

DRAFT - Citizen Committee Recommendations [in process]

Goal Statement VIII. Economic Vitality

Economics is inseparable from all of the other issues discussed in our recommendations. Maintaining the high quality of life in Skagit County is key to our economy and our attractiveness as a place to do business. Without a job, however, it is difficult for anyone to enjoy what Skagit County has to offer.

We firmly believe that the recommendations in **each of the goal statements in this document** would strengthen the local economy, as briefly described below. We also offer several additional recommendations for improving local economic vitality. At the same time, we applaud the outstanding work of the Economic Development Association of Skagit County (EDASC), the Ports of Skagit County and Anacortes, local chambers of commerce, and other organizations dedicated to improving the Skagit economy.

Goal Statement 1: Stronger Regional Coordination, Collaboration and Cooperation: Our future economic strength lies in working together, to improve the well-being of the county as a whole. Increasingly, successful economic development strategies are occurring at the regional level, rather than local jurisdiction against jurisdiction.

- The Skagit Smart Growth Alliance would help to forge this regional economic vision.
- Designating 1,600 acres of new, highly-marketable industrial land in upland areas near supporting infrastructure and transportation will help EDASC and other economic development organizations find homes for expanding and new industrial firms. Sharing revenues from this new industrial development will benefit all local jurisdictions.
- Exploring opportunities to consolidate local services (without sacrificing the quality of those services) will help stretch increasingly scarce public resources. The proposed merger of Mount Vernon and Burlington will allow each city to benefit from the other's strengths.

Goal Statement 2: Protect Natural Resource Lands, Aquatic Resources and Industries (agriculture, forestry, fish and shellfish). Historically through the present day, natural resource industries are an important part of the Skagit economy and a critical part of our unique character and sense of place. These industries provide local jobs and revenues and generally require lower public expenditures than other land uses.¹ Our recommendations would:

- Strengthen the agricultural economy by ensuring no net loss of agricultural lands; expand non-regulatory programs to support agriculture (such as doubling funding for the Farmland Legacy Program); and implement a Skagit Food System Strategy.
- Maintain existing zoning protections for forest land and look for opportunities to purchase or transfer forest land development rights to retain these lands in active forestry.
- Encourage effective management of stormwater to protect fish, shellfish, and agriculture; and encourage local/regional efforts to support natural resource industries and the ecosystem, forged by those with the greatest on-the-ground knowledge of how to meet the needs of both.

¹ Costs of Community Services, Skagit County, Washington. American Farmland Trust, 1999. Also cite national cost of community services reports.

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Goal Statement 3: Protect, Preserve, and Restore Environmental Resources and Values. 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. We have heard powerful evidence from local and national experts that Skagit County’s diverse natural environment and scenic open spaces – increasingly rare attributes across the country – are powerful forces for sustainable economic development.² Our recommendations would protect and enhance these economic assets by:

- Developing and implementing a long-range conservation vision and plan;
- Protecting and conserving the Skagit and Samish rivers, including their floodplains and ecological functions;
- Drawing on a variety of tools, including incentives, voluntary efforts, education, and regulation, to protect and restore fish habitat and salmon runs in the Skagit and Samish rivers and their tributaries; and improve water quality in the Samish River and Samish Bay and other water bodies suffering from non-point source pollution.

Goal Statement 4: Compact Communities and Conservation Development: An essential strategy for protecting the Skagit’s natural environment and natural resource industries – both of which are important long-term economic assets – is to concentrate new growth in more compact urban areas and while limiting low-density rural sprawl. Fortunately, powerful national economic and demographic forces are creating increasing market demand for just this kind of development – particularly for compact, walkable, high-amenity, mixed-use communities, and redevelopment of existing strip malls and commercial areas into mixed-use urban centers.³ Many similar sources have documented that compact development, infill and redevelopment (often called “Smart Growth”) is less expensive to provide infrastructure and services to than more sprawling, dispersed growth patterns. For these reasons, we believe the growth patterns that are best for protecting Skagit County’s scenic quality, natural environment, and natural resource industries dovetail well with powerful economic, demographic, and economic development trends of the future.

Goal Statement 5: Sustainable Transportation: This section includes a number of recommendations that would directly benefit the Skagit economy:

- Increase intercity passenger rail service in Northwest Washington, as is currently being discussed by federal, state, regional, and local agencies and rail providers. This would complement Mount Vernon’s downtown redevelopment plan and enhance low-impact tourism in the county.
- Explore innovative ways to improve transit service to east Skagit County – for instance, a system of “colectivos” or fleets of small passenger vans running with high frequency along Highway 20. This would help east county residents commute more easily to jobs in central Skagit County or adjoining counties, and access central county businesses and services.
- Preserve and enhance our ferry connections to the islands and the international ferry services to Vancouver Island, which is important for our tourism economy.
- Protect existing airport facilities from encroaching incompatible land uses that could limit their future aircraft operations.
- Preserve our current navigable waterways into the future, including Swinomish Chanel which carries large volumes of commercial and recreational vessels based in La Conner.

² Patsy Martin, Port of Skagit County; Ed McMahon, Urban Land Institute.

³ Full citations to be provided: National Association of Realtors; ULI Emerging Trends Reports; Ed McMahon, ULI; Arthur Nelson (25-year supply nationally of low-density residential development; shortage of urban walkable neighborhoods); Christopher Leinberger; Peter Calthorpe; APA’s Planning Magazine.

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Goal Statement 6: Water/ Wastewater. Ensuring an adequate supply of water for residential, industrial, and agricultural use; and protecting water quality and quantity in our aquifers, lakes, rivers, and bays, are essential to a healthy and sustainable economy in Skagit County.

Goal Statement 7: Housing Variety and Affordability: There is a serious lack of affordable housing in Skagit County – meaning housing that is affordable to the average working individual or family, as well as assistance programs for those with special needs. This section urges Skagit County, the cities and towns, the Housing Authority of Skagit County and other housing providers, builders and developers, social service organizations and others, to provide a wider variety of housing options and a broader supply of affordable housing for the county’s residents. This is important for meeting social needs in our communities and also for providing housing for the county’s workforce – a key component of a strong local economy.

We offer the following additional recommendations not already addressed in the above goal statements:

1. Develop an economic development strategy for eastern Skagit County and other rural areas that is unique to their circumstances.

Economic development approaches that work in the urban areas near the I-5 corridor are not necessarily transferable to rural Skagit County. A rural economic strategy should support small-scale, sustainable industries allowing people to work without commuting long distances. Also critical is serious affordable broadband service so that people can work from home, local businesses can run credit cards without lengthy delays, and citizens can participate in civic and cultural life without a costly and lengthy commute.

2. Encourage economic diversity as a key means to promoting a resilient local economy.

A diverse mix of business and industry adds to the county’s economic resilience, just as maintaining ecological diversity retains resilience and sustainability in the natural world. The county’s economic development strategy should strive to retain existing businesses and industries where we have strong competitive advantages – including agriculture and, increasingly, adding value to our agricultural products; forestry and wood processing; fishing and shellfish; and boat building and other marine industries. At the same time economic development efforts should promote and recruit new businesses and industries consistent with our overall community goals. This can be done by:

- retaining our natural resource base;
- designating land in appropriate places for natural resource processing industries;
- retaining zoning for boat-building and shoreline dependent marine uses;
- providing incubators for small-business startups, such as the recently-created food processing incubator at the Port of Skagit County; and
- providing advanced technical education and training, through such programs as the new Marine Technology Center in Anacortes (and associated programs through Skagit Valley College) and the new Skagit Valley College Vocational/Technical Education Center.

Economic and Financial Implications of the Committee’s Recommendations

This section is still under development.