

Open Space Report

Whatcom County

Prepared For:
Whatcom County

Prepared By:
SCJ Alliance
108 N Washington, Suite 300
Spokane, WA 99201
509.835.3770

March 20th 2026



Open Space Report

Project Information

Project: Whatcom County Periodic Comprehensive Plan Update

Prepared for: Whatcom County Planning and Development Services

Reviewing Agency

Jurisdiction: Whatcom County PDS

Project Representative

Prepared by: SCJ Alliance
108 N Washington, Suite 300
Spokane, WA 99201
509.835.3770
scjalliance.com

Contact: William Grimes, AICP

Project Reference: Whatcom County Periodic Comprehensive Plan Update

Contents

Introduction	5
Tasks	5
Consistency with the Growth Management Act	5
Approach	6
Established Criteria	6
Open Space.....	6
Green Space.....	9
Whatcom County's Open Space Program.....	9
Urban and Community Forests	11
Limitations.....	13
Assumptions.....	13
Review Assessment.....	13
Comprehensive Plan Review.....	14
Land Use Element	14
Capital Facilities Element.....	15
Economics Element	15
Resource Lands Element.....	15
Environment Element.....	17
Climate Element.....	17
Subarea Plan: Bellingham Urban Fringe	17
Map 2-2 and 2-3: Open Space Taxation Areas and Open Space Corridors Review	18
Urban and Community Forests	19
Green Space.....	19
Recommended Amendments.....	20
Comprehensive Plan	20
Land Use Element	20
Open Space	20
Introduction	20
Purpose	20
GMA Requirements	20
Background Summary.....	21
Issues, Goals, and Policies	22
Open Space Corridors Map.....	26

Inventory of Open Spaces and Corridors26
Green Space.....30
Other Land Use Maps31

Introduction

The County is reviewing the criteria and designation of open and green spaces as part of the broader 2025 comprehensive plan periodic update. In light of recent legislative changes the goals, policies, and map related to open space were reviewed for consistency with state requirements. Revisions will also include recommendations to meet the new criteria provided by House Bill 1181 known as “Climate Change in Local Comprehensive Planning”, which is described further in the legislative context subsection of this report.

Tasks

SCJ Alliance has been tasked to address open space planning, including identifying open space corridors within and between urban growth areas, including lands useful for recreation, wildlife habitat, trails, and connection of critical areas. This includes review of current Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan goals, policies, and maps and recommending amendments to these goals, policies and maps.

Consistency with the Growth Management Act

The Revised Code of Washington (RCW) 36.70A¹ is the Growth Management Act (GMA). Several planning goals guide jurisdictions’ requirements in their comprehensive plans. One such goal is to “retain open space and green space, enhance recreational opportunities, enhance fish and wildlife habitat, increase access to natural resource lands and water, and develop parks and recreation facilities” (RCW 36.70A.020(9)).

Identification of open space corridors is codified in RCW 36.70A.160², which states fully planning jurisdictions under the GMA shall identify open space corridors within and between urban growth areas. These areas shall include lands useful for recreation, wildlife habitats, trails, and connection of critical areas (wetlands, aquifer recharge areas, fish and wildlife habitat conservation areas, frequently flooded areas, and geologically hazardous areas). The identification of land as an open space corridor does not restrict existing agricultural or forestry uses.

In 2023, HB 1181 amended the GMA, incorporating climate change considerations and requirements in a jurisdiction’s comprehensive plan. Specifically, the bill adds requirements for the County’s land use element to designate the proposed general distribution, location, and extent of the uses of green spaces and urban and community forests within the urban growth area. The designation of open spaces was already codified in RCW 36.70A.070(1). Existing

¹ RCW 36.70A.070 “Comprehensive Plan – Mandatory elements:

<https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=36.70A.070>

² RCW 36.70A.160 “Identification of open space corridors”:

<https://app.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=36.70A.160>. RCW 36.70A.160 was last amended by State Legislature in 1992.

County documents were reviewed to identify opportunities and recommendations for meeting the new requirements.

Approach

This section details the approach used to assess open space, green space, urban and community forests, and open space corridors. It establishes the criteria for each category, drawing upon existing codified definitions and relevant County criteria. These established criteria inform the subsequent gap review to ensure the recommended amendments incorporate these criteria.

Established Criteria

Though HB 1181 requires that the Land Use Element designates “green spaces [and] urban and community forests within the urban growth area”, neither the bill nor the GMA explicitly define “urban and community forests”.

“Green spaces” are defined by HB 1181 as:

“(37) "Green space" means an area of land, vegetated by natural features such as grass, trees, or shrubs, within an urban context and less than one acre in size that creates public value through one or more of the following attributes: (a) Is accessible to the public; (b) Promotes physical and mental health of residents; (c) Provides relief from the urban heat island effects; (d) Promotes recreational and aesthetic values; (e) Protects streams or water supply; or (f) Preserves visual quality along highway, road, or street corridors.

Open Space

The conservation, protection, and management of a countywide open space network provides multiple benefits to the County aligned with State goals and requirements. A fully-activated open-space network is made up of multiple components:

- Natural lands are areas important for supporting wildlife, preserving ecosystems, and providing opportunities for recreation and experiencing nature.
- Farmlands are lands that support agriculture. These lands provide local food options for the region’s residents along with wildlife habitat, stormwater management, and many other ecosystem benefits.
- Working forests are resource lands that support jobs and our rural economies, provide timber and other materials and support carbon sequestration, stormwater management, drinking water, and wildlife habitat.
- Aquatic systems include lands that support clean drinking water, mitigate flood hazards, and support healthy habitats for salmon and other aquatic life.
- Regional trails are active transportation corridors that provide access to the region’s open spaces and connect communities and other important regional destinations. Often, trails are interconnected with rivers, floodplains, and farmlands.
- Urban open space is the system of parks and green spaces, both public and private, that provide recreational, aesthetic, environmental, and health benefits within an accessible distance to the region’s urban residents.

Table 1. Categorical Benefits of Open Space Planning

Category	Description
Hydrology	water supply and storage, flood protection, stormwater regulation
Biodiversity	wildlife habitat and corridors
Health	improved physical and mental health, well-being, stress reduction
Recreation	walking, playing, hiking, biking, boating, fishing, skiing, camping, hunting
Food	prime soils, pollination, irrigation, drainage, pastures, seafood, hunting, gathering
Climate Regulation	urban heat island mitigation, carbon sequestration and storage
Air Quality	pollutant removal
Water Quality	pollutant removal, filtration, cooling
Economic	tourism, recreation industry, seafood industry, timber industry, agriculture
Aesthetic	views, verdant communities, natural screening, well-being
Hazard Mitigation	protection from and mitigation of floods, wildfires, landslides, tsunamis
Cultural	identity, sense of place, tribal resources, and uses

Source: Regional Open Space Conservation Plan. PSRC, 2018.

HB 1181 does not consider agricultural land uses as a component of “open spaces”. RCW 84.34.020³ defines “open space land” as:

- Any land area so designated by an official comprehensive land use plan adopted by any city or county and zoned accordingly;
- Any land area, the preservation of which in its present use would do any of the following:
 - Conserve and enhance natural or scenic resource;
 - protect streams or water supply;
 - promote conservation of soils, wetlands, beaches or tidal marshes;
 - enhance the value to the public of abutting or neighboring parks, forests, wildlife preserves, nature reservations or sanctuaries or other open space;
 - enhance recreation opportunities;
 - preserve historic sites;
 - preserve visual quality along highway, road, and street corridors or scenic vistas;or
 - retain in its natural state tracts of land not less than one acre situated in an urban area and open to public use on such conditions as may be reasonably required by the legislative body granting the open space classification.
- Land that was previously classified under 84.34.020(2), but no longer meets the criteria of 84.34.020(2);
- Land that is traditional farmland that is not classified under Chapters 84.33 or 84.34 and has not been irrevocably devoted to a use inconsistent with agricultural uses, and that has a high potential for returning to commercial agriculture.
- Land officially designated for open space;

³ RCW 84.34.020 “Open Space, Agricultural, Timberlands – Definitions”
<https://app.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=84.34.020>

- Land is used as a means to preserve natural resources; and
- Farm/agricultural conservation land:
- Land that was previously classified as farm and agricultural land but no longer meets the criteria and is reclassified under open space land, or
- Land that was originally used for farming, but isn't currently classified under the state's special agricultural programs (RCW 84.33 or 84.34), can still be considered "open space" if:
 - The land hasn't been permanently changed into something that can't be used for farming.
 - The land still has the potential to be used for farming again, meaning it could easily be returned to commercial agriculture if needed.

The County's Conservation Easement Program is guided by a committee that focuses on six conservation goals. One goal is to "protect open spaces to preserve cultural and historic resources, scenic vistas, and recreation opportunities." This goal is represented in the program's StoryMap⁴ showing priority locations for Open Space Corridors in the County.

The County's 2016 Comprehensive plan refers to "open space corridors", "greenway corridors", and "greenbelts". These terms are not explicitly defined in the Revised Code of Washington.

Greenbelts

"Greenbelts" are referenced in RCW 36.70A.110⁵ as separate from open space areas. Specifically, RCW 36.70A.110 states that UGAs "...shall include greenbelts and open space areas", implying a difference in terms). This is also true in the 2016 Comprehensive Plan (e.g. "greenbelts and open space"). Greenbelts may fall under the umbrella of open space corridors if their function meets the conditions of open space land as defined in RCW 84.34.020. Otherwise, the term is used to refer generally to a linear natural area of land used to separate land uses, preserve open space, and provide public benefit.

Greenways

The County's Policy 2SS-5 (2016) references "greenway corridors" as a strategy to utilize within urban growth areas. According to RCW 79A.05.115⁶, the term "greenway" pertains to scenic bikeways. WSDOT uses the term "neighborhood greenways" without a formal definition but includes it in a list of facilities designed to accommodate travelers of all ages and abilities. The City of Bellingham has a Greenways Strategic Plan, which provides direction for Greenways fund expenditures. The plan lists aquatic facilities, community parks, neighborhood parks, open spaces, and special facilities under the "Greenways" umbrella, further complicating the use of the word (Storymap: Greenways Today and Tomorrow). The County's 2024 CPROS Plan classifies Greenways/Trails as "undeveloped open space natural areas, agricultural lands, recreational lands, and wildlife corridors. These greenways often serve as linear parks and may have multi-use trails. The trails can serve both recreation and transportation purposes and are

⁴ Whatcom County Conversation Easement Program Story Map (2023):

<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/2a898f0e6d9b46c788b7463b3cb7f45a>

⁵ RCW 36.70A.110 "Urban growth areas": <https://app.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=36.70a.110>

⁶ RCW 79A.05.115 "Public recreational lands - Cross-state trail facility"

<https://app.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=79A.05.115>

usually planned as part of a community trails and greenway system linking bicycle routes, parks, and destinations within the community. Examples include the Interurban and Bay Crest trails.”

Open Space Corridor

Though the term “open space corridor” is not defined in the GMA, RCW 36.70A.160 indicates that open space corridors within and between urban growth areas “shall include lands useful for recreation, wildlife habitat, trails, and connection of critical areas”. This code section further indicates that the County may not unilaterally impose restrictions on a designated open space corridor unless it acquires sufficient legal interest in the corridor. If the County desires to restrict the use or management to agriculture or forestry purposes, the County must acquire rights to do so through fee simple ownership, conservation easements, development rights, or other legal agreements.

Green Space

The County does not have existing definitions or designations for green space. RCW 36.70A.030⁷ defines "green space" as “an area of land, vegetated by natural features such as grass, trees, or shrubs, within an urban context and less than one acre in size that creates public value through one or more of the following attributes:

- Is accessible to the public;
- Promotes the physical and mental health of residents;
- Provides relief from the urban heat island effects;
- Promotes recreational and aesthetic values;
- Protects streams or water supply; or
- Preserves visual quality along highway, road, or street corridors.

A note in RCW 76.16.005⁸ outlines research-backed evidence of the health benefits of trees and green spaces:

- Air and water quality improvements,
- Positive emotional responses to being in nature,
- Physical activity, and
- Social cohesion through interacting in public green spaces.

Whatcom County’s Open Space Program

Whatcom County's Open Space Program is a property tax reduction program administered according to the Washington State Open Space Taxation Act, 84.34 RCW and its rules

⁷ RCW 36.70A.030 “Growth Management – Definitions”:

<https://app.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=36.70a.030>

⁸ RCW 76.16.005 “Wolf-Livestock Management – Finding”:

<https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=16.76.005>

WAC 458-30 (Open Space Land, Open Space Farm and Agricultural Conservation Land and Open Space Farm and Agricultural Land) and one program classified under Chapter 84.33 RCW (Designated Forest Land). Open Space Farm and Agricultural Land and Designated Forest Land are administered through the Whatcom County Assessor's Office and do not require public access. Open Space Land and Open Space Farm and Agricultural Conservation Land generally require public access.

- Timber Land was a previous classification. This classification has been terminated pursuant to State law under Whatcom County Ordinance No. 2014-055. As of the effective date of that ordinance (November 8, 2014), all lands formerly classified as timber land became Forest Land pursuant to Chapter 84.33 RCW. Designated Forest Land is a classification administered solely by the Whatcom County Assessor's Office.

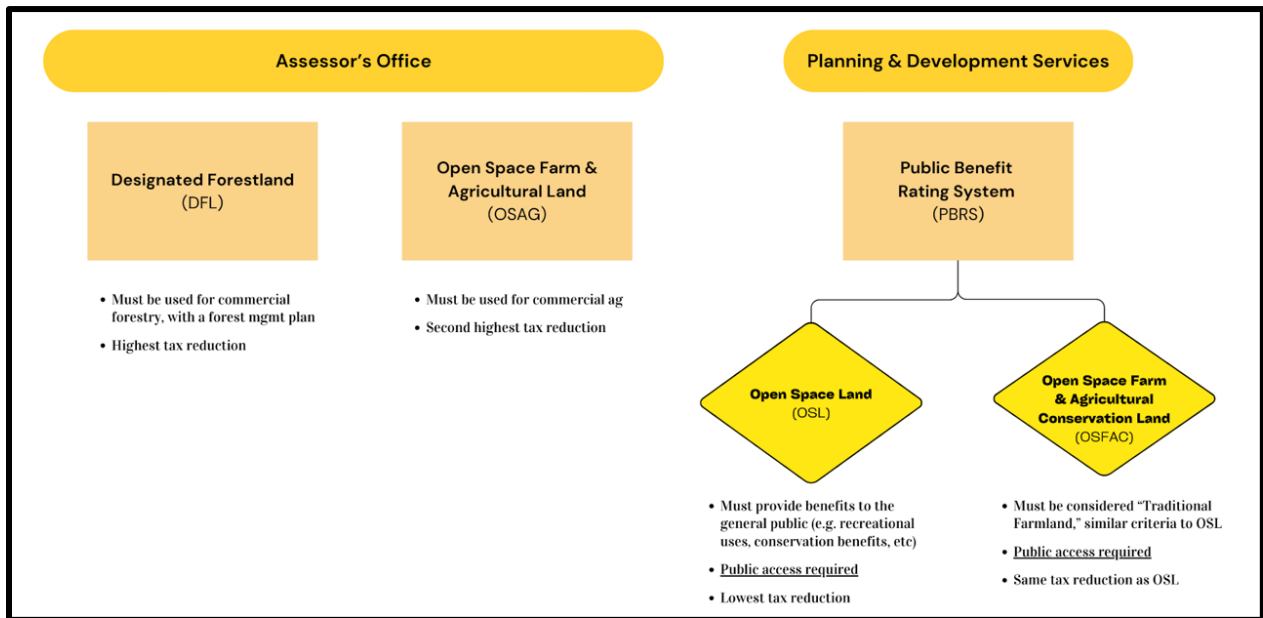


Figure 1. Open Space Organizational Structure

- Open Space Land and Open Space Farm and Agricultural Conservation Land utilize a Public Benefit Rating System (PBRs) to encourage voluntary resource conservation on private property. It is best suited for landowners wanting to protect, manage or restore open space resources on their property and provide public access. A point system determines PBRs enrollment level through qualification of PBRs resource categories. The number of points awarded determines the associated tax savings. A Public Benefit Rating of at least 45 must be attained in order to be recommended for approval. In addition, the amount of tax reduction to be granted to open space applications will be based on the Public Benefit Rating. Whatcom County's Land Use Code for Open Space Land and Open Space Farm and Agricultural Conservation Land is Land Use Code 94.

Urban and Community Forests

The GMA does not include a definition of urban and community forest. RCW 76.15.010⁹, which is not part of the GMA, defines “urban and community forest” as ‘land in and around human settlements ranging from small communities to metropolitan areas, occupied or potentially occupied by trees and associated vegetation. Urban and community forestland may be planted or unplanted, used or unused, and includes public and private lands, lands along transportation and utility corridors, and forested watershed lands within populated areas.’ This is a broad definition, which does little to narrow designation criteria for the County.

RCW 76.15.005 further outlines the values and uses of urban and community forests, including:

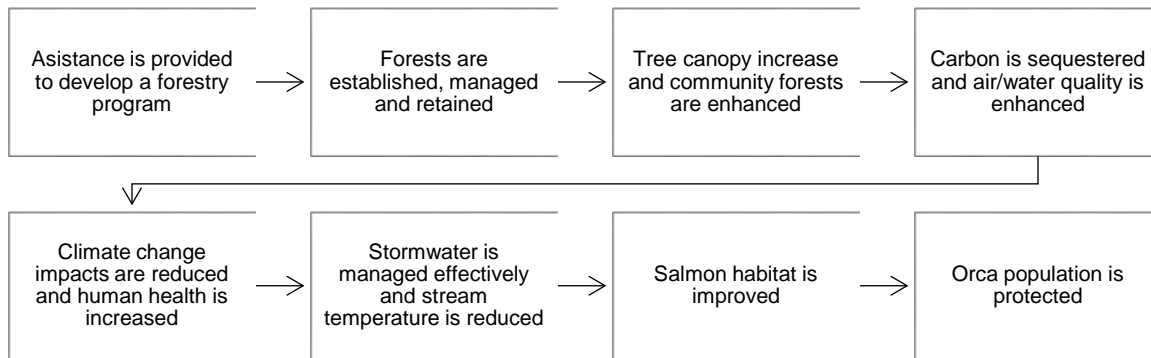
- Conserving energy,
- Reducing air and water pollution and soil erosion,
- Contributing to property values,
- Attracting business,
- Reducing glare and noise,
- Providing aesthetic and historical values,
- Providing wood products, and
- Affording comfort and protection for humans and wildlife.

Cities and communities benefit from assistance in developing and maintaining urban and community forestry programs that also address future growth. Preservation and enhancement of city trees and urban forests contributes multiple cost-effective benefits, including:

- Stormwater management,
- Carbon sequestration,
- Local air and water quality enhancements,
- Improvement of statewide climate change impacts such as summer heat waves, heavier winter rains, and lower air quality,
- Fish and wildlife habitat, and
- Significant additional benefits related to human health, especially when delivered in highly impacted communities with higher health disparities and that also have lower existing tree canopy.

⁹ RCW 76.15.005 “Urban Forest Management – Finding”:
<https://app.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=76.15.005>

Figure 2: Co-Benefits and Long-Term Effects of Forestry Programs



Source: SCJ Alliance, 2025.

The Evergreen Communities Act (ECA) was passed in 2008 to establish a framework for supporting urban forestry in Washington state. In 2021, House Bill 1216 expanded the capacity of the Washington DNR to utilize analysis tools and provide technical assistance to entities concerning urban and community forestry.

Community Forests References

- Whatcom County’s Conservation District hosts a Forest Stewardship Program, providing multiple forms of planning and assistance services, including assistance with site-specific Forest Management Plans.
- Washington State’s Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO) has a Community Forests Program which provides funding to local governments, nature conservation organizations, and other agencies for purposes of acquisition, facility development, and restoration of forest health and habitat.
- The Northwest Community Forest Coalition (NWCFC) is an organization committed to supporting the stewardship of community forests, which the organization defines as “forestlands that are owned and managed on behalf of local people to provide them secure and reliable access to the ecological, social, and economic benefits produced by forests.” This term is defined by local participation and community benefit. According to NWCFC, three Whatcom County projects have been identified under this definition of “community forest”: Canyon Lake Community Forest, Stewart Mountain Community Forest, and Chuckanut Community Forest (known colloquially as “Hundred-Acre Wood”).
- In their 2021 special report, the Trust for Public Land (TPL) defines community forests as “protected forest lands that contribute to healthy, flourishing communities. These lands are guided by local say to achieve local priorities. These unique assets are land-based economic development tools that deliver positive outcomes to the residents, visitors, and businesses located in their service areas.”
- The U.S. Forest Service’s Community Forest and Open Space Conservation Program, or Community Forest Program (CFP) provides opportunities for community entities to apply for grants to acquire forest lands. Lands acquired through the program are mandated to be managed according to a community forest plan. Private forest land is eligible that is at least five acres in size, suitable to sustain natural vegetation, and at least 75% forested.

Wildland Urban Interface

Wildland-urban interface means the geographical area where structures and other human development meet or intermingle with wildland vegetative fuels. It is where human-environmental conflicts and risks can be concentrated. The WUI can be further broken down into areas defined as interface and intermix. Interface is defined as those areas where human development MEETS areas that are covered with more than 50% wildlands. Intermix are those areas where structures intermingle with wildlands. To be considered intermix, a development OR structure must be surrounded on 2 or more sides by wildlands.¹⁰

Intermix areas are logical candidates for designation as urban or community forests because they already border wildlands. By strategically managing these intermix zones as forests, the interface can be prevented from expanding further. If these areas were developed more intensively, the interface would become larger, increasing the risk of things like wildfire spread and habitat fragmentation. So, using existing intermix areas for urban/community forests acts as a buffer, preventing further encroachment into wildland and thus mitigating some of the negative impacts of development. To see the Washington State Wildland Urban Interface map: visit the [DNR WUI map](#). The DNR is currently updating the WUI map.

Limitations

Addressing requirements added with HB 1181 is somewhat challenging because of the the lack of clear definitions in the legislation for the new urban and community forest designation, not yet complete WUI mapping by the state DNR, and the intermediate nature of Commerce's HB 1181 Climate Guidance. As such, several considerations or paths are available to the county to designate urban and community forests.

Assumptions

The County will review and recommended maps designating the proposed general distribution and general location and extent of urban and community forests within the urban growth areas based upon locally approved mapping criteria. The County will also determine next steps for implementation of portions or all of the wildland urban interface code, dependent on finalization of state guidance.

Review Assessment

The existing comprehensive plan and Open Space maps 2-2 & 2-3 were reviewed against the criteria and definitions to establish recommendations later in this report.

¹⁰The Wildland-Urban Interface, Washington State Department of Natural Resources
<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/7016c437623a445997c072a05e26afbb>

Comprehensive Plan Review

Land Use Element

The 2016 land use element has an “Open Space” section which includes designation criteria for open spaces and open space corridors as well as encouraging open space conservation. It does not have green spaces or urban and community forests included in the plan. This section includes relevant Goals and Policies in Chapter 2 Land Use. Additionally, in other sections within the land use element, there are goals and policies about conservation, urban growth areas, and collaboration with cities:

- Policy 2A-14: Maintain a density credit program to incentivize increased land use intensity in designated areas and decrease residential density in agricultural and rural areas by authorizing density credits. Density credits allow development incentives, such as increased density, in exchange for a voluntary contribution towards preserving agricultural lands and open space. This is accomplished through a voluntary payment of funds to Whatcom County for use in the Conservation Easement Program¹¹ in order to allow a higher density as specifically set forth in the Whatcom County Zoning Code.
- Policy 2DD-2: Provide options to reserve areas of land suitable for agriculture, forestry, or open space through lots clustering in the following Zoning Code provisions.
- Policy 2DD-3: Encourage property owners to conserve forested areas, agricultural land, and open space by utilizing current-use taxation provisions (RCW 84.34).
- Policy 2DD-4: Conserve open space, park land, and trails for recreational use, as well as to protect essential habitat such as riparian areas and wetlands
- Policy 2K-1: Limit lands in one-hundred year floodplains to low-intensity land uses such as open space corridors or agriculture.
- Policy 2R-5: Coordinate with cities on UGA planning, facilitating urban development, balancing commercial, industrial and residential lands in the UGA, timing of annexations, service extensions and linking greenbelts and open space.
- Goal 2R: Establish an interlocal agreement with each city which sets out general guidelines to address revenue sharing, the provision of services, management of growth, annexation, protection of critical areas, and designation of open space within urban growth areas.
- Policy 2U-3: Work with Bellingham to identify and establish a system of neighborhood parks, greenbelts and open space to serve the urban growth area as it develops.
- Policy 2X-5: Review and update the interlocal agreement with Ferndale, prior to expiration of the current interlocal agreement, to provide for coordination with the county of greenbelts and open space.

¹¹ Whatcom County Code 3.25A “Conservation Easement Program”:
<https://www.codepublishing.com/WA/WhatcomCounty/html/WhatcomCounty03/WhatcomCounty0325A.html>

These policies do not need to be amended to meet HB 1181 requirements but they do provide important context in developing new goals and policies for green spaces and urban and community forests as both pertain to urban growth areas.

Capital Facilities Element

The element was reviewed for references to open spaces. These goals and policies are consistent with implementing HB 1181 requirements.

- 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-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.

Economics Element

The element was reviewed for references to open spaces. These goals and policies are consistent with implementing HB 1181 requirements.

- Policy 7E-1: Support attractions for Canadians and other visitors so they will remain in the county longer and distribute their spending throughout the community. Some of the examples would include support for such items as the following:
 - Events such as the "Ski to Sea" race and festival.
 - The Whatcom Museum, Mount Baker Theater, other historic and cultural centers, and community revitalization efforts.
 - Parks and open spaces.
 - Local festivals.
 - The Mount Baker outdoor recreation area.
 - Farmers markets and other natural resource based activities.
 - Projects, events and activities of unincorporated areas such as Point Roberts, Birch Bay and East County.

Resource Lands Element

The element was reviewed for references to open spaces. These goals and policies are consistent with implementing HB 1181 requirements.

- Policy 8A-3: The criteria for designating or de-designating lands under the Agriculture land use designation shall be considered on an areawide basis. When applying the following criteria, the process should result in designating an amount of agricultural resource lands sufficient to maintain and enhance the economic viability of the agricultural industry in the county over the long term, and to retain agricultural support businesses, such as processors, farm suppliers, and equipment maintenance and repair facilities. The criteria are as follows:

1. The land is not already characterized by urban growth. In determining this factor, the County should consider Washington Administrative Code (WAC) 365-196-310¹² and RCW 36.70A.030(19).
 2. The land is used or capable of being used for agricultural production. In making this determination, the County shall use the land-capability classification system of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service. These eight classes are incorporated into map units and are based on the growing capacity, productivity, and soil composition of the land.
 3. The land has long term commercial significance for agriculture. In determining this factor, consider the following nonexclusive criteria.
 - a. The majority of the area contains Prime Farmland Soils as determined by the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS).
 - b. The area may contain 100-year floodplains as delineated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).
 - c. Land use settlement patterns, the intensity of nearby uses, and the history of approved land development permits are generally compatible with agricultural practices.
 - d. A majority of the area is composed of agricultural operations that were historically in agriculture prior to 1985.
 - e. The predominate parcel size in the area is large enough to adequately maintain agricultural operations.
 - f. The availability of public services.
 - g. The availability of public facilities such as roads used to transport agricultural products.
 - h. Special purpose districts that are oriented to enhancing agricultural operations such as drainage improvement, watershed improvement, and flood control exist.
 - i. The area has a pattern of landowner capital investment in agricultural operations improvements including irrigation, drainage, manure storage, the presence of barns and support buildings, enhanced livestock feeding techniques, agricultural worker housing, etc.
 - j. The area contains a predominance of parcels that have current use tax assessment derived from the Open Space Taxation Act.
 - k. The area's proximity to urban growth areas.
 - l. The area's proximity to agricultural markets.
 - m. Land value under alternative uses.
- Policy 8D-10: In the "Agricultural Protection Overlay" on parcels 20 acres and larger with Rural 5 acre and Rural 10 acre zoning, require non-agriculturally related development to be clustered on 20 or up to 30 percent of the available land with the remainder available for open space and agricultural uses. Development standards shall provide flexibility to achieve development potential in cases of natural limitations.

¹² WAC 365-196-310 "Urban growth areas": <https://app.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=365-196-310>

- Policy 8G-11: Recognize the difference between designated (mapped) forest lands and working forests. Designated forest lands may include public or private forest lands not actively managed for timber production, such as for parks, open space or habitat preservation purposes. Working forests are actively managed for timber production and to provide a balance of social, economic, and ecological benefits, products, and values.

Environment Element

The element was reviewed for references to open spaces. These goals and policies are consistent with implementing HB 1181 requirements.

- Policy 9C-18: Acquisition of and planning for trail corridors should be encouraged as new subdivisions and development occurs, if the trail has been identified in a park, trail, open space, or other plan adopted by Whatcom County.
- Policy 10A-10: Support acquisition, conservation easements, open space, and other such programs to protect high-value natural areas as identified through the GMA planning process, the Natural Heritage Plan, the state Priority Habitats and Species (PHS) program, the Lake Whatcom Management Program, and other sources.

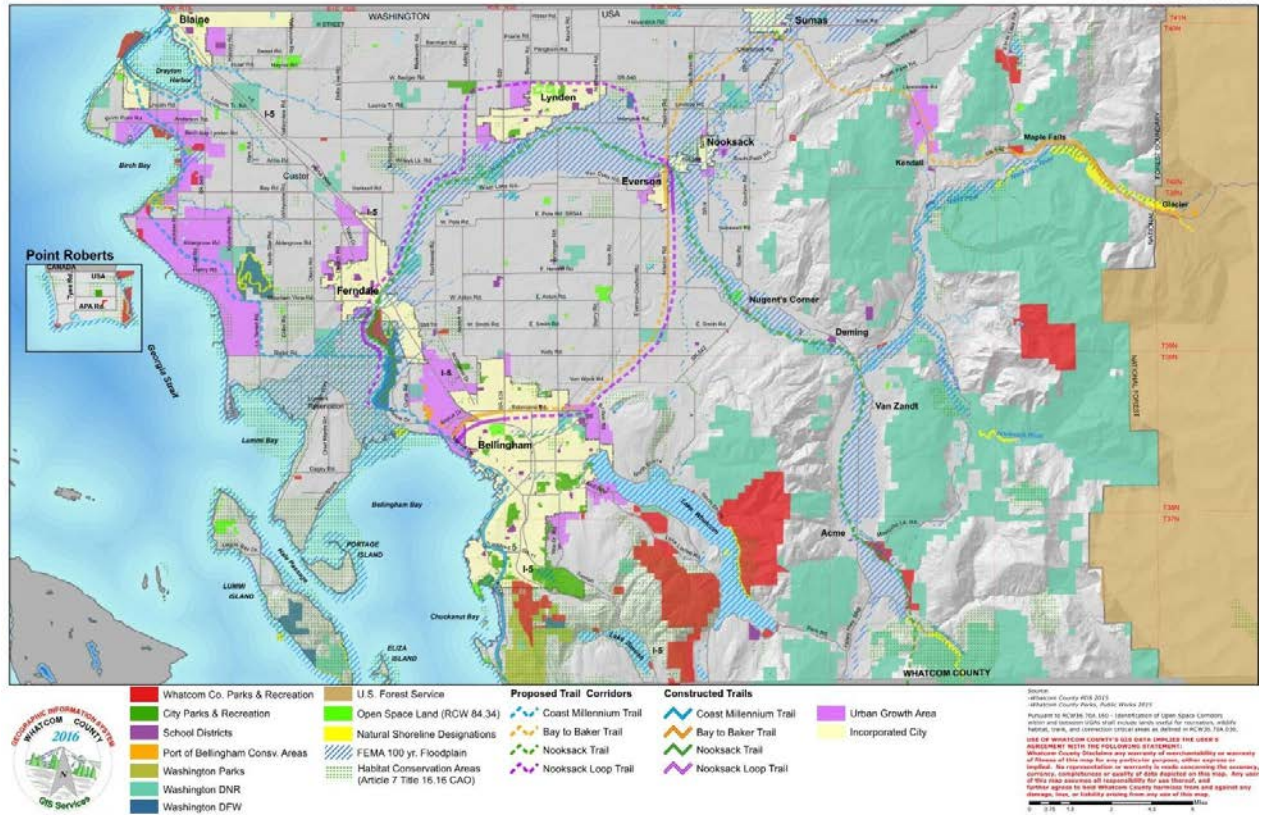
Climate Element

The County's new draft climate element as required by HB 1181 was considered to ensure consistency with existing comprehensive plan elements. Zoning and development is a sector identified in the element with a draft goal of preserving wetlands, forests, and open space. Ecosystems is another sector identified with a draft goal to protect, expand, and restore green space and tree canopy and adopt best management practices to promote aquatic and terrestrial carbon sequestration.

Subarea Plan: Bellingham Urban Fringe

The subarea plan was reviewed for references to open spaces. These goals and policies are consistent with implementing HB 1181 requirements.

- 1.15: Promote a coordinated effort to identify and prioritize interconnected natural areas and features for preservation to protect water quality and provide habitat, recreation, open space, and wildlife corridors.



Urban and Community Forests

The existing Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan does not map Urban and Community Forests. This new HB 1181 requirement is addressed below. Since the GMA does not include a definition of Urban and Community Forests, local discretion will be used to develop the criteria for mapping these forests.

Green Space

HB 1181 requires local governments to designate green spaces (RCW 36.70A.070(1)). GMA goals mention the retention of green space. Green spaces are defined in RCW 36.70A.030(24). LiDAR data and tree canopy assessment would likely include “green space” in its data set. Green spaces are not included in the current 2-3 map.

Map 2-3 provides a representation of open space, consisting of multiple components. The identified parcels are derived from various ownership designations, including:

- Whatcom County Parks and Recreation
- City Parks and Recreation
- School Districts
- Washington Parks (Washington State Parks)
- Washington DNR
- Washington DFW

- U.S. Forest Service
- Open Space Land (RCW 84.34)
 - Tax parcel analysis of property use descriptions shows the following acreage totals: At the Assessor’s Offices, the parcels which are highlighted on the Open Space Land (RCW 84.34) dataset are those parcels which have a property use description of “OPEN SP LND”. Currently, the parcels which meet this condition comprise 2,844.07 acres.
- Natural Shoreline Designations
- FEMA 100-Year Floodplain
- Habitat Conservation Areas (Article 7 Title 16.16 CAO)
- Proposed Trail Corridors and Constructed Trails
- City Limits and UGA

Recommended Amendments

Comprehensive Plan

Land Use Element

The following are recommended amendments within the “Open Space” section of the Land Use Element. Only subsections, goals, and policies that have proposed text amendments are included below, and those without changes are excluded.

Open Space

Introduction

Cascade peaks, forested mountains, the Nooksack drainage, farmlands, riparian corridors, lakes, shorelines and islands contain the natural beauty and character of Whatcom County's landscape. This setting contributes greatly to the quality of life enjoyed by county residents who value its elements of environmental quality, scenic beauty and recreational opportunities. Whether thought of as broadly as a mountain range and the marine waters of the Strait of Georgia, or as narrowly as a small corridor between two buildings in a small town, open spaces are essential components to the health and well-being of individuals and communities.

Purpose

This section, in keeping with the GMA, serves to identify and designate open spaces and open space corridors, and encourage their retention.

GMA Requirements

The GMA requires Whatcom County to designate the general location of open spaces lands, green spaces, and urban and community forests within UGAs (RCW 36.70A.070(1)). The GMA’s open space and recreation goal is to “Retain open space and green space, enhance recreational opportunities, enhance fish and wildlife habitat, increase access to natural resource lands and water, and develop parks and recreation facilities” and to “encourage the retention of

~~open space and development of recreational opportunities, conserve fish and wildlife habitat, increase access to natural resource lands and water, and develop parks" (GMA Planning Goal, RCW 36.70A.020 (9)).~~ **Map 2-2** shows the distribution of lands currently enrolled under Whatcom County's open space taxation program (see below).

The ~~GMA act~~ also has a requirement to identify open space *corridors* within and between urban growth areas to include "...lands useful for recreation, wildlife habitat, trails, and connection of critical areas..." (RCW 36.70A.160). This law authorizes the public purchase of such corridors.

Map 2-3 shows proposed Open Space Corridors for Whatcom County.

Background Summary

Whatcom County contains many public open space lands such as county and state parks and state and national forest lands. Whatcom County stewards over ~~16,000~~^{15,000} acres of parkland. The Washington State Parks Department stewards more than 2,400 acres of state parks. The State stewards over 88,000 acres of land in Whatcom County, including two Natural Resource Conservation Areas. The forest lands are generally open to the public for recreational uses, except for seasonal and some special use restrictions. The US Forest Service and the North Cascades National Park manage over 800,000 acres of land in the eastern portion of the county for timber, recreation, wildlife habitat, fisheries production, and wilderness.

~~Whatcom County currently administers two Open Space programs under the provisions of the Under the provisions of the~~ Open Space Taxation Act (RCW 84.34) ~~and one program under RCW 84.33 (Timber and Forestlands).~~ ~~Designated Forestland (DFL) and Open Space Farm and Agriculture (OSAG) are administered through the Whatcom County Tax Assessor's Office.~~ ~~Open Space Land (OSL) utilizes a Public Benefit Rating System (PBRS) criteria and is administered through Whatcom County Planning and Development Services.~~ Whatcom County may classify as "Open Space" farms, forests, and beneficial open lands upon request by individual land owners when such lands meet adopted criteria and policies. These adopted policies are contained in the policies established in this section. A Public Benefit Rating System that implements the policies rates each application under consideration.

Properties which qualify under the county's Open Space program are granted partial relief from property taxes in exchange for maintaining their land in open space use as defined by state law and county policies. ~~Some open space categories-~~ ~~The Open Space Land and Open Space Farm and Agricultural Land categories are rated using the PBRS and~~ require that a landowner provide public access provisions to the property while ~~other categories-~~ ~~OSAG and DFL~~ do not have this requirement. According to latest Assessor's information, ~~107,287~~^{119,907} acres were classified under the County's open space program in ~~2025~~²⁰¹⁴, ~~96%~~^{94%} of which were classified as Open Space ~~Farm and Agricultural Land~~. Most of the forested areas in Whatcom County, however, are classified as forest lands under RCW 84.33. This law phased out the ad valorem system for taxing timber land. This act was meant to encourage forestry and reforestation of forests for the continued enjoyment of present and future generations. See **Map 2-2** for the location of these areas.

For privately held open space lands, there can be strong pressures to convert resource lands and rural areas to more urban environments. Additionally, while Whatcom County has more than 130 miles of saltwater shoreline, only about 6% is currently in public ownership and freely

accessible to the public. With the county projecting a growing population and expanding development, the opportunity for additional public access is reduced almost every day.

Issues, Goals, and Policies

Open Space Areas

Whatcom County residents consider open space and the conservation of farm and timber land to be essential to the quality of life in Whatcom County. As urban growth pressures increase, open space, farms, forests, and shorelines are becoming more valuable to the residents of the county. Loss of open space is perceived by the people of Whatcom County as an adverse impact to the quality of life.

Goal 2QQ: **Conserve or enhance important natural, cultural, and scenic resources.**

Policy 2RR-1: Protect and encourage voluntary restoration of streams, stream corridors, wetlands, natural shorelines, fish habitat and aquifers through education and incentive programs. For willing landowners, purchase property or acquire easements for riparian and channel migration zone areas to protect habitat of threatened and endangered species.

Policy 2RR-2: Protect soil resources.

Policy 2RR-3: Protect unique or critical wildlife and native plant habitat.

Policy 2RR-4: Promote the preservation of areas with tree canopy outside of riparian areas.

Policy 2RR-~~5~~5: Enhance the values of abutting or neighboring parks, forests, wildlife preserves, nature reservations or sanctuaries or other open space lands.

Policy 2RR-~~5~~6: Enhance recreation opportunities.

Policy 2RR-~~6~~7: Preserve scenic vistas, historic, and archaeological sites.

Open Space Corridors

Retaining open spaces between and within cities and small population centers contributes to the high quality of life in Whatcom County. The need for jurisdictions to coordinate in designating Open Space Corridors in order to preserve the quality of life desired by residents, provide connector trails and public access, protect wildlife habitat, and ensure areas for recreation becomes greater as the population of the county continues to grow and urban areas continue to expand.

Goal SS: **Identify and protect open space corridors within and between urban growth areas. These corridors should include trails and other lands useful for recreation, while emphasizing wildlife habitat, and connection of critical areas, where feasible.**

Policy SS-1: Identify marine, riverine, and other riparian corridors as essential elements of open space corridors.

Policy 2SS-2: Identify contiguous forested landscapes as essential elements of open space corridors. Utilize the Conservation Easement Program to protect working forestlands to achieve numerous benefits, including the

preservation of the working forestland base, recreation opportunities, watershed health, and wildlife habitat.

Policy 2SS-3: Identify tidelands and floodplains as essential elements of open space corridors.

Policy 2SS-4: Identify estuaries, lakes, and rivers as naturally occurring open space corridors.

Policy 2SS-5: Plan greenway corridors within urban growth areas. Ensure development is consistent with these corridors through the permit process and incentive programs.

Policy 2SS-6: Include common open space in which pedestrian and bicycle pathways may be integrated in new developments.

Policy 2SS-7: Identify open space corridors in areas highly susceptible to climate change impacts.

Goal 2TT: Promote coordination among the county, cities, Port of Bellingham, and other appropriate jurisdictions in order to protect linked greenbelts, parks, and open spaces.

Policy 2TT-1: Encourage all jurisdictions to provide adequate neighborhood parks and play areas within safe walking and bicycling distances of residential neighborhoods.

Policy 2TT-2: Link county open space corridors with those of adjacent jurisdictions where viable.

Policy 2TT-3: Encourage separation of urban growth areas through planning, development regulations, open space purchase, conservation easements, and other appropriate mechanisms.

Policy 2TT-4: Enhance coordination and integration across various departments within Whatcom County, including the Parks Department, Planning & Development Services, and Public Works, to acquire land and easements that achieve maximum co-benefits.

Encouraging Open Space Conservation

A variety of methods act to encourage the retention of open space. These range from regulatory restrictions to incentives and to public purchase. It has been the policy of Whatcom County to create an equitable tax climate for the landowner willing to maintain land as open space, through the use of the Open Space Taxation Act. While the GMA authorizes the purchase of open space corridors, in many cases incentive-based measures may be more flexible, productive, and desirable.

Public and private conservation organizations such as the Nature Conservancy, the Trust for Public Land, and the Whatcom Land Trust serve important functions such as assisting in negotiating with property owners, providing funding sources, and accepting conservation easements and land donations. Often such organizations can act quickly to provide interim preservation during the time period necessary for government action to occur.

Finally, protection of private property rights is an important issue for Whatcom County residents that needs to be expressed in public policy concerning open space.

Goal 2UU: Ensure equity between the public benefit and the private burden while encouraging open space retention.

- Policy 2UU-1: Retain valuable agriculture and forestry lands by enrollment in Whatcom County's open space taxation program.
- Policy 2UU-2: Recognize that some parcels in the open space taxation program, while key components of the open space system, may not be open to the public.
- Policy 2UU-3: Support the conservation of fish and wildlife habitat through enrollment in Whatcom County's open space taxation program.
- Policy 2UU-4: Support the retention of open space and open space corridors through the use of education and incentives, such as Conservation Easement Program, density bonuses within UGAs in association with the density credit program, cluster development, and acquisition of easements.
- Policy 2UU-5: Augment land use regulations by engaging in a proactive program of public investment, landowner incentives, and other actions aimed at preserving open space.
- Policy 2UU-6: Improve public access to shorelines and other lands using such mechanisms as the Conservation Easement Program, density bonuses within UGAs in association with the density credit program, and open space tax status.
- Policy 2UU-7: Evaluate conservation opportunities, comparing conservation alternatives, and developing a list of priority sites.
- Policy 2UU-8: Make expenditures for public purposes, such as open space, parks or greenbelts, with existing public funds and other sources as appropriate. New local taxes for these purposes should be imposed only upon the vote of the people.
- Policy 2UU-9: Support the conservation of unique environmental features through the creative use of cluster subdivisions.
- Policy 2UU-10: Support the incorporation of stream greenbelts into subdivision design as common open space and provide incentives for stream buffers greater than those legally required.
- Policy 2UU-11: Support the important role of public and private conservation organizations.
- Policy 2UU-12: Support public and private land trusts in acquiring conservation easements that provide open space attributes, consistent with the intents of property owners.
- Policy 2UU-13: Review the goals of *Preserving a Way of Life: A Natural Heritage Plan for Whatcom County*, endorsed by the Whatcom County Council in 1991 and continue to implement those goals which are appropriate, beneficial, consistent with this plan, and within the County's fiscal capabilities.
- Policy 2UU-14: Consider an update to *Whatcom County Open Space Policies and Criteria and Public Benefit Rating System* (as amended in 1995 under Ord. No. 1995-040) to further incentivize voluntary [public access](#), fish and wildlife habitat enhancement and protection on privately owned lands and shorelines.

Green Space

The GMA requires the County to designate “green spaces” (RCW 36.70A.070(1)). Green space is defined in the GMA (RCW 36.70A.030) as an area of land, vegetated by natural features such as grass, trees, or shrubs, within an urban context and less than one acre in size that creates public value through one or more of the following attributes:

- (a) Is accessible to the public;
- (b) Promotes physical and mental health of residents;
- (c) Provides relief from the urban heat island effects;
- (d) Promotes recreational and aesthetic values;
- (e) Protects streams or water supply; or
- (f) Preserves visual quality along highway, road, or street corridors.

Mapped green spaces focus on publicly owned areas with the above attributes within UGAs.

Goal 2VV: Promote a coordinated effort to identify and prioritize accessible green space in urban growth areas.

Policy 2VV-1: Support retaining small green spaces under one acre in urban growth areas.

Policy 2VV-2: Promote green spaces that are publicly accessible.

Policy 2VV-3: Promote recreational use of urban green spaces.

The Bellingham, Birch Bay, Columbia Valley, and Ferndale UGAs contain green spaces. The other UGAs do not contain green spaces under the criteria above.

Urban and Community Forests in UGAs

The GMA requires the County to designate “urban and community forests” (RCW 36.70A.070(1)). Urban and community forests include vegetated areas on lands in urban growth areas. Specifically, this includes any land with trees and associated vegetation, whether it's planted or naturally occurring, used or unused, and includes areas along roads, utilities, and forested watersheds within populated zones.

Goal 2WW: Support the designation of urban and community forests in UGAs.

Policy 2WW-1: Designate urban and community forests on public land greater than 5 acres with over 75% tree canopy.

The Bellingham, Birch Bay, Blaine, and Cherry Point UGAs contain Urban and Community Forests. The other UGAs do not contain Urban and Community Forests under the criteria above.

Open Space Corridors Map

The Open Space Corridors (**Map 2-3**) indicates both areas of interest for acquisition or easements to implement the open space objectives and other areas which will remain private but because of their nature serve as visual or wildlife corridors. This does not imply that all sites will be acquired, nor have their development potential reduced. Property owners may or may not have been contacted regarding potential public access.

Inventory of Open Spaces and Corridors

Open Space and Corridors

WAC 365-196-335 (1) states that each county must identify open space corridors within and between urban growth areas. They must include lands useful for recreation, wildlife habitat, trails, and connection of critical areas

The [ArcGIS StoryMap of Whatcom County's Conservation Easement Program](#) indicates key conservation priorities throughout the County based on multiple data sources.

Critical Areas

Not all relevant critical areas are included within Map 2-3 as a mechanism for mapping open spaces. Map 2-3 has representations of:

- FEMA effective 100-year floodplain
- Habitat Conservation Areas as defined by Chapter 16.16, Article 7 of the Whatcom County Code
- Natural shoreline designations as defined in Section 23.30.102 of the Whatcom County Code

Other critical areas are comprehensively mapped in the Chapter 10 – Environment Map Series, including, Maps 10-1 through 10-4:

- Map 10-1 Water resources including Wetlands as defined in Chapter 16.16, Article 6 of the Whatcom County Code
- Map 10-2 Fish Habitat Conservation Areas
- Map 10-3 Wildlife Habitat Conservation Areas
- Map 10-4 Geologically Hazardous Areas and other natural hazards as defined in Chapter 16.16, Article 3 of the Whatcom County Code

Resource Lands

County designated agricultural and forestry resource lands support state open space goals and requirements. Farmlands support agriculture and provide local food options for the region's residents along with wildlife habitat, stormwater management, and many other ecosystem benefits. Working forest resource lands support carbon sequestration, stormwater management, drinking water, and wildlife habitat.

The following areas are shown on Map 2-1:

- Forest resource lands

- Agricultural resource lands

Public and Tribal Lands

The County could consider identifying other state and federal public lands and/or tribal lands as potential open space.

Climate Impact Areas

Sea level rise and riverine flooding are mapped in the Environmental Impact Statement and County Climate Hazard and Impact Assessment. These areas of forecasted risk may be considered as an overlay with open space designations.

Open Space Designations

In addition to those lands identified as County Open Space in Map 2-3, Map 2-2 identifies those lands currently enrolled in the agricultural, forestry and open space current use taxation program may be identified as appropriate for open space under the provisions of the GMA. Further, those lands under conservation status through deed restrictions on the property as indicated with a permanent conservation easement may be considered as open space resources.

Open Space Between UGAs

The GMA required local jurisdictions to identify open space between UGAs pursuant to RCW 36.70A.160, which was adopted in 1990 and amended in 1992. There have been no changes to RCW 36.70A.160 since 1992. This GMA provision does not require a local government to change the way the identified open space is regulated.

There are four areas where UGAs abut or are in close proximity to one another:

- Bellingham and Ferndale UGAs;
- Cherry Point and Birch Bay UGAs;
- Birch Bay and Blaine UGAs; and
- Everson and Nooksack UGAs.

Open Space between Bellingham and Ferndale UGAs

The Bellingham and Ferndale UGAs currently abut one another in the vicinity of Slater Rd. However, the City of Bellingham has proposed re-designating this portion of their UGA to UGA Reserve. This provides a unique opportunity to consider identifying an open space corridor between these UGAs under RCW 36.70A.160. Therefore, it is recommended that an open space corridor be identified on Comprehensive Plan Map 2-3 along selected streams between the UGAs south of Slater Rd. in the area being re-designated to Bellingham UGA Reserve.

Open Space between Cherry Point and Birch Bay UGAs

WCC 20.68.550(5) requires a 660' buffer where the Cherry Point UGA abuts Birch Bay UGA. This buffer area serves as an open space corridor between the Cherry Point UGA and the Birch

Bay UGA as shown on proposed Comprehensive Plan Map 2-3. Map 2-3 already identified Terrell Creek as an open space corridor between these two UGAs.

Open Space between Birch Bay and Blaine UGAs

The Birch Bay UGA abuts the City of Blaine in the vicinity of Bayvue Rd. These UGAs have abutted one another since the 1997 Comprehensive Plan was adopted. Since 1997, areas to the west and east have been removed from the respective UGAs and re-designated as Rural, reducing the land in abutting UGAs. The stretch where Birch Bay UGA abuts the City of Blaine is currently a little less than $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile. The area in County jurisdiction, in the Birch Bay UGA, has an older subdivision and a newer binding site plan that abut the City of Blaine. Therefore, there are not new opportunities for the County to identify an open space corridor between these UGAs. However, Comprehensive Plan Map 2-3 shows the Coast Millennium Trail runs through the area where the Birch Bay UGA abuts the City of Blaine

Open Space between Everson and Nooksack UGAs

The Cities of Everson and Nooksack, and their respective UGAs, directly abut one another. Comprehensive Plan Map 2-3 identifies the 100 year floodplain of the Nooksack River as an open space corridor between the UGAs.

Potential Open Space Mapping Resources

- [Landslide datasets](#)
 - WGS-Protocol Landslide Mapping shows the locations of landslides mapped using lidar and the Washington Geological Survey's published landslide mapping protocol Bulletin 82 (Slaughter and others, 2017).
 - This information should be accessible to the public and used in Map 2-3 and used as a component of a forthcoming revision of the Public Benefit Rating System.
- [Slope Data](#)
 - Slope data should be accessible to the public, used in Map 2-3 or supplemental maps, and used as a component of a forthcoming revision of the Public Benefit Rating System.
- [Lidar Forest Canopy Height \(in Feet\)](#)
 - LiDAR Forest Canopy Height give insight into the extent of urban and community forest which currently supports trees.
- [Surface Geology](#)
- [Soil Data from NRCS](#) (Natural Resource Conservation Service)
- [Conservation Lands](#)
 - This data represents a combination of data from the [Whatcom Conservation Easement Program](#), [Whatcom Conservation Futures Funding Program](#), and the [Whatcom Land Trust](#). It is intended to show non-state/federal land conservation areas within Whatcom County.
 - Whatcom Land Trust
 - Whatcom County
 - City of Bellingham
 - Lummi Nation
 - DNR

- Whatcom County and City of Bellingham
 - Private conservation lands
- [Impervious Surface Data](#) (NOAA C-CAP, WRIA 1)
- [USDA Crop Types](#)
 - Crop types may give insight into soil types. Areas which provide usable crops should be subtracted from current open space land.
- [Pipeline Corridors](#)
 - The sites of pipeline corridors may give insight into efficient corridors throughout the County. These corridors may also coincide with open space corridors.
- [Site Potential Tree Height at 200-Year Index](#)
 - This layer, which provides a projection of tree height based on soil type, may be the most effective tool for mapping the extent of urban and community forest which could support trees.

Table 2. Open Space Layers For Future Consideration

- | |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whatcom County Parks and Recreation • City Parks and Recreation • Washington State Parks • Washington DNR • Washington DFW • U.S. Forest Service • Open Space Land (RCW 84.34) • FEMA 100-Year Floodplain • Natural Shoreline Designations • Habitat Conservation Lands (Article 7 Title 16.16 CAO) • Proposed Trail Corridors and Constructed Trails • City Limits and UGAs • School Districts • Geologically Hazardous Areas <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Landslides ○ Slope Data • Effective Floodplains & Floodway • Draft Floodplains & Floodway Wetlands • Wildland Urban Interface • Open Space Designations according to tax classification • Conservation Land as indicated through deed restriction • Sea Level Rise and Riverine Flooding (3.3 ft and 1.75x 100-year flood) • Tribal Lands • Wildland Urban Interface or USFS Wildfire Risk to Communities Public Lands <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Wilderness areas ○ Non-DNR Major Public Lands, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ State Parks and Recreation ▪ WDFW ▪ Other state-owned lands (university, etc) ▪ USFS ▪ NPS |
|---|

- US Fish and Wildlife
- BLM
- Bureau of Reclamation
- Army Core of Engineers
- Other Federal (US DoD)

Urban and Community Forest

RCW 36.70A.070(1) requires local governments to identify urban and community forests within UGAs. Mapping "urban and community forests" is a locally defined task since the GMA does not include a definition of these forests. The GMA does indicate that Urban and Community Forests are within UGAs. The following criteria will be used to map Urban and Community Forests in Whatcom County: Map Urban and Community Forests on public lands greater than five acres and over 75% tree canopy in UGAs.

It should be noted that there are three "community forest projects" identified by the Northwest Community Forest Coalition (NWCFC) in Whatcom County: Canyon Lake Community Forest, Stewart Mountain Community Forest, and Chuckanut Community Forest (known colloquially as "Hundred-Acre Wood"). Whatcom County's 2024 CPROS Plan indicates boundary data for Canyon Lake and Chuckanut, but not for Stewart Mountain Community Forest. Additionally, these forests are not mentioned together except on Page 34, Forestlands subsection, Policy C: "Identify and preserve prime examples of heritage forestlands in Whatcom County – such as the old growth forests in and around Canyon Lake Community Forest and the extensive woodlands on Chuckanut, Lookout and Stewart and Sumas Mountains."

Canyon Lake Community Forest is classified as "Preserve/Open Space", Chuckanut Mountain Park is classified as "Regional Park" but is not referenced as a community forest, and Stewart Mountain is not mentioned as a community forest, nor is the Stewart Mountain Community Forest effort described in the plan. The Stewart Mountain Community Forest Initiative provides the proposed boundaries of the forest.

These areas are outside UGAs and therefore are not required to be identified as "urban and community forests" under the GMA, but they do contribute to countywide open space resources.

Green Space

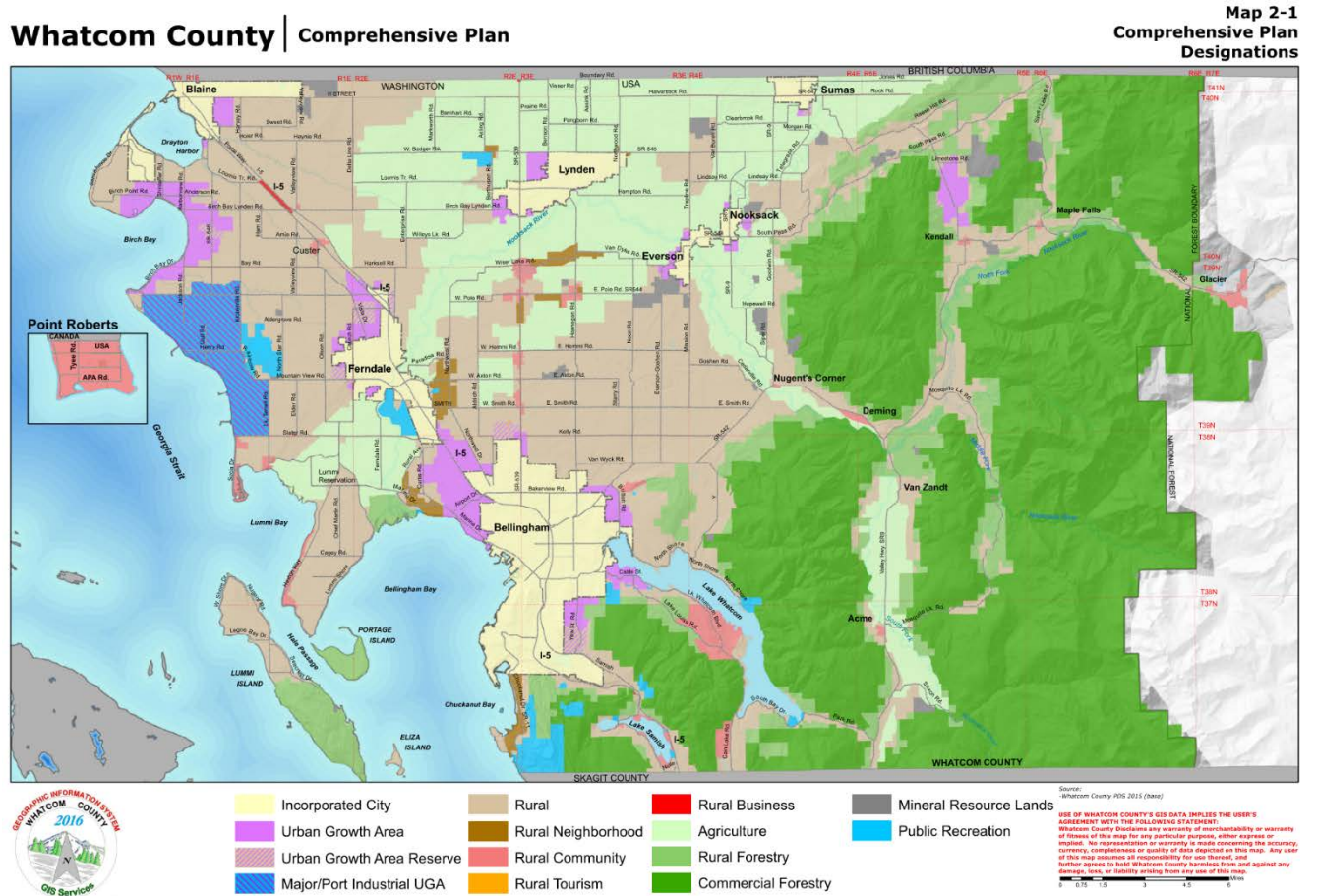
Consider designating green spaces in UGAs as a new, mappable category within the Open Space system. The challenge lies in defining Green Space criteria, as RCW 36.70A.030 specifies attributes that are often difficult to map. These attributes include: public accessibility, promotion of physical and mental health, mitigation of urban heat islands, recreational and aesthetic contributions, protection of water resources, and preservation of roadside visual quality. The County must decide whether to: separately map Green Spaces by re-designating smaller (less than 1 acre) existing Open Space areas that fulfill these criteria, or broaden the Open Space definition to encompass Green Space characteristics.

Other Land Use Maps

Map 2-1: Comprehensive Plan Designations (2016)

Map 2-1¹⁴, showing Comprehensive Plan Designations, does not explicitly delineate open space as an identified designation. Public recreation is identified, along with Agriculture lands, forestry lands, and mineral resource lands. These designated areas play a part in the County’s strategy for open space.

Figure 5. Map 2-1 Comprehensive Plan Designations



Map 2-1: Recommended Amendments

Although Map 2-1 is not referenced in the “Open Space” Section of the Comprehensive Plan’s Land Use Element, it may be useful to indicate the relationship between the Comprehensive Plan Designations and open space planning.

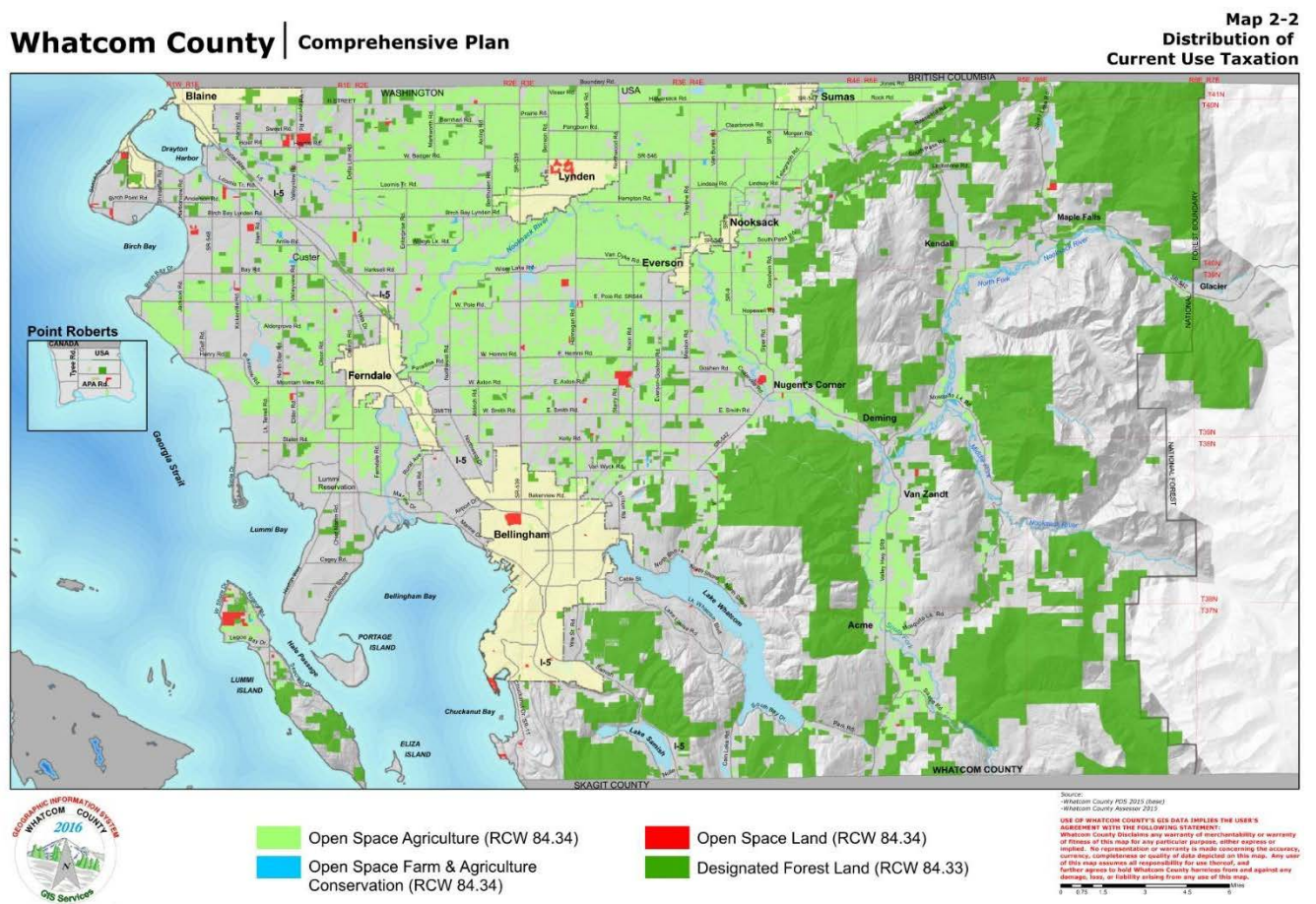
¹⁴ Current Comprehensive Plan, Whatcom County *Chapter 2 Maps* (2016): <https://www.whatcomcounty.us/1171/Current-Comprehensive-Plan>

- Recommendation: Create new urban and community forest and green space maps and insert in Comprehensive Plan Chapter 2.
- Recommendation: **Community** forestry and **commercial** forestry have the same initials and may cause confusion in GIS-based attribute tables. Consider a convention for symbolizing and referencing these items that reduces any future confusion.

Map 2-2: Distribution of Current Use Taxation (2016)

Map 2-2¹⁵ represents parcels of land in Whatcom County identified as open space land, agricultural lands, and forest lands according to taxation designations.

Figure 6. Map 2-2 Distribution of Current Use Taxation



Chapter 84.33 RCW (TIMBER AND FORESTLANDS)

¹⁵ Current Comprehensive Plan, Whatcom County *Chapter 2 Maps* (2016): <https://www.whatcomcounty.us/1171/Current-Comprehensive-Plan>

These lands are those which have the property use description of Designated Forest (“DESIG FOREST”) in the County Assessor’s tax parcel attributes.

Chapter 84.34 (OPEN SPACE, AGRICULTURAL, TIMBERLANDS—CURRENT USE— CONSERVATION FUTURES)

These lands are those which have the property use description of Open Space Land (“OPEN SP LND”), Open Space Agriculture (descriptions containing “OSAG”), Open Space Farm and Agriculture Conservation (“OSFC”) in the County Assessor’s tax parcel attributes.

General Recommendations

- Create an online map that shows the accessible properties that are in current use taxation.
- Recommendation: consider whether to include Open Space Agriculture as a formal open space designation. Open Space Agriculture is not indicated on Map 2-3.