

# Introduction

The Snohomish County Growth Management Act Comprehensive Plan (“Plan”) provides policy direction for ongoing and future county planning efforts and development regulations. This direction comes from the County’s Vision Statement; the goals, objectives, and policies; the level of service and other programming; and maps such as the Future Land Use Map (FLUM). The goals, objectives, policies, programs, and associated maps serve as a set of blueprints to guide growth, preservation, and development in Snohomish County over a 20-year planning period. The planning horizon for the Plan is between 2024 and 2044.

The County is required to comprehensively review and update the Plan as needed every 10 years per the Growth Management Act (GMA) (chapter 36.70A RCW). It is essential to update the Plan periodically to integrate the state’s forecasted population and employment growth, and any changes to state law.

This introduction lays out the County's Vision Statement, provides a general overview of the Plan, describes several shifts that have occurred since the last update in 2015, and discusses trends expected for future growth in the county. Analysis of these shifts and trends provides insight into the background and context related to the development of the Plan.

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## A VISION FOR SNOHOMISH COUNTY

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Snohomish County’s Vision is an aspirational statement of where the county wants to be in 2044. It unites the many elements of the Plan and will guide the county over the 20-year planning horizon. Each element discusses the Vision and how the goals, objectives, policies, and other programs within the element will help bring the county closer to realizing the vision. It is also a tool for government leaders to consider when they make decisions today. If decision makers understand where the county wants to be in 2044, they can review each major decision through that lens to determine if it will help or hinder the county’s efforts to move closer to that future.

## ***Snohomish County's Vision for 2044***

*We're all in this together. In 2044 Snohomish County is a resilient, vibrant, and inclusive place to live with a high-quality of life where all residents can thrive.*

*In 2044...*

***Community:*** *The County has a range of healthy, safe, and affordable housing options for all economic segments of the population and in all stages of life. Communities around light rail stations and high-capacity transit service have flourished. Neighborhoods have access to local markets, businesses, healthcare, and recreational opportunities. Displacement from development pressure is minimized to ensure that businesses and affordable housing options remain in communities. Rural areas maintain their rural character with rural businesses and services that support local needs while being stewards of the natural environment.*

***Growth, Livability, and Equity:*** *The County has focused the majority of growth in urban areas while protecting rural, resource, and open areas. All residents in urban and rural areas can attain resources and opportunities to improve their quality of life and reach their full potential. The county is a welcoming and inclusive place to work, live, and recreate. Health and wellbeing are priorities, and the community has vibrant arts, music, and diverse cultures throughout.*

***Natural Environment:*** *The County values its beautiful landscapes and fiercely protects the natural environment for its ecosystem services, recreational opportunities, and habitat. There are many connected greenways, open spaces, and wildlife corridors throughout the county providing habitat, flood mitigation, and tree canopy. Regional and neighborhood parks, trails, and open spaces offer recreational opportunities that are accessible and inclusive to all.*

***Resilience and Conservation:*** *Communities are resilient to the changing climate. Special efforts continue to support our most vulnerable populations. The County is exceeding the state's greenhouse gas reduction targets and has implemented transportation and building practices that conserve resources and promote healthy living. The County is well-prepared to respond to natural disasters and emergency events to keep communities safe.*

***Transportation and Mobility:*** *People and goods move reliably, efficiently, and effectively throughout the county. There is a well-planned interconnected transportation network for all users, including walkers, bicyclists, transit riders, and drivers. Public transportation is well-*

*integrated into the transportation system and offers affordable and useful transportation options.*

***Economy:*** *The County has a strong and diversified economy that provides ample, living wage local employment. Snohomish County's economy is anchored in part by its commercial and industrial centers, tourism, robust agricultural enterprises, and investments in aerospace, green building, and alternative energy businesses. The airports, ports, and educational institutions maintain a critical role in ensuring the county's economic strength. The County continues to be a leader in emerging trends in employment and evolving business models.*

***Infrastructure and Services:*** *The County is served by well-maintained efficient, and coordinated public infrastructure systems and services, including roadways, schools, energy, water, wastewater treatment, and broadband service. Long-range plans consider our changing environment and advances in technology. Social services are easily accessible and provide resources and support ensuring basic needs are met with assistance to develop human potential.*

## HOW THE VISION STATEMENT GUIDES THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

The Snohomish County Vision Statement reflects the values and aspirations of community members, is grounded in an understanding of current conditions, and is informed by the regional vision - VISION 2050 - and Countywide Planning Policies (CPPs). The County synthesized input from the public, elected officials, and other local and regional bodies into one aspirational Vision Statement and seven guiding principles. Public participation during the visioning process, and throughout the entire update process for the Plan focused on engagement with a diversity of community members, and especially with historically and currently marginalized communities.

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## PLANNING UNDER THE GROWTH MANAGEMENT ACT

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### BALANCING PRIORITIES

The GMA requires jurisdictions to consider 14 goals within [RCW 36.70A.020](#) and [RCW 36.70A.480](#) to help guide the development and adoption of comprehensive plans and development regulations (see Table 1). The goals are not listed in order of priority, and it is up

to Snohomish County to balance these goals within the Plan. The Plan addresses each of the GMA goals and applies them to unincorporated Snohomish County in a balanced manner.

**Table 1. GMA Planning Goals (RCW 36.70A.020 and RCW 36.70A.480)<sup>1</sup>**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concentrated urban growth</li> <li>• Sprawl reduction</li> <li>• Regional transportation</li> <li>• Affordable housing</li> <li>• Economic development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Property rights</li> <li>• Permit processing</li> <li>• Natural resource industries</li> <li>• Open space and recreation</li> <li>• Environmental protection</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early and continuous public participation</li> <li>• Public facilities and services</li> <li>• Historic preservation</li> <li>• Shoreline management</li> </ul>
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Planning is not a zero-sum game. For instance, if affordable housing is incentivized in certain locations to fulfill GMA goals around housing, urban growth, and reducing sprawl, this is not necessarily at the expense of GMA goals surrounding the protection of the environment and open space. Housing and the environment are not always at odds because, for example, open space can be designed into developments that provide recreational opportunities as well as habitat for wildlife. Further, focusing growth within already developed urban areas can protect existing resource areas from conversion, and reduce the need for expansion of infrastructure for transportation and utility networks. However, planning does sometimes require trade-offs. The aim is to find a way to balance these goals by mitigating potential negative impacts and spreading positive results equitably.

## PLANNING TOGETHER

The first Snohomish County Comprehensive Plan was adopted in 1995, and the last major update occurred in 2015. Updates to the Plan are essential to accommodate projected growth and remain in compliance with the GMA and changes to other state, regional, or local policies.

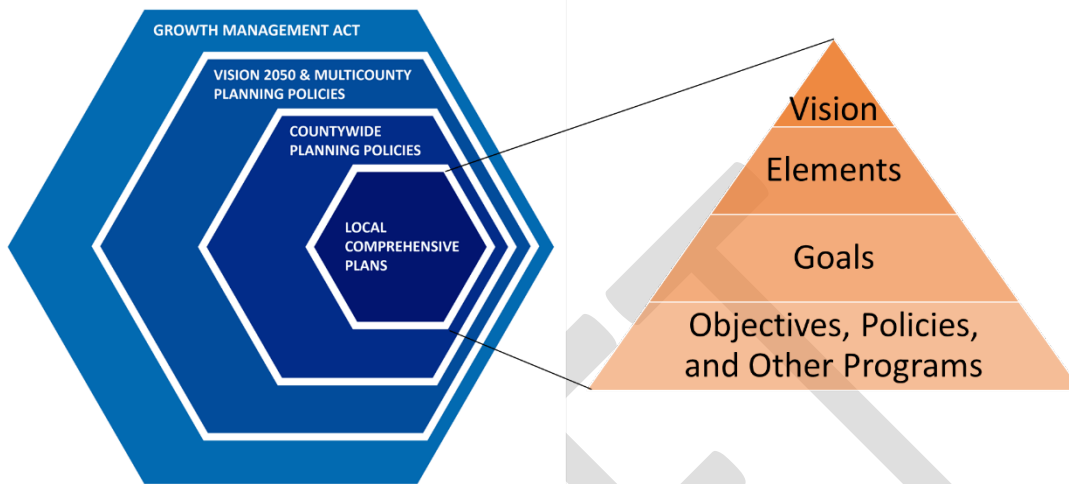
The Plan meets the requirements of a GMA comprehensive plan from chapter 36.70A RCW. The Plan includes the mandatory elements, all elements work together to guide population and employment growth for Snohomish County, and each element addresses specific GMA requirements for a local comprehensive plan.

The Plan also implements the general policy guidance of the multicounty planning policies (MPPs) and Countywide Planning Policies (CPPs) that represent regional and countywide priorities. The MPPs are found within VISION 2050, adopted by the Puget Sound Regional

<sup>1</sup> Table adapted from “Growth Management Act.” *Municipal Research and Services Center of Washington*. February 28, 2023, <https://mrsc.org/explore-topics/planning/general-planning-and-growth-management/growth-management-act>

Council (PSRC), and the CPPs are guided by Snohomish County Tomorrow (SCT) and adopted by County Council.

**Figure 1. Placing the Comprehensive Plan within the state and regional context**



The Regional Growth Strategy (RGS) in VISION 2050 outlines a strategic framework for accommodating future population and employment growth in the four-county region of Snohomish, King, Pierce, and Kitsap by shifting the geographic distribution of future growth, especially population, towards urban areas and away from rural areas. The RGS is reflected in the various elements of the Plan such as Population and Employment, Transportation, Land Use, and the Urban Core Subarea Elements. There is also a new focus within VISION 2050 on social equity and addressing climate change, and this new emphasis was carried forward into the CPPs, as well as the Plan as described below within *Planning for Growth*.

The CPPs are policy statements that establish a countywide framework from which county and city comprehensive plans are developed. Original adoption of the CPPs was in 1993 and there have been several amendments since that time to meet changing GMA requirements, address new city and county ideas, and align with regional policy such as VISION 2050. The Plan is consistent with both the MPPs and CPPs.

The Plan also strives for consistency with the plans of adjacent jurisdictions as discussed within the Interjurisdictional Coordination Element as well as the new Tribal Coordination Element. As many cities have not completed their own updates at the time of county Plan consideration and adoption, a reconciliation process as described in the CPPs is possible.

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## PLANNING FOR GROWTH

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The Plan is composed of 12 elements that together meet the requirements of a GMA comprehensive plan and guide population and employment growth for the county.<sup>2</sup> The 12 elements include:

- Population and Employment,
- Land Use,
- Housing,
- Transportation,
- Parks and Recreation,
- Capital Facilities and Utilities,
- Economic Development,
- Natural Environment,
- Interjurisdictional Coordination,
- Climate Change,
- Urban Core Subarea Plan, and
- Tribal Coordination.

Like the GMA goals, the elements are not in priority order, and they are interrelated. An effective transportation system, for example, must consider other factors such as housing and economic development.

Each element is composed of goals, objectives, and policies. Goals speak to broad desired outcomes for the element based on the Vision for the county. The goals are further clarified with more specific objectives that once implemented will help achieve the goal. Policies are actions the County will take to implement the objectives and, by extension, the goals and Vision. The policies provide specific direction for planning processes and decision-making within the county. The Transportation, Parks and Recreation, and Capital Facilities and Utilities Elements also include specific plans, programs, inventories, forecasted needs, level of service requirements, and project lists. These three elements are different because they discuss infrastructure, both county and publicly owned, that is essential for a high quality of life as well as future growth. To effectively manage existing infrastructure and plan for the future, it is necessary to understand what currently exists, what needs repair, what will be needed in the

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<sup>2</sup> The 2015 Plan consisted of five components each located in separate volumes. These included the General Policy Plan (GPP), Transportation Element, Capital Facilities Plan, Capital Improvement Program, and the Parks and Recreation Element. The GPP included the elements of population and employment, land use, housing, transportation, parks and recreation, capital facilities, utilities, economic development, natural environment, and interjurisdictional coordination. The GPP also included the Future Land Use Map (FLUM) and other supporting maps. Within the 2024 Plan, all elements that were previously within the GPP, as well as the other previously separate components of the Plan, are incorporated into one comprehensive plan document as elements.

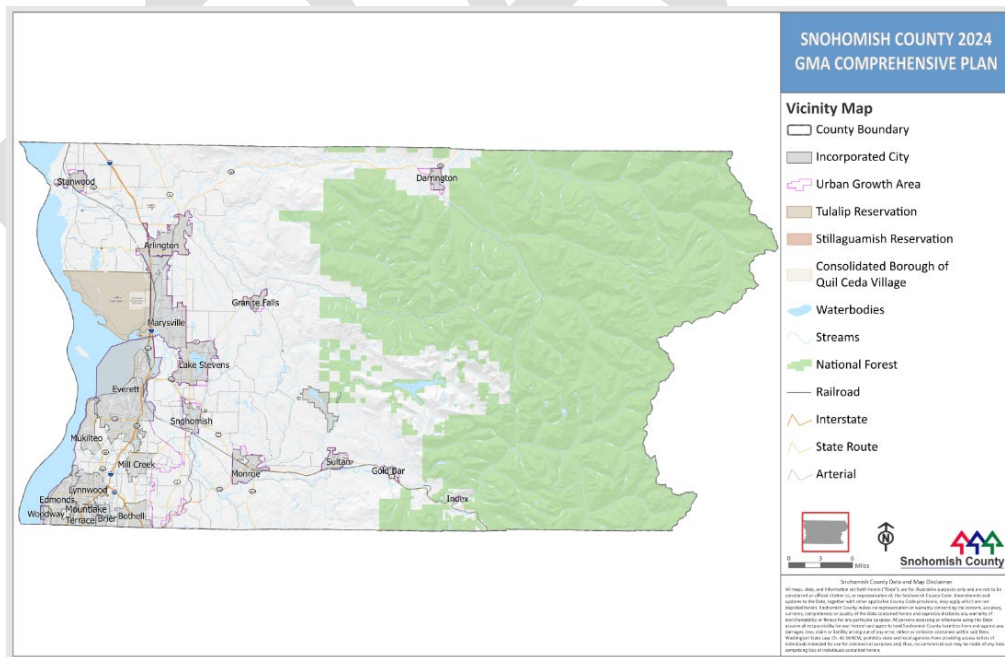
future, and how those projects will be prioritized and paid for moving forward. In this way, the Plan includes policies to inform future decision making as well as more immediate actions.

Social equity is an overarching theme present in each element because of policy changes at the state, regional, and countywide level in addition to public interest. Social equity is not a new concept, although it has a more substantial and overt role in the Plan to help move the County towards its Vision, represent the people of Snohomish County, and plan for an inclusive and accessible future necessary for our diverse county to thrive. Other themes such as climate change, housing affordability, and mobility are also discussed in multiple elements, although they are primarily focused on in the Climate Change, Housing, Transportation, and Urban Core Subarea Plan Elements.

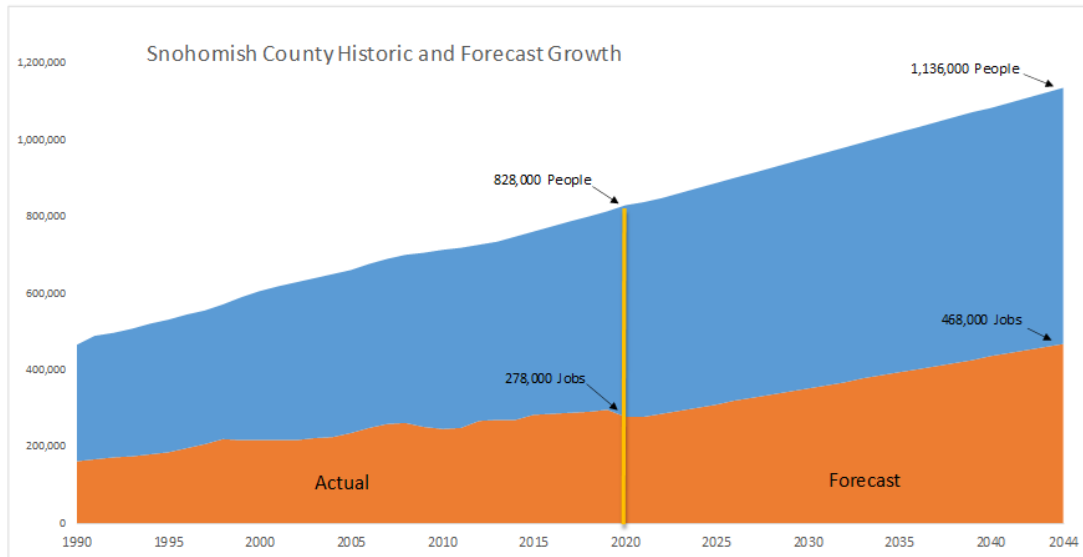
## FORECASTED GROWTH

Snohomish County is 2,090 square miles in size and the 2020 population was 828,000 people. The County’s Plan must plan for the current population as well as those forecasted to be here in 2044. Forecasting future growth is tricky as many factors impact migration and natural increase through births. Some of the factors include where jobs are available and if individuals can work remotely or need to commute to work; the price of housing; the location of neighborhood amenities; climate change, weather patterns, and natural disasters; urban versus rural preferences; and much, much more.

Figure 2. Map of Snohomish County



**Figure 3. Snohomish County Population and Employment history and forecasts utilizing PSRC data.**



Despite the potential variability, the Plan must look toward the future utilizing the best available information to plan in a responsible, equitable, and orderly fashion. As displayed in Figure 3, the forecasted total population for Snohomish County in 2044 is 1,136,000, and the forecasted employment is 468,000 jobs. This represents a potential increase of 308,000 people and 190,000 jobs between 2020 and 2044. Each element of the Plan aims to address this forecasted growth.

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## A MOMENT IN TIME

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A lot has happened within Snohomish County and the rest of the world since the last major update of the Plan in 2015. The full influence of each change is not fully understood yet, although these changes have impacted how the County plans. Some of the major shifts the county experienced are described below to provide context for factors that shaped the development of the Plan. Throughout the shifts and changes, the County’s planning efforts that began in 2018 were informed by listening to the community and utilizing forecasts and professional expertise.

### COVID-19 PANDEMIC

As the development of the 2024 Plan began, the county and world entered the COVID-19 pandemic that upended people’s lives in big and small ways. As of February 2023, 1,436 individuals have died due to COVID-19 in Snohomish County, 15,531 have died in Washington



State,<sup>3</sup> and over 1.1 million people have passed away because of this pandemic in the United States.<sup>4</sup> This health disaster has also impacted the economy, transportation systems, and how people think about their homes and open spaces. The U.S. Census reports that in 2019, 6 percent of Snohomish County residents worked remotely, and by 2021 that percentage had increased to 24.6 percent.<sup>5</sup> This represents a 302 percent increase in people working from home in Snohomish County in just 2 years. This increase in remote work decreased the demand on transportation systems, although traffic volumes in Snohomish County do appear to be returning since the height of COVID-19. It is unclear if this represents a stable trend or a short-term blip because the county has access to limited data.

It is too soon to know what the lasting impacts of COVID-19 will be, although it is clear that the pandemic amplified existing inequities. For instance, statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicate that American Indian or Alaska Native, Non-Hispanic persons are 1.6 times more likely to get COVID-19, 2.5 times more likely to be hospitalized, and 2.0 times more likely to die from COVID-19 than a white, non-Hispanic person.<sup>6</sup> The United Nations also notes that COVID-19 “is particularly detrimental to members of those social groups in the most vulnerable situations, ... including people living in poverty situations, older persons, persons with disabilities, youth, and indigenous peoples. Early evidence indicates that the health and economic impacts of the virus are being borne disproportionately by poor people. For example, homeless people, because they may be unable to safely shelter in place, are highly exposed to the danger of the virus.”<sup>7</sup> COVID-19 has also changed the way we do business, think about public safety and health, and participate in community events.

Consideration of COVID-19 impacts is incorporated into the Plan in several ways, from amendments to existing policies within the Transportation Element to the addition of new broadband policies in the Capital Facilities and Utilities Element. COVID-19 also affected public participation for the Plan. While staff were unable to do as many in-person public meetings as in past updates when work on the Plan began, staff could focus more heavily on online and virtual engagement. Virtual engagement can be more inclusive as it does not require residents

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<sup>3</sup> “COVID-19 Data Dashboard.” *Washington State Department of Health*. February 22, 2023, <https://doh.wa.gov/emergencies/covid-19/data-dashboard>

<sup>4</sup> “Trends in Number of COVID-19 Cases and Deaths in the US Reported to CDC, by State/Territory.” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*. February 28, 2023, [https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#trends\\_totaldeaths\\_select\\_00](https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#trends_totaldeaths_select_00)

<sup>5</sup> “DP03 Selected Economic Characteristics, 2021: ACS 1-Year Estimates Data Profiles.” *United States Census Bureau*. February 28, 2023, <https://data.census.gov/table?q=employment+status&g=0500000US53061&tid=ACSDP1Y2021.DP03>.

<sup>6</sup> “Risk for COVID-19 Infection, Hospitalization, and Death by Race/Ethnicity.” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*. December 28, 2022, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/investigations-discovery/hospitalization-death-by-race-ethnicity.html>.

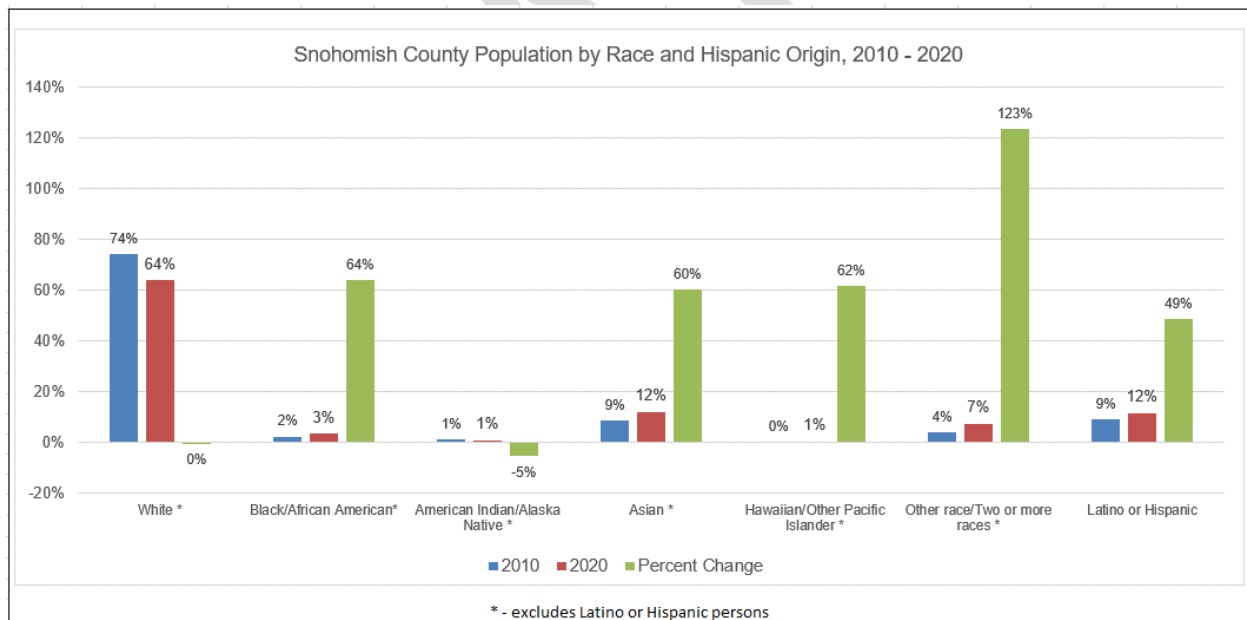
<sup>7</sup> “Everyone Included: Social Impact of COVID-19.” *United Nations*. February 28, 2023, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/everyone-included-covid-19.html>.

to travel from their homes. Overall, staff created in person, virtual, and hybrid opportunities to engage with the Plan update process.

## DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS

Between 2010 and 2020, the population of Snohomish County increased by 17 percent and the demographics indicate that the county became more diverse. More specifically, the White population decreased from 74 to 64 percent of the overall county population between 2010 and 2020, whereas the population of Black or African American residents in the county increased by 64 percent, the percentage of Asian residents increased by 60 percent, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander residents increased by 62 percent, and the Latino or Hispanic residents increased by 49 percent (see Figure 4). The biggest increase was in the category of residents identifying as two or more races, which increased by 123 percent between 2010 and 2020. The percentage of residents identifying as American Indian and Alaska Native decreased by 5 percent between 2010 and 2020.

**Figure 4. Snohomish County population by race and Hispanic origin, Census 2020.<sup>8</sup>**



As the County plans for the next 20 years, it is expected that the population will continue to increase and to diversify. The goals, objectives, policies, and programs within the Plan are inclusive and create a safe place for its increasingly diverse population, workforce, and visitors. Further, the Plan includes a Tribal Coordination Element that focuses on ways the county will coordinate with the Tribes present in the county.

<sup>8</sup> “2020 and 2010 Census Redistricting Data (Public Law 94-171) Summary File.” U.S. Census Bureau. September 16, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/about/rdo/summary-files.2020.html#list-tab-ZZWKJDURNFSGBG03L8>.

Planning decisions have historically upheld and instituted social and racial inequities. The elements of the Plan each address equity within their goals, objectives, and policies, and part of the Plan’s Vision includes that the county is an inclusive place to live where all can thrive. The County will plan for all residents, workers, and visitors and is committed to equitably and meaningfully engage and plan with Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) as well as other historically and currently marginalized communities, such as veterans, seniors, youth, immigrants and refugees, people with low income, and people living with disabilities. The definition of equity utilized in the Plan comes from the CPPs:

All people can attain the resources and opportunities that improve their quality of life and enable them to reach full potential. Those affected by poverty, communities of color, and historically and currently marginalized communities are engaged in decision-making processes, planning, and policy making.

## ECONOMIC SHIFTS

In addition to a global pandemic and demographic shifts in the county, there have also been economic changes. In particular, the Paine Field Passenger Terminal was finalized in 2018 and according to the airport, supports “158,227 jobs and has a total economic impact/business revenue of \$59.9 billion annually.”<sup>9</sup> This new, privately-owned passenger terminal is bringing awareness, travelers, jobs, and traffic to Snohomish County. In 2019 another large potential employment area was added to the county. The Cascade Industrial Center (CIC) received its official designation as a Manufacturing and Industrial Center (MIC) by the PSRC.<sup>10</sup> The CIC is located within the cities of Arlington and Marysville and according to the City of Arlington, “includes just over 4,000 acres of manufacturing and industrial zoned land with more than 1,700 developable acres...the CIC supports a wide range of mechanized and technology-driven industries due to its distinctive and abundantly qualified advanced manufacturing workforce, smart manufacturing practices, and access to emerging platform technologies offered via a concentration of mechanical engineering, instrumentation and fabrication experts. We expect to add 20,000 more family-wage jobs in the CIC over the next decade, helping residents work close to home and boosting our local economy.”<sup>11</sup> The Plan examines these economic drivers within the Economic Development, Interjurisdictional Coordination, Transportation, and Land Use Elements.

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<sup>9</sup> “By the numbers.” *Paine Field Airport*. February 28, 2023, <https://www.painefieldmasterplan.com/>.

<sup>10</sup> “Cascade Manufacturing Industrial Center designated by PSRC.” *Puget Sound Regional Council*. July 1, 2019, <https://www.psrc.org/about-us/media-hub/cascade-manufacturing-industrial-center-designated-psrc>.

<sup>11</sup> “Cascade Industrial Center.” *City of Arlington*. February 28, 2023, <https://www.arlingtonwa.gov/575/Cascade-Industrial-Center>

## HOUSING SHIFTS

Access to safe and affordable housing is fundamental to the success of our communities, and Snohomish County is in an affordability crisis. The median home price in the County increased by 117 percent between 2000 and 2021, whereas the median household income only increased by 9 percent. One major contributor to the rising cost of housing in Snohomish County is a shortage in supply. The PSRC estimates that the region (Snohomish, King, Kitsap, and Pierce counties) currently needs an additional 50,000 homes, and that by 2050 Snohomish County alone will have a deficit of 187,000 homes if the county does not plan for an increased supply of housing. The Housing and Land Use Elements aim to address the affordability crisis by incentivizing a wide variety of housing types and densities in the urban areas.

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## A LIVING PLAN

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An effective comprehensive plan cannot be a static document. It must be a dynamic guide to the future, a living document that the county monitors and refines in response to changing circumstances and events. Adjustments and refinements over the coming years may be needed to respond to changes in the GMA, new decisions from the Growth Management Hearings Board and courts, direction from policy makers, and input from the public.

The docketing process ensures that the general public – as well as the county itself – has a regular opportunity to propose plan amendments for formal consideration.

The Plan provides policy direction to decision makers utilizing the best available information to help the county move toward its Vision for 2044. The goals, objectives, policies, and other programs of the 12 elements serve as a set of blueprints to guide growth, preservation, and development in Snohomish County over a 20-year planning period.