

Thurston County
COUNTY-WIDE PLANNING POLICIES
March 18, 2025

These policies were adopted by the Board of County Commissioners on September 8, 1992. They were ratified earlier by each of the seven cities and towns within Thurston County. Those seven cities and towns are Lacey, Olympia, Tumwater, Bucoda, Rainier, Tenino and Yelm. On August 2, 1993, representatives of Thurston County and the seven cities and towns met to clarify intent of policies 1.2 and 1.3 and to affirm long and short term Urban Growth boundaries established in 1988 around Olympia, Lacey and Tumwater. In 2002, policies were amended to be consistent with RCW 36.70A.215 (“Buildable Lands Program”). In 2015, the policies were amended to incorporate foundational principles and policies from Creating Places, Preserving Spaces, A Sustainable Development Plan for the Thurston Region, December 2013. In 2025, the policies were amended to be consistent with RCW 36.70.210, incorporating tribal participation and coordination. Thurston County includes ceded lands of the Medicine Creek Treaty Tribes, including the Nisqually Indian Tribe, Puyallup Tribe of Indians, Squaxin Island Tribe, and other tribal nations; as well as the ceded areas of and the Reservation Home Land of the Confederated Tribes of the Chehalis Reservation. These tribes will be referred to in these policies as “tribes.”

Background: The Growth Management Act calls for the faster growing counties and cities within their borders to undertake new planning to prepare for anticipated growth. New parts are to be added to the Comprehensive Plans of these counties and cities, and those plans are to be coordinated and consistent. The framework for this coordination are county-wide planning policies, developed by each county, in collaboration with its cities towns, and tribes. These are Thurston County’s county-wide planning policies which will be used to frame how the Comprehensive Plans of Thurston County and the seven cities and towns will be developed and coordinated.

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I. GENERAL POLICIES

(Adopted November 10, 2015, Amended March 18, 2025)

The seven cities and towns within Thurston County commit to consulting with the tribes, and the agencies and departments on matters that directly affect the tribes, and to the following general policies:

- 1.1 Balance our needs today with those of future residents, to protect and enhance quality of life and in recognition that each generation is a trustee of the environment for succeeding generations.
- 1.2 Preserve and promote awareness of our historic, cultural, and natural heritage.
- 1.3 Collaborate with tribes to identify and protect tribal cultural resources.
- 1.4 Recognize tribal sovereignty and demonstrate respect for Tribal governmental authority.
- 1.5 Develop new ways to cultivate and support respectful civic engagement and participation by residents, and public, private, and nonprofit businesses and organizations, encouraging choices and offering information that contribute to individual, household, and community health and well-being.
- 1.6 Break down institutional barriers to communication and cooperation, fostering open communication and transparent processes that encourage community-wide participation.
- 1.7 Think broadly, regionally, and globally – act locally. Acknowledge the interdependence of communities both within and external to our region, recognizing the impacts of our region upon the world, as well as the impacts of the world upon our region.
- 1.8 Translate vision to policy and act on adopted local plans and policies. Consider the effects of decisions on achieving this vision, while balancing individual property rights with broader community needs and goals.
- 1.9 Monitor progress and shift course when necessary. Use meaningful, easy-to-understand methods to measure progress on key objectives. Respond and adapt to future social, economic, and environmental challenges.
- 1.10 Partner across topic areas and jurisdictional boundaries. While supporting local decision-making, encourage regional and cross-jurisdictional coordination, communication, and cooperation that increase our capacity to make decisions for the common good across jurisdiction boundaries.
- 1.11 Build and maintain distinct communities, preserving and enhancing the character and unique identities of the existing urban, suburban, and rural communities in a way that protects what matters most, while offering additional opportunities to improve on what can be better.
- 1.12 Meet basic human needs of clean water and air, healthy food, adequate housing, quality education, public safety, and equal access, regardless of socio-economic status.
- 1.13 Support education, employment, commercial opportunities, cultural, social, and recreational opportunities in appropriate places and at a scale that supports community health and well-being.
- 1.14 Champion energy efficiency and renewable energy strategies that contribute to energy independence, economic stability, reduced climate impacts, and long-term household and community health.
- 1.15 Protect the natural environment while acknowledging the interdependence of a healthy environment and a healthy economy.
- 1.16 Provide for adequate active and passive recreational opportunities.

- 1.17 Cooperate on utilities, transportation, and economic development issues.

II. URBAN GROWTH AREAS

(June 5, 1992, Adopted September 8, 1992, Amended November 10, 2015)

- 2.1 Urban growth within Thurston County is to occur only in designated urban growth areas.
- 2.2 The boundaries of designated urban growth areas must meet the following criteria:
 - a. Contain areas characterized by urban growth.
 - b. Be served by or planned to be served by municipal utilities.
 - c. Contain vacant land, or under-developed land with additional capacity, near existing urban areas that is capable of supporting urban development.
 - d. Be compatible with the use of designated resource lands and critical areas.
 - e. Follow logical boundaries.
 - f. Consider citizen preferences.
 - g. Be of sufficient area and densities to permit the urban growth that is projected to occur in the succeeding twenty-year period.
- 2.3 Amendments to the urban growth boundaries must use the following process:
 - a. Cities and towns will confer with the county about boundary location or amendment.
 - b. Proposed boundaries are presented to the Urban Growth Management (UGM) subcommittee of Thurston Regional Planning Council, which makes a recommendation directly to the Board of County Commissioners.
 - c. Following a public hearing, the Board of County Commissioners designates the boundaries and justifies its decision in writing.
 - d. Cities and towns not in agreement with the boundary designation may request mediation through the State Department of Commerce.
 - e. At least every 10 years, growth boundaries will be reviewed based on updated 20-year population projections.
 - f. Appeals of decisions made through this process are per the State Growth Management Act, RCW 36.70A.
- 2.4 Expansion of the Urban Growth Boundary must demonstrate consistency with:
 - a. All of the following criteria:
 - i. For South County jurisdictions: the expansion area can and will be served by municipal water and transportation in the succeeding 20 years. South County jurisdictions must demonstrate that the expansion can be served by sewage disposal measures that provide for the effective treatment of waste water in the succeeding 20 years.
 - ii. For North County jurisdictions: the expansion area can and will be served by municipal sewer, water, and transportation in the succeeding 20 years.
 - iii. Urbanization of the expansion area is compatible with the use of designated resource lands and with critical areas.
 - iv. The expansion area is contiguous to an existing urban growth boundary.
 - v. The expansion is consistent with these County-Wide Planning Policies.
 - b. One of the two following criteria:
 - i. There is insufficient land within the Urban Growth Boundary to permit the urban growth that is forecast to occur in the succeeding 20 years; or
 - ii. An overriding public interest demonstrating a public benefit beyond the area proposed for inclusion would be served by moving the Urban Growth Boundary

related to protecting public health, safety and welfare; enabling more cost-effective, efficient provision of sewer or water; and enabling the locally adopted Comprehensive Plans to more effectively meet the goals of the State Growth Management Act.

- 2.5 Reduction of the Urban Growth Boundary must demonstrate consistency with all of the following criteria:
- a. Sufficient land will remain within the reduced Urban Growth Boundary to permit the urban growth that is forecast to occur in the succeeding 20 years.
 - b. The reduced Urban Growth Boundary will include cost-effective sewer and water and transportation service areas, as applicable for each urban growth area.
 - c. Reduction of the Urban Growth Boundary is compatible with the use of the designated resource lands and with critical areas.

**III. PROMOTION OF CONTIGUOUS AND ORDERLY DEVELOPMENT,
PROVISION OF URBAN SERVICES, AND PROTECTION OF RURAL AREAS**
(August 19, 1992, Adopted September 8, 1992, Amended November 10, 2015)

- 3.1 Concentrate development in urban growth areas and protect rural areas by:
- a. Accommodating the county's growth first and foremost in the urban growth areas and ensuring that development occurring in rural areas is rural in character.
 - b. Encouraging infilling first within those parts of the urban growth areas that are:
 - i. Already characterized by urban growth that has adequate existing public facilities and service capacities to serve such development,
 - ii. Second, in areas already characterized by urban growth that will be served adequately by a combination of both existing public services and facilities, that are provided by either public or private sources, and
 - iii. Third, in the remaining portions of the urban growth areas.
 - c. Phasing urban development and facilities outward from core areas.
 - d. Establishing mechanisms to ensure average residential densities sufficient to enable the county as a whole to accommodate its 20-year population projection.
 - e. Limiting growth in rural areas to prevent sprawl and the overburdening of rural services, maintain rural character, and protect the natural environment.
 - f. Prohibiting urban net densities in rural areas.
 - g. Designating rural areas for low intensity, non-urban uses that preserve natural resource lands, protect rural areas from sprawling, low-density development and assure that rural areas may be served with lower cost, non-urban public services and utilities.
 - h. Where urban services and utilities are not yet available, requiring development to be configured so urban growth areas may eventually infill and become urban.
 - i. Considering innovative development techniques.
- 3.2 Coordinate Urban Services, Planning, and Development Standards through:
- a. Maximizing the use of existing infrastructure and assets, and leveraging the value of these in building vital, healthy, and economically viable communities.
 - b. Making public investments that further multiple community goals, target identified priorities, and leverage additional investment.
 - c. Considering both economies of scale and long-term maintenance cost when investing in infrastructure.
 - d. Providing and maintaining municipal services (water, sewer, solid waste, public safety, transportation, and communication networks) in a sustainable, and cost-effective manner.
 - e. Coordinating planning and implementation of policies regarding urban land use, parks, open space corridors, transportation, and infrastructure within growth areas. Developing compatible development standards and road/street level of service standards among adjoining jurisdictions.
 - f. Developing, and ensuring the enforcement of, agreements between Thurston County and the cities and towns within its borders, that ensure development occurring within unincorporated urban growth areas is consistent with city utility and storm water planning and conforms to the development standards and road/street level of service standards of the associated city or town.

- g. Phasing extensions of urban services and facilities concurrent with development and prohibiting extensions of urban services and facilities, such as sewer and water, beyond urban growth boundaries except to serve existing development in rural areas with public health or water quality problems.
 - h. Identifying, in advance of development, sites for schools, parks, fire, and police stations, major storm water facilities, greenbelts, open space, and other public assets. Acquisition of sites for these facilities shall occur in a timely manner and as early as possible in the overall development of the area.
- 3.3 Cooperate on annexations in order to accomplish an orderly transfer of contiguous lands within growth areas into the adjoining cities and towns. Cooperate on developing a streamlined and efficient process for annexation, while maintaining appropriate environmental review.
- 3.4 Provide capacity to accommodate planned growth by:
 - a. Assuring that each jurisdiction will have adequate capacity in transportation, public and private utilities, storm drainage systems, municipal services, parks and schools to serve growth that is planned for in adopted local comprehensive plans; and
 - b. Protecting ground water supplies from contamination and maintaining ground water in adequate supply by identifying and reserving future supplies well in advance of need.

IV. JOINT COUNTY AND CITY PLANNING WITHIN URBAN GROWTH AREAS
(August 19, 1992, Adopted September 8, 1992, Amended November 10, 2015)

- 4.1 Thurston County and the cities and towns within its borders will jointly plan the unincorporated portions of urban growth areas.
- 4.2 Each city and town will assume lead responsibility for preparing the joint plan for its growth area in consultation with the county and adjoining jurisdictions.
 - a. The lead city or town and the county will jointly agree to the level and role of county involvement at the outset of the project, including the role of each jurisdiction's planning commission.
 - b. A scope of work, schedule and budget will be jointly developed and individually adopted by each jurisdiction.
 - c. The process will ensure participation by area residents and affected entities.
- 4.3 The jointly adopted plan or zoning will serve as the basis for county planning decisions and as the pre-annexation comprehensive plan for the city to use when annexations are proposed.
- 4.4 Each joint plan or zoning will include an agreement to honor the plan or zoning for a mutually agreeable period following adoption of the plan or annexation.
- 4.5 Nothing in these policies shall be interpreted to change any duties and roles of local governmental bodies mandated by state law; for example, statutory requirements that each jurisdiction's planning commission hold hearings and make recommendations on comprehensive plans and zoning ordinances.

V. SITING COUNTY-WIDE AND STATE-WIDE PUBLIC CAPITAL FACILITIES

(June 5, 1992, Adopted September 8, 1992, Amended November 10, 2015)

- 5.1 Cooperatively establish a process for identifying and siting within their boundaries public capital facilities of a county-wide and state-wide nature which have a potential for impact beyond jurisdictional boundaries. The process will include public involvement at early stages. These are facilities that are typically difficult to site, such as airports, terminal facilities, state educational facilities, state or regional transportation facilities, state and local correctional facilities, solid waste handling facilities, and in-patient facilities including substance abuse facilities, mental health facilities, and group homes.
- 5.2 Base decisions on siting county-wide and state-wide public capital facilities on the jurisdiction's adopted plans, zoning and environmental regulations, and the following general criteria:
 - a. County-wide and state-wide public capital facilities shall not have any probable significant adverse impact on lands designated as critical areas or resource lands; and
 - b. Major public facilities that generate substantial traffic should be sited near major transportation corridors.

VI. ANALYSIS OF FISCAL IMPACT

(August 19, 1992, Adopted September 8, 1992, Amended November 10, 2015)

- 6.1 Develop financing methods for infrastructure which minimize the taxpayer's overall burden and fairly divide costs between existing and new development.
- 6.2 Cooperatively explore a method to mitigate the fiscal impact on county government of annexation of significant developed commercial and industrial properties.
- 6.3 Cooperatively explore methods of coordinating financing of infrastructure in urban growth areas.

VII. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND EMPLOYMENT

(June 5, 1992, Adopted September 8, 1992, Amended November 10, 2015)

- 7.1 Encourage an economy that is diverse, can adapt to changing conditions, and takes advantage of new opportunities.
- 7.2 Support the recruitment, retention, and expansion of environmentally sound and economically viable commercial, public sector, and industrial development and resource uses, including the provision of assistance in obtaining funding and/or technical assistance.
- 7.3 Provide in comprehensive plans for an adequate amount of appropriately located land, utilities, and transportation systems to support desirable economic development. Create and maintain regulatory certainty, consistency, and efficiency.
- 7.4 Acknowledge and look for opportunities to engage with regional economic drivers such as state government, the Port of Olympia, and Joint Base Lewis-McChord. Coordinate economic development efforts as well with other jurisdictions, the Economic Development Council, Chambers of Commerce, and other affected groups.
- 7.5 Build a vital, diverse, and strong local economy, including job opportunities that support community and household resilience, health, and well-being, by:
 - a. Supporting workforce training and offering opportunities for education and entrepreneurial endeavors.
 - b. Supporting creativity, arts, and culture.
 - c. Providing opportunities for a range of business types to succeed.
 - d. Emphasizing policies that support locally owned businesses including home-based, entrepreneurial, and nonprofit business and organizations.
 - e. Encouraging the development of local services for food, clothing, and other basic human needs.
 - f. Nurturing urban and rural agricultural and food-oriented businesses.
 - g. Protecting resource lands.
 - h. Encouraging the utilization and development of areas designated for industrial use, consistent with the environmental policies in these county-wide policies.
 - i. Connecting economic health with personal health and well-being and the advancement of environmental health.
 - j. Adding incentives for businesses to demonstrate their environmental sustainability including reduction in greenhouse gas emissions.

VIII. AFFORDABLE HOUSING

(August 19, 1992, Adopted September 8, 1992, Amended November 10, 2015)

- 8.1 Increase housing choices to support all ranges of lifestyles, household incomes, abilities, and ages. Encourage a range of housing types and costs that are commensurate with the employment base and income levels of jurisdictions' populations, particularly for low, moderate and fixed income families.
- 8.2 Accommodate low and moderate income housing throughout each jurisdiction rather than isolated in certain areas.
- 8.3 Explore ways to reduce the costs of housing.
- 8.4 Establish and maintain a process to accomplish a fair share distribution of affordable housing among the jurisdictions.
- 8.5 Work with the private sector, Housing Authority, neighborhood groups, and other affected citizens, to facilitate the development of attractive, quality, low and moderate income housing that is compatible with the surrounding neighborhood and located within easy access to public transportation, commercial areas and employment centers.
- 8.6 Regularly examine and modify policies that pose barriers to affordable housing.
- 8.7 When possible, provide assistance in obtaining funding and/or technical assistance for the expansion or establishment of low cost affordable housing for low, moderate and fixed income individuals and families.

IX. TRANSPORTATION

(April 30, 1992, Adopted September 8, 1992, Amended November 10, 2015)

- 9.1 Increase transportation choices to support all ranges of lifestyles, household incomes, abilities, and ages.
- 9.2 Increase opportunities for riding transit, biking, walking, ridesharing, allowing and encouraging flexible work schedules, and teleworking.
- 9.3 Encourage efficient multi-modal transportation systems that are based on regional priorities and are coordinated with county and city comprehensive plans.
 - a. Local comprehensive plans will consider the relationship between transportation and land use density and development standards.
 - b. Local comprehensive plans and development standards should provide for local and regional pedestrian and bicycle circulation.
 - c. Improved transit service will be based on Intercity Transit's plans, informed by and consistent with the regional transportation plan and local comprehensive plans.
 - d. Transportation Demand Management plans and programs required by State law will be implemented as a key part of the region's transportation program.
 - e. Improvements to the regional road network will be consistent with local and regional transportation plans.
 - f. The regional transportation planning process is the primary forum for setting county-wide transportation policy.
- 9.4 The transportation element of each jurisdiction's comprehensive plan will be consistent with the land use element of that jurisdiction's comprehensive plan.
- 9.5 The transportation element of each jurisdiction's comprehensive plan will include level of service standards for all arterials and transit routes and services. Each jurisdiction will coordinate these level of service standards with all adjacent jurisdictions. Transit level of service standards will be consistent with Intercity Transit policies.
- 9.6 Each jurisdiction's transportation element will include an assessment of the impacts of the transportation plan and land use assumptions on the transportation systems of adjacent jurisdictions.
- 9.7 The transportation elements of comprehensive plans adopted by Thurston County and each city and town in the county will be consistent with the Regional Transportation Plan adopted by Thurston Regional Planning Council, in accordance with the provisions of the Washington State Growth Management Act.
- 9.8 The Regional Transportation Plan adopted by Thurston Regional Planning Council will be consistent with the land use elements of comprehensive plans adopted by Thurston County and the cities and towns within Thurston County and with state transportation plans. To ensure this, the Regional Transportation Plan will be reviewed and updated, if necessary, at least every two years for consistency with these plans.

- 9.9 All transportation projects within Thurston County that have an impact upon facilities or services identified as regional in the Regional Transportation Plan will be consistent with the Regional Transportation Plan.
- 9.10 Local and regional transportation plans will consider maritime, aviation, and rail transportation as an integral link to the area's regional transportation needs.

X. ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

(August 19, 1992, Adopted September 8, 1992, Amended November 10, 2015, Amended March 18, 2025)

- 10.1 Recognize our dependence on natural systems and maintain a balance between human uses and the natural environment.
- 10.2 Establish a pattern and intensity of land and resource use that is in concert with the ability of land and resources to sustain such use, reduce the effects of the built environment on the natural environment, conserve natural resources, and enable continued resource use, through:
 - a. Land-use and transportation plans and actions that encourage compact development and concentrate development in urban growth areas.
 - b. Retrofitting existing infrastructure to reduce impacts of the built environment on the natural environment.
 - c. Planning for the amount of population that can be sustained by our air, land, and water resources without degrading livability and environmental quality.
 - d. Minimizing high noise levels that degrade residents' quality of life.
- 10.3 Protect the soil, air, surface water, and groundwater quality, including through:
 - a. Reducing dependence on the use of chemicals and other products that pollute and, when their use is necessary, minimizing releases to the environment.
 - b. Ensuring adequate clean water is available to support household and commercial needs while sustaining ecological systems through conservation, balancing of uses, and reuse.
 - c. Protecting ground and surface water, the rivers and creeks of Thurston County and the water of the Puget Sound from further degradation by adopting and participating in comprehensive, multi-jurisdictional programs to protect and monitor water resources for all uses, including fish habitat and passage.
 - d. Protecting and enhancing air quality.
- 10.4 Take action to conserve resources, increase use of renewable resources and decrease dependence on non-renewable resources by:
 - a. Reducing energy consumption and reliance on nonrenewable energy sources.
 - b. Encouraging the reuse and recycling of materials and products, and reduction of waste to the maximum extent practicable.
- 10.5 Acknowledge that changing weather and climate patterns will impact the human, natural, and built environments and plan for impacts such as increased wildfire, flooding and sea-level rise.
- 10.6 Protect and restore natural ecosystems, such as, forests, prairies, wetlands, surface and groundwater resources, that provide habitat for aquatic and terrestrial plants and animals.
- 10.7 Provide for public access to natural resource lands, while ensuring that uses and economic activity which are allowed within those lands are sustainable.
- 10.8 Provide for parks and open space and maintain significant wildlife habitat and corridors.
- 10.9 Where outdoor lighting is necessary, design the lighting to minimize the light pollution.

XI. COUNTY-WIDE POLICIES WHICH ESTABLISH A PROCESS TO DEVELOP FUTURE POLICIES

(August 10, 1992, Adopted September 8, 1992, Amended July 1, 2002, Amended November 10, 2015, Amended March 18, 2025)

- 11.1. Process to determine and assure sufficiency of Urban Growth Areas to permit projected urban population:
 - a. The state Office of Financial Management (OFM) growth management planning population projections for Thurston County will be used as the range of population to be accommodated for the coming 20 years.
 - b. Within the overall framework of the OFM population projections for the County, Thurston Regional Planning Council will develop countywide and smaller area population projections, pursuant to RCW 36.70A.110 and based on current adopted plans, zoning and environmental regulations and buildout trends.
 - c. A review and evaluation program pursuant to RCW 36.70A.215 (“Buildable Lands Program”) will be established. The evaluation and subsequent updates required under the Buildable Lands Program will follow timelines in the RCWs, subject to availability of State funding. This evaluation may be combined with the review and evaluation of county and city comprehensive land use plans and development regulations required by RCW 36.70A.130 (1), and the review of urban growth areas required by RCW 36.70A.130(3).
 - i. In the event of a dispute among jurisdictions relating to inconsistencies in collection and analysis of data, the affected jurisdictions shall meet and discuss methods of resolving the dispute.
 - ii. Nothing in this policy shall be construed to alter the land use power of any Thurston County jurisdiction under established law.
 - iii. Because inclusion of this policy is as a result of state mandated legislation, implementation of this policy shall be commensurate with state funding.
 - d. The Thurston Regional Planning Council will review the smaller area population projections to assure that the 20-year population is accommodated county-wide, and that urban growth areas are of sufficient area and densities to permit the projected urban population.
- 11.2 These county-wide policies will be reviewed upon the request of four jurisdictions.
- 11.3 Under the State Growth Management Act, authority for making changes to County-Wide Planning Policies (CWPPs) lies with counties. The State Growth Management Act also states that counties are required to consult with the cities, towns, and tribes within its borders regarding changes to the CWPPs. It is the role of the Thurston Regional Planning Council Urban Growth Management (UGM) Subcommittee to be the vehicle for this jurisdictional consultation process in Thurston County. Amendments to the Thurston County County-Wide Planning Policies must use the following process:
 - a. Proposed amendments are to be reviewed by the UGM Subcommittee, which consists of a representative from the Council of each of the cities, towns, and tribes in Thurston County and a representative from the Board of County Commissioners.
 - b. Technical assistance will be provided to the UGM Subcommittee by jurisdictional Planning Directors or their designated representatives.
 - c. It is the responsibility of the UGM Subcommittee members to coordinate with their respective Councils regarding amendments to the CWPPs and to do so prior to the UGM Subcommittee making its recommendation on the amendments to the Board of County Commissioners.

- d. The UGM Subcommittee will make a recommendation on the amendments to the CWPPs directly to the Board of County Commissioners.
- e. The Board of County Commissioners will hold a public hearing on the amendments to the CWPPs. This public hearing would allow cities, towns, and tribes within Thurston County an opportunity to comment directly to the Board of County Commissioners on the amendments.