



P.O. Box 1517
Bellingham, WA 98227

January 15, 2009

Whatcom County Planning Commission
Bellingham, WA 98225

Dear Whatcom County Planning Commission,

Subject: Staff Recommendation to the Foothills Subarea Plan

Futurewise Whatcom is the local chapter of statewide land-use advocacy organization, Futurewise, whose mission is to promote healthy communities and cities while protecting farmland, forests and shorelines today and for future generations. As advocates for wise land use planning that preserves rural areas from urban-style development, we have an interest in the county's Planning and Development Services report regarding the Foothills Subarea Plan, and appreciate the opportunity to comment on it.

Overall, we believe that staff has done a fine job analyzing the causes and effects of growth and development in the larger Foothills Subarea, and options for future alternatives. We are very grateful for their careful work.

However, we disagree with the recommendation to retain an Urban Growth Area in the Columbia Valley, and we also disagree with the accompanying recommendation to adopt a projected Columbia Valley population increase of 5,000 people over the next 20-year planning period. This represents a 30% increase (from 2006 levels) above the existing population in Columbia Valley; an increase in a population that was never planned, nor ever intended by previous zoning.

The Columbia Valley is not an urban area. Much of the area originated as rural, recreational camping lots with primary attractions being the distance from urban areas and proximity to a rural setting. Low property costs and subsequent UGA designation led to a growth of permanent residences. Attempting to mitigate the ill-effects of overly-intensive urban residential development in this rural area with additional intensive urban residential development would be unwise and unsuccessful. The Columbia Valley lies too great a distance from where the County has designated current and future commercial, industrial, and retail areas are (and will be) located. Even under the most optimistic scenarios the area will offer far fewer jobs and services than it will ever attract compared to residents, which will result in a net revenue loss for the County and lead to excess vehicle-miles traveled while area residents commute to find work, to shop, and services.

Futurewise Whatcom recommends staff Alternative #3, Rural/LAMIRD. Residential development and appropriate commercial operations and services could continue within the areas of the plats developed in 1990, and population increases would be more appropriate

Steering Committee: Allison Aurand, Todd Donovan, Lynnea Flarry,
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to levels the large geographic area and low tax base could adequately support with services such as fire stations and schools.

If there is no possibility to undo the UGA designation, certainly the UGA in the area should not be expanded. Any population projection should be as low as possible until it can be determined if the County can provide adequate public facilities and services to support the residents. Until those capital facilities questions are answered, the population allocation should not exceed 5,000.

We hope the commission will consider the staff Alternative #3, Rural/LAMIRD designation as a more appropriate alternative to continued UGA status. Thank you for considering our views, and please contact us if you have any questions or comments.

Sincerely,

Cathy Lehman
Chapter Director