

Chapter Ten DESIGN

INTRODUCTION

Purpose

The purpose of the Design chapter is to assist the citizens of Whatcom County in identifying, defining, and enhancing those qualities and attitudes that distinguish our county physically, spiritually and economically as having a unique "Sense of Place" -- an eminently habitable environment in which to live, work, play, learn and feel a part of as a citizenry.

Included is a set of policies and actions, economically sound and environmental-design-based that aim to enhance or preserve those qualities, as well as our sustainability as we grow into our natural resource environs. The application of these principles can range in scope from Regional and Landscape Planning as related to natural resource land uses and siting of community elements to the maintenance of the natural systems and accommodation of human program elements encountered in Site-specific Planning, Engineering, and Architecture in Whatcom County.

Process

A Design Committee was established in August 1993. This was a volunteer committee made up of design professionals, including architects, landscape architects, land use planners and an engineer. The committee solicited information from citizens as part of the workshops held by the Visioning Committee in March and April 1994. The results are reflected in the following summary and the Visioning Community Value Statements generated by the Visioning Committee. Based on this background, the Design Committee developed design issues, goals and policies. In reviewing the goals and policies recommended by the Planning commission in June 1996, the County Council has chosen the option of keeping the proposed goals while postponing adoption of most of the policies and implementation until the next amendment to the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan. Some new policies have been recommended to assure compliance with GMA and other legal mandates.

GMA Goals, County-Wide Planning Policies, and Visioning Community Value Statements

The Design Chapter is the only chapter that addresses Goal 13 regarding Historic Preservation by addressing inventorying and protection of historic sites and landscapes. This chapter also addresses a number of the other goals directly or indirectly. By promoting tools that will make density more acceptable in appropriate areas, it addresses Goals 1 and 2, Urban Growth and Reduce Sprawl, and Goal 4, Housing. By focusing on incentives, it acknowledges Goal 6, Property Rights. Its emphasis on quality of life and compatibility speaks to Goal 5, Economic Development, Goal 8, Natural Resource Industries, Goal 9, Open Space and Recreation, and Goal 10, Environment. Finally, by emphasizing public participation and user friendly regulations, it addresses Goal 7, Permits, and Goal 11, Citizen Participation.

In the same manner, this chapter addresses the following sections of the County-Wide Planning Policies: A) Citizen Involvement, D) Urban Growth Areas, G) Affordable Housing, H) Open Space/Greenbelts, and K) Siting of Public Facilities.

Some of the County-Wide Planning Policies this chapter most directly addresses include D-5, relating to cities maintaining their character; G-4, use of innovative techniques to promote affordable housing; H-1, protection of linked greenbelts; and K-1, which specifies a design component to reduce land use conflicts.

The following Visioning Community Value Statements have been addressed: Statement 3 under Urban Growth regarding the importance of retaining individual town and community character; Statement 1 under Historic Preservation which addresses historic preservation; the entire Housing Section; item 1 under Citizen Participation regarding local control; item 2, 3, and 5 under Land Use/Zoning which speak to flexibility in regulations, local control and community review of large projects, and maintenance of rural character; and, finally, both items under Rural Lifestyle addressing the components which make Rural Character and Open Space important elements. This chapter also addresses the sections on property rights, economic development, sprawl, the environment, open space, and recreation.

GMA Requirements

The Design Element is not a mandatory requirement nor even listed as an optional element in the act as adopted, though it was considered in an earlier draft of the law. It is recognized as important, however, and, like Economics and several other sections, was considered desirable and added to the comprehensive plan outline by the Planning Commission very early in the process.

BACKGROUND SUMMARY

Sense of Place

Resident and visitor alike are given the vivid and lasting impression of Whatcom County as a very special place. Ask them what they like best about Whatcom County and almost always included in their answer will be the multitude of natural resource amenities, such as forests, salt water, rivers, lakes, and mountains, all in a temperate climate.

Whatcom County is blessed with an agriculturally rich river valley and a long growing season, a wide range of plant species and wildlife habitat, a diversity of waters' edge experiences, and a seemingly endless supply of good tasting water, clean air and space. People here welcome the lack of traffic congestion, the relatively limited urban sprawl compared to other urbanized counties; in short, Whatcom County is described as having a unique ambience in which to pursue the richness, responsibilities, challenges and rewards of a civilized life.

Until recently, settlement in Whatcom County has been restrained and generally respectful of this verdant setting, embracing it as an integral and distinctive part of our Northwest lifestyle. As Whatcom County experiences increasing population growth, however, it is essential that the county's built environment grow compatibly with its natural environs through the use of conscious, informed, and sensitive design.

Appropriate to the task are the proactive principles of design utilized by the environmental design professions. Utilization of these principles in the building and rebuilding of community and landscape can occur in a manner that does not impair or destroy the integrity or vitality of the natural environs which are the basis of our sense of place.

Among the elements which define a sense of place and which are particularly essential to examine, protect, and enhance are Places, Spaces, Focal Points, Gateways, Corridors, Connections, Edges and Transitions. All of these are perceptual elements common to most every natural or built place. They are among the most important and dynamic elements of an environment which enable us to distinguish, qualify, and identify one place as separate from another yet related to the whole. These elements can be perceived or applied to design of a diversity of land uses typical to Urban Growth Areas, Small Towns, Crossroads; maintenance of the integrity of our rural setting; sensitive utilization our natural resource lands - aquifer recharge areas, agricultural lands, forest lands, and our waters; and they are among the integral structural components of site-specific environments we design to accommodate our recreational activities, housing, public facilities and transportation facilities.

Thoughtful design can enhance our urban centers such as Bellingham with its historic, cultural amenities, and diversity of building stock, and the friendly ambiance, compact and comprehensible scale of our small towns, as well as the life-sustaining, bucolic, landscapes of our rural river valley and its forested slopes. Carefully crafted design choices will not only define, enhance and retain our distinctive natural setting and the communities we create within it, but will fortify our individual sense of who we are as individuals in relation to this common ground, this special "place" we share, Whatcom County.

ISSUES, GOALS, AND POLICIES

Urban Growth Areas

Whatcom County has two roles in terms of urban growth areas. It has final review of the UGA boundaries as established by the cities and, therefore, some concern about what will occur within those boundaries. It also has development authority in those growth areas not associated with cities, and in those areas within city UGAs where utilities extend beyond city limits. Some areas like Sudden Valley, the Peaceful Valley/Paradise Lakes area, and Geneva have, for the most part, already been subdivided and are partially developed. Even in these areas, however, development potential remains, and there are other areas in the county designated for urban growth where the opportunity exists for a new approach.

In keeping with the spirit of the Growth Management Act, the values expressed by Whatcom County residents, and societal trends occurring nationwide, it is clear that the traditional approach to land use as particularly exemplified in the suburban development that has occurred since World War II is no longer acceptable. While there is not consensus on specific issues of density or whether the use of branching streets and cul-de-sacs should be discouraged, there is a clear desire for a sense of community and pedestrian scale, and a recognition that we can no longer afford the inefficient development patterns of the past which are land-consumptive, require excessive utility extensions, and generate too many vehicular trips.

It may be possible to alleviate some of these problems of the past including congestion, inefficiency and use conflicts by incorporating design concepts into urban growth area policies. Design opportunities center around the following:

- parks/greenbelts/open space
- mixed land uses
- in-fill development
- housing in identifiable neighborhoods
- special districts

- location of essential services
- more flexible street standards
- a variety of lot sizes including small lots
- reduced and/or more flexible setbacks
- pedestrian facilities
- public spaces and facilities
- residential design
- community character
- historic properties

GOAL 10A: In evaluating urban growth areas associated with cities, or in allowing the development of unincorporated growth areas, ensure a sense of community and pedestrian scale.

GOAL 10B: As Small Towns evolve, utilize design tools and decisions which are sensitive to and compatible with the positive character of the surrounding natural setting.

Rural Integrity

"Rural", a middle ground between urban/suburban settings and true wilderness, consists of large spaces, low-intensity uses, and environmentally fragile areas. Rural evokes images of fields and crops, farm buildings, rolling hills, great sweeping valleys, wooded ridges, wide inspiring views, peace and quiet, and a sense of small town community. Often associated with these images is the fragrance of fresh cut hay, spread fertilizers, and plowed earth. These are all characteristics not normally associated with more urbanized communities.

The rural environment can provide both pleasure and reward to residents and visitors alike. Land use and development decisions can either degrade or enhance this rural environment and the lifestyle it affords.

GOAL 10C: Retain and enhance the components that make up Whatcom County's rural integrity--the basis of its identity--its "sense of place".

GOAL 10D: Retain the natural landscape diversity and open space experience.

Historical and Cultural Resources

Cultural resources contribute materially to a sense of place and identity and civic pride. Economic dividends come from cultural tourism and downtown revitalization. Whatcom County recognizes a number of benefits which result from cultural resource preservation. A strong cultural resources management program enables the county to fulfill its legal obligation to avoid potential harmful impacts on cultural resources. The preservation of historic and archeological resources contributes to Whatcom County's rural and cultural character. Historically significant lands, sites and structures, which are part of and help illustrate the collective culture of the people, are important resources for the county.

GOAL 10E: Recognize Whatcom County's historical and archeological attributes and identify and encourage the preservation of lands, sites, and structures that have historic or archeological significance.

- Policy 10E-1: Whatcom County shall prepare a cultural resource inventory to identify and document archeological and historic resources.
- Policy 10E-2: The county's cultural resource inventory shall be updated on a continuing basis to ensure the inventory's usefulness as a historic preservation and land use tool.
- Policy 10E-3: The county's cultural resource inventory shall be coordinated with similar programs maintained by municipalities and indigenous people within the county to ensure the comprehensiveness of the inventory.
- Policy 10E-4: Consistent with its resources and based on the standards of the cultural resources inventory, the county shall provide technical assistance to local groups whose work can be incorporated into the county's inventory.
- Policy 10E-5: The county shall seek to preserve and enhance archeological, historic, and cultural resources by enacting a qualifying historic preservation ordinance and carrying out the mandates of that ordinance.
- Policy 10E-6: The county shall meet its cultural resource management obligation under federal, state, and local regulations in an efficient and effective manner.
- Policy 10E-7: Consistent with its resources, the county shall provide technical assistance on cultural resource matters.
- Policy 10E-8: The county shall promote preservation of identified archeological, historic, and cultural resources.
- Policy 10E-9: On projects under its authority, the county shall consistently seek to mitigate negative impacts to cultural resources.
- Policy 10E-10: The county shall undertake through a public/ private partnership a coordinated long-range planning in conjunction with representatives of arts, heritage, and tourism organizations, to develop strategies for preserving and enhancing cultural resources.
- Policy 10E-11: The county shall continue to cooperate with cultural groups and the organized representatives of the tourism industry to promote cultural tourism and ensure that cultural tourism projects remain eligible for funding assistance through its hotel/motel tax fund program.
- GOAL 10F: Save, protect, and enhance our county's rural setting from conversion to urban/suburban development.**
- GOAL 10G: Encourage freedom of rural land use and lifestyle choices in harmony with other county goals.**

Natural Resources and Sustainability

Natural resources have been the foundation of human development in Whatcom County. Many county residents make a living in the open, in farming, dairying, logging, mining, and fishing. The result has been an evolving landscape, unique in its diversity. As we continue to grow, however, there will be increasing conflict between resource use and the maintenance of our landscape. There is an opportunity to apply design techniques to mitigate some of the conflicts. Also, because our natural resources are not all renewable, it is necessary to consider the concept of sustainability. Sustainability means meeting our present needs without compromising the ability to meet future generations' needs.

GOAL 10H: Encourage limiting impacts from resource uses on the natural environment.

GOAL 10J: Minimize conflicts between different land uses.

GOAL 10K: Consider long term effects of building practices on communities and natural resource depletion.

Places and Focal Points

Places and focal points help define the character and provide the diversity that make up Whatcom County. These include areas as large as the City of Lynden, or the Nooksack River Valley, or Silver Lake Park; they can include such places as the Dewey Valley or Deming Logging Show grounds, Fairhaven or the Fountain District in Bellingham; or they can be as small as the grange halls throughout the county. The important point is that a place enhances the experience of a person while in that place.

As growth occurs, existing places and focal points are sometimes lost. However, with conscious design choices, these can be preserved and new ones established. It is important to identify and develop policies to protect and enhance the places that are meaningful to us.

GOAL 10L: Protect and enhance special places and focal points which define character and provide the diversity that is Whatcom County.

Gateways, Corridors, and Connections

Gateways, corridors, and connections are important as we pass from one identified place to another. The act of entering or leaving is an essential element in establishing the sense of place. Whatcom County is blessed with a number of natural corridors and important gateways such as the I-5 entry from Skagit County through the Chuckanut Mountains or the U.S./Canadian border crossings. Opportunities and problems should be recognized, associated with the following:

- human and natural gateways
- viewpoints and vistas
- river and stream corridors
- wildlife corridors
- utility easements
- traffic noise
- commercial signage
- links between urban growth areas and small towns

GOAL 10M: Take advantage of opportunities to announce Whatcom County with gateways.

Goal 10N: Utilize built and natural corridors and connections to heighten awareness of "place".

Edges and Transitions

Edges and transitions are the interface between different land uses or physical features. They can be natural or human made. They help define different places and act as a mechanism to create and maintain a sense of diversity between elements of the landscape, such as rural and urban land uses or public and private uses. A tree line at the edge of a meadow or a landscape buffer between commercial and residential development are two examples.

Edges and transitions can be hard, the edge of the road or of an irrigated field, or soft, a wetland transition to a tidal stream. In nature, they are often the most active zones as animals use the edge for hunting, foraging, or seeking shelter. In examining edges and transitions, it is important to recognize the way places are defined and also the way in which they are tied together; e.g., a deer foraging in open meadow and seeking shelter in the adjacent forest.

Visually hard edges provide the clearest indication of change and are usually preferred--the outskirts of a small town emerging from its agricultural surroundings with perhaps only a few service club signs announcing the pending transition. Hard edges can also be too harsh--the rigid delineation of a clear-cut which follows a straight line in contrast to the rolling topography.

GOAL 10P: Protect Whatcom County's diversity by maintaining or creating edges that clearly identify a sense of place.

DESIGN - ACTION PLAN

The Design Chapter will be re-examined and redrafted by the 2007 amendment to the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan. During this review policies will be added to clarify the goals Whatcom County wishes to establish.

Implementation strategy for archeological and historic sites:

1. Develop a more detailed historic preservation cultural resources inventory. This should be drafted in conjunction with heritage and cultural communities and the general public.
2. Institute procedures designed to make the information in the cultural resources inventory conveniently accessible.
3. Establish procedures to ensure county compliance with applicable cultural resources legislation.
4. Produce a strategic plan to guide the county's participation in tourism development and marketing.