

**Whatcom County
Council Special Committee of the Whole**

COUNTY COURTHOUSE
311 Grand Avenue, Ste #105
Bellingham, WA 98225-4038
(360) 778-5010



Committee Minutes - Final

Tuesday, February 3, 2026

1 PM

Hybrid Meeting - Council Chambers

HYBRID MEETING -- ADJOURNS BY 4:30 P.M. (PARTICIPATE IN-PERSON, SEE REMOTE JOIN INSTRUCTIONS AT www.whatcomcounty.us/joinvirtualcouncil, OR CALL 360.778.5010)

COUNCILMEMBERS

Elizabeth Boyle
Barry Buchanan
Ben Elenbaas
Kaylee Galloway
Jessica Rienstra
Jon Scanlon
Mark Stremler

CLERK OF THE COUNCIL

Cathy Halka, AICP, CMC

Elenbaas asked whether the county administration will be supporting requests from the mayors of Sumas, Nooksack, and Everson.

Holmes stated that the administration met with the mayors and the memo incorporates requests from the mayors, including sediment removal and widening of the corridor.

Stremmer stated that advanced design has been underway for years and he is concerned that funding will be going to design rather than execution.

Holmes said that conceptual development has occurred, but identifying plans to move forward for permitting is the next phase. He said there is a plan for an operations plan, which will be shared with Council at the February 24 meeting.

Scanlon asked whether the cities had additional asks of the state.

Holmes stated that there was an effort to coordinate the ask with the cities.

The motion passed by the following vote:

Aye: 7 - Boyle, Buchanan, Elenbaas, Galloway, Rienstra, Scanlon, Stremmer

Nay: 0

Galloway shared an update on the 2026 legislative session. She stated that she and several others testified in support of the ferry district bill, which continues to move forward. She said she also attempted to provide testimony about the ecosystem services bill, but the time for testimony ran out. She noted that the Washington State Association of Counties (WSAC) will hold their board meeting, legislative reception, and steering committee and advocacy will continue there.

Stremmer asked a question about the tracking of bills by the county's lobbyist.

Holmes stated that some of the bills have been voted on by the Council, and the Executive elects to support others.

Kayla Schott-Bresler, Executive's Office, provided historical context on the process, and stated that improvements may be possible.

Buchanan said that when he first joined the Council, the Executive did not have any interaction with the Council regarding the state legislative agenda.

code changes. He provided an overview of the changes, which include zoning text amendments, commercial rezoning, state park rezoning, and R5A to R10A rezoning.

Elenbaas asked if the change from R5 to R10 is to protect the capacity for higher densities in the future.

Aamot said yes.

Elenbaas asked if the property owners had been notified, as they may have concerns about their property values.

Aamot said that this is a countywide change, so individual landowners have not been notified. He explained the reasoning behind the change from R5 to R10.

Stremmler asked whether single family homes are still allowed in areas where duplexes, triplexes, etc. will now be allowed.

Aamot said that single family homes will still be an option in those areas.

Elenbaas asked for clarification about the types of housing currently allowed in urban residential zones.

Aamot said that urban residential zones currently allow only single-family homes. He said the impetus for the change to add duplex, triplex, and fourplex development is House Bill 1220, which requires the county to accommodate a variety of income levels and housing types.

Scanlon asked a question about the Birch Bay Bible Church.

Aamot said that the Birch Bay Community Advisory Committee recommended bringing the area around the Birch Bay Bible Church into the UGA. Aamot said that the county did not recommend this because housing for all income levels can be accommodated within the existing UGA and Birch Bay Water and Sewer District. The UGA Reserve discussion will be revisited in the next year or two. Aamot stated that zoning changes will be presented in a separate ordinance from the Comprehensive Plan, though it is part of the comprehensive review process.

Scanlon said he hopes the good work between the county and community planning for sea level rise continues.

business that would be successful over time and serve the community.

Buchanan spoke about his participation in a group that studied how to bring commercial to the Columbia Valley area. He said there was a developer interested in bringing in a shopping center, but the developer ran into some problems, so it did not move forward.

Councilmembers continued to discuss and ask questions about the Columbia Valley UGA map and its suitability to the needs of the community.

Rural and Resource Lands Proposal (Approximate Timestamp 1:27:33)

Aamot stated that the GMA envisions that future growth will go toward UGAs, and there are ten UGAs in Whatcom County. The majority of lands outside the UGAs are natural resource lands of long-term commercial significance. There are over 220,000 acres of forest land and 85,000 acres of designated ag lands. There are also about 5,500 acres of mineral resource lands and 130,000 of rural lands. Limited areas of more intensive rural development (LAMIRDs) are historic communities like Custer, Sudden Valley, Acme, etc. The estimated 2023 population of rural and resource lands was just under 71,000 people, or approximately 30% of the countywide population. Aamot provided an overview of related zoning amendments, including the following: zoning code text amendments intended to allow duplex, triplex, and fourplex development in certain zones when public water is available; rezone of Custer LAMIRD; rezone of Pole & Guide LAMIRD; rezone of Hinote's Corner LAMIRD; and removal of mineral resource land special district overlay zone of Lummi Island. Aamot also provided an overview of the land capacity analysis for housing in the rural and resource lands, explaining how a planning tool instituted following passage of House Bill 1220 distributes housing to different jurisdictions throughout the county. Under House Bill 1220, the county is required to provide for housing for different income levels, which is a change from previous years. Aamot stated that with the proposed rezone changes, the county can provide land capacity for housing across the spectrum of income levels. He said that the Planning Commission did not recommend allowing duplex, triplex or fourplex developments in the residential rural and small town commercial zone except in the Custer, Poland Guide and Hinote's Corner LAMIRDs, which creates a moderate income housing land capacity deficit. Aamot said one option would be for Council to allow only duplexes in the other LAMIRDs, allow only duplexes or triplexes in the other LAMIRDs, or allow the original proposal to allow duplexes, triplexes, and fourplexes in the LAMIRDs.

potential gravel bar scalping. He said that the upcoming discussion of this chapter may be the appropriate time to have this conversation. He added that there is a study going on with a consultant regarding all existing designated mineral resource lands and suitability for potential expansion.

Elenbaas said he is interested in an MRL overlay for the Nooksack River banks so that those areas can be included in discussions around flood management and mineral extraction.

Personius stated that there are some challenges to making changes to map designations as the county is required to do a countywide assessment of those lands.

Elenbaas said his motion is trying to determine whether his peers are supportive of the policy direction to move toward this type of change.

Elenbaas amended his motion to request the Executive to direct Planning staff to explore adding the shores of the Nooksack River into the Mineral Resource Land Special District at the earliest feasible time.

Stremmer asked Director Personius to elaborate on the MRL analysis currently underway.

Personius said a consultant is currently working to identify areas for expansion within a half mile of existing MRLs. Personius said there are existing regulations in Shoreline Management Plan and the Comprehensive Plan that provide a path forward for gravel bar scalping, but no one has ever attempted to take that permit path because of its challenging nature.

Kimberly Thulin, Prosecuting Attorney, asked that the motion maker clarify that Council is not directing staff.

Elenbaas amended his motion to request the Executive to work with Planning Staff to explore adding the shores of the Nooksack River into the Mineral Resource Land Special District at the earliest feasible time.

Boyle asked for clarification about rezoning.

Personius stated that any change to designations on the map constitute a Comprehensive Plan amendment, which requires a countywide assessment, something not covered by the current consultant's work.

Elenbaas provided clarification about how he sees the process moving

affordable housing.

Stremmer said he wonders if this change to allow higher density housing will discourage the construction of single family homes.

Elenbaas said that providing options allows people to make decisions about what they need.

The motion passed by the following vote:

Aye: 6 - Scanlon, Boyle, Stremmer, Elenbaas, Rienstra, Buchanan

No: 0

Temporarily Away: 1 - Galloway

This agenda item was DISCUSSED AND MOTION(S) APPROVED.

Motion approved to request the executive work with planning staff to explore adding the shores of the Nooksack River to the Mineral Resource Lands Special District at the earliest feasible time.

Motion approved to support the original proposal (the Planning and Development Services' Rural and Resource Lands proposal to allow duplexes, triplexes, and fourplexes in LAMIRDs).

3. [AB2026-126](#) Discussion of councilmember project updates

Scanlon stated that he would like each councilmember to talk about something they are working on.

Boyle said she is interested in increasing shelter options, including micro shelters, as everyone deserves a safe place to sleep.

Scanlon said that the Bellingham Library is closing for renovation at some point this year and there are ongoing conversations about how to fill the gap this will create, as many use the library as a daytime shelter.

Boyle said she would like to see opportunities in smaller communities for expanded shelter options, similar to Ferndale Community Services' micro shelter.

Scanlon said Nooksack Tribe is looking to build a tiny home village modeled on the Lummi Nation's tiny home village.

Stremmer said he wants to see a menu of options for long-term river management and flood mitigation. He said he is also interested in working to expand access to mental health treatment.

Rienstra said she is also excited to work on that expanding access to mental

planning.

This agenda item was DISCUSSED.

Items Added by Revision

There were no agenda items added by revision.

Other Business

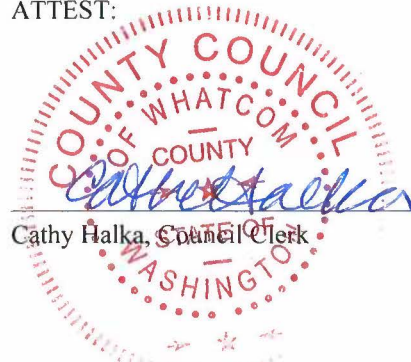
There was no other business.

Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 4:04 p.m.

The County Council approved these minutes on March 10, 2026.

ATTEST:



Cathy Halka, Council Clerk

WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCIL
WHATCOM COUNTY, WA



Kaylee Galloway, Council Chair

Meeting Minutes prepared by Jenna Gernand