

2023 Policy Priorities

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BROADBAND

1. Update Interlocal Agreement between Port of Bellingham and Whatcom PUD to include Whatcom County staff representative in steering committee. Clarify roles, responsibilities, management structures, and communication.
2. Contract with PUD to draft Broadband Priority Map
3. Develop notification system to facilitate utility coordination
4. Require all new and renewed franchise agreements include a coordination of construction activities clause
5. Require installation of conduit at all new developments and certain road construction projects (consistent with Broadband Priorities Map). Transfer ownership of conduit to PUD at no cost for their operation, maintenance, and management. Include a moratorium on re-digging unless emergency or administrative approval.

CLIMATE ACTION

1. Energy

County Facilities

- Improve LEED or develop net-zero standards for all new County buildings
 - energy efficiency, renewable energy, living building, smart metering
 - consider options for retrofitting existing buildings
 - Use of Cross-Laminated Timber and other low-carbon/carbon storage building materials
- Prepare for and apply to state and federal funding opportunities for renewable energy and storage
- Conduct an assessment on all county buildings for viability of deploying solar and estimated cost

Renewable Energy Generation

- Update wind energy code (draft currently in PDS, going to Planning Commission in Feb)
- Community Solar program on County owned lands
 - Work with PUD, who is working on a study for expanding their residential service, and/or PSE

2. Transportation (See [Resolution 2022-033](#))

Electric Vehicles and Charging Stations

- Assessment of County fleet and proposal/timeline for transition to electric or alternative fuels
- Installation of EV Charging Stations at key County facilities and parks
 - work with PUD and/or PSE
 - consider vehicle to grid opportunities
- Code requiring Industrial, Commercial, and Multifamily residential development to require certain # or % parking spots as EV charging ready

Alternative Transportation

- Implement Regional Trails Plan building out from cities (Partnership between Parks/PW)
- Enhance bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure and connectivity
- Update County Code to require transportation impact fees for new development to fund development of non-motorized trails
- Support development and implementation of improved transit options

3. Land Use

- 2025 Comprehensive Plan Update (See [Resolution 2022-036](#))
 - Incorporate climate change, watershed management, and salmon recovery
- Review/revise coastal and riverine floodplain development regulations and development of voluntary incentive programs, i.e. reduce development in the floodplain and other climate impact zones, development of Geohazard Reduction Program that removes development rights and imperiled residential structures from geohazard and climate impact zones
- Consider update to Shoreline Management Plan after Vulnerability and Risk Assessment Project is completed

4. Water

- Support Nooksack Adjudication and invest staff and funding in implementation of the Solutions Table process
- Flood mitigation and adaptation
- Implement water use efficiency standards for new development and promote voluntary water conservation programs
- Water Bank or comparable market-based mechanism
- Lake Whatcom water quality
 - Creation of a Lake Whatcom Watershed Advisory Committee
 - Reduce/remove development rights/pressure
 - Ensure forest management projects have a net positive impact

5. Salmon Recovery

- Correct fish passage barriers
 - Ensure fish passage barriers/corrections included in all County road/bridge assessments
 - MOA with Tribes
 - Implement updated Salmon Recovery Plan (to be completed this year)

- Work with non-profits such as Nooksack Salmon Enhancement Association on habitat and riparian restoration projects
- Support South Fork Nooksack River Integrated Floodplain Reconnection Project

6. Forestry

- Forest Management Plans for Lake Whatcom Park, Canyon Lake Community Forest and Stewart Mountain (\$100,000 secured in 2023 budget)
- Evaluation of the Lake Whatcom Landscape Plan
 - Expanded compliance monitoring
 - Expanded Interjurisdictional Committee membership
 - Science/data collection and analysis to determine impacts of forestry on water quality
- Economic Assessment for maintaining viable forestry economy and timber industries and development of forestry industry revitalization effort/investment – better/more efficient equipment, mass timber, what other investments need to be made to accommodate climate resilient forest management
- Monitor DNR Carbon Project and local harvests – increase communication/consultation with DNR and ask for more data
- Enforce [Timber Management Plans](#) submitted by landowners for Open Space Timber Classification

7. Agriculture

- Expand the Conservation Easement Program (funding secured for .25 FTE in 2023 and 1 FTE in 2024) – Conservation Futures
- Review recommendations of 2019 Rural Land Study and review potential rezone of Rural Study Areas
- Food Systems – work with Food System Committee
- Work with Conservation Districts to recruit more CEP applications and promote climate resilient practices
- Address remaining challenges with slaughter/packinghouse regulations – Ben?

8. Recreation

- Evaluation of recreation impact on environment
- Recreation management
- Education and Outreach on responsible recreation
- Tubing/recreation broadly in South Fork Nooksack (Stewart Mountain, South Fork Park, DNR lands will also have impacts)
- Regional Trails Plan
 - Connectivity and new development

9. Environmental Health/Justice

- Health Department climate vulnerability assessment(s) – floods, wildfires/smoke, heat

10. County Operations

- Improve cross department coordination between PDS, PW, Health and Parks

HOUSING

Health and Human Services

- Resolution recognizing housing/homelessness as a public health crisis
- Expanding housing inspections/testing for health related concerns
 - Ex: mold, meth, solid waste, lead, asbestos
- Institute stronger conditions of funding such as rental safety standards, rent increase limitations, or model lease
- Expand complaint system
- Continue to expand shelter capacity / capacity build for community partners

Planning and Development

- Economic analysis of affordability and availability of housing – post buildable lands and in conjunction with Comp plan update, evaluation of 2016 housing chapter
 - Socioeconomic study based on income levels, number of jobs, and housing stock current and projected that is affordable at those levels.
- Evaluation of permitting requirements and timeline – streamline? Incentives?
- Tiny House Registry – work with State and City of Bellingham
- Explore code amendments allowing for and expediting ADUs in UGA and R5
- Improve rental conditions
 - Inspections - FTE/co-fund with City of Bellingham
 - Improve code enforcement and issuance of penalties for non-compliance
- Short- and long-term rental registration or business license
 - Tax incentives?

Other ideas

- Explore County as landowner in community land trust model – Local Improvement district
- Work with City of Bellingham (or other cities) on safe parking / shelter / tiny home villages

Consider Whatcom County Business & Commerce Advisory Committee Housing

Recommendations:

The County should:

1. Reduce the complexity and the cost of compliance of code.
2. Prioritize density in existing city boundaries and urban growth areas while supporting limited annexations.
3. Provide incentives for permanently affordable home ownership and rentals for occupants whose incomes range from 50% to 150% of area median income.

We request that you:

Budget:

1. Add an FTE planner to focus on affordable housing in Whatcom County.
2. Adopt the Multifamily Tax Exemptions of 8, 12, and 20 years.
3. Use EDI funds as a long term, low interest loan to pay for onsite infrastructure for affordable housing.

Land Use/Building permits:

1. Approve land use permits within 4 months, and building permits within 3
2. Adopt voluntary inclusionary zoning, with incentives for permanently affordable homeownership and rentals.
3. Adopt as a pilot program, an ordinance similar to Spokane C36232 to allow ADU, duplexes, and up to 4-plexes in all single-family zones within urban growth areas.
4. Allow building permits to be approved by 3rd party outside sources
5. Enact digital permitting for land use and building permits.
6. Allow single staircase in multifamily buildings
7. Extend all county land use permit timelines to a minimum of 5 years to align subdivisions, conditional use permits, stormwater permits, development agreements, and wetland permits.
8. Extend Critical Area Permits and Consultant reports with the Preliminary Plat or Land Use Permit.
9. Allow applicants to bond clearing, grading, and stormwater permits before Public Facilities Construction application approval.
10. Expedite permitting for permanently affordable housing (complete permit sets approved within 90 days).
11. Preserve existing mobile home parks.
12. Create a minimum 7-day notice for a Hearing Examiner date.
13. Increase the notice period for rent increases to 90 days.

Planning Department Staff

1. Schedule informal monthly meetings between Planning director, staff, land use consultants, tenants, and for-profit and non-profit developers for feedback in both directions.
2. Require phone calls and emails to be returned within two business days.
3. Tighten coordination between Public Works and Planning to avoid conflicts and confusion.

Comprehensive Plan/Consolidated Plan

1. Support the following annexations in the 2026 Comp Plan: South Caitac UGA Reserve, Yew St, and Alderwood.
2. Create a wetlands mitigation bank available to developers.
3. Expand the analysis of cost-burdened households by income, to 200% of MFI.
4. Target an average rental vacancy of 3-5% for all income levels, and available housing supply of 4-6 months for all income levels.