



Skagit County Planning & Development Services

DALE PERNULA, AICP *Director*

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Staff Report

From: Dale Pernula, AICP, Director

Re: **Skagit County's 2012 Proposed Amendments to the Comprehensive Plan, and Land Use and Zoning Map**

Date: September 24, 2013

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C-2. Proposal to re-designate and rezone P118792, an approximately .3 acre parcel owned by Del Mar Community Service on which are located two water tanks, from Rural Resource-NRL (RRc-NRL) to Rural Reserve (RRv). The subject parcel is generally described as located on Fidalgo Island, south of Marine Drive, east of Rosario Road, and north and west of Sharpe Lane/Sharpe Road.

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Background

On April 9, 2013, the Skagit County Board of Commissioners held a public hearing on the 2012 annual comprehensive plan amendment docket proposals and deliberated on such on July 9, 2013. On July 15, 2013, through Resolution #R2-130179, the Skagit County Board of Commissioners established the 2012 comprehensive plan docket with supplemental findings.

On November 5, 2013, the Skagit County Planning Commission will hold a public hearing on those proposed amendments to the Skagit County Comprehensive Plan and Land-Use/Zoning Map that are being considered as part of the 2012 Comprehensive plan Amendment Docket (2012 CPA). This memorandum includes an analysis of the various proposals and their consistency with county and state requirements, and the Department's recommendations on each as required by SCC 14.08.080.

The Department's recommendations are based on the proposals' application materials, additional research conducted by the Department, and an evaluation of the (map) amendments' consistency with relevant designation policies and criteria in the Skagit County Comprehensive Plan, and provisions in Skagit County Code relating to land use designations.

At a later date, not yet scheduled, the Planning Commission will hold a public meeting to deliberate on the merits of each proposal, and will later forward a set of recommendations to the Board of County Commissioners (BCC) regarding the proposed amendments. Finally, on dates to be determined, the BCC will hold its own public meeting(s) to consider and take official action on the proposed Comprehensive Plan and Land-Use/Zoning Map amendments.

Summary

Three County-initiated proposals are being considered, two of which include amendments to the Skagit County Comprehensive Plan Land Use and Zoning maps; and, one amendment to incorporate by reference the 2012 Skagit County Parks and Recreation Comprehensive Plan.

- C-1. Proposal to amend Skagit County Comprehensive Plan to incorporate by reference the 2012 Skagit County Parks and Recreation Comprehensive Plan.
- C-2. Proposal to re-designate and rezone P118792, an approximately .3 acre parcel owned by Del Mar Community Service on which are located two water tanks, from Rural Resource-NRL (RRc-NRL) to Rural Reserve (RRv). The subject parcel is generally described as located on Fidalgo Island, south of Marine Drive, east of Rosario Road, and north and west of Sharpe Lane/Sharpe Road. The parcel immediately to the northwest, P19168, was redesignated from Rural Resource-NRL to Rural Reserve in the 2011 Comprehensive Plan Amendment Docket, leaving P118792 as an isolated island or spot zone of Rural Resource-NRL. This proposal would remedy that situation by re-designating P118792 to Rural Reserve, consistent with the properties surrounding it on all sides.
- C-3. Proposal to re-designate and rezone 4 parcels (P74450, P103560, P103559, P74451), 1.5 acres in size, to Rural Business (RB). The subject parcels are generally described as located along the east side of the Swinomish Channel, and north and west of the Town of La Conner and the Port of Skagit County. The subject properties were designated and zoned Commercial in 1992. Subsequent comprehensive plan updates indicated, in error, that the property was located within the corporate limits of the Town of La Conner. The proposal rectifies the inadvertent mapping error.

Two other 2012 Comprehensive Plan docketed proposals -- the City of Anacortes request to expand its Urban Growth Area by about 10.45 acres, and the Bayview Ridge Subarea Plan, Planned Unit Development Code and Master Site Plan and affiliated code changes are not being released at this time and will be deferred to a later date.

C-1. Proposal to amend Skagit County Comprehensive Plan to incorporate by reference the 2012 Skagit County Parks and Recreation Comprehensive Plan.

Analysis

The Skagit County Parks and Recreation Comprehensive Plan is a subset of the County's regional comprehensive plan. The Parks and Recreation Comprehensive Plan is defined as a "functional plan" whose purpose is to focus on specific regional governmental services and/or utilities (i.e., water, wastewater, transportation, housing). Functional plans can be "programmatic or operational, which means they guide daily management decision or include the specific details of facility design and location" (Skagit County Comprehensive Plan, page 1.10). Functional plans must be consistent with the Skagit County Comprehensive Plan and serve to implement its goals, policies and programs.

The proposal is to "incorporate by reference" the Parks and Recreation Comprehensive Plan into the Skagit County Comprehensive Plan. The Parks and Recreation Comprehensive Plan will not become a chapter in the Comprehensive Plan and will remain a separate functional planning document.

On February 27, 2012, by Resolution #R20120057, the Skagit County Board of Commissioners adopted the 2012 Skagit County Parks and Recreation Comprehensive Plan. In taking this action, the County Commissioners found that:

1. A major purpose of the Comprehensive Parks and Recreation Plan is to help the County evaluate and establish priorities for parks and recreation programs and facilities. A plan update is required every six years to maintain eligibility for Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO) grants which are a major source of funding for parks and recreation capital projects. The Comprehensive Parks and Recreation Plan also assists the County in complying with Growth Management Act goals related to maintaining open space, enhancing recreational opportunities and increasing access to natural resource lands and water.
2. The Comprehensive Parks and Recreation Plan reveals that the County provides a wide variety of programs and facilities including more than 1700 acres of parks and other facilities. These include boat launches, hiking trails, playgrounds, campgrounds, athletic fields, leagues, shoreline access, community and neighborhood parks, and open space and natural areas; and

The 2012 Skagit County Parks and Recreation Comprehensive Plan update relied on: four (4) public meetings in 2011; a 2011 level of service (LOS) analysis which measured the amount of public facilities that are provided to the community relative to the population size and in comparison to other counties; a 2011 online public opinion survey to elicit public input on current and future (parks and recreation) recommendations; and, the review and recommendations of a citizen-based Skagit County Parks and Recreation Advisory Board.

This 2012 Skagit County Parks and Recreation Plan (Plan) updates previous plans. The 2012 Plan...

"...is intended to lay the groundwork for the future of the County park system. The plan inventories existing parks and identifies current and future park needs. It explores potential

park development and/or improvements, and prioritizes strategies to meet a level of service which fits the needs of County residents. The plan also describes existing and potential funding sources that will be needed to meet the desired Level of Service (LOS) and maintain park facilities and recreation services. In addition, the plan sets forth several goals and objectives to help guide County staff and elected officials in implementing the park plan.

The plan establishes project priority by analyzing: 1) LOS standards, which provide service levels from other Washington State Counties and provide guidance in establishing LOS standards in Skagit County; 2) Public Input - Survey and Open Houses, which provides direct and fundamental information from those who use facilities and programs in Skagit County and indicate facility or program need; 3) Use Patterns, which provides statically valid information on statewide trends in recreation and from those who oversee facilities and programs in Skagit County and indicate facility or program need; 4) Public Input – Other Factors, which provide a category for integrating other input that should be factored into analysis.

Skagit County grew in population over 13 percent between 2000 and 2010 with the fastest growth occurring the first half of the decade. Future projections indicate similar growth may occur during the next 25 years. During the next twenty-five years, a portion of this growth will take place in the unincorporated Urban Growth Areas. As a result, the Bayview Subarea may receive a higher concentration of development than the surrounding rural lands. As a growing rural community with higher densities, there will be an increase in the need for parks and recreational facilities. The changing pattern of projected growth may require that the County's priorities and strategies related to the growth of park and recreation facilities will need to adapt in several ways. Among the ways that such strategies may change is by focusing more attention and resources into areas of projected growth. This will help assure the needs are being addressed and the services are centrally located.

The parks plan includes a discussion of sources available to fund the maintenance and expansion of the County parks system; a system that must meet the growing needs of an increasingly urbanized area. These sources include a variety of tax revenues, user fees, mitigation fees, and grants and loans from state, federal, and private sources. While the plan makes general recommendation regarding specific funding options, it assumes that most existing sources will continue to be available. Other potential sources will allow the County to be flexible and consider future funding options as circumstances may dictate. The park plan builds upon historical data to ensure that assumptions regarding projected facility and program needs are realistic.

The park plan contains an inventory of county facilities: parks, recreation, open space areas, trails, and related sites. The inventory is supplemented by a description of other facilities available to County residents; specifically, sites and facilities owned or controlled by state or federal agencies, and sites owned by municipalities and school districts. Inventories primarily show facilities and speak very little about the condition of the facilities.

The “level of service” standards used for this plan are derived from an average of three Washington State counties. The counties used for comparison are Whatcom, Snohomish, and Spokane and are aggregated into what is referenced as the “Tri-County Aggregate”. Level of Service (LOS) standards are often derived by the number and size of facilities without accounting for the facility conditions. The condition of facilities becomes important for making proper comparisons in service levels. It is one of the reasons SCPR is incorporating several other factors into the equation when determining priorities.

Use patterns can be analyzed in a variety of ways. Lack of facility space, a shortage of campsites, or an overrun trail system may lead SCPR staff and/or Parks Board members to easily conclude

needs are not being met. In other cases, the analysis may be more complex. For example, the fact that a facility is being used under capacity may lead some to believe the needs are being sufficiently met. Whereas, the real reason the facility is being under used may be due the facility is in need of maintenance, in need of expansion, or in some other way may be inadequate. In other situations, there may be a surplus of baseball fields on the west side of the county but a shortage on the east side, even though the LOS standards indicate there is sufficient amount of fields' county-wide. Because of all of these variables, it becomes necessary for SCPR Staff/Board to look at every facility and/or program "site specifically" to determine if in fact the needs of the community are being met. This level of analysis is handled in the category of "Other Factors."

The focus of this Comprehensive Plan Update is to chart the course for the Skagit County Parks and Recreation Department for the next six years. The update will also allow continued SCPR eligibility for Recreational Conservation Office (RCO) grants. A high priority of the plan update is to 1) ensure the need for adequate public facilities that maintain an adequate level of park and recreational services; and perhaps more importantly 2) ensure the needs of Skagit County residents are being met. Although challenges may force County Parks and Recreation to deviate from the original charted course, the goal will remain that of providing satisfaction with recreational opportunities to Skagit County residents" (Skagit County Parks and Recreation Comprehensive Plan, Executive Summary, pages vi-vii).

During the public hearing and comment period on the 2012 comprehensive plan amendment docket, several comments were received on the Skagit County Parks and Recreation Comprehensive Plan. The comments have been organized into "themes" and are noted below with responses from County staff.

Public Comment Themes:

1. Why does the Parks and Recreation Comprehensive Plan include Chapter 5, Fish and Wildlife Habitat Conservation. These goals are seen as a duplication of what other Skagit County departments are doing. It is perceived that this is new information.
2. The goals of Chapter 4 are not measurable so the public cannot evaluate if the plan is being implemented and is therefore not GMA compliant.
3. Parks and Recreation Comprehensive Plan is not needed under GMA.
4. Property Rights are not referenced.
5. The Parks and Recreation Comprehensive Plan facilitates Acquisition and Development (A and D) opportunities. With the current Park and Recreation staffing and funding cuts, more A and D just makes the management issue more difficult.
6. The Parks and Recreation Comprehensive Plan was deficient in Public Input opportunities and should be re-opened to review.

Public Comment Theme 1: Why include Chapter 5..., it is new...

Chapter 5 has been a component of the Skagit County Parks and Recreation Comprehensive Plan since the 1995 version. It was also part of the Plan in the 2004 update. There has been some updating and refinements, but the chapter is relatively the same as it has been since 1995. Information contained in this chapter is required by the state for the county parks department to be eligible for several habitat acquisition and habitat restoration grant programs. Skagit County Parks and Recreation has not applied for monies or been granted any funds from any of these grants programs, but this chapter has historically been included in case the right project presented itself. Before proceeding with a grant application, the grants are vetted before the Parks and Recreation Advisory Board and ultimately require concurrence and action by the County Commissioners.

Protecting and conserving natural resource lands and open space is a Skagit County multi-discipline and multi-departmental responsibility. It is important that county policies and programs be coordinated and consistent across each department.

Chapter 5 was discussed at length at the September 19, 2013, Parks and Recreation Advisory Board meeting. The Advisory Board expressed that the chapter should be presented to the public and Planning Commission in its entirety with one exception, the removal of a portion of the second paragraph, starting with the second sentence, and the complete removal of the third and fourth paragraph of “trends and concerns” under the section titled Estuarine Habitat (see Plan at pages 5-6 through 5.8). The Parks staff and Advisory Board are amenable to these paragraphs being struck from the plan. The Advisory Board feels strongly that this should not create precedent for other language being added or deleted from the Plan. The Plan has been through a very rigorous process and further revisions would compromise the public process and dilute a Plan that’s been approved and recommended by the Advisory Board. If Chapter 5 is to go through any major overhaul, the public should be made aware of the proposed changes so that they can be allowed an adequate chance to comment.

Public Comment Theme 2: Goals in the plan are not GMA Compliant

The Goals in Chapter 4 were reviewed by the Parks and Recreation Advisory Board and were available for public comment at several meetings. Chapter 11, Recommendations, contains a prioritized list of project recommendations for the public to review over the term of the Plan to assess if it is being implemented. The Parks and Recreation Comprehensive Plan addresses GMA requirements as summarized below:

RCW 36.70A.070 (8) - A park and recreation element that implements, and is consistent with the capital facilities plan element as it relates to park and recreation facilities. The element shall include:	
Requirement	Location
(a) Estimates of park and recreation demand for at least a ten-year period	Chapter 8 – Level of Service Chapter 9 – Use Patterns
(b) An evaluation of facilities and service needs	Chapter 3 – Existing Recreational Facilities Chapter 10 – Analysis of need
(c) An evaluation of intergovernmental coordination opportunities to provide regional approaches for meeting park and recreational demand	Chapter 10 – Analysis of need

Public Comment Theme 3: Parks Plan is not needed under GMA

See Theme 2 above. Skagit County has chosen to incorporate by reference a Parks and Recreation Comprehensive Plan into the County’s regional comprehensive plan. As a “functional plan” that implements the County’s regional comprehensive plan, the Parks and Recreation Comprehensive Plan provides a level of detail that has been supported by the community. This is underscored by an extensive public process that was substantial and inclusive, including more than two years of public involvement opportunities. Addressing parks and recreation facilities, services, and programs through a “stand alone” document and

planning process allows for extended public involvement opportunities and acknowledges the importance of meeting the parks and recreational needs of the community.

Public Comment Theme 4:- Property Rights are not referenced

All Skagit County land use legislative and quasi-judicial actions must take into account the property rights that landowners enjoy. Those property rights are protected through the state vested rights doctrine, the Skagit County Comprehensive Plan, and implementation of Skagit County Code, Title 14.

Public Comment Theme 5 - The plan facilitates Acquisition and Development (A and D) opportunities. With the current Park and Recreation staffing and funding cuts, more A and D just makes the management issue more difficult.

The Parks and Recreation Department has, like many Skagit County governmental services and programs, seen its budget and staffing resources reduced over the years, especially during the most recent global and local economic recession. Annually, Skagit County departments submit and the County Commissioner approve an operational budget. Land acquisition and development projects are part of the County capital facility planning (CFP) process and are evaluated on an annual basis and address projects over a 6-year period. The CFP process allows for annual assessments that include analyzing short-term project costs (i.e., A&D), and long-term operations and maintenance expenditures.

Public Comment Theme 6 - The plan was deficient in Public Input opportunities and should be re-opened to review

The following table summarizes the Public Input Opportunities for the Parks and Recreation Comprehensive Plan, a full list of comments and input can be read in Appendix A in the Plan.

Opportunity	Date(s) / Location	Participation
Public Open House	Feb 17, 2011 / Clear Lake	29
Public Open House	Feb 3, 2011 / Rockport WA	58
Public Open House	Jan 27, 2011 / Mount Vernon	12
Public Open House	Jan 20, 2011 / Anacortes	24
Public Input Survey	Summer 2011 / via internet	353
Parks and Recreation Study Sessions	November 18, 2010 / Moen	Parks & Recreation Advisory Board
	March 17, 2011 / Moen	
	April 21, 2011 / Moen	
	May 19, 2011 / Moen	
	July 21, 2011 / Moen	
	August 18, 2011 / Moen	
	September 15, 2011 / Moen	
	October 20, 2011 / Moen	
	November 17, 2011 / Moen	
	February 16, 2012 / Moen	

Recommendation

Based on the aforementioned analysis, the Department concludes that the Skagit County Parks and Recreation Comprehensive Plan be approved subject to those recommendations of the Parks and Recreation Advisory Board as shown in Appendix A to this staff report.

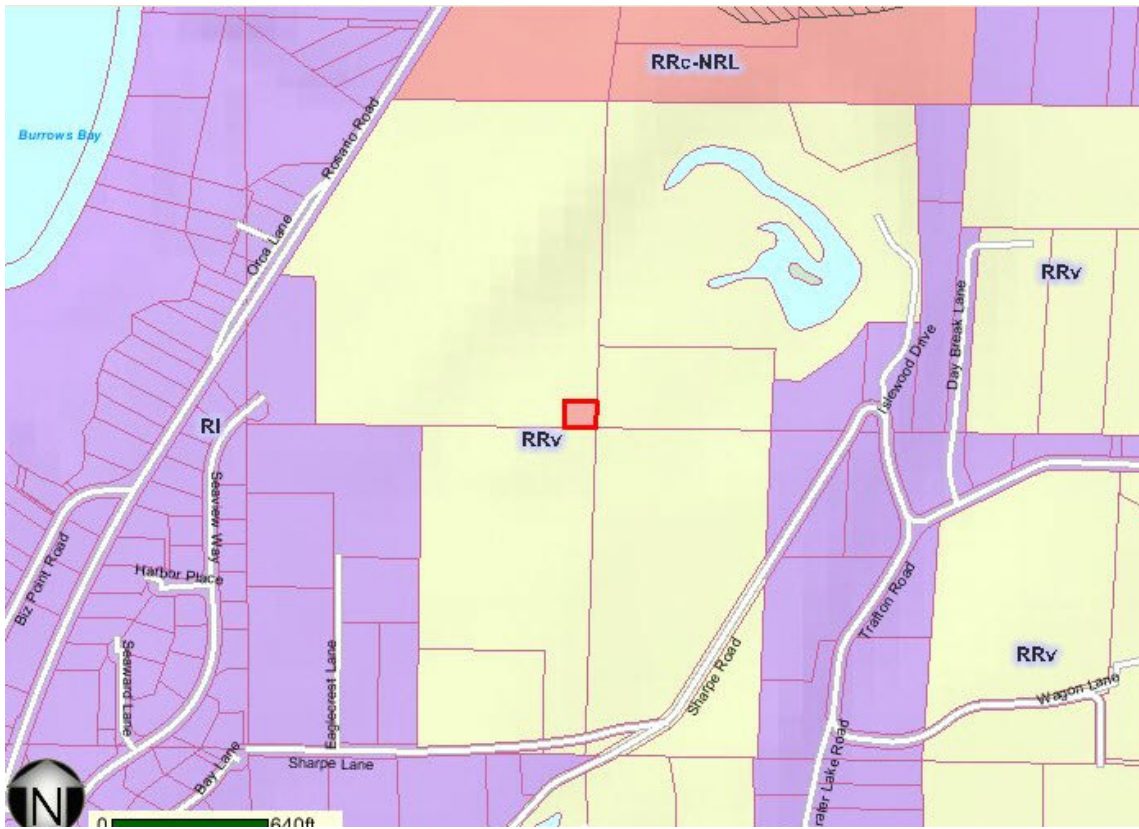
Consistency

The 2012 Skagit County Parks and Recreation Comprehensive Plan is consistent with those provisions of GMA (RCW 36.70A.070(8)), and the Skagit County Comprehensive Plan.

C-2. Proposal to re-designate and rezone P118792, an approximately .3 acre parcel owned by Del Mar Community Service on which are located two water tanks, from Rural Resource-NRL (RRc-NRL) to Rural Reserve (RRv). The subject parcel is generally described as located on Fidalgo Island, south of Marine Drive, east of Rosario Road, and north and west of Sharpe Lane/Sharpe Road. The parcel immediately to the northwest, P19168, was redesignated from Rural Resource-NRL to Rural Reserve in the 2011 Comprehensive Plan Amendment Docket, leaving P118792 as an isolated island or spot zone of Rural Resource-NRL. This proposal would remedy that situation by re-designating P118792 to Rural Reserve, consistent with the properties surrounding it on all sides.

Analysis

This is a county-initiated proposal to address an isolated property (P118792) whose land use designation/zoning is not consistent with adjacent and surrounding properties. In 2011, through Ordinance #020120008, Skagit County approved the designation of adjacent and surrounding properties as Rural Reserve on the comprehensive plan/zoning map. The subject property (P118792) was inadvertently omitted during the amendment/rezone process. This proposal seeks to address the “spot zone” by approving a reclassification for the subject property which would be the same as adjacent and surrounding properties.



Comprehensive Plan/Zoning Map





Aerial Photos

Recommendation

Based on the aforementioned analysis, the Department concludes that the proposed map redesignation be approved as described and illustrated above.

Consistency

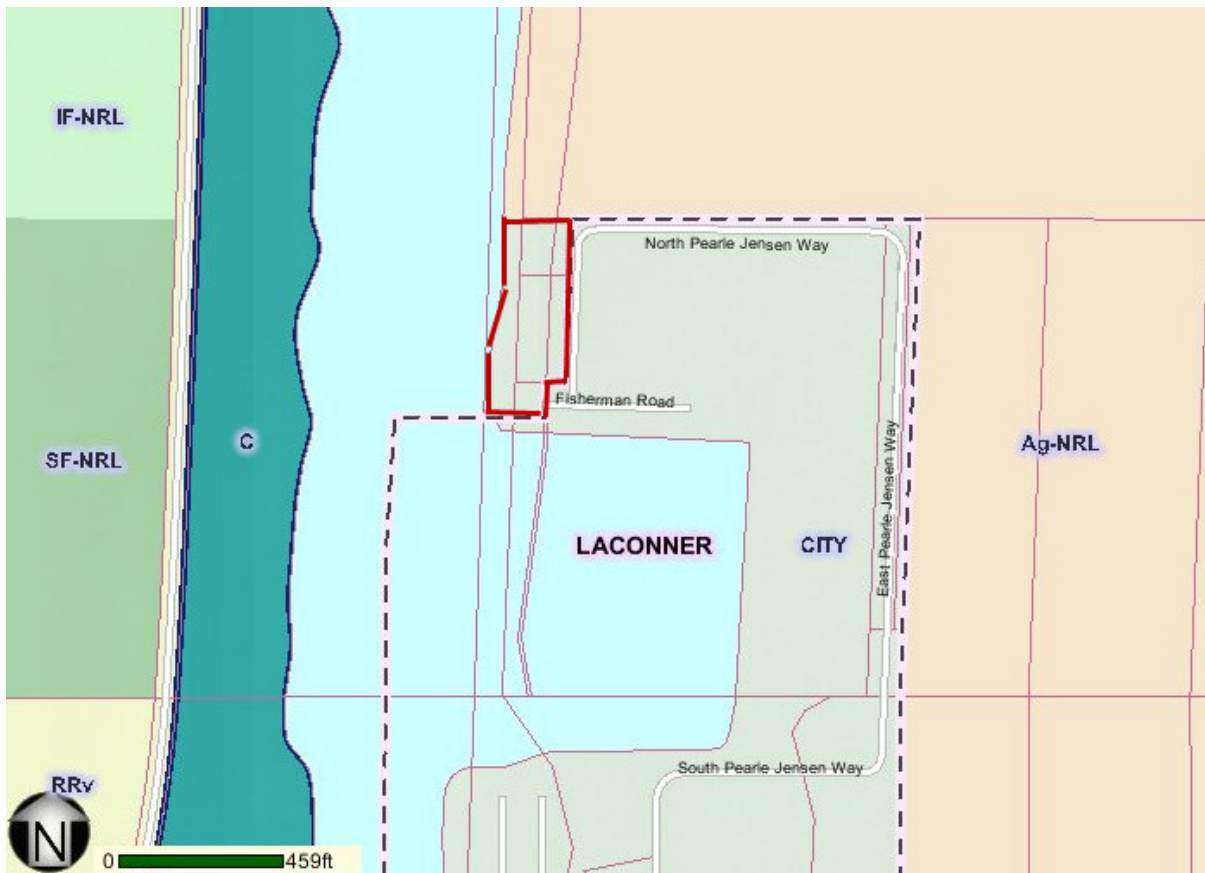
The proposal, if approved, would be consistent with GMA (RCW 36.70A.070(5)) and the Skagit County Comprehensive Plan Rural Element and Rural Reserve land use designation criteria. This action would also address the former mapping error that left the subject property inconsistent with adjacent and surrounding land use designations.

C-3. Proposal to re-designate and rezone 4 parcels (P74450, P103560, P103559, P74451), 1.5 acres in size, to Rural Business (RB). The subject parcels are generally described as located along the east side of the Swinomish Channel, and north and west of the Town of La Conner and the Port of Skagit County. The subject properties were designated and zoned Commercial in 1992. Subsequent comprehensive plan updates indicated, in error, that the property was located within the corporate limits of the Town of La Conner. The proposal rectifies the inadvertent mapping error.

Analysis

This is a county-initiated proposal to rectify an inadvertent mapping error which did not recognize a previous Skagit County action to designate several properties (P74450, P103560, P103559, P74451) for commercial/light industrial development.

In 1992, Skagit County approved through Resolution #14361 a comprehensive plan map amendment (CPA-92-011) which in effect reclassified the above referenced parcels from Agriculture to Commercial. The current Skagit County Comprehensive Plan incorrectly indicates that the subject properties are within the Town of La Conner corporate limits.



Comprehensive Plan/Zoning Map



Aerial Photo

Then, as is now, the subject property was/is being used for marine related support industries. A single family residence is located on-site, as well as marine related activities. Its proximity (abutting) to the Swinomish Channel and the Port of Skagit County marina, and other related marine industry businesses reaffirms that the land be designated for similar uses. In the short-term, a Rural Business map designation will allow existing land uses to remain in effect and allow limited change in uses and reasonable expansion (SCC 14.16.160(1)). In the long-term, the subject properties should be within the La Conner UGA or annexed into the Town.

Recommendation

Based on the aforementioned analysis, the Department concludes that the proposed map redesignation be approved as described and illustrated above.

Consistency

The proposal, if approved, would be consistent with GMA (RCW 36.70A.070(5)) and the Skagit County Comprehensive Plan Rural Element and Rural Business land use designation narrative. This action would also address the mapping error which incorrectly indicates that the subject properties are located in the Town of La Conner. A Rural Business designation will allow commercial/industrial activity more consistent with current uses both inside and outside of the Town's corporate limits.

Process

Skagit County has issued a notice of availability, established a public comment period, and given notice for a Skagit County Planning Commission public hearing consistent with the provisions of SCC 14.08.070(9). Such information was published in the Skagit Valley Herald newspaper on September 26, 2013.

Skagit County has provided notice to property owners within 300 feet of proposals C-2 and C-3 in conformance with SCC 14.08.070(10).

Public Review and Comment Schedule

The public is invited and encouraged to comment on this proposal by attendance, representation, and/or letter. The public review and comment period will begin on September 26, 2013. Written comments may be submitted in writing to the Skagit County Planning and Development Services Department, at the address listed below, through 4:30 p.m. on Tuesday, November 7, 2013.

Planning Commission Public Hearing

Comments on the proposal may also be made or submitted at the public hearing before the Skagit County Planning Commission. The public hearing will begin at 6:00 p.m. on Tuesday, November 5, 2013, in the Hearing Room of the Skagit County Commissioners Administrative Building, 1800 Continental Place, Mount Vernon, WA. The Planning Commission will meet again, on a date(s) to be determined, to deliberate upon the public testimony and written correspondence received, and to formulate recommendations to be forwarded to the Board of County Commissioners.

SEPA Threshold Determination

A State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) checklist, including supplemental sheet for non-project actions and a SEPA threshold determination of non-significance (DNS) have already been prepared and issued separately. The SEPA threshold determination was published on September 26, 2013. Written comments on the SEPA threshold determination must be received by 4:30 pm., October 10, 2013. These environmental documents are available at www.skagitcounty.net/planning (Annual Comprehensive Plan 2012 petitions), or [Annual Comprehensive Plan 2012 Petitions](#).

How to Comment

You may submit written comments via email to pdscomments@co.skagit.wa.us, or via US mail, or hand delivered to the address below. All paper comments must be submitted on 8½" x 11" paper. All comments must be received by the deadline and include (1) your full name, (2) your mailing address, and (3) the name of the proposal or project you are commenting on. Comments not meeting these requirements will not be considered.

You may also comment in person at the public hearing at the Commissioners Hearing Room, 1800 Continental Place, Mount Vernon. Public hearing testimony is usually limited to three minutes, so written comments are preferred.

Please address all comments to:

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(360) 336-9410, ext. 5818
FAX (360) 336-9416

For More Information

Please visit the project website at www.skagitcounty.net/planning ([Annual Comprehensive Plan 2012 petitions](#)), or [Annual Comprehensive Plan 2012 Petitions](#).

Appendix A

ESTUARINE HABITAT

Description:

Estuaries are areas between the marine zone and & freshwater habitats. According to the RCO classification system, waters in these areas have lower concentrations of salts than marine zones (less than 30 parts per thousand). This includes sub-tidal and intertidal zones, as well as lagoons, sloughs and channels, which meet the salinity criteria. Typically, estuaries are shallower and have warmer water temperatures than marine zones.

The dividing line between estuarine and freshwater habitats is defined by RCO as where ocean salt concentration becomes extremely low (0.5 parts per thousand). The dividing line between estuarine and terrestrial habitats is the upper limit of saltwater influence.

In Skagit County, the estuarine zone extends from the eastern edge of the marine zone upstream to a likely maximum of about 5 miles. Many factors affect salinity levels, including the amount of freshwater entering the area, the strength of the tides, and the resulting amount of mixing of fresh and salt water. Salinity is almost never constant at any one point, and varies with depth. The best indicator is not absolute salinity, but the types of animals and vegetation associated with these areas. Some studies have been made of the North Fork of the Skagit River that indicates average salinity levels may drop to 5 ppt near the North Fork Bridge, approximately 3.5 miles upstream of its outlet.

Species and Conditions:

The estuarine areas of Skagit County include Samish, Padilla, Fidalgo, Skagit, and Similk Bays, and a variety of sloughs and saltwater wetlands. These areas support over 50 types of fish, 100 types of shorebirds, 40 types of marine algae, 200 small marine animals, and several types of large marine mammals. Some familiar types include: jellyfish, anemones, marine worms, marine snails, limpets, clams, cockles, oysters, mussels, barnacles, crabs, starfish, urchins, sea cucumbers, and sea squirts. Fish species include; dogfish, herring, anchovy, salmon, sea-run trout, and smelt. Familiar birds include; loons, grebes, cormorants, herons, egrets, swans, geese, brants, a variety of ducks, sandpipers, gulls, murrelets, puffins, and others.

The Pacific Coast Joint Venture group has identified various areas along the Pacific Coast as targets for ecological restoration and enhancement. The Skagit River Estuary is considered their top priority in their five-County "Northern Washington Bays and Straits Focus Area" (Whatcom, Skagit, San Juan, Island and Snohomish Counties). It is identified as one of two first-step priority areas in the United States, due to both its high current estuarine and upland value and opportunities for enhancement.

The Skagit complex supports a winter population of over 40,000 Wrangell Island Snow Geese, the largest wintering population in the world. It is the most important wintering area in Washington for Trumpeter and Tundra Swans, supporting 86% of two species of wintering ducks, and is a feeding area for about half the brants and geese migrating on the Pacific Flyway. The Joint Venture group recommends additional habitat acquisition in both the Skagit Delta and Similk Bay.

State priority wildlife habitats and species in and/or directly dependent on the estuarine zone include bald eagle, seabirds, waterfowl (including heron), osprey and priority estuary areas. Priority fisheries habitats and species in and/or directly dependent upon the estuarine zone

include spawning areas for smelt herring, and perch, as well as salmon feeding areas, and downstream portions of salmon and steelhead migration routes. Padilla Bay includes the largest known eelgrass "meadow" in coastal Washington. This meadow supports a diversity of creatures, including 20,000 Black Brant (sea goose), which winter in the area and feed on eelgrass. Winter duck populations in Padilla Bay typically number 50,000, with counts as high as 120,000. Bald eagles feed on upland creatures, as well as taking dead fish and organisms from the estuarine zone. They have also been observed hunting and killing ducks. Many eagles winter in the areas adjacent to the estuarine zone, and some are year-round residents.

Trends and Concerns:

Historically, diking and filling of many areas in western Skagit County increased the amount of productive agricultural land, but reduced the extent of estuarine areas. Most existing dikes have been in place since the early 1900's, and others have since been proposed, but abandoned due to financial or physical problems. Experts feel passage of the Shoreline Management Act, and designation of large portions of the estuarine zone as "Shorelines of Statewide Significance," has made additional diking projects all but unfeasible.

Despite the results of diking and drainage activities and the conversion to agriculture as described above, the Padilla and Skagit Bay estuaries are considered to be relatively intact and well functioning ecosystems. ~~Other bays are limited due to diking for agricultural uses and urban and industrial development. Current threats to estuarine zones in Skagit County include contaminants in the water feeding these areas, boating-related wildlife disturbance, and the aforementioned oil transportation concerns mentioned above.~~

~~Regarding water quality issues, several streams reaching these estuarine zones currently do not meet water quality standards, with the greatest concern being contaminants from agricultural land and potential failure of current and proposed residential septic systems. Oyster beds are particularly susceptible to water quality changes, with half the oyster beds in the State currently "de-certified" (unable to commercially market oysters). The Fir Point area has been de-certified in Skagit County.~~

~~The County, in cooperation with other agencies has completed watershed studies to try to address these problems. The top three priorities are: South Fork of the Nookachamps, Padilla Bay and the Samish River. The Samish initiative has local officials attentively focusing on cleaning up the Samish River. In 2011, warnings were sent out to several cattle ranchers and fines have been placed on two cattle ranchers who refused to act on those warnings. Despite many watershed studies, increasing development pressure in areas near estuarine zones, especially without central sewer service, increases concerns over water quality.~~

(2012 Skagit County Parks and Recreation Comprehensive Plan, pages 5-6 through 5-8)