

## WHATCOM COUNTY PLANNING COMMISSION

### BUILDABLE LANDS REPORT 2022

#### FINDINGS OF FACT AND REASONS FOR ACTION

1. Staff and the Planning Commission recognize that the Buildable Lands Report does not address the issue of housing affordability. Additional work that revisits the estimates of supply and demand that are feasible, realistic, and consistent with current regulatory requirements and infrastructure are needed and will be reviewed in the 2025 comprehensive plan updates.
2. The proposal is to adopt the *Buildable Lands Report 2022 – Whatcom County Review and Evaluation Program* (July 7, 2022).
3. The SEPA Official determined on July 19, 2022 that adoption of the *Buildable Lands Report 2022 – Whatcom County Review and Evaluation Program* is categorically exempt from SEPA review under WAC 197-11-800(17) as information collection and research.
4. Notice of the Planning Commission hearing was posted on the County website on September 30, 2022.
5. Notice of the Planning Commission hearing was published in the Bellingham Herald on September 30, 2022.
6. Notice of the Planning Commission hearing was sent to the County's email list on September 30, 2022.
7. The Planning Commission held a public hearing on the subject amendments on October 13, 2022.
8. The Growth Management Act (GMA) "Review and Evaluation Program" (buildable land) requirements became applicable to Whatcom County and the cities when the State Legislature adopted Engrossed Second Substitute Bill 5254 in 2017.

9. The GMA's Review and Evaluation Program requirements (RCW 36.70A.215) include updating county-wide planning policies, developing a buildable lands program methodology, data collection, reviewing achieved densities, evaluating land suitable for development, and issuing a Buildable Lands Report. The information contained in the Buildable Lands Report will inform the next update of the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan, which is due by June 30, 2025.
10. The County's consultant held interviews with representatives of each jurisdiction and several key community stakeholders. This information was compiled in a *Stakeholder Interview Summary Whatcom County Review and Evaluation (Buildable Lands) Program* (CAI, May 2019).
11. The County's consultant conducted research on topics with important implications for the buildable lands report, including local regulations, infrastructure, housing affordability, and growth trends. This included reviewing relevant portions of the Revised Code of Washington and Washington Administrative Code. This information was compiled in a *Background Information and Key Issues Report* (CAI, June 2019).
12. Whatcom County and the cities, with the assistance of a consultant, developed the *Whatcom County Review and Evaluation Program Public Participation Plan* (April 2020) and have followed that Plan.
13. Whatcom County and the cities developed draft Countywide Planning Policies establishing the Review and Evaluation Program. The Whatcom County Planning Commission held a public hearing on these Countywide Planning Policies on September 10, 2020. The Whatcom County Council held a public hearing and adopted the Countywide Planning Policies on February 9, 2021 (Ordinance 2021-003).
14. Whatcom County and the cities, with the assistance of a consultant, drafted the *Whatcom County Review and Evaluation Program Methodology* to implement the 2017 state amendments to the GMA. Stakeholders reviewed and provided comments on preliminary draft versions of this Methodology in 2021. Modifications to the draft Methodology were made based upon stakeholder comments in 2021. The Whatcom County Planning Commission held a public hearing on the draft Methodology on October 28, 2021. The County Council and city councils were briefed on the draft Methodology in 2021-2022. The Whatcom County Planning Director approved the Methodology on February 10, 2022.
15. Whatcom County and the cities, with the assistance of a consultant, developed Data Reporting Tool templates for collection of data on development and local government ordinances over the review period. The templates are intended to facilitate uniform collection of data by the County and cities.

16. The County and cities entered information in the Data Reporting Tools, including information on building permits and plats issued between April 1, 2016 and March 31, 2021. The Data Reporting Tools calculate achieved densities over the five year review period.
17. Whatcom County and the cities, with the assistance of a consultant, developed Suitable Land Tool templates for estimating the amount of land available for development over the remaining portion of the planning period. The templates are intended to facilitate uniform evaluation of land supply by the County and cities.
18. The County and cities entered information in the Suitable Land Tools to estimate the capacity of land suitable for development to accommodate population and employment growth over the remaining portion of the existing planning period (2021-2036). The Suitable Land Tools compare the land capacity to the projected population and employment growth to estimate whether there will be a surplus or deficit of land to accommodate projected growth (2021-2036).
19. The City of Bellingham and the County shared draft Data Reporting Tool and Suitable Land Tool spreadsheets at a Buildable Lands - Virtual Stakeholder Workshop on February 9, 2022.
20. Whatcom County and the cities issued the *Buildable Lands Report 2022 – Whatcom County Review and Evaluation Program* on July 7, 2022. This Report summarizes and analyzes information from the Data Reporting Tools, Suitable Land Tools, and other sources to meet the requirements of the Growth Management Act.
21. The *Buildable Lands Report 2022 – Whatcom County Review and Evaluation Program* shows that there is sufficient suitable land to accommodate the countywide population projection contained in the *Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan* (Chapter 1).
22. The *Buildable Lands Report 2022 – Whatcom County Review and Evaluation Program* shows that each Urban Growth Area (UGA), with the exception of the Birch Bay UGA, has sufficient suitable land to accommodate the UGA population projections contained in the *Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan* (Chapter 1).
23. The *Buildable Lands Report 2022 – Whatcom County Review and Evaluation Program* shows that there is sufficient suitable land to accommodate the countywide employment projection contained in the *Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan* (Chapter 1).

24. The *Buildable Lands Report 2022 – Whatcom County Review and Evaluation Program* shows that each UGA has sufficient suitable land to accommodate the UGA employment projections contained in the *Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan* (Chapter 1).
25. The *Buildable Lands Report 2022 – Whatcom County Review and Evaluation Program* shows that reasonable measures are needed for the Birch Bay, Cherry Point, and Columbia Valley UGAs pursuant to RCW 36.70A.215.
26. For the Birch Bay UGA, reasonable measures are needed to address:
  - a. Achieved residential densities between 2016 and 2021 were below the planned densities in *Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan* Chapter 2 (Goal 2P);
  - b. Land capacity to accommodate the population projection adopted in *Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan* Chapter 1; and
  - c. Land capacity to accommodate single family housing needs as set forth in *Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan* Chapter 3.
27. For the Cherry Point UGA, reasonable measures are needed to address employment growth because growth that occurred between 2016 and 2021 was significantly below the planned growth projected in the *Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan* (Chapter 1). Employment growth would have exceeded the planned growth, except that a major employer shut down in 2020.
28. For the Columbia Valley UGA, reasonable measures are needed to address employment growth because growth that occurred between 2016 and 2021 was significantly below the planned growth projected in the *Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan* (Chapter 1).
29. Reasonable measures are not needed for any other lands in unincorporated Whatcom County.

## **CONCLUSION**

The review and evaluation required by the Growth Management Act has occurred and *Buildable Lands Report 2022 – Whatcom County Review and Evaluation Program* has been issued in accordance with RCW 36.70A.215.

**RECOMMENDATION**

Based upon the above findings and conclusions, the Planning Commission recommends that the County Council adopt the *Buildable Lands Report 2022 – Whatcom County Review and Evaluation Program*.

WHATCOM COUNTY PLANNING COMMISSION

  
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Kelvin Barton, Chair

  
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Tammy Axlund, Secretary

10 - 13 - 22  
Date

10/13/22  
Date

Commissioners voted to recommend approval on October 13, 2022 (vote was 6-0, with 3 members absent). Members present at the meeting when the vote was taken: Robert Bartel, Kelvin Barton, Atul Deshmane, Julie Jefferson, Dominic Mocerri, and Scott Van Dalen.