

David Pearson
South Fidalgo Comm. Council

TO: Skagit County Planning Commission

SUBJ: March 17, 2009 Public Comment of DRAFT "COUNTY-WIDE UGA
OPEN SPACE CONCEPT PLAN", dated January 2009

ATT: My July 2008 comments to SCOG regarding this plan

In Section 2.2 of this document, the GMA-stated directive is to identify and "protect significant and important OPEN SPACES AND CORRIDORS that define the EDGES OF THE URBAN AREA --- that can provide interpretive and recreational opportunities to be accessed by rural and urban area residents alike." Further, it is also reported in Section 2.3 that "... some of the most threatened remaining open spaces are located WITHIN OR ADJACENT TO THE DESIGNATED URBAN GROWTH AREAS (UGA's) of the county."

A tally of the frequency of terms used in Chapter 2 of the Plan are as follows: a) the word "within" the UGA appears 24 times, b) the word "adjacent" the UGA appears 19 times, and c) the word "between" appears 3 times. The contexts of the three times the word "between" appears are as follows: twice in Section 2.1 as "between the urbanizing areas and the rural landscape" and as "between the most urban and rural areas" and once in Section 2.5 as "between cities and urbanizing areas."

Further, Planning's FAQ answers stress the plan's focus on the urban-rural interface. In FAQ 1.1, "... the plan identifies a system of open spaces that are in and near the county's current and future UGA's. In FAQ 1.2, "... helps to shape urban form, particularly where the developed area ends and rural begins."

In FAQ 3.2, the report suggests that ongoing efforts by private organizations, which have "accomplished a great deal through their efforts to conserve county open space assets" have not had a sufficient focus on the urban growth areas (UGA's) and "As a consequence, some of the most threatened remaining open spaces are located WITHIN OR ADJACENT to the designated urban growth areas (UGA's) of the county," and that "the task of meeting the GMA open space goals (WITHIN AND ADJACENT to the UGA) has not been accomplished," perhaps due to higher valuations of UGA land relative to rural land and a "lack of sufficient funds with which to make up the cost differences necessary to protect open space lands ADJACENT OR WITHIN the UGA's".

These FAQ responses stress the need for a directed effort to preserve threatened open space WITHIN AND ADJACENT to the UGA's. And, consequently, that financial resources generated by this plan's approval be focused on properties WITHIN AND ADJACENT to the UGA's and not compete with ongoing efforts in rural areas.

GMA's focus on "WITHIN OR ADJACENT" to the UGA's is unambiguous.

In using the GMA's urban-rural boundary designation, we must further quantify "adjacent". An example of a definition that could be used is that for CaRD Urban Reserve (OS-UR) Open Space in SCC 14.18.310 (5)(c), which restricts the Open Space property to acreage within one-quarter mile of the urban area boundary.

In addition to a QUANTITATIVE definition of the term "ADJACENT", it will be appropriate to restrict the SCUOSAC expenditures under this plan's funding to acreage WITHIN AND ADJACENT to each UGA. Without this restriction, there will be a great temptation to add rural acreage, subverting the GMA's "WITHIN AND ADJACENT" focus,

As evidence of this temptation, Chapter 3 of the plan broadens the GMA's definition of "between" (from definitions in Chapters 1 & 2 and in the FAQ's) to add requirements for rural greenway corridors "between" the UGA's. Skagit County planners propose "linking all UGA's into a continuous greenway system across the county", with interconnecting trails "between" the county's UGA's and with trail extensions into neighboring Whatcom, Island and Snohomish counties. Further, the revised Plan suggests that these RURAL-area trails, "where appropriate, (could include) open-space related day-use park activities including fishing, boating and CAMPING".

This change will have a substantial RURAL impact countywide, and suggests that the funding generated by this plan's approval could also be used to acquire and improve RURAL trails. This amended plan is no longer constrained to land within or adjacent to the UGA's. This plan adds a rural GREENWAYS & TRAILS PLAN agenda.

So, how can this temptation be blunted? It must begin by clearly defining the plan's use of the word "between". Is "between" the urban-rural boundary, as used in Chapters 1 & 2 and in FAQ's 1.1 & 1.2? Or, is it also "between" UGA's as used in Chapters 3 & 4.

It is my view that the January 2009 "concept" plan is an attempt to bring a county-wide trails "concept" plan under the umbrella of the more narrowly defined GMA requirement --- to create the appearance that this trails plan is somehow included in the GMA WITHIN AND ADJACENT requirement, adding a COUNTY parks agenda.

If this "between" UGA's component is not deleted from the plan, there will almost certainly be a dilution of funding available for the stated GMA requirement to save the open space within and adjacent to the UGA's. These rural-area expenditures will also compete with the ongoing work of successful private efforts.

This plan, as it exists, is a "Henry Paulson". It seeks funding for protecting "threatened" UGA open spaces (as suggested by the Plan's title, Chapters 1 & 2 and the FAQ responses) but lacks an essential constraint to assure that funding is used as directed. (Recall, Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson sought funds for banks to use to increase credit liquidity; but without any constraints, the banks were largely self-serving.) Funding MUST be directed specifically to, and only to, the GMA-directed requirement.

Concluding, the UGA Plan document needs to clarify the meaning of "between". If between means the GMA's urban-rural interface, then also quantify the meaning of "adjacent" and delete ALL references to the "between UGA's" proposals in Chapters 3 & 4.

On the other hand, if "between" includes the Parks department's plans for RURAL greenways and trails between UGA's, then Chapters 1 & 2 and the FAQ's will have to be rewritten to reconcile the obvious variance with the GMA's "edges of the urban" directive.

Perhaps the solution is to prepare two separate proposals: one for the GMA's requirement (at the urban-rural interface) and one for the Parks Department plans (for rural greenways/trails). Each plan could be evaluated and funded on its merits.

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RE: Critique of DRAFT "UGA Open Space Plan", dated Jun 20, 2008

The GMA's directive is to identify and "protect significant and important OPEN SPACES AND CORRIDORS that define the EDGES OF THE URBAN AREA --- that can provide interpretive and recreational opportunities to be accessed by rural and urban area residents alike." (Section 2.2) "... some of the most threatened remaining open spaces are located WITHIN OR ADJACENT TO THE DESIGNATED URBAN GROWTH AREAS (UGA's) of the county." (Section 2.3).

Through interviews, work sessions, and mail-out/phone-back surveys, public, non-profit and organizational representatives were asked their views regarding existing conservation efforts WITHIN & ADJACENT TO URBANIZING AREAS and access systems IN THE URBANIZING AREAS (Section 2.4). Also, survey respondents were asked to prioritize "the importance of open spaces WITHIN AND ADJACENT TO THE URBANIZING AREAS of the county" (Section 2.7).

"A PRINCIPAL PURPOSE of this SCOG planning effort, therefore, is to define concepts and strategies by which to (identify) UGA open space and greenway separators that can also link with (the) open space initiatives being carried out in the more rural areas of the county by public and non-profit agencies and organizations ... in a manner that will benefit and enhance rather than duplicate or compete with these ongoing and successful efforts." (Section 2.8).

- 1) Where is the requested inventory of existing open space "within and adjacent" to each UGA?
- 2) Where is the priority listing of most-threatened open spaces "within and adjacent" to each UGA?
- 3) Why does this plan propose the interconnection of all the UGA's via new "GREENWAYS"?

Planning's expansion of the SCOG-constrained requirement listed above (i.e., specifically limited in Section 2.x to "WITHIN AND ADJACENT TO THE URBANIZING AREAS") into a county-wide plan that interconnects all the UGA's is clearly a violation of the SCOG's specific directive to NOT duplicate or compete with the on-going "successful private and non-profit efforts" in the rural areas.

June 20th's DRAFT plan is unacceptable. It has subordinated the GMA's urban "within and adjacent" focus, proposing a grandiose plan to establish "recreational greenbelts" (for hiking, biking and horse trails, for interpretive centers and for day-use parks, including camping, per Section 3.1) by interconnecting the UGA's, displacing valuable farming and resource lands. Planning further suggests that additional taxes and levies be imposed to pay for their effort, managed by a new Commissioner-appointed committee.

Someone MUST re-exert control over this plan! The proposals to create new "greenways" interconnecting UGA's must be deleted. This plan MUST be responsive to and limited by the GMA and SCOG study directives

David Pearson
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