

Section 4: Planning Background

Page 1 Natural and Human Environments

Page 1 Jurisdictional Roles & Authorities

Page 2 Summary of Solid Waste Management Roles

Page 4 County Demographics and Employment

Page 5 Land Use

Page 6 Solid Waste Collection Services

SECTION 4: PLANNING BACKGROUND

Natural and Human Environments

Whatcom County is the northernmost county in western Washington, and covers an area of 2,182 square miles. It is bounded on the north by Canada and on the south by Skagit County. Nearly two-thirds of the County's total land area lies within the mountainous region of Mt. Baker National Forest, with the majority of the population in the western portion of the County. This area encompasses 755 square miles and includes the incorporated municipalities of Bellingham, Blaine, Everson, Ferndale, Lynden, Nooksack and Sumas.

Northwestern Whatcom County is relatively flat terrain with elevations from sea level to a few hundred feet, with the eastern part of the County typically mountainous. Mt. Baker, most notable landmark of the North Cascade range reaches an elevation of 10,788 feet.

The county's position between western ocean salt water and eastern mountains gives it a maritime climate. Winters are generally moist, with temperatures dropping into the 30°'s F; summers are generally dry with temperatures in the 70°'s F. Precipitation falls mostly as rain in the lowlands, snow in the mountains, and varies from 30 inches per year near Puget Sound to as much as 200 inches in the Cascades.

Three main river systems, the Nooksack, Sumas, and Skagit, help to drain the lowlands, foothills and western mountains. The largest body of water in the western part of the County is Lake Whatcom, 5,000 acres, and the main source of drinking water for Bellingham. Other sizable lakes are Lake Samish (814 acres), Lake Terrell (600 acres), Silver Lake (184 acres), Lake Padden (152 acres), and Wiser Lake (123 acres).

Because of Whatcom County's hydrological features, the area available for the development of any future solid waste disposal landfill sites has proven to be extremely limited. As a result, currently, all county solid waste is hauled to other suitable sites in other counties.

Jurisdictional Roles and Authorities

This Plan governs the solid waste management policy of Whatcom County and all incorporated cities in the County, including Bellingham, Blaine, Everson, Ferndale, Lynden, Nooksack and Sumas. Lummi and Nooksack tribal lands are not subject to this Plan, although some interpretations indicate that non-tribe residents within reservation boundaries may be subject to provisions of County solid waste ordinances.

Solid waste management activities in the far southeastern area of the County, including Newhalem and Diablo, are not included in this plan. Waste volumes originating in these areas are managed by the Skagit County disposal system or private disposal facilities.

The State Department of Ecology (DOE) and Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission (WUTC) also perform important planning, financial assistance, and regulatory functions regarding solid waste management.

Summary of Solid Waste Management Roles

Department of Ecology

State law (RCW 70.95) assigns to local governments the primary responsibility for solid waste management planning in their jurisdictions. The planning framework must follow that established by DOE, which is charged with creating the state's long-range plan, goals, and policies.

The state controls compliance with RCW 70.95 through its review and approval of solid waste management plans and facility permits. The state delegates regulatory authority over solid waste facilities to local health departments. Issuance of permits by local health departments may be appealed by DOE to the state Pollution Control Hearings Board.

The 1989 "Waste Not Washington" revisions to RCW 70.95 set forth a new order of priorities (RCW 70.95.010 (8)) for solid waste management, as follows:

- (1) Waste reduction
- (2) Recycling, with source separation of recyclable materials as the preferred method
- (3) Energy recovery, incineration or landfilling of separated wastes
- (4) Energy recovery, incineration or landfilling of mixed wastes

By stating in RCW 70.95.010 (9) that "It is the state's goal to achieve a fifty percent recycling rate by 1995," and in (10) that "Steps should be taken to make recycling at least as affordable and convenient to the ratepayer as mixed waste disposal," the state law makes clear that landfilling is the last resort to consider in solid waste management.

Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission

The WUTC regulates garbage and refuse hauling under RCW 81.77, through the issuance of certificates entitling a hauler to provide solid waste collection services of a certain type (garbage, refuse, demolition) within a specified geographic area. This franchise system under which haulers are permitted to solely operate in particular areas is of importance to Whatcom County because of the county's significant rural population. The franchise system permits the spreading of hauler costs over large populations, which results in lower costs for rural customers. Because their costs are lower, more customers sign up for service, there is less self-haul traffic to county facilities, and there is less likelihood of illegal dumping and illegal waste storage.

The authority of the WUTC under RCW 81.77 is limited to collection of solid waste from generators and does not extend directly to the regulation of hauling of solid waste from transfer stations or of recycled materials. The WUTC regulates private companies providing the latter services through issuance of common carrier permits under RCW 81.80.

Whatcom County

Whatcom County, through its Department of Public Works, Solid Waste Management Division (SWMD), is currently the primary solid waste planning agency in the county. Whatcom County's specific authorities include:

Preparing and updating the CSWMP under the advisory overview of a Solid Waste Advisory Committee (SWAC)

Local Municipalities

Under state law, cities and towns have a broad range of authority to determine how they wish to manage or delegate control of solid waste generated within their jurisdictions. In Whatcom County, all cities and towns have delegated responsibility for solid waste transfer and disposal operations to the County and all have adopted Interlocal Agreements designating the county as their solid waste management planning agency for the purposes of comprehensive plan update.

Whatcom County Health Department

The Whatcom County Health Department is the county's primary regulatory authority for environmental and public health aspects of solid waste management. The Department includes the entire county, the 7 cities and towns, but not the Lummi or Nooksack Reservations.

Under regulations adopted pursuant to RCW 70.95, WAC 173-304 and WAC 173-350, the Whatcom County Health Department authority covers construction and operation of all solid waste facilities; the storage, collection, transfer and disposal of solid waste; sewerage systems, septic tank installation and pumpers, noise emissions, and other public health activities that might affect the solid waste management system. This charge permits the Department to assert regulatory control over both public and private facilities. The County also regulates these facilities through its land use and building regulations process.

Applications for proposed private facilities must be submitted to the Whatcom County Health Department for review and comment regarding their consistency with this comprehensive solid waste plan. If required by the appropriate zoning code, facilities proposed for unincorporated areas of the county are subject to the County's conditional use permitting process, and facilities within incorporated areas must meet the conditional use permit requirements of the applicable city or town.

Northwest Clean Air Agency

The Northwest Clean Air Agency (NWCAA) regulates mobile and stationary sources of air pollutants. Through its urban area burn bans, it has effectively moved woody wastes and slash that was formerly burned into the waste stream. Some of this additional waste goes through the system, and some goes to private facilities. Other areas in which NWCAA actions affect the system include its regulatory authority over emissions from solid waste equipment (including landfill emissions), composting facilities, and from other facilities that the system might build in the future.

County Demographics and Employment

The Washington State Growth Management Act requires counties to designate urban growth areas (UGA) based upon the 20-year population projections made for them by the state Office of Financial Management (OFM). By definition, these areas must contain enough space and density to accommodate the projected growth. Counties then allocate data gathering tasks for more specific forecasts, which are essential for planning by cities, towns and rural areas.

Whatcom County's process involved all jurisdictions and the County's Planning Department.

Population

Whatcom County population has increased steadily since the beginning of this century, with its largest increase between 1990 and 2000, of 28%. Whatcom County is the state's 8th most populous county with a 2000 population of 166,814.

Population Forecast: High Scenario for Cities of Whatcom County

City	2002	2007	2012	2017	2022
Bellingham	81,741	90,700	99,629	108,439	117,472
Blaine	5,011	5,738	6,465	7,171	7,942
Everson	2,330	2,653	3,020	3,433	3,912
Ferndale	10,451	12,174	13,891	15,585	17,322
Lynden	10,217	11,899	13,573	15,234	16,900
Nooksack	1,002	1,219	1,482	1,798	2,189
Sumas	1,036	1,168	1,316	1,480	1,669
Columbia Valley	2,712	3,765	4,818	5,839	6,966
Pt. Roberts	1,367	1,576	1,784	1,987	2,210
Birch Bay	4,815	6,004	7,193	8,347	9,619
Other Unincorp.	53,818	59,036	64,254	69,323	74,882
Total	174,501	195,931	217,426	238,636	261,084

Population Forecast: Low Scenario for Cities of Whatcom County

City	2002	2007	2012	2017	2022
Bellingham	80,375	86,612	92,647	98,403	104,228
Blaine	4,886	5,136	5,364	5,565	5,775
Everson	2,285	2,508	2,746	2,995	3,269
Ferndale	10,188	11,388	12,548	13,655	14,776
Lynden	9,972	11,343	12,681	13,970	15,269
Nooksack	973	1,121	1,285	1,465	1,672
Sumas	1,017	1,109	1,205	1,305	1,415
Columbia Valley	2,526	2,816	3,075	3,291	3,522
Pt. Roberts	1,331	1,392	1,447	1,494	1,544
Birch Bay	4,605	4,941	5,242	5,495	5,764
Other Unincorp.	52,908	54,535	56,009	57,278	58,616
Total	171,066	182,901	194,249	204,916	215,850

Source: ECONorthwest
Whatcom County Population and Economic Forecasts

Top 25 Employers in Whatcom County

Rank	Business	Employees
1	Western Washington University	2235
2	St. Joseph Hospital	1757
3	Bellingham School District	1651
4	Whatcom County	930
5	Ferndale School District	510
6	City of Bellingham	858
7	Haggen	843
8	Sodexo Services	648
9	Brown and Cole	634
10	Heath Techna	613
11	BP (Cherry Point)	571
12	T-Mobile	569
13	Intalco Aluminum	465
14	Fred Meyer	441
15	Whatcom Community College	438
16	Lummi Indian Business Council	437
17	Everyday Staffing LLC	396
18	Mount Baker School District	389
19	Haskell Corporation	350
20	Anvil Corporation	345
21	Madrona Medical Group PS	340
22	Matrix Service Inc	327
23	Silver Reef Casino	327
24	Blaine School District	321
25	Wal-Mart Associates Inc	318

Land Use

Whatcom County covers approximately 2,152 square miles, and the majority of non-federal land use distribution in unincorporated Whatcom County is dedicated to forestry and agriculture, at a combined rate of nearly 75%. Residential lands follow at 11%.

The Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan, prepared by Planning and Development Services and adopted May 20, 1997, and updated in January of 2005, gives detailed information regarding land use policies, as well as community services, transportation and environmental conditions.

Solid Waste Collection Services

All of Whatcom County is served by private collection services. In unincorporated areas, solid waste collection is currently provided to residents on a mandatory basis by three private companies operating under certificates issued by the WUTC. They include:

Blaine Bay Refuse, Inc. 491 Martin Street, Blaine, WA 98230
Nooksack Valley Disposal, Inc. 250 Birch Bay Lynden Road, Lynden, WA 98264
Point Recycling & Refuse, LLC 1423 Gulf Road, Pt. Roberts, WA 98281
Sanitary Service Company 1001 Roeder Avenue, Bellingham, WA 98225

Transportation Network

Whatcom County's transportation system is a network of highways, arterial streets, rural roads, rail, marine, airport, bikeways, ferries, and other facilities. Outside the main I-5 corridor, the county is largely rural and most area highways have light traffic volumes.

Most Whatcom County facilities are less impacted by the issue of road congestion, than they are by the issue of road condition. Volumes are increasing on roads designed and built for rural traffic, because of the development of areas such as the Casino on the Lummi Reservation, Bellis Fair Mall and the Mt. Baker Recreation area.

While these roads are a vital part of the transportation network, the County also provides ferry service, which is the only link between Lummi Island and the mainland. The Port of Bellingham operates the Bellingham Cruise Terminal, which serves the Alaska Marine Highway System ferries and commercial cruise ship lines. Other transportation facilities include off-street bikeways, harbor facilities, three airports, two north-south freight rail lines, operated by Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway (BNSF) and passenger rail service operated by AMTRAK.

With issues, goals and policies listed in the 2005 updated Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan, the County will be shaping its transportation network with several fundamental goals in mind. "The system must be cost-effective; it must be compatible with subarea, county and regional plans; it must be properly maintained and upgraded; it must provide access for transit and non-motorized travel; and it must offer acceptable levels of service and safety."

Vehicle Use Regulations

None of the major arterials includes restrictions below standard WUTC dimensions. Allowable vehicle weights under normal conditions depend upon the configuration of the vehicle. Emergency load restrictions are occasionally imposed in spring during periods of thaw, and if flooding is severe enough, some collection and transport activities must be postponed.