



SNOHOMISH COUNTY

Rural Lands Planning Project

September 2008

Summary of Public Outreach

In May, 2008, the county sent out a newsletter to 59,100 rural households inviting people to a series of public meetings in June. The newsletter also contained a comment form asking residents to identify their three top issues or concerns in the rural areas. 832 of these comment forms were filled out and returned to the county.

Four public meetings were held in June at locations throughout the county (Maltby, Arlington, Monroe and Everett). In addition, the monthly Unified Development Code (UDC) Forum in July focused on the Rural Lands Planning Project. In all, 270 people participated in the public meetings.

The county received over 3,000 comments which have been compiled into a single document and organized by key word to reflect the subject matter. This document in its entirety is available for review on the county's rural lands project web page:

http://www1.co.snohomish.wa.us/Departments/PDS/Divisions/LR_Planning/Projects_Programs/Rural_planning.htm

Key questions

Rural residents were asked to consider a series of key questions to stimulate discussion about issues and concerns in the rural areas.

- What does rural character mean to you?
- How many houses are too many?
- How are rural development patterns affecting your water supply?
- When should the county require low-impact development?
- How can new homes built in rural areas be affordable?
- What types of businesses should be encouraged in rural areas?
- How should the county modify rural roads to handle growth and still maintain rural lifestyles?

Summary of Public Comments

The public responded with comments defining their vision for Snohomish County's "rural character." These defining features of rural character will provide the foundation for review and updates of the rural policies in the county's comprehensive plan. Significant comments were also received expressing frustration with property rights, taxes, local politics and land use permit and code enforcement processes. These comments will also be reflected to the greatest extent possible in the rural land use policies.

Defining Rural Character

The responses include very strong opinions about what defines rural character and the residents' vision for growth and development of rural lands. The comments received also indicate that rural residents do not have a unified vision for that future. However, several viewpoints are prevalent in the responses in terms of which characteristics are identified as rural character and which are not. Analysis of the public comments revealed six defining features of rural character: 1) farming and agriculture, 2) rural development standards, 3) rural non-residential land uses, 4) impacts on infrastructure and services, 5) preservation of the natural environment, and 6) rural community values and lifestyles. This summary of the public comments is organized around these features.

Farming and Agriculture

All of those who commented on farming or agricultural activities supported these uses as a significant feature of rural character. The sentiment was to preserve agricultural lands to protect rural character and provide a sustainable food supply. Agricultural activities, including small farms and livestock, are integral to the county's rural character and a rural lifestyle. Agricultural activities are the best and most practical use for flood plains. Farmers should have tax incentives to preserve land for farming.

Rural Development Standards

Rural development standards include lot size and development density, housing type and style, open space and separation between neighbors, and transition between types of uses to ensure compatibility. Comments contained a significant focus on the standards for rural cluster subdivisions.

The comments contained a range of recommended lot sizes from ½ acre lots for residential areas to 40 acre lots in farming areas. The majority of responses suggest 2½ to 5 acres for rural residential minimum lot sizes. For rural cluster subdivisions (RCS), the predominant sentiment suggests that the rural cluster provisions should be eliminated, or at the very least, the density should be calculated based on 1 house per 5 acres and individual lots should be at least 1-2 acres each. A few respondents indicated that ½-acre lots in clusters would be okay provided that the clusters were small, significantly separated from each other and buffered from view.

The prevailing sentiment is cluster subdivisions, as they exist in the county today, are not rural in character: the houses are too big and boxy, cover too much of the lot area and are too close to neighbors. Smaller houses would be more affordable and more compatible with surroundings. The cul-de-sac style road layout in many cluster subdivisions is more suburban in character than rural. Many respondents also object to the increase in outdoor lighting and noise.

On the other hand, many respondents point out that cluster subdivisions can be beneficial to retain open space, native vegetation and wildlife habitat and provide recreational opportunities. Many suggested that RCS may be more appropriate if: they were closer to urban growth areas (UGAs) and served by public water systems, included better visual screening, incorporated housing styles compatible with surrounding homes, were built at densities less than current levels, and integrated improvements concurrent with the increased traffic.

Some respondents appreciate having the opportunity to re-develop their land as a rural cluster subdivision and support keeping the current policies and regulations in place to protect property values and retirement plans.

Rural Non-Residential Land Uses

Comments propose that non-residential land uses be limited in type and scale to ensure compatibility with surroundings and should be located closer to UGAs where infrastructure is available. Resource-related uses, small scale basic community services, low impact recreation and tourism, agriculture, tree farms, open space, parks and trails, home-based and small businesses are all identified as rural in character. Large box stores and strip malls are not rural uses. Respondents are also opposed to Fully Contained Communities (FCCs), motocross, gravel pits and radio towers.

Several comments, particularly from the Maltby area meeting, focus on the transition between residential and non-residential uses to mitigate impacts from noise, lights, smell, truck traffic, and safety hazards from farms, logging and mining operations, industrial uses, and motocross tracks. Meeting participants also addressed the transition and compatibility between the Maltby UGA and the surrounding rural area.

Others felt that limiting uses in the rural area infringes on rural character – they expressed that the freedom to do what they want on their land embodies rural character. However, it was acknowledged by a few respondents that “reasonable” limits are acceptable to preserve harmony in the local community.

Impacts on Infrastructure and Services

Respondents expressed concerns that growth, and rural cluster subdivisions in particular, puts a strain on infrastructure and services, especially roads, water supply and schools. Infrastructure should be in place by the time a development is completed - mitigation should be concurrent with impacts.

Roads and traffic were the number one concern. Traffic, lack of bus service and connectivity, concurrency, needed improvements to Hwy 2 and Hwy 9, safety, driver courtesy and speeding, noise, commute times, environmental impacts from impervious surface and contaminated runoff, and pedestrian and bicycle use along roads were all mentioned as major concerns of rural residents. Rural residents warn that many rural roads were not designed to handle the current capacity and speeds. However, a few people acknowledged that, “if you build it, they will come” – improvements in infrastructure and services will attract more growth into rural areas.

Concern was registered about proliferation of wells and septic systems and the potential impacts on the groundwater supply. Before a development is approved, water supply for household use, landscaping and fireflow should be assessed along with potential impacts to the water supply for surrounding residents and businesses. Many advised that sewer systems be provided. *[However, it should be noted that the GMA explicitly considers sewer service to be an “urban” service and prohibits extension of sewers into the rural areas except to alleviate an emergency situation.]*

Stormwater runoff is also a concern of rural residents - increased impervious surface and the corresponding removal of native vegetation increases runoff and potential for flooding.

Comments indicate that low impact development techniques have a more rural look and feel than the traditional storm drainage pond surrounded by chain-link fencing.

Preserve the Natural Environment

Preservation of the natural environment and native vegetation, particularly large trees, was identified as a key defining feature of rural character. Residents expressed a strong desire to preserve trees, air quality, fish and wildlife habitat, wetlands, streams, and lakes and reduce lights and noise, runoff and flooding, invasive plant species, use of chemicals, energy consumption, pollution and garbage, and development in flood plains. The peace and tranquility of the natural landscape was a significant factor influencing the decision to move to rural areas for many of the local residents.

However, many rural residents feel that environmental regulations are too expansive, infringing upon the full use of their land as they desire. This seems to be the sentiment particularly for the protection of small low value wetlands.

Rural Community Values and Lifestyle

Respondents indicate an erosion of the traditional rural lifestyle characterized by commitment to land stewardship, neighbor helping neighbor, and being able to leave the door unlocked. Residents are concerned that crime rates are higher – with no corresponding decrease in the sheriff's response time, trash dumping and junkyard conditions are prevalent, courtesy and safety on the roads is a thing of the past, and dogs run loose interfering with livestock.

Rural cluster subdivisions are perceived to attract urban dwellers who want a new large home that would otherwise be unaffordable if located in a city. They spend an ever increasing amount of their time on the road commuting to jobs and they have not embraced the rural lifestyle and rural community. They are used to urban levels of service and not used to rural inconveniences such as tractors sharing the road, the noise and smell of livestock and the occasional encounters with wildlife predators. While the cluster developments maintain large swaths of open space through the homeowners association, most residents do not actively participate in management of the land.

Property Rights

Some respondents feel that there is too much land use regulation by the state and local government. Several comments suggested that rural growth as dictated by the GMA should not be a foregone conclusion and that factors influencing growth should be addressed (i.e., immigration and natural increase). Some respondents feel that rural areas are over regulated – the freedom to do what they want with their land embodies "rural character".

Most property rights related comments focus predominantly on loss of land use options due to environmental restrictions.

Taxes

Residents complain that taxes keep going up but services are not improved commensurate with tax increases. Long time rural residents are having trouble covering the costs and maintaining ownership of their property. Several people suggest tax incentives to help preserve open space, large tracts of rural land and farms.

Local Politics

There were numerous comments about the perceived relationship between special interest groups, professional developers and the county. While these comments are not related directly to the concept of rural character and the policies in the comprehensive plan, the desire to alleviate the skepticism and suspicion expressed in the sentiments will encourage continued open government processes and public participation.

Permit Processes and Code Enforcement

Respondents feel that mitigation fees should be commensurate with the costs to improve the infrastructure and that improvements should be complete by the time the impacts occur. It was also suggested that development regulations be flexible enough to consider site-specific conditions, including impacts to and compatibility with immediate neighborhoods. Allow neighboring communities to have input on potential impacts and compatibility issues early on in the project design and review process. Buffers between different types of uses would improve compatibility and preserve native vegetation important to "rural character."

There is a perception that the county exhibits favoritism for professional developers – that big money talks while the regular people have a very difficult time navigating through the permit process. Some people suggested that the permit process be simplified so they could provide a portion of their property to their children.

A few respondents reminded that development regulations are useless if not enforced. Litter and junkyard conditions are the chief enforcement complaint.

The Next Steps

The county will use these comments to review and update our rural land policies in the county's comprehensive land use plan in two phases in conjunction with Docket XIII and Docket XIV. The comprehensive plan is called, "Snohomish County Comprehensive Plan – General Policy Plan" and is often referred to as "the GPP" for short. "Docket" refers to the annual process by which the county updates its comprehensive plan and implementing regulations.

The first phase of the Rural Lands Planning Project is anticipated to be incorporated into Docket XIII and address a proposal by the county council, known as GPP 18. GPP 18 is a placeholder in Docket XIII for General Policy Plan text and Snohomish County Code (SCC) Title 30 to reduce densities allowed in rural cluster subdivisions. The comments we have received in this process will be forwarded to the county council. Policy and code language alternatives based on these comments will be prepared by the rural planning team. The council will then conduct public hearings on Docket XIII, including GPP 18, early in 2009.

The second phase of the Rural Lands Planning Project will involve a comprehensive review and revision of the rural policies in the Land Use chapter of the GPP to ensure that the rural policies effectively implement the updated vision of "rural character". Updates to these rural policies will be reviewed through the Docket XIV process. County council action on Docket XIV is anticipated early in 2010.

Stay Involved

1. Comments or questions can be submitted at any time via email: RuralLandsProject@snoco.org

2. Watch the rural project's web page for updates and new materials:

http://www1.co.snohomish.wa.us/Departments/PDS/Divisions/LR_Planning/Projects_Programs/Rural_planning.htm

3. Monitor the planning commission's and county council's schedules of public hearings:

http://www1.co.snohomish.wa.us/Departments/PDS/Divisions/LR_Planning/Projects_Programs/Planning_Commission/Meetings/

http://www1.co.snohomish.wa.us/Departments/Council/About/Meeting_Calendar/long_term_calendar.htm

4. Keep track of the Docket proposals and process:

http://www1.co.snohomish.wa.us/Departments/PDS/Divisions/LR_Planning/Projects_Programs/Docket/

5. Watch for upcoming amendments to the county code through the UDC Forum:

http://www1.co.snohomish.wa.us/Departments/PDS/Divisions/Code_Development/UDC/

Project Manager: Terri Strandberg, Principal Planner
Snohomish County Planning and Development Services
3000 Rockefeller, M/S 604
Everett, WA 98201

(425) 388-3311, ext. 2359