

**TUMWATER PLANNING COMMISSION
MINUTES OF HYBRID MEETING
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CONVENE: 7:00 p.m.

PRESENT: Chair Elizabeth Robbins and Commissioners Nelida Daniel, Grace Edwards, Terry Kirkpatrick, Sandra Nelson, and Brandon Staff.

Excused: Commissioner Gina Kotek.

Staff: Deputy Director Brad Medrud, Housing and Land Use Planner Erica Smith-Erickson, and Associate Planner Dana Bowers.

CHANGES TO AGENDA: There were no changes to the agenda.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES:

**TUMWATER PLANNING
COMMISSION MINUTES
APRIL 8, 2024:**

MOTION: **Commissioner Nelson moved, seconded by Commissioner Daniel, to approve the minutes of April 8, 2025 as presented. A voice vote approved the motion unanimously.**

COMMISSIONER'S REPORTS: Chair Robbins referenced some conversations about future training opportunities. The City has some capability to assist in funding training for Commissioners. She encouraged members to consider future training opportunities as they become available.

DEPUTY DIRECTOR'S REPORT: Deputy Director Medrud reported that the drafts of the Comprehensive Plan elements will be provided to the Commission prior to its next meeting. The meeting schedule includes a briefing on the Conservation Element at the second meeting in May as well as the Housing Element. The review of the Land Use Element is scheduled for the Commission's first meeting in June.

The City's consultant anticipates releasing a draft of the revised Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) to staff for review within the next week.

PUBLIC COMMENT: There were no public comments.

FOOD SYSTEM PLAN UPDATE: Rebeca Potasnik updated the Commission on the status of developing the City's Food System Plan.

The plan is categorized into nine sectors that include Policy and Government and Community Advocacy. Development efforts include regional collaboration with most of the collaboration occurring in Thurston County. In the Land Use and Conservation sectors, notable

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highlights are the disappearance of farmland with some farmland remaining within City limits. However, major farmlands are located outside of the City. Statistics on the loss of farmland applies to the entirety of Thurston County and is not just specific to the City of Tumwater.

Commissioner Staff mentioned a recent conversation with a local farm owner who expressed concerns about the size limitation of farms within City limits. One historic farm located within the City is attempting to sell its farm as it is not possible to sustainability operate a farm because of the limit on acreage.

Chair Robbins noted that the disappearance of farms is also caused by the conversion of farmland to other uses. She suggested noting within the plan that the loss of farmland can also be contributed to uses for other purposes. Another related issue attributed to the loss of farmland could be the use of lands for other purposes such as timber or ranch uses.

Discussion ensued on other reasons attributed to the loss of farmland including the difficulty of finding workers to work on farms, urbanization efforts, and how small urban farming is often practiced through community gardens, communities growing gardens on vacant plots, or small gardens operated by homeowners.

Commissioner Edwards inquired as to whether the loss of farmland within the plan could be attributed to global warming and climate change. Ms. Potasnik advised that the 27% attributed to the loss of farmland in Thurston County was because of conversion to housing, commercial, or industrial uses. Many of the farmers she spoke with shared that climate change did not affect the type of crops, but they did mention that other small issues contributed while climate change did not factor in their farming decisions at this time.

Commissioner Kirkpatrick noted that the plan speaks to community farmland trusts. He researched the issue and explored the Scatter Creek Farm conservation area that provides land leases to people to farm large acre farms eliminating the need for farmers to purchase the land outright. Those types of programs enable farm production and the provision of food to local communities. For example, the Kirsop Farm in Tumwater produces vegetables, grains, and poultry that are sold at local farmers markets. Agricultural land is available with many individuals farming those lands because of the availability of a subsidy through the transaction of placing the land in conservatory protection. The arrangement enables people to farm the land without investing in the purchase of the property. Ms. Potasnik agreed and noted that placement of land in a community farmland trust enables the opportunity for

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individuals who otherwise could not afford to purchase farmland to operate a farm.

Ms. Potasnik said the plan addresses workforce, processors, and producers and how labor shortages, labor costs, and lack of interest in farming are contributing to the loss of farming. Within the City of Tumwater, recent efforts through the development of the Craft District and the South Sound Food Hub and the Southwest Food Hub support processors and producers in the region. Recent USDA approval for Colvin Ranch to open a meat processing facility at the new Agriculture Innovation Park in Tenino will provide local ranchers with an opportunity to process local meat that should help reduce the cost of meat locally. Colvin Ranch had to truck animals to central Washington for processing.

The Fresh Farm is a partnership between the City of Tumwater's Parks and Recreation Department and the Tumwater School District. The school district offered an alternative high school program producing over 13,000 pounds of food since the program was initiated. However, due to recent budget cuts, the school district is ending the program at the end of June 2025. Ms. Potasnik said she is uncertain as to future plans for the Fresh Farm in Tumwater.

Commissioner Kirkpatrick said that approximately 10 years ago, Olympia High School sold Christmas trees on land adjacent to the high school. The district offered classes to high school students to learn how to operate a business by learning how to plant and care for trees and then harvest the trees for sale.

Commissioner Staff commented on the lack of educational opportunities for the younger generation to learn how to operate a store or learn different trades. The opportunities are practically non-existent in schools today. More opportunities are needed educationally to provide opportunities for the younger generation.

In response to a question on the plan's reference to access to water, Ms. Potasnik said some of the individuals she interviewed spoke to the high cost of water or the lack of access to water for irrigating crops.

Commissioner Kirkpatrick spoke to the high cost of water in the City especially as more areas annex to the City because the City must expand its water system to support new growth.

Deputy Director Medrud noted that similar to eastern Washington, the City does not operate an irrigation district that would provide agricultural access to water, which is important for controlling water costs. City water usage overall experiences spikes during the summer as more water

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is consumed. Dependent upon the extent of agricultural usage in the City, water usage can increase, which is computed within the calculation of water rates. In terms of water storage or capture that could be used for agricultural uses, Thurston County in the recent past allowed those types of uses. The Department of Ecology opposed the options as water is supposed to feed rivers and aquifers rather than for providing water for private storage systems. However, he believes the Department of Ecology has since lessened its opposition and that the options could be considered today.

Discussion ensued on whether there has been a prevalence using farmland for higher value crops, such as marijuana rather than for food crops. Ms. Potasnik said she understands that large hemp farms are located in central and eastern Washington.

Ms. Potasnik reviewed the sectors of Retail and Distribution. During her research she spoke with the owner of Summit Farms who serves as the Chair of the Tumwater Farmers Market Board of Directors as well as with representatives from the Warehouse and Craft Districts, which promotes retail. She noted that the farm to school program as a potential resource is not offered by the Tumwater School District. She attempted to seek data on all local processors and producers in the City. Because of data limitations, not all information has been captured. However, she could contact some subject matter experts to seek missing data.

Commissioner Kirkpatrick commented on food pricing at the Farmers Market and other local food sources. In most instances, the cost of food through those sources is much more expensive than from a local grocery store. Ms. Potasnik shared that the state offers a Market Match program, whereby the Tumwater Farmer's Market doubles the value of Snap benefits when purchasing food at the market.

Commissioner Kirkpatrick recommended the City's new community center should provide an option for the Senior Center to operate a food bank and space to offer other food distribution options. Other suggestions offered included the Tumwater Armory affording space for food distribution and the importance of walkable access to food.

Ms. Potasnik cited the sector on Waste Reduction and Recovery. Based on community conversations, an element that is repeated in many sections of the plan is the capacity limitation of cold storage for preservation of food, which poses a barrier for reusing food. Some conversations conveyed concerns that regional collaborations in the past focused more on waste reduction and recovery, which some believe has lessened in recent years. Recent state laws mandate some actions but lack any enforcement mechanism.

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Commissioner Kirkpatrick reported the Thurston County Food Bank refrigeration warehouse has only been in existence for the last two years. Previously, the food bank had a small refrigeration unit.

Ms. Potasnik said she spoke with a representative for the Meals on Wheels program through Senior Services, who spoke about the limitations of cold storage in the county. The Tumwater Old Town Center does house a small commercial kitchen.

Commissioner Edwards inquired about any metrics on the amount of food waste in Tumwater. Ms. Potasnik said she did not obtain any metrics but would pursue obtaining the information. However, the data may not provide the ability to remove yard waste from food waste.

Ms. Potasnik reviewed the sector of Food Access and Security. The information references the Market Match program offered by the state. Representatives of the Thurston County Food Bank indicated more people need services, which is outpacing the countywide population growth. Other comments spoke to the increase in food costs regardless of the source of purchase. Snap benefits are tied to a formula whereas the household spend 30% of its income on food. Benefits are based on the Thrifty Food Plan. However, other comments were reflective of spending at least 70% of household income on housing costs creating difficulty for many people to meet the needs of both housing and food. Data from the Thurston County Food Bank provided some client information about Tumwater patrons. The data reflects that clients encountered difficulty in obtaining protein rich food and fresh produce. The food bank offers five satellite locations to serve clients in the region. Included within the sector of Food Access and Security is information on housing affordability as housing costs are tied to food access and transportation. Some of the draft elements address grocery access in development in terms of transportation, walkability, and transit.

Discussion ensued on food security for children. Many children have access to food through the school district or at local daycare centers during the week but during the weekend may not have access to food. It was noted that often, the school district and other providers provide children with backpacks of food for the weekend.

Ms. Potasnik reviewed the sector on Public Health and Nutrition. The information includes free and reduced lunches for students. Most public kitchens are not set up for basic scratch cooking or have the capacity for food preparation. Food rescue can be difficult to incorporate into Meals on Wheels program and other meal programs because most programs follow strict nutrition standards.

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Ms. Potasnik referred to the last sector of Educational Workforce, which includes information on the Tumwater Fresh Farm program as it provided an opportunity for young people to learn about the food system. Many schools sponsor school gardens. Often, the gardens are not necessarily institutionalized into the curriculum, as there is often a mix in terms of the emphasis on school gardens. Within the sector of Current Collaborations and Resources, she included information from Pacific Mountain WorkForce Development (PACMTN) for connecting young people to jobs in agriculture and within the food system. Programs and materials have been developed to expose younger people to the employment opportunities within the food system.

Other food system programs and resources in Tumwater include the New Market Skills Center, South Puget Sound Community College, and a Cultural Community Center recently launching a workforce program. Many opportunities are available in Tumwater to help prepare people to become engaged in the food system.

The Food System Plan is grounded in the guiding principles of equity, sustainability, stability, resiliency, and advocacy.

Chair Robbins commented on the importance of incorporating timeframes, milestones, or items that have an inherent time element for different actions. Deputy Director Medrud commented on the importance of identifying specific actions for consideration by the Council as it prepares the annual two-year budget for the City.

Commissioner Edwards commented on the benefit of including milestones as it contributes to ongoing motivation to achieve outcomes.

Commissioners discussed the City's role of food systems and food insecurity. Some goals to consider include increasing the availability of cold storage, food collaboration with other entities, seeking foundation grants, or expanding the hours of the Farmers Market. Other aspects of the food plan should speak to whether City policies need to change or whether the City can incentivize, provide resources, or create a market for a specific product(s). Ms. Potasnik noted that the City provides grants for the creation of community gardens.

Commissioners and staff reviewed other aspects of the plan including identifying appropriate staff resources for specific actions within the plan, recognizing that surrounding jurisdictions are contending with the same challenges and that ongoing collaboration will be important while acknowledging that the City of Tumwater should provide a plan specific to the Tumwater community, exploration of state local food system grants. The City should contact the Thurston Conservation District for information on existing community gardens in Thurston County.

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Commissioner Kirkpatrick recommended contacting United Way Thurston County as they have the staff and organizational skills to assist the City.

Planner Smith-Erickson recommended including the Water Resources and Sustainability Department within some of the actions regarding the usage of water for lawns and promoting the conversion of grass lawns to gardens as a way to identify whether there would be either an increase or decrease in water usage. From a land use perspective, the City could consider changes in policies that enable farm stands in neighborhoods. The City recently hired a water conservation specialist. The City's conservation program will be based on reducing the irrigation of lawns. Collaboration with the new position could be possible to consider the Plan's goals and policies that could potentially result in programs that support conservation efforts.

Commissioners and staff discussed possible ways to support community gardens and pursuing more study and research on what is possible or not possible for the City to pursue.

Ms. Potasnik encouraged the Commission to consider any changes or additions to sectors within the plan or whether other areas need additional research. Commissioner Staff recommended obtaining additional information about Harbor Wholesale as the company is a local food distributor and collaborates with other community programs. Commissioner Edwards recommended exploring the restaurant connection to the plan in terms of whether restaurants are able to access locally resourced foods.

Commissioners supported actively pursuing collaboration with other jurisdictions to support the goals and actions within the plan.

NEXT MEETING DATE: The next meeting is scheduled on May 13, 2025.

ADJOURNMENT: **Commissioner Staff moved, seconded by Commissioner Kirkpatrick, to adjourn the meeting at 8:47 p.m. A voice vote approved the motion unanimously.**

Prepared by Valerie L. Gow, Recording Secretary/President
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