

Envision Skagit Citizen Committee DRAFT Recommendations

June 9
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For discussion with the GMA Steering Committee and Envision Skagit Steering Committee



ENVISION
Skagit
2060

Highlighted recommendations, for discussion with County Commissioners and City Mayors, and Envision Skagit Steering Committee

- **Establish a broad-based regional “smart growth alliance” that calls for a unified approach to Skagit County’s growth, development and conservation of natural resources and the environment.**

This could potentially include the current members of the Skagit Council of Governments but would include non-governmental organizations as well. An alumni committee of Leadership Skagit would recommend organizational details, ideally preceded by a long-range planning exercise with broad community participation, designed to identify shared principles and visions.

- **Modify the Countywide Planning Policy population distribution goals to direct 90 percent of new population growth to urban areas and 10 percent to rural areas, instead of the current 80/20 split. Half of the rural 10% should go toward clustered “conservation developments” and to selected expanded rural villages.**

The reduced development capacity in rural areas implied by these targets should be achieved through a much expanded purchase of development rights program, which builds on the successful Farmland Legacy Program, and also through initiation of a transfer of development rights program. Transferred development rights should be sent to urban areas, as well as to expanded rural villages at Alger and Conway Hill, and to the Town of Hamilton, or to small clustered rural developments where they will have less impact on the environment and will be more efficient to serve with transportation and other infrastructure.

- **Urban Growth Areas (UGAs) should not expand into agricultural lands or the floodplain. Existing urban communities should grow up rather than out, become more compact rather than more sprawling, provide a range of housing options, and mix compatible uses to create more complete, walkable communities, rather than continuing to isolate uses in ways that create ever-greater reliance on the automobile to meet basic daily needs. Expand public transit and non-motorized transportation.**

Higher densities can be achieved gracefully in existing residential neighborhoods through quality infill (e.g., well-designed cottage housing, accessory dwelling units and “granny flats”), but the greatest potential for bringing more residents into the urban environment is through creative and imaginative redevelopment of our historic downtowns and existing commercial strips, malls, and big box centers. In these areas, walkable, mixed use development should be encouraged, with commercial and retail on the ground floor and condominiums and apartments on top, in the range of 2 to 5 stories.



Photo: Beth Dwyer, GGLO



Photo: Bill Kreager



Photo: Bill Kreager

- **Establish a new industrial tax revenue sharing mechanism, to develop a more regional and effective approach to designating and marketing industrial lands, while providing tax revenue benefits in an equitable manner to all participating jurisdictions. Designate 1,600 acres of new industrial land for the future.**

Shared revenues would be distributed based on population to jurisdictions that are accepting their agreed-upon allocations of new growth. Revenue sharing would avoid inter-jurisdictional competition for industrial tax base, allowing industrial land to be sited and zoned rationally out of the floodplain, off of agricultural land, and close to transportation and infrastructure. The 1,600 acres of new industrial land should be located outside of the floodplain and agricultural land, in areas adjacent to or already served by appropriate urban infrastructure, and within reasonable distance of I-5 or SR 20.



Photo: Ozzie Wiese

- **Allow redevelopment of existing cities in the floodplain, including Burlington and Mount Vernon, into mixed-use urban centers.**

Too much has already been invested in existing infrastructure and in existing development that is important to preserve due to its economic, cultural and historic value, to give up on these areas as locations for redevelopment. However, flood risks justify strict building codes, effective evacuation plans, and an improved flood prevention and control system.

- **The cities of Mount Vernon and Burlington should ultimately merge into one, because the strengths of each city address the weaknesses of the other. Discussions to consider logical consolidation of services should begin now.**

Other governmental consolidations may also make sense for reasons of efficiency, but this one has additional compelling reasons based on land use. Essentially the entire City of Burlington is in the floodplain. Mount Vernon has room to grow—and is allocated a large share of the entire county’s future growth—but has an inadequate commercial tax base to pay for the services needed by that additional population. Burlington has a very strong existing commercial tax base. Mount Vernon has no prime locations for adding new commercial areas that are not in the floodplain or agricultural lands. The idea is not new: Sedro Woolley, Concrete, and Bellingham are all products of mergers.

- **Skagit County should strive for no net loss of acreage and total agricultural productivity potential from land zoned for agriculture (Ag-NRL) over coming generations, to help preserve agriculture and food production.**

To accomplish this, the County should initiate the identification of lands for possible addition to Ag-NRL in the near future, and create a plan for rezoning lands to achieve no net loss over time. Lands to consider for replacement of lost Ag-NRL land are those that have high quality agricultural soils and/or display active agriculture use and are located within a reasonable proximity to existing farm operations, with top priority given to parcels that are 40 acres or greater with current agricultural use.



- **Double funding for the Farmland Legacy Program.**

One of the most successful current programs for protecting farmland is the Skagit County Farmland Legacy Program. The program purchases development rights through voluntary sales that provide compensation to landowners and protect private property rights while permanently protecting agriculture land. Doubling funding for this program will accelerate the permanent protection of agricultural land, and would be one major way in which development rights are removed from the Skagit and Samish River floodplains per the recommendation below.

- **Prioritize the floodplain for purchases and transfers of development rights, with a goal of eliminating as much future residential and commercial development in the floodplain as possible.**



This would provide landowners appropriate compensation for loss of development rights and provide farmers continued flexibility to construct barns and other farm-related structures as needed to support farm operations. Minimizing future development in the floodplain avoids conflicts for agriculture with other land uses and protects the best remaining opportunities for ecological restoration in the Skagit and Samish River watersheds.

- **Develop and implement a long-range conservation vision and plan for the entire county.**

Our community needs a long-range conservation plan, just like it needs long-range transportation and development plans; in fact, the two go hand in hand. We must plan for “green infrastructure”—an interconnected network of natural lands and open spaces, including trails—as seriously as any other infrastructure. To achieve environmental and economic goals over the next 50 years, we must identify and protect our most valued open space lands and natural and environmental resources, at the same time as determining where future development should go. This needs to be a broadly shared community vision that is implemented through education, incentives, partnerships and voluntary initiatives, not just regulations.



- **Seek state, federal or international designation for Skagit Valley as a Cultural and Natural Heritage Site.**

The Skagit Valley has some of the state's and world's most productive agricultural soils and remains the most intact agricultural landscape in Western Washington. Skagit Valley is just as worthy of recognition as an outstanding natural area, as the largest watershed in Puget Sound, supporting all five native species of Pacific salmon and an enormous diversity of wildlife. Formal designation at the state, federal, or international level would increase protections from inappropriate development and help secure additional funding for conserving farmland and restoring the ecosystem. Skagit Valley should be nationally and internationally known for the variety and quality of its farm products, fish and shellfish, the sustainable practices of those who live and work here, and the continued majesty of its landscape.

- **Work together collaboratively, in a positive, forward-looking, manner, to protect and restore the Skagit River’s once abundant salmon and steelhead trout runs, the salmon runs of the Samish River and smaller direct tributaries to Puget Sound, and the shellfish along our shorelines.**

Restoration of salmon and shellfish are goals that affect us all, reflect on our stewardship of the Skagit and Samish watersheds, and will require action by all: restraint by fishers; best management practices by farmers; enforcement of critical area and other regulations; good stewardship from all landowners; and restoration.



- **Maintain the current pace of habitat restoration in the middle Skagit River.**



Restoration of dynamic, complex floodplain habitats is important for coho, steelhead, and yearling Chinook salmon, as well as a wide variety of other creatures. Restoration on private land should be cooperative, voluntary, and incentive-based. Ag-NRL lands that are lost should be replaced under the “no net loss” policy above.

Photo: SFEG

- **Fully contained communities (FCCs) should be avoided in Skagit County unless they can achieve their urban densities strictly through transfers of development rights from rural or resource lands, at a ratio of one-to-one.**

If an FCC could achieve its density strictly through one-to-one transfers of development rights from rural or resource lands, it would be worth considering. However, it is generally far better to locate new urban development within or adjacent to existing urban areas, where infrastructure can be extended cost-effectively and impacts on working lands and natural systems can be minimized. If the one-to-one standard means that FCCs are infeasible in Skagit County for the foreseeable future, we find that an acceptable outcome.



As Skagit County’s population grows, opportunities for outdoor recreation will become increasingly important, from hiking trails to improved pedestrian and bicycle facilities as part of the road network, to abundant and affordable athletic fields for children and adults.