



Fact Sheet

Rural Element WHATCOM 2031

What is the Whatcom 2031 Rural Element?

“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). As a part of this update, the County is working to update its policies and regulations for managing growth and development in rural areas. The purpose of this update is to ensure that the Rural Element section of the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan accurately reflects the values and expectations of county residents and complies with Washington’s Growth Management Act.

Why is the update needed?

Updating the Rural Element portion of the comprehensive plan is a high priority to Whatcom County because an update is needed to bring Whatcom County’s comprehensive plan and zoning regulations into compliance with the Washington State Growth Management Act (GMA). The GMA requires counties to protect the character of their rural areas and prevent sprawling suburban type development. A 2005 Growth Management Hearings Board decision found Whatcom County’s comprehensive plan to be out of compliance with the GMA. Specifically, the policies and designation descriptors for Small Towns, Crossroads Commercial, Resort and Recreational Subdivisions, Suburban Enclaves, and Gateway Industrial land use designations did not minimize and contain development. In addition, the following rural zoning classifications were found to be too dense for rural lands: RR1, RR2, RR3, EI, R2A, and RRI.

The County can do a number of things to bring its Comprehensive Plan and zoning into compliance with the GMA:

- Revise the rural land use designations
- Change the non-compliant zones to promote appropriate rural densities and uses
- Designate LAMIRDs with clear outer boundaries using appropriate criteria to determine these boundaries.

Before the county makes the needed changes, it is important to gather input from the community to make sure the changes are consistent with the community’s vision of rural character.





What is a LAMIRD?

The GMA allows counties to designate “limited areas of more intensive rural development” (LAMIRDs) to “minimize and contain” areas where more intensive uses and densities already existed when GMA took effect in 1990. Under the law, most of these are described as “rural development consisting of the infill, development, or redevelopment of existing commercial, industrial, residential, or mixed-use areas, whether characterized as shoreline development, villages, hamlets, rural activity centers, or crossroads developments.”

The County, with your help, must define the criteria to decide where these LAMIRDs should be allowed and how their outer boundaries should be determined. The GMA requires the county to address the following when determining LAMIRD boundaries:

- The need to preserve the character of natural neighborhoods and communities that existed as of July 1, 1990
- Physical boundaries such as bodies of water, streets and highways, land forms and contours
- The prevention of abnormally irregular boundaries, and
- The ability to provide public facilities and public services in a manner that does not permit low-density sprawl;

What happens next?

The County will study the comments from the November 2008 workshops and questionnaires, and prepare drafts of comprehensive plan amendments and LAMIRD boundaries based on those comments. In early 2009 the County will make those drafts available for public review and hold another series of public meetings to receive comments. After that round of public review, the Planning Commission and County Council will consider the proposed changes to the comprehensive plan and zoning classifications. Whatcom County invites citizens to stay informed and participate throughout the process.

How can you get involved?

We want to hear from you! Please don't hesitate to contact us - we want to answer your questions and hear your ideas. You can contact Michelle Stiles at (360)676-6907 or email pds@co.whatcom.wa.us for more information.

You can also learn more about Whatcom 2031, the Rural Element update, and about upcoming meetings on our website:

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

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