



Whatcom County

COUNTY COURTHOUSE
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Agenda Bill Master Report

File Number: AB2025-381

File ID:	AB2025-381	Version:	1	Status:	Substitute Adopted
File Created:	05/12/2025	Entered by:	lclark@co.whatcom.wa.us		
Department:	Planning and Development Services Department	File Type:	Ordinance Requiring a Public Hearing		
Assigned to:	Council	Final Action:	06/10/2025		
Agenda Date:	06/10/2025	Enactment #:	ORD 2025-029		
Related Files:					

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TITLE FOR AGENDA ITEM:

Ordinance amending Whatcom County Code Chapter 20.82, Public Utilities, to increase allowable power line voltage to 230 kilovolts in zones currently limited to 115 kilovolts

SUMMARY STATEMENT OR LEGAL NOTICE LANGUAGE:

Ordinance adopting proposed amendments to WCC 20.82.010 and 20.82.030(9)(a-c) to allow power lines of up to 230 kV countywide with a Conditional Use Permit.

HISTORY OF LEGISLATIVE FILE

Date:	Acting Body:	Action:	Sent To:
05/27/2025	Council	INTRODUCED FOR PUBLIC HEARING	Council
		Aye: 7 Buchanan, Byrd, Donovan, Elenbaas, Galloway, Scanlon, and Stremier	
		Nay: 0	
06/10/2025	Council	SUBSTITUTE ADOPTED	
		Aye: 7 Buchanan, Byrd, Donovan, Elenbaas, Galloway, Scanlon, and Stremier	
		Nay: 0	

Attachments: Staff Memo, Draft Ordinance, Substitute Draft Ordinance, Staff Report, Planning Commission Memo, Map, Presentation, Letter - PSE, Letter - BP

PROPOSED BY: Planning & Development Services

INTRODUCTION DATE: _____

ORDINANCE NO. 2024-00002

ORDINANCE AMENDING WHATCOM COUNTY CODE 20.82, PUBLIC UTILITIES, TO INCREASE ALLOWABLE POWER LINE VOLTAGE TO 230 KILOVOLTS IN ZONES CURRENTLY LIMITED TO 115 KILOVOLTS

WHEREAS, in 1990, Initiative 4-90 was approved by Whatcom County voters, prompting the Whatcom County Council to pass Ordinance 1990-124 restricting new high voltage power transmission lines over 115,000 volts or 115 kilovolts (kV) to industrial zones; and

WHEREAS, Ordinance 1990-124 was invalid, as any ordinance proposed by initiative which would repeal a portion of county zoning ordinance is outside the scope of initiative power as decided in *Save Our State Park v. Board of Clallam County Commissioners*, 74 Wash. App. 637, 875 P.2d 673 (1994); and

WHEREAS, the language of this section of code has changed multiple times since 1990, with major changes occurring via Ordinance 2000-002 and Ordinance 2004-041; and

WHEREAS, Councilmember Galloway and Councilmember Donovan proposed amending Whatcom County Code Sections 20.82.030(9)(a-c) to allow for higher voltage power lines; and

WHEREAS, on October 8, 2024 (AB2024-661), County Council passed a motion requesting that Planning and Development Services review and amend the code, placing it on the 2024 docket as PLN2024-00002; and

WHEREAS, power lines are critical infrastructure for transporting energy from where it is produced to where it is consumed; and

WHEREAS, allowing higher voltage power lines is needed to modernize our electric grid and meet Whatcom County's growing electricity demands; and

WHEREAS, increasing the potential for electricity transport allows Whatcom County to take advantage of state and federal investments in energy infrastructure, increase safety and grid reliability, build infrastructure needed to support a clean energy transition, and promote climate resiliency; and

WHEREAS, in 2019, the Washington State legislature passed Engrossed Second Substitute Senate Bill 5116, known as the Clean Energy Transformation Act (CETA), requiring all retail energy sales of electricity to be greenhouse gas neutral by 2030; and

WHEREAS, Whatcom County is the only county in PSE’s service area which prohibits 230 kV transmission lines; and

WHEREAS, continuing to limit power line voltage to 115 kV may prevent PSE from making new renewable energy investments and supporting long-term growth in Whatcom County, as current transmission lines may not have high enough voltage to accommodate increased energy transport; and

WHEREAS, amending the code to allow for higher voltage power lines will incentivize new industrial economic opportunities within Whatcom County and ensure adequate infrastructure is planned for and can be sited appropriately; and

WHEREAS, amending the code to allow for higher voltage power lines can open opportunities to provide needed infrastructure in areas where heavy industry may expand; and

WHEREAS, WCC 20.82.030(9)(a-c) is in conflict with goals contained in the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan, including:

- Goal 5F: Identify and remove impediments to effective siting of necessary utility facilities
- Goal 5H: Support cost-effective renewable energy projects and implement policies that promote renewable energy projects
- Goal 5L: Support direct and indirect economic benefits to Whatcom County originating with energy or utilities in general; and

WHEREAS, amending WCC 20.82.030(9)(a-c) will further support the goals, strategies, and actions outlined in the Whatcom County Climate Action Plan; and

WHEREAS, the World Health Organization found that “based on a recent in-depth review of the scientific literature, the WHO concluded that current evidence does not confirm the existence of any health consequences from exposure to low level electromagnetic fields;” and

WHEREAS, Goal 5K of the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan reads: Be responsive to new information on electric and magnetic field (EMF) research progress; and

WHEREAS, The County Council hereby adopts the following findings of fact:

FINDINGS OF FACT

1. On October 8, 2024, the Whatcom County Council requested the Whatcom County Planning and Development Services Department to make various amendments to the Whatcom County Code (WCC) to make corrections, updates, and clarifications via passage of PLN2024-00002.
2. A determination of non-significance (DNS) was issued under the State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) on February, 19th, 2025. One comment was received with a link to an article regarding the potential safety hazards of living near power lines.
3. Notice of the subject amendment was submitted to the Washington State Department of Commerce on February 20th, 2025 for their 10-day review. One comment was received to date.
4. The Planning Commission held a work session on the proposed amendments on March 13th, 2025.

5. The Planning Commission held a duly noticed public hearing on the proposed amendments on April 24th, 2025.
6. The County Council held a duly noticed public hearing on the proposed amendments on January 14, 2025, 2025.
7. The amendments are consistent with Comprehensive Plan Goal 2D to refine the regulatory system to ensure accomplishment of desired land use goals in a fair and equitable manner.
8. The amendments are consistent with Comprehensive Plan's Policy 5C-5: *Encourage regional planning of public facilities and utilities that will facilitate coordinated land-use management and capital facility construction.*
9. The amendments are consistent with Comprehensive Plan's Policy 5C-9: *Appropriately scale public utility systems to accommodate anticipated population growth.*
10. The amendments are consistent with Comprehensive Plan's Policy 5K-1: *As new information regarding EMF becomes available consider the need for new standards.*
11. The amendments are consistent with Comprehensive Plan's Policy 5L-2: *Require a utility proponent to show how the proposal provides local or regional benefit.*
12. The amendments are consistent with Comprehensive Plan's Goal 5F: *Identify and remove impediments to effective siting of necessary utility facilities.*
13. The amendments are consistent with Comprehensive Plan's Goal 5H: *Support cost-effective renewable energy projects and implement policies that promote renewable energy projects.*
14. The amendments are consistent with Comprehensive Plan's Goal 5L: *Support direct and indirect economic benefits to Whatcom County originating with energy or utilities in general.*

CONCLUSIONS

1. The amendments are in the public interest.
2. The amendments are consistent with the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT ORDAINED by the Whatcom County Council that the Whatcom County Code 20.82 is hereby amended as described in Exhibit A, attached.

Section 1. Amendments to the Whatcom County Code are hereby adopted as shown in Exhibit A.

Section 2. Adjudication of invalidity of any of the sections, clauses, or provisions of this ordinance shall not affect or impair the validity of the ordinance as a whole or any part thereof other than the part so declared to be invalid.

Section 3. Staff is authorized to work with Code Publishing to correct and update any cross-references made ineffective by these amendments.

ADOPTED this _____ day of _____, 2025.

WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCIL
WHATCOM COUNTY, WASHINGTON
ATTEST:

Cathy Halka, Council Clerk

APPROVED as to form:

Kellen Kooistra, Civil Deputy Prosecutor

Kaylee Galloway, Council Chair

() Approved () Denied

Satpal Sidhu, Executive

Date: _____

Exhibit A: 2024 Miscellaneous Code Amendments: Public Utility Code

(Editor's note: Ellipses (...) indicate that sections of the code not being amended are not shown.)

1) Amending WCC 20.82.030(9)(a-c) to allow electrical power lines of up to 230 kV with a Conditional Use Permit.

Amending 20.80.010 and 20.82.030(9)(a-c) to allow electrical power lines of up to 230 kV will allow PSE the flexibility to make long term choices as it plans for grid modernization which is required by CETA. Whatcom County is the only county in PSE's service area that prohibits 230 kV transmission lines. In addition to deleting references to historic ordinance, the following cleans up the code through deleting unnecessary references to major project permits and major development. The change will allow PSE to upgrade existing towers to 230 kV transmission lines with a Conditional Use Permit.

Title 20 ZONING

Chapter 20.82 Public Utilities

20.82.010 Intent.

The provisions of this chapter regulate the installation, maintenance and operation of public utility lines, sanitary sewer, pipelines for oil and gas, railroads (but not included switching yards or round houses), or maintenance facilities. ~~The citizen initiative, enacted through Ordinance 90124, regarding power line placement, Comprehensive Plan land use designations, Comprehensive Plan policy directives and the specific provisions of this chapter, shall be the basis for decisions regarding utility development. This chapter applies to all zoning districts unless stated otherwise. The uses listed in this chapter are subject to the development standards of the underlying zoning district unless stated otherwise in this chapter.~~

...

20.82.030 Conditional uses.

The following uses shall require a conditional use permit. However, if such a project meets or exceeds the criteria of WCC 20.88 then it shall require a major project permit and shall be subject to a threshold determination in accordance with Chapter 16.08 WCC.

- (1) Transmission pipelines, or pipelines termed a distribution pipeline but having characteristics that fit the definition of a transmission pipeline, carrying petroleum and petroleum products other than natural gas when such pipelines will be located outside the zoning district classified as Heavy Impact Industrial.
- (2) Regional transmission pipelines for the bulk conveyance of natural gas, or pipelines termed a distribution pipeline but having characteristics that fit the definition of a transmission pipeline. Except for the above conditions, natural gas pipelines which are owned and operated by a gas utility company regulated by the State Utilities and Transportation Commission and which are distribution lines owned by the utility that provide natural gas service directly to county citizens and businesses shall not be considered regional transmission lines.

- (3) New water lines with a nominal pipe size greater than eight inches except for the following, which are permitted outright:
- (a) New water lines located and installed by a public utility or municipality within urban growth areas or limited areas of more intensive rural development (LAMIRDs); or
 - (b) New water lines outside urban growth areas or limited areas of more intensive rural development (LAMIRDs) in conformance with a state approved water comprehensive plan pursuant to RCW 43.20.260 and consistent with the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan, so long as they are water transmission lines (as defined in Chapter 20.97 WCC), or provide service at an intensity historically and typically found in rural areas, per RCW 36.70A.030(17), including but not limited to agricultural uses. Water service for uses or densities not permitted in rural or resource areas shall not be extended or expanded outside urban growth areas or limited areas of more intensive rural development (LAMIRDs), except where necessary to protect basic public health and safety and the environment and when such services are financially supportable at rural densities and do not permit urban development, per RCW 36.70A.110(4).
- (4) New sewer lines with an inside diameter of six inches or greater and length of 150 feet or greater, except for new sewer lines located and installed within urban growth areas or limited areas of more intensive rural development (LAMIRDs), and in conformance with a state approved sewer and/or water comprehensive plan and consistent with the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan, which shall be permitted outright. Sewer lines shall not be extended to serve lots outside urban growth areas unless such extensions are shown to be necessary to protect basic public health and safety and the environment, and when such services are financially supportable at rural densities and do not permit urban development. Sewer lines may pass through areas outside urban growth areas provided they do not provide sewer service to any lot in the nonurban areas.
- (5) Electronic communications structures and telecommunication towers including associated maintenance and operations structures, provided this section shall not apply to personal wireless service facilities and associated structures regulated under Chapter 20.13 WCC nor to structures or towers in the public right-of-way.
- (6) Water storage reservoirs with volumes exceeding 50,000 gallons, those with height in excess of 12 feet above the ground level measured within 20 feet in all directions of the tank. The following height standards shall apply:
- (a) The height limit on the water storage reservoir shall be the minimum necessary to accomplish its intended purpose. The applicant shall provide technical documentation that the height proposed is the minimum necessary.
 - (b) The height of the water storage reservoir may exceed the height limit of the underlying zone; provided, that all other criteria in WCC 22.05.026 are satisfied.
- (7) Utility structures located above ground such as pump stations, equipment buildings and similar structures greater than 200 square feet in area.
- (8) Sewer and water treatment plants, except that sewer treatment plants are prohibited in the Airports Operations Zone.
- (9) Electrical substations and new electrical power lines operating at voltages greater than 55 kV (55,000 volts); ~~and provided, applications for such substations and power lines shall be processed as a major development (pursuant to Chapter 20.88 WCC); provided, that no further major project~~

~~development permit shall be granted for such lines which: operate at greater less than or equal to 115230 kV (115230,000 volts) except on land where such permits have already been granted or in those districts classified as industrial; or~~

~~(a) ——— Operate at 115 kV (115,000 volts) and carry greater than 160 mw (160 megawatts) average loading, except on land where such permits have already been granted or in those districts classified as industrial. For purposes of this section, "average loading" means the average power in megawatts carried by a power line over any 12-month period; provided, that loading at full line carrying capacity may not extend beyond any 90-day period;~~

~~(b) ——— Are dedicated to provision of transmission service to (from) an electrical generating plant having a generating capacity greater than 160 mw (160 megawatts), except on lands where such permits have already been granted or in those districts classified as industrial.~~

(10) Electrical substations and new electrical power lines with height in excess of the zoning district's height limitations. The following height standards shall apply:

(a) The height limit on the substation or power line shall be the minimum necessary to accomplish its intended purpose. The applicant shall provide technical documentation that the height proposed is the minimum necessary.

(b) The height of the substation or power line may exceed the height limit of the underlying zone; provided, that all other criteria in WCC 22.05.026 are satisfied.