Residential Development Trends

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Recorded formal plat activity began to rise again in 2013 after four years of record low single family lot creation.

The annual volume of single family residential lots in recorded formal plat subdivisions and segregated-lot condominiums countywide reached a record high of 4,659 lots in 2007, and then dropped off sharply in 2008 and again in 2009 to just 20% of peak 2007 levels. After four years of record low lot creation from 2009-2012, the number of recorded lots rose in 2013 to 1,634 (but still at only 35% of 2007 levels). The number of recorded lots fell slightly in 2014 to 1,486, but rose again to stabilize in 2015 and 2016 at 1,896 and 1,873, respectively.

As can be seen in Figures RD-1 and RD-2, the number of recorded lots in unincorporated urban areas has exceeded the number recorded in cities each year during the past nineteen years (starting in 1998). Lots recorded in unincorporated urban areas have also accounted for the majority of new lots countywide during this same period, except for the most recent year (2016) when a jump in recorded lots within cities in the SWUGA (to the highest level since 2006) caused the share of lots countywide recorded in unincorporated urban areas to drop to 45%. Overall, however, the percentage of total lots created by formal plat since 1995 in unincorporated UGAs has averaged 59%.

New lots in formal plat subdivisions recorded outside the UGAs average 8% of the countywide total since 1995. Most recently, the percentage of lots countywide that were recorded outside the UGAs has fluctuated between 2% and 13% in the years since 2010.

A low level of rural cluster subdivision application activity has continued so far this decade, with only two rural cluster subdivision applications filed since April 5, 2009.

Rural cluster subdivision applications peaked in 2006 with 1,805 lots applied for that year, then plummeted in 2008 (with 78 lots applied for) and 2009 (with 157 lots applied for). This low volume of rural cluster subdivision application activity has continued into the post-recession years, with only two rural cluster subdivision applications applied for (for a total of 19 lots) since the April 5, 2009, effective date of amendments to the rural cluster regulations. (See Figure RD-5.)

The number of lots in recorded rural cluster subdivisions reached a high of 315 in 2007, then dropped off during the recession. The number of recorded lots remained at a low level compared with pre-recession era levels for several years, then picked up again in 2015 with 253 lots recorded. (See Figure RD-6.)

There remain a large number of rural clusters that have preliminary approval, representing 2,034 potential lots. Many of those were approved in 2006 and 2007 (prior to the recession), and have expiration dates (extended during the recession) coming up soon. Evidence of rural cluster subdivision expiration is already starting to be observed, however, with over a dozen rural cluster plats (representing 171 lots) expiring in 2015.

The maps which follow Table RD-3 show the location, pattern, and status of RCS projects (formal plats only) in Snohomish County as of December 31, 2015.

The percentage of new countywide housing units permitted outside the UGA continue its two and a half decade-long decline.

Figure RD-7 shows the number of housing units authorized by building permit within Snohomish County for each year since 1990. Housing units permitted countywide reached a 26-year peak in 1998 at over 9,000 units. After declining each year from 1999-2003, permitted units peaked once again at nearly 7,000 units in 2005. The number of units permitted countywide then dropped each year from 2006-2010, reaching only 2,279 in 2010 – down 67% from the 2005 unit count, and representing the lowest annual number of housing units permitted in the 26 years depicted in Figure RD-7. In the years since 2010, the number of housing units permitted has rebounded, climbing to a post-recession high of 4,273 units in 2015, representing a growth of 87% from the 2010 low, but still just 61% of the 2005 peak.

Figure RD-8 and Table RD-4 show countywide housing units permitted by area since 1990. Cities have permitted 42% of the total new countywide housing units since 1990 – the same percentage of housing units permitted countywide that were permitted by the County within unincorporated UGAs during this time period. The past four years, however, has witnessed an increase in the importance of cities as locations for permitted housing units. For each year during this time period, the share of new countywide units permitted within cities increased (from 33% in 2012 to 49% in 2015), while those permitted within the unincorporated UGA accounted for a steadily decreasing share of permitted units countywide (from 60% in 2012 to 41% in 2015).

Rural/resource areas were the locations for 16% of the total housing units permitted since 1990. In the five years prior to the adoption of the County's first GMA comprehensive plan in 1995, the share of total countywide housing units permitted in rural/resource areas was 24% – considerably higher than the overall 14% share observed in the years since 1995. In addition, there has been a further drop in the rural/resource share during the most recent decade, with the percentage of total countywide housing units permitted within rural/resource areas at 10% or less for 5 of the past 6 years.

Figure RD-9 shows countywide housing units permitted in the SWUGA, non-SWUGA and rural/resource areas since 1990. It is apparent that housing production in the Southwest UGA has dominated new housing production since 2011, capturing 68-77% of the annual countywide permitted units during the past five years. Prior to 2011, housing permit activity in the SWUGA normally captured between 50-60% of the countywide levels. The recent increase in the share of new housing units in the SWUGA directly corresponds to a proportional decrease in the share of housing units permitted in the non-SW UGAs, since rural/resource annual shares have remained relatively constant during this period.

The post-2010 recovery in new countywide housing unit production is attributable to increased multi-family permitting activity, mainly in the Southwest UGA.

Figure RD-11 shows countywide housing units permitted by housing type since 1990. It is evident that the County's largest surges in multi-family housing permits – 4,221 new multi-family units authorized in 1990 and 3,866 in 1998 – caused those two years to become the County's peak housing construction years of the past 26 years. Unlike those two years, however, the County's third highest spike in annual housing units permitted was driven by a surge in single family housing construction in 2005, when single family units accounted for 5,579 units of the total 6,981 total units permitted countywide that year. Between 2005 and 2008, however, the downward slide in total housing units permitted is almost entirely attributable to large annual reductions in single-family units, with 2007 to 2008 alone witnessing a 53% drop in single family units permitted (from 3,900 in 2007 to 1,818 in 2008). Since falling in 2008 to record-low levels, single-family permit activity has stayed remarkably stable, averaging around 2,000 units per year for the entire 2008-2015 period (considerably lower than the average of about 3,850 annually for the 1990-2007 period).

Since 2010, the overall increase in housing production can be almost entirely attributed to multi-family permitting activity. The number of multi-family units permitted countywide reached a 13-year high in 2013 with 2,112 units permitted, followed by 1,331 multi-family units permitted in 2014 and 1,902 in 2015. Multi-family units have accounted for 27.5% of total housing units permitted countywide during the entire 1990-2015 period. Note that with increased levels of multi-family permitting in recent years, the share of countywide units permitted that were multi-family exceeded this 1990-2015 average share in each of the last 5 years. In fact, 2013 witnessed the highest multi-family share observed during the entire 1990-2015 period, and only the second year in the 26-year period in which the majority (51%) of the residential units permitted countywide were multi-family units (slightly over 50% of units permitted countywide in 1990 were multi-family units).

It should also be noted that the importance of mobile homes as a housing option in Snohomish County has steadily diminished over the course of the last two-and-a-half decades, both in absolute and relative terms (see Figure RD-11).

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