

# 2024 Comprehensive Plan *Update*



## Community Interviews

### Summary Report

Snohomish County hired Berk Consulting in 2021 to conduct the environmental review of the 2024 Snohomish County GMA Comprehensive Plan under the State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA). As a part of this review, Berk interviewed four community organizations working with historically marginalized groups in Snohomish County. This summary report delves into what the County heard from these interviews, and how the important information will be incorporated into the Comprehensive Plan Update.

#### **Why Perform Community Interviews?**

One of the [overarching public participation](#) goals for the 2024 Comprehensive Plan Update is to engage with historically marginalized communities. One way the County seeks to actively involve and partner with a broader and more diverse population is through deeper, one-on-one engagement with organizations that work with historically marginalized communities. The County's consultant helped with these efforts by interviewing four community-based organizations in the county.

The interviews sought to understand each entity's role in the community, their values, and the concerns of those they serve. Questions aimed to identify planning topics of interest to the organizations and the communities they serve that could be incorporated into the 2024 Comprehensive Plan Update. These interviews serve as one piece of the public engagement puzzle that will hopefully result in a Comprehensive Plan that is well-grounded in the experiences and knowledge of the public. Through public engagement the County also hopes to better understand the potential negative and positive impacts of the Comprehensive Plan so that the full story can be presented to elected officials before they need to make final decisions.

#### **Who was Interviewed?**

Berk interviewed four organizations that were selected in concert with Snohomish County staff including the Office of Social Justice (OSJ). The first two interviews took place around the SEPA scoping period in early December of 2021, with the Edmonds School District's leads on school/family partnerships, and the Communities of Color Coalition (C3). Both entities serve black, indigenous, and persons of color (BIPOC), and the District focuses in particular on young members of the county and their families.

The second two interviews were with Cocoon House and the Verdant Health Commission in July and October 2022, respectively. Cocoon House serves unhoused and at-risk youth in the county

and Verdant Health focuses on access to healthcare, housing, food security, education, and supporting seniors.

The mission statements from each organization interviewed are copied below to more fully describe the activities of each entity.

**Edmonds School District** - Our mission is to advocate for each and every student by providing learning environments that embrace their cultural and linguistic diversity as an asset that will prepare them for success as lifelong learners and responsible world citizens.

**Communities of Color Coalition** - The Communities of Color Coalition (C3) mission is educating and advocating for social justice and human rights, especially for people of color and other under-represented groups that have been systemically oppressed. We do this through a transformational process that centers and supports those who are closest to the problem in developing and implementing the solutions necessary for systemic change.

**Cocoon House** – To empower young people, families, and the community to break the cycle of homelessness through outreach, housing and prevention.

**Verdant Health Commission** – To improve the health and well-being of our whole community.

### **What Did We Hear?**

Below is a summary of the central talking points that Berk communicated with the County about the interviews of the four organizations. These do not represent exact quotes, or the full breadth of topics, although they were all important to the organizations and the communities they serve.

- *Value of green space* - Verdant Health recently conducted a community survey with 600 responses that indicated their community values green spaces, playgrounds, and gathering places. These are especially important as the community feels they are being lost. It is also essential that these spaces are culturally and linguistically appropriate.
- *Affordable Housing* – South Snohomish is seeing an increase in housing prices, and it is no longer affordable for many to live there. If families are pushed north, it could increase commuting costs. The organizations agreed that some of the most important things the county needs as we grow are affordable housing at all economic levels. Home ownership is important, although there is also a need to focus on renters and creating situations where people feel safe and secure in their housing. Where people are not worried that they will be forced to move, whether they own or rent. Housing for young people is especially important, as is housing with services such as culturally responsive mental health and substance use treatment. One way to accomplish these goals could be to move away from single-family housing.
- *Affordable Transportation* – Access to well-connected transit, pedestrian and bike facilities, and open space/recreation that focuses on where people live and where amenities are located was a common discussion point. In addition to housing, each of the organizations discussed the need for people to be able to reach jobs, school,

healthcare, and community in an efficient, safe, and affordable manner. This is connected to the need to create more walking and biking opportunities that are safe, the desire to limit roadway congestion, provide more road connections, and create better access to transit. Access to public transportation is also a barrier in rural communities, where young residents can feel isolated and have difficulty reaching jobs.

- *Prioritize people* – The organizations felt that the county is prioritizing property and development over people. Environmental impacts should address people not just land, particularly vulnerable people, renters not just owners. How the plan affects people is important to consider.
- *Mixed-Use Centers* – The organizations discussed the desire to see mixed-use centers with access to regional transportation networks and affordable housing to those who work in Snohomish County. The county needs to plan for anti-displacement, and ensure development addresses equity. Be sure to also focus resources to also support suburban and rural areas, and not create pockets of impoverished areas.
- *Inclusivity* - The county must focus on being inclusive for all residents regardless of abilities, with services provided to each neighborhood. Services for people with disabilities are placed at a premium by the organizations and their communities.
- *Barriers to Communication* – Language is often a barrier to communication, and there is the need to translate county efforts. While key informant interviews are good, they can sometimes be gatekeepers, and it is important to make sure we hear from the whole community. It is best to have a multi-faceted approach, and recognize fatigue in community members.
- *Opportunities to Communicate* – Find already planned community events you can go to with an interpreter where we can share information. Do informational sessions alongside other events so the public interacts with people and not just long documents. Infographics are also really helpful.

The interviews were a success because county staff was able to learn from organizations who serve a more diverse community than we normally hear from during planning processes. This information will be shared with all members of the Comprehensive Plan Update team to be incorporated into the Plan and to improve future engagement efforts.

The interviews will not be the end of public engagement for the 2024 Update. Instead, the interviews will hopefully serve as a foundation for future relationships and partnerships across the county. The County will also continue to use virtual meetings and recorded presentations as other tools to engage with the public throughout the 2024 Update process.

### **How Will We Improve?**

The four interviews provided information that is actionable for the Update, and provided lessons learned that the County can utilize in the next engagement efforts.

### *Compensation*

Snohomish County is required by State law to conduct public participation during the Comprehensive Planning process, and it is also essential to ensure the Plan captures the values of the community. Despite the need for public input, the County cannot yet provide monetary compensation for time spent by non-employees in service of the Comprehensive Plan. While there is a process underway by the Executive's Office to change this policy and create a way to pay residents and organizations that take the time to help the county make planning efforts more equitable, accessible, and inclusive, it is not yet available.

In light of not being able to pay the organizations, the questions asked in the interview could be interpreted as asking the public to do the County's job for staff versus partnering with the community. Moving forward, the county will conduct more up-front research about the organizations we hope to partner with, and aim to compensate these organization for their time. This will hopefully result in even deeper and more productive discussions that can aid both the county and the organization.

### *Staff Involvement and Timing*

The four interviews were conducted by the consultant primarily without county staff present. The idea was that such a dynamic could allow the organizations to feel more comfortable talking without fear of any negative reactions from the county. Although this was also an opportunity lost to build the foundations of a relationship between county staff and the organizations that could serve both parties moving forward.

Based on the availability of consultant and organization staff time, the interviews were not all conducted at the same time, and two of the organizations initially selected for interview had to change. With more county staff involvement and hopefully growing partnerships, this issue may naturally work itself out. Staff will make every effort in the future to make sure that desired interviews can occur when they can have the most impact.

### **What Are Our Next Steps?**

A common question after public outreach is how will this comment be used? After the interviews, Berk provided county staff with notes. The content from the first two interviews were included in the scoping period that helped direct the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the Update. The second two interviews are summarized in this report, and together with the first two interviews will be incorporated into each element of the Plan where possible.

Staff hope that the interviews will not be the only point of interaction between these organizations and the county. The interviews will be the starting point for further engagement, especially as the 2024 Update team presents preliminary drafts of policy amendments for each element to the public for input starting in November 2022. Staff will also take the lessons learned during the interviews and incorporate them into future outreach.