

Skagit County 2025 Comprehensive Plan Input

Recommendation for The Board of County Commissioners to Create an Environmental Advisory Board.

Reason for this recommendation

Although 2023 Washington state legislation requires that local comprehensive plans include specific goals and policies for climate change preparedness, response, and recovery, Skagit County does not have a committee or board to advise and make recommendations on all of the foundational elements of these issues. Our county needs an environmental board focused on Skagit County's open space and natural lands that would also provide input on plans critical to climate change adaptation and carbon emissions reduction.

Natural ecosystems are all of a piece. They work together to regulate our climate, lock away carbon, clean and store the water we drink, provide adequate habitat for native fish and wildlife to adapt, slow and alleviate flooding, control storm water and filter pollutants, create natural beaches protecting communities, help deter invasive species, protect biodiversity, and allow people from all communities to connect with nature in healthy, low carbon ways.

None of our commissioner-appointed advisory boards associated in any way with the environment is charged with looking at Skagit County's natural lands from a holistic point of view. The Agricultural Advisory Board (AAB) and Forest Advisory Board (FAB) have a commercial interests' focus. The County Parks and Recreation Advisory Board focuses largely on the recreational aspects of lands within the county parks system. The Marine Resources Committee is concerned principally with science, monitoring, education and restoration projects and does not play as advisory board role.

Critical area regulations do not cover the significant need the county has to identify and plan for conservation and restoration of a broad range of interconnected natural lands and environments, especially their critical role in climate adaptation and mitigation.

The County needs an environmental board with a diverse membership to evaluate Skagit County's natural lands and related policies through a variety of lenses, including social justice, biological and ecological sciences, climate science, and sustainability concepts to help the commissioners and the County make balanced decisions about the totality of our natural world and the people who inhabit it.

Proposed Primary Role and Duties

The Environmental Advisory Board reports to and makes recommendations to the Skagit County Board of Commissioners and Planning Agency on natural resource and environmental plans, policies and programs including, but not limited to:

- A. Existing and proposed legislation affecting natural lands, open space, waters and wildlife habitat of Skagit County
- B. Land uses as they impact the long-term sustainability of natural processes (river process, marine shoreline, etc.)
- C. Ways to maintain, enhance, collaborate on, and promote natural solutions to improve climate preparedness.
- D. Ways to maintain, enhance, collaborate on, and promote environmental justice and environmental stewardship.

For example, a key role of an Environmental Advisory Board would be to review and comment on evolving drafts of the comprehensive plan and climate change elements concerning the

environment. Reviewing and commenting on plans is one of the main roles of the FAB and the AAB and would thus also apply here.

The Commissioners do not need to adopt a comprehensive plan policy calling for an Environmental Advisory Board in advance of its establishment; however, such a policy should be included in the proposed comprehensive plan update.

The advisory board would complement and not compete with any other governmental efforts to restore and manage the natural environment.

Additional roles of the Environmental Conservation Advisory Board

- Examine and advise on possible solutions and options for natural resource and environmental issues as they arise in Skagit County.
- Ensure that best available science is consistently available for consideration in local planning.
- Advise on updates and priorities in the County's Open Space Concept Plan to account for climate change.
- Advise on Integrated Plans as they develop; in particular, areas of fish and wildlife habitat and corridors.
- Make recommendations on measures that may be needed to protect the Skagit's unique natural ecosystems.
- Advise on ways to honor private property rights while supporting voluntary conservation and restoration.

Groups and Community Members that might be considered for appointment to the board include:

- **Nonprofit and Public Conservation and Restoration organizations that focus on environmental sustainability in the Skagit Area** (Skagit Land Trust, Skagit Fisheries Enhancement Group, Skagit River Systems Cooperative, Skagit Watershed Council, Skagit Conservation District, The Nature Conservancy, etc.)
- **Organizations focused on education or research about the environment, including climate change** (Skagit Climate Science Consortium, North Cascades Institute, Padilla Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, Skagit Audubon Society, Evergreen Islands, etc.)
- **Conservation-oriented businesses and nonprofits with demonstrated knowledge, interest and experience in one of the following areas:** natural sequestering of carbon; recycling; gleanng; native habitat restoration and/or engineering; surface water management; conservation biology; climate impacts on forests; aquatic or terrestrial ecology; hydrology etc.
- **Next generation groups with environmental programs** (Skagit Valley College, Triumph Teen Centre, Vamos Outdoors, Anacortes Green Club, etc.)
- **Community members and landowners at large from each district including young people** (under 23), those interested or with expertise in environmental issues, and members of an underserved community that may be disproportionately affected by climate change impacts.
 - **This group would consult as needed with others including: tribal representatives; large ecosystem public land managers** (National Park Service, US Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, WA Department of Fish and Wildlife, WA Department of Natural Resources, WA State Parks, etc.); **other entities** planning for natural lands and open space locally; **natural resources** boards etc.

Submitted on July 11 2024 on behalf of Skagit Land Trust

Molly Doran, Executive Director

**Skagit Land Trust, 1020 S 3rd Street
Mount Vernon WA 98273
mollyd@skagitlandtrust.org**