

Farm Friends response to Executive Kremen's Urban Growth Area Recommendations

Executive Kremen's UGA recommendations make substantial progress from the indefensible recommendations of the Growth Management Coordinating Council. But it still falls short of a plan that is consistent with well established growth management goals in the County Comprehensive Plan and the community's desires for growth management expressed in numerous community surveys throughout the recent years.

We are hopeful that the County Council and Planning Commission will keep moving the debate closer to what the entire community has clearly expressed as their desires.

The farm community hopes you keep these points in mind as you weigh action on this very significant question for Whatcom County's future:

- We need to keep front and center the importance of protecting our agricultural resource lands. There are ample reasons to be serious about protecting farmland. Among these reasons are:
 - Global food crisis – productive farmland is increasingly more valuable. We have some of the best, most productive farm land in the world in Whatcom County. Keeping our farm land in farming is imperative from both a local and global perspective.
 - The role ag plays in the Quality of life in Whatcom County
 - Environmental protection of our county's natural resources through farm stewardship
 - Preservation of agriculture as a key component of Whatcom County economic health
- There has not been anything that approaches a real community discussion on where future growth should be located. Executive Kremen's proposals lean heavily on the recommendations of the Growth Management Coordinating Council. The GMCC choose a model that disperses growth into the smaller cities with a lower growth projection for Bellingham. Why? There is no credible argument that was the "will of the people". In fact, the only process that has any legitimacy as a measure of what the public wants – the Legacy project's survey – would indicate quite the opposite. Significant policy directions such as this require much more thought.
- We are invested in the economic health of all Whatcom County cities and especially cities in the ag areas. We accept the fact that unreasonable restrictions on city growth will drive growth outside city boundaries thereby hurting agriculture. The key word here is "reasonable". We have difficulty accepting that Lynden, Ferndale, and Everson (the three cities expanding into ag and rural resource land) can reasonably justify taking more ag land. A serious effort to protect 100,000 acres of ag land requires much more discussion before the Executive's recommendation is accepted.
- We have serious questions about the projected growth rate of these cities in the ag areas of the county. The County is justifying accelerated rates of growth in small cities as a means of establishing their own economic centers. We find this strategy counterproductive. It makes no sense to damage one of the primary economic engines for these cities – agriculture – in the hope of trying to establish some other economic driver which seems to be based more on hope than reality.

- We don't know what "Urban Growth Area Reserve" means. We will need to know more about what this designation is and what it intends to accomplish. We agree that it makes some sense to plan far into the future for where growth is intended to go. We are willing to be part of that discussion. It is premature to designate areas as Urban Growth Area Reserves without any clarity about what that means.
- We do not see mitigation requirements for ag land that is recommended to be added to UGAs. It is our policy that a loss of ag land requires an effort to solidify long-term protection of ag land elsewhere so that our ag base is provided a "net win". The executive's plan does not do this.

Farm Friends urges the Planning Commission and the County Council to avoid the temptation to simply pass along the Executive's recommendations as our final plan. This discussion opens a healthy debate about the nature of our County's future. We would much rather engage in this debate than to see it punted into the future with negative consequences for everyone involved. The old adage that "if a job is worth doing it is worth doing right" applies here. The County should not adopt a growth plan based on the assumption that future growth should be pushed into areas competing with resource lands.