

Editorial

Envision Skagit report deserves serious discussion

The possibility of merging Burlington and Mount Vernon into a single municipality is but one of many thought-provoking concepts presented in the draft recommendations of the Envision Skagit Citizen Committee.

It certainly got people's attention.

Now we look forward to a broadening of the community conversation about the future of Skagit County to the year 2060.

In many ways the committee's recommendations reflect what has been the prevailing consensus among Skagitonians who would preserve farmland and open space.

As always, the devil is in the details.

To keep from sprawling into agricultural land, the draft document calls for increased density in the already urbanized parts of the county.

In other words, to keep from growing outward we must grow upward. That goal would be reinforced by placing 90 percent of the new population in existing urban areas and only 10 percent in rural areas, the recommendation goes.

The committee suggests that the multiple dwellings of up to five stories that would be part of this vertical growth could be designed "gracefully" and built in existing residential neighborhoods.

Clearly, this concept would challenge our bias toward traditional single-family housing that has guided many development policies since the 1950s.

And that is the purpose of the Envision Skagit effort — to challenge our thinking about how to guide the growth we know is coming.

The committee recommendations call for 1,600 acres of new industrial land outside the flood plain and agricultural lands. They suggest that a new "industrial tax revenue sharing mechanism" be created to share the revenue equitably.

Another vital area of concern is management of the flood plain itself.

Flood protection planning remains somewhat fragmented, as Burlington and Mount Vernon continue to challenge federal estimates for heights of a 100-year flood, which has a 1 percent chance of happening in a given year.

Some may question the Envision Skagit committee's recommendation for allowing redevelopment in urban areas already established in the flood plain.

The committee notes that there has already been considerable investment in urban infrastructure by cities like Burlington, almost all of which is on the flood plain.

On this issue, as with the proposal for what some jokingly refer to as "Mount Burlington," the public conversation is just beginning.

The citizen committee has done its job by challenging us to think 50 years ahead.

Editorials reflect the consensus opinion of the editorial board and are written by its members: Publisher L. Stedem Wood and newsroom editors Dick Clever and Colette Weeks. Signed columns reflect the authors' viewpoints.

The Citizen Committee appreciates Sunday's very thoughtful editorial in the *Skagit Valley Herald*. Unfortunately, there was one significant misstatement of a committee recommendation. The editorial reads:

"The committee suggests that the multiple dwellings of up to five stories that would be part of this vertical growth could be designed 'gracefully' and built in existing residential neighborhoods."

The Committee's actual recommendation reads as follows (Goal Statement IV: Compact Communities, Recommendation 2):

"While higher densities can be achieved gracefully in existing residential neighborhoods through quality infill (e.g., well-designed cottage housing, accessory dwelling units and 'granny flats'), the greatest potential for bringing more residents into the urban environment is through **creative and imaginative redevelopment of our historic downtowns and existing commercial strips, malls, and big box centers. In these areas** encourage mixed use development with commercial and retail on the ground floor, and condominiums and apartments on top, in the range of 2 to 5 stories." (bold emphasis added)