

Amendments to the Growth Management Act (GMA) in 1997 require Snohomish County and its cities to collect data on buildable lands and analyze how planning goals are being achieved. The amendments, often referred to as the Buildable Lands Program, require local governments to monitor the amount and density of residential, commercial and industrial development that has occurred since adoption of a jurisdiction's GMA comprehensive plan. Using this information, an evaluation of the adequacy of the remaining suitable residential, commercial and industrial land supply within urban growth areas (UGAs) to accommodate projected growth at development densities observed since the adoption of GMA plans is required every five years. If the results of the 5-year buildable lands evaluation reveal deficiencies in buildable land supply within UGAs, then the county and the cities are required first to adopt and implement reasonable measures that will remedy the buildable land supply shortfall without adjusting UGA boundaries.

In December 1999, Snohomish County contracted with ECONorthwest to prepare this report, which describes methods to be used by the County and its cities in meeting state requirements for a buildable lands analysis. This report covers only the first step of a full buildable lands analysis: determining and getting agreement on methods to be used by jurisdictions to collect, analyze, and present information about land supply and demand. It provides a written description of protocols for data collection and analysis, but not the databases or analyses themselves, which will be developed later based on the methods described in this report.

PURPOSE

This report describes cooperative, interjurisdictional methods for estimating the amount of buildable land for Snohomish County and its 20 cities that address:

- State requirements, especially as described in the buildable lands guidelines document issued by the Washington State Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development (CTED) in July 2000
- Both five-year and annual data collection requirements
- Data needed to conduct the five-year buildable land analysis, and estimated costs of collecting and maintaining it
- The strengths and weaknesses of systems now used by Snohomish County jurisdictions that generate information related to buildable lands

- Funding priorities for allocating the state buildable lands grant funds within Snohomish County
- A schedule of tasks and responsibilities for completing the integrated buildable lands inventory.

Consistent with the GMA requirements, this buildable lands methodology applies only to buildable land supply evaluation within UGAs. It does not address buildable land supply evaluation outside the UGA in rural and resource areas.

While the State's Buildable Lands Program requires land inventories (land supply), the term *buildable lands analysis* does not really cover the full State requirements, which include an evaluation of *land need* also. Thus, the methods described in this report address not only *land supply*, but also (to a lesser extent) *land demand*.

METHODS

The main purpose of this report is to develop methods for conducting a buildable land assessment and a plan for implementing those methods. This section describes the methods we used to develop those methods,¹ cost estimates, and work plans. Our information came from several sources:

- Literature review. ECO began the project by reviewing relevant state documents, local plans and policies, and buildable lands analyses from other jurisdictions.
- Interviews. ECO conducted interviews with individuals knowledgeable about data collection procedures, and database systems.
- Questionnaire. ECO developed and administered a questionnaire for cities and the county to complete regarding data availability, preferences regarding data collection procedures, and ability to document and analyze data consistent with GMA requirements. ECO discussed the results of the questionnaire in two workshops with representatives of cities and the County.
- Previous experience. ECO has conducted over a dozen buildable land analyses. We drew on that experience, and the procedures we have developed, to recommend methods for Snohomish County and its cities.

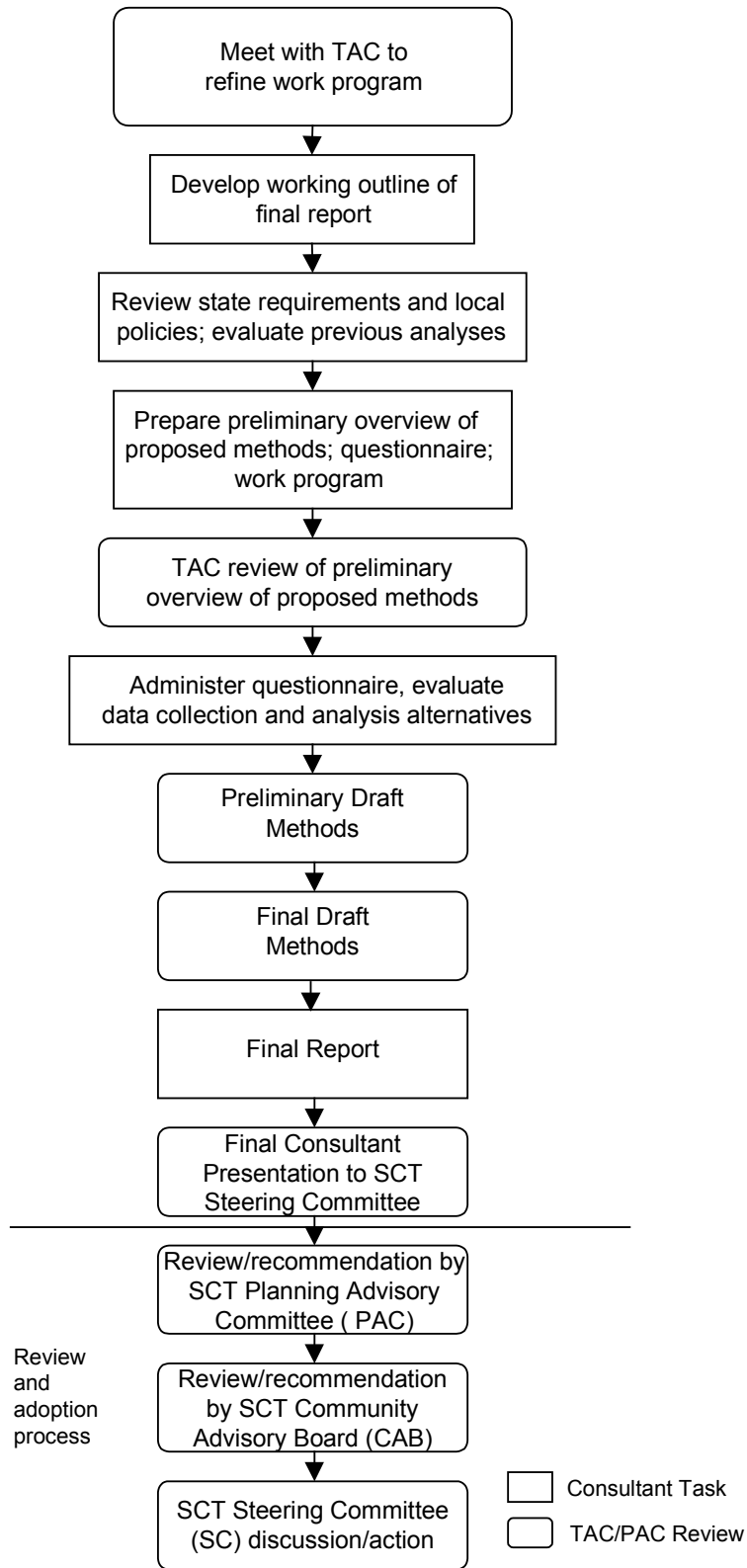
Our research was supplemented by a process that engaged local

¹ Yes, though it is awkward it is correct: we had to decide what methods we would use to gather, analyze, and present the information in this report, which is itself about methods to be used to prepare a county-wide buildable lands inventory.

jurisdictions and other parties interested in discussing the buildable lands methods. ECO initiated the project by developing an outline of the final report and performing a quick evaluation of data sources and methods applied by Snohomish County in previous buildable lands work.

Figure 1-1 provides an overview of the methods and process used to develop the buildable lands data collection procedures and analytical methodologies. The boxes below the line describe the review and approval process for this report. This process uses the Snohomish County Tomorrow (SCT) process for interjurisdictional review and approval. The first step in this process involves SCT Planning Advisory Committee (city and county planning staff) review and recommendation. The second step entails SCT Community Advisory Board (various stakeholder/interest group representatives) review. The last step requires SCT Steering Committee (city, county, tribal elected officials) review and approval.

Figure 1-1. Overview of project process and methods



STATE REQUIREMENTS²

GROWTH MANAGEMENT ACT GOALS AND REQUIREMENTS

The GMA established 14 goals to guide local government planning. These goals address sprawl reduction, concentrated urban growth, economic development, environmental protection, adequate infrastructure, affordable housing, and regional transportation, among others. [RCW 36.70A.020 and RCW 36.70A.480(1)]. Implementation occurs primarily at the local level through a framework that includes:

1. County-wide planning policies
2. Comprehensive plans
3. Development regulations
4. Capital budgets and other ongoing local activities
5. Optional incentive programs.

The GMA requires establishment of urban growth areas (UGAs) for incorporated towns and cities that are defined so as to contain a 20-year supply of buildable land for urban growth. Urban growth is not allowed outside UGAs. Development within UGAs must be at urban densities (generally, a minimum of four residential units per acre), with some exceptions for areas with significant critical area constraints. Natural resource lands outside UGAs are designated for long-term commercial agriculture, forestry, and mineral extraction. Certain environmentally sensitive lands are designated as critical areas.

POPULATION FORECASTS

The five-year GMA buildable lands analysis requires that jurisdictions "determine the amount of land needed for commercial, industrial, and housing for the remaining portion of the twenty-year planning period used in the most recently adopted comprehensive plan." (RCW 36.70A.215(3)(c)) For Snohomish County and its cities, the "remaining portion of the planning period" is the remaining portion of the 1992-2012 population and employment forecasts as represented by the growth targets for cities, UGAs, and the rural area, adopted as Appendix B of the Countywide Planning Policies on December 20, 1995. These growth targets reflect the outcome of the individual city and county GMA comprehensive planning efforts. The issue of growth forecasts is described in more detail in chapter 3.

² A more detailed discussion of state requirements is presented in Appendix A.

THE BUILDABLE LANDS PROGRAM

In 1997, ESB 6094 (codified as RCW 36.70A.215) established specific reporting requirements for development monitoring and periodic buildable land supply reevaluation. These requirements are commonly referred to as the “buildable lands program.”

The Buildable Lands Program is required for six Western Washington counties (Clark, King, Kitsap, Pierce, Snohomish, and Thurston) and the 101 cities and towns within their boundaries. The program requires local governments to compare anticipated growth against actual development over time to answer two questions: (1) Do local governments have enough suitable land inside the UGA to accommodate the growth anticipated during the remaining portion of the 20-year planning period? and (2) Are urban densities being achieved in urban growth areas?

The primary purposes of the Buildable Lands Program, as described in the statute, are to:

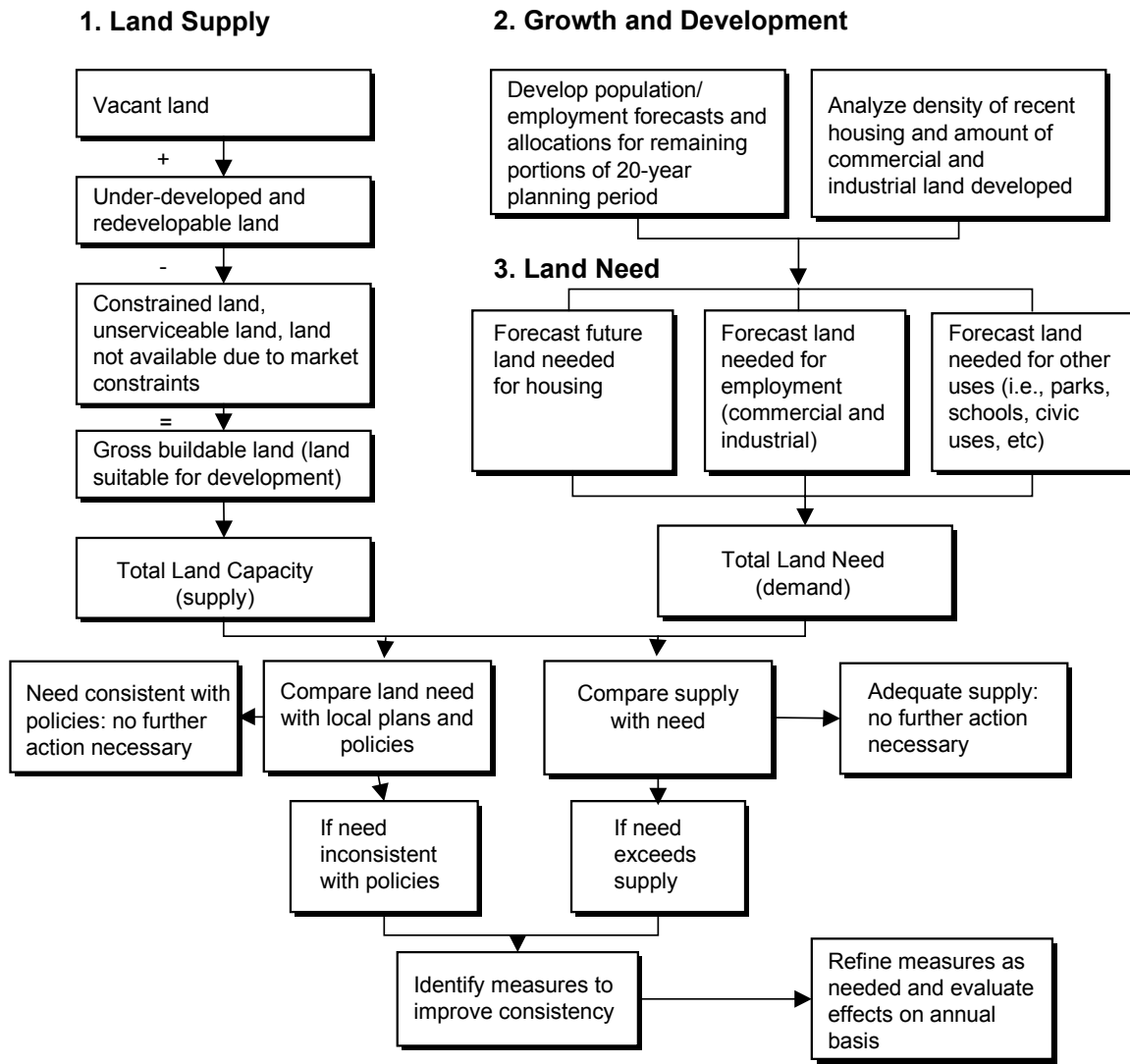
- Determine whether a county and its cities are achieving urban densities within UGAs by comparing growth and development assumptions, targets, and objectives with actual growth and development that has occurred in the county and its cities.
- Identify reasonable measures, other than adjusting UGAs, that will be taken to comply with the Growth Management Act (GMA), including increasing consistency between actual development and plan assumptions.

LOCAL BUILDABLE LANDS POLICIES

Snohomish County has completed a considerable amount of work towards addressing the GMA Buildable Lands Program requirements. Prior to the passage of the Buildable Lands Program requirements, the County completed the *Urban Growth Area Residential Land Capacity Analysis* and the *Employment Land Capacity Analysis* (unincorporated areas) in 1995.

Subsequent to the passage of the Buildable Lands Program requirements, Snohomish County Tomorrow (SCT) accepted state grant funds to begin implementation of the state requirements. As a part of the implementation process, SCT developed and implemented a work program designed to address the requirements of the GMA. The products of that work included Countywide Planning Policies intended to implement the GMA requirements.

Figure 1-2. Overview of GMA buildable land program requirements



Requirements of RCW 36.70A.215

Purposes: Determine whether a county and its cities are achieving urban densities in urban growth areas, and to identify reasonable measures, other than adjusting UGAs, to comply with GMA.

- Step 1. Land capacity analysis - estimate supply of buildable land and buildable land capacity
- Step 2. Determine the actual density of housing and the amount of land developed for commercial and industrial use within the UGA since Comprehensive Plan approval or last periodic review
- Step 3. Estimate land need based on information developed in step 2.
- Step 4. Compare land need and land supply. If need exceeds supply, identify measures, if not, review land need for consistency with local plans and policies
- Step 5. If inconsistencies exist, implement measures to address inconsistencies, conduct annual monitoring and evaluation.

The County-wide Planning Policies UG-2c and HO-9 require that SCT develop and implement a coordinated, long-term growth and housing monitoring program. Policy UG-2c1 lists the data indicators that need to be analyzed annually as part of the program:

- Estimated population and employment growth;
- Annexations and incorporations;
- Residential and non-residential land consumption;
- Land supply and land values relative to demographic changes; and
- Availability and affordability of housing.

The SCT 1999 Growth Monitoring Report provides a detailed analysis of these data indicators.

FRAMEWORK FOR BUILDABLE LANDS PROGRAM³

A buildable land analysis as defined by state law has not only a *supply* component, but also a *demand* component. The GMA requires local governments to address two questions: (1) Do local governments have enough suitable land to accommodate the growth anticipated during the remaining portion of the 20-year planning period? and (2) Are urban densities being achieved in urban growth areas?

The first question embodies both supply and demand elements. The supply element is embedded in the phrase “do local governments have enough land.” The demand element is addressed in the second part of the question: “to accommodate the growth anticipated during the remaining portion of the 20-year planning period.”

DEMAND FOR LAND

Demand for land is typically characterized through analysis of national, regional, and local demographic and economic data. For residential uses, population and households drive demand. Information about the characteristics of households is used to identify types of housing that will be affordable to area households. For non-residential uses, an employment forecast is the primary driver of demand for land. This forecast is converted to estimates of the probable absorption rates for commercial and industrial lands.

Thus, a demand analysis typically includes the development of population and employment forecasts and a housing market analysis. The data generated from the demand analysis, combined with density assumptions, lead to an estimate of *land need (demand) by type*.

³ A more detailed discussion of this topic is presented in Appendix B.

SUPPLY OF BUILDABLE LAND

There are many ways that “vacant land” and “buildable land” can be defined. In general, vacant land means land without structures or other significant man-made improvements. (A typical threshold for defining "significant manmade improvements" is tax lots that have no structures or have buildings with improvement values of under a nominal amount). Typically, “vacancy” is not a difficult determination to make: most people walking the land or looking at an aerial photograph could agree on what land was covered by significant structures that constituted existing development (and thus precluded new development unless the existing development were demolished).

The trick is to define "vacancy" and "buildability" without individual examination of every plot of land; i.e., to define it in ways that existing data bases and GIS sources can be used to show the amount and location of such land.

Vacant land that is constrained (either physically or legally) is not buildable. Constrained land is conceptually identical to what state law refers to as critical areas. Such land may be constrained by natural features such as slopes, wetlands, and designated floodways. Some of those features may be absolute constraints on development (water courses, cliffs); in most cases, however, physical constraints lead to unbuildable land because of policies that apply to them (e.g., though there are no physical impediments to building in a floodplain, policy prohibits it for several reasons related to the public good). Other policy constraints might include zoning (which often limits use or density) and public facilities (e.g., limits on service extensions).

ORGANIZATION OF THIS REPORT

The remainder of this report presents a recommended methodology and work program designed to provide Snohomish County and its cities with a set of explicit methods for addressing the GMA buildable lands requirements and completing the five-year growth monitoring report. This report is organized around the proposed work program for completion of the five-year growth monitoring report. The rest of this report is organized as follows:

- **Chapter 2, Issues, Assumptions, and Definitions** describes key issues, assumptions, and definitions that guide the methods.
- **Chapter 3, Overview of the Buildable Lands Work Program (2000 – 2002)**, provides a brief overview of the proposed work program, schedule, and estimated cost. It also addresses issues of project administration, process, and TAC and public involvement.
- **Chapter 4, Phase I: Startup** describes project startup: getting organized for the project, kick-off meetings, RFP development if

consultants are hired, and other issues important to project initiation.

- **Chapter 5, Phase II: Data Collection, Analysis and Evaluation** is the core of the buildable lands program methods. It describes data collection procedures and data structures.
- **Chapter 6, Phase III: Consolidation and Reporting** describes how the data gathered using methods described in chapter 5 will be consolidated and reported.

The appendices provide additional background information on various elements of the buildable lands program.

- **Appendix A, Overview of State Requirements and Local Policies** provides an overview of GMA requirements for buildable land programs and County policies pertaining to these requirements.
- **Appendix B, Framework for Buildable Lands Analysis** presents a conceptual model for completing buildable lands inventories and lands needs assessments.
- **Appendix C, Evaluation of Local Conditions** presents the results of local interviews and a questionnaire covering issues of data availability, and financial and staff resources.
- **Appendix D, Cost Estimates** shows a budget of hours by phase (by task and by labor type) for implementing the buildable lands work program and completing the five-year growth monitoring report.
- **Appendix E, Proposed Data Structure** presents the proposed data table structures and coding for data elements required to complete the five-year growth monitoring report. It also shows sample buildable lands supply and demand calculations.
- **Appendix F, Outline for Buildable Lands Report, May 2002** presents an outline of the final product of the buildable lands analysis: i.e., of the five-year growth monitoring report that the County would produce by May 2002.