

WHATCOM VIEW September 12, 2008

Population forecast key to smart future growth plans

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Whatcom County and our local cities are gearing up for the next comprehensive plan updates, to be completed in 2011.

Who cares? We all should pay attention because this plan provides the structure and context for the development regulations and zoning rules that govern land use to the year 2030.

This plan and its implementation will have major effects on our quality of life because it will determine where and how we add new residential, commercial and industrial developments. Equally important, the comprehensive plan will determine whether and how we protect our rural areas, including farms, forests, wildlife habitat, shorelines, and open space.

During the next several weeks, the county will review and decide on its official population forecast. For how many people should Whatcom County plan over the next 20 years?

State law requires that counties base their population forecasts on projections developed by the state Office of Financial Management. OFM prepares high, medium, and low projections for each county. For 2030, these state forecasts for Whatcom County range from 218,000 to 324,000 people. The difference between the high and low forecasts is huge - about 50 percent more than Bellingham's current population. This large difference among the OFM forecasts gives us much flexibility in planning for future growth.

How should we decide on a population forecast? The county's forecast is both a technical exercise and a policy choice.

Technically, it includes demographics (age-adjusted births and deaths) and migration (a function of many factors including the economic attractiveness and quality-of-life of Whatcom County compared to other areas). Perhaps more important, the forecast is a policy statement. It states our preference for future growth, how much we want to grow over the next 20 years.

Ask yourself: Would the quality of your life be better if Whatcom County's population expanded to 324,000 rather than 218,000 people? Would an extra 106,000 people make your life more enjoyable? Most people would likely favor a future with slower growth because of its many benefits:

- More farmland, forests, and other open space to provide us with food and fiber, wildlife habitat, clean water, and parks for outdoor recreation.
- Lower taxes to pay for less new infrastructure, such as roads, schools, police and fire stations, parks, water systems, and sewer systems.

- Less traffic congestion, better air quality, better water quality (including a cleaner Lake Whatcom and better salmon habitat), and fewer fights about limited water supplies.

The pro-development advocates, including many who profit financially from more growth, tell us that slow growth would mean fewer jobs and less income for those who live here. But that's not so.

Many studies show that rapidly growing areas have higher unemployment rates and higher taxes than areas that grow slowly. For example, if a new company that pays high wages moves to town, people will move from other parts of Washington and other states to work here. So we'll have more jobs in the county but not necessarily a lower unemployment rate.

What happens if we plan for moderate growth and rapid growth occurs? Because comprehensive plans are updated every seven years, we have ample opportunity to change zoning to accommodate additional growth if and when needed. On the other hand, if we plan for high growth and growth is slower, it is very difficult to downzone land from development back to agriculture or forestry.

Citizens should let our County Council members and county executive know what kind of future we want for our community. Fortunately, there will be opportunities to offer public comment during the coming weeks and months as the comprehensive plan is updated. In particular, the county will conduct a visioning process during the next few months to identify citizen preferences on how much and what kind of growth we want for ourselves and our children.

Eric Hirst is a member of Futurewise Whatcom, an advocacy group focused on growth management in Whatcom County. It is part of the statewide Futurewise organization.