

Meeting Notes
Envision Skagit Citizen Committee Retreat
May 13, 2011
8:30 a.m. – 4:30 p.m.
May 14, 2011
9:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.
Padilla Bay Breazeale Interpretive Center

Attendees:

John Cheney
Kerri Cook
Peggy Flynn
Cory Ertel
Jim Meyer
Kim Mower

Grace Popoff
Gustavo Ramos, Jr.
Doris Robbins
Tim Rosenhan
Ryan Sakuma
Nate Youngquist

Staff:

Kirk Johnson, Skagit Co. PM
Lisa Dally Wilson, Facilitator
Josh Greenberg, Skagit GIS
John Lombard, consultant
Mark Personius, consultant
John Bolte, OSU/Envision

Meeting Handouts:

1. Meeting Notes, April 29 CC Meeting (e-mailed)
2. Citizen Committee Schedule, May 12, 2011
3. Degrees of agreement
4. Goal Statement I: A Regional Vision: Stronger Regional Coordination, Collaboration and Cooperation, 5-5-11 draft
5. Goal Statement II. Protect Natural Resource Lands and Industries (agriculture, forestry), 5-5-11 draft
6. Citizen Committee Replies to Yes-No Questions Preferred Future
7. Grace's Pros and Cons of Adding More People to Burlington UGA
8. Goal Statement III. Protect, Preserve, Restore Environmental Resources and Values, 5-11-11 draft
9. Goal Statement IV. Compact Communities and Conservation Development, 5-12-11 draft
10. Goal Statement V. Sustainable Transportation, 5-11-11 draft
11. Goal Statement VI. Water, 5-11-11 draft
12. Goal Statement VII. Housing Variety and Affordability, 5-11-11 draft

Committee Business

The meeting notes for April 29 were approved.

Schedule: Kirk reviewed handout #2, anticipated CC meetings in June. The CC agreed to delete "finalize" recommendations as a goal for its June 9 meeting. The CC agreed that publicity for the meeting with county commissioners and mayors should be kept to a minimum, to encourage open and honest discussion.

Retreat Framework: Lisa reviewed handout #3, which identified six different levels of agreement (ranging from "endorsement" to "formal disagreement, but willing to go with majority") and two different levels of disagreement. She said that she would treat all six levels of agreement as qualifying for one of the eight votes needed for a recommendation to be formally approved by the CC.

Review/Edit Goal Statement #1 Recommendations: Regional Coordination

Peggy reviewed handout #5, focusing on edits from the previous draft. After discussion, the CC called for recommendation #2 to refer more generally to “Reality Check,” describing it as an example of a long-range planning exercise. The recommendation should also specify that an alumni committee of Leadership Skagit help coordinate the exercise, and that tribes should be involved. The CC voted unanimously to support the alternative for recommendation #4 that calls for Mount Vernon and Burlington to unify into one city, but asked staff to draft alternatives for the timeframe for further CC consideration. The CC asked that more general references to other possible government consolidations, such as for school or hospital districts, be included under recommendation #1 and a new 4a).

Review/Edit Goal Statement #2 Recommendations: Protect NRL

Kim said she had reviewed the draft CC recommendations for natural resource lands with the Agriculture Advisory Board, which was very concerned that a new Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) program could undercut the County’s successful Farmland Legacy program, since it is based on Purchase of Development Rights (PDR). The CC agreed to add a statement to recommendation 4.b) on TDR that it must be designed not to have this effect.

Jim reviewed edits to recommendation #7, including a bullet that should be added noting that one of the goals of a Skagit Food System Strategy would be to support education about the food system.

The CC discussed recommendation #1, clarifying they are interested in “no net loss” of both acreage and productivity for Ag-NRL land. The CC parked for later discussion whether there should be a recommendation on protecting agricultural land uses on rural resource or rural reserve lands. The CC also agreed to come back to a recommendation concerning seasonal and farmworker housing in the housing recommendations.

The CC asked that recommendation 4.e), on a proactive plan for returning farmland to tidal marsh or wetland if it becomes economically unsustainable due to sea level rise, be moved to a new 1.b), and agreed that it fell under the “no net loss” policy in recommendation #1. The CC also asked that the recommendation specify that the dike districts and affected landowners should be the ones determining the economic sustainability of this farmland.

The CC voted to keep recommendation 5.a), supporting the Tidegate Fish Initiative, but to reword it to offer general support for efforts to address the needs of farms and fish together, the Tidegate Fish Initiative being one example.

The CC discussed recommendation #6, on seeking designation of the Skagit Valley as a Cultural and Natural Heritage Site, at some length. The CC agreed that the designation could be international, not just state or federal, and could potentially also include environmental features as well as agriculture. Reservations were raised if the designation were an attempt to “freeze in place what we have,” but CC members did not see this as necessary. CC members favored the recommendation because formal designation would help discourage development of areas that are important for both agriculture and the environment and would also help raise resources for their protection. The designation could be just for agriculture, or for both agriculture and the environment, based on which was more likely to be successful.

A Preferred Future: Key Elements

Lisa reviewed handout #6, CC replies to “Yes-No” questions, focusing where CC members agreed. Grace reviewed handout #7, pros and cons she identified for further development in Burlington. Kim agreed with Grace in voting against redevelopment in Burlington, but all other CC members present voted in favor, citing multiple reasons, including the amount of development that is already there and the restrictions on floodplain development that will make it more expensive and hence discourage it.

For purposes of modeling a “Preferred Future” recommended by the CC, Kirk asked whether it should include one or more fully contained communities (FCCs). Seven members voted yes, not enough for formal approval. Kirk asked whether the Preferred Future should have more than the Plan Trend policy of 80% of growth targeted to urban areas. Three members voted for 85%, eight voted for 90%, with some of the 10% that would be targeted for rural areas going to expanded rural villages (Cory did not vote, as he had not yet joined the meeting).

Josh reviewed a variety of policies that have been included in the Envision model of the “Preferred Future.” The CC supported incorporating Plan Trend assumptions for conservation and restoration. The CC supported doubling the Plan Trend assumption for purchasing farmland development rights, from 640 to 1,280 acres/year. After a lengthy discussion, the CC voted unanimously to model prohibiting additional residential or non-farm commercial development in the floodplain. This would be accomplished through purchases or transfers of development rights. For modeling purposes, the rights would be removed immediately, although a number of CC members were concerned about lack of clarity as to how this might be accomplished in reality. The CC supported allowing new residences in the channel migration zone but outside of the floodplain, with an educational program warning landowners that they would be building at their own risk.

Goal Statement #5: Transportation Recommendations

Lisa suggested that in the limited time remaining for the first day of the retreat, the CC review handout #10, draft recommendations for transportation. The CC generally supported the recommendations as written, with some additions, including references to road standards for bicycling safety, possible river taxi service, and rain protection for bus stops. The CC discussed the potential for light rail, but with no decision about whether to add a recommendation concerning it.

The first day of the retreat adjourned at 4:30 p.m., followed by a potluck at Kirk’s house.

Day 2

Check In

Lisa asked CC members how they thought the first day of the retreat went. A number of members expressed concern that not everything on the agenda had been covered and that it was important to get through everything assigned to the retreat. Kirk said that the CC recommendations need to be final by the end of June. Since we would not have John Bolte for future meetings, Kirk wanted to be sure that we formalized recommendations for the Preferred Future in the Envision model. Lisa said that the CC needed to be sure it allocated sufficient time for recommendations on Compact Communities and the Environment.

Envision Results: CC Preferred Future

John Bolte presented some key results from the Envision model of the Preferred Future, based on the first day's recommendations. He noted that the model distributes new population on the landscape in large part based on relative capacity: where there is more capacity in a particular city or a particular land use zone, the model will direct more population there. Since that does not always reflect actual patterns of population growth, the model allows for "preference factors" that can override the rest of the model's tendencies for directing growth to one place versus another.

The CC discussed the preference factors assigned to different cities as well as rural areas and rural villages and their resulting population allocations. The model shown had an FCC at Butler Hill, which the CC had not agreed to include. Lisa asked John to remove the FCC from the next model run.

A chart showing transferred or purchased development rights did not include any for the floodplain. John agreed this would also change in the next run. The chart showed a large number of development rights transferred from rural zones, which was confirmed to be consistent with the policies Josh had reviewed on the first day for development rights transferred to rural villages. However, a map showed many development right purchases from Guemes and other islands, which some CC members did not believe was appropriate. The CC agreed that the County should develop and apply a consistent policy on preserving rural character, which could guide where rural development rights should be purchased.

Final Decisions on Goal Statement #4: Compact Communities

Lisa asked that the CC focus on bold recommendations. She noted the CC's call for a 90/10 split between urban and rural development from the first day, asking that the CC be clearer about how much of the rural portion should go toward rural villages. For modeling purposes, the CC agreed that it would target one-quarter of the rural share for rural villages and another quarter for clustered "conservation development," consistent with Ed McMahon's recommendations at the April 29 CC meeting.

Grace asked that the introduction to the rural development recommendations recognize that responsible rural development could minimize environmental impacts. The CC agreed to add the lahar zone as a place where the County should discourage rural development. Cory noted that city zoning would need to change to support the recommendation for a TDR program. The CC agreed that the range of organizations that should work with the County to develop a TDR program was similar to those the CC recommends for the Skagit Smart Growth Alliance. The CC agreed that protecting salmon and wildlife habitat should be one of the goals for the TDR program. The CC agreed that a Purchase of

Development Rights program for environmentally sensitive lands would need to be designed to avoid competing for funds with the Farmland Legacy Program.

The CC agreed that the recommendation supporting increased densities for “certain existing rural villages” should instead specifically reference Alger and Conway Hill, and that Hamilton should be handled similarly (although it is an urban area and might have higher densities; specific language was parked for later discussion). Kirk noted that expanding rural villages would violate current Growth Management Act requirements but there were still good arguments for doing so. The CC discussed some of the challenges for this recommendation. Lisa asked John Lombard to draft supportive language reflecting the CC discussion. The CC also agreed that the language should recommend coordinating with the Upper Skagit Tribe over development near their casino, given its relationship to expansion of Alger.

The CC discussed a recommendation on FCCs at length. Many CC members raised concerns about them, including conflicts with rural character, their effects on transportation, affordable housing, and the tax base for existing cities, and their general potential for sprawl. However, some CC members were interested to retain them as an option under certain conditions, including that they must achieve their population allocation through one-for-one transfers of development rights from rural and resource lands. Lisa asked John Lombard to draft a revised recommendation that touched on all of these concerns.

The CC discussed the two options in handout #9 concerning redevelopment of existing urban areas in the floodplain. Nine members voted in favor of option A, which supports redevelopment of the floodplain portions of Burlington and Mount Vernon. Tim noted that such redevelopment will be governed by federal regulatory requirements that are currently unknown. Kim said that cities should have evacuation plans to keep people out of harm’s way. Peggy said that cutting edge technology could help make new floodplain development safer. Lisa said that those who voted against option A could write a minority opinion for inclusion in the final CC report.

The CC agreed to recommend prohibiting expansion of Urban Growth Areas into the floodplain, recognizing that the CC had already opposed expanding UGAs into agricultural lands and the two areas generally overlap. The CC agreed to recommend discouraging, but not prohibiting, expansion of UGAs into sensitive stream basins, such as the East Fork Nookachamps or Hansen Creek.

Working Lunch

Ryan asked whether there would be legal review of the CC’s recommendations. Kirk said no, legal review would only occur at the point when jurisdictions consider implementing actions. Doris asked how much weight would likely be given the CC’s recommendations because of the citizen-based nature of the committee. Kirk said that it depends on many factors, including ongoing citizen support for the recommendations, public dialog, and how receptive the elected officials are to the recommendations. He said that the project website includes all comments that have been submitted by e-mail or in writing, and would soon have summaries of the community meetings. Peggy asked whether the CC’s recommendations would be considered in public hearings. Kirk said that he was hoping for several months of public dialog before major recommendations would come up for decision.

Revised Envision Results

John Bolte presented a new chart showing growth allocations for the latest model run for the Preferred Future. CC members expressed concern that too much growth was being directed to Mount Vernon and not enough to Sedro Woolley and Anacortes. Kirk noted that population allocations are a huge issue since they relate to equity between jurisdictions, the adequacy of tax bases, whether some UGAs should increase while others still have capacity, and other concerns.

Kim said that Hamilton has a big program for its relocated city and could take a larger share of growth. Lisa asked that we park the issue of recommendations for Hamilton, saying that she could work on language with Kim and Kirk. Cory and Peggy said they thought it was appropriate for growth to be concentrated in existing cities, including Mount Vernon and Burlington, which are the county's core cities, with access to I-5 and the best opportunities for compact, dense development.

John Bolte revised preference factors in Envision based on CC comments and showed new results, with Burlington down to 3% of new growth. Some CC members expressed concern that this was too small, while the 7% allocation to Bayview was too big. After some discussion, the CC supported changing both allocations to 5%. A map for this Envision run showed almost no development in downtown Mount Vernon and none in the commercial core of Burlington. Kirk asked that John Bolte review how the model was treating urban floodplain development to make sure it was consistent with CC direction.

Review/Edit/Discuss Goal Statement #3: Environment and Open Space

Lisa reviewed handout #8, draft recommendations on environmental resources and values. The CC agreed that recommendation #3 should specify that frequently flooded residences that are removed should be bought out. After some discussion, the CC also agreed to delete the sub-bullet under recommendation #3 concerning removal of the "training levy" above Cockerham Island, because CC members are not sufficiently familiar with the details to make that specific recommendation.

Lisa noted that recommendation #4 should be changed to "Keep the current" pace of restoration in the middle Skagit floodplain, rather than "Increase" it, based on CC discussion of the Preferred Future the day before. Kim noted that the middle Skagit has a lot of Ag-NRL land but not all of it is farmed. The CC asked that the goal statement document be amended to include discussion under this recommendation, which should note that restoration projects should be chosen not just to maximize habitat value but also to prioritize lands that are not actively farmed or are not of long-term commercial significance for farming, that the projects should be voluntary with landowners receiving compensation, and that any loss of Ag-NRL land should fall under the "no net loss" policy in the Natural Resources goal statement.

Recommendation #6, on returning delta farmland to tidal salt marsh or wetland if it becomes uneconomical to farm because of sea level rise, should have the same wording as used in the Natural Resources goal statement.

After some discussion, the CC approved a revision to Recommendation #7 drafted by Kirk, as follows: "As part of long-term and comprehensive flood control efforts, investigate opportunities to widen the Skagit and Samish River corridors to regain floodplain ecological functioning; purchase flooding easements from willing landowners in the floodplain to create flood storage." The CC asked that the recommendation be moved to the previous sub-section of the goal statement, so there was no implication that it would apply only in the Delta, and specified that any restoration in the Delta that involved loss of farmland should be part of the 2,700 acres included in the Tidegate Fish Initiative.

Cory asked whether the CC recommendations should include a section specifically devoted to flooding and floodplain issues. Tim noted that flooding is intertwined with many other issues. He suggested that the CC implore elected officials to secure federal support to finish the flood study by the Corps of Engineers that is currently stalled due to a lack of funds.

The CC generally supported recommendation 8, on salmon restoration, but asked that it be broadened to include the Samish River as well as shellfish issues. After considerable discussion, the CC agreed to amend the final sub-bullet under 8, removing the phrase “(supported by necessary and appropriate regulation,” in part because regulation was already discussed in the fourth sub-bullet. The CC also agreed to change the last sentence of the final sub-bullet so that it no longer singled out Doreen Maloney and Kevin Morse, because the CC did not want to leave others out whose approach to salmon restoration the CC also supports.

Latest Envision Results

John Bolte presented revised results for the Preferred Future with urban floodplain development allowed. Burlington increased to 11% of growth. John Bolte said that the Preferred Future was modeling greater densities in cities than the Ecosystem Scenario had.

Housing Recommendations

The CC did not discuss handout #12, draft recommendations for housing variety and affordability, because of lack of time. Kirk asked CC members to send comments to him, and he would work with Gus, Ryan and Doris on revisions to bring back for discussion at the next meeting. CC members raised questions about how farm labor housing was regulated, which the revised draft will attempt to clarify.

Next Steps – Followup - Schedule

Ryan said he was concerned that the CC might not finish on schedule, since it was not getting through its agendas and had also “parked” new items for consideration. Cory said he thought that if the CC was conscious of the need to finish, it could do so. Peggy agreed, but noted that the next scheduled meeting was with the elected officials.

Kirk said that County Commissioner Dahlstedt and some of the mayors might be flying to Washington, DC, when the CC was thinking it might meet with them. He said he could try to schedule the meeting with elected officials for June 9. Lisa said she thought the CC could finish its draft recommendations in preparation for meeting with elected officials over a half day, if CC members reviewed materials in advance and focused only on points of disagreement. The CC agreed to schedule its next meeting on June 2, from 8:30 to 12:30, with materials going out by e-mail no later than May 27. Kirk said that he would identify CC recommendations that supported economic vitality.

Kirk encouraged CC members to take the lead on presenting recommendations to elected officials. He said he would brief the Mount Vernon City Council on May 18 and the Anacortes City Council on May 23. He suggested that John Cheney, Gus, and Cory might attend the Mount Vernon meeting and that Peggy and Cory might attend the Anacortes one. He said that the public open house on the CC recommendations would be at the Burlington Pipefitters Hall, which was available on both June 13 and June 16.

Lisa noted that there was a lot that was still needed for the public meeting, including a vision statement that highlights primary recommendations and includes pictures. Kim stressed the importance of pictures of positive examples. Kirk asked that CC members consider the five or six headlines they would want to see about the project. Ryan asked whether summaries of the public meetings would be available by May 27. Kirk said he would send them out by the end of the week.

5:00 Adjourn