

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION & SUMMARY

The primary purpose of comprehensive planning is to help the public and elected officials define objectives, set priorities, and seek solutions to long-term issues. The Comprehensive Plan provides a sense of direction, a broad overview of where a community is (existing conditions) and where it is going (trends and vision). It is a way of assuring that a community's health, safety and general welfare are protected by striving for and creating a better, more healthful, efficient and aesthetically pleasing environment in which to live.

The purpose of the Skagit County Comprehensive Plan is to address these principles within the framework mandates by the state Growth Management Act and to provide goals, policies, and strategies for managing growth over the next 20 years.

SKAGIT COUNTY PERSPECTIVE

Skagit County is located in the northwestern portion of Washington State. It encompasses 1,735 square miles, ranks 21st in geographic size among the state's counties and had approximately 110,900 residents as of April 2005.

Skagit County was established in 1883 and named after the river and one of the Indian tribes that lived along its banks. The Skagit River is the third largest in the western United States, flowing 78 miles through a diverse and beautiful land. The county stretches from the crest of the rugged North Cascade Mountains on the east, down through the fertile valleys, to saltwater beaches. The topography of Skagit County ranges from sea level to 8,966-foot Mount Logan and is reflected in the terms used for such places as the Skagit Flats, western islands, upper Skagit, Sauk, and Samish River Valleys, and the Cascades.

Skagit County has a marine climate affected by its proximity to Puget Sound and the Pacific Ocean resulting in mild winters and warm, drier summers. Agriculture is the dominant factor in Skagit County's economy and community character. Farming and ranching have been an important part of the community's heritage since early settlement in the 1800's. The Skagit Valley is regarded as one of the most fertile valleys in the world, producing major commodities, specialty crops, and vegetable seeds and flowers with unique market niches. Forest lands, which predominate much of the county's upland landscape, are another significant natural resource. The practice of forestry (logging, reforestation, and timber management) was established in the earliest stages of settlement in the county. Large-scale commercial forestry remains a vital industry and is practiced on well over 300,000 acres. Lands designated for forest resource production account for 29% of Skagit County's total land

area of 1.1 million acres. Fishing - commercial and recreational - is another natural resource industry that has influenced Skagit County economically and culturally. The mining industry similarly has much importance to the County economy. In addition to natural resource-based industries, the economy has diversified to include strengths in the areas of retail sales, contracting, fabrication, and services.

LINKING THE PAST TO THE PRESENT

The Skagit Valley was inhabited for thousands of years before the arrival of settlers in the 19th Century. The cession of tribal lands through the Point Elliot Treaty of January 22, 1855 greatly changed traditional Native Americans' ways and beliefs. Land titles and surveys were alien ideas to the customs of Native Americans, but were basic to the farmers settling in the valley.

A fern-covered prairie on March's Point seems to have been the site of the first white settlement. By 1870, other new settlements were located elsewhere in the Flats, although there was still very little development. Construction of dikes enabled the growth of farming on the rich delta land.

By 1890 railroads were instrumental in supporting the farming, logging, and mining industries, featuring a line from Portland, Oregon to Anacortes. During the 1890s, two north-south lines were completed through the county, connecting it with Seattle and Vancouver. By 1901, the east-west line was extended from Hamilton through Concrete and into Rockport.

The Skagit River has played an important role in the history of Skagit County. Tribal settlements were located near salt water and along the rivers. For new settlers in the logging business, the Skagit provided the means to transport timber, although logjams hindered activity until 1889. By 1890, most of the land next to water had been logged off, and operations moved further inland using animals and machines to transport timber.

The River and Sound also furnished an abundance of resources. Salmon provided an important food source for the early tribal peoples. Commercial fishing by new settlers began in the 1890s with the building of fish-processing plants and by 1900, clams and oysters were also being canned. By the turn of the century, however, over-fishing had reduced available stocks and experiments with fish hatcheries sought to supplement dwindling fish runs. Over the next thirty years, canneries continued to be productive in Anacortes. When the commercial fishing industry declined, other marine industries emerged, such as boat-building and recreational boating. Today, the Anacortes and La Conner marinas are among the largest in the State of Washington.

Skagit County separated from Whatcom in 1883. In 1884, La Conner was established as the temporary county seat with its established port and considerable population. The county's first newspaper, the Skagit News, garnered sufficient support to make Mount Vernon as the county seat and a vote later in 1884 confirmed the change.

COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING IN SKAGIT COUNTY

Skagit County has a 40-year commitment to the value of planning. The first Comprehensive Plan was adopted in 1965 and was the guiding document for the physical development of the county until the growth management era.

The 1965 Comprehensive Plan:

- *Set the stage for farmland preservation.*
- *Identified logical areas for industrial and residential uses.*
- *Called for avoiding development in areas sensitive to or suffering from pollution.*
- *Introduced the County's first zoning and subdivision regulations.*

During the period 1970 – 1990, the County prepared district plans; updated the zoning code; adopted joint sphere of influence agreements with the cities and towns; worked with the tribes to prepare joint plans for the reservations; and began working with the cities and towns on growth management plans.

Figure 1-1 illustrates the progression of County planning through the pre- and post-growth management eras.

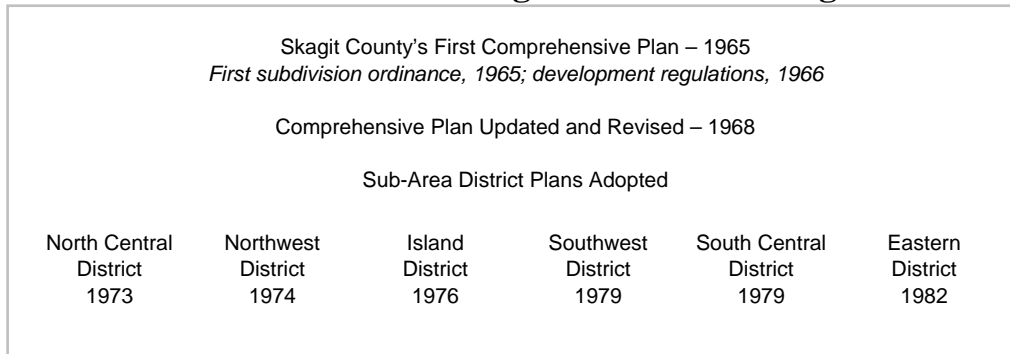
GROWTH MANAGEMENT ACT

Starting in October of 1990, the County initiated planning as required by the Growth Management Act (GMA), adopted by the State Legislature earlier that year. This began more than six years of work by the community, Planning Commission, and the Board of County Commissioners leading to the May, 1997 adoption of the current Comprehensive Plan. In addition, the County worked with the cities to draft the Countywide Planning Policies which were adopted in July of 1992 and amended in 1996 and 2000. The Countywide Planning Policies support the thirteen state-mandated GMA goals for compact urban growth, reducing sprawl, and addressing transportation, housing, economic development, property rights, permits, natural resource industries, open space and recreation, environment, citizen participation, public facilities and services, and historic preservation. The Countywide Planning Policies serve as the legal backbone of the comprehensive plans of the County and cities.

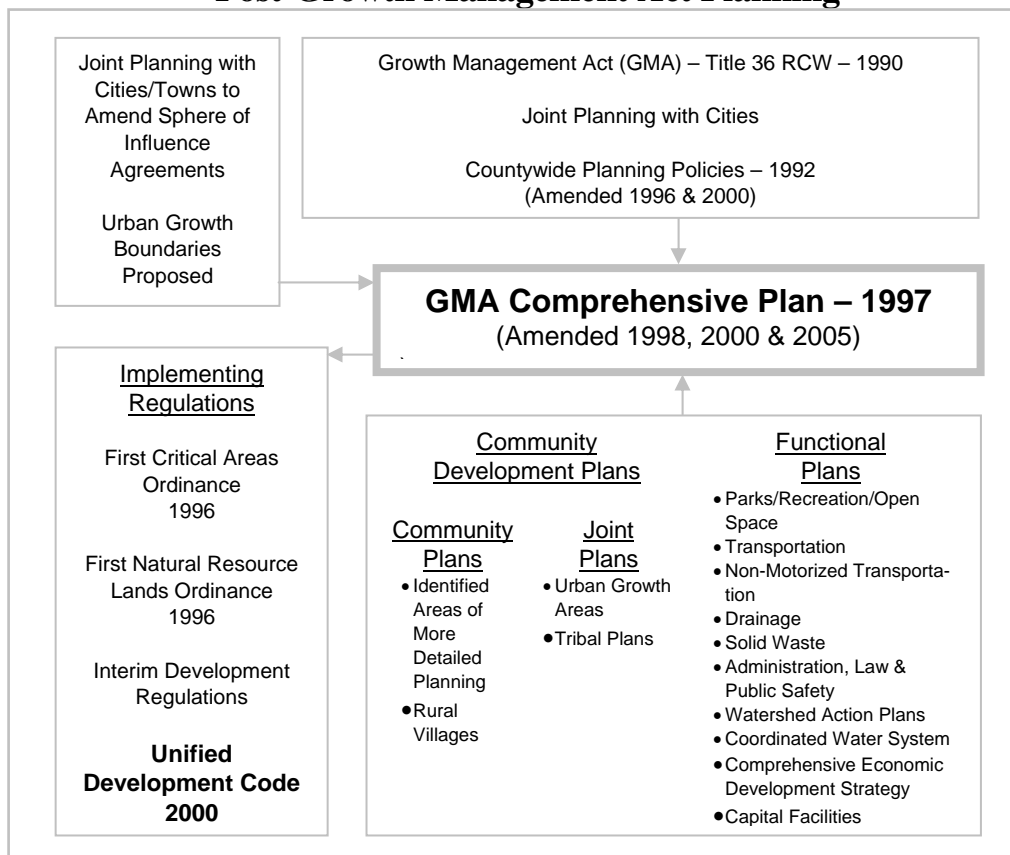
Planning Framework

Figure 1-1

Pre-Growth Management Act Planning



Post-Growth Management Act Planning



PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

From the start of the GMA era, the County embraced the GMA requirement for “early and continuous” public involvement. This included a wide-ranging visioning process, creation of citizens’ advisory committees for the key plan elements, newsletters and media articles, videotapes, and presentations and briefings to community and interest groups. Since the Plan was first adopted, the County has used the Planning Commission as the primary focus for public outreach and communication. Community planning processes for Bayview Ridge and South Fidalgo Island involve appointed advisory committees. Natural resource advice is provided in part by the Agricultural Advisory Board and the Forest Advisory Board. Other advisory committees have worked on such issues as mineral resource lands and Master Planned Resorts.

For the 2005 update, the Board of County Commissioners appointed a 15-member advisory committee to assist the Planning & Development Services department in reviewing the Plan and formulating recommendations for amendments. As time goes on, the County employs a wider range of outreach procedures such as open houses, the *Community Report* newsletter, and the Skagit County website to reach the community. A detailed listing of major public involvement activities may be found in Appendix B to the Plan.

PLANNING FOR TOMORROW

The GMA is intended to direct local (county and city) planning to create blueprints for growth over a 20-year period. The basic objective of the legislation is to guide and encourage local governments in assessing their goals, evaluating their community assets, writing comprehensive plans, and implementing those plans through regulations and innovative techniques to encompass their vision of the future. The Growth Management Act invests local government with significant decision making power. This “bottom up” approach is consistent with long held traditions of local governance in this state.

THE VISION: A COMPREHENSIVE AND BALANCED PLANNING APPROACH

VISIONING PROCESS

From the fall of 1990 through the spring of 1991, citizens worked at home and at public workshops to voice their visions for the future. Participants across the county said they wanted to preserve the high quality of life, strive for government efficiency, support economic opportunities, increase housing choices, ensure that transportation facilities and services are available to serve development at time of occupancy and use (concurrency), provide for an efficient land-use pattern, preserve rural, resource and ecologically fragile areas for future generations, respect property rights and maintain opportunities for citizen participation and involvement throughout Skagit County's planning processes.

MAJOR THEMES OF THE COMMUNITY VISION

All of the goals, objectives and policies of the Comprehensive Plan are based on these community vision statements and are an expansion of the Countywide Planning Policies and State GMA goals:

Preserve the high quality of life: Residents of Skagit County choose to live here for many reasons: natural beauty, clean air, good jobs, a good place to create a home and family. This plan seeks to foster this high quality of life for residents and their children by providing for social, cultural, educational, economic, recreational, civic, transit, health, and safety needs.

Strive for government efficiency: This plan calls for efficient delivery of services in a cost-effective way by:

- *Concentrating infrastructure investments and service delivery to support development patterns near cities and towns where a full range of local services are or can be made available.*
- *Looking to Skagit County to provide certain countywide, regional facilities and services.*
- *Relying primarily upon cities, towns and special purpose districts as the providers of local facilities and services appropriate to serve those local needs, except where the County is a local service provider.*

Support economic opportunities: This plan strives to promote a strong and diverse economy for Skagit County residents through policies and programs that promote new business opportunities, increase family wage jobs and create a predictable regulatory environment for businesses and citizens. Sustainable economic development efforts will focus on providing all communities with a balance of jobs and housing and helping communities with redevelopment or new economic initiatives.

Increase the housing choices for all residents: Skagit County unincorporated residents live in a wide variety of home types: single family houses with yards, large rural lots, duplexes, apartments, and mobile homes. This plan seeks to increase housing opportunities for all residents (families, individuals, seniors, and persons with special needs). The plan promotes more choices for both owners and renters alike, such as single family homes on smaller lots, creative opportunities for all types of home ownership, and high quality housing design that fits with surrounding neighborhoods and is located closer to jobs, in particular within UGAs.

Ensure that necessary transportation facilities and services are available to serve development at the time of occupancy and use: This plan provides a basis for targeting road and transit investments where growth is desired and for equitable contributions to the transportation system by new development.

Balance urban uses and environmental protection: This plan promotes an efficient and effective land use pattern within urban growth areas that respects environmental values by balancing urban uses with nature and open space. This will be achieved through careful site planning that maximizes developable land while respecting natural systems. This plan also proposes that the County consider community and joint planning to ensure natural systems continue functioning at a smaller geographical level while allowing the economy to expand.

Protect and retain rural lifestyles: This plan seeks to maintain the unique rural lifestyle for which Skagit County is widely known and cherished. Skagit County's rural communities and open spaces require protection and conservation from urban sprawl and suburban development patterns. Rural community character and open spaces are a valued part of Skagit County's diversity.

Protect and conserve agriculture, forest and mineral resource lands: Natural resource lands, such as farms and timber lands, provide economic, social, cultural and environmental benefits. This plan ensures that these areas, including mineral resource lands, continue to be viable today and into the future.

Protect and conserve the environment and ecologically sensitive areas, and preclude development and land uses which are incompatible with critical areas: This plan recognizes that the environment is an important public resource. Protecting and conserving the environment and ecologically sensitive areas is in the community's best interest. Development of areas susceptible to natural hazards may lead to inefficient use of limited public resources, jeopardize environmental resource functions and values, subject persons and property to unsafe conditions, and affect the quality of life.

Respect Property Rights: This plan respects private property rights by assuring that regulatory and administrative actions do not result in an unconstitutional taking of private property. Skagit County, in exercising its land use regulatory authority to protect the public health, safety and general welfare (Article XI Section 11 of the State Constitution), must respect private property rights by not exceeding the constitutional limits on its authority.

Encourage Citizen Participation and Involvement: This plan derives its strength from the thousands of citizens who have participated throughout the planning process to develop a vision for Skagit County's future. Skagit County has a diverse and vocal population whose opinions continually shape public policy. The development of Skagit County's Comprehensive Plan is the product of a planning process that included extensive public participation. Procedures provided for broad dissemination of all plan proposals and alternatives, opportunities for written comments, public meetings after effective notice, provision for open discussion, communication programs, information services and consideration of and response to public comments.

STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES THROUGH LOCAL PLANNING

To be successful, plans must address a broad spectrum of issues that affect a community. The plans must address social as well as physical infrastructure needs. Skagit County's community planning efforts were designed to strengthen communities at three geographic levels: countywide, community, and inter-jurisdictional (with cities, towns, tribes, and other institutions). Functional plans overlay all three community-planning levels. At each planning level, issues and needs vary widely. Each plan will be tailored to those unique characteristics and specific issues. Countywide plans are regional in nature, community plans are defined by watershed boundaries, existing development patterns, or other physical features, and joint plans primarily address cities, towns, and Tribal Reservations and their Urban Growth Areas. Community plans will address the full range of issues for a healthy community, such as public safety, health and human services as well as land use and infrastructure. This menu approach allows the geographic scope of a plan to be determined based on local physical and natural features, political boundaries, issues and concerns.

Countywide Plan: A Regional, Countywide Perspective

The Skagit County Comprehensive Plan seeks to manage growth by protecting natural resource lands, open space and rural areas, and establishing Urban Growth Areas where development is directed. This Plan:

- ensures efficient use of land by minimizing the public costs and adverse impacts of growth;
- avoids incompatible rural and urban uses by reducing sprawl;
- provides efficient and safe transportation networks;
- supports coordinated networks for open spaces, greenbelts, and recreation;
- protects critical areas and environmentally sensitive lands;
- maintains and improves the quality of air and land resources;
- minimizes risk to public health and safety; and
- preserves urban and rural landscapes, lifestyles, character, and features.

This Plan establishes the most appropriate uses of land in unincorporated Skagit County through the year 2025. Broad land use designations have been adopted to provide the basis for regulating uses on natural resource lands, urban growth areas, rural areas, and open spaces. Natural resource lands are where Skagit County will through conservation and protection measures promote long-term, commercially significant agriculture, forest, and mineral resource uses. Urban growth areas include incorporated (city and town) areas and unincorporated areas appropriate for urban growth through the year 2025. Rural areas include rural activities and uses that are not suitable for urban intensity or natural resource uses that do not meet the GMA standard of long-term commercial significance. Open space areas are lands with regional importance that have been set aside, dedicated, designated or reserved for public or private use or enjoyment for either active or passive recreation, scenic amenities, natural resources, or for the protection of environmentally sensitive areas.

Community Plans: A Sub-Regional Approach

Community plans are more detailed plans for smaller geographic areas that address location-specific issues. Site-specific land-use designations and zoning may result to take into account these local issues and needs. Community plans provide an opportunity for integrating land use, infrastructure and human service delivery at a more up-closer level than is possible with the Comprehensive Plan.

Joint Plans: Creating Partnerships with Cities, Towns, Tribal Communities and Rural Villages

- *Urban Growth Area plans* seek to reduce taxpayer costs by focusing the expenditure of public funds, encouraging concentrated development, and increasing choices for housing and economic development. By directing urban growth to areas within and near cities and towns, growth will be focused in those areas where services can best be provided by cities, towns, special purpose districts and the County. Urban Growth Area plans will strengthen local character and make urban areas desirable places to live while ensuring that future generations will continue to enjoy the best qualities of the Skagit Valley, have choices for affordable places to live, obtain good quality jobs and have a high quality of life. These plans focus on collaborative actions between the County and its cities and towns as established in the Countywide Planning Policies and the Framework Agreement.
- *Rural Village plans* provide an opportunity for rural residents to define and shape the future of existing, historic unincorporated rural communities. Rural Villages contribute to rural housing options and provide employment opportunities and limited commercial-retail services for rural residents. Rural Villages will assist in providing for a variety of rural densities by allowing higher density housing than is permitted in the surrounding rural and natural resource areas. Rural Villages provide activity centers where rural residents and others can gather, work, shop, entertain, and reside. Site-specific land-use designations and zoning will take into account local issues and needs.
- *Tribal Community plans* are unique in that they result from coordinated planning processes involving a tribal community and Skagit County. Skagit County and the local tribes have worked diligently to create better communities for their residents. For example, the Swinomish Rural Village was established in 1988 and modified as an Urban Growth Area in 1997. Agreements were reached to provide for joint County/Tribe comprehensive planning efforts. In 1994, the Board of County Commissioners adopted a resolution recognizing the Swinomish Tribal Community, Upper Skagit and Sauk-Suiattle Tribes as sovereign governments. This creates a formal government-to-government relationship since both entities regulate land use activities affecting Indian and non-Indian interests. Tribal Community plans provide policy guidance for future development (both public and private),

land stewardship, and resource protection. The importance of Tribal Community plans is evident as both jurisdictions seek to: assure a quality of life which is deemed desirable to both present and future generations; confront the issues of land and resource management; and balance the interests of Indians and non-Indians.

Functional Plans: Providing Countywide Facilities or Services

Functional plans are detailed plans for facilities and services and other governmental activities, such as:

- Transportation
- Parks
- Solid Waste
- Stormwater
- Economic Development
- Housing Needs
- Water
- Schools
- Emergency Services
- Natural Hazards

Some functional plans are operational or programmatic, which means they guide daily management decisions or include the specific details of facility design and location. Functional plans are prepared by Skagit County, independent special districts, and other public agencies.

Capital improvement programs (CIPs) are important components of functional plans as these plans identify needs, costs, and funding mechanisms for facilities and services. CIP plans distinguish between capacity improvements needed for new growth versus improvements to meet general public health, safety and welfare needs.

THE 2005 UPDATE

The Growth Management Act requires local jurisdictions to review and update their plans and development regulations every seven years. Skagit County and all of the cities and towns are in a cycle for updates at 2005, 2012, 2019 and beyond. At each of these points, the 20-year planning horizon is extended and the resulting growth forecasts must be addressed in terms of land needs, infrastructure, and the other GMA factors. The plans can be amended annually as well, but the seven-year update requires a more comprehensive review. The County Comprehensive Plan has undergone substantial reviews and revision since 1997 for a variety of reasons. Consequently, the 2005 update was focused in three ways:

- *A check-up to consider the durability and consistency of the goals and policies. This includes continued consistency with GMA and any recent updates to the act, related state statutes, and evolving local circumstances.*

- *A clean-up to remove or update old information and directives and reduce redundancies.*
- *Development of new goals and policies to provide additional guidance for future planning and implementation.*

GROWTH FORECAST

In 2003, elected officials serving as the Growth Management Act Steering Committee adopted a county population target of 149,080 for 2025, or 46,100 new residents over the next 20 years. The Steering Committee's decision was based on the recommendation of a technical committee of County, city and town planners who reviewed the population forecast range by the state Office of Financial Management (OFM) and the local ability to accommodate growth. The OFM forecast a range from 139,253 to 198,992. The adopted number of 149,080 is approximately half-way between the Office of Financial Management's low and medium estimates. The target was further broken down into numbers for the cities, towns and their municipal UGAs (96,500), the County and tribal UGAs (9,250), and the rural area population (43,330). These numbers are used as the basis for comprehensive plan updates in each jurisdiction. In addition, the Growth Management Act Steering Committee adopted an employment target for 2025 that – converted to acreage – works out to nearly 3,500 acres of developable commercial and industrial land for the urban areas. This is only 129 acres more than the adopted number for 2015 contained in the current Countywide Planning Policies and reflected in existing Urban Growth Area boundaries. The process is documented in *Population & Employment Forecasting & Allocation, December, 2003*.

UPDATE PROCESS

Two parallel activities were initiated in 2004. First, the County prepared a scope of work for the update process and formulated a schedule for the review. The Board of County Commissioners appointed a 15-member Steering Committee representing various interests: resource, economic, property rights, environmental, growth management, urban, rural, community, and tribal. The Committee's role was to advise the Planning and Development Services department in the review of the Comprehensive Plan goals and policies. This included a year of intensive meetings resulting in recommended revisions that were sent to the Planning Commission for further review. During this period, Planning and Development Services conducted outreach via the County's *Community Report*, the website, media releases, presentations to community groups, and open houses.

The second update activity included the public docketing of policy recommendations and proposals for changes to the land use map. Citizens submitted these recommendations and proposals to the County. The policy recommendations were integrated into the Steering Committee review and recommendations. The mapping proposals were screened by Planning and Development Services staff, previewed by the Board of County Commissioners, and then evaluated for consistency with the goals and policies of the Plan. Other mapping proposals

were brought forward by Planning and Development Services following suggestions by other advisory bodies and the Board.

The draft Plan was published in November 2005, commencing review under the State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA), as well as public review and comment, Planning Commission hearings and deliberations, and ultimately transmittal of a recommendation to the Board of County Commissioners.

In addition to the Comprehensive Plan, the 2005 update also examined the adopted Unified Development Code and produced recommendations for amendments to the Code to be implemented over the next year. This is described in a separate report to the Planning Commission and BOCC.

UPDATE THEMES

Several themes emerged during the 2005 update process regarding the following needs:

A land use management database – The County has less data regarding the inventory of “buildable” lands, legal lots, and associated development capacity than is desired for growth management planning. Building such a data base is an expensive task and probably cannot be compiled at one time. Rather, the County should initiate the development of the database on an incremental basis – perhaps in conjunction with the phasing of community plans.

A predictable program of community planning – The Plan identifies both specific and general areas that need another, more specific type of planning to address localized issues and conditions. This program should be established by determining the scope of community plans and then adopting a schedule based on priorities of need, funding, and other criteria. This process is important as a way to address more specific applications of designating local areas

Additional work with the cities on urban growth planning – The Countywide Planning Policies should be updated to address the provision of infrastructure and other government services within Urban Growth Areas, Urban Growth Area expansion and development standards, an affordable housing strategy, and other common issues.

More emphasis on the preservation of the resource land base – Farming, forestry and other resource activities are threatened by the loss of the land to non-resource uses. In particular, the transfer of resource lands to non-profit corporations and other agencies for purposes of habitat protection or enhancement results in farm and forest land being taken out of natural resource production.

Closer coordination with natural hazard avoidance. Both urban and rural area planning in Skagit County need to be more sensitive to the threats posed by devastating natural hazard events, particularly flooding. UGA expansion, rural community development, public facility siting, and other forms of growth in identified hazard areas should be avoided through integrated comprehensive and hazard mitigation plans.

More and better incentives – The toolbox of methods for achieving the County’s growth management goals for the preservation of resource lands, protection of critical areas, and preservation of property rights should be expanded. These tools include the purchase and transfer of development rights as well as density “credits” for producing affordable housing and other desired results.

Readers’ Guide

The Comprehensive Plan is organized into elements and appendices. In addition to elements required by the Growth Management Act – land use, rural, housing, transportation, utilities, economic development, and parks and recreation – the Comprehensive Plan includes these other elements:

- **Natural Resource Conservation Element**
Goals and policies for agriculture, forestry, minerals, and rural resources.
- **Environment Element**
Policy basis for the County’s critical areas regulations.
- **Shoreline Element**
Policy basis for the Shoreline Master Program.
- **Plan Implementation and Monitoring Element**
Guidance for further subarea or functional planning.

Each element contains two parts:

- A “chapter” containing land use goals and policies, underlying Growth Management Act goals, and Countywide Planning Policies, and
- A “profile” of the intent, context, and history related to the goals and policies.

The appendices contain: [Appendices to be added at later date]

- A glossary of terms;
- Abstracts of other County plans adopted by reference;
- A history of public involvement, and
- Other supporting materials.