

2 Background

2.1 History

The name Sumas is derived from a Native-American phrase “sm-mess” which means “land without trees.” The original word comes from the Cowichan Tribe and refers to a natural prairie at the approximate site of the modern city of Sumas.

Settlers of European extraction arrived in the Sumas River basin in the 1870s. Records show a homestead by R. A. Johnson in 1872. Early settlers were drawn by the timber resources in the area, and a mill was soon constructed. During the 1880s gold rush, Sumas became a major outfitting center for prospectors seeking gold in the Fraser River basin. The city boomed to over 2,500 people. A weekly newspaper, *The Sumas Advocate-News*, was first published in 1889. Growth was further encouraged by the arrival in 1889 of the Northern Pacific Railroad and the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Railroad, providing a rail link with the Canadian Pacific Railroad. The link with Canadian transportation facilities, including US Customs and Immigration Services, remains an important economic resource today.

The City of Sumas was incorporated in 1891, and the first school was built in 1892. While the early growth of the city was supported by the timber and mining industries, a gradual shift toward an agricultural base took place during the first decades of the 20th century. Dairy farming, poultry farming, and fruit raising became major contributors to the city’s economy. A 1921 publication titled “The Show Window: Publication of the Chamber of Commerce, Bellingham, Whatcom County, Washington” identifies Sumas as “a desirable residence town” with “splendid schools, both grade and high, paved business streets, electric lights, good water supply, public library, telephone service, and other city conveniences.”

Between 1900 and 1940, Sumas dwindled in size as a result of the shift away from timber and mining. By 1940 there were less than 700 residents in town. The size and economic base of Sumas then changed very little through 1990: the city continued to rely on border-related commerce and the surrounding agricultural base.

In recent years, Sumas has experienced an unprecedented series of floods (one in early 2020 and two in late 2021) which have drastically changed the culture in Sumas. The first flood in late 2021 was by far the largest flood in living memory county-wide. One casualty was reported in the City of Everson. 85% of all structures in the city of Sumas were damaged by the flood waters as they rushed through town on their way to the Fraser River. Many residents were left without viable shelter. The process of repairing and rebuilding damaged homes and businesses took upwards of two years to complete. Many of Sumas’ long-time residents no longer felt safe living in such a flood-prone area and

relocated away from Sumas. Those who chose to stay now live in fear of the next big flood.

2.2 Prior Planning

Sumas developed a draft comprehensive plan in 1969, with the assistance of Urban Planning and Research Associates, a Seattle-based consulting firm. The plan included an inventory of existing land uses, a set of development and land use goals, a map recommending land-use zones, and a discussion of traffic circulation. Although an official zoning map was adopted after publication of the draft plan, the plan itself was never completed or adopted by the city council. As mentioned earlier, the GMA now requires that the city develop a more extensive plan.

2.3 Summary of Planning Pursuant to the GMA

Sumas began the process of complying with the GMA late in 1990. The first steps taken were to identify and protect critical areas including wetlands, frequently flooded areas, fish and wildlife habitat, geologically hazardous areas, and critical aquifer recharge areas. By March of 1992 an interim critical areas ordinance was in place.

Development of the comprehensive plan got underway in the summer of 1992. A consultant was charged with development of the plan, under the supervision of the planning commission. A citizen survey was distributed in July of 1992 and the results of the survey were distributed to city officials soon thereafter. In March of 1993 a town meeting was held to present the results of the survey and initiate a goal-setting process. In April of 1993 the county and the cities adopted county-wide planning policies. A draft set of local goals was developed in the summer of 1993 and presented at a second town meeting in September. The focus then shifted to establishment of an interim UGA encompassing 772 acres was adopted by the county council in May of 1994. Work on the comprehensive plan resumed in the spring of 1994 and continued until adoption of the first GMA-compliant plan in mid 1995.

In mid-1997 a plan update began as an outgrowth of a flood-planning process. Flood planning had revealed the need for different land uses in certain flood-prone areas, and also revealed that other areas were suitable for development. Other minor plan amendment requests had also been docketed. The planning commission began reviewing proposed amendments in the fall of 1997. In early 1998, the city council decided to simultaneously tackle an update of the Shoreline Master Program, which had not been revised 1988 and which contained some problematic provisions. Wildlife and fish habitat consultants worked in the spring of 1998 to develop science-based data, and a coordinated proposed update of the SMP and the comprehensive plan was published in June, 1998.

The 2001 plan update was undertaken in order to develop and integrate a detailed parks and recreation element and to incorporate the results of a *Water System Comprehensive Plan* that was finalized in the fall of 2000. The planning commission began reviewing

proposed amendments in the fall of 2000, and a draft plan revision was produced in spring 2001.

In 2002, the state legislature mandated that Sumas, together with other jurisdictions in Whatcom County, revise its comprehensive land-use plan prior to December 1, 2004. The review was to also include a review of all development regulations (i.e. zoning, subdivision, critical areas) to ensure consistency with the current goals and requirements of the Growth Management Act. The planning commission began the revision process in the fall of 2003 and produced a revised draft in the spring of 2004.

Amendments to the GMA adopted after 2004 established that the city of Sumas, in coordination with Whatcom county and the other cities in the county, was required to review and update its comprehensive plan and development regulations and review its UGA by the end of June, 2016. Coordination with neighboring jurisdictions regarding the required review and update began in 2013. Initial work involved coordinating with staff from Whatcom County and other cities in the county to develop an overall update schedule, a land capacity analysis methodology, and background information. In the fall of 2013, a consultant hired by the county (but paid for by all of the cities as well) prepared high, medium, and low projections for population and employment growth in the county through 2036 along with allocations of such growth to all of the UGAs, including Sumas. In late 2013, the city submitted a preliminary proposal to the county that identified the city's proposed allocations of population and employment growth. In early 2014, the Whatcom county council adopted a non-binding resolution establishing preliminary allocations of population and employment to all of the cities, including to the city of Sumas. In June of 2015, the Sumas city council authorized submission of the city of Sumas UGA Proposal which included the same allocations of population and employment included in the prior county council resolution. The Sumas planning commission began the review and revision process in the fall of 2015, and the recommended revisions to the plan were made available in the spring of 2016. Final action adopting the 2016 update of the comprehensive plan was taken by the Sumas city council in June 2016.

In 2020, an adopted amendment to the Growth Management Act established that the city of Sumas, in coordination with Whatcom County and the other cities in the county, was required to review and update its comprehensive plan and development regulations and review its UGA by the end of June, 2025. The 2020 amendment also established that the timing for major comprehensive plan updates has been extended from an 8-year timeline to a 10-year timeline. In 2021, Whatcom County, in coordination with the cities therein, began the process of updating comprehensive plans. The County and cities issued a Buildable Lands Report in 2022. In 2023, the County hired a consultant, partially paid for by the cities, who set out on developing a population and employment projections report.

2.4 Community Survey

In May of 2024, the City conducted a community survey of all residents in and around Sumas. Surveys were available online and they were also mailed out to every resident with their utility bill. The City received 120 responses, a response rate of about 6%. A copy of the actual survey document is included in Appendix III, along with the complete set of comments made by residents. The following is a brief summary of the survey showing the five major questions followed by the responses in priority order.

Q. Do you think Sumas is heading in a good direction? (1 to 5 Scale)

- 4
- 3
- 5
- 2
- 1

Q. What do you consider to be Sumas' greatest strengths as a community?

- Small Town Feel
- Great Tasting Water
- Semi-Country Living
- Peace and Quiet
- Good Neighbors
- Great Place to Raise Children
- Close-knit Community
- Proximity to Canada
- Housing Affordability
- Great Parks and Recreation

Q. Which amenities would you like to see come to Sumas?

- Doctor's/Dentist's Office
- Bank
- Hardware Store
- Public Pool
- Recreation Center
- Athletic Business
- Theater/Cinema
- Hotels/Motels
- Childcare Center
- Skatepark

Q. What aspects of Sumas do you think could use improving? (Organized by response category)

- More Businesses
- Infrastructure
- Flood Control
- Curb Appeal
- Recreation
- Housing
- Nuisances
- Growth
- Events
- Border

Q. What do you think should be the City of Sumas' top priority for the next 20 years? Why?
(Organized by response category)

- Flood Control
- More Businesses
- Infrastructure
- Housing
- Growth
- Curb Appeal
- Recreation
- Nuisance
- Safety
- Border
- Disasters

The final two questions listed were formatted to be filled out as written answer questions. The full list of written answers for those questions will be included in Appendix IV. In summary, the written responses showed solidarity on issues such as business growth and curb appeal. Many respondents commented on Cherry St, Sumas' downtown corridor, and its presentability, emphasizing that the City should prioritize rehabilitating the downtown to look more inviting and maybe attract new businesses. Flood control was also a major priority for the respondents. They emphasized that the flood control needs to be the number one priority for the City for the next twenty years.

2.5 Community Vision and Goals

Based upon the results of the community survey, the input of the planning commission, and citizen feedback at public meetings, the following vision has been identified:

Sumas should continue to grow and develop while maintaining its small-town character, promoting a high quality of life for its citizens, and preserving the unique identity and diverse characteristics of the city. Sumas should strive to respect the legacy of the past while promoting economic vitality and quality of life for future generations.

Several policy objectives have been identified to help the city attain this vision.

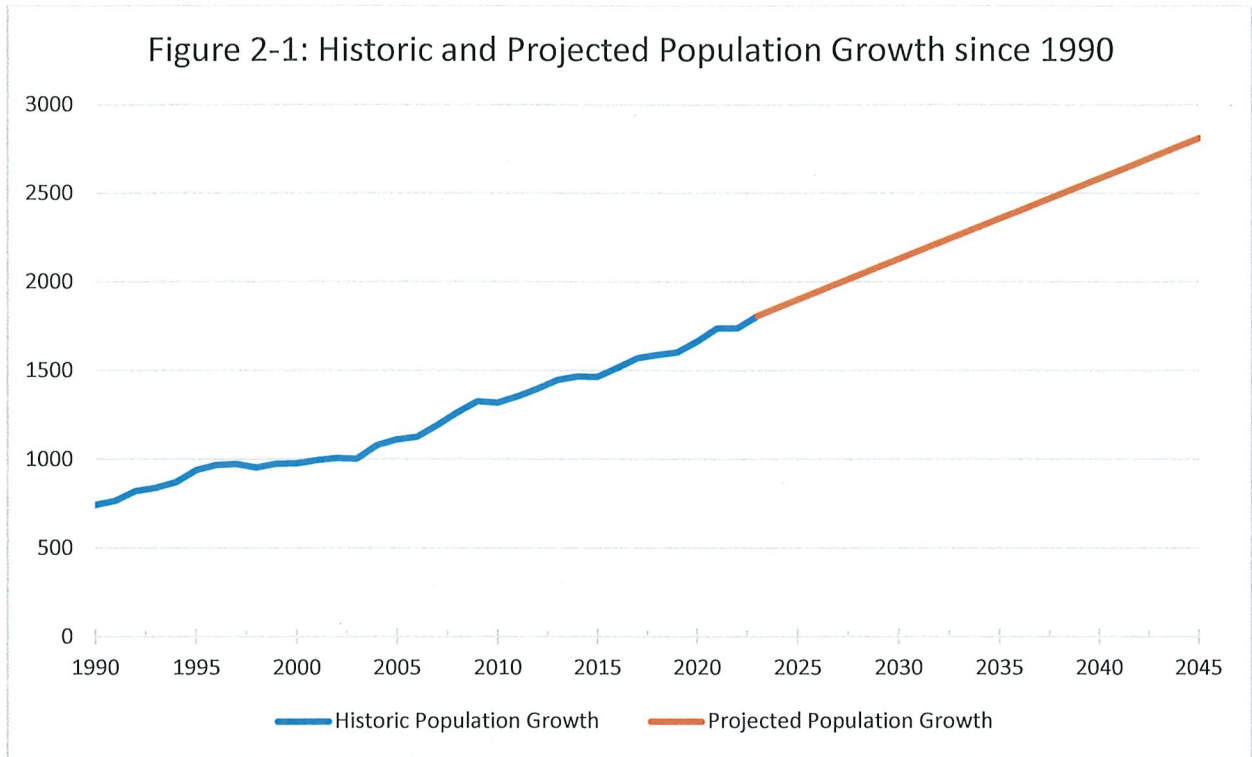
- Sumas should protect the natural elements – the clean air, pure water, and beautiful open space – that create the pastoral environment enjoyed by residents.
- Sumas should protect the residential character that is the essence of a rural town: residents should have “room to breathe,” yet should still be able to walk anywhere in town.
- Sumas should encourage commercial development that provides a benefit to local residents. Sumas should capitalize upon the large number of “passers-through” in order to support desirable businesses that would otherwise not survive in such a small town.
- Commercial development should be contained within compact, well-defined areas, both to minimize the impact on surrounding neighborhoods and to serve patrons conveniently.
- Sumas should encourage “clean” industrial development in areas separate from residential use.
- Sumas should enhance the facilities at existing parks and also develop new trail and park facilities by conversion of land that is unsuitable for development because of flooding.
- Sumas should protect groundwater resources to ensure that potable water meeting the current high standard and in quantities sufficient to support new growth will continue to be available into the future.
- Sumas should provide special protection of anadromous fisheries through implementation of the city’s critical areas regulations and shoreline management master program goals, policies and regulations.

In addition to the goals set forth above, the planning goals established in the Growth Management Act (GMA) pursuant to RCW 36.70A.020 are hereby adopted and incorporated by this reference as planning goals under this comprehensive plan. In addition, the policy of the Shoreline Management Act established under RCW 90.58.020 is added as one of the GMA planning goals, without creating any priority order, and is incorporated by this reference into the Sumas comprehensive plan.

2.6 Population Projection

After decades of relatively constant population, Sumas experienced substantial growth beginning in 1990. From 1940 to 1990, the average annual growth rate was a mere 0.25 percent, and during certain decades (e.g. 1950s, 1970s) the population fell by small amounts. In contrast, the average annual growth rate was 2.7 percent during the interval from 1990 through 2004, which equated to an average increase of 24 people per year. This rapid rate of growth continued, and even increased somewhat. During the 20-year period from 2003 to 2023, the average annual growth rate in Sumas increased to 3.0 percent. Growth during this period saw Sumas add approximately 40.4 people per year. Figure 2-1 shows how the population in Sumas has grown since 1990.

Figure 2-1: Historic and Projected Population Growth since 1990



In 2024, the consultant SCJ Alliance (SCJ) provided a range of projections for population growth in Sumas from the baseline year in 2023 through 2045 at the end of the planning period. SCJ’s “High” estimate of an increase in 1,052 would be achieved if growth were to occur at an annual average rate of 1.67 percent in the period from 2023 through 2045, which equates to an average annual increase of approximately 48 people. SCJ’s “Medium” and “Low” growth projections reflected growth rates of 1.26 percent and 0.93 percent, respectively. These growth rates equate to average annual increases of 32 and 21 through the twenty-two-year period.

Survey results and citizen testimony reveal that residents desire some growth in coming years. The planning commission believes that a population of about 2,800 would be compatible with the small-town atmosphere that residents wish to preserve.

In consideration of the consultant projections, historic growth rates and the residents’ desires, *Sumas plans to accommodate a population of 2,810 in the year 2045, which equals a net increase of 1,000 from the 2023 population of 1,810.* The city’s adopted population growth projected through 2045 is also shown on Figure 2-2. The target population will be attained if growth occurs at an average annual rate of 2.0 percent. The population growth rate adopted by Sumas is consistent with the strong growth in the city seen over the past thirty-five years and is based, in part, on the expectation that, over the next twenty years, increasing shares of overall county growth will be seen in urban areas due to limitations on growth in rural and resource lands as a result of the GMA. Table 2-1 shows projected city population at milestone planning years, based upon the adopted population growth number and using 2023 as the baseline year.

Table 2-1. Adopted Population Projection, 2023-2045

Milestone year	Projected population	Number of Newcomers
2020 Census	1,665	-
2023 OFM Baseline	1,810	-
2031 Six-year capital planning horizon	2,174	364
2035 Mid-point in planning period	2,356	546
2045 Planning period	2,810	1,000

2.7 Employment Projection

The SCJ report projects that the Sumas employment base will increase by 148 jobs over the course of the planning period. However, consistent with Whatcom County’s initiative to provide more opportunities for industrial development, Sumas will be looking to prioritize bringing in new industries during the upcoming planning period. Because of this effort, the City of Sumas has been allocated employment growth of 500 jobs through the year 2045.