

THE GRISTLE



EXURBIA: The syllogism underlying the debate on population growth euphemized as Whatcom 2031 goes something like this: The public is compelled to pay some portion—by way of infrastructure (roads, etc.) and costly, ongoing support services (police, etc.)—for growth that is lawfully authorized. The public in general doesn't care to fund any expansion of these costly services (and, moreover, vehemently dislikes the impacts of growth). Therefore, the smallest amount of growth that is lawful should be authorized.

The Gristle won't debate the wisdom of this logic, except to note it misses the point. The point of forecasting population growth should be to best prepare the community for what is *likely to occur*.

Set the growth forecast large, and you do compel the unwilling public to pay large; set the forecast small, and you may fail to best plan the places where, and the densities at which, larger numbers might reasonably go. Here we enter the sunlight of informed land use policy.

Alas, actual population growth is not entirely ours alone to know—people elsewhere are mobile and able to move here to the extent of their interests and means.

Dick Morrill, professor of geography at the University of Washington and an expert in urban demography, observed recently that the population of the Pacific Northwest has quadrupled since 1950, a bursting expansion unseen elsewhere in the United States in the same period.

"The pattern of growth 2000-2009 is the same as from 1990-2000, overwhelmingly suburban," Morrill writes.

"These 50 years of expansion are viewed by critics as classic 'urban sprawl,' but this is not mainly true," Morrill cautions. "Rather it has mostly been urban growth necessary to accommodate a population four times as large, another 2.3 million people. Perhaps surprising to some, the average density, which did decline from 1950 to 1970, in the postwar suburban boom, has risen over the last 30 years."

Ever the laggard, Bellingham continues to off-gas some of the lowest urban densities in Western Washington, fueled less by what we've planned than by forces we've ignored. Whatcom growth bounds past the suburbs to favor disconnected, widely separated development clusters requiring endless support services.

Perhaps the most distressing piece of information from the Whatcom 2031 process is that while growth has lagged in the county's designated urban growth areas, it has exploded in the county's incorporated rural areas, mushrooming more than 20 percent over the past two decades, four times the rate anticipated—the very definition of unplanned, unsupported, unconnected leap-frog development. We've lost an average of 1,200 ag land acres per year over the same period, the most egregious loss of agricultural capacity in Western Washington. What the community wished to preserve,



views

OPINIONS ◀ THE GRISTLE

BY MICHAEL LILLQUIST AND ERIC HIRST

Quantity or Quality?

THE CHALLENGE OF CREATING OUR FUTURE

OVER THE next few weeks, many people will be debating the future population of Whatcom County over the next 20 years. State law requires the county to periodically update its population growth projection and revise its planning documents accordingly. But planning is more than following past trends. It means deciding upon a goal and working toward it.

So what kind of future do the people of Whatcom County want? And, just as important, what impact will overall population growth have upon our quality of life? How is the character of development affected by the magnitude of growth?

As a starting point, the County must use the range of numbers given to it by the state Office of Financial Management: 219,000 to 330,000 residents in the year 2031, compared to 191,000 today. Any number within this range is permissible under the Growth Management Act. But what a difference 100,000 people might make!

There are at least two schools of thought.

The first school believes growth is not really under our control, that past trends are destiny. Thus, our job is to plan for the coming population growth in order to minimize negative impacts and perhaps reap some benefits as well. For example, the pressure of population growth might finally force us to get serious about good urban planning and agricultural preservation.

This school insists we have no choice but to pick a higher number, because it is "most likely." However, the "most likely" scenario assumes we take no actions, change no policies, do nothing to affect the loca-



tion of future development, and do nothing new to protect our rural lands from sprawl. This scenario can also be described as the "failure to plan" approach.

The second school, advanced by Futurewise Whatcom, holds that the consequences of never-ending population growth are so clearly bad that we ought to take every opportunity to change our ways. The past is destiny only if we continue to do the same old things, follow the same old rules and reward the same old practices. If we want a different future, we need to start by picking a different goal—lower population growth. Say, 220,000. Then, we need to roll up our sleeves and enact the changes that will preserve our resources and the quality of life we value.

Rather than accept past trends, we should plan our future population based upon policy considerations and public values. Local citizens strongly favor slower growth and better character of growth. Nearly 2-½ times as many respondents to county-sponsored surveys and workshops thought the county's recommended number of 251,490 people was too high as thought it was too low. Preserving what we value and guiding the character of growth will be easier in the absence of the pressure to expand our urban growth areas—pressure

that will undoubtedly accompany a high end projection. In addition, the current projections are based upon old data that do not reflect current economic conditions.

Planning for high population growth commits the county to providing an unaffordable level of government services and infrastructure. Working rural lands produce more tax revenue than they use, while residential development uses more in government services than it yields in local taxes. This is critical, because Whatcom County is losing its rural areas to sprawl at an alarming rate—faster than any other county in Washington—and a lower population projection supports agricultural preservation. Data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture show that, between 1982 and 2003, an average of 1,200 acres a year of farms and forests were converted to urban uses. Worse, the pace of conversion is accelerating. We ought to focus on this problem, rather than accommodate ourselves to continual population growth.

Finally, a lower projection is less risky and easier to modify to adjust to actual growth patterns in the future. These are no ordinary times. A higher projection commits us to difficult-to-undo zoning changes. A recent county study found that we have an over-supply of urban growth area land. If any shortfall occurs in the coming years, we will see it coming years ahead of any actual need.

Bellingham Planning Director Tim Stewart recently warned of the negative consequences of a "failure to plan for growth." Futurewise suggests that planning for unwanted growth is an even greater failure. ☺