

**WHATCOM COUNTY
PUBLIC WORKS DEPARTMENT**

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NATURAL RESOURCES

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MEMORANDUM

TO: The Honorable Members of the Whatcom County Council

THROUGH: Elizabeth Kosa, Public Works Director

FROM: Gary Stoyka, Natural Resources Manager 
Lauren Clemens, Climate Action Manager

DATE: April 2, 2025

RE: Climate Planning Briefing

The Climate Action Manager will provide an update to the County Council regarding the inclusion of HB 1181 and climate planning requirements in the County's Comprehensive Plan periodic update process.

Background

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 20-year planning period. Whatcom County is in the process of a multi-year project to update its Comprehensive Plan and development regulations by the state deadline. There are two significant changes in GMA that affect the 2025 update, including GMA changes regarding housing (HB 1220) and climate change (HB 1181).

Legislation signed into law in 2023 (HB1181) added a climate goal to the GMA and requires local comprehensive plans to have a climate element. Climate elements must maximize economic, environmental, and social co-benefits and prioritize environmental justice in order to avoid worsening environmental health disparities. A climate element can take the form of a single comprehensive plan chapter or be integrated into several chapters/elements such as housing, transportation, and land use. Cities and counties with a 2025 comprehensive plan periodic update deadline will be the first jurisdictions required to have a climate element and should use the Washington State Department of Commerce "intermediate" climate planning guidance.

Next Steps for Incorporation of Climate Planning into Comprehensive Plan Update-

- **Tribal Consultation-** Consistent with RCW 36.70A.040, a federally recognized Indian tribe "may voluntarily choose to participate in the county or regional planning process and coordinate with the county and cities." Tribal consultation is in process with Nooksack Tribe and Lummi Nation on the draft climate element with additional notice consultation throughout

the legislative process.

- **Advisory Committee review-** the committee version of the climate element was issued in January 2025 and advisory committees submitted comments in March. Staff is evaluating the comments received and providing rationale for incorporating input prior to a Planning Commission work session. To see the comments issued by Climate Impact Advisory Committee, see: March 25, 2025- Climate Draft- Approved Revisions.
- **Planning Commission work session-** After incorporation of advisory committee recommendations and completion of tribal consultation, the climate element will be introduced for Planning Commission work session.

Council Briefing- Summary of HB 1181 and GMA Climate Planning Requirements in the 2025 Comprehensive Plan Update-

- **Draft Countywide Planning Policies-** The Growth Management Act requires interjurisdictional coordination and development of countywide planning policies for the protection and promotion of environmental quality. These policies, adopted by all jurisdictions within Whatcom County, were last amended in 2021 and will include new climate change policies based on HB 1181. The process to initiate these amendments for review includes review by Whatcom County Council Committee of the Whole, approval by the cities, and final adoption by the Whatcom County Council. The draft Countywide Planning Policy climate amendments were discussed at the March 25th meeting and can be found at the link.
- **Committee Draft- Climate Element-** In December 2023, the Washington State Department of Commerce published "intermediate" climate element planning guidance for local governments planning under the GMA. In 2025, Commerce will publish "full" guidance that reflects the results of an ongoing rulemaking process for HB 1181. Whatcom County is directed to follow the intermediate guidance and will be subject to meeting the minimum requirements, which include:
 - **Greenhouse Gas (GHG) Reduction Sub-Element Goals and Policies Minimum Requirements (Guidance p. 42):**
 - Requirement 1: Result in reductions in overall GHG emissions generated by transportation and land use within the jurisdiction but without increasing emissions elsewhere in Washington
 - Requirement 2: Result in reductions in per capita vehicle miles traveled within the jurisdiction, but without increasing GHG emissions elsewhere in Washington
 - Requirement 3: Prioritize reductions that benefit overburdened communities in order to maximize the co-benefits of reduced air pollution and environmental justice.

- **Resilience Sub-Element Goals and Policies Minimum Requirements (Guidance p.16):**
 - Requirement 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
 - Requirement 2: Identify, protect, and enhance natural areas to foster climate resilience, as well as areas of vital habitat for safe species migration
 - Requirement 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.

Climate Element Content and Organization

Commerce recommends that GHG emissions policies address reducing emissions across all sources to reach net zero by 2050 and resilience policies address every relevant climate-exacerbated hazard. Commerce also encourages every jurisdiction addresses each of the eleven sectors below in its set of policies (Guidance p. 39):

- **Agriculture & Food Systems** (includes production and distribution);
- **Buildings & Energy** (includes energy generation, transmission, and consumption);
- **Cultural Resources & Practices** (includes historic sites and cultural resources and practices);
- **Economic Development** (includes business continuity, opportunities);
- **Emergency Management** (includes community preparedness, response, and recovery);
- **Health & Well-being** (includes community well-being, equity, and engagement);
- **Ecosystems** (includes land and water species and habitat);
- **Transportation** (includes multimodal travel and infrastructure);
- **Waste Management** (includes materials recycling and disposal);
- **Water Resources** (includes water quality and quantity);
- **Zoning & Development** (includes site use, design, and other development facets)

To provide a common structure across the element, both the GHG mitigation and resilience draft sub-element include one goal for each of the eleven sectors listed above. Policies within each sub-element were included if there was an established relationship to a GHG reduction mechanism or climate hazard. Policies that were not specifically identified by Commerce are considered consistent with the Commerce's guidance if the policy is measurable and supported by scientifically credible projections and scenarios that indicate the policy's adoption is likely to result in reductions of GHG emissions or increased resilience to climate hazards.

Climate Element Policy Audit

Commerce recommended that each jurisdiction audit at least 3-5 plans and identify approximately 20-40 collective policies within those plans to review for consideration for amendment or inclusion in the Climate Element. Commerce indicated the audit should, at a minimum, include the Comprehensive Plan and Hazard Mitigation Plan. Whatcom County's Climate Policy Audit included the following plans:

- Whatcom County 2016 Comprehensive Plan
- Whatcom County 2016 Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan
- Whatcom County 2021 Climate Action Plan
- Whatcom County 2023 Food Systems Plan
- Whatcom County 2024 Extreme Heat & Smoke Vulnerability Assessment
- Whatcom County 2024 Compound Flood Vulnerability Assessment

Additional state and local climate plans were also evaluated by staff, including:

- City of Bellingham Climate Protection Action Plan
- Port of Bellingham Climate Action Strategy
- Port of Bellingham Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy
- Lummi Nation Priority Climate Action Plan
- Lummi Nation Climate Change and Adaptation Plan
- Nooksack Indian Tribe Climate Adaptation Plan
- Whatcom Transit Authority Sustainability Plan
- Whatcom Council of Government Way to Go Whatcom Plan
- Department of Commerce Policy Explorer
- Washington State Climate Resilience Strategy
- Washington State Comprehensive Climate Action Plan (Draft)

Other Plans, including the Coordinated Water System Plan, Rural Lands Study, and Sea Level Rise & Compound Flooding Vulnerability Assessment (Phase 2) will be audited by staff for consistency as completed.

- **Climate Updates to Other Elements-**

- **Transportation Element-** Amends the GMA to encourage efficient multimodal transportation systems that "will reduce GHG emissions and per capita VMT [vehicle miles traveled]," and "are based on regional priorities and coordinated with county or city comprehensive plans." Requires inclusion of "multimodal level" of service standards for all locally owned arterials. Issued by the Planning and Development Services Department (PDS) for advisory committee comment from Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee.
- **Parks and Recreation Element-** Amends the GMA to require retention of open space "and green space," enhancement of recreational opportunities, "enhancement" of fish and wildlife habitat, increased access to natural resource

lands and water, and development of parks and recreation facilities. Requires an "evaluation of tree canopy coverage within the urban growth area." Issued for advisory committee comment by PDS from Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory and Whatcom County Parks and Recreation Commission.

- **Environment Element-** Amends the GMA to require protecting "and enhancing" the environment and enhancing the state's quality of life, including air and water quality, and the availability of water. Issued for advisory committee and staff comment by the Marine Resources Committee and WRIA 1/ Salmon Staff Teams and Planning Unit.
- **Land Use Element-** Amends the GMA to require designation of "green spaces, urban and community forests within the urban growth area;" giving "special consideration to achieving environmental justice in its goals and policies," including efforts to "avoid creating or worsening environmental health disparities;" "reduction in per capita vehicle miles traveled within the jurisdiction, without increasing greenhouse gas emissions elsewhere in the state;" "reduction and mitigation of the risk to lives and property posed by wildfires by using land use planning tools."
- **Capital Facilities Element-** Amends to the GMA to require an inventory of existing capital facilities owned by public entities, "including green infrastructure" in capital facilities plans.
- **Utilities Element-** Identification of location and capacity of "telecommunications" and natural gas "systems." Additionally, requires that the jurisdiction "identify all public entities that own utility systems and endeavor in good faith to work with other public entities" to gather and include within its element the information required. Issued for staff comment by PDS to WRIA 1 Planning Unit.

- **Technical Deliverables**

To meet requirements within the intermediate climate planning guidance, Whatcom County contracted for the following additional technical deliverables to comply with the intermediate guidance. These deliverables were funded with a climate planning grant from the Department of Commerce and will be complete by the end of the state fiscal year.

- **GHG Inventory & Trends Report-** Commerce requires counties use the Commerce-provided emissions inventory as the basis to develop a GHG reduction sub-element. To ensure emissions trends are reported in a consistent way, the 2017 Whatcom County GHG inventory was updated to use the 2022 inventory methodology.
- **GHG Forecasting Report-** Intermediate Guidance (p. 64) requires that jurisdictions identify target emissions reductions and that local jurisdictions identify incremental targets that lead to achieving net zero emissions in 2050 with

a 2022 baseline. The forecasting report provides the technical justification for target setting.

- **Environmental Justice and Health Disparities Report-** HB 1181 requires that jurisdictions give special consideration to achieving environmental justice in goals and policies, including efforts to avoid creating or worsening environmental health disparities. This report will provide an analysis of existing health disparities and exposure to climate hazards based on socioeconomic conditions, occupational hazard, and location of residence.
- **Hazard and Impact Assessment & Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan (NHMP) Audit-** As of April 2023, FEMA requires that all updated local hazard mitigation plans assess the effects of climate change and other future conditions in the document's required risk assessment. The Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan Audit reviewed the existing NHMP against the new climate requirements and identified gaps. The Hazard & Impact Report incorporated best available downscaled data to map climate hazards across Whatcom County. This assessment of climate hazards and risk will be the basis for resilience policies included throughout the Comprehensive Plan and climate element.
- **Washington State Department of Commerce- Rulemaking and Voluntary Approval**
 - **Climate Element rulemaking-** Commerce will be updating the Washington Administrative Code to provide guidance that cities and counties can use when developing comprehensive plan updates and describe new regulatory authority by which Commerce will review and approve city and county climate elements submitted as part of comprehensive plan updates. This guidance will be reviewed by staff for incorporation throughout the legislative process.
 - **Voluntary GHG Reduction Sub-Element Approval-** Jurisdictions that are required to complete a GHG emissions reduction sub-element per RCW 36.70A.095 may voluntarily request Commerce approval of their sub-element. If Commerce approves the submitted sub-element, Commerce would then defend its decision before the state's Growth Management Hearings Board, should the sub-element be appealed. Whatcom County is in the process of determining whether to submit a Notice of Intent to submit the subelement for Commerce review.