



Snohomish County

Planning and Development Services

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Snohomish County Planning Commission

Dave Somers
County Executive

FROM: Sarah Titcomb, Principal Planner

SUBJECT: Introduction to the Snohomish County Comprehensive Plan

DATE: March 10, 2023

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this staff report is to provide information on a staff-recommended repeal and replace of the Introduction for Snohomish County's Growth Management Act (GMA) Comprehensive Plan ("Plan"). A briefing on the recommended language is scheduled for the March 28, 2023, Planning Commission meeting.

BACKGROUND

The proposed Introduction to the Plan provides the statutory framework and requirements for the Plan, as well as a snapshot in time for when the Plan is being updated. The Introduction gives the reader the background and context related to the development of the Plan that is necessary to understand the elements and policies.

The proposed Introduction is part of an effort to reformat the Plan so it is more concise, user-friendly, and relatable. The reformat of the Plan will combine the previously separate General Policy Plan (GPP), Transportation Element, Capital Facilities Plan, and Park and Recreation Element into one document. Additionally, the 2024 Plan will include three new elements: Climate Change, the Urban Core Subarea Plan, and Tribal Coordination. The proposed Introduction will serve the entire Plan and include a new Vision Statement for 2044 to unify the different elements of the Plan as well as staff, the public, and elected officials by making it clear what the county is planning toward. The Vision Statement has its foundations in the regional VISION 2050 from the Puget Sound Regional Council (PSRC) and was made county specific through public engagement.

The 2015 version of the Introduction is limited to the GPP, it focuses heavily on Demographic Trends and Projections specific to the early 2000s, and it touches on consistency with other plans as well as regulatory requirements. The proposed Introduction of the 2024 Plan will deviate from the 2015 version in content, although the goal of both introductions to introduce the reader to the Plan is the same.

Public sentiment on many topics has evolved since the last Plan was adopted in 2015, and there have been shifts in demographics, the economy, and housing in Snohomish County as well as a global

pandemic. The Introduction presents this context as well as the new Vision Statement and also touches on updates within the Multicounty Planning Policies (MPPs, e.g. VISION 2050) adopted in 2020, and the Countywide Planning Policies (CPPs) adopted in 2021 with growth targets adopted in 2022. The proposed 2024 Introduction thereby demonstrates the Plan’s consistency with regional and local directives and provides community, legislative, and historical context.

PROPOSED COMPREHENSIVE PLAN AMENDMENTS

The proposed 2024 Introduction is reorganized from the 2015 version to emphasize and explain the newly proposed Vision Statement, describe how the Plan fits into state, regional, and countywide planning processes, and discuss the motivations behind several element-specific updates. The proposed 2024 Introduction also briefly examines forecasted population growth, the COVID-19 pandemic, and demographic, economic, and housing shifts occurring across the county to describe the context the county is planning under.

There is some overlap in the information provided in the 2015 and 2024 Introductions. Both list the elements of the Plan, sources and reasons for the update, and demographic trends. Although the 2024 Introduction is a repeal and replace instead of a series of amendments because the way the material is presented in the 2024 Introduction is almost completely new. The organization of the 2024 Introduction is very different from the 2015 version, and there is also a new Vision Statement, a new discussion of how planning goals can be balanced, and a discussion of the overarching themes of the Plan. The majority of the demographic information from the 2015 Introduction is proposed to be removed as it is specific to 2015, although this information will not be lost completely from the 2024 Plan. Updates to demographic figures and tables will be presented, as relevant, in the Population and Employment Element. The 2015 Introduction also includes a “Major Concepts” section that discusses the GMA requirements for the inclusion of resource, rural, and urban lands in the Plan that will be moved primarily to the Land Use Element. With the removal of sections from the 2015 Introduction, and a major rewrite of the sections proposed to remain in the 2024 Introduction, the proposed 2024 Introduction is significantly shorter than the 2015 version. This could inspire more users of the Plan to read the Introduction and serves to highlight the Vision Statement.

The newly proposed Vision Statement is:

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.

ANALYSIS

The following analysis provides a summary of the proposed amendments’ compliance with state law, and regional and countywide planning policies.

Compliance with State Law

The GMA planning goals adopted in RCW 36.70A.020 guide the development and adoption of comprehensive plans. RCW 36.70A.070 also lists mandatory elements required for GMA comprehensive plans. The Introduction provides relevant introductory text and a Vision Statement for Snohomish County’s Plan that all serve to frame and inform the county’s development of its Plan elements in a manner consistent with the GMA. Additionally, the Vision Statement is informed by public input and is therefore reasonably related to and consistent with GMA planning goal 11.

Compliance with the Multi-County Planning Policies

The proposed Introduction does not necessarily serve to implement specific MPPs like the elements of the Plan do, instead, the Introduction lays the foundation for the rest of the Plan. This is similar to how the introduction is described in VISION 2050 as introducing “the reader to the region, the vision for the future, desired outcomes, and how VISION 2050 establishes a plan to help the region grow in a more sustainable and socially equitable manner. It serves as both an introduction and a broad summary of VISION 2050.”

The topics discussed in the Introduction are consistent with the MPPs and the regional vision. As an example, part of VISION 2050 reads, “All people can attain the resources and opportunities to improve their quality of life and enable them to reach their full potential.” This definition of equity was adapted within the CPPs and is proposed to be included in the Introduction for use in the Plan. Similarly, the format of the regional vision in VISION 2050 is emulated within the Plan’s Vision Statement in the Introduction.

Compliance with the Countywide Planning Policies

The CPPs do not directly relate to the proposed Introduction. Although the proposed Introduction is consistent with the CPPs. For instance, the definition of equity from the CPPs is utilized in the Introduction and the Introduction helps inform the county’s Plan that is consistent with the CPPs.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The GMA requires early and continuous public participation (GOAL 11 and RCW 36.70A.140). Public participation for the Introduction has been provided to date through:

- Snohomish County held a Visioning comment period for the 2024 Comprehensive Plan Update between November 1, 2021, and February 25, 2022. Staff compiled the input received from over 100 comments, as well as comments received during a prior Parks Division visioning process, to help develop a draft Vision statement.
- To advertise the Visioning comment period, staff traveled across the county to speak with businesses and community members about the visioning process and the importance of the Comprehensive Plan. The comment period was also advertised through a press release, on the 2024 Update project website, distribution list emails, and through newsletter articles.
- Staff compiled a draft Vision Statement synthesizing public comments, the regional vision (VISION 2050), and staff expertise. This draft was presented back to the public for comment in the Spring 2022 newsletter and in emails sent to all previous commenters.

Many of the public comments were received on a Vision Statement Comment Form posted on the 2024 Update project website that included the following prompts:

- Please tell us your Vision for Snohomish County in 2044!

- In 2044, what is your Vision for the County regarding: housing, economic development, capital facilities, parks, transportation/mobility, land use, and the natural environment?
- What is important to you as the county grows?

On the comment form, in emails, and through in person discussions, Snohomish County received a range of comments. There were a number of comments related to increasing residential densities, preserving agricultural lands, and ensuring there was sufficient infrastructure to support development. There were also discussions of wildlife corridors, the economy, and specific road projects. Some highlights from the public comment forms about a vision for Snohomish County in 2044 are provided below:

- “As a resident of unincorporated Snohomish County, my vision is based on preserving our farmlands, our rural areas, wildlife habitat, and the aquifers that serve them...”
- “I want a county that expands outdoor recreational opportunities as the county continues to grow in terms of development and population. Recreational opportunities that are more conducive to urban areas and front country public land like mountain biking need support to build the community and keep people active and healthy.”
- “Those in control of 'who gets what' have settled upon strategies to enrich all people in our County by sharing whatever they have with the less fortunate. People seek higher education in the healing arts and sciences because so many people need to recover from intergenerational violence, poverty, greedy-abusive land practices, personal disabilities, as well as family disruption and community dislocation. The healing of our environment and ourselves leads our decision making as we have given up blaming and punishing one another in favor of meeting each other's needs through responsive listening. Tolerance thrives...”
- “Keep Snohomish County green in all ways: preserve agricultural lands, parks and opens spaces and embrace sustainable practices and technologies. Maintain the commitment to corral density within prescribed development zones. Build affordable housing that allows people of all ages and capacities to thrive here. Build out a robust public transportation system.”
- “By 2044 Snohomish County should have an adequate supply of housing for all income levels, but development must leave room for natural areas, especially forests and farms. There must be careful planning around transportation, as well as heating and cooling systems for buildings that won’t exacerbate the greenhouse gas emissions. Many more parks and recreational facilities are needed, close to neighborhoods where people live. These items constitute a quality of life we should strive to retain.”

Additional public comments are available in the index of records.

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

The County issued a Determination of Significance (DS) for the 2024 Update to the Plan on November 1, 2021. A Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) will likely be issued in September 2023, satisfying State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) review.

NOTIFICATION OF STATE AGENCIES

Pursuant to RCW 36.70A.106, a notice of intent to adopt the proposed regulations and standards will be transmitted to the Washington State Department of Commerce for the entirety of the 2024 Update to the Plan in September 2023.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends approval of the proposed Introduction contained in Amendment A of this staff report.

ACTION REQUESTED

The Planning Commission is requested to hold a public hearing, consider the proposed comprehensive plan Introduction, and provide a recommendation to the County Council. The Planning Commission can recommend approval of the Introduction with supporting findings of fact as proposed or modified, deny the proposal with findings, or amend the proposal with appropriate findings.

cc: Ken Klein, Executive Director
Mike McCrary, PDS Director
David Killingstad, PDS Manager
Ryan Countryman, Legislative Analyst

Attachments:

Attachment A—Introduction