

Whatcom 2031 Regional Growth Alternatives Workshops

Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan Update ■ Whatcom County ■ June 2009

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Introduction

“Whatcom 2031” is the County’s effort to plan for the next 20 years of growth by updating the Comprehensive Plan to be consistent with the requirements of the Growth Management Act (GMA). Currently, the County is focusing on the required 10-Year Urban Growth Area (UGA) Review where the County will consider: growth forecasts and allocations, urban growth boundaries, and the future land use map including land uses patterns.

On March 23 and 24, 2009, the County conducted three Regional Growth Alternatives Workshops, held at:

- Birch Bay Bible Community Church • 7039 Jackson Rd • Blaine, WA; Mon, March 23 • 7:00–9:00 p.m.
- Bellingham Public Library Lecture Room • 210 Central Ave • Bellingham, WA; Tues, March 24 • 9:00–11:00 a.m.
- Meridian High School cafeteria • 194 W Laurel Rd • Bellingham, WA; Tues, March 24 7:00–9:00 p.m.

The three interactive meetings represented the second round of community outreach focused on the County’s Comprehensive Plan Update. Nearly 65 citizens attended the three meetings combined. The purpose of the Regional Growth Alternatives Workshops was to collect citizen ideas about UGA boundary adjustments and growth allocations to help formulate mitigation measures to be included in an environmental impact statement (EIS). This document summarizes the workshops and results, as well as highlights previous public participation efforts.

Workshop Goals

The intent of the workshop was to share the latest regional growth alternatives and environmental suitability analysis criteria to gather input to help inform the project team’s environmental impact statement (EIS) preparation.

The format offered a variety of elements, including a brief presentation to inform and provide context; question and answer period, a suitability analysis criteria prioritization exercise; and break-out groups. The structure was intended to encourage discussion and comment on four key issues:

- How should we prioritize additions to UGAs that are undersized, or subtractions to oversized UGAs?
- What should we do if more or less growth comes than we planned?

- How can we best direct growth away from rural areas and towards urban communities?
- Should growth be focused on Bellingham or should a greater share go to other urban areas?

Notification

In mid-March, a workshop announcement was emailed to community organizations and project stakeholders, who then forwarded the announcement on to their constituents and members. A news release was distributed to local newspapers on March 13, 2009. Other recent media included articles and workshop announcements in local newspapers.

Materials

Participants were asked to sign in upon their arrival, then given a meeting agenda, project fact sheet, workshop comment sheet, and comment card. A gallery of maps illustrating urban growth areas and natural and built environment features were hung around the room. Base maps and discussion questions for use by small groups were available at tables. A copy of materials is provided in Appendix A.

Format

The three workshops followed the same format, with a welcome and introductions, presentation, question and answer session, break-out groups, and a final recap of key ideas from each small group of citizen participants.

Melinda Posner, the consultant team's workshop facilitator, welcomed meeting participants, thanked them for their involvement, and introduced County Council members present. At two of the meetings, council member Barbara Brenner provided opening remarks, and at one meeting council member Seth Fleetwood addressed workshop participants.

Lisa Grueter, Senior Planner, ICF Jones & Stokes presented information about the alternatives and the urban growth suitability analysis; this information was also included in the workshop fact sheet.

Melinda Posner explained the purpose of the workshop series was to gather community feedback the alternatives and suitability analysis criteria. She reviewed the meeting format and encouraged participants to submit their comments via comment card, letter or email.

In Birch Bay, the general question and answer session was followed by a prioritization exercise addressing the suitability analysis criteria, and then by break-out group sessions. At meetings in Bellingham, the general question and answer session was followed by a small group break out session.

Breakout sessions at all meetings were structured as follows:

- Participants counted off into between 3 and 5 groups
- Aerials, maps, large sheets were provided with pre-printed questions (see below), allowing participants to self-direct their discussion.
- Each group recorded answers to questions on large sheet and base map.
- Staff roamed the room to answer break-out group questions, and keep the agenda moving.

The discussion questions at the meetings included:

Table 1. Workshop Small Group Break-Out Questions

Birch Bay Workshop Questions	Bellingham Public Library and Meridian High School Workshop Questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ By 2031, what is your preferred population growth level for Birch Bay in the range of 3,240 and 6,220? Why? ▪ By 2031, what is your preferred job growth level for Birch Bay in the range of 200 to 1,400? Why? ▪ How would you prioritize changes to the UGA?* ▪ What should we do if more or less growth comes than we planned? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How would you prioritize additions to urban growth areas that are undersized, or subtractions from urban growth areas that are oversized? ▪ What should we do if more or less growth comes than we planned? ▪ How can we best direct growth away from rural areas and towards cities and urban communities? ▪ Should growth continue to be focused in Bellingham or should a greater share of growth go to other urban communities?

*Notes: The original question was "how would you prioritize subtractions to the UGA?" Several citizens did not concur with the land capacity analysis conclusions that there is an oversupply of residential and employment capacity.

Additionally, individuals could fill out a comment sheet with the same questions to allow for ideas that may differ from the small group sessions. (See Appendix A)

Other Input

The County has prepared a public participation plan. To date the County held three workshops in fall 2008 on citizens' visions and values for the future. The County also issued a questionnaire in fall 2008. About 100 citizens attended the workshops and 387 completed questionnaires. Citizen input has fed into the development of the growth options under consideration, such as testing a Bellingham-centric focus versus a greater share of growth to small urban communities.

Prior to setting the range of alternatives for study in the EIS, the County conducted a 21-day scoping period taking written comments. On February 17, 2009, the County held a day long open house followed by a joint County Planning Commission and County Council public hearing.

The Regional Growth Alternatives Workshops held on March 23 and 24, 2009 were intended to collect citizen ideas as the County and cities consider UGA boundary adjustments and growth allocations.

Results of the public process to date can be found at:

www.co.whatcom.wa.us/pds/2031.

Upcoming public comment opportunities include a written comment period after issuance of a Draft EIS in May, which would be at least 30 days in length. Planning Commission and County Council hearings would also be held in the summer and fall as the County considers various UGA and Rural growth allocations and associated plan amendments. More information is available at the website address above.

Results

Workshop 1: Birch Bay

Location: Birch Bay Bible Community Church

7039 Jackson Rd • Blaine, WA

Date: Mon, March 23 • 7:00–9:00 p.m.

Meeting Participants: approximately 35

Question and Answer Period

- Q Achieved vs. planned density/growth. Question regarding revised UGA map.
- Q Suitability analysis criteria. Does GMA mandate the criteria? Who developed our criteria? Seems to be a lack of demographic data related to migration. Glaring absence.
- Q Planned unit development/campus-type developments. Any intergovernmental agreements related to requirements for schools? What other uses are designated/required, e.g., recreation?
- Q Historical allocation. Developed acres. Why are comprehensive plan figures greater than historical figure? Why project more growth given dire economic situation?
- Q Why not take Birch Bay projection forward?
- Q Do we have any cost analysis associated with population projections?
- Q UGA not split.

- Q Any coordination between comprehensive plan update and County’s Watershed characterization project?
- Q Make explicit that the Bellingham waterfront project will have impact. Acknowledge it. Perhaps include in comp plan appendix?
- Q Population projections. Have you considered all planned unit developments on file? Are those included in projections, e.g., Horizon? Do you fill those PUDs first before additional development is considered?
- Q We want to see all pending lots before considering what population projection is appropriate.

Parking Lot Issues

Comments that require additional follow up:

- Question population figures (2008)—too low?
- Based on year-round?
- Very difficult to identify job growth

Suitability Analysis Prioritization

Participants were asked to review the suitability analysis criteria and indicate those that were the highest priority to guide the County in determining appropriate locations for growth and growth boundaries. Priorities were indicated by each participant placing up to three colored dots total across the topics. Criteria were displayed on large posters available for view. These preferences were intended to encourage dialogue in break-out groups. Group participants added to the list of suitability criteria. They also indicated a concern that the criteria needed to be made more clear.

Table 2. Suitability Criteria Prioritization

Criteria	“Dot” Voting Results
Original List of Criteria	
Critical areas	13 dots
Biodiversity	3 dots
Sensitive watersheds	11 dots
Resource lands	2 dots
Lot patterns	2 dots
Service areas	7 dots
Transportation	8 dots
Land capacity	1 dot

Criteria	"Dot" Voting Results
Added criteria	
Projected demographic mix to come	1 dot
Economic need for light industry	17 dots
Serviceable boundaries, high level, realistic	5 dots
Natural boundaries	1 dot

Results showed participants gave the highest priority in order of the "dot vote" to the following criteria to guide the County in determining appropriate locations for growth and growth boundaries:

- Economic need for light industry
- Critical areas
- Sensitive watersheds
- Transportation
- Service areas

Question 1 Results

By 2031, what is your preferred population growth level for Birch Bay in the range of 3,240 and 6,220? Why?

- Group 1: 6,220 or higher
- Group 2: Continue moderate growth. Keep community vibrant. Enforce concurrency so we are prepared.
- Group 3: 3,240. Community Comprehensive Plan population protection 9,6XX to 2020.
- Group 4: As low as possible to reflect economic reality.
- Group 5: 3,240

Question 2 Results

By 2031, what is your preferred job growth level for Birch Bay in the range of 200 to 1,400? Why?

- Group 1: 1,400 or higher. Increased services, needs for jobs, increase area(s) for commercial development. More jobs here means less traffic and happy people going to work on a bike.
- Group 2: We need more job opportunities locally. Need family-wage jobs.
- Group 3: Retirement community – needs... medical facility...senior community. Need light industrial zoning.

- Group 4: Don't know about level – just create clean, living wage jobs within our UGA. “People in hell want ice water too!” The economy determines job creation rates – not planners.
- Group 5: 500 attract commuters. The more jobs the better.

Question 3 Results

How would you prioritize changes¹ to the UGA?

- Group 1: Expand the UGA to encourage those that wish to live in the rural areas have an opportunity to live on a larger lot sizes on the periphery as an alternative to rural growth.
- Group 2: Implement Design Guidelines Plan. Follow the Birch Bay plan.
- Group 3: Include the Bay in the UGA! Add parks. Lincoln Road fully in UGA (not a dividing boundary).
- Group 4: Add the bay. Add BP. Developer needs to pay “impact fees” for all (12) taxing districts for example, schools, roads, fire, etc. Currently levels of service (LOS) should not be negatively impacted due to growth. Concurrency ordinances should provide county funding for all UGAs.
- Group 5: Natural resources. Assure that areas in UGAs with high-medium conservation value removed from land capacity inventory. May need to shift and grow to preserve C.A. + wetlands.

Question 4 Results

What should we do if more or less growth comes than we planned?

- Group 1: If more, initially plan to high end. If exceeded, increase density or size. Good planning which is well executed will drive down the cost per capita for services. If less, so what?
- Group 2: If more, be prepared. If less, adapt.
- Group 3: No response.
- Group 4: If more, major protections for the watershed. Expand the UGA on if and when growth comes – “pay as you go”. It's harder to take away than to give later. If less, major protection for the watershed. Do not plan for anything but the minimum OFM number for population to reflect economic reality in 2009!
- Group 5: It's not the #'s – it's what people's needs are! Agreed! If more, expand UGA. If less, I would be happy.

¹ Original question asked about “subtractions” to the UGA. Participants did not believe the land capacity analysis results showing an oversupply; there are concerns that the land capacity analysis may not account for all the wetland constraints and that not all of the properties identified as available for development actually are.

Map Results

See Appendix B.

Comment Sheets and Cards

See Appendix C.

Workshop 2: Bellingham City Center

Location: Bellingham Public Library Lecture Room

210 Central Ave • Bellingham, WA;

Date: Tues, March 24 • 9:00–11:00 a.m.

Meeting Participants: approximately 18

Question and Answer Period

- Q Jobs/Housing balance for all communities? How does that relate to UGA sizing?
- C Consider jobs/housing balance as a criteria.
- C Alternative Y – more growth in smaller communities. Marries unincorporated growth with benefits of directing growth to smaller centers. Alternative Y “lite” – remove the growth in rural areas. This is what people agree on.
- Q How do rural study areas relate to other study? Are they resource lands on our suitability maps? <Yes>
- C Wish these decisions could be made based on environmental impact analysis.
- C Want County Council to rely more on that analysis than uninformed citizens.
- C Appreciate the opportunity to share input.
- Q What weight will we have /will the County Council use in their process?
- C What philosophy/criteria were used to say UGAs are over/undersized? <Land capacity analysis>
- Q Can criteria include “objectives” of each UGA? Are there criteria to use?
- C Changes in housing preferences – new families like no yards; empty nesters like no yards and younger families are taking over old houses.
- C Opportunity for leadership that infill can be good – it has a different look.
- C Maybe Bellingham could take greater share with good infill.
- C Comment regarding lands good for septic also good as resource lands – how to prioritize.
- Staff question to audience: What are ideas for County’s role in infill?*
- C Top down?
- C County Council encourage city councils to “take on” neighborhoods
- C Bellingham has aggressive plan for infill – but more growth has gone into rural – not enforced. County needs to step up and do something.

- C Bellingham wants to control development in rural – they adopted lowest growth share.
- C Some may expect County to downzone some of that area.
- C Lots of finger pointing between County and Cities. Need additional coordination between the County and cities.
- C Great to have public forum but want to rely on leaders to address those tough policy choices.

Parking Lot Issues

Comments that require additional follow up:

- Process/mapping task will be compromised by lack of suitability mapping for all of the county, e.g. critical areas (see what’s happening at the borders).
- County impact fees.

Question 1 Results

How would you prioritize additions to urban growth areas that are undersized, or subtractions from urban growth areas that are oversized?

- Group 1: UGAs should be adjusted to provide jobs-housing balance. Subtract from lands which have environmental or resource values, e.g. Geneva. How much rural development is sprawl and how much is appropriate rural development?
- Group 2: Availability of water. Consider existing community character. Determine the purpose of the UGA: *commercial/ind. *urban villages – stand alone *residential – high? low? – med. Consider efficiency of UGA area for intended use. Efficient use of UGA. Close to infrastructure. Identify nodes for urban villages within UGA.
- Group 3: Overlay CA’s (critical areas), resource areas, watersheds, etc., and remove the areas with the most “overlays”. On build-up, do the reverse. Lynden is out of room and should not be able to expand outward into ag/rural * Critical areas can be seen as adding value to adjacent properties.

Question 2 Results

What should we do if more or less growth comes than we planned?

- Group 1: Monitor population expansion and land supply every 3-5 years. If not enough/too much land, jurisdictions must adjust. If more growth comes, expand UGAs. If less comes, do nothing (assuming we should straighten UGAs out now).
- Group 2: Monitor/continue to adjust. React faster. Be pro-active/realistic.
- Group 3: Monitor & adjust – Yes. Given the economic downturn, maybe expect less growth...

Question 3 Results

How can we best direct growth away from rural areas and towards cities and urban communities?

- Group 1: Impact fees in County. Rezoning. Gravel roads – lower level service standards. Land gain taxes on speculative property. Stop providing incentives for people to commute. Regulations. Investigate water limitations in rural areas.
- Group 2: Policy – zoning tools. TDR's with incentives for participants. Enough area for growth in cities – kit of tools for transferring densities.
- Group 3: Permanently reserve areas for forests and farms. Rezone to Ag where used as ag. Impact fees in County. Water right enforcement on resident. dev. Vertical living (European style) condo. Change language of housing per acre to living units. Use less land to support more homes.

Question 4 Results

Should growth continue to be focused in Bellingham or should a greater share of growth go to other urban communities?

- Group 1: Better jobs-housing balance. How to get people to work where they live? Encourage smaller city growth. Mass transit needed.
- Group 2: ?
- Group 3: Growth goes to other urban communities – yes. We like to see the smaller cities/towns grow more – prosperity, economic growth. Clear, permanent boundaries.

Map Results

See Appendix B.

Comment Sheets and Cards

See Appendix C.

Workshop 3: Meridian

Location: Meridian High School cafeteria

194 W Laurel Rd • Bellingham, WA;

Date: Tues, March 24 7:00–9:00 p.m.

Meeting Participants: approximately 12

Question and Answer Period

General questions were posed about the land capacity results.

Question 1 Results

How would you prioritize additions to urban growth areas that are undersized, or subtractions from urban growth areas that are oversized?

- Group 1: Infill before you expand the UGA. UGA should only expand if jobs permit the need for services.
 - Presentation notes: Infill first before expanding, e.g. Ferndale, Bellingham, & Blaine. Lynden – OK have jobs. Okay to expand with jobs supporting services.
- Group 2: A) Marginal soils makes the best place to locate housing. B) Utilities/services easier to extend. C) Accessibility.
 - Presentation notes: Marginal soils –put housing growth – save farmlands. Oversize utilities and extend. Accessibility (transportation). Map – growth north on the Guide. Growth already there. Ferndale-west, hilly, not farming. Great views. Enterprise – yes. North Bellingham – already filled up. Protect creeks.
- Group 3: No response.
 - Presentation notes: Columbia Valley – need jobs. People want to be near jobs. Sumas –have to have jobs. Blaine since 1970s lost fishing. Not much going into Blaine. Did invite Semiahmoo. Can't expect to live in. Lynden – some places to live. Main places – Bellingham, South Ferndale. Need more businesses. Facilitate permits – otherwise too expensive.

Question 2 Results

What should we do if more or less growth comes than we planned?

- Group 1: Tell them how great California is!
 - Presentation notes: Send back to California.
- Group 2: A) Review lot size/configuration. B) Density more/less. C) 3 year review of growth.
 - Presentation notes: We plan; review lot size and configuration. Density more or less. Every 2-3 years review growth.
- Group 3: No response.

Question 3 Results

How can we best direct growth away from rural areas and towards cities and urban communities?

- Group 1: Protecting resource areas. No downzoning without compensation.
 - Presentation notes: Preserve resource areas. 5 acre lots can be market gardens. Prefer over 4-plexes. If downzoning, then pay for downzone.

- Group 2: A) Services, i.e. shopping, hospitals, transportation. B) Business incentives.
 - Presentation notes: Services, shopping, hospital transportation. Business incentives – people move closer to jobs.
- Group 3: 5 acres too large. Need more jobs first. Make urban area more attractive – larger lots. Permit process way too slow and difficult. Columbia Valley not a good area. Sumas no jobs. Blaine no jobs.
 - Presentation notes: 5 acres is waste. Need 2 acre zoning. Then larger in farming areas. Smaller in non-farm. Make urban areas more attractive. Too small lots, cars in front yards. Larger lots for privacy.

Question 4 Results

Should growth continue to be focused in Bellingham [and/] or should a greater share of growth go to other urban communities?

- Group 1: Yes – Bellingham, or other high employment or service areas.
 - Presentation notes: Focus on Bellingham and where there are services and jobs.
- Group 2: Other urban communities.
 - Presentation notes: Not just Bellingham; spread people out.
- Group 3: No response.
 - Presentation notes: Put growth where jobs are.

Map Results

See Appendix B.

Comment Sheets and Cards

See Appendix C.