

Jeremy Eckhart

HOW TO LOSE FARMLAND: A CASE STUDY WITH CHARTS AND PICTURES

RECEIVED

WHATCOM COUNTY'S BIG DECISION

SEP 17 2009

GROWTH IS COMING, BUT WHERE WILL IT GO?

Growth is coming to Whatcom County. As shown by the projections in the table below, the question is not if Whatcom County will grow, but how Whatcom County will grow. LONG RANGE PLANNING DIVISION

Whatcom County Projected Population Projections¹

	2000 Census	Washington State's Office of Financial Management (OFM) Projected Population				
		2010	2015	2020	2025	2030
High	166,814	217,152	243,405	270,259	297,535	324,156
Midrange	166,814	195,633	213,046	230,008	246,406	261,416
Low	166,814	181,450	192,540	202,407	210,985	217,628

State law requires that counties plan for growth. This is a two-step process. First, the county must plan for urban growth based on the 20-year population forecasts provided by OFM. Second, the county must provide urban growth areas to accommodate the planned growth.² State law requires urban growth areas to encourage urban growth, rather than sprawl onto rural and resource lands.

Currently, Whatcom County is working through this two-step process. First, the County Executive has recommended that Whatcom County plan for a population of 245,000, 16,416 below OFM's midrange numbers. Second, the County Executive has recommended that Whatcom County accommodate growth through Bellingham infill and through smaller cities extending their urban growth areas into prime agricultural areas.³

THIS DECISION IMPACTS YOU

The County's decision on how to accommodate growth will shape virtually every aspect of how we live, work, and play. Because this decision is important, it is useful to learn from other counties' planning under the state's Growth Management Act.

Between 2002 and 2004, Pierce County addressed the same population allocation issues currently facing Whatcom County. Similar to Whatcom County, Pierce County struggled to reconcile steady population growth with protecting the county's agricultural heritage.

¹ Projections found in Washington State's Office of Financial Management 2007 projections webpage: <http://www.ofm.wa.gov/pop/gma/projections07.asp>

² RCW 36.70A.110.

³ The County Executive's plan for accommodating growth can be found at: <http://www.whatcomcounty.us/pds/2031/uga.jsp>

Similar to the Whatcom County Executive's recommendation, Pierce County decided to accommodate growth through infill in the county's largest city, Tacoma, while allowing smaller cities to grow onto agricultural land.

The results were disastrous for Pierce County's farmland.

PIERCE COUNTY: A CASE STUDY

PIERCE COUNTY POPULATION GROWTH

Similar to Whatcom County, Pierce County has encountered steady population growth.

Pierce County Historical Population Growth⁴

Population	1990	2000
Pierce County	586,203	700,820
Unincorporated	339,925	315,443
Incorporated	246,278	385,337

The Growth Management Act (RCW 36.70A.110) requires counties to designate urban growth areas that are sufficient in size to accommodate the projected urban population growth for the 20-year planning period.

Similar to Whatcom County, Pierce County based growth populations upon varying growth projections.

Pierce County Projected Population Projections⁵

Population Projection	2000	2022
High	700,820	1,027,718
Midrange	700,820	912,711
Low	700,820	813,711

Pierce County adopted a countywide population allocation of 912,700 because "OFM's midrange figure has historically been accurate."⁶

⁴ Figures found in table 19A.20-1 of the Pierce County Code. Figures based upon U.S. Census as reported by the OFM, 2002.

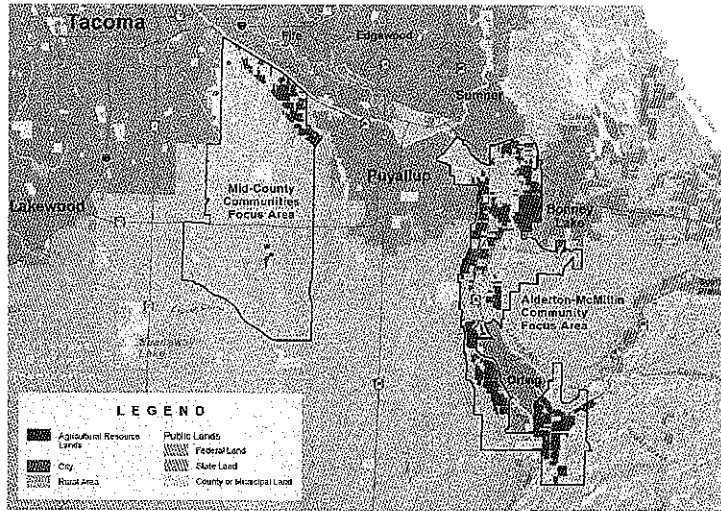
⁵ Figures found in Pierce County Code 19A.20.100.

⁶ Pierce County Code 19A.20.100.



A Quick Note on Pierce County Geography

Pierce County's prime agricultural valleys are immediately adjacent to Puyallup, Sumner, and Bonney Lake. In this 2007 map, prime agricultural land is shown in bright orange.



Pierce County's Population Allocations

Pierce County decided to accommodate growth through infill efforts and through extending Puyallup, Sumner, and Bonney Lake's urban growth areas.⁷

Accommodating Growth through Infill⁸

	Projected population to be accommodated through City of Tacoma infill
Tacoma	61,676

Accommodating Growth through Urban Growth Area Expansions⁹

City	Projected population to be accommodated through urban growth area expansions
Puyallup	2,320
Sumner	4,418
Bonney Lake	2,320

Tacoma Is Not Meeting Infill Targets

Under the county's plan to accommodate growth, the City of Tacoma must accommodate approximately 3,000 new residents through infill efforts annually. However, the City of Tacoma's population has consistently increased by only 1,000 residents, failing to meet the projected population target by 2,000 residents annually.¹⁰

Failed Infill Efforts and Dispersed Growth Resulted in Dramatic Farmland Losses

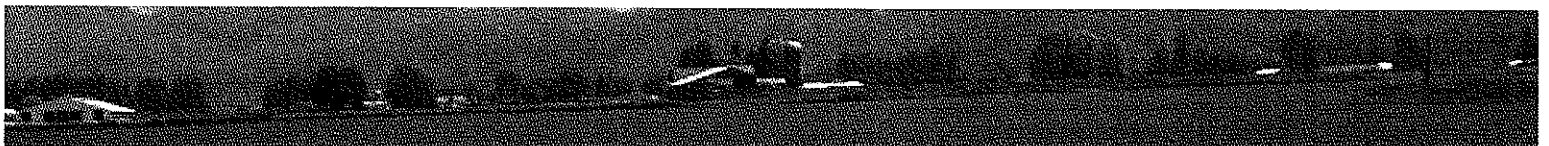
According to the United State Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Census, Pierce County's total farmland acreage remained relatively steady from 1987 to 2002, hovering

⁷ Figures found in table 19A.20-2 of the Pierce County Code.

⁸ Figures found in table 19A.20-2 of the Pierce County Code.

⁹ Figures found in table 19A.20-2 of the Pierce County Code.

¹⁰ Figures found in the City of Tacoma's website: <http://www.cityoftacoma.org/Page.aspx?nid=48>



around 58,000 acres.¹¹ However, between 2002 and 2007 Pierce County lost 17% of its available farmland.¹² The timing of this 17% loss directly coincides with Pierce County's decision to extend Puyallup, Sumner and Bonney Lake's urban growth areas onto farmland.

USDA Agricultural Census Data for Pierce County, Washington¹³

Year	Total farmland acreage	Cropland Acres
2007	47,677 (17% decrease from 2002)	17,319
2002	57,224	27,658
1992	58,750	27,166
1987	58,754	29,318

Factors that led to a 17% loss of Pierce County's farmland

Farmland is converted to non-farm uses for a variety of reasons: agricultural economic trends, regulations, tax policy, farmland zoning, and conversion pressure all play a role. No one factor is solely responsible for farmland conversion.

However, authorizing growth into agricultural areas has a primary effect of converting farmland, but it has a secondary effect of placing conversion pressure onto farmland adjacent to the urban growth area. As a result, farmland adjacent to an urban growth area is often converted to residential under current zoning, resulting in rural sprawl across the countryside.

LESSONS LEARNED?

Currently, Whatcom County is deciding how to accommodate growth. Whatcom County's current plan mirrors the growth plan adopted by Pierce County. After adopting the plan, Pierce County lost 17% of its agricultural land base. Will Whatcom County learn from Pierce County's missteps?

While a variety of factors led to the loss of Pierce County's agricultural land, the City of Tacoma's failure to meet its allocated infill goals, coupled with the county's decision to extend urban growth areas into or adjacent to agricultural areas played a significant role.

¹¹ Pierce County agricultural statistics from 1987 and 1992 found at: http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/1992/State_and_County_Highlights/datafile/wac027.txt; Information also based upon interviews with City of Tacoma's Economic Development Department.

¹² Pierce County agricultural statistics from 2002 and 2007 found at: http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2007/Online_Highlights/County_Profiles/Washington/cp53053.pdf

¹³ Pierce County agricultural statistics from 1987 and 1992 found at: http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/1992/State_and_County_Highlights/datafile/wac027.txt; Information also based upon interviews with City of Tacoma's Economic Development Department; Pierce County agricultural statistics from 2002 and 2007 found at: http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2007/Online_Highlights/County_Profiles/Washington/cp53053.pdf

