

Date: Oct 26, 2010; Section: Front Page; Page: A1

Envision county in 50 years

Forecasts show the population could double by 2060

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About 120,000 people call Skagit County home.

Get ready for some new neighbors.

Forecasts show the county's population could nearly double in the next 50 years to 217,500 people.

In the county's future growth lies a problem: how to plan for those new residents without compromising the area's natural beauty, agricultural resources or quality of life.

Fourteen county residents have come together as a committee called Envision Skagit 2060 to do just that. Members come from all over Skagit County and include a project management consultant, a former Mount Vernon City Council member and a dairy farmer.

This is more than just an academic exercise, said Skagit County Planner Kirk Johnson. The work the committee does now could shape the county's future.

The county will not make decisions without the input of area cities, Johnson said. But county commissioners will take the committee's work under advisement when considering changes to the county's comprehensive plan or development regulations, he said. The citizen committee's report — due out next spring — also will talk about implementation of the group's recommendations.

"We're not spending three to four years going through this process for naught," Johnson said.

The work is paid for through an Environmental Protection Agency grant.

The group will take a close look at the boundaries between cities and farmland, Johnson said, and they'll take input from people about how to accommodate future growth.

Last week the members toured the lower Skagit Valley, and later trips will include points east of Sedro-Woolley.

During a trip to Burlington, members spoke with Margaret Fleek, the city's planning director.

Fleek told the group that city officials had made the decision to not expand its current geographic footprint.

"We're finding out how to get high-density, in-city living in a way that people will like it," Fleek said.

One result of the city's planning, Fleek said, is to lower the required parking spaces that businesses must have in the city.

"Traditional parking is based on Christmas, basically," Fleek said.

Residents could also move around the city on trails instead of roads, she said.

The city is also exploring how to take away the option for developers to build on the city's fringes by transferring "density credits" to the city's core.

Those density credits would be handy if the city's population rises from today's 8,970 people to more than 12,000, as forecasters predict.

But the city's footprint might not be so static, partly because of the clash between agricultural and urban uses.

Agriculture employs a large workforce, and Burlington has long sought to get Raspberry Ridge, a farm worker housing project, annexed into the city's growth management area. But as it stands now, the city cannot add the development to the city's sewer system.

Committee members also learned about flooding and farming, both of which are preventing cities from expanding their boundaries.

Proposed flood maps will put further restrictions on construction in flood-prone areas, which will drive the cost of development up. And farming groups are resisting the encroachment of urban uses on dwindling farmland.

Right now there are about 93,000 to 95,000 acres of productive farmland in Skagit County, said Allen Rozema, executive director for Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland. Because of the farmers' complex crop rotation schedule — which can require a 14-year cycle for certain seed crops — the county really needs 100,000 or more acres to maintain viability, he said.

"One of the trends that we're seeing is a lot more small-scale farms," Rozema told the group. "We've seen four to five 1-acre or 5-acre farms get established in the last 24 months."

Steve Sakuma's new blueberry farm by the Port of Skagit was another stop on the tour. Small planes glided in for landings as the members stood in the field of newly planted bushes.

Berry farming, Sakuma said, requires a lot of precision hand labor. His company's seasonal employees need somewhere to live, and those planning for the county's future need to consider that, too, Sakuma said.

But as the county's population grows, Sakuma said he's concerned about whether farmland will become separated from other areas, which is what happened when his family's farm was bisected by Interstate 5 in the 1960s.

That land is now the site of the Burlington Fred Meyer store, he said.

"It's the best soil you've probably ever seen, but you'll never see it again because it's covered by asphalt," Sakuma said.

Committee member Peggy Flynn of Anacortes asked Sakuma what the county's agriculture would look like if agricultural land disappeared at the same rate in the next 50 years as it did in the prior 50. At that time, there were about 140,000 acres in production, Rozema said.

"It would be gone," Sakuma said.

Fleek said farmland is important to city dwellers, too.

"I can speak for every citizen in town," she said. "As you drive North on I-5, we want to see that farmland out there."



Fleek



Sakuma



Margaret Fleek talks to Envision Skagit members John Cheney (left) and Gary Thor on Oct. 17 at Burlington's Railroad Park. Behind Fleek are Cory Ertel (left) and Nate Youngquist.



Photos by Scott Terrell / Skagit Valley Herald

Members of the Envision Skagit team meet at a Sakuma Brothers blueberry field off Ovenell Road on Oct. 17.