

Initial Citizen Committee Recommendations

III. Protect, Preserve, Restore Environmental Resources and Values

Skagit County is a beautiful, often still wild place, with an amazingly productive and diverse ecosystem. The people of Skagit County value their proximity and access to nature, abundant fish and wildlife, and clean water and air. Maintaining the environmental character and nature of the valley will be a challenge over the next 50 years due to projections of continued population growth and impacts from climate change.

To provide the best chance of meeting that challenge, the Citizen Committee recommends the following:

Long-Range Conservation Planning

1. Skagit County and its partners develop and implement a long-range conservation vision and plan.

Our community needs a long-range conservation plan, just like it needs long-range transportation and development plans; in fact, the two go hand in hand. To achieve environmental and economic goals over the next 50 years, we must identify and protect our most valued open space lands and natural and environmental resources, at the same time as determining where future development should go. This needs to be a broadly shared community vision that is implemented through education, incentives, partnerships and voluntary initiatives, not just regulations. The Skagit Smart Growth Alliance could play a leadership role in developing the plan.

As part of the long-range conservation vision and plan, we encourage the community to embrace the concept of “green infrastructure,” which means “An interconnected network of natural lands and other open spaces that conserves ecosystem values and functions and provides associated benefits to human populations.” “Green infrastructure” helps to emphasize that the network of natural lands and open spaces is fundamental to the health and well being of our community, just like other forms of infrastructure. Also like other forms of infrastructure, the network must be connected, not isolated, to be effective.

Skagit County already has two important building blocks of a long-range conservation plan:

- One is the *Skagit County Comprehensive Plan*, which designates and protects significant public open space areas, and natural resource (farm and forest) lands of long-term significance.
- The second is the *Skagit Countywide UGA Open Space Plan*.¹

2. Skagit County should move forward with its many public and private partners, as outlined in the adopted *Skagit County UGA Open Space Plan*, to identify funding sources for open space protection within and between Urban Growth Areas, and to implement a “bottom up” approach for allocating funds and prioritizing proposed open space projects. As part of this process:

¹ This plan was developed cooperatively and in a highly public process by Skagit County, the Skagit Council of Governments, and 36 other public agencies and non-profit organizations involved in open space efforts. The plan was adopted by the Board of County Commissioners in January, 2009.

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- Solicit competitive proposals on an annual basis from interested parties to creatively implement open space and greenbelt enhancements rather than Skagit County issuing a list of presumed acquisition targets.
- Skagit County and its partners should appoint a balanced and broadly representative Open Space Advisory Committee to evaluate and prioritize open space project proposals on an annual basis (for consideration of outside funding), award open space funds when they become available, and monitor ongoing projects for compliance and expenditures.
- Skagit County and other members of the Skagit Smart Growth Alliance should take the next step in moving from a conceptual Open Space Plan to identify actual interconnected networks using GIS-level data that accounts for habitat connectivity of critical species and non-motorized transportation connectivity where appropriate. This information should be used by the Open Space Advisory Committee to prioritize open space projects.
- Development of the Skagit open space network should emphasize a wide variety of open space greenbelt enhancement approaches, including cooperative agreements, easements, and other innovative measures, in addition to outright acquisition. When the potential for loss of critical open space to development becomes imminent, immediate public acquisition through purchase should be considered as a necessary course of action.
- Skagit County and all local jurisdictions within the Skagit Council of Governments (SCOG) should budget for and manage green infrastructure as prudently as any other civic asset such as water, sewer, or roads.

Definitions for the above section are provided at the end of this document.

Protect and Conserve the Skagit River and its Functions

- 3. We implore our local and federal elected officials and the responsible government agencies to complete the federal General Investigation study of flood hazard management options on the Skagit River and related local flood hazard management planning as soon as possible, using best available science.**

The federal study began in 1997. It should provide crucial information for local decision-making, along with the basis for federal cost-sharing to implement recommended flood hazard management actions. Skagit County is not adequately prepared for future flooding. This is a major threat to our community. Further delay is unacceptable.

- 4. Purchase and remove rural and urban residences from the Skagit River floodway and other parts of the “functional floodplain” – such as Hamilton and Cape Horn – that experience repeated flood damage. (There are 447 existing dwellings in the Skagit River Floodway).²**

- 5. Purchase or transfer development rights from the floodplain outside of UGAs.**

² As part of buying out floodway residences, the Skagit community must work to increase the supply of affordable housing so very low-income people have options other than living in the floodway; see recommendations in the **Housing Variety and Affordability Section**.

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Skagit County should explore ways to eliminate all future residential and commercial development in the floodplain outside of current urban growth boundaries, while providing landowners appropriate compensation for loss of development rights and also providing continued flexibility for farmers to construct barns and other farm-related structures as needed to support farm operations.³ This would minimize conflicts for agriculture with other land uses, while protecting the best remaining opportunities for ecological restoration in the Skagit and Samish River watersheds.

Development outside of the floodplain but within the channel migration zone should be allowed to proceed, consistent with federal requirements and other relevant regulations. The county should, however, notify landowners and developers in these areas that they are building at their own risk, and that the county assumes no obligation to protect them from flood damages.

6. Maintain the current pace of restoration in the middle Skagit floodplain

Beside the marine shoreline, natural floodplains provide the most complex and dynamic set of habitats found across the landscape. Levees, while protecting against flood damage at the local scale, eliminate or degrade these complex habitats and also remove storage capacity in the floodplain that can help reduce flooding downstream. Setting back or removing levees, as has been proposed in a number of places in the middle Skagit River, is a simple and proven way to increase flood storage and improve habitats for Chinook and coho salmon and a wide range of other wildlife.

Ecological restoration projects should work in partnership with landowners and compensate them for losses in economic value, prioritizing areas that are not actively farmed or where agricultural land does not have high-quality soils or is not of long-term commercial significance. Any Ag-NRL land that can no longer be farmed after restoration should be replaced under the “no net loss” policy in Goal Statement #2, Recommendation #1.

7. 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 and improve flood storage and conveyance⁴; and purchase flooding easements from willing rural landowners in the floodplain to create additional emergency flood storage.

To the extent these projects may be located in the Skagit Delta, they should be part of the 2,700 acres of restoration performed as part of the Tidegate Fish Initiative.

Strategically Restore Parts of the Skagit Delta

8. In Goal Statement 2 - Natural Resource section, we support implementation of the Tidegate Fish Initiative, which authorizes the conversion of 2,700 acres of delta farmland to salmon habitat in return for regulatory certainty necessary to operate and maintain the dike and drainage system. The Citizen's Committee supports the efforts made by all the parties involved, encourages full implementation of the agreement over the next 25 years, and seeks to highlight this effort as an outstanding model for creating effective partnerships to accomplish diverse objectives.

9. If sea level increases begin to cause significant salinity and drainage impacts to farmland in the Delta such that the costs of those impacts become economically unsustainable for dike and drainage

³ GIS and Envision analysis indicate there are 1,795 remaining development rights in the floodplain.

⁴ Conveyance is the ability to move floodwater downriver, reducing backups and potential levy breaches.

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districts and landowners, then develop a proactive plan for returning affected farmland to tidal salt marsh or wetland in areas where the Dike District and landowners deem the costs to be economically unsustainable. Replace the lost farmland under the “no net loss” policy in Goal Statement #2, Recommendation #1.

Work Together to Restore Our Salmon Runs

The Skagit River is the only river system in Puget Sound that still supports all five native species of Pacific salmon. Some of those runs remain strong, while others are threatened with extinction. Humans now occupy and have altered virtually all of the habitat that these amazing fish require for survival - from the Skagit River Delta that was once a massive saltwater estuary, to the low lands and riverbanks where we have built many of our cities and towns, to the forest lands that surround the salmon's native spawning streams.⁵

10. We call on residents of the Skagit Valley to work together in a positive, forward-looking manner to protect and restore the Skagit River's once abundant salmon and steelhead trout runs, the salmon runs of the Samish River and smaller direct tributaries to Puget Sound, and the shellfish along our shorelines . These goals affect us all, reflect on our stewardship of the Skagit and Samish watersheds, and will require action by all. Unfortunately, the management and harvest of Skagit and Samish salmon in the Pacific Ocean is largely beyond our local control, but it plays a significant role in the salmon's survival. Nonetheless, each of us is responsible to help protect and restore these runs; and we call on all sectors, jurisdictions, and Skagit Valley residents to work cooperatively and aggressively to ensure survival and vitality of our salmon heritage by implementing the following recommendations:

- Tribal and recreational fishers, to observe the fishing seasons and regulations intended to allow sustainable harvest of salmon. At times, when particular runs are weak, this may require a several-year fishing moratorium to allow those runs to rebuild. [At the Committee's request, project staff is doing additional research on the effects of in-river fishing on salmon viability.]
- Farmers in the Delta, and along the many fish-bearing Skagit tributaries, to observe best management practices, and engage in voluntary stewardship efforts to maintain clean water, healthy riparian areas, and other habitat conditions necessary for the salmon's survival.
- Forest landowners, who already work under strict regulations to benefit salmon but who nevertheless have responsibilities to be good stewards over their large share of the landscape.
- The County, cities and towns, to implement and enforce effective critical areas ordinances and other land development and management rules and regulations, including management of urban runoff and storm water, to improve water quality and habitat integrity.
- To Skagit property owners, urban and rural, to embrace stewardship activities on their land, and to support through voluntary efforts and financial contributions the many worthy organizations, projects, and programs seeking to restore the Skagit's once great salmon runs.
- Conservation organizations and tribes, to realize that much of the work of protecting and restoring salmon runs will occur on private land. In the long run, a cooperative, voluntary, incentive-based approach will be more successful than an adversarial approach. We have been

⁵ Tim Beechie, NOAA Fisheries Biologist, Ecology of Place Citizen Committee Workshop, November 9, 2010.

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impressed by the holistic and comprehensive visions shared with us by many people throughout this process.

- 11. We applaud the Clean Samish Initiative and its community-wide approach to cleaning up Samish Bay, with the goal of lifting all restrictions on shellfish harvest and bringing Samish Bay and all of its tributaries into compliance with Clean Water Act standards. We urge the County to quicken its pace of identifying pollution sources and following up with education, technical assistance, and, if necessary, enforcement actions to get problems corrected as soon as possible.**

The problems of Samish Bay trace back to the entire watershed that drains to it. Failing septic tanks, inadequate livestock management, even waste from wildlife and household pets can contribute to bacterial pollution downstream. As population in the Samish watershed grows, the need for both individual and community-wide stewardship of the Bay also grows. Samish Bay supports an important commercial shellfish industry, with more than \$3 million in annual sales, a \$1.2 million annual payroll, and more than 40 full time equivalent employees working directly for shellfish farms. It is also a vitally important environmental and recreational asset.

The County has received substantial grant funds to identify specific sources of high concentrations of pollution, for prompt and targeted follow up with responsible parties. The County and the Skagit Conservation District also have received substantial funding to provide landowners with technical and financial assistance to clean up problem locations.

- The County, its government partners, and everyone in the Samish watershed should take advantage of this opportunity to clean up this precious resource and keep it clean for the future.
- Skagit County and its partners should apply lessons and techniques from the Clean Samish effort to other rivers and bays suffering from non-point source pollution.

Protect Riparian Areas and Other Critical Areas

- 12. We support the use of a variety of tools, including regulation, incentives, education, and voluntary partnerships, to protect critical areas on those rural and resource lands that develop in the future.**

- We do not have the time or the technical knowledge to become experts in the county's existing regulations protecting critical areas and other environmental features, but we do support the implementation and enforcement of those regulations currently in effect.

- 13. Heighten protections to maintain the ecological functions and values of riparian areas. The Citizen Committee recognizes the importance of riparian areas (particularly along salmon-bearing streams) for protection and restoration of salmon and other fish species, as important wildlife habitat and wildlife corridors, for the maintenance of water quality and overall watershed function and integrity. To increase protections:**

- Strongly enforce existing critical area regulations affecting land clearing, development and other land use and resource management activities;
- Implement strong education programs that help landowners understand and appreciate the ecological functions and values of riparian areas and the most important actions they can take to protect or enhance them;

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- Implement innovative and voluntary land conservation techniques, including conservation easements, transfer and purchase of development rights, and other measures that purchase development rights from or allow their transfer out of the riparian corridor;
- Implement innovative site development techniques, including conservation development and use of low impact development measures to preserve water quality and reduce water flows;
- Coordinate these site-specific actions with a broader plan for maintaining the integrity and connectivity of important riparian and habitat areas and corridors – the green infrastructure network.
- A similar range of measures can and should be applied to protect wetlands and other critical areas.

Implement Low Impact Development

14. The Citizen Committee supports expanded voluntary use of Low-Impact Development (LID) techniques in public and private projects, especially in sensitive stream basins and where downstream agriculture would likely benefit. The Committee also supports early amendment of local codes to encourage or require LID where feasible, giving special attention to these same places.