

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary .....	3
▪ Background and Purpose .....	3
▪ Methods .....	3
▪ Key Findings .....	4
▪ Recommendations .....	5
Section A: Economic Opportunity Assessment	
▪ Table of Contents .....	A-1
▪ Project Overview.....	A-3
▪ Assessment Findings.....	A-95
Section B: Land Use Study	
▪ Table of Contents .....	B-1
▪ Project Overview .....	B-3
▪ Summary Conclusions and Recommendations.....	B-37
Section C: Community Engagement	
▪ Table of Contents.....	C-1
▪ Project Overview.....	C-3
▪ Conclusion .....	C-15



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

In October 2007, Snohomish County initiated a project to create a vision of how the farming community and Snohomish County citizens want local agriculture to look and function 100 years from now. From that work, a practical business plan would be developed serving as a roadmap for implementing an agriculture action plan that ideally would be a permanent part of a comprehensive county-wide program to sustain agriculture.

The initial work of the project included three components: 1) economic opportunity assessment; 2) inventory mapping and land-use analysis; and 3) community outreach to identify community attitudes and values to be used as a benchmark for future use. The project had a Community Oversight Steering Committee (COSC) which consisted of the Snohomish County Agriculture Advisory Board and three outside community members. The product of this collaborative effort would be used as the basis for an agricultural business plan that will help guide both policymakers and planners.

Three vendors were selected through an RFP process to complete the work. Nyhus Communications, LLC served as the lead contractor of the project and led the community engagement piece of the project, Community Attributes conducted the economic opportunity assessment and MAKERS Architecture and Urban Design conducted a land use surveys well as land use recommendations.

## METHODS

The three components of the project ran concurrently and used a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods to gather the information needed to complete the project. Overviews of the methods used by project elements are as follows:

### ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY ASSESSMENT METHODS

- Interviews of farmers, agriculture businesses, industry leaders, public officials and other stakeholders;
- Analysis of secondary data, agricultural activity, economic and market conditions and demographics;
- Original analysis designed to illuminate economic opportunities;
- Collaborative conversations with the Snohomish County Agricultural Advisory Board and project team;
- Participation at the Focus on Farming conference;
- Support and participation at community involvement events.

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## LAND USE STUDY METHODS

- Land use inventory was built on previous County agricultural land use analysis for designated farmlands by inventorying non-designated farmlands that are currently in production or have the potential for cultivation; and
- Review of land use policies, trends.

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## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT METHODS

- Community Workshops – Six targeted community outreach workshops were held in Edmonds, Lynnwood, Mukilteo, Everett, Snohomish and Arlington;
- Community Outreach Meetings – In addition to the workshops, an additional eight community groups across the County were engaged to gather input and feedback; and
- Stakeholder Interviews – More than 25 key stakeholders that were carefully selected to represent the broad cross-section of Snohomish County’s economic and cultural fabric were interviewed one-on-one.

## KEY FINDINGS

Agricultural opportunities are ripe as political, social, environmental, and economic conditions shift at a rapid pace in 2008. World food prices are rising dramatically, as is the demand for food and biofuels. Consumers place increasing emphasis on locally grown food products, with market demand in the Puget Sound region likely exceeding existing available supply. New state laws ensure a lasting market for locally grown food for schools and institutions.

The biggest challenges ahead lie in determining which opportunities to pursue. Snohomish County has many opportunities to assist farmers in agricultural activities, and farmers have new, emerging opportunities to capture consumer dollars unlike any other time in recent history.

More than 200 new farms started between 1997 and 2002. However, large farms comprise most of the economic output and therefore are an essential component of the future of Snohomish County agriculture; 58 of the 1,600 farms in Snohomish County accounted for 62% of county-wide farm sales in 2002.

There are roughly 34,500 acres of designated farmlands in production and approximately 19,700 acres of non-designated farmlands in production. And while most of this non-designated land is located on small and scattered sites, the agricultural activities supported by the non-designated lands are important to the County’s agricultural economic sector. They provide products (for example, hay) to larger farming activities and they in turn increase the market for agricultural support services such as farming equipment and processing facilities needed by farmers on designated farmlands.

Although agriculture is an important part of the Snohomish County economy, our engagement efforts revealed that those citizens who had an existing understanding of agriculture’s personal and public benefits also have a greater appreciation of the need to keep farmland in production. The challenge is with the urban

and suburban Snohomish County citizens. With no direct relationship to agriculture, these citizens see no connection between the success of agriculture and their lives.

Even though the connection to farming by urban and suburban citizens was low, there was a general feeling that farm land is being threatened by development pressure, regulatory restrictions and taxes. And finally, it was identified that public education about farms, farmland and local food is essential if farmland is to be preserved.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY ASSESSMENT

Community Attributes performed an economic analysis of the current agricultural industry and, based on input from county, community and agricultural stakeholders, unique research, and key findings from previous studies, recommends the County develop a business plan based on the Agriculture Sustainability Project. The business plan would be based on the identified opportunities listed below:

- Year-Round Public Market: Draw a consistent consumer base to help farmers capture a higher proportion of potential sales;
- Processing Unit: Allow farmers to increase farm gate value of products;
- Agritourism: Promotional signage to brand Snohomish County and participating farmers;
- Biofuels: Innovative technology drives food and fuel usage from canola crops;
- Distribution Hub: Infrastructure is required to help connect farmers with purchasers;
- Hire a Food Systems Planner: Ensure food and agriculture policy plans are implemented in Snohomish County;
- Include Food Policy Goals in County Comprehensive Plan: Plan for growing interconnectedness between agricultural lands and urban needs;
- Coordinate with other Snohomish County Action Committees: Avoid duplicate efforts and maximize resources;
- Develop an Interactive, User-friendly, Web-based Database: Connect producers and purchasers with interactive, user-friendly Web 2.0 technology;
- Promote Local Agriculture: Marketing and signage to create brand awareness of Snohomish County agriculture and individual farms;
- Work with Washington State on Farm-to-School Initiative: Snohomish County can facilitate the process by sharing information and networks;

- Develop Snohomish County Agricultural Sustainability Business Plan: Leverage the recommendations found during the Snohomish County Agricultural Sustainability Project to develop a comprehensive plan.

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## LAND USE STUDY

The following are land use and environmental regulatory measures recommendations:

- Tighten boundary adjustment criteria to further discourage the development of existing non-conforming lots;
- Add a Comprehensive Plan policy and implementing regulations to ensure a “No Net Loss” of farmland;
- Consider adding a requirement that the loss of viable non-designated farmland be mitigated;
- Track the changes in agricultural uses through subdivision and land use permits;
- Consider revising the rural cluster subdivision standards to better accommodate farming activities;
- Encourage the implementation of the County’s Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) program as proposed by the Planning and Development Services Department;
- Require that TDR credits be purchased for all residential units built in rural areas above the base zoning;
- Work with other jurisdictions to develop a regional receiving area strategy;
- Augment the TDR program with a Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) program.

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## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

And finally, the following are the community engagement recommendations:

- Develop a final vision statement and project goals;
- Conduct qualitative and quantitative public opinion research to test preliminary ideas and priorities generated from the broad-based community outreach process;
- Conduct qualitative and quantitative research to test and gather feedback on the 1) key messages, 2) business plan concepts, and 3) proposed public actions / ideas to sustain agriculture into the future;
- Develop and implement a strategic communications plan that creates and maintains community interest, awareness and excitement of the County’s newly adopted Agricultural Sustainability Action Plan.

## ORGANIZATION OF THIS DOCUMENT

The following sections in this document include the detailed findings of the three components of the Agriculture Sustainability Project. Each section consists of a project overview, detailed findings, and conclusions, which are followed by recommended next steps and related appendices.