



P.O. Box 1517
Bellingham, WA 98227

March 17, 2009

Whatcom County Council
311 Grand Avenue, Suite 105
Bellingham, WA 98225

Dear Whatcom County Council,

Subject: Support Whatcom County Planning Commission recommendation to remove Columbia Valley UGA status and consider it as a LAMIRD

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 Council's decision regarding Columbia Valley's future Urban Growth Area (UGA) status. We agree with and applaud the Whatcom County Planning Commission's recommendation to remove UGA status in the Columbia Valley and consider it for LAMIRD designation.

We are well aware you have received much information on this subject. Our policy committees have discussed the issue at length, invited guests to present their various viewpoints, and conferred with the Futurewise legal and planning teams in Seattle. We understand Whatcom County has a desperately underserved population in Columbia Valley, and we understand the desire to provide urban-level services to a population where needs are great and some citizens are requesting them. However, we oppose continuation of a floating UGA in the Foothills for the following reasons:

- 1) The Columbia Valley is not an urban area, and an urban population was never planned nor ever intended by previous zoning there. 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 are what led to a growth of permanent residences – not good planning. If we had a blank slate, nobody would choose to put a UGA in the Columbia Valley. There is not adequate water, sewer, or roads for more than 5,000 people at this time. It is not a place conducive to urban levels of development.
- 2) It is unwise to locate a small urban enclave so far from the major source of retail and jobs. The Columbia Valley is too far from where the County's 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 compared to residents,

Steering Committee: Allison Aurand, Todd Donovan, Lynnea Flarry, Eric Hirst, Michael Lilliquist, Charlie Maliszewski, Tris Shirley, Dan Warner **Chapter Director:** Cathy Lehman

which will result in a net revenue loss for the County and lead to excess vehicle- miles traveled while area residents commute to work, shop, and services.

- 3) It will cost an inordinate amount of money to bring the Columbia Valley UGA's infrastructure up to reasonable standards to accommodate urban development, and there is no Capital Facilities Plan in place to do so. As it is unlikely that the UGA would be incorporated as a city any time soon (indeed the school-age population in the Mt. Baker district is declining), funding for most of the road, fire and police protection, and water and sewer would come from the County (i.e., all local taxpayers).
- 4) Under LAMIRD status, 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 to levels the large geographic area and low tax base could adequately support.
- 5) Amenities presently available in the Valley are sufficient to maintain the rural lifestyle favored by people who choose to live there. Those who find that Columbia Valley offers too few amenities actually desire urban levels of service and should locate to urban areas. Those who desire the rural ambiance should not be compelled to endure its transition to something more urban. This is a critical stand the County should take to support the intentions laid out in our Comprehensive Plan to protect rural areas and drive population growth into urban areas.
- 6) A UGA by definition is expected to expand to become an urban area. In retrospect it is apparent that Whatcom County would have been better off if, 40 years ago, Sudden Valley had not been developed. We can learn from our mistakes: Sudden Valley was a mistake. Let's not make another by creating an intentional new population center in Columbia Valley.

Ultimately, we remain unconvinced that mitigating the ill-effects of overly-intensive urban residential development in this rural area with additional intensive urban residential development would be wise and successful.

If there is absolutely no possibility to undo the UGA designation, the UGA in the area should definitely 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.

On January 15, 2009 Futurewise Whatcom wrote to the Planning Commission on this Columbia Valley UGA/LAMIRD issue. We thanked the Commission for its subsequent vote to remove the UGA status, and we are very grateful for this further opportunity to provide input to County Council as well. Please contact us if you have any comments or questions.

Sincerely,

Dan Warner
President Futurewise Whatcom