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Time is now to protect our important rural life, lands

CATHY LEHMAN - THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

Think our rural areas are growing too quickly? You're not alone. Sixty-two percent of respondents to Whatcom County's Values & Beliefs survey conducted in late 2008 agreed that our rural areas had grown too fast over the past ten years. And quite frankly, you're right.

Between 1990 and 2008, more people moved to the rural areas of Whatcom County than any part except Bellingham. In fact, The Bellingham Herald reported in January of this year that according to Whatcom County planning staff, all the population growth planned for the rural parts of Whatcom County by 2024 was already there. So where does that leave us now?

In Washington state, most land use protections are covered under the Growth Management Act (GMA), adopted by the state Legislature nearly 20 years ago. The GMA requires fast growing counties to protect the character of their rural areas and prevent sprawling suburban type development in order to protect water quality, working farms, working forests, rural lifestyles, and our environment.

Not only has Whatcom County allowed zoning in the past that divides up our rural lands into small, urban-style lots that encourages growth of these areas - we have yet to correct the problem. It is estimated that almost 7,000 more rural lots can be created in Whatcom County under current zoning, making places like Nugents Corner on Mount Baker Highway, Wisner Lake surrounded by prime farmland, or areas along Chuckanut Drive under continued threat of becoming more and more dense and developed in the future.

Until now.

In early 2005, as required by the GMA, Whatcom County updated its comprehensive plan - the county's blueprint for growth - and its zoning codes. Because the plan didn't adequately protect rural Whatcom County from large, high density developments, Futurewise challenged parts of the plan and zoning codes to the Western Washington Growth Management Hearings Board.

The Hearings Board sided with Futurewise, and rather than appeal the decision, Whatcom County chose to comply with the board's demand that they fix their plan to comply with state law. The county is currently undertaking a public process to update the rural element to comply with the GMA, and are considering a number of measures to bring its comprehensive plan and zoning into compliance, including:

- Revising the rural land use designations in the comprehensive plan.
- Changing the non-compliant zones to provide for appropriate rural densities and uses.
- Designating LAMIRDS with clear boundaries using appropriate criteria to determine these boundaries.

Futurewise Whatcom is participating in this process to ensure that the county plans will protect our rural areas rather than promote their overdevelopment. We want to be sure that the rural zoning adopted

maintains rural character, protects water quality, and ensures that Whatcom County remains a place where we all want to live. Done right, the rural element update will provide many benefits to Whatcom County including increased protection for working farms and forests, reduced future costs to tax payers, increase protection for Lake Whatcom and Bellingham Bay, and reduced traffic congestion and climate impacts.

Please attend the Whatcom County Planning Commission meeting next Thursday, July 9th at 6:30pm in County Council Chambers to speak out in support of 'Keepin' it rural, Whatcom Style!' Our local decision makers need to be reminded that yes we do value keeping rural land rural in Whatcom County, and now is the time to protect it.

Cathy Lehman is chapter director of Futurewise Whatcom is the local chapter of statewide land-use advocacy group, Futurewise, whose mission is to promote healthy communities and cities while protecting farmland, forests and shorelines today and for future generations. Learn more at www.futurewise.org/whatcom.