

Chapter One

Introduction and Growth Projections

How the Plan was Created

Whatcom County's Comprehensive Plan is intended to guide growth in unincorporated areas for the next 20 years in coordination with city comprehensive plans. The fundamental purpose of the Comprehensive Plan is to establish a framework of goals and policies to guide growth, land use, capital facility and transportation planning, and environmental protection.

The plan identifies urban growth area (UGA) boundaries, rural areas, agricultural lands, forestry lands and mineral resource lands. The majority of the county's growth will be located within the UGAs. Several factors influenced the development of the adopted goals and polices contained in the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan.

First, this plan has been reviewed for consistency with the requirements of the Growth Management Act (GMA) and the current County-Wide Planning Policies. The Whatcom County Council, in conjunction with the cities, previously adopted a set of County-Wide Planning Policies (see Appendix C). The framework provided by the adopted County-Wide Planning Policies ensures that local planning efforts will be consistent and supportive of regional goals.

Second, through inter-jurisdictional cooperation, Whatcom County has coordinated planning and decision making with various levels of government to ensure compatibility of goals and consistency of plans.

Third, extensive citizen participation was facilitated through meetings, presentations, public hearings, and written comments made throughout this process.

Original Adoption and Amendments

The County Council adopted the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan in May of 1997. Since then, amendments have been made on an annual basis. Additionally, a comprehensive plan update took place in 2005, a UGA review occurred in 2009 and a combined comprehensive plan update and UGA review occurred in 2016.

Introducing Whatcom County

Whatcom County lies in the northwest corner of both the State of Washington and the coterminous United States. It is bounded on the north by the Canadian border, on the east by Okanogan County, on the south by Skagit County, and on the west by the Strait of Georgia and Bellingham Bay. These borders enclose large parts of the Mount Baker National Forest and the North Cascades National Park, which take up about two-thirds of Whatcom County's total area. All but a few residents live in the western third of the county. Bellingham is Whatcom County's largest city. Other cities include Blaine, Everson, Ferndale, Lynden, Nooksack, and Sumas, and there are three unincorporated UGAs and several smaller unincorporated communities.

Two Indian reservations and associated trust lands are located within Whatcom County's borders. The Lummi Nation reservation is on the Lummi Peninsula and Portage Island on the western side of the county; the Nooksack Tribe reservation and trust lands include parcels along the Nooksack River in the west-central area of the county.

Population

Population growth in Whatcom County since the arrival of the first Euro-American immigrants in the 1850s has been driven largely by in-migration of people from other sections of the state and country. **Table 1** displays the growth of population in Whatcom County from 1910 to 2010, and **Table 2** shows the estimated growth figures for each year of the current decade. These tables indicate a steady increase in population over time, with varying rates of growth often driven by factors external to Whatcom County such as international events or changes in technology and transportation. Approximately 73% of the population growth between 1980 and 2013 was due to in-migration of people from outside the area seeking jobs, life styles, and amenities found in Whatcom County. **Figure 1** below shows net migration fluctuating significantly over time.

It should be noted that the first decade of planning under the Growth Management Act (1990-2000) accompanied the reversal of a 30-year trend from 1960-1990 where unincorporated areas grew faster than cities. From 1990 to 2000, cities grew at a more rapid rate than unincorporated areas for the first time since the 1950s. The trend of faster city growth continued between 2000-2010.

Table 1. Population Growth in Whatcom County, 1910-2010

YEAR	TOTAL COUNTY POPULATION	AVERAGE ANNUAL RATE OF GROWTH	UNINCORPORATED POPULATION	AVERAGE ANNUAL RATE OF GROWTH	COMBINED POPULATION OF CITIES*	AVERAGE ANNUAL RATE OF GROWTH
1910	49,511		20,183		29,328	
1920	50,600	0.2%	19,621	-0.3%	30,979	0.5%
1930	59,128	1.6%	23,112	1.7%	36,016	1.5%
1940	60,355	0.2%	25,860	1.1%	34,495	-0.4%
1950	66,733	1.0%	26,462	0.2%	40,271	1.6%
1960	70,317	0.5%	25,990	-0.2%	44,327	1.0%
1970	81,983	1.5%	34,004	2.7%	47,979	0.8%
1980	106,701	2.7%	48,622	3.6%	58,079	1.9%
1990	127,780	1.8%	59,187	2.0%	68,593	1.7%
2000	166,826	2.7%	74,231	2.3%	92,595	3.0%
2010	201,140	1.9%	87,065	1.6%	114,075	2.1%

Source: US Census

*Cities include Bellingham, Blaine, Everson (since 1930), Ferndale, Lynden, Nooksack (since 1920), and Sumas

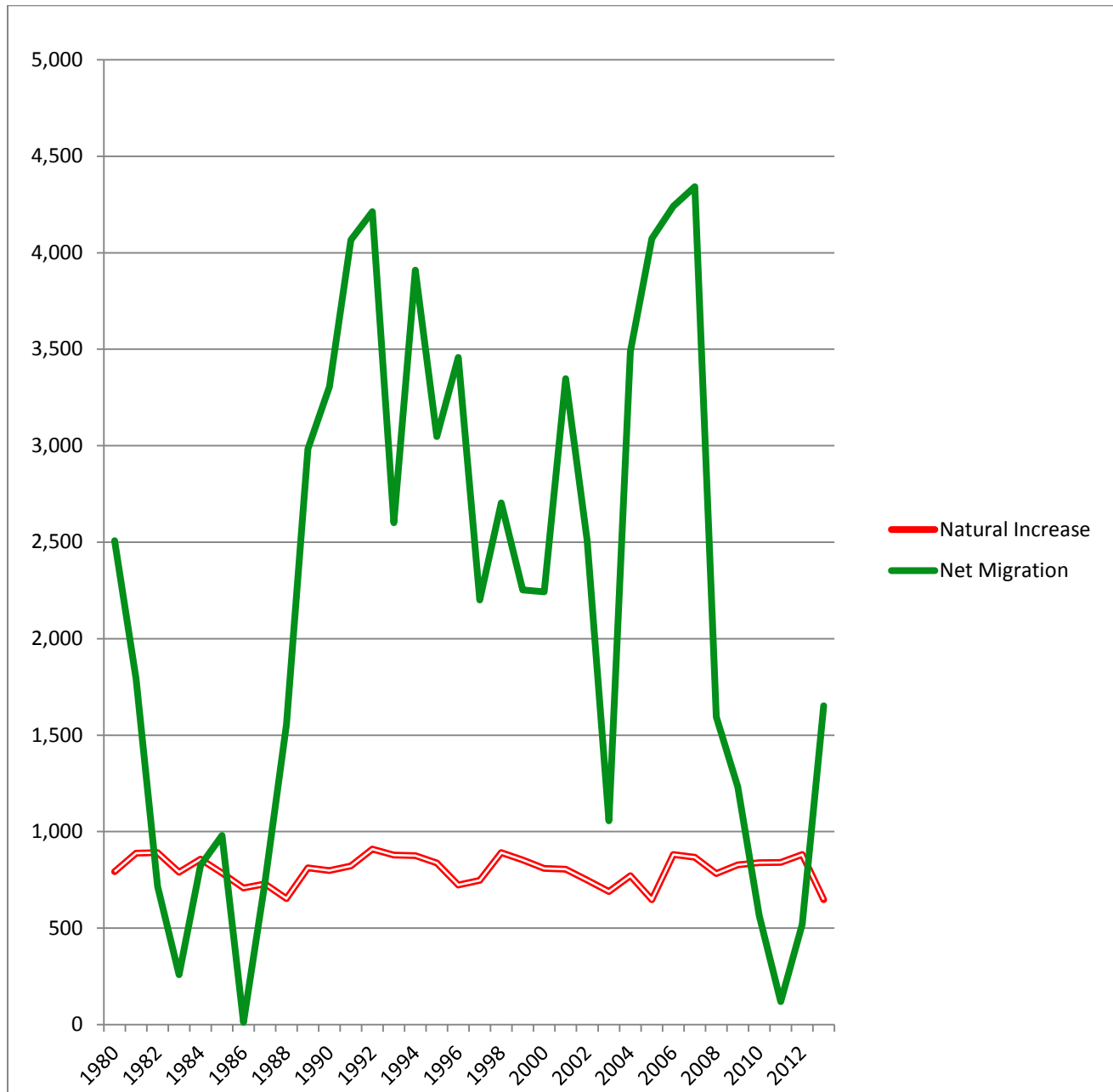
Table 2. Estimated Population Growth in Whatcom County, 2010-2013

YEAR	TOTAL COUNTY POPULATION	ANNUAL RATE OF GROWTH	UNINCORPORATED POPULATION	ANNUAL RATE OF GROWTH	COMBINED POPULATION OF CITIES*	ANNUAL RATE OF GROWTH
2010	201,140		87,065		114,075	
2011	202,100	0.48%	87,535	0.54%	114,565	0.43%
2012	203,500	0.69%	87,921	0.44%	115,579	0.89%
2013	205,800	1.13%	88,276	0.40%	117,524	1.68%

Source: Washington State Office of Financial Management (2013)

*Cities include Bellingham, Blaine, Everson, Ferndale, Lynden, Nooksack, and Sumas.

Figure 1. Natural Increase and Net Migration in Whatcom County



More than half of all Whatcom County residents live in cities. **Map 1-1** displays the 2010 population density for Whatcom County. The highest densities are in and around cities, though there are other centers of medium to high population density such as the ones at Sudden Valley, Birch Bay, Columbia Valley, and along the Guide Meridian. Approximately 68% of the Whatcom County population lived in cities and urban growth areas in 2013.

Population Projections

Projections of future population size are an essential component of land use planning. As required by RCW 36.70A.110, in 2012, the Washington State Office of Financial Management (OFM) developed a 20-year population projection for Whatcom County. The OFM projections for 2036 are provided in Table 3 below:

Table 3. OFM Population Projections for Whatcom County

	OFM Population Projections for 2036	Average Annual Growth Rate 2013-2036	Average Annual Population Growth 2013-2036	Total Population Growth 2013-2036
Low	225,580	0.4%	860	19,780
Medium	273,911	1.3%	2,961	68,111
High	330,869	2.1%	5,438	125,069

Source: OFM (2012) and *Whatcom County Population and Employment Projections and Urban Growth Area Allocations – Phase I Technical Report*, Berk (2013)

The Growth Management Act requires the County to plan for population growth based upon OFM population projections. The county and each city must include areas and densities sufficient to permit the urban growth that is projected to occur for the succeeding twenty-year period.

The County's 2036 population projection of 280,581 is within OFM's range and therefore requires no further justification. The rationale for using this figure, which is close to OFM's medium projection, include: ensuring an adequate land supply to accommodate growth, the need to plan for growth, and the need to protect the quality of life and natural resources in Whatcom County. This population projection is selected for planning purposes only and does not obligate the County to encourage growth. Given past population trends and the requirements of GMA, planning for population growth, whether it occurs or not, is critical for the quality of life, protection of natural resources and economic health of Whatcom County.

Table 4 shows how the total projected 2036 population would be distributed to UGAs and the area outside UGAs.

Outside the UGAs there is a large number of undeveloped tax parcels. While it is not clear exactly how many of these tax parcels are legally buildable lots, the total number of potential new dwelling units could theoretically accommodate population growth in excess of the rural population projection. However, because adequate

land capacity is available for growth within urban growth areas, growth is not forced into the rural areas. Through the monitoring process described in Policies 2S-5 and 2DD-1 of this plan, the County will evaluate development activity in comparison with these urban and rural growth projections and take action as necessary to address discrepancies if any are identified.

Table 4. Whatcom County Population Projections and Distribution

	2013 UGA Population	Projected 2036 Population	2013-2036 Net Growth
Bellingham	92,660	128,578	35,918
Birch Bay	7,540	13,040	5,500
Blaine	5,171	9,585	4,414
Columbia Valley	3,103	4,448	1,345
Everson	2,665	3,907	1,242
Ferndale	12,758	19,591	6,833
Lynden	12,872	19,275	6,403
Nooksack	1,435	2,470	1,035
Sumas	1,449	2,323	874
Subtotal	139,696	203,260	63,564
Area outside UGAs	66,104	77,321	11,217
Total Whatcom County	205,800	280,581	74,781

Source: The 2013 total Whatcom County population is from OFM and was distributed to UGAs by BERK Consulting (2014).

Employment Projections

The Growth Management Act requires that comprehensive plans and/or development regulations provide sufficient capacity of land suitable for development within their jurisdictions to accommodate employment growth. In 2009, the Act was amended to ensure that the employment growth accommodated medical, governmental, educational, institutional, commercial and industrial facilities.

The employment forecasts considered the various sectors of the labor force in Whatcom County, including construction, finance, government, manufacturing, retail, services, transportation, and wholesale trade. The forecasts also considered the labor participation rate as the proportion of labor to the total population of all ages. For the purpose of Urban Growth Areas, non-agricultural labor force was considered in the forecasts.

Employment allocations were based largely on the local request recognizing the incentives that cities have for larger employment areas (sales tax, property tax). Due to the challenge in designating lands for commercial or industrial development,

the allocation of employment allowed for these optimistic scenarios. Table 5 shows the allocation of employment to the Urban Growth Areas and the area outside UGAs.

Table 5: Whatcom County Employment Projections and Distribution

	2013 Employment	2013-2036 Growth Allocation	2036 Employment
Bellingham UGA	52,359	22,641	75,000
Birch Bay UGA	595	545	1,140
Blaine UGA	3,062	2,097	5,159
Cherry Point UGA	1,993	890	2,883
Columbia Valley UGA	85	359	444
Everson UGA	710	602	1,312
Ferndale UGA	5,372	2,802	8,174
Lynden UGA	4,946	2,157	7,103
Nooksack UGA	254	290	544
Sumas UGA	700	445	1,145
Area outside UGAs	13,156	3,201	16,357
TOTALS	83,232	36,029	119,261

Source: The 2013 non-farm employment is from the Whatcom Council of Governments (2010 and 2013) and BERK Consulting (2014).

Demographics

The culturally diverse demographic makeup of the county's population has an effect on land use patterns. For example, Whatcom County residents with children may choose different kinds of transportation and recreation than retired people. Single-parent families and large extended families need different kinds of housing. Another influence on county demographics is the cyclical influx of seasonal residents, primarily from Canada, who maintain recreational homes in parts of the county. Areas most influenced by seasonal residency include Point Roberts, Birch Bay, and the Foothills Subarea.

Table 6 below shows the Whatcom County population in the following generalized categories: school age, college age, working age and retirement age. All categories have seen an absolute increase in population between 2000 and 2010. However, as a percentage of total population, the school age children category has declined, the college age category has remained steady, and the working age and retirement age categories have increased. OFM projects that the retirement age population (65 and over) will continue to increase over the planning period.

Table 6. Population and Age Groups

	2000	Census	2010	Census
Age				
0-19	47,175	28.28%	50,566	25.14%
20-24	16,776	10.06%	20,277	10.08%
25-64	83,463	50.03%	103,657	51.54%
65-over	19,400	11.63%	26,640	13.24%
Total	166,814	100.00%	201,140	100.00%

Land Use History

When Euro-American immigrants first arrived on Bellingham Bay in the 1850s, the landscape of Whatcom County was comprised of mature conifer forests, winding streams and rivers, numerous lakes and wetlands, and small natural meadows.

Lummi and Nooksack people inhabited villages near the coast and along the rivers and lakes at strategic fishing locations. The Nooksack Indian people cultivated root crops they had developed along the Nooksack Valley where sub-irrigated meadows were ideal sites for such plants as camas and "Indian carrot." They emphasized the use of root crops, perhaps much more than other native peoples along the Pacific Coast.

The abundance of high-quality timber and easy accessibility to water for milling and transport were the principal reasons Euro-American immigrants first came to Whatcom County in the 1850s. Small communities grew along Bellingham Bay and the Nooksack River as more immigrants arrived in Whatcom County. They began clearing the forests and draining the wetland areas for farmsteads. Between 1890 and 1925, 130,000 acres of lowland Nooksack Valley forests were cleared for farms. In addition, logging companies sold logged-over land to their employees and to immigrants from the East Coast for small farmsteads. As a result of the sale of small parcels of logged-over lands, the average farm size in Whatcom County is relatively small--about 68 acres--compared to the statewide average of 396 acres (2012 Census of Agriculture, USDA).

Many lumber and shake mills and other industrial plants were built in Bellingham, on Lake Whatcom, and in other areas of the county, while new commercial and residential buildings were being developed in all communities. Coal mining was taking place at several locations in Whatcom County at this time, and major fish processing plants were constructed on Bellingham Bay. Whatcom County's population in 1910 was 49,511.

Between 1925 and 1950, there was little change in the land use patterns that had been developed during the previous fifty years. Some land, which had been cleared for agriculture was abandoned and naturally regenerated into second-growth

forests. Most areas that were harvested for timber had re-seeded and were growing mixed forests of conifers and deciduous trees. Residential and industrial development continued to grow, but at a slower pace than during the previous fifty years. Commercial centers remained within the core of the major cities. By 1950, Whatcom County's total population had grown to 66,733, with the majority of the growth occurring in the cities.

Between 1950 and 2000, the amount of land devoted to commercial activity gradually increased in response to population growth. Expanded use of the automobile encouraged commercial activities and residential development outside city centers. Coal mining ceased, but sand and gravel mining grew in importance. Farming became increasingly competitive, and the economic pressure tended to concentrate agricultural resources on the most productive soils. The trend toward abandonment or conversion of farmland to other uses continued. Some lands in the Nooksack Valley, which were formerly cleared for agriculture reverted back to native forest cover. Residential, commercial, and industrial uses continued to expand into agricultural areas. These changes picked up speed during the 1960s and 1970s as Whatcom County experienced a population boom. Rapid population growth also occurred in the 1990s and from 2004-2007. The total population for Whatcom County in 2010 had grown to 201,140, an increase of approximately 145% in 40 years.

Current Land Use

Whatcom County covers 1,378,446 acres, or approximately 2,154 square miles. A significant portion of this total (850,980 acres or 62%) is under federal management. Cities cover 31,577 acres or 2.3% of the total Whatcom County land area.

Resource land uses, which include agriculture, forestry, and minerals, are the largest category of land use in Whatcom County. Agricultural land use predominates throughout the western lowlands of the county and in the South Fork Nooksack Valley. Forest land use is concentrated on the uplands of the county. (See Chapter 8, "Resource Lands," for more detailed information on each of these land uses.)

The majority of commercial land uses occur next to major transportation routes, such as the Guide Meridian, or within cities. There are also concentrations of commercial uses in the Birch Bay UGA and Point Roberts. The majority of industrial parcels are also located in the cities, their UGAs or at the Cherry Point industrial area. The locational pattern of commercial and industrial uses indicates the importance of transportation connections to these land uses. (See Chapter 6, "Transportation," and Chapter 7, "Economics.")

The majority of single-family homes are concentrated in the cities and the major urban and intensely developed rural portions of the county such as Sudden Valley, Columbia Valley, Glacier, Lake Samish, Lake Whatcom (north end), Cain Lake, Birch Bay, Sandy Point, and Lummi Island. Lower density residential development is

scattered throughout the rural areas of the County. As may be expected, single-family homes are also located along the valley floors of the three forks of the Nooksack. The Cherry Point industrial area, the agriculturally dominated area north of Lynden and the forested foothills in the eastern part of the county have very low to zero residential density.

A prominent characteristic of Whatcom County housing is the high number of vacation, resort, and second-home units found throughout the county. In 2010, approximately 55% of the "vacant" units were actually occupied part of the year for seasonal, recreational or occasional use.

The majority of multi-family residential units are located in the urban areas of the county, primarily in and around Bellingham, Ferndale, Lynden, and Blaine. Within the unincorporated area of Whatcom County, multi-family housing units are found near Birch Bay, Sudden Valley, Glacier, Point Roberts and in the area between Bellingham and Lynden.

Other Topics

Background information on other topics including land use, housing, utilities, transportation, economics, natural resources and the environment can be found in the following chapters of the Comprehensive Plan.