



P.O. Box 1517  
Bellingham, WA 98227

November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2010

Honorable Sam Crawford, Council Chairperson  
Whatcom County Council  
311 Grand Avenue Suite 105  
Bellingham, WA 98225

Dear Whatcom County Council,

**SUBJECT: Proposed Changes to Conservation Futures Funding**

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. We focus our local efforts on protecting rural and resource lands and promoting compact, livable cities, so as to prevent sprawl in Whatcom County. Our work ensures the state's Growth Management Act is adhered to and that citizens' interests are upheld by local planning decisions. Our chapter has over 600 local supporters, and is funded entirely by Whatcom County donations.

We are extremely concerned about the possibility of a 56% cut to Whatcom County's voter-approved Conservation Futures Fund in the proposed 2011 budget, and urge Council not only to NOT cut the fund, but also to restore it to 2009 levels.

**The Purchase of Development Rights Program Contributes to Whatcom County**

Conservation Futures has enabled Whatcom County's Purchase of Development Rights program to exist, which has put *671 acres of farmland into a permanent conservation easement*, ensuring that this land will continue in perpetuity to be used for resource production. It has been unanimously recommended by the Agricultural Advisory Committee as one of 9 tools *necessary* for agricultural land protection, and is the only tool utilized in Whatcom County that protects natural resource land while compensating farmers for their development rights.

Agriculture is one of the most important sectors of our County's economy, with over \$326,000,000 per year paid at the "farm gate" and over \$600,000,000 in food processing gross sales in the Whatcom County food system, according to the USDA and WSDA.

Protecting farming is fiscally conservative and saves taxes because farmland produces much more tax revenue than it costs in taxpayer services, especially compared to rural residences demanding urban levels of service. Maintaining local farming and forestalling urban sprawl is a fiscally conservative policy that helps to control the rising cost of services.

Economically, conserving farmland makes sense. Protected farmland will yield annual cash benefits for years to come: good food sold into local and global markets, good jobs and farm business opportunities for local families, County tax income in excess of what farmland costs the County, and PDR payments that get recirculated in the local economy.

The PDR Program works well, with low overhead, bringing in large matching grants from federal and state programs that double how far the CF can go when it's saving farmland. It is a fundamental building block to a larger agricultural protection strategy, and needs to be invested in for the future of our agricultural economy.

**Citizen Preferences Support Farmland Protection**

Citizens of Whatcom County support their farms and farmers. In 1996, a solid majority of Whatcom voters, over 57 percent, voted, "Yes," to keep the property tax going into Conservation Futures. The 2007 Agriculture Census figures show a 125% increase in direct sales (end-consumers buying directly from the farmer) in Whatcom County since 2002. This is 5x the state average.

Whatcom County residents strongly supporting protecting working farms. For example, Whatcom County Values and Beliefs Survey found that:

Fifty-eight percent (58%) of residents thought it was likely that the growth in the County will be concentrated in existing cities, and working farmland and forested foothills will be left undeveloped in the next 50 years, and seven in ten (69%) residents found this somewhat or very desirable.<sup>1</sup>

Additionally, sixty-five percent of the respondents to the Rural Element Update survey agreed that more residential development threatened the rural values of Whatcom County that we all agree need to be protected, such as clean water, agriculture, and forest lands.

It's easy to foresee that in a future election, at least 57 percent of the voters would likely vote, "Yes," to save family farms and conserve farmland in Whatcom County.

Whatcom County's own planning documents highlight the priority of farmland preservation for an agricultural economy:

- **Comprehensive Plan GOAL 8A:** Conserve and enhance Whatcom County's agricultural land base for the continued production of food and fiber.
- **Countywide Planning Policy I9:** The County and the cities recognize the need for the protection and utilization of natural resources and resource lands including agricultural, mineral, forestry and fishing. As part of a broad based economy, productive timber, agriculture and fisheries industries should be supported in a sustainable manner.

Additionally, the Growth Management Act recommends resources be directed to agricultural protection:

- **GMA Planning Goal 8, Natural Resource Industries:** Maintain and enhance natural resource-based industries, including productive timber, agricultural, and fisheries industries. Encourage the conservation of productive forest lands and productive agricultural lands, and discourage incompatible uses.

Conservation Futures Funding was originally approved by the voters in Whatcom County 1992. It was overwhelmingly reaffirmed in 1996. It should not be altered without a vote of the people. Please continue to support the will of Whatcom County voters by not to depleting Conservation Futures in the 2011 budget by 56% for a second year in a row, and in fact restoring it to 2009 levels. This will ensure a functioning PDR program can continue to enhance the County's farmland protection efforts, and meet the goals of our state law, local comprehensive planning policies and the wishes of Whatcom County citizens.

Thank you for this opportunity and for considering our comments.

Sincerely,

Cathy Lehman  
Chapter Director

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<sup>1</sup> Davis, Hibbitts, & Midghall Inc., *Memorandum to Whatcom Legacy Project Steering Committee Re: Whatcom County Values and Beliefs Survey* p. 9 (February 3, 2009).