

May 23, 2012

Skagit Audubon Society  
P.O. Box 1101  
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Envision Skagit 2060  
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To the Members of the Envision Skagit 2060 Citizens Committee:

I am writing on behalf of the 200 families who comprise the membership of Skagit Audubon Society. Of National Audubon Society's 26 chapters in Washington State, ours is the one focused on Skagit County. We appreciate the long hours, hard work, and creative thought which you and the county planning staff have devoted to this project. Your report presents many great ideas. We offer the following comments on some of those ideas in support of what you have written and to urge the report's adoption by county officials as guidance for the future of the home we all share.

#### Skagit Audubon Mission

- Accommodating birds and other wildlife in how we live is a quality of life issue as well as the right thing to do.

Skagit Audubon Society's mission is to conserve and restore natural ecosystems, focusing on birds, other wildlife and their habitats for the benefit of humanity and the earth's biological diversity. Audubon members are people who value the presence of birds and other wildlife in their daily lives. They are characteristically well-informed, active citizens who care about the environment, take responsibility for their impacts on it, and vote for public officials who see restoring and preserving the environment as a key part of their responsibility. Audubon members envision a Skagit future in which birds and other wildlife are valued and their needs are accommodated not as an afterthought but as an essential aspect of our quality of life. We also believe that birds and other wildlife have a right to exist independent of their utility to us.

#### Preservation of Farmland and other important bird habitat

- Key recommendations in the Envision report coincide very well with the new National Audubon strategic plan (e.g. compatibility of agriculture and birds)
- Farmland provides essential habitat for notable species for which Skagit County is famous, such as the Trumpeter Swan.
- To survive and thrive, these bird species need both farmland and other types of habitat.
- We support the recommended concentration of new development in urban areas with the goal of a 90/10 split.

The National Audubon Society recently completed a new strategic plan. It is a happy coincidence that recommendations in the Envision Skagit report correlate well with those of this strategic plan. The importance, both realized and potential, of farmland for birds is one of the central themes of the Audubon plan. In winter, Skagit County hosts far more Trumpeter Swans

than any other area where this largest of all North American waterfowl occurs. These magnificent birds depend on harvested corn and potato fields here for much of their winter forage. And they need such areas as Johnson-DeBay Slough (Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife) and Barney Lake (Skagit Land Trust) for both feeding and secure night-time resting areas. The Samish Flats are famed among birders for the falcons, hawks, and eagles that winter there in numbers and a level of diversity matched in a few other places in the United States. The agricultural and other fields on the Samish and Skagit deltas provide the rodents and small birds on which these raptors depend and the fence posts and poles they need for perching.

#### Expanding the Farmland Legacy Program

- This is a good program that would benefit from improved direction and then expansion to enable protecting more farmland and other lands too.

Skagit Audubon supports the concept of the Farmland Legacy Program. It would appear, however, that the program at present lacks clear standards and a system for establishing priorities and monitoring easements. We urge that these measures be put in place and that the program seek accreditation as quickly as possible. This would set the necessary stage for increasing the financial support which Skagit taxpayers provide to the program. Further, as you recommend, we would like to see these revenues be used more broadly to support the acquisition of non-farmland undeveloped areas as well as agricultural land. This is the case with similar programs in other counties, and in our vision of the future, it would be so in Skagit County too.

#### Bird-friendly agricultural practices

- Skagit farmers and other land owners engage in practices which promote bird conservation.
- The general public can help by buying Skagit agricultural products and in other ways supporting the economic viability of farming.

As noted above, farming is especially important for particular bird species. Without corn and potatoes, it is doubtful that Skagit County would provide sufficient habitat for the recovered population of the once very rare Trumpeter Swan. We urge our members to buy locally produced food and dairy products to support agriculture in Skagit Valley. We applaud The Nature Conservancy's Farming for Wildlife program and the farmers who have participated in that innovative program. We know that additional farmers, agricultural organizations, and other land owners are interested in supporting bird populations in additional ways. We envision a future in which all landowners and farmers continue to integrate bird-friendly practices with agriculture and other land management: leaving brushy, shrubby corners and field margins; preserving roost trees and snags; avoiding excessive clean-up of brush piles, providing raptor perches for rodent control, etc. Audubon recognizes that the presence of large numbers of certain bird species, such as Snow Geese, can be costly to farmers and that consideration for management practices and possibly compensation programs may need to go on for many years. Global warming will probably continue to affect Snow Goose reproduction and choice of wintering areas in ways that impact Skagit farmers.

#### Provision for "no net loss" of Farmland:

- It is unclear what this provision would mean in practice.

We note that in the Envision Skagit recommendations' discussion of farmland there is a commitment to "no net loss" and to replacing land taken out of farming with acreage put into

agricultural zoning elsewhere in the county. It is unclear what this would involve. We feel strongly that this standard should not be implemented at the expense of significant, non-agricultural wildlife habitat nor should it become a reason to put into production areas such as wetlands that should not be farmed. We note that there may be some areas in production now or recently which are inappropriate for agriculture, which suggests that a rigid “no net loss” standard would preclude correcting past mistakes. As noted above, if they are to survive and thrive, Skagit Valley birds need a variety of habitats including both agricultural lands and diverse undeveloped areas.

#### Green and livable urban areas

- Urban areas can and should be designed to support birds and other wildlife.
- Greening urban areas makes them more livable for people too and enhances the acceptability of greater density.
- This goal accords with another priority in National Audubon’s strategic plan.
- Increased community gardens will both improve quality of life and support birds.
- We support the idea of corridors of open space connecting urban areas and other parts of the county for the benefit of recreation as well as migratory and resident birds.

Skagit Audubon supports the Envision Skagit recommendation that 90% of future growth take place in cities. Another priority in National Audubon’s strategic plan is “Creating Bird-friendly Communities and Cities,” which is a fitting goal for Skagit’s future. We believe it is important for birds as well as human welfare that the county’s excellent farmland not be paved over or built upon, that forested areas remain in forest as much as possible, and that wild areas be preserved for the essential habitat they provide. We envision densely populated areas that are attractive and more livable because they integrate with the natural world. Street trees, native plant landscaping, backyard habitat programs that encourage accommodating wildlife in place of lawns and chemical applications, parks of many types and sizes that include natural habitat - these all improve human quality of life in part because they support birds and other wildlife.

We would like to see a future in which more members of our community also have access to community gardens where they can grow their own vegetables, flowers, etc. if they so choose. There are too few such places in Skagit County now to accommodate the many Mount Vernon residents, for example, who live in apartments.

This kind of urban environment also helps meet the ethical obligation we have to share the world with other living things. Those of us living in the county’s urban areas know that even in those settings migratory birds return yearly from Mexico and Central and South America. Your recommendations include a laudable goal of open space protection within and between Urban Growth Areas for a variety of reasons including habitat connectivity for wildlife. We strongly support this vision. Even urban areas can provide effective habitat for wild birds in migration and during breeding and do so more effectively when there are links to less developed or undeveloped habitat. Measures to ensure this accommodation of the wild world throughout the county should definitely be part of Skagit’s future.

#### Economic importance of birds and birding

- Skagit County is a major destination for both serious and occasional birders: they spend money here and could be better accommodated.

- Birding is part of the county's natural resource economy.
- Simple measures could improve the accommodation of this economic activity.

The Envision Skagit report recognizes the importance of natural resources to the county's economy and urges a sustainable approach to their utilization, which we of course support. The references are to resource extraction; logging, for example. With the exception of the wintering Bald Eagles upriver on the Skagit, the economic importance of birds tends to be little recognized and undervalued as an aspect of the natural resource economy here. Thousands of birders from near and far are drawn to Skagit County to see Snow Geese, Trumpeter and Tundra Swans, Bald Eagles, Samish Flats raptors, sea birds and waterfowl. The LaConner Chamber of Commerce has recognized this fact, and the organizers of Edison's new bird festival have too, but otherwise this aspect of the county's economy is so far ignored or treated as a problem rather than an opportunity. The birders who irritate local residents of Fir Island and Samish Flats by pulling over to see a rare Gyrfalcon or watch a Short-eared Owl hunting the fields finish the day eating meals at local restaurants or staying the night in Skagit County lodging. On a winter weekend, poll the birders stopping at the Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife parking area on Samish Flats, and you will find groups from California, Portland, Seattle, the Olympic Peninsula, and more.

Skagit Audubon members envision a future in which non-birders and county agencies and officials value birds in their own right but also as an important aspect of the local economy and, as a result, take action to better accommodate people who come here to simply look at birds. In this future, Samish Flats and Fir Island, for example, would have more areas where people can safely stop and watch birds. Area residents could earn additional income by providing parking where public property is unavailable for that purpose. Viewing platforms and universally accessible paths would be welcome and valuable amenities. Local residents could provide paid guide service as in other places in the world that attract birders. Old Northern State Hospital has one of the most important roost sites for migrating Vaux's Swifts, a Washington State listed species. In the fall, ten to twenty thousand of these birds converge at dusk to enter the tall stack at the hospital's former heating plant. Spectacular natural phenomena similar to this one are the basis for highly successful festivals at other locations and could be here too. Bird watching is already part of the sustainable natural resource economy of Skagit County and could readily play a larger role.

#### Floodplain development and dikes

- We support the Envision plan's ideas on reducing development in floodplains plus stronger measures.
- Dike management needs updating.

The Envision Skagit plan could be stronger about development in the 100-year floodplain. There clearly needs to be improved flood protection before the inevitable disaster takes place, but such improvements should not provide an excuse for further development in the flood-plain.

Protection against one hundred-year floods is still only a gamble. Skagit Audubon supports the plan's suggestion for an active program to transfer development rights out of the floodplain. This would also have positive benefits for the protection of Puget Sound's threatened environmental quality.

Skagit Audubon sees a future in which dike management is driven by a larger and updated vision. Dike districts lose public support when general public funding supports capital improvements and repairs related to dikes (e.g. Fisher Slough; Army Corps repairs in the vicinity of the I-5 bridge), but public access is forbidden. People wanting to watch birds and people wishing to simply take a walk need access to places to do these simple, positive things. We see a future in which the dike districts gain public support by providing recreational access to dikes wherever feasible and to lands between the dikes and the river. We support contributing general tax funds to dike maintenance along with a provision for general public access and participation in dike district elections. We note that newer thinking by dike engineers is disputing the apparent notion that grass is the only acceptable vegetation on dikes. Woody vegetation has been planted on some Skagit dikes, and we would like to see further investigation of such treatments. These newer concepts need to be explored to see if Skagit's dike system could double as habitat corridors for birds and other wildlife, a function which brush and trees would support. This fits with the committee's recommendations on connectivity.

#### Regional cooperation on regional-scale issues

- A cooperative approach needs to extend to the multi-county scale to effectively address certain challenges.

We support the Envision Skagit report's emphasis on the importance of a cooperative approach among the cities and other entities within the county. We would take this further and envision a future in which a multi-county approach is taken to challenges and opportunities such as:

- Increased regional public transportation for workers, students, and others.
- Large scale industrial projects affecting multiple counties and communities; e.g. coal trains & terminals.
- The future increased challenge of allocating Skagit River water when diminished North Cascades glaciers fall further short of providing sufficient summer flows.
- Energy generation when diminished river flows result in reduced hydropower.

The Envision Skagit report is a thought-provoking and significant contribution to motivating our community to think seriously about the future. We appreciate the opportunity to participate with these comments, however incomplete, and look forward to helping make this envisioned future a reality.

Sincerely,

Timothy Manns  
President, Skagit Audubon Society