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Mount Burlington?

Committee envisions creating one city from two

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M O U N T V E R N O N — Envision this: No net loss of agricultural land, 1,600 new acres of zoned industrial land and Mount Vernon and Burlington merged into a single city.

The 12-person Envision Skagit 2060 Citizen Committee released those recommendations and more Tuesday as part of a plan to help manage Skagit County's growing population over the next 50 years. Based on current growth projections, the county will double in population — 100,000 new residents — by 2060.

The committee met with Skagit County commissioners and four mayors from across the county Thursday to discuss the draft recommendations and collect feedback. They will hold another meeting for the public at 4 p.m. Thursday at the Pipefitters Hall in Burlington.

The group also recommended relegating 90 percent of Skagit County's population growth to urban areas; developing a system for the county and cities to share tax revenues from new industrial projects; and creating a "smart growth alliance" comprised of members of the Skagit Council of Governments and non-governmental organizations to help oversee the county's growth.

Some of the ideas were welcomed by the commissioners and mayors Thursday with enthusiasm, others skepticism.

Sedro-Woolley Mayor Mike Anderson said the county has been unable to keep growth within cities at even a rate of 80 percent over the last several years, and he embraced the idea of a 90 percent rate.

B u t M o u n t V e r n o n Mayor Bud Norris joked that he wants to be in the far back of the room when the committee recommends merging the two cities in a public forum. "There's room for discussion for combined services, but combining two municipalities separated by a river might be a little more of a challenge," Norris said.

Committee member Tim Rosenhan said merging the cities takes advantage of each one's shortfalls and surpluses. Mount Vernon has more residential growth potential, but needs commercial growth. Burlington, by contrast, has more commercial growth potential but needs areas for residential growth, according to the committee.

Norris said residents have been resistant to even smaller mergers and collaborations.

More than 10 years ago, he was on a committee attempting to build a joint stadium to serve the cities' two high schools.

"That wasn't received very well," Norris said. "I can imagine what the response might be to a proposal such as this."

Burlington Mayor Ed Brunz was noncommittal on the topic.

Skagit County Commissioner Sharon Dillon lauded a plan to more than double the acreage dedicated to industrial developments.

Rosenhan said it would be necessary to support the county's economy.

"If we don't get that, we're heavily relying on commuting outside of the county," Rosenhan said. "One-third of our work force commutes outside of the county already."

The committee was formed last fall and has held 10 community meetings across the county over the last nine months. They collected ideas and preferences from residents in the area to form the recommendations.

Members of the committee said that a few common themes stood out at those meetings. Committee member Jim Meyer said many residents complained about the loss of agricultural acreage or natural wilderness, what he called “overlapping and intertwining stories of loss.”

“What we found is really no surprise,” committee member Peggy Flynn said. “People want open spaces, they want to see agriculture grow and thrive in this county, they want cities to be compact and walkable.”

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What do you think?

We're interested in hearing from Skagit County residents about the idea of merging Burlington and Mount Vernon. Please send comments to news@skagitpublishing.com by noon Monday. We will publish a sampling of them later in the week.