



Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan and Development Regulations Update

Draft Public Participation Plan

May 2024



WHATCOM COUNTY
WASHINGTON



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Introduction

Whatcom County is updating its Comprehensive Plan following the Washington State Growth Management Act (GMA). Whatcom County is a fully planning jurisdiction and is required to evaluate the Comprehensive Plan and development regulations against updates in the GMA and changes in land use and population growth ([RCW 36.70A.130](#)).

The Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan is a policy document for how the County will manage a variety of topics including land use, zoning regulations, subdivisions, hazard regulations, annexations, and development review. The Plan is a framework and guide for accomplishing community aspirations and intentions. It contains goals and policies relating to future growth and development of the land, public facilities and services, and environmental protection. The Comprehensive Plan includes the following chapters:

1. Introduction and Growth Projections
2. Land Use
3. Housing
4. Capital Facilities
5. Utilities
6. Transportation
7. Economics
8. Resource Lands (Agricultural, Forest, Mineral, and Marine Resource Lands)
9. Recreation
10. Environment

Two new chapters will be added to the Comprehensive Plan: The Shorelines Chapter (currently being reviewed by the State Department of Ecology) and the Climate Change and Resiliency Chapter (required under Washington House Bill 1181, passed by the State Legislature in 2023).

Public engagement is a key component of this update effort. This Public Participation Plan (PPP) is intended to guide community engagement efforts throughout the process to ensure early and continuous involvement in the Comprehensive Plan and development regulations update. Efforts to encourage participation will continue over the course of the Comprehensive Plan update.

Public Participation Plan Objectives

This document outlines the public participation opportunities for the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan update, including engagement methods, timeline, and implementation strategies. This is a working document and may be updated over time to reflect the needs of the community, changes in scheduling, etc.

The objectives for this Public Participation Plan are:

- ◆ Inform the public of the Comprehensive Plan and development regulations update, the process, and outcomes. Utilize outreach methods to inform the public and property owners of the variety of participation opportunities.
- ◆ Exchange information by conducting collaborative events that engage in conversation and the exchange of ideas and information. By exchanging information, we can give participants more ownership in the outcome of planning processes leading to buy-in, a sense of ownership, and higher-quality planning documents.
- ◆ Be inclusive of a range of perspectives, engaging the public in unique ways to reach a broader audience and understand their goals, needs, and desires.
- ◆ Provide access to engagement opportunities, events, and participation for all residents within Whatcom County, including vulnerable populations and overburdened communities.
- ◆ Be transparent and openly reflect a variety of viewpoints within the community and the County's process for the development and implementation of the Comprehensive Plan.
- ◆ Build support for the Comprehensive Plan and work with the Whatcom County community, elected officials, and other agencies toward success in implementing its goals and policies.

Roles and Responsibilities

Whatcom County

Whatcom County is responsible for the update of the Comprehensive Plan and development regulations in compliance with the Growth Management Act. This responsibility includes actively inviting public comment and coordinating with state, regional, and County planning policies as outlined in the GMA.

Planning Commission

Whatcom County's Planning Commission, a volunteer advisory body appointed by the County Council, is required to review amendments to the Comprehensive Plan and development regulations, conduct at least one public hearing, and provide a recommendation to the County Council for consideration and potential adoption.

County Council

The Whatcom County Council will review the Plan, hold public meetings, conduct at least one public hearing, and adopt the final Plan.

Public Participation

Collaboration Groups

Governments, groups, stakeholders, individuals and agencies will participate in the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan and development regulations update, and each will engage with the process in different ways. The Whatcom County Council recognized, in Resolution 2022-036, the importance of coordinating and collaborating throughout the planning process with the following governments and stakeholders:

- ◆ Whatcom County residents, business owners, farmers, farmworkers, community interest groups, and nonprofits.
- ◆ Whatcom County departments including the Planning & Development Services, Public Works, Parks & Recreation, Health Department, Finance Department, and the Emergency Management Division of the Sheriff's Office.
- ◆ Whatcom County boards, commissions, and advisory committees including, but not limited to, the Planning Commission, Climate Impact Advisory Committee, Flood Advisory Committee, Marine Resources Committee, Bicycle/ Pedestrian Advisory Committee, Racial Equity Commission, Forest Advisory Committee, Agricultural Advisory Committee, Food System Committee, Child and Family Wellbeing Taskforce, Business and Commerce Advisory Committee, Housing Advisory Committee, and WRIA 1 Planning Unit.
- ◆ Native Nations including Lummi Nation and the Nooksack Indian Tribe.
- ◆ The seven incorporated cities of Whatcom County: Bellingham, Blaine, Ferndale, Lynden, Sumas, Everson, and Nooksack.
- ◆ The Port of Bellingham.
- ◆ The Public Utility District No. 1 of Whatcom County.
- ◆ Whatcom Conservation District.
- ◆ State government including local legislators, the Governor, the Department of Natural Resources, the Department of Ecology, the Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Commerce, and other relevant agencies.
- ◆ Federal government including local Congressional delegation, U. S. Forest Services, U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Interior, National Parks Services, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and other relevant agencies.

Communication Channels

Information must be made available so any interested person can review the materials and participate. Throughout the Comprehensive Plan and development regulations update process, the County will maintain several channels to notify the public and other participants of relevant meetings and events. Regular opportunities for education and notification may include:

- ◆ Whatcom County 2025 Comprehensive Plan Update dedicated webpage: <https://www.whatcomCounty.us/4218/2025-Comprehensive-Plan-Updates>
- ◆ Material posting at public locations including:
 - ◆ Whatcom County Campus
 - ◆ Whatcom County Planning & Development Services Annex
- ◆ Social media posts
- ◆ Mailers and other County communications
- ◆ Press releases to local news organizations
- ◆ Email – Anyone can sign up to be on the “Planning & Development Services – 2025 Comprehensive Plan Update” email list at the County’s [Notify Me](#) website

Participation Inclusivity and Potential Barriers

The channels by which we communicate and the events we hold should incorporate an inclusive engagement approach. The table below identifies the engagement options for this plan, including the potential barriers of each, and potential methods to achieve inclusivity.

Engagement Method	Potential Barriers	Inclusivity Method
<p>Project Website</p> <p><i>A central location for status updates, draft documents, meeting schedules and related information, official notices, and feedback/comment portal</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Getting the public to the website ◆ Reaching non-English-speaking people ◆ Reaching residents in areas of the County with limited internet services ◆ Uploading materials promptly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Ensure ease of access through virtual outreach on social media and email correspondence directing the public to the website ◆ Spanish translation of consultant provided materials can be provided upon request ◆ Make materials available in advance for distribution to the public ◆ Keep participants informed of results/progress ◆ Display information in multiple formats (images, charts, graphs, videos, etc.)
<p>Social Media</p> <p><i>Sharing of public events, surveys, and other opportunities to participate</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Posting and noticing promptly ◆ Creating postings that appeal to a wide audience ◆ Reaching non-English-speaking persons ◆ Reaching people in areas of the County with limited internet services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Spanish translation of consultant provided materials can be provided upon request ◆ Links to surveys and other web-based platforms provided
<p>Public Meetings, Open Houses, and Presentations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Identifying appropriate events for the community ◆ Engaging non-English-speaking people ◆ Childcare availability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Work with County departments to identify appropriate events to reach a diverse audience

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Potential for low participation ◆ A high level of coordination/communication required ◆ Inclement Weather 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Designate 1-2 point people for coordination/communication to ensure clarity and efficiency ◆ Provide opportunity for written comments by non-English speaking people ◆ Ensure ADA accessibility ◆ Include opportunities for both virtual and in-person participation; host “hybrid” public meetings –in-person meetings with a virtual participation option ◆ Tailor events to various size audiences
<p>Printed Materials</p> <p><i>Printed materials describing the update process, including:</i></p> <p>Press releases Flyers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Reaching non-English-speaking people ◆ Potential for low participation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Spanish translation of materials can be provided upon request ◆ Identify a variety of outlets with relevant contact information for notification and distribution of materials (e.g. newspapers, neighborhoods, churches, and other community-oriented organizations/groups) ◆ Include website link and QR code for access
<p>Community Workshops and Open Houses</p> <p><i>Public events may be held at any location open and accessible to the public, including but not limited to neighborhoods, schools, community door-</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Engaging non-English speaking people ◆ Potential for low participation ◆ Identifying appropriate events for the community ◆ Inclement Weather 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Provide opportunity for written comments by non-English speaking people ◆ Ensure ADA accessibility ◆ Include opportunities for both virtual and in-person participation; host “hybrid” public meetings –in-person meetings with a virtual participation option ◆ Tailor events to various size audiences

<i>to-door, or other gathering places</i>		
Planning Commission and County Council Meetings and Hearings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Reaching non-English-speaking people ◆ Potential for low public participation ◆ May be intimidating ◆ Childcare availability ◆ Inclement Weather 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Provide ample time for the public to speak and/or provide written comments and questions ◆ Provide opportunity for written comments by non-English speaking people ◆ Include opportunities for both virtual and in-person participation

Languages Spoken in Whatcom County

Based on 2022 five-year estimates from the American Community Survey (Table: C16001) the languages spoken in Whatcom County in order of most spoken are:

- ◆ English: 86.6%
- ◆ Spanish: 6.1%
- ◆ Other Indo-European: 2.4%
- ◆ Asian and Pacific Island languages: 0.9%
- ◆ Russian, Polish or other Slavic languages: 0.6%
- ◆ Korean: 0.5%
- ◆ Unspecific languages: 0.5%
- ◆ French, Haitian, or Cajun: 0.4%
- ◆ Chinese (including Mandarin, Cantonese): 0.3%
- ◆ Tagalog (including Filipino): 0.3%
- ◆ Arabic: 0.1%

Vulnerable Populations and Overburdened Communities Participation

The inclusion of vulnerable populations and overburdened communities in the participation process starts with identifying where those populations are located within the County. Based on both the Washington Health Disparities Mapping Tool and EPA’s Environmental Justice Screening tool vulnerable populations are located within urban Bellingham, East Whatcom County, and the Lummi and Nooksack Reservations. The consultant team, with support from County staff, will engage the following groups to facilitate conversations with vulnerable and

overburdened communities by engaging and partnering with diverse established organizations in the County:

- Foothills Community Alliance and/or Columbia Valley Parks & Recreation District - Coordinate with and attend established community meetings to solicit feedback from East Whatcom communities.
- North Sound Accountable Community of Health (ACH)/Race and Health Equity Alliance – Collaborate with established community health advocates and groups to invite them to participate and inform on the project. Utilize existing avenues of communication such as newsletters and regular meetings to engage groups.
- Chardi Kala Project – Reach out to the Chardi Kala project to partner with and/or attend a One Whatcom event to facilitate environmental justice discussions.
- Racial Equity Commission –Involve the County’s Racial Equity Commission as a sounding board and resource to effectively involve vulnerable and overburdened communities throughout the outreach process.
- Lummi Nation – Include the Lummi Nation in interviews, a letter from the County Executive requesting that the Lummi Nation review Substitute House Bill 1717 and consider whether they intend to participate in the County’s planning process through a memorandum of Agreement (MOA), and host pop-up at the annual Stommish Water Festival
- Nooksack Tribe: Included the Nooksack Tribe in interviews, a letter from the County Executive requesting that the Nooksack Tribe review Substitute House Bill 1717 and consider whether they intend to participate in the County’s planning process through an MOA, and host pop-up in Nooksack/Everson/Sumas region that invites tribal members to participate.

Engagement Activities

This section delves deeper into each of the engagement strategies that are planned as part of the Comprehensive Plan update process, including descriptions and anticipated timeframe.

Project Website

Timeframe: Duration of Project

The project website will provide the latest information related to the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan update for all interested parties. The website will allow the public to:

- ◆ Access project status and timelines
- ◆ View meeting schedules and related information
- ◆ Review draft and final documents and community workshop materials
- ◆ Provide feedback through a comment portal
- ◆ View official notices related to the update process

The County will be responsible for updating the website with current information as the consultant team provides deliverables and schedules events.

Social Media

Timeframe: Key Points in the Project

Social media (Facebook) will be utilized to broadcast public events, surveys, and other public participation activities. Project information will be targeted to areas in Whatcom County by using strategically scheduled posts.

To run a successful social media campaign, materials must be published on time and updated regularly. There should be a schedule for postings that lead up to events, and each post should include an image that can be clicked to redirect people to the County's website. Any comments from social media posts should be compiled and delivered to County staff and consultants regularly.

Orientation Interviews

Timeframe: December 2023 (Completed)

Interviews were held with community representatives, and other interested parties in Whatcom County. The interviews were primarily in-person and flexible to accommodate the diverse working schedules and home life responsibilities. Interviewees included County departments, committees, and Nooksack Indian Tribe to orient the project team to issues, concerns, and opportunities. The *Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan Orientation Interviews: Topic & Issues* report was issued in May 2024.

Interactive Community Survey

Timeframe: June-July 2024

SCJ Alliance will lead the design of a community survey for Whatcom County on Alchemer (interactive survey website). The survey will be made available online and in print format. The consultant team will provide the survey in English and Spanish (and possibly other languages). We will align the survey timeframe with the regional pop-ups and workshops to collect data from the public. Following the completion of the survey, we will analyze the information gathered to inform the Comprehensive Plan update.

Topic-Specific Citizen Advisory Committees

Timeframe: Project Duration

County staff will engage citizen advisory committees that have been appointed and are at work to review various plan elements for the 2025 plan update. SCJ Alliance will review and incorporate feedback into the planning process.

Regional Pop-ups and Workshops

Timeframe: June-July 2024

The Comprehensive Plan update process will include seven public pop-ups and workshops put on by SCJ Alliance to support engagement. Regional workshops will be planned and designed to discuss the project and review and assess Comprehensive Plan policies. These workshops

will also discuss changes that need to be made, as well as EIS alternatives. The regions of the County each workshop will be hosted in include:

- 1) Blaine / Birch Bay / Custer
- 2) Sumas / Nooksack / Everson
- 3) Lynden / Central County
- 4) Maple Falls / Kendall
- 5) Lummi Reservation / Southwest County
- 6) Ferndale
- 7) Bellingham

Early June			
Area	Event	Location	Date(s)
Blaine/Birch Bay/ Custer	Market by the Sea	Blaine	Sat, June 1 @10a-2p
Sumas/ Nooksack/ Everson	Youth Fishing Derby Pop-Up	Sumas	Sat, Jun 1 @9am-12pm
Lynden/Central County	Lynden Farmer's Day Parade	Lynden	Sat, Jun 1 @10:30am
Maple Falls/Kendall	Coffee Talk Workshop (Coordinate w/Foothills Alliance)	Kendall	Sun, June 2 late morning
Mid-June			
Area	Event	Location	Date(s)
Lummi Reservation	Lummi Stommish Water Festival	Lummi Reservation	Thurs/Fri, June 13 all-day, & 14 half-day
Ferndale	Ferndale Farmer's Market	Ferndale	Friday, June 14 @3p-7p
Bellingham	Bellingham Farmer's Market	Bellingham	Saturday, June 15 @10a-2p

County staff may conduct additional meetings, if needed.

Draft EIS Release

Summer or fall of 2024

A draft EIS release will be distributed, and comments and feedback will be gathered from the community.

Open House: Plan Recommendations

Timeline: October 2024 to December 2024

At least one Open House event will be held in Bellingham toward the end of 2024 to gather plan recommendations from the community and stakeholders. One representative of SCJ Alliance from the consultant team will lead the recommendations with support from County staff. This may be a regional event to be held in more regions.

Draft Plan Presentation 1

Timeframe: Feb 2025 - June 2025 (TBD)

County staff and consultant (SCJ Alliance) will present a summary of engagement efforts and the draft Comprehensive Plan to the Planning Commission.

Draft Plan Presentation 2

Timeframe: Feb 2025 - June 2025 (TBD)

A combined Planning Commission/County Council workshop will be held to roll out the full draft of Whatcom County's updated Comprehensive Plan. County staff and consultants (SCJ Alliance) will provide an overview of the planning process, public feedback, and a draft of the plan. Feedback will also be collected from the two public bodies and substantive comments will be incorporated into the next draft set for Planning Commission deliberation.

Planning Commission Recommendation

Timeframe: Feb 2025 - June 2025 (TBD)

After reviewing the draft Comprehensive Plan, the Planning Commission is required to review and provide a recommendation to the County Council for consideration and potential adoption.

County Council Comprehensive Plan Review and Adoption

Timeframe: June 2025 – December 2025

The County Council will hold at least one hearing to adopt the updated Comprehensive Plan. It is anticipated that County Council committees will hold a number of meetings to discuss various Comprehensive Plan chapters prior to final adoption.

Comprehensive Plan Coordination

While the Planning Commission and County Council will continue to hold regular meetings throughout the update process, there will be meetings specifically associated with the update process.

Planning Commission

The Planning Commission will coordinate with the consultant team and County staff to host workshops, meetings, and public hearings, and they will serve in an advisory capacity throughout the update process.

The Planning Commission will hold work sessions on each element throughout the update process, then review a final consolidated draft of the updated Comprehensive Plan to prepare a recommendation for the County Council.

Intergovernmental Coordination Meetings

The consultant team and County staff will meet with internal and external groups, as needed, to address key issues as they arise. Anticipated partner agencies include:

- ◆ Whatcom County departments include the Planning & Development Services, Public Works, Parks & Recreation, Health and Community Services Department, Finance Department, and the Emergency Management Division of the Sheriff's Office.
- ◆ Whatcom County boards, commissions, and advisory committees including, but not limited to, the Planning Commission, Climate Impact Advisory Committee, Flood Control Zone District Advisory Committee, Marine Resources Committee, Bicycle/ Pedestrian Advisory Committee, Racial Equity Commission, Forestry Advisory Committee, Agricultural Advisory Committee, Food System Committee, Child and Family Wellbeing Taskforce, Business and Commerce Advisory Committee, Housing Advisory Committee, and WRIA 1 Planning Unit, Surface Mining Advisory Committee, WRIA 1 Salmon Recovery Staff Team, Whatcom County Parks & Recreation Commission, WRIA 1 Watershed Staff Team, Wildlife Advisory Committee, and Joint Shellfish Advisory Committees.
- ◆ Native Nations including Lummi Nation and the Nooksack Indian Tribe.
- ◆ The seven incorporated cities of Whatcom County: Bellingham, Blaine, Ferndale, Lynden, Sumas, Everson, and Nooksack.
- ◆ The Port of Bellingham.
- ◆ The Public Utility District No. 1 of Whatcom County.
- ◆ Whatcom Conservation District.
- ◆ Whatcom Transportation Authority
- ◆ State government including the Department of Natural Resources, the Department of Ecology, the Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Commerce, [the Department of Transportation](#), and other relevant agencies as needed.
- ◆ Federal government including U.S. Forest Services, U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Interior, National Parks Services, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and other relevant agencies as needed.

Outreach Schedule

Event	Date/Time	Location	Activity	Outcomes	Notes
Orientation Interviews w/County Committees and Tribal Nations	December 2023 (completed)	Whatcom County	Interviews	Early list of topics and issues for the process to address	Consultant conducted a series of orientation interviews early into the project process and incorporate comments into deliverables and summary.
Project Website	Launched	Online	Project Website	Accessible source of current project information, results, surveys, and resources	County launched and will maintain the project website.
Interactive Community Survey	June-July 2024	Online	Survey	Targeted identification of community priorities and general preferences	Consultant team will develop an online survey that is available as paper copy when requested. Survey timeline will coincide with regional workshops.
Social Media Posts	Key points in the project	Online	Social Media	Periodic invitations to participate in various activities	Consultant will provide social media flyers and images to advertise outreach events up to seven images/flyers, one for each pop-up and regional

Event	Date/Time	Location	Activity	Outcomes	Notes
					workshop. County will post and keep updated.
Topic-Specific Citizen Advisory Committees	Project Duration	Whatcom County	Staff Engagement	Committee recommendations on Comprehensive Plan and development regulation amendments	County staff will facilitate and gather feedback from advisory committees. Consultant will review and incorporate recommendations in deliverables.
Regional Pop-ups and Workshops	June-July 2024	Seven Locations	Public Event	Grass-roots input into planning issues, policy responses, inviting additional participation	Host a series of seven regional pop-ups and workshops throughout the County.
Draft EIS Hearing	Summer or fall 2024	TBD	Public Hearing	Public comment on Draft EIS	Release Draft EIS document, make available for public comment, and hold a public hearing.
Open House: Plan Recommendations	October 2024 to December 2024	TBD	Public Event	Feedback on initial Plan recommendations	Host an open house on the plan recommendations.
Planning Commission/County Council Work Sessions	2024 and 2025	Whatcom County	Planning Commission	Initial Planning Commission and County Council	County staff will lead work sessions with the Planning

Event	Date/Time	Location	Activity	Outcomes	Notes
				deliberations and feedback on Plan recommendations	Commission and County Council.
Draft Plan Presentation 1	Feb 2025 - June 2025	Whatcom County	Planning Commission	Introduction of draft plan to Planning Commission	County staff and SCJ Alliance will present a summary of engagement efforts and the draft Comprehensive Plan to the Planning Commission.
Draft Plan Presentation 2	Feb 2025 – June 2025	Whatcom County	Planning Commission	Planning Commission feedback on Plan recommendations	A combined Planning Commission/County Council workshop will be held to roll out the full draft of Whatcom County's updated Comprehensive Plan. County staff and consultant (SCJ Alliance) will provide an overview of the planning process, public feedback, and final draft of the plan. Feedback will also be collected from the two public bodies and substantive comments will be incorporated into the next draft set for Planning Commission deliberation.

Event	Date/Time	Location	Activity	Outcomes	Notes
Planning Commission Recommendation	Feb 2025 - June 2025	Whatcom County	Planning Commission	Planning Commission issuance of Findings of Fact, Reasons for Action, Conclusions, and Recommendations on the Comprehensive Plan Update	After reviewing the draft Comprehensive Plan, the Planning Commission will hold at least one public hearing and review and provide a recommendation to the County Council for consideration and potential adoption.
County Council Comprehensive Plan Review Adoption	June 2025 - Dec 2025	Whatcom County	County Council	Comprehensive Plan adoption	The County Council will hold at least one hearing to adopt the updated Comprehensive Plan.

Conclusion

The Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan and Development Regulations update is a collaborative effort in which the County will engage the public, businesses, governmental agencies, and other interested groups. As detailed in this Public Participation Plan, the County's website, public postings, community events, public meetings, interviews, and workshops will be used to engage with interested parties and involve them in the update process