



WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCIL

MEMORANDUM

TO: Growth Management Coordinating Council

FROM: Rebecca Craven, Planning and Policy Analyst
Whatcom County Council

RE: Policy issues for GMCC discussion

DATE: February 25, 2009

As the GMCC begins the process of reviewing the existing countywide planning policies and prepares to begin the second phase of population allocation discussions, there is a huge array of policy issues that will need attention from the GMCC and its component member jurisdictions. This memo presents a few of those issues, primarily related to the issue of how rural growth should be planned, and how much population should be allocated to the rural areas, and how the cities might be willing to participate in transactions that could affect rural growth patterns.

Please note: The following items are included here for purposes of starting discussions about these within the GMCC, among the cities and between the county and individual cities. They are not meant to be policy proposals or to reflect the intentions of staff or the County Council. There is no expectation that these issues will be resolved today or anytime soon. They questions posed are intended to start discussions on difficult policy issues that need considered debate among the various policy makers and within each of the communities in the county.

1. The county comprehensive plan called for very little of the growth from 2002-2022 to go into the rural and resource areas of the county, and for most of the growth to go into the cities and their UGAs. For example, the county wide planning policies

call for: encouraging future growth in urban areas; discouraging conversion of undeveloped land into low density sprawl; maintaining and enhancing resource industries including timber, agriculture and fisheries. Is the growth allocation intention expressed by the comprehensive plan and the countywide planning policies still shared by the cities? Do the cities want to continue the intent of the plan's current allocation to dramatically limit growth in the rural and resource areas?

2. Comments have been made by cities and members of the public that as the cities take action to increase the densities within their borders, the county needs to take action to implement the goals of the comprehensive plan and limit the growth going to the rural and resource lands. Without seeking commitments to any specific actions let's examine the options and what we know about recent rural growth and potential future growth:

- a. How much growth will the rural areas accommodate?

Information compiled by the county in the context of its review of the rural element of the comprehensive plan indicates that there are a substantial number of vacant, vested lots in the rural (14,500) and resource (3,900) lands in the county, with additional lots (8,100) possible under existing zoning. Some of the potential future lots may already be vested by virtue of pending applications.

- b. How much recent growth has gone into the rural areas?

From 2000 to 2008, approximately 74% of the residential growth has gone into the urban areas (cities and UGAs) and approximately 26% has gone into the rural and resource areas. By comparison, the comprehensive plan allocated only 6.3% of future growth to the unincorporated rural areas of the county.

- c. Possible options:

1. Should the county reduce the size of the UGAs and have any future expansion be dependent on the city or other proponent buying development rights from rural and ag lands? (County code currently calls for private proponents to do this at a rate of 1 DR per 5 acre expansion)

2. Should the county downzone in the rural and resource lands? There are functional limitations on how

much potential growth this would limit given the number of existing vacant lots.

3. Should the county undertake some sort of lot consolidation effort for non-conforming (smaller than nominal zoning) lots in the rural and ag zones?

4. Should the cities that want to reduce densities in certain portions of their jurisdictions to levels below urban densities be able to do that by purchasing development rights out of the rural and ag zones? What about cities that want to use achieved densities rather than planned densities for determining their population capacity? Note that this strategy would reduce population capacity in both the city and the rural area and therefore would not be sustainable indefinitely, but in the short term could be used to create a market demand for development rights.

5. Related to market demand for TDRs is the policy adopted by several cities to limit utility extensions to areas that have been successfully annexed. This policy, adopted so that cities could limit development in UGAs until they were ready to annex them has some secondary effects, including impacts on the TDR market: if the effective zoning for an area does not change until annexation, the county's ability to require the use of TDRs for additional development density is limited – that is, the transaction increasing the property's value from the potential increase in density does not occur until the zoning increases to an urban density at annexation, so there is limited ability for the county to create a market for TDR use as an incentive for added density. The market in these cases would require participation of the city involved.

Sometimes UGA areas "fully develop" at rural densities with large homes on large lots, restricting the UGA's practical future population capacity and making orderly expansion of capital facilities for urban development somewhat more complicated, and occasionally contentious. Are there other ways, besides the utility extension policies, to accomplish the cities' goals to control extension of urban services and urban densities without these secondary effects? Are the cities interested in taking on the planning for their UGAs? Including land use designations? Development regulations? Permitting or permit review?

Are there other mechanisms that create a market demand for the existing development rights in the rural and resource areas?

Are there other mechanisms that the cities can support that would implement the countywide planning policies of the comp plan?

cc: Whatcom County Council
David Stalheim, PDS Director
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correspondence