

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Why Comprehensive Planning?

Skagit County began Comprehensive Planning in 1965. The need sprang from the concern that development was occurring in a haphazard way, and the regulation of development was inconsistent. Since there were no overarching plans or visions of development, the communities did not have tools to establish consistent policies.

Following the Skagit County plan in 1965, La Conner established its first Comprehensive Plan in October 1969. The original Comprehensive Plan was only eleven pages, but did attempt to initiate policies to govern code implementation and development. The adopting ordinance specifically stated that “All ordinances or parts of ordinances in conflict with any provision of this ordinance [Comprehensive Plan] are hereby repealed.”

The subsequent plan adopted in 1978 combined zoning codes with the comprehensive plan. This version lost its policy framework and became the development code standards.

It became evident that plans establishing the goals and policies must be separate from the codified development standards. The goals and policies of a community must be amended less frequently and provide long-term continuity. In contrast, development codes can be amended frequently to be responsive to the needs of development, but reflect the goal and policy agenda of the comprehensive plan.

What’s the Connection to Growth Management?

In the 1980’s, uncontrolled growth had become a major concern of Washington State citizens, which set the stage for the Growth Management Act. In 1990, the Washington State Legislature passed the Growth Management Act (GMA). The GMA established the comprehensive plan as the cornerstone of community planning. It gave comprehensive plans more legal weight, and is the instrument by which jurisdictions became accountable for consistent regulation of development.

New terms entered into the language (i.e. consistency, concurrency) and invigorated old terms with new meaning (i.e. classification, designation, protection and conservation). The GMA also provided an organizing structure beyond each jurisdiction. Local municipal comprehensive plans must be

coordinated with county plans with regard to population growth and development planned allocations.

It also required integration with other planning efforts such as shorelines, transportation and capital facilities. In addition to being internally consistent and consistent with other local planning efforts, the GMA requires that La Conner coordinate with Skagit County and adhere to the County-adopted Countywide Planning Policies (CWPPs) and the original thirteen (now fifteen) GMA planning goals listed in RCW 36.70A.020. These statewide goals, which have been revised over the years, currently state:

- 1) **Urban growth.** Encourage development in urban areas where adequate public facilities and services exist or can be provided in an efficient manner.
- 2) **Reduce sprawl.** Reduce the inappropriate conversion of undeveloped land into sprawling, low-density development.
- 3) **Transportation.** Encourage efficient multimodal transportation systems that will reduce greenhouse gas emissions and per capita vehicle miles traveled, and are based on regional priorities and coordinated with county and city comprehensive plans.
- 4) **Housing.** Plan for and accommodate housing affordable to all economic segments of the population of this state, promote a variety of residential densities and housing types, and encourage preservation of existing housing stock.
- 5) **Economic development.** Encourage economic development throughout the state that is consistent with adopted comprehensive plans, promote economic opportunity for all citizens of this state, especially for unemployed and for disadvantaged persons, and encourage growth in areas experiencing insufficient economic growth, all within the capacities of the state's natural resources, public services, and public facilities.
- 6) **Property rights.** Private property shall not be taken for public use without just compensation having been made. The property rights of landowners shall be protected from arbitrary and discriminatory actions.
- 7) **Permits.** Applications for both state and local government permits should be processed in a timely and fair manner to ensure predictability.
- 8) **Natural resource industries.** Maintain and enhance natural resource-based industries, including productive timber, agriculture, and fisheries industries. Encourage the conservation of productive forest lands and productive agricultural lands, and discourage incompatible uses.
- 9) **Open space and recreation.** Encourage the retention of open space and development of recreational opportunities, conserve fish and wildlife habitat,

increase access to natural resource lands and water, and develop parks and recreation facilities.

10) **Environment.** Protect the environment and enhance the state's high quality of life, including air and water quality, and the availability of water.

11) **Citizen participation and coordination.** Encourage the involvement of citizens in the planning process, including the participation of vulnerable populations and overburdened communities, and ensure coordination between communities and jurisdictions to reconcile conflicts.

12) **Public facilities and services.** Ensure that those public facilities and services necessary to support development shall be adequate to serve the development at the time the development is available for occupancy and use without decreasing current service levels below locally established minimum standards.

13) **Historic preservation.** Identify and encourage the preservation of lands, sites, and structures, that have historical or archaeological significance.

14) **Climate change and resiliency.** Ensure that comprehensive plans, development regulations, and regional policies, plans, and strategies under RCW [36.70A.210](#) and chapter [47.80](#) RCW adapt to and mitigate the effects of a changing climate; support reductions in greenhouse gas emissions and per capita vehicle miles traveled; prepare for climate impact scenarios; foster resiliency to climate impacts and natural hazards; protect and enhance environmental, economic, and human health and safety; and advance environmental justice.

15) **Shorelines of the state.** For shorelines of the state, the goals and policies of the shoreline management act as set forth in RCW [90.58.020](#) shall be considered an element of the county's or city's comprehensive plan.

Consistency Countywide Planning Policies

In addition to the above GMA planning goals developed by the State, Skagit County developed Countywide Planning Policies (CWPPs) which are written policy statements establishing a Countywide planning framework to ensure consistency between county and city comprehensive plans as required in RCW 36.70A.100.

The Town developed its Plan in conformance with the CWPP. The CWPP with particular relevance to the Town of La Conner include:

Urban Growth: (Note that in this context urban growth area refers to the town limits. With the exception of a small area used for municipal purposes, the town has no urban growth area).

- Encourage development in urban areas where adequate public facilities and services exist or can be provided in an efficient manner.
- Urban growth areas shall include greenbelt, open space, and encourage the preservation of wildlife habitat areas.
- Urban growth areas shall provide for urban densities of mixed uses and shall direct development of neighborhoods which provide adequate and accessible urban governmental services concurrent with development. The GMA defines urban governmental services as those governmental services historically and typically delivered by cities, and includes storm and sanitary sewer systems, domestic water systems, street cleaning services, fire and police protection services, public transit services, and other public utilities associated with urban areas and normally not associated with nonurban areas.

Transportation:

- Encourage efficient multimodal transportation systems that are based on regional priorities and coordinated with county and city comprehensive plans.
- The development of new transportation routes and improvements to existing routes shall minimize adverse social, economic, and environmental impacts and costs.
- Primary arterial access points shall be designed to ensure maximum safety while minimizing traffic flow disruptions.
- The Transportation Element of the Comprehensive Plan shall be designed to; facilitate the flow of people, goods and services so as to strengthen the local and regional economy; conform with the Land Use Element of the Comprehensive Plan; be based upon an inventory of the existing Skagit County transportation network and needs; and encourage the conservation of energy.
- Level of service (LOS) standards and safety standards shall be established that coordinate and link with the urban growth and urban areas to optimize land use and traffic compatibility over the long term. New development shall mitigate transportation impacts concurrently with the development and occupancy of the project.
- Cost effectiveness shall be a consideration in transportation expenditure decisions and balanced for both safety and service improvements.

Housing:

- Plan for and accommodate housing affordable to all economic segments of the population; promote a wide variety of residential densities and housing types, and encourage preservation of existing housing stock.
- Allow for an adequate supply of land use options to provide housing for a wide range of incomes, housing types, and densities.
- The Comprehensive Plan should support innovative land use management techniques, including, but not limited to, density bonuses, cluster housing, planned unit developments and the transfer of development rights.
- The existing affordable housing stock should be maintained and efforts to rehabilitate older and substandard housing should be encouraged.

- Accessory dwelling units (ADUs) shall be permitted on all residential properties.

Economic development:

- Encourage economic development throughout the state that is consistent with adopted comprehensive plans, promote economic opportunity for all citizens of this state, especially for unemployed and for disadvantaged persons, and encourage growth in areas experiencing insufficient economic growth, all within the capacities of the state's natural resources, public services, and public facilities.
- The development of environmentally sensitive industries shall be encouraged.
- A diversified economic base shall be encouraged to minimize the vulnerability of the local economy to economic fluctuations.
- Tourism, recreation, and land preservation shall be promoted provided they do not conflict with the long-term commercial significance of natural resources and critical areas or rural lifestyles.
- Commercial and industrial activities directly related to or dependent on local aquatic resource areas should be encouraged in shoreline areas provided they are shoreline dependent and/or related.
- The Comprehensive Plan shall support and encourage economic development and employment to provide opportunities for prosperity.

Open Space and Recreation:

- Encourage the retention of open space and development of recreational opportunities, conserve fish and wildlife habitat, increase access to natural resource lands and water, and develop parks.
- Open space corridors within and between urban growth areas shall be identified. These areas shall include lands useful for recreation, fish and wildlife habitat, trails, and connection of critical areas.
- Expansion and enhancement of parks, recreation and scenic areas and viewing points shall be identified, planned for and improved in shore lands, and urban areas.
- Property owners shall be encouraged to site and design new construction to minimize disruption of visual amenities and solar resources of adjacent property owners, public road ways, parks, lakes, waterways and beaches.
- Expansion and enhancement of parks, recreation and scenic areas and viewing points shall be identified, planned for, and improved in shorelands, urban, and rural designated areas.
- A park and recreation system shall be promoted which is integrated with existing and planned land use patterns

Environment:

- Protect the environment and enhance the state's high quality of life, including air and water quality, and the availability of water.
- Natural resource lands, including aquatic resource areas and critical areas shall be classified and designated, and regulations adopted to assure their

long-term conservation. Land uses and developments which are incompatible with critical areas shall be prohibited except when impacts from such uses and developments can be mitigated.

- Protect natural resource lands, aquatic resource areas, and critical areas.
- Usual and accustomed activities on natural resource lands and aquatic resource areas shall be protected from interference when they are conducted in accordance with best management practices and environmental laws.
- In cooperation with appropriate local, state, and Federal agencies, develop and implement flood hazard reduction programs consistent with and supportive of the Corps Feasibility Study.

Skagit County and Cities and Towns shall work together to provide ongoing public education about flooding in a coordinated and consistent program, and shall adopt a flood hazard reduction plan, that works together with the natural and beneficial functions of floodplains.

Citizen participation:

- Encourage citizen participation throughout the planning process. For land use proposals, including those within the marine environment, all applicants shall bear the costs for public notification, by mail, and by posting of signs. Affected neighbors and surrounding shoreline owners shall be notified as prescribed by ordinance.

Historic Preservation:

- Identify and encourage the preservation of lands, sites, and structures that have historical or archaeological significance.
- Skagit County shall cooperate with local historic preservation groups to ensure coordination of plans and policies by the State Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation.

In July 2024, Skagit County has developed and implemented an extensive public participation effort designed to the cities and towns within the county to become actively involved in their planning efforts. Their stated public participation plan goals are:

- Commit to early and continuous engagement
- Broadly disseminate proposals and information in accessible formats
- Provide equitable opportunities for public participation in all areas of Skagit County
- Provide timely information at key milestones
- Use concise, plain, and easy to understand language
- Consult with local tribes
- Consult with neighboring jurisdictions, and federal and state agencies.
- Provide multilingual engagement opportunities and materials
- Update the project website with current information
- Utilize a variety of outreach mediums including local media, print, web, social media, emails, community meetings, and open houses.

Early in 2024, Skagit County conducted an online public survey to gather feedback. The County identified the following goals for the survey.

1. Identify broad priorities from Skagit County residents;
2. Identify Skagit County's greatest strengths;
3. Identify Skagit County's greatest weaknesses;
4. Identify key topics for the Comprehensive Plan to focus on;
5. Use the survey to advertise the start of the year-long project; and
6. Collect emails from interested residents to build a network for future input.

The County's survey results showed that the highest-ranking values of the respondents were "family-oriented, stewardship of natural resources, and health and safety." The highest-ranking strengths listed were "rural character, Environment, and healthy food access." The highest-ranking weaknesses were identified as "housing supply and affordability, transportation options, and local industry and employment." Respondents to public participation efforts in La Conner are in general agreement with these statements.

The Town of La Conner's Plan must be consistent with the GMA's goals and with the Skagit County Countywide Planning Policies. As the town has worked toward its Comprehensive Plan update, we have built upon the county's public participation goals. But at least as importantly, the Town's Plan must serve the needs of the people who live, work, visit, and play in the Town of La Conner. It must also be internally consistent and externally consistent with the development regulations that implement it.

The legislature has amended the GMA many times to address issues that have arisen through the implementation, and this process continues. In 2002, the legislature established a 7-year cycle for a full "periodic review" of comprehensive plans to ensure that they reflect the most current requirements of GMA. Each "periodic review" considers a 20-year planning period. In 2005 La Conner completed its first "periodic review" covering the years 2005-2025. A subsequent periodic review in 2016 planned for the years 2016 to 2036. The Current update is also a required "periodic review" and reflects the planning period encompassing the years 2025 to 2045.

La Conner Vision Statement

The Town of La Conner is a waterfront village that seeks to preserve its rural flavor, small town livability and historic authenticity while recognizing its status as a culturally artist community and visitor destination. Keeping a balance between preservation and promotion is the key to maintaining a satisfactory quality of life in La Conner. The goals cited below provide direction toward that balance.

Mission Statement:

The mission of Town government is:

1. To deliver the basic services to its people and visitors; public safety, water, sewer, streets, and zoning, in an economical and efficient manner.

2. To promote a business climate that will maximize sales and use tax revenues while controlling expenditures.
3. To advance La Conner as a cultural center, to preserve its heritage, and to support the arts.
4. To maximize public access to, and enjoyment of, the water whenever possible.
5. To prepare for natural disasters and climate change.

Goals:

1. Provide effective stewardship of the environment to protect critical areas, conserve land, air, water, and energy resources, and preserve the Town's historic heritage.
2. Encourage changes that promote livability, pedestrian orientation and high quality design, and limit stress factors such as noise pollution and traffic congestion.
3. Identify the responsibilities of public and private agencies at the local and regional level for providing emergency and social services.
4. Use local resources whenever possible to encourage local involvement in community actions and to enhance community pride.
5. Encourage the local economy by providing a predictable development atmosphere through development regulations.
6. Enhance opportunities for recreational and cultural activities for all ages by encouraging diversity in available choices.
7. Open space and public access to the waterfront are priorities whenever possible.

