

# CHAPTER 3

## LA CONNER PROFILE

### **Community History and Profile**

La Conner is a historic rural town settled in the 1860's that has preserved much of its small-town character. It is located approximately 12 miles southwest of the City of Mount Vernon, Washington between the Swinomish Channel, Sullivan Slough, and Skagit Bay in the agriculturally rich Skagit Valley of Washington State. Most of the community is at or near sea level, indicating that approximately 77% of the town is located within a floodplain. The topography of the Town area is characterized by a basaltic hill with flat agricultural lands to the east and the Swinomish Channel to the west

The arrival of Native American groups in the Pacific Northwest cannot be dated with great precision. However, archaeological investigations at the Manis Mastodon site near Sequim on the Olympic Peninsula indicate man was in the area as early as 12,000 years ago.

Swinomish, Samish, Sauk-Suiattle, and Upper Skagit Indians are the Tribes native to the Skagit River valley and each has reservation lands in the Valley. Swinomish Indian Tribal Community is composed of approximately 900 tribal members with the majority of members residing on the Swinomish Reservation or nearby in Skagit County. Most tribal members reside in the Swinomish Village area located on the southeast corner of the Reservation near the tribal offices. The Swinomish Indian Tribal Community is a federally recognized Indian Tribe that is governed by a Constitution and Bylaws that were originally adopted in 1936 and by the Swinomish Senate, the tribe's governing body, which is comprised of 11 elected members that serve staggered five-year terms.

The Swinomish are a community of Coast Salish peoples descended from groups and bands originating from the Skagit and Samish River valleys, coastal areas surrounding nearby bays and waters, and numerous islands including Fidalgo, Camano, Whidbey and the San Juan Islands. For thousands of years, these Coast Salish tribes maintained a culture centered on abundant salt water resources that included salmon, shellfish, and marine mammals, as well as upland resources such as cedar, camas, berries, and wild game.

They lived in large villages during the winter and in summer encampments that followed the seasonal cycle of resource gathering from the mouths of rivers and streams where salmon was taken, to coastal shorelines where shellfish and herring and other forage fish were taken, to marine waters where finfish and sea

mammals were taken, and to inland forests where wild game and berries were taken.

The Swinomish Tribal Community has a reservation across the Swinomish Channel from La Conner. Members of the community attend schools in La Conner and participate in various recreational opportunities within the town. The Swinomish Tribal Community also has interlocal agreements with Skagit County, the La Conner School District, the La Conner Library, and Fire District 13 regarding assessment, collection, and distribution of taxes on permanent improvement on land owned by the United States and held in trust for the Tribe.

Although the Town of La Conner currently has an official population of 995 people, its infrastructure serves residents outside the Town limits from Pleasant Ridge to Kiket Island (approximately 5,000 people within 30 square miles). The Town is projected to reach a total of 1,191 people by 2045. La Conner town limits cover approximately 255 acres, of which 51 acres is within a National Historic Preservation District. The La Conner Comprehensive Plan provides for increased population densities by encouraging in-fill. No expansion of the Town limits is planned.

### **Climate and Geography**

Washington State's climate is strongly influenced by moisture-laden air masses created in the Pacific Ocean. The airflow from the Pacific Ocean is interrupted first by the Olympic Mountains and then significantly by the Cascade Mountains. As a result of the mountain ranges, the west or windward sides of the Cascades receive moderate to heavy precipitation. Due to its unique location in the "rain shadow" of the Olympic Mountains, La Conner receives less precipitation than areas outside the "rain shadow", an average of only 30" of rain per year. This location and mild marine temperatures help make La Conner a popular recreation area, and a pleasant tourist destination.

Mean temperatures vary from a high of 70 degrees in July to a low of 40 degrees Fahrenheit in January with extreme variations recorded at -3 to a high of 102 degrees Fahrenheit. The average annual growing season is about 170-190 days. Approximately 80 percent of the precipitation occurs from October through March.

Topography ranges from 0 to about 100 feet above Puget Sound on the hills. The main residential hill, facing the Downtown district, drops off abruptly in places with slopes ranging from 40 to 100 percent.

The Town was established along the Swinomish Channel before it was dredged for navigational purposes and the tidal waters surrounded much of the Town periodically from Sullivan Slough to the Channel. Following the dredging, seawalls and agricultural dikes defined and expanded the Town beyond the rock outcrops. Until recently, this was a stable and predictable defense against natural forces. As weather patterns have shifted in the last ten years, this defense is now

vulnerable. The town has seen an increase of flooding events in recent years, and is developing plans to address this issue.

Increased population density and tourist activity will place greater demands upon existing parks, open spaces and public spaces. Additional land for recreational use may be developed as the property that is currently zoned as Transitional Commercial becomes more accessible.

