

# Whatcom council seeks to revive transfers of development rights

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A program that would remove the right to build homes from some rural areas and transfer them to cities got a nod of approval on Tuesday, March 11.

The Whatcom County Council approved in a 6 to 1 vote preliminary population and job-growth estimates that will guide updates of the county and cities' 20-year plans, which are due in 2016.

The resolution approved Tuesday calls for 85 percent of the new population in the next 20 years to locate in or near cities. Embedded within the resolution is a request that cities work with the county on a transfer of development rights, or TDR, program.

It's too early to say exactly how such a program would work, but basically it would involve some entity - a city or a developer - purchasing development rights from rural property owners so more homes could be built in a city. Such programs exist to reduce urban sprawl.

A city would be asked to pursue a TDR program only if it requested an expansion of its urban growth area, which is the area surrounding a city that is slated for annexation. Most of the smaller cities already have declared they won't be asking for an urban growth area expansion in the 2016 plan update, but Bellingham has left the option open.

People speaking Tuesday at a public hearing on the population projections opposed the TDR language, saying it would add another cost to development. An estimate used at the hearing was \$5,000 per development right.

That amount would be added to the roughly \$25,000 in permit fees for building a new home in Bellingham, said Linda Twitchell, government affairs director for the Building Industry Association of Whatcom County.

"Please don't add an additional fee because it's the homeowner that's going to end up paying for this," Twitchell told the council.

Supporters within the council majority said the TDR language would give cities an incentive to work with the county on a program that has proven difficult to make work.

Council member Sam Crawford voted against the resolution because he didn't want the TDR wording included. The issue stirs up the political differences between rural landowners and city environmentalists, and Crawford said adding the TDR statements politicized the population projections.

Crawford said the TDR language was injected into the resolution at the "11th hour," two weeks before the public hearing.

"It's not coming at the 11 the hour," said council member Ken Mann, who proposed including the TDR statements. "It's been before us for six years, and all it's ever gotten was lip service. It's time to make this happen."

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