

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION & GROWTH PROJECTIONS

1.	1-2	How the Plan was Created	<p>“Third, extensive <u>citizen-community</u> participation was facilitated through meetings, presentations, public hearings, and written comments made throughout this process, <u>consistent with the Public Participation Plan.</u>”</p> <p>Hyperlink Public Participation Plan or add to the appendix: https://www.whatcomcounty.us/DocumentCenter/View/85488/Approved-Public-Participation-Plan-June-4-2024---2025-Update</p>	Galloway	<p>APPROVED TO SEND TO PC 6/24/25 COTW</p> <p>APPROVED via “CONSENT” SCOTW 3.3.26</p>
2.	1-3	Countywide Planning Policies	<p><u>During the Comprehensive Plan process,</u> the the Whatcom County Council, in conjunction with the cities, previously adopted a set of Countywide Planning Policies (see Appendix C). The framework provided by the adopted Countywide Planning Policies ensures that local planning efforts will be consistent with one another and supportive of regional goals.</p>	Donovan	<p>APPROVED TO SEND TO PC 6/24/25 COTW</p> <p>APPROVED via “CONSENT” SCOTW 3.3.26</p>
3.	1-3	Introducing Whatcom County	<p>Introducing Whatcom County</p> <p>Whatcom County lies in the northwest corner of both the State of Washington and the coterminous United States. It is bounded on the north by the Canadian border, on the east by Okanogan County, on the south by Skagit County, and on the west by the Strait of Georgia and Bellingham Bay. These borders enclose large parts of the Mount Baker National Forest and the North Cascades National Park, which take up about two-thirds of Whatcom County's total area. All but a few residents live in the western third of the county. Bellingham is Whatcom County's largest city. Other cities include Blaine, Everson, Ferndale, Lynden, Nooksack, and Sumas, and there are three unincorporated UGAs and several smaller unincorporated communities.</p> <p><u>Tribal Land and Sovereignty</u></p> <p><u>Whatcom County is built on the ancestral homelands and waterways of the Coast Salish peoples, including Lummi Nation and Nooksack Indian Tribe, who have lived on, cared for, and protected these lands and waters since time immemorial. Their culture, values, and teachings are intertwined in the waters, lands, and resources that sustain our life ways. The Whatcom County government acknowledges the Tribes’ treaty rights, as guaranteed by the 1855 Treaty of Point Elliott between the United States government and the Lummi Nation and the Nooksack Indian Tribe, and commit to honoring and upholding the Treaty as the supreme law of the land per the United States Constitution. We respect their sovereignty and their right to self-determination.</u></p>	Galloway /Rienstra	<p>APPROVED AS AMENDED via MOTION SCOTW 3.3.26</p>

			<p><u>There are Two Indian</u> reservations and associated trust lands <u>are</u> located within Whatcom County's borders. The Lummi Nation reservation is on the Lummi Peninsula and Portage Island on the western side of the county; <u>†</u><u>The Nooksack Indian</u> Tribe reservation and trust lands include parcels along the Nooksack River in the west-central area of the county.</p> <p><u>The Labor that Built Whatcom County</u></p> <p><u>Whatcom County as it stands today is only possible because of those who have come before us. The Whatcom County government acknowledges the labor that built our country, institutions, and infrastructures. Our country has depended upon the labor, wisdom, and skills of enslaved peoples, Indigenous Peoples, immigrants, and migrants who have often worked within harsh and unjust systems. We recognize the immigrant and American-born workers whose labor often remains unseen yet contribute to the wellbeing of our collective community.</u></p>		
4.	1-4	Whatcom County Government	<p>The following goals and policies are intended to ensure good <u>County</u> government <u>that serves all residents. This includes through accessibility, transparency, accountability, robust public involvement, and ongoing process and performance improvement, enhanced tribal engagement and coordination, and fostering inclusion and belonging for all who call Whatcom County home.</u></p>	Galloway	APPROVED via "CONSENT" SCOTW 3.3.26
5.	1-4	Goal 1A	<p>"Ensure that government activities, regulations and policies are transparent, accountable, <u>accessible</u>, and easy to understand."</p>	Galloway	APPROVED TO SEND TO PC 6/24/25 COTW APPROVED via "CONSENT" SCOTW 3.3.26
6.	1-5/6	Add a NEW Goal 1B and associated policies	<p><u>Goal 1B: Take concrete steps to facilitate tribal engagement and coordination with Lummi Nation and Nooksack Indian Tribe on all relevant county government activities, regulations, and policies to ensure the opportunity for tribal partners to have a voice in moving the county towards a shared vision for the future.</u></p> <p><u>Policy 1B-1: Recognize the Tribes' sovereignty and right to self-determination; honor and uphold tribal treaty rights including their rights to fish, hunt, and gather.</u></p> <p><u>Policy 1B-2: Work collaboratively with the Tribes in an effort to develop a mutually agreed upon engagement and coordination framework that incorporates regular and meaningful Whatcom County government-to-Tribal government cooperation promoting open lines of communication, information sharing, and collaborative decision making.</u></p>	Galloway /Rienstra	APPROVED AS AMENDED via MOTION SCOTW 3.3.26

			<p><u>Policy 1B-3: Recognize and support tribal cultures, taking steps that include promoting education and outreach materials and programs that honor tribal history, culture, treaty rights, and sovereignty.</u></p> <p><u>Policy 1B-4: Conserve cultural and natural resources that sustain Indigenous Peoples’ way of life. These include watersheds, shorelines, forests, and other culturally significant areas critical to tribal cultural practices and treaty protected resources.</u></p> <p><u>Policy 1B-5: Coordinate and collaborate with Tribes on all relevant public works and development projects to avoid or minimize adverse impacts on tribal archaeological and cultural resources.</u></p> <p><u>Policy 1B-6: Acknowledge that water is integral to tribal culture and treaty rights; coordinate with tribal governments on the facilitation of the WRIA 1 Nooksack Adjudication, identify and implement methods of protecting streams, rivers, estuaries, groundwater, surface water, aquifer recharge areas, and water related infrastructure.</u></p> <p><u>Policy 1B-7: Acknowledge that the effects of climate change, including extreme weather events, natural hazards such as flooding and wildfires, increasing temperature, and rising sea levels, disproportionately threaten the rights, livelihood, and cultural practices of Indigenous Peoples.</u></p>		
7.	1-6	Add NEW Goal 1C and associated policies	<p><u>Goal 1C: The Whatcom County Government, in all that it does, shall work towards the elimination of economic and racial disparities and inequities so that all residents of Whatcom County, regardless of identity, citizenship status, socioeconomic status, and/or geography, can live, thrive, and belong for who they are, as they are, without fear, every day.</u></p> <p><u>Policy 1C-1: Acknowledge the historical harm caused to communities of color by Whatcom County Government’s actions through planning, housing, and development and identify the connections between the actions and local racially disparate outcomes.</u></p> <p><u>Policy 1C-2: Acknowledge and uplift the culture, diverse values, and cultural resources of communities of color as valuable community assets.</u></p> <p><u>Policy 1C-3: Coordinate and increase the participation of communities facing racial disparities and inequities in County civic processes and decision-making. Design equitable decision-making structures that allow for community engagement at every step.</u></p> <p><u>Policy 1C-4: Develop and implement an equity and equality of opportunity framework and toolkit to inform decision making and to evaluate how budget, policy, and programmatic decisions impact marginalized and underserved communities.</u></p>	Galloway /Rienstra	APPROVED AS AMENDED via MOTION SCOTW 3.3.26

Policy 1C-5: Invest County staff time and resources to develop environments, capital projects, and initiatives that enhance opportunities for communities currently experiencing racial disparities through public amenities, access to affordable housing, childcare, healthy and culturally relevant food, and health programs.

Policy 1C-6: Leverage county resources and investments in public work to empower and uplift a local and diverse workforce, including supporting job opportunities for women, minorities, veterans, and those economically distressed, marginalized, and underserved.

Policy 1C-7: Modernize county code, policies, and processes to ensure diversity, equity, inclusion, and equal protection and provision of county services to all people.

Table 3. Estimated Population Growth in Whatcom County, ~~2020-2050~~ 2025-2045

YEAR	Natural Increase		Net Migration		Total 5-Year Annual Growth
	Pop. Increase	% of Growth	Pop. Increase	% of Growth	
2020-2025	1,706		11,768		13,474
2025-2030	2,795	20.20%	11,042	79.80%	13,837
2030-2035	889	6.68%	12,415	93.32%	13,304
2035-2040	-595	-4.64%	13,408	104.64%	12,813
2040-2045	-1119	-9.00%	13,558	109.00%	12,439
2045-2050	-916	-7.56%	13,038	107.57%	12,121

The County's 2045 population projection of 303,438 is within OFM's range ~~and therefore requires no further justification~~. The rationale for using this figure, which is above OFM's medium projection, include: ensuring an adequate land supply to accommodate growth, the need to plan for growth, and the need to protect the quality of life and natural resources in Whatcom County

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Table 3

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Population Projections

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10.	1-11	Population Projections	<p>"The County's 2045 population projection of 303,438 is within OFM's range and therefore requires no further justification. The rationale for using this figure, which is above OFM's medium projection, include: ensuring an adequate land supply to accommodate growth, the need to plan for growth, and the need to protect the quality of life and natural resources in Whatcom County. This population projection is selected for planning purposes. Given past population trends and the requirements of GMA, planning for population growth—whether it occurs or not—is critical for the quality of life, protection of natural resources, and economic health of Whatcom County."</p> <p>"This population projection is selected for planning purposes."</p> <p>Question:</p> <p>Need help understanding the budget and policy implications of opting for a projection higher than OFM medium. Given RCW 36.70A.110, what are the County's obligations to designating new UGAs or areas within which urban growth shall be encouraged?</p> <p>How do we reconcile what we are hearing from jurisdictions, that infrastructure cost will be a significant financial barrier to accommodating growth even within the UGAs and that the cost of over-planning and building more infrastructure to accommodate a higher projection than actual growth experienced is ultimately passed on to tax payers and residents, and further impacts affordability and cost of living?</p>	Galloway	N/A
11.	1-12	Table 5	<p>Proposed Amendment:</p> <p>Revert to OFM Medium for Birch Bay UGA (2,313 rather than 2,662) and Columbia Valley UGA (988 rather than 1,137)</p> <p><i>Note: Council did approve a motion to change the population growth allocation for areas outside UGAs from 9,000 to 7,243, causing the total Whatcom County population to be reduced to 65,881.</i></p>	Galloway	FAILED SCOTW 3.3.26
12.	1-13	Employment Projections	<p>Employment <u>Projections</u></p> <p><i>Note: The title to this section used to say Employment Projections, in the preliminary planning commission draft, the word projections is removed. Councilmember Donovan moved to preserve the word "projections."</i></p>	Donovan	APPROVED TO SEND TO PC 6/24/25 COTW

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13.	1-13	Employment Projections	<p>Employment allocations were based largely on the local request recognizing the incentives that cities have for larger employment areas (sales tax, property tax). Due to the challenge in designating lands for commercial or industrial development, the allocation of employment allowed for these optimistic scenarios. Most of the employment projections displayed in Table 5 shows the allocation of employment to for the Urban Growth Areas and the area outside UGAs <u>greatly exceed the "high" projections provided in the Technical Analysis (Leland Report).</u></p>	Donovan	<p>APPROVED TO SEND TO PC 6/24/25 COTW</p> <p>APPROVED via "CONSENT" SCOTW 3.3.26</p>
14.	1-14	Table 6	<p>Question: Most of the employment projections/allocations are OFM high or above high. What are the implications? Are these reasonable? Do we want to consider something more reasonable or closer to OFM medium? Have we engaged Cherry Point industries/landowners to see if these projections are reasonable within their plans for industrial growth?</p> <p>And with these employment allocations being not proportionate to population growth allocations within the UGA, are there unintended consequences we should be tracking such as are we further exacerbating the issues related to increased vehicle miles traveled (VMT) by increasing need for commute to other areas?</p>	Galloway	N/A
15.	1-15	Demographics	<p>"The culturally diverse demographic makeup of the county's population has an effect on land use patterns. For example, Whatcom County residents with children may choose different kinds of transportation and recreation than retired people. Single-parent families and large extended families need different kinds of housing. Another influence on county demographics is the cyclical influx of seasonal residents, primarily from Canada, who maintain recreational homes in parts of the county. Areas most influenced by seasonal residency include Point Roberts, Birch Bay, and the Foothills Subarea. <u>Students attending local colleges and universities are another significant seasonal demographic group.</u></p>	Galloway	APPROVED via "CONSENT" SCOTW 3.3.26
16.	1-17	Current Land Use	<p>The majority of single-family homes are concentrated in the cities, <u>Urban Growth Areas (UGAs), Limited Areas of More Intense Rural Development (LAMIRDS), and the major urban and intensely developed unincorporated rural portions of the county</u> such as Sudden Valley, Columbia Valley, Glacier, Lake Samish, Lake Whatcom (north end), Cain Lake, Birch Bay, <u>and</u> Sandy Point, and Lummi Island. Lower density residential development is scattered throughout the rural areas of the County. As may be expected, single-family homes are also located along the valley floors of the three forks of the Nooksack. The Cherry Point industrial area, the agriculturally dominated area north of Lynden and the forested foothills in the eastern part of the county have very low to zero residential density.</p>	Galloway	<p>APPROVED TO SEND TO PC 6/24/25 COTW</p> <p>APPROVED via "CONSENT" SCOTW 3.3.26</p>

17.	1-17	Current Land Use	A prominent characteristic of Whatcom County housing is the high number of vacation, resort, and second-home units found throughout the county. In 2020, approximately 50% of the "vacant" units were occupied part of the year for seasonal, recreational or occasional use (2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table B25004). <u>Over 1000 single-family housing units in the unincorporated areas are used as short-term vacation rentals (cite the study PDS provided Council).</u>	Donovan	APPROVED TO SEND TO PC 6/24/25 COTW APPROVED via "CONSENT" SCOTW 3.3.26
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ADDITIONAL AMENDMENTS FOR 3/10

18.		Preface: Add a labor Acknowledgement	Whatcom County as it stands today is only possible because of ancestors, elders, and those who have gone before us. The Whatcom County government acknowledges the labor that built our county, institutions, and infrastructures. Our region depended on the labor, dehumanization, exploitation, suffering, wisdom, and skills of: enslaved people primarily of African descent, Indigenous peoples of this land, the Chinese immigrants who built railroads that allowed for westward American development, Japanese Americans whose properties and livelihoods were taken from them while incarcerated during World War II, and migrant workers from the Philippines, Mexico, South Asia, and Central and South America who have worked lumber mills, farms, and canneries within harsh and unjust systems. <u>We recognize the Dutch community with their wisdom and skills to develop agriculture lands which remains a vital part of Whatcom County's economy.</u> We recognize the immigrant and American-born workers of African, Asian, and Central and South American descent whose labor often remains unseen yet contributes to the wellbeing of our collective community. We acknowledge all unpaid care-giving labor.	Stremler	SEE PREFACE (AB2026-273)
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19.	1-6	Policy 1C-6	Leverage county resources and investments in public work to empower and uplift a local and diverse workforce, including supporting job opportunities for women, minorities, veterans, and those economically distressed, marginalized, and underserved. <u>Through fair and open competition, leverage county resources and investments in public work to empower and uplift a local and diverse workforce for all.</u>	Stremler	APPROVED via MOTION COTW 3.10.2026
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ADDITIONAL AMENDMENTS FOR 6/16

20.		NEW Goal 1X	<u>NEW Goal 1X: Whatcom County shall implement this Comprehensive Plan through transparent, coordinated, predictable, and efficient regulatory and permitting processes that protect public interests, maintain clear decision-making authority, utilize objective standards where practicable, and reduce unnecessary delay, duplication, uncertainty, and cost.</u>	Elenbaas	
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21.		NEW Policy 1X-1	<u>NEW Policy 1X-1: County regulations and permitting processes should be clear, understandable, consistently administered, and supported by defined procedures, review timelines, and transparent application requirements whenever practicable.</u>	Elenbaas	
22.		NEW Policy 1X-2	<u>NEW Policy 1X-2: The County should coordinate review processes among departments, municipalities, Tribal governments, agencies, and stakeholders to avoid unnecessary duplication, conflicting requirements, and procedural delay.</u>	Elenbaas	
23.		NEW Policy 1X-3	<u>NEW Policy 1X-3: The County shall encourage consultation, collaboration, and government-to-government coordination consistent with applicable law while maintaining clear decision-making authority and jurisdictional responsibilities established by state and federal law.</u>	Elenbaas	
24.		NEW Policy 1X-4	<u>NEW Policy 1X-4: Implementation of this Plan should consider impacts on housing affordability, housing supply, project feasibility, economic opportunity, infrastructure investment, environmental stewardship, and family-wage employment.</u>	Elenbaas	
25.		NEW Policy 1X-5	<u>NEW Policy 1X-5: Regulations should be implemented through objective, measurable, and consistently applied standards whenever practicable, using defined criteria and best available information appropriate to the decision being made.</u>	Elenbaas	
26.		NEW Policy 1X-6	<u>NEW Policy 1X-6: The County should periodically evaluate permitting performance, review timelines, regulatory effectiveness, and implementation outcomes and pursue improvements that increase predictability, accountability, and administrative efficiency.</u>	Elenbaas	

TECHNICAL AMENDMENTS FOR 5.19.2026

Update the numbers in yellow highlight below:

	2023 2013-UGA Population	Projected 2045 2036 Population	2023-2045 2013- 2036 Net-Growth Allocation
Bellingham UGA	105,529 92,660	135,839 123,710	30,310 31,050
Birch Bay UGA	8,908 7,540	11,570 12,822	2,662 5,282
Blaine UGA	6,728 5,171	10,228 9,585	3,500 4,414
Columbia Valley UGA	3,577 3,103	4,714 4,448	1,117 1,345
Everson UGA	3,171 2,665	4,579 3,907	1,408 1,242
Ferndale UGA	16,762 12,758	27,723 19,591	10,961 6,833
Lynden UGA	16,696 12,872	23,361 19,275	6,665 6,403
Nooksack UGA	1,573 1,435	2,568 2,425	995 990
Sumas UGA	1,810 1,449	2,810 2,323	1,000 874
UGA Subtotal	164,815 139,696	223,453 198,129	58,638 58,433
Area outside UGAs	70,985 66,104	78,228 79,985 77,321	7,233 11,217
Total Whatcom County	235,800 205,800	301,681 303,438 275,450	65,801 69,650

Note: Council preliminarily approved changing the 2023-2045 growth allocation for “Area outside UGAs” and “Total Whatcom County” on 3/3/2026 (as shown in the bottom right of the chart in green highlight). Changing these numbers also changes the total projected population for 2045. These new totals (in yellow) need to be approved by Council.

Note: this amendment was originally listed in the attachment titled “Technical Amendments for 5.19.2026.” It has also been included here for clarity.

1. 1-12 Table 5

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