

# Officials: Working together key to creating more jobs in county

By KATE MARTIN

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BURLINGTON — Local governments should find ways to work together to bring more businesses and jobs to the county, a group of elected officials said Thursday during a discussion about Skagit County's future.

Officials seemed unified on the idea that ports, cities, the county and other agencies should work together to benefit the region as a whole.

The topic Thursday was part of a larger discussion on Envision Skagit 2060, in which local officials and residents are planning for the addition of 100,000 people within the next 50 years.

More than 40 percent of county residents commute outside of Skagit County to work, said Kirk Johnson, senior planner with Skagit County. Recruiting businesses to the county through a "Skagit Alliance" group would lower worker commute times and keep more money in Skagit County, officials said.

Already the cities of Mount Vernon and Anacortes are independently working to bring more industry to their respective cities. Other agencies, like the ports of Skagit and Anacortes, as well as the Economic Development Association for Skagit County, have been tasked with that duty for years.

Mount Vernon Mayor Jill Boudreau said the city convenes an informal weekly leadership group to discuss economic development within the city "and deciding which sectors make sense for our city. ... Wouldn't it be great to look regionally to figure out what each city and each industry needs?"

To that end, officials said they wanted to take inventory of all available industrial land within Skagit County. If a business is unable to locate in, say, Burlington, other cities might be more appropriate for that operation, said Skagit County Commissioner Sharon Dillon.

"If they win, then we win," she said. The group discussed other recommendations from the Envision process originally formulated after a two-year process with a citizen committee.

One of those recommendations included a so-called "industrial tax basket," which would allow cities to pool their industrial lands in a central area in Skagit County.

Those cities would be able to claim the property tax revenues from that area, although it would not be contiguous with those cities' urban growth areas.

While added industrial land for property tax purposes would not add more money to city coffers in the long term, it would reduce the tax burden on current city residents, according to the recommendation.

Another popular topic was consolidating government services among cities, as well as protecting agriculture from growth and promoting economic diversity for a resilient local economy.

Ideas from the original citizens committee that were shot down included merging the cities of Mount Vernon and Burlington, increasing building density in Alger and Conway Hill and discussing climate change solutions as part of the process.

Envision Skagit 2060 was paid for with two federal grants totaling \$1.4 million. Local governments have supplemented that amount with \$750,000. No decisions were made at the meeting, and decisions are not likely for some time on many issues.

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## CLARIFICATION

A story on Page A1 Friday headlined "Officials: Working together key to creating more jobs in county" stated that some citizen committee recommendations, including climate change, were shot down by local officials. While some elected officials indicated climate change as a factor in future planning was not their priority, it could remain a point of discussion.

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