

Skagit Land Trust's

COMMENTS ON POLICY REVISIONS

Skagit County's 2025 Comprehensive Plan Environment and Climate Elements.

Suggestions submitted on behalf of
Skagit Land Trust. November 21 2024
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Thank you for the opportunity to comment on preliminary policy revisions to the Skagit County Comprehensive Plan Environment and Climate Elements.

Skagit Land Trust conserves wildlife habitat, agricultural and forest lands, scenic open space, wetlands, and shorelines for the benefit of our community and as a legacy for future generations. Our organization has over 1,700 family and business supporters (members) and 400 active volunteers who work to protect the most important and beloved places in Skagit County. Today, the Trust protects more than 10,000 acres, including more than 48 miles of shoreline.

Our comments draw from this mission and seek to ensure that the Skagit County Comprehensive Plan works to maintain the resilience of Skagit County's natural environment in the face of population growth and the impacts of climate change.

General Comments & Suggestions

We are impressed with the staff and consultants' development of the draft Climate Element. This is a substantial body of work that suggests, if adopted, that Skagit County is prepared to address the significant challenges we will face, and are already facing, due to climate change. It demonstrates that the County will also seek to play a role in reducing its contribution to greenhouse gas emissions. We urge adoption of a robust set of climate oriented policies. Adopting sound policy for the newly required element of the Comprehensive Plan will help the County prepare. Failing to plan for climate issues risks worsening the problem, making future "fixes" more costly or out of reach.

Establish an Environmental Advisory Board

Implementation of these new policies would be assisted greatly by the County's creation of an Environmental Advisory Board (EAB).

Skagit County's natural environment is multi-layered with a variety of diverse ecosystems, open space, and critical areas. County policy states that decisions about these complex areas will be based on "Best Available Science," yet Skagit County does not have an Environmental Advisory Board to assist county decision makers in addressing environmental issues. These issues are made increasingly complex as the impacts of climate change intensify and affect many areas of the County's plans and oversight. An Environmental Advisory Board would serve a similar purpose to the existing Agricultural Advisory Board and Forest Advisory Board.

The County's Environmental Advisory Board would be composed of people who have lived experience and those with professional expertise on a variety of environmental issues, including land conservation, habitat restoration, climate science, greenhouse gas emissions reduction, climate impacts mitigation, urban planning, open space issues such as bike and walking paths, water conservation, and connected wildlife corridors. Tribes should be included if they felt this was appropriate.

This Environmental Advisory Board (EAB) would help the County Commissioners and the Planning Department look at environmental issues holistically which assists in making decisions based on the best available science. In addition to researchers, scientists, and educators, the EAB could include younger people and underserved populations so the Commissioners could hear from those who do not usually have the opportunity to contribute to environmental policy planning. Individuals selected to serve on the EAB should demonstrate a commitment to environmental conservation, and a willingness to collaborate with others to seek realistic local solutions to the environmental concerns and the climate crisis. An Environmental Advisory Board would report to, and make recommendations to, the Skagit County Commissioners on natural resource and environmental plans, policies, and programs. Examples include legislation affecting natural lands, open space, wildlife habitat; land use decisions affecting the long-term sustainability of natural processes such as rivers and marine shorelines; natural solutions to improve climate preparedness and adaptation; environmental justice and environmental stewardship.

An Environmental Advisory Board could help ensure that Best Available Science is consistently considered in local planning. This board could also provide communication between the County and the environmental community as well as the community at large.

Specific Comments

Climate Element Preliminary Policies

AGRICULTURE & FOOD SYSTEMS

In suite CE 1, we support policies which seek to enhance flooding, sea level rise, innovation and drought resilience within the agricultural sector as well as support communities and their housing and safety.

Climate change impacts are a threat to Skagit's agricultural land. Sea level rise's impact in addition to more frequent high precipitation events will put stress on drainage systems leading to more flooding and may change soil health. Growing season or crop suitability may shift with warmer temperatures, changes in weather and reduced water availability. It seems unlikely that all of the currently identified 88,000 acres can be protected over time. Therefore, we strongly support the policy's call for planning involving all involved stakeholders, however, this need is not be limited to agriculture. With a changing climate, it is important to consider the entire watershed's agricultural potential and limitations as well as the needs and challenges of agriculture alongside forestry, fisheries, habitat, water, and the built environment. Looking at the this larger interconnected system prepares us for long-term ecological resilience.

CE 1.6 We recommend addressing the following:

One key area of focus should be identifying what lands in the watershed have a good likelihood of remaining viable farmland through time with or without public investments. Those lands that are not likely to remain viable farmland, even with reasonable long-term public investments, may be better served through dike setbacks or managed retreat, coupled with restoration projects to address Chinook recovery, blue carbon, flood storage and other ecosystem restoration goals.

We recommend that planning associated with climate impacts looks at the watershed as a whole instead of only at areas of the delta below the Wild and Scenic portion of the Skagit River (as proposed) and involve the widest slate of affected parties. Agricultural lands, including those with identified unique or USDA prime farmland, extend well into the Wild and Scenic portion of the Skagit watershed. As well, agriculture, forestry, fisheries, habitat, water, and the built environment all interact in, and will face interdependent challenges, as the climate changes. Watersheds are interconnected systems.

ZONING & DEVELOPMENT**We strongly support policies in CE 10:**

CE 10.1, “Work with regulatory agencies to develop regulations for elevating or setting back new and substantially improved structures located within mapped areas sea-level rise hazard areas [sic] to reduce the risk of damage caused by sea level rise.”

We note that a 2022 EPA-funded study by Coastal Geologic Services and Washington Sea Grant indicates that Skagit County is, by far, the location most vulnerable to climate-driven impacts, such as sea level rise and coastal erosion, in all of Puget Sound. (<https://wacoastalnetwork.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Prioritizing-Sea-Level-Rise-Exposure-and-Habitat-Sensitivity-Across-Puget-Sound.pdf>)

We also recommend the following:

- Other techniques besides “elevating” and “setting back” structures will need to be used, such as property buy-outs. Working with organizations that can assist with voluntary buyouts as part of their conservation strategy should be identified in the proposed policies. These voluntary buyouts can happen well before the situation becomes critical which assists property owners and local adaptation needs.

We support proposed policy revision CE 10.3, “Consider climate change, including sea level rise, extreme precipitation, increased winter stream flow, and other impacts, in floodplain management planning by updating flood hazard zones according to most recent climate change projections and modeling.”

One need only consider the devastating floods and resulting damage in North Carolina, as just one recent example, to realize the importance of updating flood hazard zones accordingly.

We also recommend the following:

- Skagit County should actively plan for sea level rise and climate change by updating the Shoreline Master Program under new regulations now in development, within 3-5 years.
- Skagit County should conduct a sea level rise vulnerability assessment and make it public.

We support proposed policy revision CE 10.4, “Require that proposals for shoreline stabilization demonstrate a need, and require the use of soft shore stabilization methods to the extent practicable to protect sites from wave-driven erosion or flooding exacerbated by sea level rise.”

We also recommend the following:

- Do not classify boulders as soft armoring.
- Require that new development be situated to avoid needing shoreline stabilization for the life of the structure.

We strongly support proposed policy CE 10.5, “Consider future climate conditions during siting and design of capital facilities to help ensure they function as intended over their planned life cycle.”

We also recommend the following:

- The location of hazardous industries and essential public services should be located well above the 100-year flood level.

We support but encourage fleshing out proposed policy CE 10.7, “Protect and restore coastal ecosystems to increase the resilience of species, habitats, and communities to climate change.”

We also recommend the following:

- This policy should be fleshed out with more detail, such as the need to address protection and resilience through planning for shoreline migration and natural processes.
- Identify managed retreat as a tool to create new habitats and manage risk for flooding.
- Assess the sea level rise vulnerability of wetlands, aquatic vegetation, beaches and dunes, and other valuable natural assets and collaborate with landowners and partners to support adaptation.
- Identify, protect, and restore submerged aquatic vegetation (eelgrass, kelp, etc.) that provides aquatic habitat, "blue" carbon storage, and other ecosystem services
- We recommend that language be added that supports working with partners and funding sources to protect these lands as part of resilient community projects

We support, but encourage strengthening, of policy CE 10.8, “Ensure all residential and commercial development and accessory uses, port and water-related industrial facilities, equipment, and works should be located, designed, and maintained to avoid, or if necessary, withstand 100-year flood frequency flooding and/or storm tides or surges without becoming hazards and without the placement of flood hazard reduction measures or other hard structural shoreline stabilization....”

We also recommend the following:

- This policy addresses residential/commercial development in the 100-year floodplain including areas subject to sea level rise and storm surge. It does say such development should be located or designed to avoid impact from flooding/storm surge, but the implication is for new development or perhaps raising structures. There is no mention of options such as managed retreat or dike setbacks so that structures are relocated or not built in the 100-year floodplain

BUILDING & ENERGY

We support draft revisions emphasizing increased use of clean energy sources and a reduction of burning fossil fuels for energy.

We support Proposed policy CE 2.4, “Identify areas in the County that are appropriate for siting renewable energy generation and storage facilities that prioritize protection of Natural Resource Lands.”

We also recommend the following:

- In addition to protecting natural resource land, this policy should also emphasize the protection of floodplains and valuable habitats and ecosystems from new energy facilities.
- The County should consider installing community solar arrays on County buildings, similar to what the City of Anacortes has done on some of its public buildings. In that city individuals can invest in solar arrays on public buildings and then receive dividends on investment for a set time. The arrays allow multiple customers such as low-income and other individuals, businesses, nonprofits, and other groups to benefit from solar energy production.
- The County should plan now for all types of clean energy installations, mapping and developing policy and code concerning the siting of electrical energy generation and storage facilities. The County should indicate where such facilities can be sited with the least conflict, and where they do not belong.

LAND USE & ECOSYSTEMS

We support CE Goal 6, “Protect and enhance natural ecosystems to support climate change resilience, carbon sequestration, and GHG emissions reduction.”

We support proposed policy CE 6.1, “Ensure the protection and restoration of streams, riparian zones, estuaries, wetlands, and floodplains to maintain healthy, climate-resilient watersheds.”

We support proposed policy CE 6.6, “Protect and manage natural lands (forests, grasslands, wetlands) to maintain or increase their carbon concentrations and avoid conversion of carbon-rich ecosystems.”

- Thank you for including the language on avoiding conversion of carbon-rich ecosystems.

We support proposed policy CE 6.7, “Align with Conservation Futures and Open Space Program strategies of the Climate Commitment Act to maximize conservation and carbon sequestration efforts.”

- The County should explore options to include forest lands, especially Secondary Forest, in the Conservation Futures program or look for other opportunities such as Transfer of Development Rights to facilitate conservation of forest lands as it already does with agriculture lands through Farmland Legacy.

TRANSPORTATION, CLIMATE RESILIENCE

We support proposed policy CE 7.1, “Support the expansion of employer commute trip reduction (CTR) programs to include both large and small businesses across various jurisdictions.”

We support proposed policy CE 7.2, “Map and prioritize transportation infrastructure that is vulnerable to repeated floods, landslides, and other natural hazards, and designate alternative travel routes for critical transportation corridors when roads must be closed. Strengthen the resilience of public transportation systems against heatwaves and extreme precipitation by implementing proactive measures that prevent delays, reduce disruptions, and minimize the risk of community isolation.”

We support proposed policy CE 7.4, “Support community mobility hubs in strategically accessible, multimodal available locations with a focus on overburdened communities experiencing a scarcity of transportation alternatives.”

EXPAND FOREST RESOURCE LANDS WILDFIRE STRATEGY

We support proposed policy CE10.6, “Establish development regulations that support and incorporate best practices for reducing the risks and consequences of wildfire, extreme heat, flooding and other climate-exacerbated hazards.”

Specific Comments: Comprehensive Plan: All Elements (Climate Integration)

Make changes to policy revisions for Rural Lands Conservation and Reduction of Carbon Emissions

We support proposed policy revision 3A(a), Protection of Rural Character, “Protect the rural landscape, character, and lifestyle by defining and identifying rural lands for long-term use, conservation, and resilience,” and appreciate the addition of the term resilience to this policy.

We also recommend the following:

- Recognize the value of conserving rural lands including agricultural lands, grasslands, forests, and wetlands because of their important role in carbon sequestration. In addition, forest lands without development are easier to manage during wildfires; grasslands, wetlands, and marginal agricultural land can hold flood waters thus protecting homes and businesses.
- The County needs to avoid creating additional development potential outside of cities, towns, and urban growth areas. Rural development will result in increased greenhouse gas emissions due to frequent travel for schools, shopping, jobs, and essential services.

EXPAND FOREST RESOURCE LANDS WILDFIRE STRATEGY

We support proposed policy 4B-2.11, “Wildfire Resilience Strategy. Develop a comprehensive, county-wide wildfire resilience strategy planning program to increase public safety and awareness regarding forest fire dangers, and establish the means of managing, reducing and suppressing catastrophic wildfires.”

We also recommend the following:

- Identify and implement strategies for reducing residential development pressure in the wildland-urban interface. The County should discourage building in some forested areas due to increased risk of intense wildfires. The County could achieve this by proactively purchasing development rights or assisting conservation agencies and nonprofits to purchase development rights. This will decrease risk of people building homes where they may be impossible to defend from wildfires. Some other vulnerable communities are no longer allowing development in fire prone forests and wildlands.

EXPAND MULTI-MODAL TRANSPORTATION, public transit, and the non-motorized transportation network:

We support proposed policy revision 8A-1.3 Multi-Modal Transportation, “Participate in the planning and implementation of multi-modal transportation systems to increase mobility of all users, especially in underserved communities, and provide affordable, accessible, and reliable alternatives to the passenger car to reduce vehicle miles traveled and greenhouse gas emissions.”

We support proposed policy revision 8A-3.1, “Transit Support- Support Skagit Transit to create incentives to encourage citizens and businesses to participate in transit use over single-occupant vehicles to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and vehicle miles traveled. Enhance the quality of transit systems viability by increasing speed, frequency, coverage, and reliability.”

We support proposed policy revision 8A-6, Non-Motorized Transportation Network, “Provide an equitable, resilient, safe, and efficient network of trails and bikeways, including both on- and off-road facilities that link populated and historically underserved areas of the County with important travel destinations such as jobs, schools, and essential services.....”

We also recommend the following:

- We note that expansion of public transportation and non-motorized transportation networks will go a long way toward helping Skagit County meet its greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions reduction requirements and its reduction in per capita miles traveled (MVT) requirements, while benefiting overburdened communities by reducing air pollution, improving both individual and community health.

The County should look carefully at safety and connectivity as it considers how to best implement a non-motorized transportation network. We recommend the County:

- Develop multi-use non-motorized trail systems that connect towns, cities, and the green spaces around them, that connect rural areas to towns and cities, and that lead to public transit. Incorporate dikes into the non-motorized trail system, allowing public access for biking and walking. Create incentives and protections for dike districts and adjacent landowners.
- Prioritize completing the Centennial Trail from Snohomish County to Whatcom County, a safe long-distance route for locals and tourists. Plan other trails to attract recreationists and eco-tourists like birders, creating a win-win for the County by increasing the tourism economy without increasing the carbon footprint. The Tiger Trail from Burlington to Edison, and a trail from an appropriate point on the I-5 corridor to Anacortes are top priorities.
- Map and identify roads, including roundabouts, and bridges that are currently too dangerous for walking, cycling, or rolling and plan to make them safer.
- Consider safety measures like wide shoulders; bicycle lanes separated from traffic by barriers (continuous or broken); bike paths or trails along heavily trafficked routes; sidewalks on bridges wide enough to accommodate walkers and riders; operational tools like bicycle, wheelchair or pedestrian accessible signals for crossing streets, highways, and bridges.

ENERGY CONSERVATION AND CLEAN ENERGY SOURCES

We support the proposed policy revisions in Utilities Element policies 9A-5.1 through 9A-5.7 related to energy conservation that emphasize increased use of clean energy sources and a reduction of burning fossil fuels for energy.

We also recommend the following:

- To achieve the goals of the above policies, Skagit Land Trust recommends the County consider adding rules and regulations that will encourage use of currently available sources of renewable energy and plan for use of newly developing sources of renewable energy.
- The County should plan now for future desirable uses of March Point as we transition away from fossil fuels to cleaner energy sources, taking into consideration product types, manufacturing processes, and transportation methods.
- The County should consider the use of thermal energy, which following the passage of House Bill 2131, electric and gas utilities may now sell, delivered via a thermal energy network (TEN). Distinct from geothermal energy, TENs use neighborhood-scale, highly-efficient, carbon-free networks of water pipes and ground-source heat pumps to distribute thermal energy for heating, cooling, and domestic hot water, drawing on various local non-emitting energy sources (like lakes, rivers, wastewater systems, or the stable temperature of the ground not far below the surface), making clean thermal energy available to all, including renters and lower-income households.

SPECIFIC COMMENTS – ENVIRONMENTAL ELEMENT REVISIONS

For the most part, proposed revisions to the Environment Element appear to be minor in nature, emphasizing streamlining the policy language and removing extraneous detail.

We support Environment Element Goal 5A, especially the strengthening of the first subgoal to emphasize no net loss of wetland functions and values: “Preserve and protect wetlands to prevent their continual loss and no net loss of wetland functions and values.”

We also support the corresponding language change to Policy 5A emphasizing no net loss of wetland functions and values.

We recommend that the final subgoal under 5A be strengthened as follows, with underlined language, to emphasize protection of wildlife corridors:

- “Protect, restore where practical, and enhance fish and wildlife populations and their associated habitats, including seeking opportunities to protect and restore corridor connections and continuous tree canopy and cover, to allow wildlife movement and migration across the landscape.”
 - Measures shall be taken to protect the natural ability of wetlands to improve the quality of surface water runoff, hold and gradually release storm water, function as primary producers of plant matter, provide habitat for fish and wildlife, provide recreational opportunities, and provide historical and cultural values.”

We would like to see corresponding language changes to Policy 5A-5.1

- Emphasize protection and restoration of habitat corridor connections and continuous tree canopy and cover to allow wildlife movement and migration.
- Given the beavers' role in maintaining healthy wetlands, the County also needs to consider, when possible, ways to incentivize relocation of infrastructure and structures away from areas likely to support or be flooded by beavers. Beavers create, protect and restore wetlands, helping to maintain healthy, climate-resistant watersheds. We appreciate that the County's Natural Resources Division has provided the public with education about living with beavers, and about how to manage beavers when they cause trouble.

We recommend that 5A2.2 be more specific to assist with hazard reduction.

Alluvial drainage floods will happen more frequently with the intense precipitation events expected with climate change. While Skagit County code does recognize alluvial fans as hazard areas, specific assessment or development standards for alluvial fans are absent. These should be added to the code to reduce risk and damage.

We recommend adding the following

Add specific standards such as these examples from Whatcom County code:

- Permanent residential structures and commercial developments shall be allowed in alluvial fan hazard areas only if the fan has undergone a county-approved study to assess potential hazards, determine risks, and identify mitigation measures and is deemed suitable for development
- The determination of risk and mitigation should be based on a detailed assessment by a qualified professional that identifies the risks associated with a 500-year return period debris flow, or the maximum credible event, that could impact the alluvial fan.

We strongly support additions to policies 5A-3.1 and 5A-5.1 emphasizing the importance of protecting wildlife habitat and habitat corridors. Thank you for adding these sections

We support what appear to be new policies added at the end of the Environment Element under the theme or subheading of Climate Change, listed on pages 20 – 22 of the Environment Element revisions document.

We are unclear where these policies would reside in the Environment Element as they are not given policy numbers; and we are also unclear how they compare to the new proposed policies on p. 23 which are shown in red underlined text which implies new policy language.

We appreciate the opportunity to comment. Thank you.