

Urban Growth Area Review

City of Sumas UGA/UGA Reserve Proposal Addendum

October 20, 2025

I. Introduction

On August 29, 2025, the City of Sumas submitted its UGA and UGA Reserve Proposal (UGA Proposal) to Whatcom County as part of the 2025 review and update of the city and county comprehensive plans required under the state Growth Management Act (GMA), RCW 36.70A. See the attached map that shows the City's existing urban growth area (UGA) and UGA Reserve. See also the attached map that shows the Sumas UGA Proposal, including Areas 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, and 9 that are proposed to be included in the Sumas UGA.

In an email message dated September 4, 2025, Whatcom County Planning and Development Services provided a list of issues/concerns related to the City's UGA Proposal. City Staff met with the County Planning Director and Senior Planner on September 8, 2025 to discuss the County's concerns and provided the City's preliminary responses to these concerns. The purpose of this UGA Proposal Addendum is to provide supplemental information to address these concerns to a sufficient degree to allow the City's UGA Proposal to move forward.

In subsequent messages from the County dated September 9 and October 1, 2025, County Planning provided additional requests that the City's UGA Proposal Addendum also address Whatcom County Comp Plan Chapter 2, page 2-18, and Policy 8A-6, related to setbacks and buffers from agricultural lands in the UGA Reserves and de-designation of agricultural lands and changed circumstances. This Addendum also addresses this additional request from County Planning.

II. County Concerns

The issues/concerns raised by the County Planning Department in relation to the City's UGA Proposal included the following:

1. Population and Employment Land Capacity – The land capacity for population is about 43% higher than the population allocation (p. 9). The Proposal states "...With the additional land capacity provided by the proposed UGA expansions, Sumas would have enough land capacity to accommodate the projected population with some extra capacity for more population growth going into the 40-year planning period..." (p. 9). Our understanding of Growth Board cases is that, when UGAs are being expanded, the increased land capacity should roughly match the population allocations (more or less). The proposal causes concern with oversizing the UGA expansion.
2. Housing Land Capacity Deficits – The 0-80% AMI and 120+ AMI income band categories both show land capacity deficits (p. 9). Could Sumas consider modifying zoning the City limits and/or future zoning on land in the proposed UGA outside of City limits to eliminate deficits in these income band categories?

3. Sewer Plan – The City’s proposal states the City transmits wastewater to Abbotsford for treatment (p. 10). Do you know approximately when the Abbotsford sewer plan will be completed? Will it plan for sewer facilities through the year 2045 for Sumas? Additionally, if not in the Abbotsford sewer plan, Sumas would have to provide capital facility information required by RCW 36.70A.70(3) relating to the City and the proposed UGA:

A capital facilities plan element consisting of: (a) An inventory of existing capital facilities owned by public entities, including green infrastructure, showing the locations and capacities of the capital facilities; (b) a forecast of the future needs for such capital facilities; (c) the proposed locations and capacities of expanded or new capital facilities; (d) at least a six-year plan that will finance such capital facilities within projected funding capacities and clearly identifies sources of public money for such purposes; and (e) a requirement to reassess the land use element if probable funding falls short of meeting existing needs and to ensure that the land use element, capital facilities plan element, and financing plan within the capital facilities element are coordinated and consistent

When UGAs are being expanded, the Growth Board has required adopted capital facilities plans (draft plans are not sufficient).

4. Naturally Occurring Asbestos – One of the criteria for expanding a UGA into a UGA Reserve is addressing risk from Naturally Occurring Asbestos (p. 13). This will need to be addressed in greater detail.
5. Floodplain – The GMA provision cited in the Sumas proposal on p. 13 (RCW 36.70A.110(10)(b)(iii)(C)) states:

(iii) Urban growth area expansions where: ...

(C) The land is owned by a jurisdiction planning under this chapter or the rights to the development of the land have been permanently extinguished, and the following criteria are met:

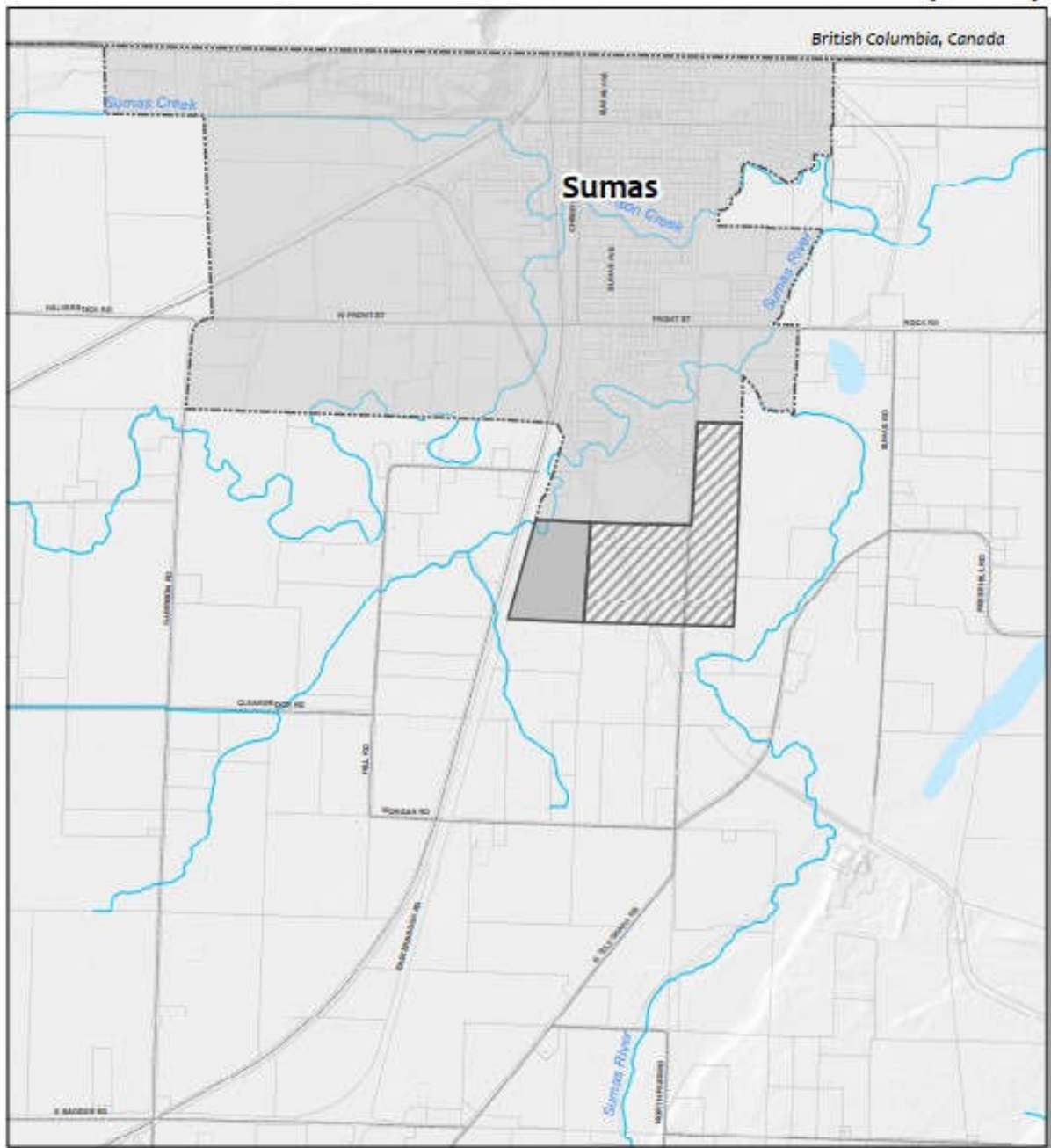
(I) The permissible use of this land is limited to one of the following: Outdoor recreation; environmentally beneficial projects, including but not limited to habitat enhancement or environmental restoration; stormwater facilities; flood control facilities; or underground conveyances; and

(II) The development and use of such facilities or projects will not decrease flood storage, increase stormwater runoff, discharge pollutants to fresh or salt waters using normal operations or floods, or increase hazard to people and property.

Is the land proposed to be added to the UGA currently owned by the City? If not, have development rights already been permanently extinguished? One of these conditions must already be in place before the County can consider expanding the UGA into such areas.

6. Agricultural Land – The UGA Proposal Template asked cities proposing to expand UGAs into designated Ag lands to address the policies in Whatcom County Comp Plan Chapter 8. There are a number of policies that may be relevant to the proposal. Policy 8A-3, relating to de-designation of Ag lands, is particularly important and needs to be addressed. We would also like to discuss mitigation for loss of Ag land in more detail.
7. Setback/Buffering from Ag Lands – The criterion for expanding UGAs into UGA Reserves (County Comp Plan Chapter 2, p. 2-82) includes addressing potential incompatibility with adjacent Ag land (p. 14).
8. Re-designation Criteria – The County asks that the City address Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan Policy 8A-6:

Require all requests for re-designation from agriculture to demonstrate that changed site conditions or circumstances have occurred since the original designation to such an extent that the site no longer satisfies the designation criteria for agricultural lands



- Sumas Urban Growth Area

-  City of Sumas
-  Urban Growth Area
-  Urban Growth Area Reserve

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III. Population and Employment Land Capacity

The initial results from the City's land capacity analysis were included in the UGA Proposal that was submitted in late August. These results showed a significant surplus of capacity for population growth. Since submitting the UGA proposal, the City has continued to refine the choices and assumptions incorporated into the land capacity analysis. As a result of minor adjustments to the anticipated density of planned industrial growth, the City's land capacity results now show a significantly smaller surplus for both population and employment growth.

Updated Table 6. Proposed UGA - Population Land Capacity Analysis Results		
1	Population Growth Capacity of Proposed UGA	1,341
2	Population Growth Allocation Proposed	1,000
3	Surplus (Deficit)	341

Updated Table 7. Proposed UGA - Employment Land Capacity Analysis Results		
1	Employment Growth Capacity of Proposed UGA	500
2	Employment Growth Allocation Proposed	40
3	Surplus (Deficit)	540

IV. Housing Land Capacity Deficits

The City of Sumas has been working to comply with the housing requirements established under HB 1220, while still addressing land capacity requirements under the GMA. Although the City's UGA Proposal showed an initial surplus of capacities in moderate-income housing categories and a deficit in low- and high- income housing categories, the City has been working to refine our housing allocation assumptions to reduce this excess capacity. The updated results presented in the table below show the most-recent results from the land capacity analysis for housing units within various income bands.

Updated Table 8. Proposed UGA – Housing Land Capacity Analysis Results

Income Band (AMI)	Aggregated Housing Needs	Total Capacity of Proposed UGA	Surplus (Deficit)
0-80%	427	457	30

80-120%	61	119	58
120+%	124	138	14
Total	612	714	102

NOTE: AMI means "Area Median Income"

As can be seen, the land capacity analysis now shows minimal surpluses for the low and high income bands. A modest, but reduced, surplus of housing units still remains in the moderate-income (80-120% AMI). The City will continue to work to reduce the overall surplus to the maximum extent possible given the statutory constraints under HB 1220.

IV. Sewer Plan

The City of Sumas is uncommon amongst cities in that we do not treat our own sewage, rather we contract with the City of Abbotsford in British Columbia, Canada to have our sewage transferred to their treatment plant for processing. This current contract with the City of Abbotsford was initially signed in 2008 and is set to expire in 2028. Subsequently, the City of Abbotsford is scheduled to update their Abbotsford-Mission Joint Wastewater Master Plan in 2028 as well. The Joint Wastewater Master Plan was last updated in May 2018 and has a planning horizon of 25 years, ending in 2043.

The GMA requires that jurisdictions include a Capital Facilities element in their Comprehensive Plans which, among other things, requires Cities to describe existing facilities and forecast future needs to determine what future facilities upgrades may be required to accommodate increased demand. These Capital Facilities plans are required to accommodate growth through the year 2045. While it does not completely reach the 2045 planning horizon, the Abbotsford-Mission Joint Wastewater Master Plan does have a planning horizon of 2043 and does include Sumas' wastewater inputs into its projections. To supplement this work, the City will also be adding additional information to the Sewer System section of the Sumas Comprehensive Plan Update that will give more details regarding projected capital projects and funding costs.

V. Naturally-Occurring Asbestos

Whatcom County's concern regarding potential risks related to naturally-occurring asbestos pertains only to the City's proposal to convert the portion of the existing UGA Reserve that lies on the west side of Hovel Road to full UGA Status. Although the County has asked Sumas to demonstrate that risks related to the potential presence of naturally occurring asbestos have been reduced to acceptable levels,

the County has not specified what constitutes an acceptable level of risk. Nevertheless, the City is confident that the existing geographic, topographic, and regulatory conditions already in place are sufficient to reduce risks from naturally occurring asbestos within the UGA Reserve to negligible or insignificant levels.

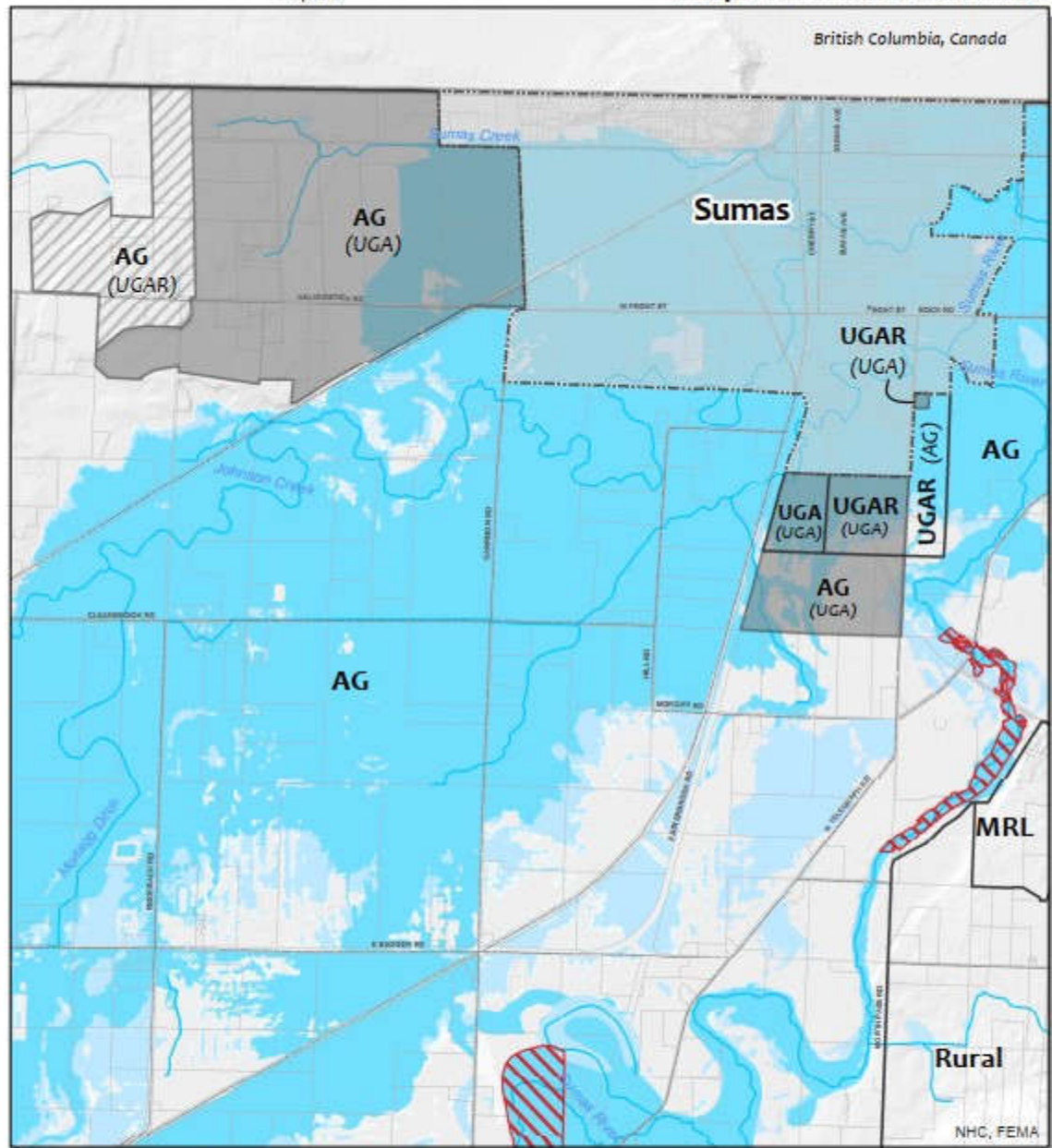
First, any naturally occurring asbestos that makes its way into the UGA Reserve would have to come by way of a flood from the Sumas River. In late 2021, the Sumas River did flood but was unable to reach the section of the UGA Reserve due to the presence of Hovel Road blocking the water from reaching that area. Because of this and other first-hand accounts, the City is confident that the area of UGA Reserve that we are proposing to give full UGA status is safe from exposure to naturally occurring asbestos.

VI. Floodplain

The County has raised a concern that the proposed UGA expansion areas 2, 3, 7, and 9 include expansions into the floodplain of the Nooksack River. The City is aware of these expansions into the floodplain and feel that to do so is necessary for the future of Sumas. Sumas is in a unique situation in that virtually all areas surrounding Sumas' existing UGA are within the floodplain. The proposed expansion area to the south and a small portion of the expansion area to the west are the only portions surrounding the Sumas UGA that are not within the existing floodplain. This has left Sumas with incredibly few options for where the boundaries of our UGA may be able to grow.

RCW 36.70A.110(10)(b) provides certain exceptions to the restriction that UGAs cannot be expanded into a floodplain, shown above in Section II of this document. One of these exceptions provides that jurisdictions may expand UGA into floodplains on the condition that areas of the proposed UGA expansion located within a floodplain are owned by the jurisdiction or that the land's development rights have been permanently extinguished and must be used for open spaces or other similar such purposes.

As the areas of the Sumas UGA expansion which are located within the floodplain are virtually all used for agricultural purposes, these uses would continue after annexation. The City does not own these areas and their development rights have not yet been extinguished. However, the City is working with the owners of these properties to ensure that those areas will have their development rights extinguished prior to adoption of the Comprehensive Plan.



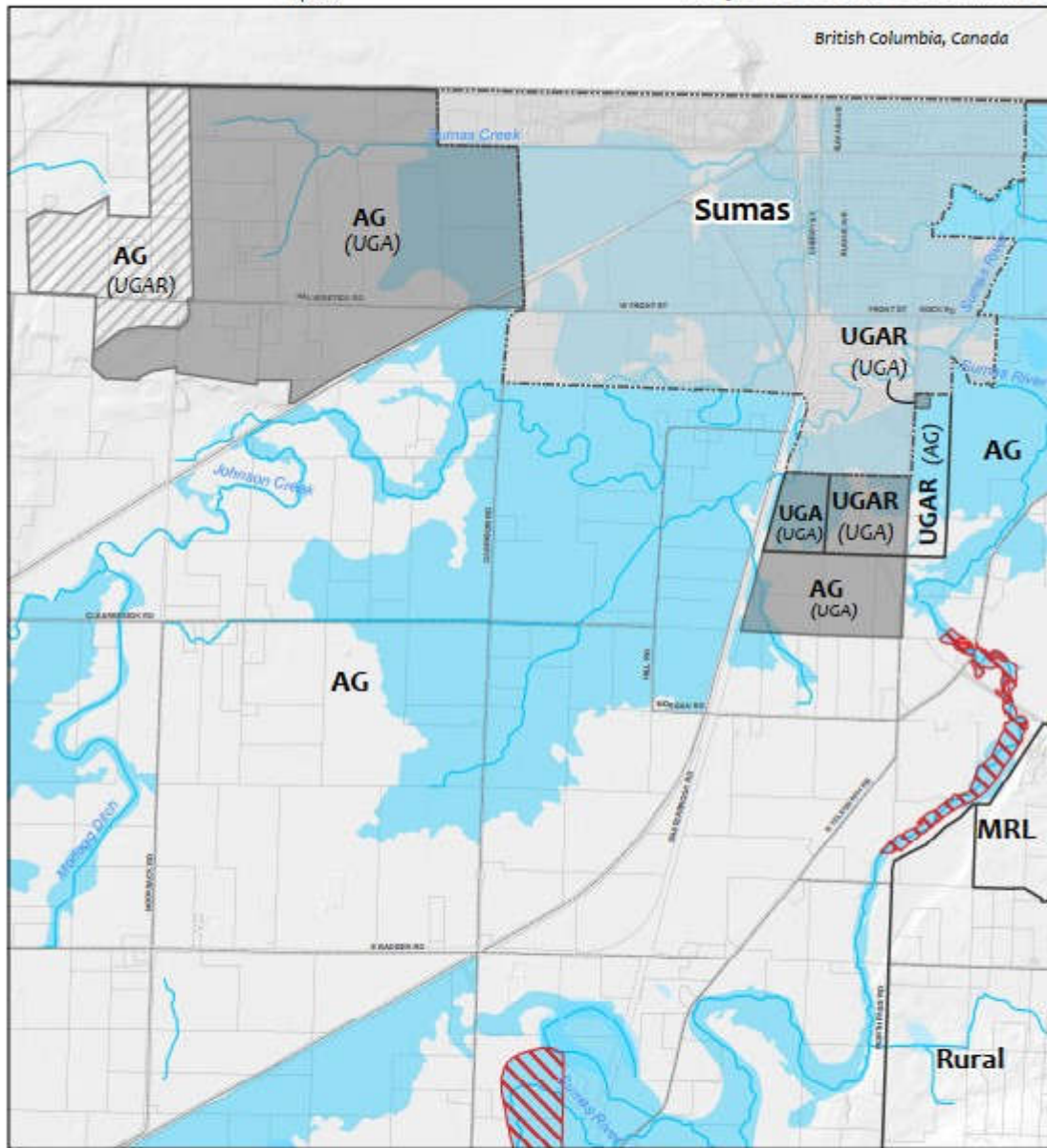
- Sumas Urban Growth Area

- City of Sumas
 - Proposed Urban Growth Area
 - Proposed Urban Growth Area Reserve
 - Comprehensive Plan Designations (Proposed in **()**, Current in)
 - Draft Floodway (2024-2025)
 - Draft SFHA (2024-2025)
 - Nookack 1p75x 100 Year Flood
- Net change in AG designation - 702 ac. to UGA/UGAR

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- Sumas Urban Growth Area

- City of Sumas
 - Proposed Urban Growth Area
 - Proposed Urban Growth Area Reserve
 - Comprehensive Plan Designations (Proposed in **()**, Current in **bold**)
 - Effective Floodway
 - Effective Flood Zone
- Net change in AG designation - 702 ac. to UGA/UGAR

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VII. Agricultural Land

As stated in the City's UGA Proposal, all lands surrounding Sumas are zoned Agriculture by the County. The County's Agricultural zoning somewhat conforms to the requirements of a natural resource lands designation, the criteria for which are listed in Chapter 8 of the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan. In order to change the designation of a natural resource land to UGA, there is a specific set of criteria related to designating agricultural lands that must be addressed in order to have the property de-designated. Below are a list of those criteria and the City of Sumas' response to those criteria in italics:

1. The land is not already characterized by urban growth. In determining this factor, the County should consider WAC 365-196-310 and RCW 36.70A.030(19).
 - i. *The land to the west is not characterized by urban growth, but a majority of the area is made up of residences and not characterized by agricultural uses.*
2. The land is used or capable of being used for agricultural production. In making this determination, the County shall use the land-capability classification system of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service. These eight classes are incorporated into map units and are based on the growing capacity, productivity, and soil composition of the land.
 - i. The UGA expansion areas are all generally capable of being used for agricultural production.
3. The land has long term commercial significance for agriculture. In determining this factor, consider the following nonexclusive criteria:
 - a. The majority of the area contains Prime Farmland Soils as determined by the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS).
 - i. *The UGA expansion area to the west of town is primarily Laxton soil which is characterized as being good soil for agricultural use but also good for buildings and development. The City of Sumas has developed residential neighborhoods on these same types of soils atop Moe Hill on Ridgeview St and Arthurs Way.*
 - b. The area may contain 100-year floodplains as delineated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).
 - i. *Although portions of the proposed UGA areas are located within the 100-year flood, a majority of the areas are not. Please see*

Section VI of this document which provides more information on this issue.

- c. Land use settlement patterns, the intensity of nearby uses, and the history of approved land development permits are generally compatible with agricultural practices.
 - i. *These proposed UGA expansion areas are characterized by both urban and agricultural settlement patterns in their general vicinity. The areas to the south are currently used for agriculture, and the areas to the west are used for a mix of hobby farms and rural residential development.*
- d. A majority of the area is composed of agricultural operations that were historically in agriculture prior to 1985.
 - i. *The UGA expansion areas to the south of town were composed of agricultural operations prior to 1985, however a majority of the UGA expansion areas to the west do not have a history of agricultural operations prior to 1985.*
- e. The predominate parcel size in the area is large enough to adequately maintain agricultural operations.
 - i. *The average parcel size in the UGA expansion areas to the south of town is 12.4 acres. This parcel size is somewhat adequate to maintain agricultural operations. The average parcel size in the UGA expansion areas to the west is 18.7 acres. This parcel size is similarly somewhat adequate to maintain agricultural operations.*
- f. The availability of public services.
 - i. *The UGA expansion areas are close in vicinity to Sumas City Limits. They are near the Sumas City road network, including State Route 9 to the south, and are already serviced by Sumas City Water through our wholesale agreements with the Sumas Rural Water Association in the South and the Nooksack Valley Water Association in the West. Services that would need to be extended to those areas include sanitary sewer and storm sewer.*
- g. The availability of public facilities such as roads used to transport agricultural products.
 - i. *The UGA expansion area to the south is bordered to the west by State Route 9, a regional highway featuring high speeds, and to the east by Hovel Road, a County road which features lower speeds but provides access to Sumas' Hovel Estates housing*

development. The UGA expansion area to the west exists along either side of Halverstick Road, a County road that provides connection from Sumas to the farmlands farther west of town, and eventually to Lynden.

- h. Special purpose districts that are oriented to enhancing agricultural operations such as drainage improvement, watershed improvement, and flood control exist.
 - i. *Sumas and the surrounding areas lie within the Sumas Watershed Improvement District (SWID) which handles waterway improvements, drainage, and some amounts of flood control.*
- i. The area has a pattern of landowner capital investment in agricultural operations improvements including irrigation, drainage, manure storage, the presence of barns and support buildings, enhanced livestock feeding techniques, agricultural worker housing, etc.
 - i. *The UGA expansion area to the south of town is actively used for agricultural operations and does include the use of irrigation and drainage, although there are no barns on those properties. The UGA expansion area to the west of town has some agricultural operations but a majority of the area is not used in that capacity. Many of those residences do have barns and support buildings to service their hobby farms, but none of those buildings are of a commercial nature.*
- j. The area contains a predominance of parcels that have current use tax assessment derived from the Open Space Taxation Act.
 - i. *A majority of the UGA expansion areas to the south and west have the tax designation of OSAG Dairy. Some of the areas to the west have the tax designation OSAG Ranches, DESIG Forest, and RESIDENTIAL.*
- k. The area's proximity to urban growth areas.
 - i. *All UGA expansion areas are either directly adjacent to the Sumas UGA or are within 1 mile of the Sumas UGA.*
- l. The area's proximity to agricultural markets.
 - i. None of the proposed UGA expansion areas are close to major agricultural markets, but rather, all of these areas are quite close to Sumas.
- m. Land value under alternative uses.

- i. Generally, land value tends to rise significantly when land is included into a UGA. Even more so when annexed into a jurisdiction. All properties included in the UGA expansion area would see their property values go up significantly.*

VIII. Setback/Buffering from Ag Lands

The County's concern regarding setbacks and buffering from agricultural lands pertains only to the City's proposal to convert the existing UGA Reserve to full UGA status. It is the City's assumption that this concern is intended to reduce potential conflicts between new uses in the City and ongoing agricultural activities in the county. No specific comments or concerns from the owners of properties located adjacent to the UGA Reserve (Area 2) have been provided by the County, nor have any such concerns been received by the City. Additionally, there would be no parcels immediately adjacent to Area 2 which would be zoned Agriculture by the County. Area 2 is bordered to the north by Sumas City Limits, to the west by Sumas' existing UGA, to the east by Hovel Road, and to the south by additional areas of the Sumas UGA proposal.

If the County can provide a solid basis for needing increased setbacks or buffering between residential and adjacent agricultural uses, the City would be willing to discuss establishing such zoning provisions prior to annexation of the current UGA Reserve.

IX. Re-Designation Criteria – Changed Conditions

Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan Policy 8A-6 states the following:

Require all requests for re-designation from agriculture to demonstrate that changed site conditions or circumstances have occurred since the original designation to such an extent that the site no longer satisfies the designation criteria for agricultural lands.

All areas of Sumas' UGA expansion proposal is designated as Agricultural lands. These areas have been zoned Agriculture for many decades, including prior to the enactment of the Growth Management Act. Since their initial designation as Agricultural Lands, these areas (and the areas immediately surrounding them) have been subject to a number of important changed conditions and circumstances that have a direct bearing on the appropriateness or inappropriateness of their current designations.

The City of Sumas has expanded its city limits towards these UGA expansion areas. In 1997 and 1999, the City of Sumas annexed property to the west of town, expanding Sumas' Industrial District. In 2003, the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) re-aligned State Route 9, having the route use Easterbrook Road to approach Sumas, as opposed to Garrison Road farther west. In 2006 and 2009, the City of Sumas annexed property to the south of town,

expanding Sumas' residential base and building a new community park and baseball fields along the re-aligned State Route 9. The City has not expanded its boundaries since that 2009 annexation. Prior to these annexations, the proposed UGA expansion areas were near Sumas but not directly adjacent. Now, they are adjacent, making them more suitable for Urban Development.

X. Withdrawal of UGA Reserve Proposal

The current UGA expansion proposal shows that the City would like to change the designation of the land labeled Area 10 from Agriculture to UGA Reserve. In consultation with Whatcom County Planning and Development Services, the City of Sumas is willing to postpone adding Area 10 to UGA Reserve, as well as leaving Area 10 off the UGA proposal all together, with the intent of revisiting the proposal following the conclusion of this Comprehensive Plan Update process. This will save time and resources on a proposal which is not required at this time and can be revisited later.

XI. Conclusions

The City of Sumas is currently in an unfortunate situation in which a lack of land capacity to accommodate future population growth is forcing the City to propose expansion of our UGA into lands designated agriculture and located within the Nooksack River floodplain. This expansion proposal is not perfect, but a lack of residential capacity and risks associated with flooding are forcing us in the current direction. The City is willing to work with Whatcom County and the State of Washington to take any steps necessary to see this proposal come to fruition, within reason. In this UGA Proposal Addendum, the City has provided information that should supplement the information included in the City's initial UGA Proposal. This additional information has been provided in response to requests received from County Planning and Development Services. The City will continue to work in cooperation with the County to provide all of the information needed to support the City's UGA Proposal.