 622. Whatcom County does not contain all NRCS categories of prime soils.

Map 8-2 shows Agriculture Protection Overlay soils, and provides a visual representation of those areas that are subject to the Agriculture Protection Overlay (APO). The APO recognizes that agriculturally important soils may lie outside existing agricultural zoning, in designated rural areas, and provides a mechanism for conserving these soils for agricultural use, if conservation is appropriate. Soils were classified as APO soils based on the NRCS's Prime Farmland classification system and Land Evaluation and Site Assessment (LESA) system.

The purpose of the APO is to promote and encourage commercial agricultural activity, meet long-term agricultural needs not otherwise met in the Agriculture zone district, provide a reasonable mix of uses and activities that may enhance the economic resources available to the farmer, and provide for a variety of uses within the rural areas that are not inconsistent with or incompatible with the use of lands within these areas for agricultural activities.

Conserving productive agricultural lands in rural areas is a primary objective of the APO. The APO applies to all lands zoned Rural-5A or Rural-10A that are outside designated urban growth area boundaries and held in parcels of 20 acres or larger.

Map 8-2 shows lands zoned Rural-5A or Rural-10A that are outside UGAs. Applied at the time of subdivision, the APO uses cluster zoning in order to allow development on one portion of a parcel, while leaving the remainder of the parcel available for agricultural use. The portion available for development will be limited to 20 percent (or possibly, up to 30 percent).

The APO seeks to conserve lands, with agriculturally important soils, whose predominant use has been and continues to be, or could be commercial agriculture. This overlay zone shall include areas that:

1. Have been designated as agricultural open space for county property tax purposes within the past seven years; and/or
2. Those that include more than 50 percent APO soils;

GMA also specifies the need for regulatory protection relative to agriculture. It requires that the county "shall adopt development regulations on or before September 1, 1991, to assure the conservation of agricultural, forest, and mineral resource lands . . ." Whatcom County has enacted a Right-To-Farm ordinance that meets this requirement.

Background Summary

Today agriculture plays an important role in both Whatcom County's economy and its identity.

Whatcom County agriculture is widespread and diverse, ranging from small, organic farms in the Mt. Baker Foothills to cold-storage facilities in Bellingham, and includes orchards, dairies, cattle ranches, produce farms, and nurseries, to name a few. Our farms are the country's top producers of red raspberries and are also major producers of milk, beef, blueberries, potatoes, nursery products, and many other agricultural commodities.

The economic impacts of agriculture on Whatcom County are substantial. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's 2012 Census of Agriculture, 1,483 Whatcom County farms produced a market value of \$326 million in crops and livestock that year, ranking eighth in the state. Milk produced locally in 2013 reached an all-time high market value of \$246.1 million. Raspberries and blueberries combined for a record market value of \$123.6 million in 2014.

Average annual agricultural employment in Whatcom County in 2014 was 3,512, with substantial seasonal variation within that average, according to the Washington State Employment Security Department. Locally, agricultural jobs soared to 5,661 in the third quarter of 2015. In addition, farms and support businesses, such as equipment retailers, veterinarians, processing facilities, and feed suppliers employ many Whatcom County residents.

Agricultural activity is generally considered to be a condition or activity which occurs on agricultural land in connection with the commercial production of agricultural products. Agricultural land may include, but not be limited to the land, freshwater ponds, buildings, infrastructure and machinery used in the commercial production of agricultural products. Agricultural products are those plants and animals useful to humans. Commercially viable agricultural products require generally rich and fertile soil with appropriate amounts of water to bring them to a harvestable stage.

Agricultural lands are an important resource to the people of Whatcom County and Washington State yet if not adequately protected through zoning and other measures, these lands may be converted to urban or rural uses. Often the conversion process begins when rural uses move onto agricultural land, creating smaller parcels,

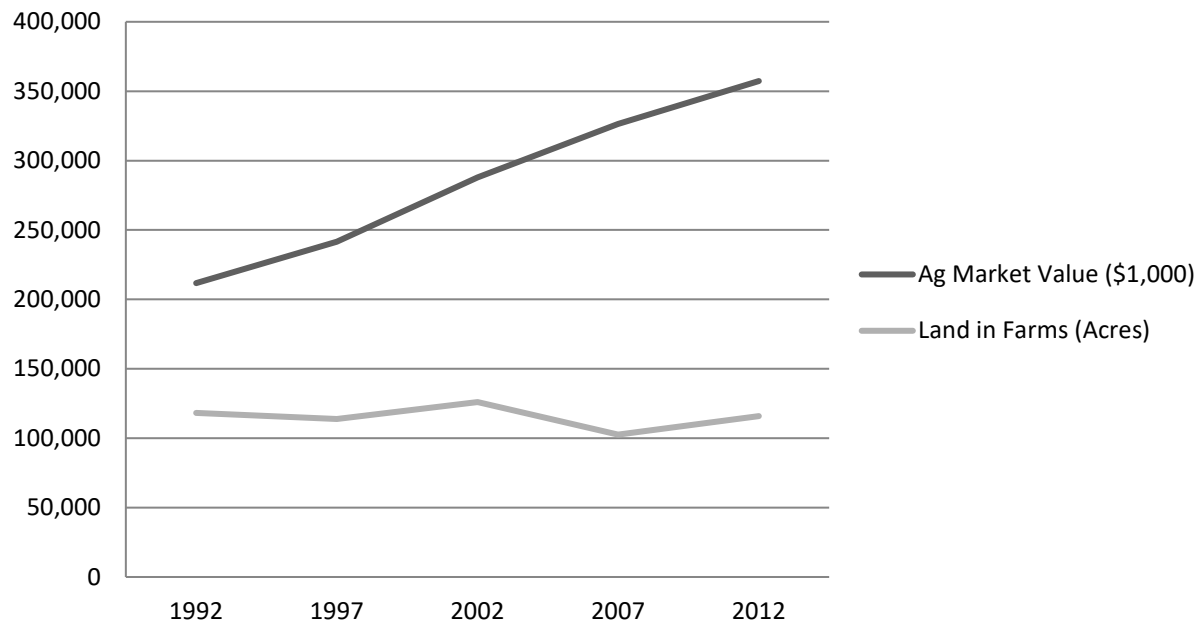
more buildings, and activities that, in some cases, are incompatible with agriculture. In many cases, this blurs the line of distinction between agriculture uses and other uses and sets the stage for further conversion of the limited agricultural land base in Whatcom County.

The viability of an agricultural resource economy is dependent upon the presence of certain agriculture related industries and activities. These include processors (for example, fruit and vegetable packers and milk processors in Whatcom County), farm implement sales and repair, fertilizer and pesticide suppliers, trucking firms, certified meat inspectors and processors, a pool of farm labor, etc. These activities, in turn depend on a stable (or expanding) agricultural products economy that is in turn dependent on maintaining a stable agricultural resource land base. If agricultural production is reduced below a certain level in a given geographical area, then it becomes no longer economical for the agriculture related activities to remain in that area. Loss of these support industries results in further reduction and conversion of the agricultural land base and an accelerating downward spiral for the local agricultural economy.

Another important consideration is maintaining a large contiguous land base without a significant potential for conversion to non-agricultural residential uses for agriculture. Smaller, discontinuous agricultural areas are more vulnerable to conversion pressures resulting from longer hauling routes, difficulty in transporting farm equipment and supplies on roads dedicated to residential traffic, conflicts with neighboring non-agricultural land uses, and the reduced importance of agriculture in the local economy. Maintaining such a large contiguous land base sometimes requires preserving within the agricultural resource land area some lands that are not well suited to actual production of crops. Such inclusions may best be used for building sites, windbreaks, specialty crops, livestock wintering, forestry, etc. Thus it is important to consider both the size and the configuration of the agricultural resource area to provide long term stability of the agricultural resource and support industry economy.

In 1949, 200,000 acres of land were reported to be in farm production in Whatcom County. Between 1949 and 1992, land in farm production declined. In 2012, agriculture accounted for 115,831 acres, nearly 85,000 fewer acres than 1949. However, since 1992, the amount of land in farms has remained relatively stable (between 100,000 and 125,000 acres). But at the same time, both the number and diversity of farms in the County has been increasing. Even while the amount of land in agricultural use has remained relatively stable over the past two decades, the economic value of the products produced on those farms has increased by more than \$100 million in the same time period.

Whatcom County Land in Farms/ Product Market Value Over Time



Issues, Goals, and Policies

Agricultural Land Base

The state legislature has recognized that agriculture faces unprecedented international market competition and costs. Low profit margins have contributed to the decline of Whatcom County's agricultural land base from 1949 to 2012. The continued loss of working agricultural land also harms critical areas because, as the Puget Sound Partnership has noted, farm and cattle ranch lands can deliver critical area outcomes that can be superior to converted lands, in terms of water quality functions, floodplain, aquifer recharge, and food and habitat functions for fish and wildlife species. Because of this, additional regulations need to be carefully tailored to prevent additional threats that can accelerate conversion to non-agricultural uses.

Agricultural viability is dependent upon long-term supplies of clean water and a large fertile land base. Erosion of the farm land base has been recognized as a national and local problem. The maintenance of a sufficiently large land area devoted to agricultural activity is necessary to support associated farm processing operations such as milk and berry processing facilities.

Demand for low cost residential building sites coupled with fluctuating profit margins for agricultural operations and availability of residential development rights brings pressure to convert agricultural land to residential and other non-agricultural uses.

Whatcom County passed Resolution 2009-040 on July 7, 2009 in which the County Council confirmed that 100,000 acres of land available for agricultural use is the

minimum goal for ensuring a land base necessary to support a viable agricultural industry in Whatcom County. The resolution also stated the need to strengthen agricultural land protection in the County's Rural Study Areas as defined in the 2007 Rural Land Study by the Agricultural Advisory Committee (AAC). The AAC assisted in the creation of the County's Agricultural Strategic Plan in 2011, which included the task of reviewing rural study areas and identifying any new agricultural zoning designations or where agricultural land protection efforts should be strengthened.

Goal 8A: Conserve and enhance Whatcom County's agricultural land base for the continued production of food and fiber.

Policy 8A-1: Conserve productive agricultural lands and agricultural resource lands, including areas with prime soils that are not now zoned agriculture, or where the area is composed of agricultural operations that have historically been and continue to be economically viable, by developing and implementing a long-range strategy. The planning horizon should be twenty years in the short-term and 100 years in the long-term.

Policy 8A-2: Maintain a working agricultural land base sufficient to support a viable local agricultural industry by considering the impacts to farmers and agricultural lands as part of the legislative decision-making process. Measures that can be taken to support working farms and maintain the agricultural land base should include:

- Maintenance of 100,000 acres of agricultural land to support a healthy agricultural industry.
- A density credit program where development incentives are offered in cities and/or UGAs if density credits are purchased by the developer. Funds from the density credit program would supplement the existing Conservation Easement Program funding.
- Developing a marketplace approach to strengthening agricultural practices while enhancing larger-scale watershed processes and functions by identifying feasible opportunities on agricultural land to improve both watershed health and agricultural viability and developing incentives and tools to compensate farmers for actions that exceed minimum regulatory standards.
- Maintaining a Conservation Easement Program that facilitates the removal of development rights from productive farmland and provides permanent protection of those agricultural lands through the use of conservation easements or other legal mechanisms.
- Incentives and cooperation between landowners and public agencies such as the use of the current use tax assessment provisions.

- Implementing land use policies that encourage farming on Rural lands of high agricultural productivity and potential.
- Discouraging conversion of designated agricultural lands to non-agricultural uses.
- Track acres lost due to conversion, development, or policy implementation such as critical areas ordinance, so mitigation strategies can be implemented to offset the acres lost.
- Education and marketing of programs that emphasize recognition of the local and regional significance of agricultural land as a natural resource and the economic, social and ecological benefits it provides.
- Working cooperatively with local farmers and coordinating with local and state agencies to address water quality impacts of agricultural activities on local streams and groundwater.
- Securing an adequate, sustainable, and legal supply of irrigation water sufficient to support the long-term viability of the local agricultural industry.
- Identify and evaluate any new or changed zoning or comprehensive plan agricultural lands of long term commercial significance designations as needed or warranted for the Rural Study Areas.
- Economic development assistance to agricultural-related enterprises.
- Recognize regulatory impacts and encourage farm friendly regulations.

Policy 8A-3:

The criteria for designating or de-designating lands under the Agriculture land use designation shall be considered on an areawide basis. When applying the following criteria, the process should result in designating an amount of agricultural resource lands sufficient to maintain and enhance the economic viability of the agricultural industry in the county over the long term, and to retain agricultural support businesses, such as processors, farm suppliers, and equipment maintenance and repair facilities. The criteria are as follows:

1. The land is not already characterized by urban growth. In determining this factor, the County should consider WAC 365-196-310 and RCW 36.70A.030(19).
2. The land is used or capable of being used for agricultural production. In making this determination, the County shall use the land-capability classification system of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service. These eight classes are incorporated into map units

and are based on the growing capacity, productivity, and soil composition of the land.

3. The land has long term commercial significance for agriculture. In determining this factor, consider the following nonexclusive criteria:
 - a. The majority of the area contains Prime Farmland Soils as determined by the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS).
 - b. The area may contain 100-year floodplains as delineated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).
 - c. Land use settlement patterns, the intensity of nearby uses, and the history of approved land development permits are generally compatible with agricultural practices.
 - d. A majority of the area is composed of agricultural operations that were historically in agriculture prior to 1985.
 - e. The predominate parcel size in the area is large enough to adequately maintain agricultural operations.
 - f. The availability of public services.
 - g. The availability of public facilities such as roads used to transport agricultural products.
 - h. Special purpose districts that are oriented to enhancing agricultural operations such as drainage improvement, watershed improvement, and flood control exist.
 - i. The area has a pattern of landowner capital investment in agricultural operations improvements including irrigation, drainage, manure storage, the presence of barns and support buildings, enhanced livestock feeding techniques, agricultural worker housing, etc.
 - j. The area contains a predominance of parcels that have current use tax assessment derived from the Open Space Taxation Act.
 - k. The area's proximity to urban growth areas.
 - l. The area's proximity to agricultural markets.
 - m. Land value under alternative uses.

Policy 8A-4: Support conservation of productive agricultural land by requiring the use of best management practices including soil and water conservation, livestock nutrient/manure management, etc.

Policy 8A-5: Discourage conversion of productive agricultural land to incompatible non-agricultural uses.

- Policy 8A-6: Require all requests for re-designation from agriculture to demonstrate that changed site conditions or circumstances have occurred since the original designation to such an extent that the site no longer satisfies the designation criteria for agricultural lands.
- Policy 8A-7: Work cooperatively with farmers to prioritize agricultural activity in land use decisions when land is composed of prime and/or productive agricultural soils and agriculture is the highest value resource use.
- Policy 8A-8: Establish flexibility in land use plans and regulations to encourage maintenance of the productive agricultural land base, such as agricultural parcel reconfiguration.
- Policy 8A-9: Use an "Agriculture Protection Overlay" (APO) designation in certain Rural zoned areas as one way to increase agricultural production in areas outside of designated agricultural land of long-term commercial significance.
- Policy 8A-10: The Agricultural Advisory Committee shall advise the Whatcom County Executive and Council on agricultural issues and agricultural land use. Whatcom County shall support the Agricultural Advisory Committee with staff and other resources, and shall recognize the AAC's input with regard to agricultural resource lands.

Agricultural Products Industry

Agriculture is an essential contributor to the local Whatcom County economy. Agriculture is most productive in large agricultural communities where neighbors support agriculture and where labor, farm supplies and market systems for farm products are available.

Agriculture is one of the most important resources in Whatcom County. Whatcom County works with farmers to ensure productive agricultural land and improved nutrient management practices help reduce impacts on aquatic lands. Whatcom County is also strongly supported by agriculture fiscally with sales and jobs.

Goal 8B: Maintain and enhance Whatcom County's agricultural products industry as a long-term and sustainable industry.

- Policy 8B-1: Promote the expansion and stability of local and regional agricultural economies.
- Policy 8B-2: Assist Whatcom County's agricultural industry in the pursuit of its long-term economic potential. This should include the development of strategies and policies necessary to reach this potential, in terms of both production and diversity.
- Policy 8B-3: Support agricultural product processing facilities through appropriate planning, zoning, and land use regulations.

- Policy 8B-4: Support methods and strategies to market Whatcom County agriculture in ways that ensure that agricultural activities (such as dairying) and entities (such as processors) will remain here in the long term.
- Policy 8B-5: Support improving the efficiency and flexibility of state and local environmental regulations affecting the agricultural products industry.
- Policy 8B-6: Utilize a range of result-oriented non-regulatory programs, options, and incentives, collaboratively developed and monitored by the County and landowners, that agricultural landowners can employ which meet or exceed county environmental regulations.

Agriculture Related Cultural Heritage

Agriculture is not just a business but a way of life, with many farmers farming the same land their parents and grandparents farmed. The sense of community that these people have built over the years is one of the most valuable assets of our county.

Nevertheless, the livelihood of these people appears to be threatened. Property has become a valuable commodity in Whatcom County and oftentimes young farmers cannot afford to buy productive farmland because the cost is so prohibitive.

Goal 8C: Preserve and enhance the cultural heritage that is related to agriculture.

- Policy 8C-1: Identify, preserve, and enhance community character, landscape, and buildings associated with agricultural activity.
- Policy 8C-2: Involve those who actually are engaged in agricultural activities, and give high regard to their opinions in the County's decision-making during the planning process. Use groups working effectively with the agricultural community to help preserve and/or create a sustainable economic agricultural base.
- Policy 8C-3: Support the continuation of owner occupied/family owned farms.
- Policy 8C-4: Encourage the use of programs that help beginning farmers buy productive farmland.
- Policy 8C-5: Develop and support more programs to promote ag-tourism and ag-education to increase public awareness of the nutritional and economic value of agriculture and quality food production.

Land Use Conflicts

The Right-To-Farm Ordinance was created because agriculture is the priority use. Usual and accustomed farm activities create odors, dust, sprays, noise from farm machinery, etc. and are prioritized with the Right-To-Farm Ordinance. Agriculture may conflict with other land uses. Improper nutrient/manure management practices on agricultural land may impact the commercial and recreational use of aquatic lands miles away. Residents of non-farm housing adjacent to farms, and owners and

patrons of nearby commercial uses, have complained of nuisances such as odors, dust, chemical sprays, and noise from machinery. Farm equipment, crops, and livestock may suffer from increased vandalism. In addition, non-farm residential development, particularly residential subdivisions, can raise assessed valuation or lead to special assessments on adjacent farmlands, resulting in higher property taxes for farmers. The same is true of commercial uses. On the other hand, the open space value of farmland can be diminished or destroyed by the location of commercial uses such as junk yard, auto wrecking yards, etc.

Many agricultural drainage districts have been in existence since the early 1900s with little or no outside influence. Their sole function has been to keep the water table down low enough to allow crops to grow throughout the season. In the last few years, however, there has been growing concern about the impact this activity may have on fish habitat and fish populations. As a result, Hydraulic permits have been difficult to get from the Washington State Department of Fish & Wildlife and drainage activity has been slowed.

Mining activities, such as the extraction of sand and gravel, are often an alternative use of land zoned for agriculture. Such activities may limit options for later agricultural use, depending upon the intensity of the activity and the extent of soil rehabilitation efforts.

Many profitable agricultural operations are located on land outside of predominantly agricultural areas. Although these operations may not be entirely compatible with neighboring urban and suburban developments, they are important contributors to the agricultural base in Whatcom County.

Goal 8D: Reduce land use conflicts between Whatcom County's agriculture and non-agricultural landowners.

Policy 8D-1: Strive to reduce potential conflicts between incompatible agricultural activities by maintaining zoning regulations that protect productive agricultural lands of long-term commercial significance from conversion to non-compatible uses.

Policy 8D-2: Maintain the Right-To-Farm ordinance. Give priority to agricultural uses and owners of parcels zoned for agriculture priority in land use and nuisance conflicts with residents of adjacent properties and adjacent property owners.

Policy 8D-3: Support improved communication and understanding between agricultural landowners and the public through such mechanisms as community forums and educational programs.

Policy 8D-4: Recognize the importance of surface mining as an agricultural practice when the activity contributes to enhancing subsequent agricultural uses on the property.

Policy 8D-5: Accommodate the location of designated mineral resource lands in or near agriculture zones when determined by Whatcom County to be in the best interests of the community.

- Policy 8D-6: Support agricultural activity in mixed farm/rural residential areas, with the understanding that certain farm practices may conflict with other neighboring rural land uses.
- Policy 8D-7: Help resolve conflicts associated with maintaining and enhancing fish habitat and the necessary drainage work that is annually done by agricultural drainage districts, watershed improvement districts, and landowners.
- Policy 8D-8: Develop a continuum of efforts moving from education and outreach, development of voluntary best practices, technical assistance, and incentives, monitoring, and regulation, to minimize impacts when conflicts arise between agriculture and other land uses.
- Policy 8D-9: Encourage low intensity recreational activities that help sustain and are compatible with agricultural uses.
- Policy 8D-10: In the "Agricultural Protection Overlay" on parcels 20 acres and larger with Rural 5 acre and Rural 10 acre zoning, require non-agriculturally related development to be clustered on 20 or up to 30 percent of the available land with the remainder available for open space and agricultural uses. Development standards shall provide flexibility to achieve development potential in cases of natural limitations.

Fish and Wildlife

Use of agricultural lands can impact habitat, including riparian areas, stream flows, channel habitat structure, and water quality.

Goal 8E: Work with agricultural land users to find efficient and effective cooperative ways to protect and improve habitat of threatened and endangered species through education and incentive programs.

- Policy 8E-1: Ensure that adequate riparian buffers are maintained along rivers and streams.
- Policy 8E-2: Prevent livestock from degrading riparian and instream habitat by using best management practices for the fencing of livestock from streams and support the provision of alternative watering systems.
- Policy 8E-3: Encourage the use of integrated pest management practices, including herbicides and pesticides, that protect water quality.
- Policy 8E-4: Ensure proper storage and application of compounds that can pollute our waterways such as manure and other fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides.
- Policy 8E-5: Ensure properly functioning habitat conditions for those riparian areas and stream reaches that do not currently provide such

- habitat conditions through voluntary restoration, technical assistance incentives.
- Policy 8E-6: Encourage the maintenance and operation of drainage systems such that actual and potential habitat and water quality impacts from such systems are minimized and agricultural uses remain viable.
- Policy 8E-7: Work with the watershed improvement districts, drainage districts, and the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife to resolve tradeoffs associated with fish and wildlife habitat on agricultural lands.
- Policy 8E-8: Continue to work with farmers on improving water quality practices.
- Policy 8DE-9: Provide outreach and education to farmers on using Best Management Practices as defined by WCC 14.02.020 to protect water quality.
- Policy 8E-10: Develop and implement education and incentive programs that encourage agriculture land owners to take steps to improve habitat of threatened and endangered species.
- Policy 8E-11: Support State and Federal agencies in increasing funding and improving practices that avoid adverse impacts to the habitat of threatened and endangered fish and wildlife species and to marine waters that support shellfish resources.

Water for Agriculture

Agriculture uses a significant amount of water, most of which is pumped from wells or surface waters. Given the competition for scarce water supplies (addressed in Chapter 10, Environment, Water Resources), ways must be found to secure an adequate long-term water supply while encouraging water conservation and improving water quality prior to it entering the waterways.

Goal 8F: Strive to ensure adequate water supplies to support a thriving agricultural sector.

- Policy 8F-1: Actively participate in the WRIA 1 Watershed and Salmon Recovery Programs.
- Policy 8F-2: Conserve water resources from both a quantity and a quality perspective to ensure and possibly enhance continued agricultural viability.
- Policy 8F-3: Support the agricultural community's access to sufficient legal water rights.
- Policy 8F-4: Balance the needs of agricultural water users with needs for instream uses through such process as the WRIA 1 Salmon Recovery Program.

Policy 8F-5: Recognize while regulation of water quality is important, the water need for production of food, fiber, shelter and energy by agricultural resource lands is equally critical.

Chapter Seven Economics

Introduction

Purpose

Economic vitality is the measure of the economic health of the County—its people, businesses, and government. Different ways of enhancing economic vitality are through public and private actions designed to achieve:

1. Maintenance of a strong sustainable economic base;
2. Diversification of the local economy;
3. Improved job training and educational opportunities; and
4. Creation and maintenance of a range of family-wage jobs.

Economic vitality depends on job retention, job creation, job training programs, public and private capital investment, and business and community capacity-building to allow businesses or community groups to do the job themselves. The purpose of the economic element is to set goals and establish policies which promote economic vitality for the future of Whatcom County. This chapter provides policies that directly affect other elements of this plan. There are also policies that can be utilized to help direct future planning actions or to review private requests for plan amendments, rezones, or specific projects.

GMA Goals and Countywide Planning Policies

This chapter specifically addresses Goal #5 of the Growth Management Act, which encourages economic development and economic opportunity for all citizens of the state. The Countywide Planning Policies also have a section on economic development, which this chapter specifically addresses. Examples include: recognition of the need for a healthy economy; the emphasis on coordination and cooperation among jurisdictions and public/private partnering; coordination with environmental quality; and the desire to maintain the resource-based industries and recreation as we move toward a more diversified economy. This chapter recognizes the best path towards economic prosperity will likely be found through promotion of the county's existing strengths, such as our unique position to accommodate Canadian companies looking to expand and access the US market, our extensive recreational infrastructure, and the skilled workforce produced by our excellent educational institutions.

GMA Requirements

The GMA was amended in 2002 to require an economic development element in a comprehensive plan upon appropriation of state funding. As of 2014, state funding has not been provided.

Issues, Goals, and Policies

Local Food System

Whatcom County is home to a robust agricultural production industry, marine harvest industry, as well as an associated local consumption industry. To maintain and advance the quality and quantity of food produced in Whatcom County, consideration must be given to interconnected sectors which support a thriving food system, including land, water, fishing, farming, labor, processing, transportation, consumption, aquaculture and waste. A vibrant local food system is a community asset to be protected, strengthened, planned for and celebrated.

Goal 7L: Strengthen the local food system and take steps to improve conditions for a healthy, resilient, and prosperous food economy.

Policy 7L-1: Encourage government, institutions, and local businesses to purchase food produced within Whatcom County when available.

Policy 7L-2: Encourage local farmers and producers to sell their products to local markets.

Policy 7L-3: Support development plans and zoning changes that increase access to healthy and locally grown food products.

Policy 7L-4: Support food outlets such as grocery stores, convenience stores, and local food markets that provide fresh, healthy foods, especially in underserved areas.

Policy 7L-5: Support efforts and/or organizations seeking to achieve economic diversity within the food system such as:

- Niche markets for local agricultural products;
- Technical assistance or educational programs.
- Farmer's markets;
- Value-added or innovative agricultural products or services;
- Farm-to-school and farm-to-institution;
- Agricultural diversity;
- Food access and affordability; and
- Community gardens, education, and information dissemination.

Policy 7L-6: Support efforts to protect water quality and quantity, soil health, and best management practices as related to the food system.

Policy 7L-7: Encourage communication and collaboration across and within all sectors of the food system and support efforts/organizations working to build common understanding and to facilitate better collaborative effort toward an equitable, sustainable, and healthy food system for all.

Policy 7L-8: Support establishment of communitywide food system development plans.

- Policy 7L-9: Support healthy and safe working conditions as well as healthy and safe living conditions for farmworkers.
- Policy 7L-10: Support organizations that provide technical assistance, educational programs, and general support to people and businesses within the local food system.
- Policy 7L-11: Consider food waste systems that reduce food waste and capture food waste nutrients.