

SKAGIT COUNTY HOUSING ELEMENT UPDATE

Summary of Housing Element Requirements, Housing Situation, and Key Questions

INTRODUCTION

Skagit County's 2016 Comprehensive Plan Update will include an updated Housing Element. This summary document presents Housing Element requirements under the Growth Management Act (GMA), some early findings regarding County demographics and housing conditions countywide. It also provides some key questions that Planning Commissioners and the public can think about ahead of the February 17, 2015 meeting where the Housing Element will be discussed.

HOUSING ELEMENT CONTENTS

Housing Element Requirements

A housing element provides an inventory of the county or city's current housing stock, a forecast of future housing needs, and goals and policies to promote housing preservation, variety and affordability. The GMA goal for housing is:

Encourage the availability of affordable housing to all economic segments of the population of this state, promote a variety of residential densities and housing types, and encourage preservation of existing housing stock. (RCW 36.70A.020(4))

The specific GMA content requirements for a housing element are:

A housing element ensuring the vitality and character of established residential neighborhoods that: (a) Includes an inventory and analysis of existing and projected housing needs that identifies the number of housing units necessary to manage projected growth; (b) includes a statement of goals, policies, objectives, and mandatory provisions for the preservation, improvement, and development of housing, including single-family residences; (c) identifies sufficient land for housing, including, but not limited to, government-assisted housing, housing for low-income families, manufactured housing, multifamily housing, and group homes and foster care facilities; and (d) makes adequate provisions for existing and projected needs of all economic segments of the community. (RCW 36.70A.070(2))

Skagit County Housing Element Status

The County's current housing element contains [goals and policies](#) and a [profile](#). Current goals include:

GOAL A – HOUSING QUANTITY: Ensure that the supply of housing and sufficient land capacity keep pace with population growth in the County.

GOAL B – HOUSING QUALITY: Strive to preserve, conserve, and enhance the existing housing stock, including historic structures and sites; develop design guidelines and standards to improve the quality of new housing consistent with applicable building codes.

GOAL B1 – INFORMATION: Manage regulatory, administrative, funding and information programs that contribute to the development and maintenance of high quality housing and strong communities throughout the County.

GOAL C - HOUSING DISTRIBUTION AND ACCESSIBILITY: Strive to ensure that a variety of housing types, densities, and values can be produced in the rural area, Urban Growth Areas, and Rural Villages appropriate to the character of the individual communities. Additionally, ensure sufficient infrastructure capacity is available to accommodate growth and provide housing opportunities for all economic segments of the population.

GOAL C1 – HOUSING FOR SPECIAL NEEDS: Ensure the availability of housing for people with special needs.

GOAL D – FARM-WORKER HOUSING: Strive for an adequate supply of housing to meet the needs of farm workers and the agricultural industry.

GOAL E – MANUFACTURED HOUSING: Recognize the value of manufactured housing as an affordable housing solution.

The current Housing Element profile was adopted in 2007. The profile does not reflect recent US Census and American Community Survey data or more recent Skagit County housing studies, such as:

- *Building A Skagit County Housing Affordability Strategy Interim Report*, Skagit County Community Services Department, 2012, a primer on housing affordability concepts and policy options.
- *Skagit County 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness*, Skagit County Community Services Department, 2012, a detailed strategy for building and coordinating a system of housing and supportive services.
- *Skagit County Farmworker Housing Action Plan*, Washington Farmworker Housing Trust, 2011, addressing the housing and related needs of skilled farm workers and food sector employees.
- *Skagit Prosperity Report: A Community Needs Assessment 2013*, Community Action of Skagit County, 2014, reporting directly from local, working class households and local safety-net agencies.

Following a review of more recent data and studies, the County intends to review its current Housing Element Goals and Policies for potential updates to reflect recent and forecast trends.

RECENT DEMOGRAPHICS AND HOUSING CONDITIONS

The County is collecting and reviewing data. Preliminarily, trends show the following:

- **Skagit County has grown, but more recently at a slower rate.** The official U.S. Census population for 2010 was 116,901 and in 2014 it equaled 119,500, according to the State Office of Financial Management (OFM). The average annual increase from 2000 to 2010 was 1.3 percent, while for the period between 2010 and 2014 it was about half that rate, at 0.6 percent.
- **Skagit County's population is becoming more diverse.** The percentage of the population that is white alone has decreased between 2000 and 2010 from 86.5 to 83.4 percent and the percentage of Hispanic or Latino persons has increased from 11.2 to 16.9 percent. (US Census 2000 and 2010)
- **The population is aging; those that are aging tend to have more disabilities.** The share of the population aged 65 years and older has increased (from 14.6 percent in the year 2000 to 16.1 percent in 2010). The median age is also increasing (from 37.2 years in 2000 to 40.1 in 2010). About 13 percent of the county population has a disability. Those 65 years old or greater tend to have more disabilities (36.2 percent). (American Community Survey 5-Year Estimate, 2009-2013)

- **Household sizes are getting smaller.** The average household size is decreasing (from 2.6 in 2000 to 2.53 in 2010). As of 2010 more than half of county households consist of a householder living alone (25.6 percent) or married couples with no children (33.3 percent). (US Census)
- **Household poverty has increased.** In 2013, the median household income was estimated at \$55,925; 13.4 percent of total households are in poverty, up from 11.5 percent in 2010. In 2013, about 40.4 percent of households earned very low, low, and moderate incomes (0-80 percent of the countywide median income). (American Community Survey 2010 and 2013)
- **Homelessness is a special need in the County, and affects children and adults.** Recent annual Point-In-Time Homeless Counts have identified nearly 1,000 persons who are homeless at any given time in Skagit County. In 2011, 957 people were identified as homeless (Community Action of Skagit County, 2012) and a 2012 count identified 1,247 homeless persons with 48 percent being children (Community Action of Skagit County, 2013).¹
- **Farmworkers have a need for safe, affordable housing.** The 2010-2015 Skagit County Farmworker Housing Action Plan (March 2011) found that approximately 4,220 farmworkers and family members in Skagit County do not have a safe affordable home, and there is an immediate need for about 844 farmworker housing units (2/3rd year-round, 1/3rd seasonal).
- **Community services help support households in need.** The County Public Health & Community Services Department manages contracted and directly-provided services countywide for those with special needs (Meals on Wheels for seniors in need, behavioral health services, developmental disabilities programming, etc.). Community Action of Skagit County developed a community needs assessment in 2013 addressing the dimensions of poverty; about 704 households were surveyed. Some housing-related findings include the need for living wage jobs and concerns with increasing rental and utility costs.
- **Housing stock is predominantly single family.** As of 2013 countywide there were 52,218 dwellings. Most (72 percent) are single-family detached dwellings. There is a higher share of manufactured housing units in unincorporated Skagit County than in incorporated cities as a whole; conversely most of the attached dwellings are in incorporated cities. (OFM 2013)
- **Housing stock is aging.** The County's overall housing stock shows nearly one third were built between 30-50 years ago (29 percent), and another third are greater than 50 years old (33 percent). (American Community Survey, 2009-2013 5-Year Sample Estimates). Over the 20-year life of the Comprehensive Plan, the percentage of the older housing stock would increase.
- **There is a greater need for affordable ownership and rental housing.** The *Building a Skagit County Housing Affordability Strategy* found that "two out of every five households cannot afford the housing they occupy in Skagit County." This means about 17,000 households have unaffordable, cost-burdened housing – defined by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development as paying more than 30 percent of household income on housing costs. There is an undersupply of affordable rental units as well as a county-wide undersupply of total housing units. Additionally, economic forecasts indicate that a significant proportion of new local jobs in the upcoming decades will pay a relatively low wage. Therefore, by 2036 about 40 percent or 6,000 units of the *future* housing stock will need to be available at affordable levels.

¹ This count does not total the entire Skagit homeless population, but a smaller number of people who were homeless and located on the day of the count. The count best represents trends in homelessness rather than a total count of people with shelter.

KEY QUESTIONS

Key questions for consideration in the Housing Element Update include:

- What can Skagit County do to “preserve, conserve, and enhance the existing housing stock” in its rural communities and neighborhoods, consistent with Goal B of the Comp Plan’s Housing Element?
- Given a trend of smaller household sizes and an aging population, what can the County and cities do to promote housing variety for the current and next generation?
- What are the appropriate and respective roles of the private sector – which finances and builds most of the housing in Skagit County – and the public sector – which establishes the policy and regulatory framework for housing development – in meeting current and future housing needs?
- The County allocates growth over the 2016-2036 planning period in consultation with cities. The County is responsible for housing in unincorporated UGAs and especially rural areas where there is a larger share of single family and manufactured housing presently. The County is required under the GMA to limit residential growth and densities in the rural area, while the cities are encouraged to accommodate population growth and have greater leeway to encourage multi-family housing and higher residential densities. The County provides human services countywide. There is a gap in the supply of housing affordable to a range of household incomes in the County. What should be the County’s role? What should be the cities’ role?
- As one of the more prominent employment sectors in Skagit County, agriculture generates a need for farmworker housing. While the agricultural jobs are largely in the rural county, the location of services and infrastructure tends to be in the cities. What should be the County’s role? What should be the cities’ role? Where should farmworker housing be located?