

March 13, 2009

Jeroldine Hallberg
Skagit County Planning
1800 Continental Place
Mount Vernon, WA 98273

Dear Ms. Hallberg:

On behalf of The Nature Conservancy of Washington, I would like to commend the County for the development of the Skagit Countywide UGA Open Space Concept Plan. We believe the Plan has the potential to advance multiple community interests and express our support for implementing the Plan toward three mutually supporting goals:

- the protection of fish and wildlife habitat,
- the preservation of working farm and forestlands, and
- the enhancement of human quality of life.

The results from the County's public survey conducted in preparation for this Plan make it clear these are all high priorities for the local community.

The Skagit is widely known as a regional treasure – supporting some of the state's largest salmon and migratory bird populations, including Puget Sound's largest Chinook salmon, chum salmon, pink salmon, steelhead trout, bull trout, shorebird, waterfowl and raptor populations. Through the years, multiple surveys have indicated that this community places an exceptionally high value on the Skagit's natural assets. Many thousands of people come annually to fish, bird watch, and hunt the Skagit Valley. Yet those who live in the Skagit's primary population centers have relatively minimal access to these treasures. Lifestyle issues, particularly obesity and declining life expectancy, are predominant nationwide and are linked to the disappearance or lack of access and utilization of our open space.

Except for those who live in Anacortes, those who desire to live next to or have access to the scenery and open space which they love need to live in our rural areas – increasing pressure for sprawl onto working farms and forestlands. Those living in Mount Vernon and Burlington who wish to take a walk for more than a couple miles, or visit some semblance of a natural river corridor, need to drive for miles to find a place to do so.

The Skagit, known as one of 2 or 3 salmon strongholds in the state, changes from a nationally recognized wild and scenic river upstream from Sedro Woolley to a highly constrained channel, largely blocked from view by levees, as it passes through our urban areas. Millions of dollars have been invested in protecting and restoring the Skagit upstream of our urban centers and

downstream at the river's mouth. Yet many of those who live here have limited access to the river despite surveys indicating their desire to have more access to it.

It is not coincidental that the concept plan therefore focuses much of its emphasis on the river corridor. But creating access to and a greenway around the river need not only benefit wildlife habitat or quality of life issues. It can enhance our local economy. In many cities around the state and country, rivers are the focus of community and economic development. Spokane and Yakima are two examples of cities in which riverfront greenways are both community gathering points and a center for recreational and retail activity. In the lower Skagit Valley, what could represent a major source of free natural capital (the river) has not been exploited.

One of the most pressing economic and human safety issues in the valley is the lack of a significant level of flood control. A river-focused open space plan could help ensure development doesn't occur in the most flood prone areas, thereby reducing risks to people and costs to taxpayers. If a river-focused open space corridor is designed with the County's flood control goals in mind, it could also help support – even help pay for – some of our badly need flood control works.

Working farms and timberland support highly important economic activities, buffer native fish and wildlife habitat, and support many wildlife populations. Skagit County's population is forecasted to double over the next 50 years. I repeat: double. This growth is going to place an incredible burden not only on urban areas, but on our farms and forestlands.

Skagit County and local non-profit organizations have made great progress in protecting farmland through zoning and through the voluntary purchase of development rights. But with another 120,000 people arriving in the foreseeable future, we need to be ever more proactive in protecting farmland. Working forestlands have received little long-term protection to date, except through zoning. The protection of open space corridors around and between UGA's could encourage more compact urban development, provide an important hedge against the continued loss of these economically valuable and ecologically valuable lands and help shape urban form in an attractive way that protects our farms and forests.

Creating a local open space revenue source would enable local jurisdictions and agencies to leverage local dollars to secure state and federal funds. The Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program, for example, is one of the largest funding sources for parks, farmland preservation and wildlife habitat in the state – three of the communities top priorities identified in the survey. Creatively applied, the benefits of this plan to the local community are likely to far outweigh the local costs.

In sum, Skagit County is blessed with one of the most beautiful, biologically important, and economically productive landscapes in the region. Tremendous growth pressures threaten all of these resources: our scenery, the biological richness of this landscape, and working resource lands. Yet it is these things that define our cultural heritage and drive our quality of life. Our urban population has relatively limited access to those resources and without being able to see and touch these things, the desire to maintain them will decrease through time.

The Nature Conservancy strongly encourages the County to look for ways to support and fund open space conservation and to do so in ways that also advance the community's interests in protecting its working farm and forest lands, reducing flood hazards, protecting fish and wildlife, and creating more opportunities for people to enjoy this incredible landscape. Doing so will enhance this valley's quality of life for current and future generations.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bob Carey', with a large, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Bob Carey
Skagit River Program Director