

**Chapter Four
Capital
Facilities**

Planning Commission approved draft = Redline
Pending Council Amendment = **Yellow Highlight**
Preliminarily Approved Council Amendments = **Green Highlight**

Introduction

Capital facilities as defined here, and for purposes of the plan, include facilities owned by Whatcom County and other public entities. Capital facilities typically have long useful lives, significant costs, and are not mobile. Whatcom County capital facilities include buildings, land, parks, and roads (transportation facilities, including roads, are addressed in chapter 6). Capital facilities provided by other public entities may be addressed in this plan. Those capital facilities may include water, sewer, fire protection, stormwater, and schools.

Purpose

This chapter contains policies to guide Whatcom County in providing adequate public facilities and services within the county's financial capability, and provides a unifying framework for facilities planning. It also establishes levels of service for certain capital facilities. The cities and other public owners of capital facilities are encouraged to use the *Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan* as a guide in preparing their own plans and capital improvement programs, particularly with respect to designated urban growth areas (UGAs).

GMA Goals and Countywide Planning Policies

The goals and policies in this chapter contribute to achievement of several of the GMA planning goals, including those considering urban growth, open space and recreation, ~~and~~ public facilities and services, and climate change and resilience. The chapter has been written to satisfy those goals while also meeting the intent and requirements of the Countywide Planning Policies (CWPP).

Although CWPPs do not separately address capital facilities, as defined in this chapter, they are addressed within a number of the policies. Policies requiring fiscal and physical ability to provide adequate public facilities, services, and infrastructure are satisfied in this chapter. The interlocal agreements specified in the policies must address reasonable criteria for annexation and ensure adequate public services including transportation, parks, administrative services and corrections facilities.

GMA Requirements

The Growth Management Act mandates that counties required to plan under the Act adopt comprehensive plans including an inventory of facilities (including green infrastructure), a forecast of future needs for such facilities, the proposed location and the capacities of expanded or new facilities, minimum levels of service, a six-year plan for financing those facilities with indication of sources for that funding, and a requirement to re-assess the Land Use chapter if there are funding shortfalls. The Land Use element must be consistent and coordinated with the capital facilities plan.

These Growth Management Act requirements are addressed in this chapter of the Comprehensive Plan, the Whatcom County 20-Year Capital Facilities Plan (Appendix E) and in the *Six-Year Capital Improvement Program for Whatcom County Facilities* (Appendix F).

Background Summary

Capital facility cost is estimated based on studies, adopted level of service standards, or other planning assumptions. Availability of revenue from existing sources may not be sufficient for needed facilities. Mechanisms for additional funding may be developed or proposed; these mechanisms may include new or additional taxes, or impact fees.

The GMA expressly authorizes cities and counties to impose impact fees on new development to help finance the capital facilities required to serve new development (RCW 82.02.050-110). This authorization applies only to capital facilities owned or operated by government entities: (a) public streets, ~~and~~ roads and bicycle & pedestrian facilities; (b) publicly owned parks, open space, and recreation facilities; (c) school facilities; and (d) fire protection facilities.

If the adopted level of service cannot be achieved without acquiring major debt, raising taxes beyond acceptable levels or establishing unacceptably high impact fees, then the level of service standard must be adjusted, facility costs must be reduced, or growth must be curtailed until a balance is achieved. When planning major capital facilities, the County should evaluate whether policy, service, or programmatic strategies could influence long-term facility demand, ensuring that capital investments remain consistent with the County's long-term financial capacity.(#1)

Adjusting land use to achieve level of service standards is one means of attaining concurrency. Concurrency, as required by the GMA, means that adequate facilities as defined by adopted levels of service are available at the time that the impacts of development occur or within a specified time thereafter. The GMA, at minimum, requires concurrency for transportation facilities. Concurrency is preferred for all other capital facilities as well in providing for new development while maintaining an acceptable quality of life that people desire.

Goals and Policies

Goal 4A: Within the county's financial capacity, adopt a carefully planned program of county services and facilities.

Policy 4A-1: Plan appropriate county facilities commensurate with the ability of the county to fund them.

Policy 4A-2: Provide County facilities and services in a manner that supports future urban growth in urban growth areas (UGAs) and facilitates potential city annexation(#2).

Policy 4A-3: Evaluate all types of county facilities to determine whether they should serve countywide or strictly unincorporated areas.

Policy 4A-4: The land use element of the comprehensive plan must be reassessed to ensure that land use is coordinated and consistent

with the financing plan within the capital facilities element and to ensure probable funding does not fall short of meeting existing needs.

Goal 4B: Develop a six-year financing program for capital facilities that meets the requirements of the GMA, achieves the county's adopted levels-of-service, and is within financial capability as determined by projected financial resources.

Policy 4B-1: Maintain and update, on at least a biennial basis, a six-year capital improvement program (CIP) that identifies projects, outlines a schedule, and designates realistic funding sources for all county capital projects based on a review of population and revenue conditions existing at that time.

Goal 4C: Locate county facilities which require urban infrastructure, serve primarily urban populations, and are urban in character within identified urban growth areas (UGAs).

Policy 4C-1: Evaluate all new capital facilities requiring a new site for urban characteristics and limit selection of sites for urban projects to designated UGAs.

Goal 4D: Consistent with the Justice Project Implementation Plan, develop (#4) and implement a coordinated program of facility improvements and/or expansion for the departments and agencies which together carry out the county's law enforcement and corrections functions. Plan correctional facilities as part of a comprehensive justice system that prioritizes diversion, treatment, and behavioral health services, so that the facilities reflect community needs and align with Whatcom County's long-term financial capacity. (#5)

Policy 4D-1: Complete those capital improvement projects necessary to correct any space deficiencies in law enforcement facilities and corrections facilities.

Policy 4D-2: Maintain Sheriff's Office adult corrections facilities and headquarters to provide a safe environment for the community, staff and inmates incarcerated individuals. The number of jail beds in adult corrections facilities will be determined after a comprehensive review and analysis of multiple factors, including projected population growth, local criminal justice policies and State sentencing laws, alternative response programs, prevention, treatment, behavioral health, diversion programs, early release programs, re-entry support, (#6) the need to separate violent inmates incarcerated individuals (#7), the need to separate inmates incarcerated individuals by gender, the need to separate inmates incarcerated individuals by other classification considerations, average length of stay, peak inmate incarcerated individual populations and available funding. Existing facilities

may be expanded, remodeled and/or new facilities developed in response to changing need.

Policy 4D-3: Maintain juvenile detention facilities and alternative corrections programs to provide safe and secure methods to provide accountability and support for **youth involved in the legal system**~~minors who break the law~~(#8). Existing facilities may be expanded, remodeled and/or new facilities developed in response to changing need.

Policy 4D-4: Develop, maintain, improve, expand, and operate behavioral health facilities such as the 32-bed crisis stabilization center, behavioral care center, 23-hour crisis relief center, and other facilities aimed at improving opportunities for prevention, intervention, treatment, aftercare, diversion, rehabilitation, and jail alternatives to reduce incarceration rates and use of the criminal justice system. (#9)

Policy 4D-~~4~~5: Maintain adequate facilities for daily emergency management activities and, during an emergency or disaster, for the emergency operations center. The facilities will provide sufficient space for activities relating to emergency/disaster planning, mitigation, response and recovery. Existing facilities may be expanded, remodeled and/ or new facilities developed in response to changing need.

Goal 4E: Develop and carry out a realistic long-range program of facility expansion or improvement to accommodate the county's projected staffing requirements for departments and agencies.

Policy 4E-1: Include in the capital facilities plan, a program of building and space improvements to efficiently provide quality work space for projected staffing levels through the 20-year planning period.

Policy 4E-2: Investigate alternatives to capital facility construction through the private sector, and pursue technologically feasible alternatives.

Goal 4F: Achieve level of service standards for parks and trails identified in this chapter. Support objectives and priorities identified in the *Comprehensive Parks, Recreation and Open Space Plan*, in the *Natural Heritage Plan*, and in this plan.

Policy 4F-1: The following level of service standards are adopted for parks and trails:

developed parks 9.6 acres per 1,000 population
trails 0.60 of a mile per 1,000 population

Policy 4F-2: Seek non-capital opportunities to acquire, enhance and maintain park lands, trails, and other recreational facilities. Consider partnering with **tribes**, cities, school districts, park & recreation

districts, **non-profit stakeholders**, and others when planning and implementing park and trail projects. **Make a good faith effort to consult with Lummi Nation and Nooksack Indian Tribe on relevant land acquisitions and the development of new trails and other recreational facilities that may have an impact on their cultural resources. (#10)**

Policy 4F-3: Include acquisition and development costs in the six-year CIP for future park and trails projects.

Policy 4F-4: Place a high priority on improvements to existing county recreational sites and facilities and using them to their full potential, including those outlined in the *Whatcom County Comprehensive Parks, Recreation and Open Space Plan*, before investing capital in the acquisition and development of new facilities.

Policy 4F-5: Continue to provide and support activity centers, including senior centers, to serve the growing population of Whatcom County by undertaking the following: (1) Community-informed program planning, conducted in coordination with community stakeholders and partners, 2) evaluation of budgetary constraints and opportunities 3) exploration of innovative partnerships for service delivery.~~the following methods, as needed, which are listed in priority order: (1) implementing programming changes, (2) adding space to existing centers, and/or (3) establishing new centers.~~

Commented [LC1]: Recommended by Bennet Knox per email of June 17, 2025.

Goal 4G: Coordinate with non-county facility providers such as cities, **tribes, school districts, **fire districts**, (#11) and other special purpose districts to support the future land use pattern promoted by this plan.**

Policy 4G-1: Establish interagency planning mechanisms to assure coordinated and mutually supportive capital facility plans from special districts, cities, and other major non-county facility providers which are consistent with this and other chapters of the comprehensive plan.

Policy 4G-2: In consultation and coordination with special districts, cities, and other major non-county facility providers, review and update as appropriate capital facility plans supporting UGAs in conjunction with the UGA Review.

Policy 4G-3: The UGA review process should demonstrate that the urban growth areas are served by urban levels of fire protection facilities and service. If the level of service standard adopted by the County cannot be provided over the 20-year planning period, then re-designation of UGAs to rural designations should be considered.

Policy 4G-4 Urban levels of service for fire protection shall be a response time of 8 minutes 80% of the time when the department covering the urban area has staffed the fire station. When the fire station is not staffed the response time shall be 10 minutes 80% of the time, or a WSRB Rating of 6.

Rural levels of service for fire protection shall be a response time of 12 minutes 80% of the time when the department covering the rural area has staffed the fire station. When the fire station is not staffed the response time shall be 14 minutes 80% of the time, or a WSRB Rating of 8.

Staffed station shall be a fire station that is staffed 24 hours a day 7 days a week 365 days a year. Staff may be paid, volunteer, or combination of the two.

Goal 4H: Maintain effective concurrency measures and procedures for all facilities and services necessary for development.

Policy 4H-1: Based on established levels of service for all road segments under control of the county, administer a concurrency management program that provides for consistent and predictable evaluation of the impacts of future proposed development.

Goal 4I: Consider alternative funding sources for needed county facilities.

Policy 4I-1: After all other financing options have been exhausted, consider the use of bonded indebtedness to finance major capital investments in infrastructure.

Policy 4I-2: Identify and promote public private partnerships to provide and enhance the provision of necessary services.

Goal 4J: Ensure that capital facilities provide protection for threatened and endangered fish and wildlife species.

Policy 4J-1: Fish and wildlife habitat should be carefully considered when selecting projects for the Six-Year Capital Improvement Program.

Policy 4J-2: Projects selected for the Six-Year Capital Improvement Program shall not degrade habitat for threatened and endangered species. **Where feasible, develop a strategy to mitigate harmful impacts and aim to achieve net ecological gain of salmon and other aquatic species habitat for all public projects and a voluntary incentive driven strategy for private projects. (#12)**

Policy 4J-3: Projects selected for the Six-Year Capital Improvement Program should strive to restore degraded habitat for threatened and endangered species, when the projects are in direct contact with such habitat. The County Council will determine when such restoration is financially feasible through adoption of the six-year capital improvement program and the County budget.

Policy 4J-4: Develop an updated culvert inventory and prioritized list and proposed schedule for the removal of county owned fish passage barrier culverts (consistent with the memorandum of agreement with Tribes). Work with the cities, state, federal and tribal governments, and private landowners, to support investment in removal of fish passage barriers and installation of fish-friendly culverts and bridges. (#13)

Commented [KO2]: Added to Appendix per Council direction on 3/17/26

Goal 4K: Enable school districts and fire districts to receive mitigation fees or impact fees to fund a proportionate share of system improvements reasonably related to new development by adopting into this plan their capital facilities plans. ~~Notwithstanding the above, recognize the mitigation and impact fees will only apply to new construction and will result in new homes becoming even less affordable.~~ Establishing mitigation fees or impact fees must carefully balance the need to mitigate against the impacts of new development and fund critical capital facilities and infrastructure with the need for housing that is affordable to all economic segments of the community. (#14)

Commented [MA3]: Planning Commission voted to insert this language on July 24, 2025.

Commented [KO4R3]: Council voted to strike language 9/9/25 & 3/17/26

Policy 4K-1: The ~~capital facilities plan for the~~ Bellingham School District No. 501 Capital Facilities Plan, adopted by the district ~~in June 2021 on August 27, 2015~~, is adopted into the comprehensive plan by reference.

Policy 4K-2: The capital facilities plan for the Ferndale School District, adopted by the district ~~on in September 2025~~ April 12, 2013, is adopted into the comprehensive plan by reference.

Commented [MA5]: Updated to reflect District adoption of new Capital Facilities Plan after initial Planning Commission review of Comp Plan Chapter 4 in July 2025.

Policy 4K-3: The ~~capital facilities plan for the~~ Lynden School District Capital Facilities Plan, adopted by the district ~~on in March 2025~~ February 11, 2016, is adopted into the comprehensive plan by reference.

Policy 4K-4: The ~~capital facilities plan for the~~ Meridian School District No. 505 Capital Facilities Plan, adopted by the district ~~on in September 2025~~ June 24, 2015, is adopted into the comprehensive plan by reference.

Commented [MA6]: Updated to reflect District adoption of new Capital Facilities Plan after initial Planning Commission review of Comp Plan Chapter 4 in July 2025.

Policy 4K-5: The Capital Facilities Plan for Whatcom County Fire District #5 (Point Roberts), adopted by the District on July 11, 2018, is adopted into the comprehensive plan by reference.

Policy 4K-6: The Capital Facilities Plan for Whatcom County Fire District #8, adopted by the District on March 12, 2026, is adopted into the comprehensive plan by reference.

Commented [KS7]: Added by Matt Aamount 3.16.26 due to a newly approved Capital Facilities Plan by Whatcom Co Fire District 8.

Goal 4L: Adopt special district and County capital facility plans for unincorporated UGAs, not associated with a city, into this

plan by reference when consistent with the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan.

- Policy 4L-1: The Birch Bay Water and Sewer District Comprehensive Water System Plan, dated June 2020~~March 2009~~, is adopted by reference into the comprehensive plan.
- Policy 4L-2: The Birch Bay Water and Sewer District Comprehensive Sewer System Plan, dated April 2020~~May 2009~~, is adopted by reference into the comprehensive plan.
- Policy 4L-3: The Birch Bay Comprehensive Stormwater Plan, dated July 2006 and amended in March 2025 to include sub-watershed master plans, is adopted by reference into the comprehensive plan.
- Policy 4L-4: The Blaine School District Capital Facilities Plan, dated December 2025~~2015~~, is adopted by reference into the comprehensive plan.
- Policy 4L-5: The North Whatcom Fire and Rescue and Fire District # 4 Capital Facilities Plan, dated May 2016, is adopted by reference into the comprehensive plan.
- Policy 4L-6: The Public Utility District No. 1 Comprehensive Drinking Water System Plan, dated January 2022~~October 2004~~, is adopted by reference into the comprehensive Plan.
- Policy 4L-7: The Columbia Valley Water District 2013 Water System Plan Update is adopted by reference into the comprehensive plan. This water system serves a portion of the Columbia Valley UGA.
- Policy 4L-8: The Water District No. 13 Small Water System Management Plan, dated July 2021~~August 2012~~, is adopted by reference into the comprehensive plan. This water system serves a portion of the Columbia Valley UGA.
- Policy 4L-9: The Water District No. 13 Comprehensive Sewer Plan, dated August 2012, is adopted by reference into the comprehensive plan. This sewer system serves a portion of the Columbia Valley UGA.
- Policy 4L-10: The public stormwater facilities sections relating to the Columbia Valley UGA in the Water Quantity and Quality Report Foothills Subarea (Aspect Consulting, July 18, 2008, pp. 2-3, 36-39, and 55-56) are adopted by reference into the comprehensive Plan.
- Policy 4L-11: The Whatcom Fire District No. 14 Capital Facilities Plan, dated August 2015, is adopted by reference into the comprehensive Plan.
- Policy 4L-12: The Mount Baker School District Capital Facilities Plan, dated May 2013, is adopted by reference into the comprehensive plan.
- Policy 4L-13: The Whatcom County Fire District No. 7 Capital Facilities Plan, dated September 2025~~February 2016~~, is adopted by reference into the Comprehensive Plan.

Commented [MA8]: Updated to reflect District adoption of new Capital Facilities Plan after initial Planning Commission review of Comp Plan Chapter 4 in July 2025.

Goal 4M: Plan for greenhouse gas emissions reduction and climate resilience as part of all capital projects included in the County’s Capital Improvement Program.

Policy 4M-1: Install fleet and publicly accessible electric vehicle charging infrastructure at new and existing County facilities, as required by WAC 51-50-0429, and in support of fleet electrification requirements under RCW 43.19.648, to the extent practicable.

Policy 4M-2: Construct new and renovated County facilities over 5,000 square feet to a minimum of LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Silver standard where feasible, as required in County resolution 2005-028, and evaluate costs to meet LEED Gold or Platinum certification level.

Policy 4M-3: Retrofit County owned buildings, that are regulated under the Clean Buildings Performance Standard, to meet energy use intensity targets set by the state’s energy benchmarking law, RCW 19.27A.210.

Policy 4M-4: Site solar systems with battery storage at County facilities, where suitable.

Policy 4M-5: Consider vulnerability of existing and new County facilities to climate and natural hazards including but not limited to:

- Avoid siting critical facilities in high-risk flood areas where feasible.
- Account for future floodplain conditions and sea level rise.
- Design facilities for continuity during extreme weather, smoke, heat, and outages.

Policy 4M-6: Assess Whatcom County owned facility and short-term sheltering needs outlined in the Whatcom County Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan, required by RCW 38.52.

Policy 4M-7: Explore opportunities to support alternative infrastructure models and off-grid and distributed renewable energy systems serving low-impact rural residential development, where such systems reduce reliance on public infrastructure and advance the County’s climate resilience goals. (#17)

Commented [LC9]: RCW 43.19.648 allows for exemptions, if determined not practicable.

WAC 194-29-020(7) defines practicable to mean, “the extent to which alternative fuels and vehicle technologies can be used to displace gasoline and diesel fuel in vehicles, as determined by multiple dynamic factors, including cost and availability of fuels and vehicles, changes in fueling infrastructure, operations, maintenance, operations, maintenance, technical feasibility, implementation[... [1]

Commented [MA10]: Planning Commission voted to insert this language on July 24, 2025. Resolution 2005-028 includes the “where feasible” language.

Commented [LC11]: County resolution 2005-028 commits Whatcom County to construct all new and renovated County buildings over 5,000 square feet, where feasible. The policy is revised to align with the resolution text.

Commented [MA12]: Planning Commission voted to insert this language on July 24, 2025.

Commented [LC13]: Whatcom County Comprehensive Emergency Plan and operational guides at Sheriff’s Office Division of Emergency Management guide the Whatcom County response to dis[... [2]

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The 2025 Whatcom County Fleet Electrification Assessment provided an evaluation of costs associated with compliance with RCW 43.19.648.

Whatcom County Comprehensive Emergency Plan and operational guides at Sheriff’s Office Division of Emergency Management guide the Whatcom County response to disaster sheltering and public facility utilization.