



P.O. Box 1517
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April 22nd, 2010

Whatcom County Planning Commission
5280 Northwest Drive
Bellingham, Washington 98226-9097

Dear Whatcom County Planning Commission,

SUBJECT: Whatcom County PDS Public Participation Plan DRAFT

Futurewise Whatcom is the local chapter of the statewide land-use advocacy organization, Futurewise, whose mission is to promote healthy communities and cities while protecting working farms, working forests and shorelines today and for future generations.

We thank Whatcom County's Planning and Development Services staff for producing a detailed yet accessible document that more than adequately meets the minimum requirements set forth in the GMA for ensuring public participation in planning processes. In general, we are ultimately interested in ensuring that the comprehensive planning update to be pursued between now and December 1st, 2011 is consistent with the GMA, and since this plan does provide for early and continuous public participation, we find that overall it is extremely well done.

Suggestions for clarifying the process for community members:

Chapter 1. Introduction

The only objective we find that could be improved upon in the introduction reads, 'Provide a roadmap for the public, outlining a clear and accessible public process through December 1st, 2011.' While this document is extremely well laid out to be readable, digestible, and likely understandable by the general public, it doesn't include general timeline provisions that would make it even more effective as a resource for the community. For example, in section 4.2. *Public Participation Information Sheet*, while it explains that a coordinator will complete a public participation information sheet and post it to the website, it fails to cite a guideline for how far in advance the sheet will be published online and the website at which it will be available. We think the community would find it a more helpful roadmap if this kind of timing and location information available here as well.

3.1.3. Other Groups and Individuals

Although intended to be a fluid document, it may be useful to spell out a sampling of the 'Other Groups and Individuals' being invited to participate in the process, to ensure at least an example of that 'broad cross-section of the community' for future public participation plans, and to help community organizations self-identify their appropriate role in the process.

3.2.1. Planning Commission

Paragraph two explains, 'In this way, the planning commission will hear straight from the public on each issue and will be more involved in crafting policies, earlier in the process.' While the idea of involving the planning commission more fully is justified and useful, we anticipate a vulnerability in the process

Protecting Rural & Resource Land + Promoting Compact, Livable Cities = Preventing Sprawl

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when a political disconnect evolves between planning commission and county council ideologies. Although the county council would hold a public hearing if any substantive changes were made to the planning commission's recommendation, we're concerned that the extensive public process already carried out could be dropped at the planning commission level and restarted at county council without continuity of existing comment. If some connection could be ensured, that would be preferred, so that citizens know if they've weighed in to the planning commission on an issue their perspective is being considered at county council as well, even if they don't make it to the additional public hearing.

4.3.1. Approach

Again in this section, we'd like to see more clarification of the timing, particularly regarding items **4) Public hearing: Planning Commission holds public hearing on issue**, and **5) County Council: County Council will review the recommendation of the Planning Commission and hold a work session in committee**. We'd like to see more clarity around the opportunity for comment being primarily at the planning commission, and that council's work session is where it will go next, not necessarily to another public hearing. This is especially important on issues where concerns aren't identified until late in the game – often during the planning commission's public hearing or through media reports of the hearing afterward – resulting in the public not demonstrating awareness or interest until after that initial (and maybe only) public comment period is through.

In the April 12th UGA Settlement Conference held by Whatcom County Council at Cornwall Church, councilmember Kershner commented on her commitment to public process, stating that she would 'not be voting for any proposals that hadn't been through a thorough public process, as anything otherwise would be assuming the public was too stupid to understand it.' We couldn't agree with the priority of early and continuous public comment more. Yet council set a terrible precedent for public participation last week by adopting a resolution on the UGA matter without any advance public notice, and without allowing any public comment. We hope such actions are an aberration, as they are in conflict with the goals and policies stated in this plan and the GMA.

Additionally, this plan notes that the county council is currently reviewing options to resolve UGA issues, and that "Should some additional public participation activities need to occur associated with this," the plan "will be reviewed and revised." Since those issues are currently deemed GMA-compliant, and the county has other compliance issues to resolve in the short term, it is our sincere hope that no review and revision of this document need occur to accommodate such untimely and unwarranted actions.

Again, much thanks to Whatcom County PDS staff for the excellent attention they've given to the priority of public input to planning processes in this draft plan for the 2011 Comprehensive Plan update.

Cathy Lehman
Chapter Director

Todd Donovan
Steering Committee President