

Whatcom County Council (Special)

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



Minutes - Draft Minutes

Wednesday, August 6, 2025

3 PM

Hybrid Meeting - Council Chambers

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

COUNCILMEMBERS

Barry Buchanan
Tyler Byrd
Todd Donovan
Ben Elenbaas
Kaylee Galloway
Jon Scanlon
Mark Stremmler

CLERK OF THE COUNCIL

Cathy Halka, AICP, CMC

Call To Order

Council Chair Kaylee Galloway called the meeting to order at 3:06 p.m. in a hybrid meeting.

Roll Call (Council)

Present: 7 - Barry Buchanan, Tyler Byrd, Todd Donovan, Ben Elenbaas, Kaylee Galloway, Jon Scanlon, and Mark Stremler

Roll Call (Planning Commission)

Planning Commission Members Present: Kelvin Barton (Chair), Daniel Dunne, Jim Hansen, Dominic Mocerri, Alvin Scott Van Dalen, Rud Browne

Absent: Nicholas Greif, Suneeta Eisenberg, Julie Jefferson

Announcements**Special Presentation**

1. [AB2025-551](#) Presentation from the Whatcom County Climate Action Manager regarding the Climate Element, Chapter 12, of the 2025 Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan
Lauren Clemens, Climate Action Manager, read from a presentation (on file).

Browne asked why the chapter would be submitted to the Washington Department of Commerce for review ahead of Council approval and voiced concern that that is preempting the process, and Clemens explained the parallel approval process.

Clemens answered whether substantial changes by the Council or Planning Commission would trigger a re-submission to Commerce since they would then be preliminarily approving an outdated version at that point, and stated Commerce just asked that whatever the County submits to them was a public review draft, so if there are substantial changes through the process, the County would just notify them.

Hansen asked what way land use contributes to greenhouse gas emissions.

Clemens stated the data that was used to measure that looks predominately at changes in land use designation, and she gave examples. She stated the estimation in that category is maybe less precise than some of the rest of the data because they are downscaling Federal data versus using the electricity and natural gas data they receive directly from local utilities.

Dunne asked which policies in the chapter are “shalls” and which have more latitude, and Clemens stated the best point of reference is the checklist for fully-planning counties (as listed in the memo and in the presentation) since that is what the State will be reviewing to consider the County as compliant. The County should also be reviewing legislation and changes to the Growth Management Act (GMA). Dunne referred specifically to chapter section 12.3 where language reads, “Whatcom County will...” and chapter section 12.5 which does not use that language, and asked why some of the language seems more prescriptive and some more flexible. Clemens stated some of the language in chapter section 12.3 is statutory and that more items in the chapter reflect minimum requirements.

Dunne asked how the “shall do” elements might conflict with other parts of this plan or other elements in the Comprehensive Plan (specifically around housing). He would suggest looking at places where the chapter is saying they *have* to do something and whether it takes away latitude for other priorities.

Moceri spoke about the maps and stated he does not see anything identified on the south fork of the Nooksack, though he knows there is some flooding that occurs there, and Clemens stated they could add more maps if necessary. Moceri stated he would suggest they include one specifically on the south fork and more if there are any other areas in the north fork or other places not represented. He would include all of them.

Browne stated wildfire risk is a pretty significant map they should be showing as well.

Galloway asked whether the vulnerability maps showing the extreme heat hotspots will also be incorporated (see **AB2025-432**).

Clemens spoke about the maps that were included being ones that look at forecasted risk and that wildfire risk is more challenging to forecast.

Scanlon asked how this process accounts for changes in Federal policy, and Clemens stated she was focusing on State laws that are in place right now and trying to recognize that what they would have to do locally might be different if there are Federal policy changes.

Clemens answered why Whatcom County’s total greenhouse gas emissions per capita were higher than all but one of the eleven Washington state counties inventoried in 2022, how much of that comes from Cherry Point (about 25 percent), and whether Whatcom County is impacted by that in

terms of what it is mandated to do by the State even though an industry like Cherry Point serves the entire state. She stated the State was just trying to set a baseline to make counties aware of what is happening, and they were trying to differentiate between core emissions (items that County government can have more control over through land use or transportation policy) and other things that may be regulated at another level of government (State or Federal).

She answered whether the work in this chapter would influence where the County and cities are planning on placing population and employment growth, and stated that city planners considered the data in their urban growth area (UGA) proposals.

Barton referenced overburdened communities and asked how climate change action would be impacted by someone that is disabled or has a chronic health condition, and Clemens spoke about the benefits of gathering the demographic data.

Galloway thanked everyone who worked on the chapter.

This agenda item was PRESENTED.

Committee Discussion

1. [AB2025-513](#) Presentation by the Whatcom County Planning and Development Services Director and discussion relating to preliminary preferred alternatives for the Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) associated with the 2025 Comprehensive Plan Update

Galloway introduced the discussion and the following people (in addition to councilmembers and Planning Commission members) spoke:

- Mark Personius, Planning and Development Services Department Director
- Chris Behee, City of Bellingham

Personius stated he was there to answer questions

Bellingham

Hansen stated he would like to see the population growth proportionate to the job growth in Bellingham in order to cut down on transportation miles, and Behee answered how the City opted for the allocation for the population versus the employment growth. He stated the ratio is based on consultants looking at, historically, what fraction of the countywide total population is in the workforce.

Dunne stated he would advocate for bringing in study area seven as an urban

growth area (UGA) and asked what the barriers are for doing so, and Behee stated it was based on the estimated development capacity, and explained why study area seven is proposed to remain as a UGA reserve. Dunne stated it feels ironic that the reason is for density, and that the lack of density is because the City bought the 60 acres that could have been developed for homes.

Donovan stated it was never planned for much density.

Browne asked about employment and how much they are factoring for the way the economy is going to change. He also stated he does not recall seeing the inclusion of more industrial land up Meridian, going to Smith, and asked if they have included that, and he asked what that employment growth looks like. He stated, traditionally, the majority of the real economic development in this community has come from Canadian companies trying to access the U.S. market, and to do that, they either need warehousing or manufacturing space which is land intensive and cannot be in the city limits. He asked what consideration has been given for that.

Behee stated the preliminary countywide industrial land study that the Port of Bellingham has been working on is nearly completed and includes a lot of detail about looking at exactly the kinds of things Browne is talking about, such as which UGAs in the county have larger parcels and which have smaller ones. He stated what Bellingham has left are very small parcels. He spoke about why study areas one, two, and three are proposed for removal from the UGA and how the regional study can benefit everybody in determining where there is room for the larger footprint spaces. Bellingham does not have many areas available for that.

Personius stated the Port of Bellingham has released that draft study and will be scheduling a briefing to the County Council in September.

Donovan asked how they were going to discuss employment growth numbers and Hansen spoke about his concern that population and employment numbers not being synced will have an effect on transportation, and that he would like to see an active planning policy instead of relying on historical data. He thinks they should decide what is best for the county and then take steps (mitigations, incentives, and regulations) to stop the rural sprawl and concentrate growth in the cities.

Personius spoke about how legislation and the desire to create a better jobs/housing balance is driving the planning, how land use can reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and the adoption of multimodal level of service

standards to promote more non-motorized transit opportunities.

Scanlon asked about the boundaries of study area four and whether it makes sense to look at the possibility in the next two decades of going all the way to Smith Road. Behee stated there is a lot of work to be done to figure out how development can occur out there. He answered what the City needs from the Council in order to do that, and stated they would like some kind of expression of comfort with the growth that Bellingham is contemplating ahead of their meetings with the Planning Commission in September and then the City Council.

Personius answered if the County's Planning Department can look into it to see if there is something the Council can do to give clear indication about studying further north. He stated they will be issuing the final environmental impact statement (EIS) in about two weeks to make sure the City can meet their city Planning Commission targets, and they can follow up with staff to see if there is anything else they can provide.

Browne stated he agrees with what Scanlon is proposing, but the challenge we are going to have is having the industrial land base that is going to attract inward investment from the Canadians. He spoke about the unique city pairing between the US and Canada and stated it is a very strategic advantage which they need to retain if they want to keep high value jobs in the community. But to do that, you need the industrial land base with water and sewer, and the logical place for the expansion area is between the city limits to Smith Road and then east of Meridian. Mitigation also has to be factored in, and the other area is between Bellingham and Ferndale.

Galloway summarized that the action item out of this discussion is to explore what extending study area four north might look like and stated it could theoretically allow Bellingham to take on more population growth if that is still on the table.

Birch Bay (Part 1)

Galloway stated what she was looking at intently for Birch Bay were the sea level rise projections that were in the future shorelines climate vulnerability assessment, so she was pleased to see that none of the proposed UGA areas were in the sea level rise zone floodplain.

Donovan stated the last time they did a Comprehensive Plan update, they removed some UGA area from Birch Bay because it was potentially in the

floodplain, but looking at the map (in the presentation), there is already something (study areas 5 and 6) in the UGA reserve that should not be.

Personius stated that area is operating at a very low density. The blue in those study areas on the map is the modeled sea level rise and matches the floodplain but the model does not assume any other mitigation has been applied. Those areas would remain at one unit per ten acres and could possibly be developed in the future should some mitigation be applied for the sea level rise.

Donovan asked why they would not just keep it rural, and if the goal is to recognize that this is not a place they want to develop, why they would have it as a UGA reserve.

Personius spoke about why areas five and six are proposed for reserve designation and about a church that requested to be included in the UGA reserve because they are currently on septic but would like to connect to sewer at some point in the future. This would potentially help them. He answered whether that helps other properties to go down the same road and what the process would be for other property owners to come into UGA.

Scanlon stated he wonders if it would make sense for some of the areas that are at higher elevation to come in. He asked if they have a way to analyze the impact of Blaine's plans on Birch Bay.

Blaine

Personius answered whether it has ever been studied to look at Blaine going east, south of H Street, and stated the city's well fields are in that area. One of the city's prime concerns what that they did not want to see that area urbanized because they want to protect their aquifer.

Birch Bay (Part 2)

Barton asked about specific areas in Birch Bay where the blue (on the map) extends and Personius stated they are working on putting more detail into the maps.

Hansen stated he is basically opposed to dumping population in both Columbia Valley and Birch Bay, but if people want to move there, they should increase the density of the current areas that are outside of the flood

zone instead of adding more areas and UGAs. They should increase the UGAs in Bellingham and Ferndale and try to spare the rural areas because that is their mission under the Growth Management Act (GMA).

Browne stated he remembers a presentation given by Personius on UGA rules and the ability to switch them, which said you can move your UGA as long as you do not impact more than 15 percent of critical areas, which is a challenge in this community. He asked how that affects Blaine's plans and about the nature of Blaine's wells. He stated Blaine has a surplus of sewer capacity because they overbuilt their sewer system in anticipation of growth which did not materialize. So, the Blaine and Birch Bay area has a lot going for it in terms of the infrastructure capacity, both water and sewer.

Personius spoke about the laws regarding moving UGAs.

Donovan spoke about Browne's comment that Blaine and Birch Bay have a lot going for them. He stated they should all remember the study they have on the amazing amount of capital facilities needed for stormwater management in that area and the resources that we do *not* have for that. Those areas have a lot going for them, but we do not have the resources to do that infrastructure, and this gets to the question of how we do that. That is a question we ought to figure out.

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 4:31 p.m.

ATTEST:

WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCIL
WHATCOM COUNTY, WA

Cathy Halka, Council Clerk

Kaylee Galloway, Council Chair

Meeting Minutes prepared by Kristi Felbinger