

June 23, 2008

David Stalheim, Director  
Whatcom County Planning and Development Services  
5280 Northwest Drive  
Bellingham, WA 98226

Re: Foothills Subarea Plan/Fire protection

Dear Mr. Stalheim:

I question the assertions made recently by the East County Fire Commissioners and Chiefs in their letter dated April 28, 2008, and encourage you to do the same for the following reasons:

*In their letter, the commissioners state that: "The information reported on page 95 of the plan under heading of "fire protection/emergency medical services" is woefully inadequate."*

- While this may or may not be true, it seems to me that the fire districts failed to participate or provide essential information to the FSPAC and County Staff in a timely or meaningful way during the planning process. If information is sparse then it is because of this lack of meaningful participation and the onus of responsibility for these deficiencies should fall on the Commissioners who failed to participate during the nearly two years while the rest of our community was engaged in the process.
- It appears somewhat calculated on the part of these districts to feign ignorance and fail to participate in a two year planning process and then submit a rebuttal months after a plan has been developed indicating their dissatisfaction with the adequacy of the recommendations especially when they acknowledge their recognition of potentially adverse impacts on the region and further articulate their acknowledgement that districts within the planning area have experienced issues affecting response capabilities "**Over the past three years**" as stated in their letter.

*In paragraph six (6) of the letter, the commissioners state that: "Unrealistic population projections for the Columbia Valley area will only further exacerbate the current problems in the area of response to fire and EMS events." And again there is reference to "the adverse impacts of the Subarea Plan's population projections" in paragraph one (1) -*

- I question upon what factual basis the Commissioners have determined that the population projections are "unreasonable"? The population projections adopted by the FSPAC were based upon current population forecasts that were prepared by a professional consultant and unanimously approved by the committee as a whole.
- The recommended population projections adopted by the majority members of the FSPAC for the Columbia Valley UGA appear well within the range provided by the consultant and consistent with current and historical trends for this area as witnessed in the Commissioners letter, paragraph three (3) where they note that "*recent growth in the Columbia Valley region has resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of responses for both fire and EMS for the Kendal station.*" I am unsure of how valid these assertions regarding "unreasonable"

population projections can be - when it is quite apparent that the influx projected to occur during the planning period is ALREADY occurring according to the Commissioner's own comments.

- The conditions created in the proposed Subarea plan for accommodating population primarily in the Columbia Valley UGA near a commercial center appear to be protective of the public welfare, as they support additional medical and social services and potentially limit the response area and filter a majority of the projected population into an established population center where fire and EMS providers should already be planning to provide urban levels of service since this area has been an established UGA for nearly 10 years.

*In paragraph seven (7) of the letter, the Commissioners appear to ignore the mandates provided to the FSPAC during the planning process and seem completely unaware of the fact that planning under the GMA requires growth to be located in established UGA's to preserve and protect the rural areas.*

- The Commissioners appear to imply that the FSPAC members were acting without authority to somehow benefit themselves to the "detriment" of the rural areas of the Subarea. It seems to me that the recommendations of the FSPAC majority are clearly consistent with the planning model contemplated in GMA for preserving rural character by locating services and population in an established UGA.
- I am unimpressed that our fire officials would cast these thinly veiled aspersions at the citizens who volunteered almost two years of their lives to this complex planning process. Unlike our fire Commissioners who are compensated with public funds, the members of FSPAC were not compensated for their service to the community.
- The Commissioners reference the implementation projects without regard to their content and fail to note that the East County Regional Resource Center and a satellite medical, dental and behavioral health clinic with pharmacy are among the top projects supported. The plan further supports an enhanced tax base and increased transportation options. In my opinion, these projects and recommended conditions have the potential to subsidize and increase resources for our fire and EMS providers if the management in these districts would participate meaningfully in the planning process.

In all, the Commissioner's letter appears to be a political attempt to mask the fire district's lack of planning and inability to provide responsible management and oversight of the public welfare behind some pretty outlandish assertions. Their lack of participation in the planning process is a detriment to the public welfare and in my opinion should be closely scrutinized. I do not appreciate that these Commissioners are spending public funds to write inflammatory letters instead of doing the real work of planning for emergency response in our communities.

As a medical provider living in the rural East County, I support the Subarea Plan as adopted by the FSPAC. This plan has the potential to create conditions that will allow additional resources, services and an enhanced tax base to a large population located appropriately in an established UGA, while maintaining the character and quality of life we appreciate in the rural areas.

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