

## Chapter One INTRODUCTION

### HOW THE PLAN WAS CREATED

Whatcom County's Comprehensive Plan is intended to guide growth in unincorporated areas for the next 20 years in coordination with the new plans of its cities. The fundamental purpose of the Comprehensive Plan is to establish a framework of goals, policies and action items for the more detailed growth planning and implementation actions which will occur in the near future in designated urban growth areas and in the county's rural areas.

The plan identifies urban growth area (UGA) boundaries and contains a future land use map. The majority of the county's growth will be located within the UGA's. Several factors influenced the development of the adopted goals and polices contained in the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan.

First, this plan has been reviewed for consistency with the requirements of the Growth Management Act (GMA), the thirteen (13) goals of the GMA (RCW 36.70A.020), mandatory plan elements (RCW 36.70A.070), and the current County-Wide Planning Policies.

Second, through inter-jurisdictional cooperation, Whatcom County has coordinated planning and decision making with all levels of government to ensure compatibility of goals and desires, and has made this plan consistent with local plans.

Third, extensive citizen participation was facilitated through educational forums, surveys/questionnaires, ~~video~~ presentations, public hearings, and written comments made throughout this process. The Planning Commission and County Council quickly learned that for every group or individual that sought a benefit, another's rights were potentially impacted. This Plan will probably not satisfy any one particular group of citizens with strongly held views. It does, however, provide common ground on the most sensitive issues that all sides can stand on, if somewhat uneasily, in the interest of what is best for the County as a whole.

#### *County-Wide Planning Policies*

The Whatcom County Council in conjunction with all local cities previously adopted a set of County-Wide Planning Policies. The framework provided by the adopted County-Wide Planning Policies ensures that local planning efforts will be consistent with one another and supportive of regional goals.

#### *Whatcom County: The Next Generations*

In April 1993, the County Executive appointed a committee of individuals representing a broad cross-section of county residents. Their charge was to produce a graphic and written description of what the people of Whatcom County wanted the county to be in 2010 and beyond. They designed an extensive public input process to define this vision for the County. The committee's work was supported and facilitated by Planning staff. Staff also provided the committee with information about GMA requirements and existing conditions in the county. Information included land use facilities, population, environment, resources, and existing plans and zoning designations.

The committee helped staff a booth at the Northwest Washington Fair in August 1993. Over 1,500 people visited the booth where they perused displays and maps, completed questionnaires, and read newsletters. In June, August, and September, the Visioning Committee hosted sixteen town hall meetings throughout the county that were attended by over 500 people. Committee members also met with various community groups to explain the Visioning Process. To encourage public input, over 12,000 surveys were distributed, and by October 1, over 1,000 had been returned. A countywide statistically valid phone survey was conducted which added another 410 people's opinions to the Visioning Process.

The telephone survey and questionnaire data were then analyzed, and the results tabulated and summarized by professional survey consultants. By February 1994, the committee had thoroughly reviewed the data and generated a set of **Visioning Community Value Statements**. These statements are included in Appendix C of this plan. They were distributed to all committees working on components of the plan.

The committee then developed four land use alternatives in order to explore and test different ways of expressing the value statements. ~~These four alternatives are the same alternatives used for the Environmental Impact Statement for this comprehensive plan.~~ The four land use alternatives were presented around the county in another series of town hall meetings. Finally, in June 1994, the committee produced a recommended land use alternative expressed through written value statements and a conceptual land use map. The Visioning Community Value Statements and written recommendations were the basis from which individual committees and Planning staff developed land use issues, goals, policies, and action plans as presented to the Planning Commission in the November 1994 *Draft Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan*.

### Whatcom 2031

Whatcom 2031 is the County's work program for the period 2008 to 2011 to prepare for the next 20 years of growth and update its Comprehensive Plan consistent with GMA. Phase I focused on the required 10-Year UGA Review and included developing population and employment forecasts and reviewing land capacity and UGA boundaries. An EIS addressing four regional growth alternatives was prepared addressing urban and rural growth patterns to the year 2031. Phase II will address the required 7-Year Review which is anticipated to involve a broader review of the Comprehensive Plan elements in relation to GMA amendments and other required topics.

### **Other Growth Management Committees**

Citizen committees were used extensively to develop this plan in the 1990s. Almost all of the elements of the plan were generated using input from appointed citizen committees. Each committee was given the results of surveys and town hall meetings from the *Whatcom County: The Next Generations*. Each committee spent countless hours reviewing background material, identifying issues, generating goals and policies, and, in some cases, action plans. Committees and committee members are listed in the front of this document.

For the purposes of updating the Urban Growth Areas (UGAs) in 2009, and as Phase I of the Whatcom 2031 comprehensive plan update process, the Growth Management Coordinating Council (GMCC) was formed in 2008. This committee was composed of elected officials from all the affected jurisdictions including one representative from each of the small cities, two from Bellingham, and three from Whatcom County. Planning staff from each of these municipalities met with county staff on a regular basis to review methodologies, data, and policies and provide guidance to the GMCC on these issues. At its last meeting for the UGA update process on July 1, 2009, the GMCC approved a document showing their recommendations for the Urban Growth Area review. This document was presented to the county planning commission and county council to provide perspective to their decision-making process.

The Whatcom 2031 process will be on-going through 2011 and the comprehensive plan will be revised and updated as part of that process.

### **Coordinating Committee**

~~The final step in developing the plan was to bring together representatives from all the committees to review each other's products in order to identify conflicts and inconsistencies. Committees then attempted to respond to and correct conflicts.~~

### **Planning Commission and County Council Review**

~~With the development of the draft plan completed, the County Council and Planning Commission held four joint public hearings to receive public input. Following these hearings, the Planning Commission held a series of 43 work sessions from March 1995 through June 1996, reviewing and editing each of the eleven chapters of the draft plan. On June 26, 1996, the Planning Commission completed their review of the plan and forwarded their recommendations to the Whatcom County Council. The Council then conducted six final public hearings and numerous work sessions of their own, and produced the final version contained herein.~~

### **Whatcom County Planning and Development Services**

~~The actual drafting and production of the plan was completed by the Planning Division staff. To a substantial degree, this plan is a refinement of the County's existing Subarea plans. The subarea planning recognized the diversity of communities, life styles and interests in Whatcom County. It afforded citizens a more direct influence in the planning for their particular community. This outcome would seem to validate both the basic wisdom of our subarea planning and the methodology and content of this new Plan.~~

~~This plan, and its attendant goals and policies and optimal land use patterns, represents a balance of the views and opinions expressed by the many citizens who took time to participate in surveys, workshops, hearings or wrote letters for the record.~~

~~The goals, policies, and implementation strategies developed through the regional visioning and planning process were intended to be consistent with the goals of the GMA. These will provide the foundation for policies intended to assist in the implementation of the GMA by forming a framework for coordinating and integrating the regional goals of our community. In August 1996 a short video was produced introducing the plan to the community. This video was made available in local libraries, to local groups, and to individuals who wished to check it out from the Planning Office. Citizens were asked to return a questionnaire after viewing the video.~~

## Original Adoption and Amendments

The County Council adopted the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan in May of 1997. Since then, amendments have been made on an annual basis. Additionally, the periodic review of the comprehensive plan for consistency with the GMA, required by RCW 36.70A.130, is occurring over a three-year period from ~~2002-2004~~2008-2011 and is called *Whatcom 2031*.

## GMA GOALS, COUNTY-WIDE PLANNING POLICIES, AND VISIONING COMMUNITY VALUE STATEMENTS

Every chapter in this plan was reviewed for consistency with the *GMA Planning Goals, the County-Wide Planning Policies, and the Visioning Community Value Statements* generated by the Visioning Process. Each individual chapter describes how consistency was achieved. The connections between this plan's goals and policies, and the goals, policies, and value statements of the other documents are evaluated in the *Environmental Impact Statement* for this plan.

For the complete text of the GMA Planning Goals, the County-Wide Planning Policies, and the Visioning Community Value Statements, see Appendix C of this plan.

## INTRODUCING WHATCOM COUNTY

Whatcom County lies in the northwest corner of both the State of Washington and the coterminous United States. It is bounded on the north by the Canadian border, on the east by Okanogan County, on the south by Skagit County, and on the west by the Strait of Georgia and Bellingham Bay. These borders enclose large parts of the Mount Baker National Forest and the North Cascades National Park, which take up about two-thirds of Whatcom County's total area. All but a few residents live in the western third of the county. Bellingham, with an estimated 200~~28~~ population of ~~69,260~~75,750 (89,284 with unincorporated UGA), is Whatcom County's largest city. Other cities include Blaine, Everson, Ferndale, Lynden, Nooksack, and Sumas, and there are several smaller unincorporated communities.

Two Indian reservations and associated trust lands are located within Whatcom County's borders. The Lummi Nation reservation is on the Lummi Peninsula and Portage Island on the western side of the county; the Nooksack Tribe reservation and trust lands comprise several parcels along the Nooksack River in the west-central area of the county.

## Population

Population growth in Whatcom County since the arrival of the first Euro-American immigrants in the 1850s has been driven largely by in-migration of people from other sections of the state and country. **Table 1** displays the growth of population in Whatcom County from 1910 to 2000, and **Table 2** shows the growth figures for each year of the current decade. These tables indicate a steady increase in population over time, with varying rates of growth often driven by factors external to Whatcom County such as international events or changes in technology and transportation. Approximately 73% of the population growth between 1960 and 2000 was due to in-migration of people from outside the area seeking jobs, life styles, and amenities found in Whatcom County.

It should be noted that the first decade of planning under the Growth Management Act (1990-2000) accompanied the reversal of a 30-year trend from 1960-1990 where unincorporated areas grew faster than cities. From 1990 to 2000, cities grew at a more rapid rate than unincorporated areas for the first time since the 1950's.

**Table 1. Population Growth in Whatcom County, 1910-2000**

YEAR	TOTAL COUNTY POPULATION	AVERAGE ANNUAL RATE OF GROWTH	UNINCORPORATED POPULATION	AVERAGE ANNUAL RATE OF GROWTH	COMBINED POPULATION OF CITIES*	AVERAGE ANNUAL RATE OF GROWTH
1910	49,511		20,183		29,328	
1920	50,600	0.2%	19,621	-0.3%	30,979	0.5%
1930	59,128	1.6%	23,112	1.7%	36,016	1.5%
1940	60,355	0.2%	25,860	1.1%	34,495	-0.4%
1950	66,733	1.0%	26,462	0.2%	40,271	1.6%
1960	70,317	0.5%	25,990	-0.2%	44,327	1.0%
1970	81,983	1.5%	34,004	2.7%	47,979	0.8%
1980	106,701	2.7%	48,622	3.6%	58,079	1.9%
1990	127,780	1.8%	59,187	2.0%	68,593	1.7%
2000	<b>166,814</b>	2.7%	74,231	2.3%	92,583	3.0%

Source: US Census

\*Cities include Bellingham, Blaine, Everson (since 1930), Ferndale, Lynden, Nooksack (since 1920), and Sumas.

**Table 2. Estimated Population Growth in Whatcom County, 2000-20022008**

YEAR	TOTAL COUNTY POPULATION	ANNUAL RATE OF GROWTH	UNINCORPORATED POPULATION	ANNUAL RATE OF GROWTH	COMBINED POPULATION OF CITIES*	ANNUAL RATE OF GROWTH
2000	166,814		74,231		92,583	
2001	170,600	2.27%	75,682	1.95%	94,918	2.52%
<del>2002</del>	<del>172,200</del>	<del>.94%</del>	<del>76,718</del>	<del>1.37%</del>	<del>95,482</del>	<del>.59%</del>
<del>2003</del>	<del>174,500</del>	<del>1.3%</del>	<del>77,796</del>	<del>1.4%</del>	<del>96,704</del>	<del>1.3%</del>
<del>2004</del>	<del>177,300</del>	<del>1.6%</del>	<del>78,746</del>	<del>1.2%</del>	<del>98,554</del>	<del>1.9%</del>
<del>2005</del>	<del>180,800</del>	<del>2.0%</del>	<del>79,848</del>	<del>1.4%</del>	<del>100,952</del>	<del>2.4%</del>
<del>2006</del>	<del>184,300</del>	<del>1.9%</del>	<del>81,066</del>	<del>1.5%</del>	<del>103,234</del>	<del>2.3%</del>
<del>2007</del>	<del>188,300</del>	<del>2.2%</del>	<del>82,309</del>	<del>1.5%</del>	<del>105,991</del>	<del>2.7%</del>
<del>2008</del>	<del>191,000</del>	<del>1.4%</del>	<del>83,911</del>	<del>1.9%</del>	<del>107,089</del>	<del>1.0%</del>
<del>2002</del>	<del>172,200</del>	<del>.94%</del>	<del>76,718</del>	<del>1.37%</del>	<del>95,482</del>	<del>.59%</del>

Source: Washington State Office of Financial Management (~~June 28, 2002~~June 29, 2009)  
 \*Cities include Bellingham, Blaine, Everson, Ferndale, Lynden, Nooksack, and Sumas.

~~In the last ten years~~Between 1997 and 2007, the total population of Whatcom County had grown at an average annual rate of ~~2.25~~1.83% per year, with the incorporated cities growing at an annual rate of 1.86% and the unincorporated areas (including the urban areas of Birch Bay and Columbia Valley) growth at 1.50% per year (source: OFM1992-2002). The total 2007 estimated population was 188,300 and the 2008~~2~~ estimated population of Whatcom County is 172,200191,000, ~~representing a 1.86% annual rate of growth in five years (1997-2002).~~

More than half of all Whatcom County residents live in cities. **Map 1** displays the 2000 population density for Whatcom County. The highest densities are in and around cities, though there are other small centers of medium to high population density such as the ones at Sudden Valley, Birch Bay, Paradise Lakes near Kendall, and along the Guide Meridian. The 2000 Census data showed 92,583 people, or about 55.5% of the county's total population, living inside the city limits of Whatcom County's seven incorporated cities. Another 13,920 people were living near the cities in city urban growth areas (derived from *Whatcom County Population and Economic Forecasts*, ECONorthwest, May 2003, Table 3-2 and Census counts). Counting these neighborhoods, the urban population was about 64% of the county total.

**Population Projections**

Projections of future population size are an essential component of land use planning. As required by RCW 36.70A.110, in 2007~~2~~, the Washington State Office of Financial Management developed a 20-year population projection for Whatcom County. ~~Meanwhile, Bellingham, in coordination with Whatcom County and the other cities, contracted with a private consulting firm (ECONorthwest) to develop population projections for the next 20 years.~~The ~~ECONorthwest~~OFM and OFM projections for 2029are provided in Table 3 below:

**Table 3. ECONorthwest-OFM Population Projections for Whatcom County**

	<b>ECONorthwest OFM Population Projections for 2022-2029</b>	<b>Average Annual Growth Rate 2009-2022</b>	<b>Average Annual Population Growth 2002-2029</b>	<b>Total Population Growth 2002-2029</b>
<b>Low</b>	215,850 216,300	1.14% 0.66%	2,183 1,265	43,650 25,300
<b>Medium</b>	231,928 258,448	1.50% 1.77%	2,986 3,372	59,728 67,448
<b>High</b>	261,084 318,832	2.10% 3.35%	4,444 6,392	88,884 127,832

Source: *Whatcom County Population and Economic Forecasts* (ECONorthwest, May 2002); *Whatcom County Countywide Population and Employment Extrapolations and Scenarios*, Memo, Berk and Associates, February 9, 2009

Note: The OFM population estimate of 172,200 people in Whatcom County in 2002 estimate of 191,000 in 2008 was utilized as a starting point for calculating the average annual growth rates and average annual population growth figures in this table.

Source: *State Office of Financial Management Population Projections* (Jan 2002).

The Growth Management Act requires that the County plan for a 20-year population growth that is based upon the growth management population projection by the office of financial management within the range projected by (OFM). The county and each city must include areas and densities sufficient to permit the urban growth that is projected to occur for the succeeding twenty-year period, unless the County has studies to prove that a different figure is justified. The current 2022-OFM projection for Whatcom County ranges from to a Low projection of 205,991 people to a Medium projection of 236,837 people and a High projection of 281,122 people.

The County's 2022-2029 population projection of 234,917-244,892 is within OFM's range and therefore requires no further justification. The rationale for using this figure, which is close to ECONorthwest's-OFM's medium projection, include: an overall slowing trend for growth in Washington State and Whatcom County, Consistency with past growth trends, the quality of life in Whatcom County is expected to fuel growth in the future, and ensuring an adequate land supply to accommodate this growth, the need to plan for growth and the need to protect the quality of life and natural resources in Whatcom County. This population projection is selected for planning purposes only and does not obligate the County to encourage growth. Given past population trends and the requirements of GMA, planning for population growth, whether it occurs or not, is critical for the quality of life, protection of natural resources and economic health of Whatcom County.

Table 45 shows how the total projected 2022-2029 population would be distributed assuming: 1) that all of the UGAs have been annexed into existing cities; and 2) that each city-urban area receives a share of the county's overall growth; and 3) that the portion of growth to urban areas is approximately 85% of county-wide growth, with the balance to rural areas. apportioned according to each city's comprehensive plan growth projections.

**Table 45. Whatcom County Population Projections and Distribution**

	2000 Population (Based on 2000 City Limits)	20080 Population- (Cities and unincorporated inc lude UGAs)	Projected 2022 2029 Population (Cities Include UGAs)	20080-2022 2029 Net Growth Cities Include and unincorporated UGAs)
<b>Bellingham</b>	67,174	89,284 78,040	111,761 113,055	22,477 35,015
<b>Birch Bay</b>		5,290	8,529	3,239
<b>Blaine</b>	3,770	4,667 4,779	8,916 7,942	4,249 3,163
<b>Columbia Valley</b>		3,924	5,000	1,076
<b>Everson</b>	2,035	2,395 2,256	3,623 3,912	1,228 1,656
<b>Ferndale</b>	8,758	12,019 9,934	20,140 17,322	8,121 7,388
<b>Lynden</b>	9,020	11,613 9,604	15,078 16,900	3,465 7,296
<b>Nooksack</b>	851	1,137 895	2,081 1,881	944 986
<b>Sumas</b>	978	1,279 995	2,072 1,669	793 674
<b>Subtotal</b>	92,583	131,608 106,503	177,200 162,681	45,592 56,178
<b>Unincorporated Rural Whatcom County</b>	74,231	59,392 60,311	67,692 72,236	8,300 11,925
<b>Total Whatcom County</b>	166,814	191,000 166,814	244,892 234,917	53,892 68,103

Source: *Whatcom County Population and Economic Forecast* (ECONorthwest, May 2002), Washington Office of Financial Management (July 28, 2002/April 1, 2009) and County Council (January 2004).

It is also projected that, by the year 2022, the Birch Bay UGA will have 9,619 people, the Columbia Valley UGA will grow to 5,000 people, and Point Roberts will have 1,743 people. These three areas are all located within unincorporated Whatcom County. It is projected that other unincorporated areas (rural, agriculture, etc.) will have 55,874 people.

To avoid tightening urban land supply, the county is using a projection of 234,917 for land use and facility planning purposes.

## Employment Forecasts and Distribution

The Growth Management Act requires that comprehensive plans and/or development regulations provide sufficient capacity of land suitable for development within their jurisdictions to accommodate employment growth. In 2009, the Act was amended to ensure that the employment growth accommodated medical, governmental, educational, institutional, commercial and industrial facilities.

Whatcom County contracted with ICF Jones & Stokes and Berk and Associates, to develop Countywide Population and Employment Extrapolations and Scenarios, and then to provide allocation scenarios to the various urban and rural areas. These employment scenarios were reviewed with cities, the Growth Management Coordinating Council, and their report was first published on September 23, 2008, and later edited and re-published on February 9, 2009 prior to the scoping process for the Environmental Impact Statement on the Urban Growth Area review.

The employment forecasts considered the various sectors of the labor force in Whatcom County, including construction, finance, government, manufacturing, retail, services, transportation, and wholesale trade. The forecasts also considered the labor participation rate as the proportion of labor to the total population of all ages. For the purpose of Urban Growth Areas, non-agricultural labor force was considered in the forecasts.

After the county-wide employment forecasts were complete, the allocation of that employment to the various urban areas was also developed in a report by Berk and Associates, published on January 13, 2009. These allocation scenarios considered allocation based on current pattern of job distribution and an alternative approach to allocating job growth distinguishing between regional and local employment growth. Variations on these scenarios were tested in an EIS prepared in 2009.

The common theme recommended by the Growth Management Coordinating Council was a labor participation rate of 49%. In some urban areas, this rate is either high (Bellingham) or low (Columbia Valley and Birch Bay). City requests for allocation of employment, and the sizing of the Urban Growth Area, were based largely on the local request recognizing the incentives that cities have for larger employment areas (sales tax, property tax). Due to the challenge in designating lands for commercial or industrial development, the allocation of employment allowed for these optimistic scenarios if they did not result in expansion of Urban Growth Areas. If expansion of an Urban Growth Area would be considered for employment purposes, greater justification for the need for employment lands should be required. Table 5 shows the allocation of total non-agricultural employment to the various Urban Growth Areas.

**Table 5: Whatcom County Employment Projections and Distribution**

<u>Study Area</u>	<u>2008 Employment</u>	<u>Growth Allocation</u>	<u>2029 Total Employment</u>
<u>Bellingham UGA</u>	<u>51,153</u>	<u>18,829</u>	<u>69,982</u>
<u>Birch Bay UGA</u>	<u>436</u>	<u>489</u>	<u>925</u>
<u>Blaine UGA</u>	<u>2,971</u>	<u>1,903</u>	<u>4,874</u>
<u>Cherry Point UGA</u>	<u>1,182</u>	<u>760</u>	<u>1,942</u>
<u>Columbia Valley UGA</u>	<u>90</u>	<u>359</u>	<u>449</u>
<u>Everson UGA</u>	<u>638</u>	<u>602</u>	<u>1,240</u>
<u>Ferndale UGA</u>	<u>5,534</u>	<u>4,335</u>	<u>9,869</u>
<u>Lynden UGA</u>	<u>4,832</u>	<u>3,115</u>	<u>7,947</u>
<u>Nooksack UGA</u>	<u>206</u>	<u>130</u>	<u>336</u>
<u>Sumas UGA</u>	<u>254</u>	<u>391</u>	<u>645</u>
<u>Rural</u>	<u>10,130</u>	<u>2,276</u>	<u>12,406</u>
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>77,426</b>	<b>33,188</b>	<b>110,614</b>

Note: Year 2008 employment data (77,426) do not add up to Employment Security Department's (ESD) current estimate of non-agriculture wage and salary employment for the County as a whole (84,850) likely due to jobs for which ESD was unable to assign a specific location.

## Demographics

The culturally diverse demographic makeup of the county's population has an effect on land use patterns. For example, Whatcom County residents with children may choose different kinds of transportation and recreation than retired people. Single-parent families and large extended families need different kinds of housing. And levels of service requirements will vary according to cultural and individual abilities. Another influence on county demographics is the cyclical influx of seasonal residents, primarily from Canada, who maintain recreational homes in parts of the county. Areas most influenced by seasonal residency include Point Roberts, Birch Bay, and the Foothills Subarea~~Paradise Lakes/Peaceful Valley area near Kendall.~~

In the period between 1990 and 2000, the age composition of Whatcom County's population changed appreciably, and some of the changes were different from what was happening state-wide and nation-wide. These changes were partly due to in-migration. For instance, the number of people at or nearing retirement age (50-69 years) increased in Whatcom County faster than simple aging could account for, and at a much greater rate than the state average (*Whatcom County Population and Economic Forecast*, ECONorthwest, May 2002, pp. 2-7 & 2-8). In 2000, there were 19,400 people age 65 and older in Whatcom County (11.6% of the total population). Over 4,900 of the 65+ group had self-care or mobility limitations. Approximately 1,560 (8%) had incomes below the poverty level. By comparison, approximately 15% of Whatcom County residents under age 65 lived in poverty.

Census age groups containing the traditional ages of college students (15-19 and 20-24) have significantly larger counts than the pre-college-age and post-college-age groups.

In 2000, Whatcom County residents between the ages of 15 and 64 numbered 114,185. There were 33,229 children under 15.

The county's racial composition also changed between 1990 and 2000. Although in 2000 88% of all county residents were white, there has nevertheless been an increase in populations of Native Americans, African Americans, Asian-Pacific Islanders, and Hispanics. The Hispanic population

is the most difficult to assess accurately because of its mobility. It is the primary component of a large contingent of migrant farm workers. The Washington State Employment Security Department estimates that of the approximately 3,600 farm workers employed annually in the county (not including agricultural support services such as processing and trucking), 2,300 are seasonal or migrant workers.

### **Land Use History**

When Euro-American immigrants first arrived on Bellingham Bay in the 1850s, the landscape of Whatcom County was comprised of mature conifer forests, winding streams and rivers, numerous lakes and wetlands, and small natural meadows.

Lummi and Nooksack people inhabited villages near the coast and along the rivers and lakes at strategic fishing locations. The Nooksack Indian people cultivated root crops they had developed along the Nooksack Valley where sub-irrigated meadows were ideal sites for such plants as camas and "Indian carrot." They emphasized the use of root crops, perhaps much more than other native peoples along the Pacific Coast.

The abundance of high-quality timber and easy accessibility to water for milling and transport were the principal reasons Euro-American immigrants first came to Whatcom County in the 1850s. Small communities grew along Bellingham Bay and the Nooksack River as more immigrants arrived in Whatcom County. They began clearing the forests and draining the wetland areas for farmsteads. Between 1890 and 1925, 130,000 acres of lowland Nooksack Valley forests were cleared for farms. In addition, logging companies sold logged-over land to their employees and to immigrants from the East Coast for small farmsteads. As a result of the sale of small parcels of logged-over lands, the average farm size in Whatcom County is relatively small--about 84 acres--compared to the statewide average of 523 acres (1997 Census of Agriculture Profiles, USDA).

Many lumber and shake mills and other industrial plants were built in Bellingham, on Lake Whatcom, and in other areas of the county, while new commercial and residential buildings were being developed in all communities. Coal mining was taking place at several locations in Whatcom County at this time, and major fish processing plants were constructed on Bellingham Bay. Whatcom County's population in 1910 was 49,511.

Between 1925 and 1950, there was little change in the land use patterns that had been developed during the previous fifty years. Some land, which had been cleared for agriculture was abandoned and naturally regenerated into second-growth forests. Most areas that were harvested for timber had reseeded and were growing mixed forests of conifers and deciduous trees. Residential and industrial development continued to grow, but at a slower pace than during the previous fifty years. Commercial centers remained within the core of the major cities. By 1950, Whatcom County's total population had grown to 66,733, with the majority of the growth occurring in the cities.

Between 1950 and 2000, the amount of land devoted to commercial activity gradually increased in response to population growth. Expanded use of the automobile encouraged commercial activities and residential development outside city centers. Coal mining ceased, but sand and gravel mining grew in importance. Farming became increasingly competitive, and the economic pressure tended to concentrate agricultural resources on the most productive soils. The trend toward abandonment or conversion of farmland to other uses continued. Some lands in the Nooksack Valley, which were formerly cleared for agriculture reverted back to native forest cover. Residential, commercial, and industrial uses continued to expand into agricultural areas. These

changes picked up speed during the 1960s and 1970s as Whatcom County experienced a population boom. The total population for Whatcom County in 2000 had grown to 166,814, an increase of approximately 137% in 40 years.

**Current Land Use**

Whatcom County covers 1,377,645 acres, or approximately 2,152 square miles. Of that total area, about 1,107,453 acres, or 80%, is either covered with forest or is managed for forest resources. This total includes virtually all federal lands and all state and private forest lands in unincorporated Whatcom County. A significant portion of this total (877,000 acres) is under federal management by either the US Department of Agriculture Forest Service or the US Interior Department, North Cascades National Park. Cities cover 29,063,30,647 acres.

~~Land use patterns on non-federal lands in unincorporated Whatcom County (470,241 acres) can be summarized by looking at the distribution of the various uses. Table 6 reflects the land use patterns. These data show that agriculture and forestry land uses predominate today in Whatcom County with 116,120 and 231,352 acres respectively classified in each category. Forest lands in the lower foothills which were initially harvested between 1900 and 1950 now support commercially mature stands of timber. Some areas of original forest still remain on non-federal lands in Whatcom County. Large tracts of un-managed forest are found primarily on federal lands in the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest in the upper watershed of the Nooksack Basin.~~

**Table 6. Land Use Distribution on Non-Federal Lands in Unincorporated Whatcom County**

Land Use	Total Acres	Percent of County Total
Forestry	231,352	49.2
Agriculture	116,120	24.7
Residential	53,008	11.3
Vacant	29,323	6.2
Mining, Fishing & Related Uses	2,177	0.5
Public & Utilities	10,729	2.3
Industrial & Manufacturing	2,987	0.6
Commercial & Services	8,856	1.9
Lummi Nation Trust Lands	7,100	1.5
Property with no Assessor's Land use code (Roads, lands along the Nooksack River, etc.)	8,589	1.8
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>470,241 Acres</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

—Source: Whatcom County Planning and Development Services, 2003

Resource land uses, which include agriculture, forestry, and minerals, are the largest category of land use in Whatcom County. **Map 2** displays the distribution of agriculture and forestry land uses based on County Assessor's data within Whatcom County. From the map it is evident that agricultural land use predominates throughout the western lowlands of the county and in the South Fork Nooksack Valley. Forest land use is concentrated on the uplands of the county. (See Chapter 8, "Resource Lands," for more detailed information on each of these land uses.)

**Map 3** displays the distribution of commercial and industrial land uses in Whatcom County. The majority of commercial land uses occur next to major transportation routes, such as the Guide Meridian, or within the boundaries of cities. There are also concentrations of commercial uses in the Birch Bay UGA and Point Roberts. The majority of industrial parcels are also located in the cities, their UGAs or at the Cherry Point industrial area. ~~There are a total of 14,222 acres of industrially zoned land in Whatcom County, including 4,095 acres within city limits and 7,045 acres in the Cherry Point industrial area.~~ The locational pattern shown by **Map 3** indicates the importance of transportation connections to these land uses. (See Chapter 6, "Transportation," and Chapter 7, "Economics.")

Vacant lands are scattered throughout the county. **Map 4** depicts the general distribution of vacant lands, as defined by the latest Whatcom County Assessor's records. Vacant lands are land which at the time of the assessor's survey appear to be undeveloped, or if previously developed, are presently vacant and unused. They are usually lands being held for future development. Vacant lands are particularly concentrated in and around urban areas of the county.

**Map 5** graphically portrays the distribution of all single-family residential parcels in unincorporated Whatcom County, as interpreted from the Whatcom County Assessor's property information database. The majority of single-family residents are concentrated in the cities and the major urban and intensely developed rural portions of the county such as Sudden Valley, Paradise Lakes, Glacier, Lake Samish, Lake Whatcom (north end), Cain Lake, Birch Bay, Sandy Point, and Lummi Island. A fairly even, but lower, density distribution of single-family residences is scattered throughout the central rural portion of the county between Bellingham and Lynden, Ferndale and Everson/Nooksack. Another even but lower density distribution of single-family residences occurs between Ferndale and Blaine. As may be expected, single-family homes are also located along the valley floors of the three forks of the Nooksack. The Cherry Point industrial area, the agriculturally dominated area north of Lynden and the forested foothills in the eastern part of the county have very low to zero residential density.

A prominent characteristic of Whatcom County housing is the high number of vacation, resort, and second-home units found throughout the county. In 2000 approximately 2/3 of the "vacant" units were actually occupied part of the year for seasonal, recreational or occasional use.

Multi-family residential land use is displayed on **Map 6**. The majority of multi-family residential units are located in the urban areas of the county, primarily in and around Bellingham, Ferndale, Lynden, and Blaine. Within the unincorporated area of Whatcom County, multi-family housing units are found near Birch Bay, Sudden Valley, Glacier, Point Roberts and in the area between Bellingham and Lynden.

According to the 2000 Census, there were 34,421 housing units within the unincorporated portions of Whatcom County. This figure equates to a residential housing density of 0.127 dwelling units per acre of land, or one residence per eight acres, on land currently zoned to permit residences (Rural, Urban, Rural Residential, Agricultural, certain commercial zones, the Point

Roberts Transitional zone, Eliza Island and Rural Forestry). ~~The density of cities in Whatcom County is as follows:~~

Under the direction of the Growth Management Act, Whatcom County is required to develop transportation plans for future population growth. Part of the analysis for transportation planning includes defining the density of population by transportation analysis zones. **Map 7** presents the housing density per acre for Whatcom County in 2000, displayed by Census Block. (See Chapter 3, "Housing," and the *Housing Background Document* for more information.)

#### ~~Future Land Use~~

~~Future land use patterns in Whatcom County will likely be influenced to a large degree by County and city land use plans, existing development patterns, existing transportation systems, local and international economics, and environmental and natural resource land constraints. Agriculture and forest resource lands will likely continue to dominate the landscape. Availability of potable water for residential, commercial, and industrial use will almost certainly be a limiting factor to development in some areas of the county. Establishing urban growth areas will likely encourage more growth in those areas identified and result in less pressure on rural areas.~~