

Comment To Planning Commission On Proposed Foothills Subarea Plan Update

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KEEPING THE PAST IN PERSPECTIVE
PLANNING FOR A VIBRANT FUTURE

WHATCOMB COUNTY PLANNING

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For Comparison Purposes Examine The County's Community Plan For Birch Bay

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“As an unincorporated urban area, Birch Bay’s comprehensive planning is the responsibility of the Whatcom County Planning and Development Services Department.” (Page 3-2 – Birch Bay Plan)

Notice:

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- The Birch Bay plan contains 18 chapters discussing all the same elements of a GMA compliant comprehensive Plan that a small city comprehensive plan is expected to address;
- The Columbia Valley UGA portion of the proposed Foothills Plan contains eleven pages;
- The Birch Bay plan is almost exclusively dedicated to examining how the UGA will grow in the future;
- The Columbia Valley portion of the Foothills Plan is primarily focused on the existing shortcomings the UGA is experiencing.

A Discussion Issue For The Commission

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The Growth Management Act (GMA) requires specific planning objectives be met in UGAs;

The GMA requires that “Development regulations must implement comprehensive plans,” i.e. plans made must eventually be plans achieved;

Can the portions of the proposed Foothills Subarea Plan dealing with the Columbia Valley be modified slightly to assure plans made today are plans realized tomorrow?

Some Suggestions

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- Remove some important language that is gratuitously negative or, point to a problem in the context of creating planning approaches overcoming the identified challenge;
- Address the fact that not one inch of land in the Columbia Valley is zoned to allow hoped for jobs to be provided by industry;
- Insert, in the Columbia Valley UGA portion of the plan, policies developed to help assure the plan succeeds.

Removing Or Modifying Negative Language

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The language utilized in the Columbia Valley UGA portion of the Foothills plan is, almost certainly without intention, dreary in terms of the prospects for the UGA;

That might be the case because so much of the language is backwards looking, describing a past during which the UGA was Whatcom County's planning stepchild.

Recognize Challenges – Point To Opportunity

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It is fine to recognize challenges we all face as citizens of Whatcom county as we seek to plan for our future;

But a good plan does more than point to the challenges we face, it points to opportunity and lays out a roadmap to achieve success.

Going Back Is Not An Option

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The Columbia Valley's population is within 700 people the population of Blaine;

The Columbia Valley is about three hundred persons larger than the population of Sumas, plus Nooksack plus *another* Sumas.

The Columbia Valley is home to about 1,500 more people than live in Everson;

No one suggests Blaine, Nooksack, Sumas or Everson are not viable communities to be treated with respect.

Looking Forward Is A Necessity

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The Planning Commission should work with staff to make the UGA portion of the Foothills Plan a positive, forward looking document capable of enhancing quality of life for all in the Foothills region

An Example

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Page 12-7

The comment, “Single family residential development does not generate enough property tax revenue to support itself,” has no apparent foundation in fact and, if it did, has no meaning absent discussion of how the challenge can be overcome just as it is overcome in Blaine, Everson, Sumas, Nooksack and other jurisdictions.

The Comment Should Be Erased From The Plan

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- City of Bellingham analysis (see attached white paper) demonstrates residential housing, at urban levels, is very profitable to a jurisdiction, as is commercial and industrial.
- The City's analysis shows two primarily residential annexations will provide in excess of \$16 million in surplus funds to the city over the next 12 – 20 years *on top of paying for roads, sewer, water, police, firemen and other required urban services.*
- Expenditures by residents will add millions of dollars in sales tax revenue over those years.

In The Columbia Valley

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- Residents today account for \$1,150,000 in property tax collections per year;
- The assessor's valuation of the UGA as measured by combining the valuations assigned the two water districts serving the UGA is about 1.3 times that of the City of Nooksack.
- Columbia Valley residents account for about \$700,000 in sales tax revenue each year.
- If the projected new residents were here today they would contribute an additional \$200,000 + annually.

Alternatively, If The Statement Is True

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It should be accompanied by planning approaches backed up by policies and development regulations capable of assuring the growth planned for in the Columbia Valley can be financed in the same or similar ways growth in towns like Nooksack, Everson, Sumas, Blaine or others is financed.

Provide For Jobs – A Number One Desire

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- During both the Subarea planning and the ten year review process a desire to have jobs available in the Columbia Valley was consistently pointed to as a “top of the list” desire by the people of the Columbia Valley;
- The Planning Commission should consider what a small industry would have to do to locate an industrial facility in the Columbia Valley today.
- The proposed process makes locating an industrial job in the Columbia Valley a near impossibility.

Zone The Land Designated For Industrial

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A number one consideration when a company decides to either build a new plant or relocate an existing plant is, “How soon can I be up and running.”

If an industrial client wanted to locate in the Columbia Valley today the rezone alone is, by County requirements, at least a 23 month process.

Develop Specific Policies Calling For Success

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The Columbia Valley portion of the Foothills Subarea Plan will essentially serve as the Comprehensive Plan for the UGA;

A Countywide Comprehensive Plan is a significantly different animal than a Comprehensive Plan designed to implement an Urban Growth Area is;

Pointing to policies in the countywide plan that may pertain to the Columbia Valley UGA does not constitute adequate planning for a UGA;

Some well thought out policies directing planning in the UGA would inform future decision makers regarding your intention that the Columbia Valley of the future be a vibrant, exciting community.

In Short

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Your job as Planning Commissioners is to put some real thought into how the plan before you will enhance quality of life, preserve the environment and expand the economy of the Foothills Subarea and then to suggest adjustments designed to enhance the plan;

Success in the Columbia Valley UGA is central to the success of the Foothills Subarea Plan. In its current form the proposed plan cannot, and does not, assure success;

You should not forward the plan to the Whatcom County Council until you can, with a straight face, say, “This plan is a good plan **and**, it can be implemented.