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DATE: October 15, 2024

RE: October 22, Planning Commission briefing – 2025 Periodic Comprehensive Plan Update – Environment & Climate Elements with Resiliency and Greenhouse Gas Emissions Sub-Elements

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We look forward to the opportunity to brief the Skagit County Planning Commission on September 24, 2024, regarding the 2025 Periodic Comprehensive Plan update. The briefing will focus on providing a:

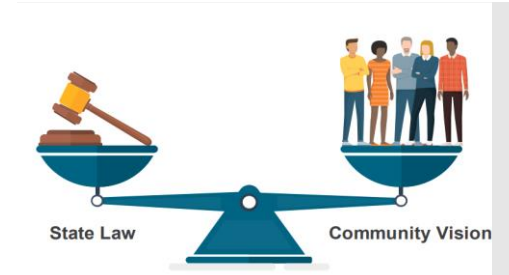
- Project overview
- Project schedule overview and update
- Community engagement overview
- Presentation on Preliminary Draft Policy amendments for the Environment & Climate Elements with Resiliency and Greenhouse Gas Emissions Sub-Elements.

We look forward to answering any questions the Planning Commission may have and receiving feedback on the Preliminary Draft Policy amendments. Your comments will help as we continue efforts to engage the community and develop a complete Comprehensive Plan draft this winter.

### **Background**

The Washington State Growth Management Act (GMA) requires cities and counties to update Comprehensive Plans and implementing development regulations every 10 years (RCW 36.70A.130). Comprehensive Plans are 20-year policy documents which guide the community vision for growth (population, housing, and employment), transportation, capital facilities and utilities, parks, recreation and open space, rural areas, and protection of natural resource lands (RCW 36.70A.070). While the deadline to update the comprehensive plan was June 30, 2025, recent legislation ([House Bill 2296](#)) extended the deadline to December 31, 2025. Skagit County is still focused, however, on completing this project by June 30, 2025.

Comprehensive Plan updates are an opportunity to revise the existing Plan to ensure consistency with updated state laws/case law since the last update, Best Available Science (BAS) for incorporation into critical areas regulations and changes in local conditions. Given the Growth Management Act (GMA) is a bottom-up planning process, having robust engagement as part of the update will ensure the community vision is captured in the Plan as we look out to 2045. Strong community engagement also ensures the Planning Commission and Board of County Commissioners have the best information as updates to the Plan are considered.



**Schedule Overview**

The 2025 Periodic Comprehensive Plan update is currently on schedule for completion by June 30, 2025. Efforts this spring have focused on community engagement and early data collection and analysis, which provides the foundation for the project.

The next phase of the project is policy drafting. The goal is to ensure the Skagit County Comprehensive Plan not only aligns with the GMA and Countywide Planning Policies, but also reflects the community vision as the the county plans for growth out to 2045.

To ensure the community can provide robust input and the Planning Commission has ample opportunity to provide early direction, the project schedule has a two-step policy review process. Preliminary draft policy amendments, for each comprehensive plan element, will be prepared and brought to the Planning Commission for initial comments between July and October 2024. In addition, a 30-day comment period will be provided each month for the public to provide early comments. More information about the schedule and opportunities to comment on these early drafts may be found on the [project website](#).

After these early briefings with the Planning Commission and public comment, a draft comprehensive plan will be developed and issued in early 2025. The draft comprehensive plan will also be released to the public for comment and the Planning Commission will review as part of public meetings and hearings before being completed.

**Summer/Fall 2024 preliminary policy review schedule**

Topic	Planning Commission – Preliminary Review	Comment Period	Planning Commission Second Review
Rural <b>(Complete)</b> Natural Resource Lands <b>(Complete)</b>	July 23, 2024	July 23, 2024, to August 22, 2024, 4:30 p.m.	Early 2025

Land Use <b>(Complete)</b> Housing <b>(Complete)</b> Economic Development <b>(Complete)</b>	August 20, 2024	August 20, 2024, to September 19, 2024, at 4:30 p.m.	Early 2025
Transportation <b>(Complete)</b> Capital Facilities, and Utilities <b>(Complete)</b>	September 24, 2024	September 24, 2024, to October 24, 2024, 4:30 p.m.	Early 2025
Climate & Resiliency Environment	October 22, 2024	October 22, 2024, to November 14, 2024, 4:30 p.m.	Early 2025

Overall project schedule



Community Engagement overview

As of October 2024, the following engagement initiatives have been completed.

- Development of project website.
- First community survey to gather high level input from residents.
- Pop-up events to advertise the project and engage with the community.
- Eight stakeholder interviews with various interest groups.
- Three open houses around Skagit County to collect existing conditions data for multiple comprehensive plan elements.
- Issuance of preliminary draft policies for the Rural, Natural Resources, Housing, Land Use, and Economic Development Elements. This includes presentations for the Planning Commission and 30-day comment periods to receive initial feedback from the community.
- Climate open house held in Mount Vernon on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024, at Jefferson Elementary School.

The climate survey was released on October 11<sup>th</sup> and will be open until the end of October. Please visit <https://www.skagitcounty.net/2025CPA> for more details.

Key themes from engagement completed thus far include:

- **Resource Lands** – “Preserving agricultural land” was deemed as the #1 priority for the next twenty years based on community engagement conducted thus far. Updated goals and policies are focused on protecting agricultural lands of long-term commercial significance. Protection of Forest lands of long-term commercial significance was also a key theme.
- **Housing** –Based on community input thus far, “Improving housing supply and affordability” is the #2 priority for the next twenty years. Given limitations on providing more dense housing in rural areas, we are exploring policy options that will focus on maintaining rural character while providing more options for people who live in rural communities.
- **Environment** – There have also been substantial comments on the desire to protect the environment as the county grows. As policies are being reviewed, we are looking to balance environmental and climate policies with the need for housing and jobs.

### Policy Revision Approach

As part of its periodic update, Skagit County is auditing each Comprehensive Plan element for its ongoing applicability and consistency with state laws and local trends and needs. The Comprehensive Plan is used to set goals and policies for management of land use, rural character, natural resource lands, critical areas protection, housing, economic development, capital facilities, transportation, utilities, and more.

Skagit County Comprehensive Plan’s goals set forth intentions and directions, and policies provide strategies or principles on how to achieve the goals. Each month one or more elements will be reviewed in a preliminary manner and brought forward for initial feedback. This month the preliminary draft policies presented to the Planning Commission are the policies for the new Climate Element, Resiliency Sub-element, and Greenhouse Gas Emissions Sub-element.

Our review of the County’s Environmental Element policies focus on a few overarching objectives as follows:

- New goals and policies based on community input.
- Consistency with the Growth Management Act (GMA) and current law changes
- Streamlining of policy language to make it easier to apply across the planning period, leaving details in the County Code
- Use of active verbs to enhance readability and engagement

Furthermore, our focus includes identifying outdated policies for potential removal and recommending the integration of pertinent discussions from policies into relevant sections, thus fostering a more cohesive policy framework.

This memo aims to provide an overview of our approach and findings during the policy audit, highlighting key areas of review and consideration.

## PRELIMINARY DRAFT POLICY REVISIONS - SUMMARY

The preliminary draft policy revisions are provided within the attached appendix. The following summarizes the preliminary draft policy changes.

### Climate Element

Amended in 2023 by House Bill 1181, the GMA now requires integrating climate change policies into comprehensive plan updates. To meet the new requirements, the Washington State Department of Commerce (Commerce) requires that Skagit County develop a Climate Element that includes both resilience and GHG emissions mitigation goals and policies, in line with the state requirements below.

#### Resilience Requirements:

1. Address natural hazards created or aggravated by climate change, including sea level rise, landslides, flooding, drought, heat, smoke, wildfire, and other effects of changes to temperature and precipitation patterns;
2. Identify, protect, and enhance natural areas to foster climate resilience, as well as areas of vital habitat for safe species migration; and
3. Identify, protect, and enhance community resilience to climate impacts, including social, economic, and built-environment factors, which support adaptation to climate impacts consistent with environmental justice.

#### GHG Emissions Reduction Requirements:

1. Result in reductions in overall GHG emissions generated by transportation and land use within the jurisdiction but without increasing emissions elsewhere in Washington;
2. Result in reductions in per capita vehicle miles traveled (VMT) within the jurisdiction but without increasing greenhouse gas emissions elsewhere in Washington; and
3. Prioritize reductions that benefit overburdened communities in order to maximize the co-benefits of reduced air pollution and environmental justice.

In addition to the HB 1181 requirements, the Climate Element is developed within the context of the following other key climate policies:

- [Climate Commitment Act \(CCA\)](#): Washington state target aiming for a 95% reduction in climate pollution by 2050.
- [Clean Energy Transformation Act](#): Requires utilities to transition to 100% zero-emission electricity by 2045.
- [Clean Fuel Standard](#): Law requires fuel suppliers to gradually reduce the carbon intensity of transportation fuels to 20% below 2017 levels by 2034.
- [Zero-emission vehicle mandates](#): Low- and zero-emission vehicle standards for vehicles in Washington.
- [Updated Energy Codes](#): Updated codes for commercial and residential building aligning to the International Energy Conservation Code (IECC) 2021.

- **Clean Building Performance Standards:** Standards to lower costs and pollution from fossil fuel consumption in the state’s existing covered buildings, multifamily buildings, and campus district energy systems.

To develop the GHG reduction and resilience policies, the project team utilized key information from the following activities:

- **Policy Audit:** An assessment of Skagit County’s climate-related policies in the Comprehensive Plan, Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan, Climate Action Plan, and Shoreline Master Program to understand the climate policy trends, gaps, and opportunities. The Climate Element will build on goals and policies in these documents to provide consistent, clear, and actionable guidance on GHG emission reduction and climate resilience.
- **Greenhouse Gas Inventory:** An analysis that determined the greatest emissions sources within Skagit County, including emissions from buildings, land use, industrial processes, transportation, and waste. The goals and policies in the Climate Element will focus on GHG emissions sources over which the County has the most authority, and where it does not, the County may pursue education and partnerships.
- **Climate Vulnerability Assessment:** An assessment that summarized climate risks, adaptive capacity, and vulnerability within Skagit County, as indicated by data tools and resources from the WA Department of Commerce and other peer-reviewed literature. This information helped to prioritize resources and actions to reduce vulnerabilities, shape policies to protect critical infrastructure, and address social and environmental inequities.
- **Community Engagement:** Hosted an open house, an online climate survey for those who were unable to attend the climate open house, and stakeholder surveys.

The documents described above are still under review by Skagit County and will be released to the public at a later date. Preliminary data analysis and results were used for policy development.

Draft Policies

A new proposed chapter, the Climate Element, has been introduced into the comprehensive plan to encompass resiliency and GHG reduction policies across ten sectors, including:

- Agriculture & Food Systems
- Buildings & Energy
- Community Health & Well-being
- Cultural Resources and Practices
- Economic Development
- Land Use & Ecosystems
- Transportation
- Waste Management
- Water Resources
- Zoning & Development

In addition to the Climate Element chapter, GHG emissions reduction and resiliency policies are proposed to be integrated into the existing Comprehensive Plan, in the following sections:

- **Protection of Rural Character:** Modified overarching goal to include protection for long-term resilience.
- **Natural Resource Lands:** Modified agricultural drainage policy to incorporate climate resilience considerations. Modified wildfire planning program to focus on resilience.
- Modified saltwater intrusion policy to account for sea level rise.
- **Environment:** Modified saltwater intrusion policy to account for sea level rise.
- **Transportation:** Modified policies to include equity considerations and emphasize VMT and GHG reduction.
- **Energy Conservation:** Modified goals and policies to emphasize reduction of GHG emissions and align to Commerce Guidance.
- **Solid Waste Management:** Added policy on composting.

## Environment Policies

The goals and policies in the Environment Element have been revised in accordance with the policy revision approach outlined on page 4. Policies were revised to ensure consistency with applicable state and regional laws, provide clear direction, reduce redundancies, improve feasibility and implementation. Beyond the general policy approach environmental policies have been revised, where possible, to satisfy new climate, resiliency, and GHG requirements in state law.