



Memorandum

May 20, 2024

TO: The Honorable Whatcom County Council
FROM: Matt Aamot, Senior Planner
THROUGH: Steve Roberge, Assistant Director
RE: 2025 Comp Plan Update - Public Participation Plan

The Washington State Growth Management Act (GMA) requires Whatcom County to review and revise its comprehensive plan and development regulations by December 31, 2025 (RCW 36.70A.130). Additionally, the GMA requires review of urban growth areas (UGAs) under RCW 36.70A.130(3). The UGAs must be able to accommodate housing and employment growth projected for the planning period (through the year 2045). Therefore, Whatcom County has initiated a multi-year project to update its Comprehensive Plan and development regulations by the state deadline.

Comprehensive Plan Update Process

The update process for the Comprehensive Plan and development regulations in Whatcom County will include:

- Creating and implementing a public participation plan;
- Developing population, housing and employment growth projections;
- Conducting an analysis under the State Environmental Policy Act, including the development of an environmental impact statement (EIS) assessing various land use alternatives;
- Addressing recent GMA amendments, including changes relating to housing (HB 1220) and climate change planning (HB 1181);
- Engaging with advisory committees;
- Planning Commission work sessions, hearings, and recommendations; and
- Whatcom County Council meetings, hearings, and ordinance adoption.

Growth Management Act Requirements

The GMA requires counties to develop public participation programs for comprehensive plan and development regulation amendments ([RCW 36.70A.140](#)). The GMA includes planning goals in RCW 36.70A.020 to guide the process of amending comprehensive plans and development regulations. The State Legislature approved House Bill 1181 in 2023 modifying planning goal 11 as follows:

Citizen participation and coordination. Encourage the involvement of citizens in the planning process, including the participation of vulnerable populations and overburdened communities, and ensure coordination between communities and jurisdictions to reconcile conflicts.

The GMA contains the following definitions in RCW 36.70A.030, also added in the 2023 State legislative session:

(41)(a) "Vulnerable populations" means population groups that are more likely to be at higher risk for poor health outcomes in response to environmental harms, due to: (i) Adverse socioeconomic factors, such as unemployment, high housing and transportation costs relative to income, limited access to nutritious food and adequate health care, linguistic isolation, and other factors that negatively affect health outcomes and increase vulnerability to the effects of environmental harms; and (ii) sensitivity factors, such as low birth weight and higher rates of hospitalization.

(b) "Vulnerable populations" includes, but is not limited to:

- (i) Racial or ethnic minorities;
- (ii) Low-income populations; and
- (iii) Populations disproportionately impacted by environmental harms.

(40) "Overburdened community" means a geographic area where vulnerable populations face combined, multiple environmental harms and health impacts, and includes, but is not limited to, highly impacted communities as defined in RCW [19.405.020](#).

A draft Public Participation Plan has been developed, with the assistance of the County's consultant (SCJ Alliance), to guide community engagement efforts throughout the process to ensure early and continuous involvement in the Comprehensive Plan and development regulations update. Public engagement is a key component of this update effort. The draft Public Participation Plan includes public engagement activities, including such activities relating to vulnerable populations and overburdened communities. Efforts to encourage participation will continue over the course of the Comprehensive Plan update.

Planning Commission Recommendation

The Planning Commission held a public hearing and recommended approval of the draft Public Participation Plan on May 9.

WSDOT Request

After the Planning Commission hearing, the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) requested to be added to the list of state agencies on p. 13 of the Public Participation Plan. Staff recommends adding WSDOT to the list as shown on the attached Public Participation Plan.

Environmental Impact Statement Timeline

Staff would also like to modify the text relating to the Draft EIS Release to the "summer or fall of 2024" (p. 11) to reflect the possibility that the Draft EIS may be released later than this summer.

Conclusion

The draft Public Participation Plan will guide community engagement efforts, which is an important part of the planning process under the GMA. We look forward to discussing the Public Participation Plan at the Council's Planning and Development Committee on June 4. We request that Council consider a motion at the evening meeting on June 4 to approve the Plan.