

# Skagit County Climate Element

## Summary of Interview with Skagit Land Trust

October 2024

### Introduction (Skagit County)

Washington House Bill ([HB 1181](#)), passed in 2023, updates the Washington Growth Management Act (GMA) to require cities and counties to integrate greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions reduction and climate change resilience policies into comprehensive plan updates. The Climate Element will include two important sub-elements: the Greenhouse Gas Emissions Reduction Sub-element and the Resilience Sub-element. The Greenhouse Gas Emissions Reduction Sub-element will include policies that reduce Skagit County's GHG emissions, reduce per-person driving miles, and prioritize actions that benefit overburdened communities. The Resilience Sub-element will include policies that enhance resilience to climate-intensified natural hazards.

As part of the planning process, the Skagit County Planning and Development Services (SCPDS) Department interviewed several organizations and individuals working in climate-related fields. The interviews will inform policy development and the final Climate Element. Below is a summary of SCPDS's interview with Skagit Land Trust's Public Policy committee.

### Interview Questions for Skagit Land Trust (SLT or the Trust)

1. What is your role at Skagit Land Trust and how do you consider your work to be related to climate change?
  - a. **SLT's mission is conservation of natural lands and ecosystems: parks, habitat, trails, shorelines, forests, ag lands etc. Our goal is to knit together ecosystems for people and wildlife.** We only work with willing landowners. We protect land outright or by helping other organizations.
  - b. **Conservation is essential to mitigating climate change impacts and critical in resilience planning.** We need to protect and restore natural systems to slow climate change. Natural ecosystems such as our forests, salt marshes etc. are needed carbon sinks. Healthy ecosystems are going to help us adapt better to climate change - i.e. act as buffers, filter water, cool temps etc.
  - c. **Cities should be where growth goes but we need to make cities livable and dense with easy access to rural areas and nature.** The work SLT is currently

doing with Skagit County Parks to protect Big Rock outside of Mount Vernon is a great example. Preserving this as a nature park near a densifying urban area provides access to nature so many people in our community. We also need interconnected trails systems through Skagit County. The Trust is working with partners to achieve this goal.

- d. **Keeping people out of harm's way.** We expect more flooding, coastal erosion, Sea Level Rise, fires and landslides. There is a cost to inaction around these climate-intensified events as homes and infrastructure will continue to be put in places that will be impacted. For example, it will be very expensive to defend structures in fire-prone forests. With changing climate, letting natural processes happen will often be the norm. Conservation is a good use for this kind of land. The Trust can help purchase these lands from willing landowners to keep people out of harm's way.
- e. **Appropriate stewards of lands that should be left natural as these lands do not require many tax-based "services" like structures do.** Insurance will be as important a driver as policy as we think about a changing climate. People are already not able to get certain types of insurance. A question to ask is where will burden fall when things happen?
- f. **Valuing the diverse wildlife habitats** in Skagit County. As the Climate Element is developed, SLT hopes there is a recognition of the importance of biodiversity to the quality of life in Skagit County as well as in its own right.
- g. **Recognizing that habitat restoration funding is important.** Restoration projects that help maintain or restore natural habitats and gain community resilience can be an efficient use of dollars. Many government funding sources want to see this rather than replacing the same infrastructure in the same places.
- h. **SLT believes that conservation is a wonderful tool for resilience planning.**

## [Reducing Emissions](#)

**1. The Greenhouse Gas Emissions Reduction Sub-element will include policies that reduce Skagit County's GHG emissions, reduce per-person driving miles, and prioritize actions that benefit overburdened communities.**

What specific actions should Skagit County prioritize to **reduce its impact on climate change** (e.g., reduce emissions)?

- **Support the production of local, clean renewable energy sources such as solar, geothermal, wind, battery energy storage facilities, and pump storage hydro, in areas of the county that would support this use.**
  - SLT would like the Plan to address this. A proposal for Golden Eye energy storage system was brought to the County Commissioners. Skagit Land Trust supports the Commissioners' recommendation that the project be denied and the proposed amendment to keep these structures off of ag land. The Trust also think it's important, when looking at renewable energy sources, that the County also develops a broad green energy plan that **looks at not only where things don't belong but where they do belong.**
  - SLT would like a proactive policy to map "**least-conflict**" areas for **BESS, solar, and wind**, rather than waiting for developers to submit proposals and reacting to them. A plan will lessen battles and keep communities safe. Reactivity to renewable energy projects prevents people from adopting green energy.
  
- **Anything the County can do to increase density in cities** will reduce our carbon footprint and keep intact carbon-sink areas, natural-resource based economies, and natural processes. For example, the County could change codes so it does not allow Fully Contained Communities (FCC's). FCC's increase greenhouse gas emission as they increase vehicle use from the FCC to service and work areas. They also put more infrastructure in rural areas which should be kept as intact as possible.
  
- **Support the expansion of public transportation and multimodal transportation options such as bike lanes, sidewalks, and trails.**
  - Multi-use trails that connect towns and green space around town are under Skagit County's 2009 Open Space Concept Plan. It needs to be updated with climate change in mind. This plan helps focus SLT's conservation work around cities and towns.
  - Protection of "green space" in the Open Space Concept Plan (OSCP). The OSCP has had good success via work by Skagit County, SLT, cities etc., but it was not developed with climate change in mind. The County needs to update the OSCP for these issues - i.e., areas for increased storm water runoff, heat sinks, flood water storage, wildlife habitat, and ways to enhance quality of life in towns – cities easily accessible to nature, trails to rural areas, etc.

- The Trails section of the OSCP has not been as successful, and needs to be updated. We need to understand where trails should be located to assist with emission reductions. Having more trails encourages people to walk, use bikes, etc., rather than cars. Currently it is very unsafe to bike to town from a rural area or between towns.
  - Map and identify roads that are currently dangerous for cyclists and develop plans to make them safer. Plan now to add shoulders or specific bike lanes to bridges when the time comes that they need to be replaced.
  - Recognize the rising use of e-bikes, their potential use for commuting, and make chargers and safe routes available.
- **Consider routes with bus stops at county parks and trailheads** like Little Mountain, Big Rock, and Northern State. Plan for more scheduled stops at such sites on the weekends.
  - **Support the adoption of regulations that transition residential, commercial, and industrial buildings to use energy-efficient technologies and practices that save energy and costs.**
  - **Support the expansion of electrical vehicle charging infrastructure throughout Skagit county.** There are no public EV charging stations east of I-5.
  - **Transition Skagit County’s motor pool fleet to electrical vehicles to the greatest extent possible. The use of electric vehicles by orgs (i.e. used by County etc) might help with wider adoption.**
  - **Support the expansion of opportunities to reduce, reuse, and recycle waste materials sustainably.**
  - **Invest in solar infrastructure on County owned properties and facilities as appropriate.**
  - **Consider community solar** to allow individuals who would like solar but can’t afford it or whose property isn’t solar appropriate to invest in solar arrays on public buildings and then get a share of the electricity. Community solar allows for smaller arrays than large solar farms, which would take up farmland.
2. What else **should the County keep in mind** as we draft and implement emissions reduction policies for the Climate Element?
    - a. Look at where development happens in the County to ensure that 80% of development goes into UGAs to protect natural resource industries, wildlife habitat, agriculture, forests, and floodplains. SLT would support bumping

80% up to 90%. The County should discourage UGA expansion as that helps cities grow denser, which is needed.

- b. There is a way to look at more density in rural and rural-intermediate areas, and support affordable housing, but the County should be aware that many of these areas are in floodplains or fire-prone areas which isn't an appropriate place to grow density. SLT feels we should not put more people and structures in at-risk areas of the future.
- c. Support mixed use development, green spaces, and 15-minute walkable communities.
- d. Consider what industries currently contribute pollution and plan ahead for the future. As we transition away from the use of fossil fuels, what type of industry and manufacturing processes does the County want in a future industrial area? What types of industries should not be on shorelines due to Sea Level Rise, pollution, etc.

## Enhancing Preparedness and Resilience

The next couple of questions will cover climate hazards and possible resilience policies for the Resilience Sub-element.

Examples of climate-intensified natural hazards include drought, extreme rainstorms, flooding, increased pests that threaten crops and trees, heat waves, severe cold weather events, loss of habitat and species, sea level rise, coastal erosion, landslides, wildfires, and wildfire smoke.

- 3. Given your role/community, which climate-intensified hazards do you believe should be Skagit County's **highest priority to address**, and why?
  - a. We need to identify wildlife corridors needed, how marine areas will evolve, and how to allow natural processes so that **we maintain fish and wildlife ecosystems**. They are critical to our ability to adapt and add immensely to our quality of life.
  - b. **Sea level rise** – Planning around this subject is needed. Dikes will not be able to fully hold back water as the level rises.
  - c. **Eroding bluffs** – Structures and roads built too close to feeder bluffs are in danger. Bluffs will erode faster in the future. Eroding bluffs maintain our beaches and barriers, protecting infrastructure from storms. They are also needed for fish and wildlife habitat.

- d. **Riverine (Skagit and Samish Rivers) flooding** – Natural processes will happen and we will not be able to hold back flood waters over time, especially with changing conditions. The rivers should have space for this to happen as it also supports fish and wildlife habitat. The County should work to stem building in the floodplain as it will keep people out of harms way.
  - e. **Geologic hazard areas** (landslides, alluvial fans, unstable slopes etc.) – Many of these are not marked on the County’s hazard map, or they are very hard to find. It seems that many communities are not aware of the maps or information. It is hard to keep people safe in these areas as conditions change.
  - f. **Fire – SLT is very supportive of keeping working forests and native forests** for habitat, cooling, absorbing and storing water, and to storing carbon etc. SLT thinks the County needs to **dissuade the construction of structures in large, forested areas**. Allowing building there is a risk. It is possible to do some things to mitigate fires but not as much as people think. It is very expensive to protect structures, and may not be possible in the future.
  - g. SLT would like to see the County keep structures out of eroding shores, floodplains, large forest areas, and other hazard areas.
  - h. **The County should think long-term**. Most current infrastructure is around for 80 years or more. Also, County plans should incorporate with earthquake planning since there are many overlaps.
4. Are there **specific areas or populations** (e.g., low-income communities, rural areas) in Skagit County that you believe will be more impacted than others by these hazards? If so, where and why?
- a. **Hamilton, Edison, La Conner**, and other that are in the floodplain or where you have to travel through floodplain to get there. During a flooding event these areas will be cut off from emergency response.
  - b. **Rural areas**. Natural hazards – Floods, eroding shorelines. It’s much easier to protect cities.
  - c. **Cities and dense neighborhoods are at risk of heat impacts and other issues if we don’t make them livable**. We need trails between cities, greenspace, and parks.
  - d. **With climate change, the County needs to think differently about zoning**. Do not encourage building in rural areas. Farmland, forest land, and conservation should be main uses in rural areas. Densify the cities. Make cities livable.

- e. **Concern about forest land.** Many communities in the United States are pulling back and not allowing development in forest lands as they cannot defend them from fire. A solution would be to buy up development rights to make sure that they aren't exercised.
  - i. There is little difference between what can happen in a secondary forest and industrial forest, outside of lot size: 20 acres vs. 80 acres. However, there is less protection for secondary forests with one development right per 20 acres. This makes such areas more vulnerable to development. Putting houses in these areas adds to fire risk.
  - ii. SLT wants to keep from chopping forests up into 20-acre blocks, which makes forest management harder, and can disrupt ecosystems.
  - iii. County and partners should plan to protect forest land.
  - iv. Purchase of Development Rights program

Policy areas in the Resilience sub-element could include:

- 5. What specific actions should Skagit County prioritize to strengthen the **preparedness and resilience** of its services (such as Planning, Public Works, Public Health, Parks & Recreation) and the communities they serve in response to climate change-intensified natural hazards?
  - a. Communication: No sugarcoating about hazards. Make hazard information very easy to find and use.
  - b. Support people to make a plan to minimize hazards: Want to prevent putting people, housing, and structures in harm's way.
- 6. What else **should the County keep in mind** as we draft and implement resilience policies for the Climate Element?
  - a. Planning Commission:
    - i. Climate Element will need a balanced approach so the County could make a policy that requires a balanced Planning Commission staffed by representatives from different focus areas. Also, because this is a new element, educating the Planning Commission will be needed. There is a role here for an Environmental Advisory Board (EAB) to assist with the education aspect. SLT sent in a proposal for the types of groups to include on the Environmental Advisory Board.

## Co-Benefits of Climate Policy

The next question is about co-benefits, which are the additional social, economic, and environmental benefits of climate policy, aside from reducing GHG emissions or building resiliency to hazards. Examples of co-benefits include improving salmon recovery, promoting economic development, promoting equity and justice, provides cost savings, protects tribal treaty rights, improves public health and well-being, improves air quality, builds community knowledge, protects water quality, supports housing supply and diversity. Understanding which co-benefits are valuable to the community will help us prioritize, implement, and communicate about policies.

7. What **co-benefits** are most important to you/your community?
  - a. **Biodiversity.** Skagit Land Trust prioritizes this as do groups like Skagit Audubon. People move here and stay here for biodiversity.
  - b. **We want to maintain Skagit's biodiversity** – climate change policy can help do that. Green infrastructure and conservation land can help too.
  - c. Agriculture was the top issue in the County survey. Environment and housing were also top issues in the survey. People love the environment but may take it for granted. We need to educate on how important it is and what we have.

## Additional Considerations

The final set of questions will cover any additional considerations for the County to keep in mind through policy development.

8. Does your community face **any barriers to participation** in climate policy planning? If so, how can the County address these barriers?
  - a. **Environmental Advisory Board: The environment and conservation are critical in adapting to climate impact and mitigating such impacts. The County needs an environmental advisory board.** There is a Forest Advisory Board and Agricultural Advisory Board. They are focused on working uses of lands. The County Parks and Rec advisory board focuses on recreational aspects of lands within the county park system. The County needs an Environmental Advisory Board (EAB) to look at the county's natural lands from a holistic point of view, so the Commissioners can also hear advice on environment/conservation from experts and those in this work, that is generally best-available and science-based. The County should consider people for an environment advisory board that do conservation and restoration, climate science, research orgs, educational orgs, conservation businesses. Etc. The County should bring in younger people, and people from cities, to better hear from people that do not currently have a voice in the process. An EAB could cover environment issues, emission reduction, and open space issues such as biking paths, walking paths, etc. SLT sent in a letter about this in the summer.
9. What type of **resources and/or support** would your community benefit the most from (e.g., financial, educational)?
  - a. **Increase funding for conservation.**