Visual Quality and Aesthetic Resources

To many people, the region is defined by its mountains, water, and abundant greenery as well as the inherent aesthetic qualities characterized by visually diverse, stimulating views of rural landscapes, towns, cities, and prominent structures. This chapter discusses potential impacts to the visual setting of the region under each of the growth distribution alternatives.

5.12.1 Affected Environment

The natural beauty of the central Puget Sound region is considered one of its most valuable resources. The Final Environmental Impact Statement considers existing visual resources and elements that define visual and aesthetic character in the region, including:

- Viewpoints and views to visual resources — natural resources, farm landscapes, historic structures, dramatic downtown skyplines.
- Landforms — types, gradients, and scale.
- Vegetation — types, size and maturity, and continuity.
- Land uses and structures — size, scale (apparent size in relation to actual size), and character of associated buildings and ancillary site uses.
- Urban design.
- Historic structures and neighborhoods.
- Public spaces — including civic facilities, plazas, gathering places, and public art.
- Other open space types (including parks, reserves, greenbelts, and undeveloped land), extent, and continuity.
- Transportation facilities — types, sizes, scale, and directional orientation.
- Streetscapes — including pavement types (for the roadway itself, as well as bike lanes, crosswalks, and sidewalks), median design, street trees, street furniture, and light fixtures.
- Overhead structures, utilities, and lighting — types, sizes, and scale.
- Apparent upkeep and maintenance.

A. PHYSICAL SETTING

The central Puget Sound region has rolling plateaus that trend north-south, bordered by parallel valleys occupied by the waters of Puget Sound, Hood Canal, and the harbors and bays next to which many of the cities in the four-county area are sited. River valleys lead to Puget Sound in Tacoma, Seattle, and Everett. Throughout the area, plateaus generally rise
100 to 300 feet above the valley floors. Most of the valley walls are moderately steep and many remain undeveloped. The Cascade and Olympic Mountains and their foothills are visible throughout the area. These views are especially valued, as are views of Mt. Rainier, Mt. Baker, Puget Sound, and the many lakes and rivers in the region.

**FIGURE 5.12-1: VISUAL RESOURCES IN THE CENTRAL PUGET SOUND REGION**

Source: Parametrix, Inc.
Generally, land use patterns and associated structures relate to the underlying terrain. The plateaus and gentler valley walls are largely occupied by residential, institutional, and commercial uses that are small to moderate in scale. Buildings associated with these uses typically range from one to four stories high. Major valley bottoms support commercial, industrial, and transportation uses that are moderate to large in scale. Aside from high-rise structures in urban areas, building heights in the valley bottoms typically range from one to six stories, but many buildings have large horizontal dimensions. Many of the steeper valley walls support dense greenbelts of primarily native trees. These linear greenbelts are visually distinctive features in otherwise densely developed urban areas.

Valley walls have also channeled major existing transportation facilities and high-voltage transmission lines to be oriented north-south. Where east-west corridors occur, the corridors can also be visually prominent (i.e., the Tacoma Narrows Bridge, or Interstate 90). The visible features of this infrastructure include support structures such as bridges, viaducts, retaining walls, noise barriers, overhead structures such as towers and conductors. It also includes right of way developments such as park-and-ride lots, parks, trails, public art installations, and mature landscape plantings.

**Natural Features**

The rolling topography in the region allows for numerous scenic views. Plateaus and hillsides, river valleys, water bodies and islands, wooded areas, and wetlands are notable parts of the area's visual and aesthetic character. The forests and peaks of the Cascade and Olympic Mountains and foothills are visible from many points in the region. These mountain views are picturesque and valuable and appear from many locations in the core urban area to be in a natural state, although clear-cuts and other forestry activity become visible as one approaches the mountains.

Scenic water views of Puget Sound and Hood Canal are available in the western part of the region. Lake Washington and Lake Sammamish, as well as many smaller lakes, are valuable visual resources in the eastern part of the planning area. Waterfront land uses and water or marine activities such as pleasure boating, commercial fishing, ferry and cruise ships, and shipping provide further visual interest. Other bodies of water that are locally and/or regionally important due to their size, visibility, or scenic use include Green Lake, Lake Union, Lake Stevens, the Lake Washington Ship Canal, and the Puyallup, Duwamish, Green, White, Cedar, Sammamish, and Snohomish rivers.

In suburban areas throughout the region, undeveloped wooded areas, wetlands, creek and river corridors, and floodplains (located between areas of development and at the suburban fringe) are valuable visual resources that give portions of these areas the natural character that is an important part of the region’s identity.

**Urban and Rural Environment**

The built-environment in urban portions of the region is extremely diverse in scale, bulk, height, and overall character. Structures such as the Space Needle, sports stadiums, and bridges are significant pieces of public architecture, as well as prominent visual features. High-rise buildings such as occur in downtown Seattle, Tacoma, Bellevue and Everett create scenic skyline views for viewers within these cities as well as in outlying areas. Additionally, these structures may serve as landmarks that orient viewers. At the street level the layout and orientation of buildings define places and pathways for people. Public plazas, civic facilities, and public areas further define the urban environment.

The region is defined by bluffs, steep slopes, water bodies, or other natural features that provide breaks in urban development. This helps provide visual distinction to different communities. Plantings in most dense urban areas are limited to street trees and perimeter landscaping in some locations, but there are also urban parks, and the grounds of office complexes and educational institutions that contribute to the “green” appearance of the region.

Industrial land uses such as shipping, manufacturing, and warehouses are located along parts of the waterfronts of Bremerton, Everett, Seattle, and Tacoma. These areas are typified by filled shorelines, low-rise industrial buildings, mid-rise commercial buildings, and large shipping equipment. Large expanses of pavement are often required in these areas to accommodate parking, handling and storage of equipment and material, and container cargo processing and storage.

Byways and thoroughfares are also prominent parts of the built environment. The view-from-the-road is an everyday urban experience, but roadways also affect urban form and the experiences of people once they have left their cars, bikes, or the bus. Some boulevards and highways are well landscaped, with wide promenades for walking and accessing businesses. Many more roadways lack landscaping, facilities for pedestrians and bicyclists, and have auto-dominated uses, including parking, which do not contribute to a uniform and aesthetically pleasing experience.
Urban and suburban neighborhoods are located throughout much of the urban area. The highest intensity development is generally along the Interstate 5 corridor through King, Pierce, and Snohomish counties, and it decreases as one moves away from Puget Sound. Older urban areas developed in the 19th and early to mid-20th centuries exist in and around the historic large cities of Bremerton, Everett, Seattle, and Tacoma, as well as numerous smaller towns and historic cores of suburban cities.

**Figure 5-12-2: Age of Structures in the Central Puget Sound Region**

Census Note: The figure only presents data within the urban growth area because the data only exists at the census block group level. Given the large size of the census blockgroups outside the urban growth area, they are not shown to increase the legibility of the figure.

Source: Puget Sound Regional Council
These areas are generally denser, more uniformly developed, and organized around the straight lines of the street grid. Suburban-style development became more widespread with neighborhoods and cities developed from the mid-20th century until the present. These areas are generally characterized by lower density, more open space, greenery, and curvilinear street systems that more closely follow topography.

Aesthetic features of the urban and suburban areas of the region include the diversity and visual interest provided by concentrations of human activity, instances of prominent structures featuring historic or distinctive architecture, and urban art. The oldest architecture is found in downtowns and surrounding neighborhoods. Smaller to mid-range cities such as Edmonds, Kirkland, Des Moines, Poulsbo and Auburn are located throughout the area. They were typically founded around a historic city center with a relatively small street grid, small to moderate-scale buildings, and a pedestrian-friendly environment. Other cities such as Bellevue, Federal Way, or Redmond, cover larger areas, with core downtowns as well as areas with commercial and industrial uses, and large areas of mostly single-family residential neighborhoods. Recent development and land use in and around these cities varies; however, reliance on the automobile for transportation has led to an extensive system of arterial roads and highways, and automobile-oriented retail/commercial development such as medium- to large-scale retail malls, small- to medium-scale commercial and retail strip development, and office parks. The height of these structures can be equivalent to that of a typical three- or four-story building, and their horizontal scale tends to be moderately large to very large. However, some newer cities, particularly Bellevue, have increasingly prominent skylines. Throughout the suburban areas, development is buffered in most neighborhoods of the region by native vegetation, especially evergreen trees which maintain a visual barrier year-round. Some neighborhoods have trees interspersed through them, which can even mask entire residential areas and give the impression that the area is undeveloped and in a near-natural state.

Parks, public places, and open spaces are found throughout urban areas. In business cores, parks tend to be small-scale, with some large linear parks located along shorelines. Larger urban parks tend to be located outside the business core, near urban neighborhoods or at the outskirts of urban areas. Campuses of several colleges and universities, as well as high schools and grade schools, also serve as civic facilities with open space for sports and recreation.

Utilities and transportation infrastructure are visible throughout most urban areas. Light standards and overhead utilities and transmission lines are common visual elements. Transportation signage can be seen near freeways and state highways, and commercial signage can be viewed in commercial cores and industrial areas. Roads, on-ramps, retaining walls, parking lots, and parking garages are all very prominent aspects of views and visual character of urban centers.

Light standards, electric utilities, and communications lines are located mostly along transportation corridors, with the exception of high-voltage transmission lines and towers, which utilize rights of way that were established before much of the suburban areas were developed. Signage for transportation facilities and commercial establishments is a major visual element in areas with strip development.

Rural areas (e.g., eastern portions of King, Pierce, and Snohomish counties, and outlying parts of Kitsap County) are typified by their dominance of natural features, openness, low density of development, rural architecture, and occasional historic structures. Farming and grazing activities, as well as low-intensity commercial uses are also typically associated with rural areas. The pastoral character of these areas within close proximity to the more intense core urban area is considered an invaluable resource worth protecting from encroaching urban and suburban development.

In rural and other less-developed parts of the region, single-family neighborhoods are typically located on or near ridge tops and desirable natural features, while multifamily development tends to be located closer to arterials, highways, and commercial centers. Vegetation is diverse, including residential landscapes, broad and mostly open landscapes typical of business parks, landscaped public parks, nature reserves, and street trees. Native conifers — oftentimes remnants of native woodlands — are found at or near the boundaries of many properties, creating a naturalistic visual quality that is typical of the Pacific Northwest. These trees act as informal visual screens, sometimes giving the impression that native vegetation extends into a site’s interior.

B. CURRENT TRENDS

Changing development patterns are continuing to alter the visual environment of the four-county area. New private and public developments are emerging in the centers of metropolitan and core cities, redeveloping underutilized parts of urban areas. The region is seeing expanded road systems, new public open space and recreational facilities, and higher levels of density. In many places, thoughtful zoning, planning, and design have led to numerous beneficial additions to the visual landscape. These additions include ambitious civic projects like Seattle’s Public Library and Bremerton’s City Hall, Redmond’s and Bellevue’s city hall complexes, commercial development like Bellevue’s Lincoln Center, and
development in South Lake Union in Seattle, which have become new urban landmarks. Many of these areas incorporate public and semi-public streetscape spaces, such as those that characterize Tacoma’s revitalized downtown. In some cases, roadways such as Bremerton’s SR 304 Gateway and SeaTac’s International Boulevard have been re-envisioned as boulevards and parkways, with street trees and ornamental plantings. Similarly, Washington’s Department of Transportation has begun to commit to context sensitive planning and design that will allow its road projects to fit more appropriately into the visual characters of the landscapes through which they pass.

Recent trends in the region’s development have also affected the region’s visual character. Throughout the region, much of the growing population has been accommodated by residential development based on traditional suburban models, with low-density single-family houses, located away from employment centers, shopping, recreation, and entertainment. Areas that were originally rural, farm or agricultural uses are being converted to residential, commercial, warehouse, industrial and other urban uses which, while making an economic contribution to the region and housing the region’s growing population, also can affect urban form and the visual character in these areas. As development has occurred in what was formerly open space, both in rural areas and at the fringes of suburban cities, some natural resources, vegetation, and scenic views have been altered.

The increased transportation needs of the region’s growing population have affected the visual character of the region, too. New and expanded roadway facilities are increasingly dominant elements of the visual landscape, as are new high capacity transit facilities, such as infrastructure associated with new commuter and light rail systems. Other adverse trends related to recent development are displacement of historic structures, obstruction of scenic views, and reliance on architectural models that are ubiquitous throughout the country, rather than regional style. These changes to the visual landscape of the region will be more thoroughly covered in the following sections.

C. REGULATORY SETTING

Within the four-county area, cities and counties have developed and adopted plans, policies, and regulations that impact design, aesthetic, and visual character in different ways. Some local jurisdictions have adopted view regulations that specifically address light, glare, or protected views. For example, some cities have adopted specific requirements for environmental review on projects or plans within the city that protect views of specific natural and human-made features; discourage light, glare, and light blockage; and list parks, shorelines, schoolyards, and street ends that are to receive special protection.

Local jurisdiction comprehensive plan policies also address the visual character of their communities, either explicitly through formal policies or in more general terms within the entire planning document. Urban design concepts are more and more part of the comprehensive planning process and combine with the public involvement process to present and discuss the desired look and feel of the community as it develops. These comprehensive plan policies and provisions, whether general or specific, are then translated into land use regulations that control the type, height and bulk of individual projects throughout the region. Many communities also adopt design guidelines to specify certain architectural standards in specific districts.

5.12.2 Analysis of Alternatives (Long-Term Impacts)

A. IMPACTS COMMON TO ALL ALTERNATIVES

All the alternatives being studied have the potential to affect existing visual resources at several levels. Each of them could add, alter, or remove some of the visible features that compose the basic visual resources of the landscape. These features include landforms, water bodies, vegetation, structures, and transportation facilities. Growth also could result in new and renovated residential, commercial, and industrial buildings as well as new and expanded infrastructure (e.g., transportation and utility structures). At the neighborhood scale, these new, expanded, or renovated structures could affect the views and viewsheds, especially in areas experiencing high rates of growth or change. New structures and buildings would be introduced. Issues involving design and community character would come into play. At larger scales, such as that of the region, the conversion of land uses from agricultural or open space to urban would be apparent, as would the addition of prominent individual structures or buildings, or the general intensification of uses within individual neighborhoods.

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1 The term viewshed refers to the entire area that is visible from a particular vantage point. From a vantage point at significant elevation in the Cascade foothills, for instance, much of the region would lie within the viewshed.
Long-term impacts would vary depending on localized factors, including the nature of existing land use, the proximity of future development, and the incorporation of potential measures to avoid or mitigate potential negative effects that impact visual resources, design or aesthetics. The impacts would vary for each alternative. For example, neighborhoods with single-family homes, parks, cemeteries, schools and hospitals with open space campuses would tend to be more sensitive to bulk, height, increase of scale, and visual change of potential development than mixed-use areas that are already characterized by larger multistory residential buildings and commercial or industrial land uses. Similarly, future development could markedly alter the setting and features in areas that are currently rural, unincorporated, or natural, which might be disruptive to the character of those areas. Light and glare impacts could increase, and taller buildings could increase shading. Conversely, redevelopment could improve the visual and aesthetic environment in areas with aging infrastructure, poor maintenance, or that visually contrast with or are otherwise incompatible with adjacent land uses. Areas devoted to parking may be developed to incorporate parking within other more aesthetically pleasing structures.

In many cases, new development could be an attractive addition to the views and visual character of communities, helping to create new community identity or enhancing the existing sense of place. However, as areas redevelop and become denser, parcels and subareas would likely redevelop in different time frames. Some neighborhoods could have a discontinuous visual appearance, and visual contrasts could increase. This is particularly true where properties are privately-owned, and development proposals (or decisions not to develop) will largely remain with many individual parties.

In terms of public developments and projects, needed street and transit improvements would provide opportunities to balance the requirements of motorized transportation with other community goals such as pedestrian-friendly streetscapes, the addition of street trees and attractive ornamental plantings, and reducing the visual dominance of existing roadways in communities. Similarly, public facilities such as schools, city halls, parks, and other civic buildings can also provide opportunities for improved visual conditions, incorporating high quality design and the use of art or aesthetic treatments as part of public projects.

All alternatives anticipate the significant growth and change in the region that will result from approximately 1.7 million new residents and 1.2 million new jobs. Regardless of how this growth is distributed, it will result in visible change in many parts of the region. As an illustration, a 2004 report by the Brookings Institution determined that 44 percent of the residential buildings that will be needed in the Seattle metropolitan area in 2030 have not yet been built. Commercial and industrial buildings generally have a shorter lifespan, which makes the figures even more dramatic for these uses. According to this study, as much as 63 percent of the commercial square feet, and 60 percent of the industrial square feet that will exist in the metropolitan area in 2030 has yet to be built (Nelson, 2004).

New development will frequently be placed in areas with existing neighborhood character and design features. The specific manner in which development occurs and the extent to which the opinions of the community are considered will largely determine whether changes are considered positive, negative, or neutral. An emphasis on sound planning and public involvement at all levels of the land development process would likely help promote well-designed, context-sensitive projects that will maintain and improve the aesthetic qualities of the region's built and natural environments.

**B. ANALYSIS OF EACH ALTERNATIVE**

**Preferred Growth Alternative**

- *Metropolitan Cities.* In the Preferred Growth Alternative, populations of metropolitan cities are predicted to grow by 540,000 by 2040, and employment growing by over 510,000. This is almost 100,000 more population and over 40,000 more jobs than under current plans (Growth Targets Extended). This growth will be accommodated by construction on undeveloped private property and redevelopment of built property with land uses that are denser, larger, and taller than existing development. In some places, surface streets could be widened from residential to arterial and large-scale transportation projects could be required to provide transportation for a growing population. This development could affect visual and aesthetic character in several important ways. Undeveloped and relatively low-density areas that have been zoned for new types of development could experience the most notable changes. In some areas, multi-use development with offices, retail, and multifamily residences might replace stand-alone houses that are currently common in parts of neighborhood centers or in adjacent districts of other activity centers.

In some cases development and redevelopment might detract from visual and aesthetic character by replacing human scale development or buildings with unique or historic character with large, more modern structures. Natural features that are part of visual and aesthetic features of metropolitan cities could also be impacted or enhanced by the
Preferred Growth Alternative. For instance, denser development of private property might remove existing vegetation and leave less room for new plantings. Public parks, greenbelts, shorelines and other sensitive natural areas might be affected by increased numbers of visitors. In areas that currently have low aesthetic quality due to poor maintenance or land uses that do not lend themselves to scenic views (e.g., warehouses, industrial, parking), increased population could provide the financial basis for residential, retail, business, and recreation redevelopment with attractive structures, open spaces and street level activity that provides visual interest.

- **Core Cities.** This class of cities would see an increase of 360,000 residents and 350,000 jobs, both levels being higher than under Growth Targets Extended. These levels of growth could change these largely residential communities and the retail/business areas that serve them. The density and extent of retail/business centers of these cities could increase, and moderate to large-scale development could become more common along arterials and intersections. Numbers of multiple-family residences might greatly increase to accommodate more residences within these cities, as could medium to large-scale retail and office structures. Regional transportation facilities could be added or expanded to serve growing transportation needs. Many existing private undeveloped open spaces could be developed, and both native and introduced vegetation could be displaced as part of new development. In some areas, available open space could be converted to public parks, athletic fields, and other types of recreational facilities to keep up with the demands of a growing population.

- **Larger Cities.** This class of cities would see an increase of 180,000 residents and 110,000 jobs, both levels being higher than under Growth Targets Extended. These cities are currently developed at relatively low densities and large tracts of undeveloped land are limited. Growth could likely be accommodated through a combination of the subdivision of remaining large lots into a denser configuration, and the addition and densification of pockets of higher-density activity centers. This development could adversely affect visual resources like views, open space, natural features, and historic architecture. Carefully planned and designed new development could also result in attractive architecture (both private and civic structures), creation of vibrant public spaces like revitalized or entirely new downtown cores, parks, sports fields, urban plazas, and streetscapes that are inviting and safe for people on foot.

- **Small Cities.** This class of 51 cities would see an increase of 150,000 residents and 100,000 jobs. This is less population and slightly more employment, creating a closer balance, than under Growth Targets Extended. These cities are distributed throughout the region, and are generally on the periphery of the urban growth area, or in urban islands surrounded by rural or resource lands. The level of growth anticipated under Preferred Growth Alternative is less than under Growth Targets Extended, but still could have potential to modestly impact the existing visual and aesthetic character of these communities. Some existing undeveloped open space will likely be converted to other uses, while town centers and activity clusters will likely see modest redevelopment.

- **Unincorporated Urban Growth Areas.** These areas within the four counties would experience growth of over 360,000 population and over 110,000 employment under the Preferred Growth Alternative. This is less slightly less population and slightly more employment, creating a closer balance, than under Growth Targets Extended. Currently, land use in the unincorporated urban growth area consists of a wide variety of developed and undeveloped urban form, with a mixture open space, both single- and multifamily housing, and commercial areas. Small clusters of retail and business developments serve mostly local needs. The Preferred Growth Alternative could likely result in additional amounts of the same type of development. Because the height and bulk of this potential development could likely be small to moderate, view blockage could be minimal. The overall visual character of the unincorporated urban growth area could begin to trend toward suburban, but undeveloped open space in many areas might still be a notable visual and aesthetic feature.

- **Rural Areas.** Increases in populations (almost 120,000) and employment (over 30,000) in rural areas are less under the Preferred Growth Alternative than under Growth Targets Extended. While the new growth could be spread over a relatively large area, in some areas impacts could be more noticeable because of the conversion of undeveloped land. Residential cluster development in rural areas could possibly minimize some of these impacts. Specific visual resources, open views, agricultural land uses, natural resources, low density development, historic buildings or buildings which might be eligible for historic status might be either displaced or affected by changes in the surrounding visual and aesthetic character. Development could also tend to be less dense and would occupy more area per person than in urban areas, perhaps changing the overall character of some rural areas from a mixture of agricultural, open space and low density residential uses to one that is more largely low density residential.
Growth Targets Extended Alternative

- **Metropolitan Cities.** In Growth Targets Extended, populations of metropolitan cities are predicted to grow by 450,000 by 2040. This growth will be accommodated by construction on undeveloped private property and redevelopment of currently built property with land uses that are denser, larger, and taller than existing development. In some places, surface streets could be widened from residential to arterial, and large-scale transportation projects like freeway expansion or the addition of both light and heavy rail could be required to provide transportation for a growing population. This development could affect visual and aesthetic character in several important ways. Undeveloped and relatively low-density areas that have been zoned for new types of development would experience the most notable changes. In some areas, multi-use development with offices, retail, and multifamily residences might replace stand-alone houses that are currently common in parts of neighborhood centers (like Seattle’s Ballard Neighborhood) or in adjacent districts of other activity centers.

The highly developed city centers such as those found in Bellevue, Seattle, Tacoma, and Everett would continue to trend toward development of high-rise buildings and other large-scale office, retail, and residential structures. Views might be altered or obstructed in some instances, especially from private property, but many views from public property and rights-of-way could also be protected. An increase in population in Tacoma, Bremerton and Everett would likely result in more extensive and larger scale development than exists presently, noticeably changing the character of parts of these communities, where density and scale currently diminish quickly with distance from the city center. In a city such as Seattle, which is already intensively developed, the change would still be quite noticeable as remaining parcels are developed and smaller-scaled buildings are replaced by larger ones. In some cases development and redevelopment might detract from visual and aesthetic character by replacing human scale development or buildings with unique or historic character with large, more modern structures.

Numerous beneficial changes could result as well, including providing attractive new structures and public/semi-public open spaces, renovating or replacing buildings that have poor maintenance or that have reached the ends of their designed usefulness, and planning development/redevelopment in a way that addresses changes in land uses and lifestyles. The growth anticipated by Growth Targets Extended could spur infill development or redevelopment of currently underutilized parts of metropolitan cities that have lost residents and businesses to outlying suburban cities. These improvements could enhance the built environment and also provide for a more vibrant public presence.

Natural features that are part of visual and aesthetic features of metropolitan cities could also be impacted or enhanced by Growth Targets Extended. For instance, denser development of private property might remove existing vegetation and leave less room for new plantings. Public parks, greenbelts, shorelines and other sensitive natural areas might be affected by increased numbers of visitors. Impacts from private development could be mitigated through thoughtful planning and the use of incentives to encourage developers to provide new and replacement plantings as part of their projects. On the other hand, redevelopment may create new opportunities for creating open space where none existed, to create a market for the reuse of historic facilities, and to redesign and rebuild streets to make them more pedestrian and environmentally friendly. In areas that currently have low aesthetic quality due to poor maintenance or land uses that do not lend themselves to scenic views (e.g., warehouses, industrial, parking), increased population could provide the financial basis for residential, retail, business, and recreation redevelopment with attractive structures, open spaces and street level activity that provides visual interest.

Supporting incentives from government agencies may provide the opportunity to encourage private parties to reuse historic properties to include open space and landscaping, and to develop distinctive designs. These elements could also be part of public sector developments.

Larger numbers of people who use visual and aesthetic resources such as public open spaces and recreational facilities could also impact the appearance of the resource. Planners and administrators of these facilities would need to provide corresponding increases in maintenance and upgrades, as well as planning for and providing new facilities like parks, trails, and natural area access.

- **Core Cities.** The 14 cities in this category all have designated regional growth centers, which would presumably be the focus of much of the new growth envisioned in Growth Targets Extended. The rate of growth they would experience would be in the mid range in terms of the alternatives. Development within these centers would likely occur as new medium- and high-rise buildings, potentially creating new skylines in the core cities. New residential development, both multifamily and single family, would become a somewhat more dominant visual feature under Growth Targets Extended as roughly 100,000 housing units are built among the cities in this category.
Retail and office development, such as that currently found in Bothell's Canyon Park area, would possibly become a more common part of the built environment, while existing retail/business cores could become more extensive and more densely developed. Buildings in retail/business cores may tend to be taller and more intense to accommodate the needs of a larger number of residents. Some of the development in core cities could occur in what is currently undeveloped woodlands, wetlands, or former farmland. Large lots with single-family residences could be redeveloped at a greater level of residential density, and buildings from the early to mid-twentieth century could be replaced by new development. New or improved arterial roads might be needed, and more areas could be devoted to parking to accommodate population growth. In general, the visual character of core cities would become more urban and more densely developed, which would impact the existing visual character.

- **Larger Cities.** This class of 13 cities would see an increase of 150,000 residents and 80,000 jobs. These cities are currently developed at relatively low densities and large tracts of undeveloped land are limited. Growth would likely be accommodated through a combination of the subdivision of remaining large lots into a denser configuration, and the addition and densification of pockets of higher-density activity centers. This development could adversely affect visual resources like views, open space, natural features, and historic architecture. Carefully planned and designed new development could also result in attractive architecture (both private and civic structures), creation of vibrant public spaces like revitalized or entirely new downtown cores, parks, sports fields, urban plazas, and streetscapes that are inviting and safe for people on foot.

- **Small cities.** Small cities include 52 smaller cities distributed throughout the region, which are generally on the periphery of the urban growth area, or in urban islands surrounded by rural or resource lands. The level of growth anticipated under Growth Targets Extended has the potential to modestly impact the existing visual and aesthetic character of these communities. Some existing undeveloped open space will likely be converted to other uses, while town centers and activity clusters will likely see modest redevelopment.

- **Unincorporated Urban Growth Area.** Unincorporated urban growth areas within the four counties would experience high population and more modest employment growth under Growth Targets Extended. Currently, land use in the unincorporated urban growth areas consists of a wide variety of developed and undeveloped urban form, with a mixture open space, both single- and multifamily housing, and commercial areas. Small clusters of retail and business developments serve mostly local needs. Growth Targets Extended would likely result in additional amounts of the same type of development. Because the height and bulk of this potential development would likely be small to moderate, view blockage would be minimal. The overall visual character of the unincorporated urban growth areas would begin to trend toward suburban, but undeveloped open space in many areas might still be a notable visual and aesthetic feature.

- **Rural Areas.** Populations and employment in rural areas would increase substantially under Growth Targets Extended. While the 230,000 new residents represented by Growth Targets Extended would be spread over a relatively large area, in some areas impacts would be more noticeable because of the conversion of currently undeveloped land. Residential cluster development in rural areas could possibly minimize some of these impacts. Specific visual resources, open views, agricultural land uses, natural resources, low density development, historic buildings or buildings which might be eligible for historic status might be either displaced or affected by changes in the surrounding visual and aesthetic character. Development would also tend to be less dense and would occupy more area per person than in urban areas, perhaps changing the overall character of some rural areas from a mixture of agricultural, open space and low density residential uses to one that is more largely low density residential.

**Metropolitan Cities Alternative**

- **Metropolitan Cities.** In this alternative, 2040 populations of metropolitan cities are projected to be much larger than they are today. This would change the way that metropolitan cities look as compared to today. The most likely effects would be increased development density, increased bulk and height of buildings, loss of undeveloped open space to development, more obstructed views, more extensive transportation infrastructure, and conversion of land uses to accommodate population increase. The effects on visual resources would be similar to those described for metropolitan cities in Growth Targets Extended; however, the intensity would be far greater. Nearly 300,000 new housing units would likely be required among the five cities to house this population increase. Additional activity centers may be targeted to accommodate this level of growth. Changes to visual resources could be most notable in neighborhood activity centers outside central business districts, which currently have small- to medium-scale development supporting moderate residence-to-acre density.

  Larger buildings, greater density, larger expanses of roadway, and higher traffic volumes would create an overall visual and aesthetic character decidedly more urban than currently exists. For example, development needed to
accommodate increased population and employment could take the form of large to very large-scale structures — many of them high-rise — if development were focused in a few areas. With development in a larger number of centers, including neighborhood centers, density and building scales would increase in more areas of a city. These might include multifamily residences, office buildings, commercial development, and civic buildings with shopping, entertainment, sporting events or governmental functions. Thoughtful zoning and provision of financial incentives, coupled with quality-of-life-driven market forces could help ensure that these new structures are beneficial additions to the visual environment. The future visual character of metropolitan cities could be enhanced if incentives were available. Ordinances could also emphasize the importance of carefully planned and designed streetscapes and public spaces in urban environments.

- **Core Cities.** In the Metropolitan Cities Alternative, populations and employments of core cities are predicted to increase substantially, changing these largely residential communities and the retail/business areas that serve them. The density and extent of retail/business centers of these cities would increase, and moderate to large-scale strip development could become more common along arterials and intersections. Numbers of multiple-family residences might greatly increase to accommodate more residences per acre, as could medium to large-scale retail and office structures. Regional transportation facilities would be added or expanded to serve growing transportation needs. Many existing private undeveloped open spaces could be developed, and both native and introduced vegetation could be displaced as part of new development. In some areas, available open space could be converted to public parks, athletic fields, and other types of recreational facilities to keep up with the demands of a growing population.

- **Larger Cities.** Larger cities could experience changes to visual and aesthetic resources similar to those described for Growth Targets Extended, with some specific views, historic structures, natural resources, and undeveloped open spaces being affected by new development. In some places an increase in density would make parts of these cities seem a little more urban. Overall, the visual resources of these cities will absorb these changes with modest noticeable effects.

- **Small cities.** Small cities would experience changes to visual and aesthetic resources similar to those described for larger cities in Growth Targets Extended. Although conditions vary by jurisdiction, specific views, historic structures, natural resources, and undeveloped open spaces could be affected by new development. In some places an increase in density could make parts of these cities seem more urban, and boundaries of the cities could become less distinct as they merge with adjacent areas.

- **Unincorporated Urban Growth Areas.** The population and employment in unincorporated areas would grow much more modestly under the Metropolitan Cities Alternative. This relatively small increase of growth over time could be largely accommodated by existing housing, retail/business development, and transportation infrastructure. As a result, little noticeable change to visual and aesthetic resources would be expected.

- **Rural Areas.** The rural population and employment would grow relatively little under the Metropolitan Cities Alternative. This low growth rate over time could be largely accommodated by existing housing, retail/business development, and transportation infrastructure. As a result, little noticeable change to visual and aesthetic resources would be expected.

### Larger Cities Alternative

- **Metropolitan Cities.** In the Larger Cities Alternative, the effects from growth in population and employment would likely be significantly less than those generated from Growth Targets Extended. New development would likely be denser, and structures would be taller and more intense. Undeveloped open space might be displaced by new construction in some areas, with an overall decline in both native and introduced vegetation. In some areas, population increase could provide the economic driver for redevelopment that would include attractive architecture and public spaces.

- **Core Cities.** In the Larger Cities Alternative, the increase in population and employment would result in visual and aesthetic impacts similar to those of the Metropolitan Cities Alternative. Regional growth centers within these cities would likely develop into dense, medium- and high-rise mixed-use neighborhoods. Surrounding low- and medium-density neighborhoods would gradually become denser and come to include higher-intensity uses. Residential development, both multifamily and single family, could be a more notable visual feature, as could retail and commercial structures. Height and bulk of new development could likely be greater than now, and increased volumes of traffic might lead to increased expanses of both roadways and parking lots. Some of the development in core cities would displace undeveloped woodlands and wetlands. Residential development would trend to
higher residences per acre than now, with a greater reliance on multiple-family housing. In general, the visual and aesthetic character of core cities would become more urban, more densely developed.

- **Larger Cities.** The high amount of growth in population and employment levels allocated to these cities under the Larger Cities Alternative could affect visual and aesthetic resources of these cities in a number of important ways. Although residences may still be predominantly single-family in many neighborhoods, multiple-family residences could be a far larger part of the built environment. Retail, office, and business-related development would also increase in scale and frequency of occurrence, perhaps becoming regionally significant centers for non-residential land uses. Some of this increase in non-residential development could occur in and around retail/business districts near city centers. Moderate to large-scale strip development could become more common along arterials and major intersection. In general, density, scale, and bulk of structures in these cities would increase. New or expanded regional transportation facilities may become noticeable view elements. These might include expanded surface streets, extended or expanded limited access roads, high-capacity transit facilities, parking facilities, and related utilities. New development would likely displace existing undeveloped open space; however, public parks, athletic fields, and other types of recreational facilities might be developed to serve larger numbers of residents, adding to existing visual resources. Overall, the look and feel of these cities would be noticeably more urban than now, and might come to resemble some of the existing core cities.

- **Small cities.** The Larger Cities Alternative’s small increase to relatively small population and employment levels, coupled with an ability to absorb change over time, could result in only minor changes to the visual and aesthetic character of these cities.

- **Unincorporated Urban Growth Areas.** The growth in population and employment predicted for urban growth areas under the Larger Cities Alternative could cause mostly moderate to minor changes to visual resources. Although these changes may be noticeable, the potential to affect the overall visual character of these geographies is low.

- **Rural Areas.** Effects on visual resources from the Larger Cities Alternative could be fairly minor, with low potential to change the visual character of these areas.

**Smaller Cities Alternative**

- **Metropolitan Cities.** The Smaller Cities Alternative would generate the smallest population and employment increase for metropolitan cities. Changes in resulting development and corresponding effects would be similar to those described for other alternatives, but far less intense. Visual and aesthetic features in metropolitan cities would likely not be impacted much by these relatively minor effects. However, there would also be fewer opportunities to incorporate development that adds public spaces and reuses or rehabilitates historic and other existing structures.

- **Core Cities.** In the Smaller Cities Alternative, population and employment levels of core cities would experience the smallest increase of the alternatives, which might be absorbed over time with relatively little impact to the visual and aesthetic character of these cities. As with metropolitan cities, there may be fewer opportunities for reuse of structures and the development of public spaces that could accompany new construction.

- **Larger Cities.** Population and employment levels in larger cities would increase more modestly in the Smaller Cities Alternative than in other alternatives, and consequently, visual and aesthetic features in these cities could potentially be less impacted. There could be fewer opportunities for reuse and rehabilitation of existing structures, as mentioned for metropolitan cities and core cities.

- **Small cities.** Under the Smaller Cities Alternative, these 52 cities would absorb a half-million additional residents, where only 260,000 people live now. Perhaps more dramatically, employment would increase by 360,000 where only 100,000 work now. This increase would profoundly impact the visual and aesthetic character of these communities. To accommodate larger numbers of residents, both single-family and multiple-family housing would become far more dominant part of the built environment than they are currently. Corresponding retail/commercial development could expand the scale and extent of existing similar land uses and could also cause the development of areas that are currently residential or open space. Small- to medium-scale structures that are currently the most common elements of the built environment in smaller cities could be joined or replaced by new development that could trend toward medium- to large-scale. Transportation requirements of a growing population would result in expanded roadways and additional transit and parking facilities. Higher traffic volumes would result in busier roadways being a dominant visual feature in some places, which is somewhat different form what exists today.
These fundamental changes to the physical environment of smaller cities would cause a significant shift in the cities’ overall visual and aesthetic character and could create potential for higher contrasts between or within neighborhoods and the surrounding area. However, carefully planned and designed new development could also result in attractive architecture (both private and civic structures), creation of vibrant public spaces like parks, sports fields, and urban plazas, and streetscapes that are inviting to and safe for people on foot.

- **Unincorporated Urban Growth Areas.** In the Smaller Cities Alternative, unincorporated urban growth areas are predicted to experience a doubling of population, and a fourfold increase in employment. Visual and aesthetic features, such as agricultural land, natural resources, historic architecture, scenic views, human scale development, and compact retail/commercial centers, could be affected by population-generated development. Visual change could occur with the relatively large increases in single-family development, multiple-family development, strip retail, and greater expanses of roadway, transit facilities and paved parking needed to accommodate increases in travel. The capacity of the built environment to absorb these changes could in some cases be surpassed, altering the overall visual character from open space to built environment, from relatively low density residence-to-acre to relatively dense suburban. While potentially spread over the area, the employment could change the residential character of these places to a much greater mix of commercial structures with associated changes to visual appearance.

- **Rural Areas.** Population and employment levels of rural areas could increase at a noticeable rate. Although specific visual resources could be affected by this increase, the overall visual character of rural areas may not be greatly affected. However, effects on specific visual resources could be significant and might include changes to or displacement of scenic views, agricultural land uses, natural resources, low density development, historic buildings or buildings which might be eligible for historic status. Similar to the unincorporated urban area, the residential character would likely change.

### 5.12.3 Cumulative Effects

At the scale of this review, most of the effects described above are cumulative in nature and consider a variety of direct and indirect impacts to visual and aesthetic character. On a localized level, portions of the urbanized area could be significantly altered over the next 35 years, while other parts could remain much as they are today. On a more regional scale, continued development outside the urban growth area could expand the trends toward increased construction, with both beneficial and adverse effects.

Examples of adverse effects:

- Loss of natural features, agricultural uses, and open spaces.
- Reduction of the inventory of historic properties.
- Lower overall quality of visual character.
- Loss of “human scale” settings.

Examples of beneficial effects:

- Rebuilt streets that are more aesthetically pleasing, more functional, and more pedestrian-friendly.
- Redevelopment of properties and neighborhoods that have become blighted.
- New development that provides vibrant public spaces.
- Opportunities for excellent architecture that provides local or regional character and civic pride.

### 5.12.4 Potential Mitigation Measures

Effects of population and employment increases to the visual environment could be mitigated by careful planning and design of new development, by limiting or avoiding development of specific areas that contain valuable visual resources, and by enhancing existing structures, public open space, and natural features to increase their value in local communities and the region at large. Specific measures may include:

- Commitment to architectural design standards, design ordinances, and design review.
- Main Street or Great Streets programs.
- “Complete streets” programs.
• “Green streets” programs.
• Clustering development to minimize open space displacement.
• Preserving, restoring, and enhancing natural features.
• Planning for and providing parks, athletic facilities, plazas, and other types of open space.
• Preserving historic and vernacular architecture.
• Planning for visually interesting and stimulating urban development — including designing for ground floor retail and utilizing pedestrian-friendly design practices.
• View preservation ordinances.
• Building provisions for sun and air access.
• Providing incentives for preserving and planting vegetation.
• Context-sensitive design.
• Developing and implementing street tree planting and greenway development.
• Engaging in transportation planning that minimizes the visual impacts of increased traffic volumes and extensive roadway and parking facilities.
• Sign standards and ordinances.
• Relocating utilities underground.
• Interdisciplinary design practices, and programs to preserve and enhance parks and open space, views, and natural resource features in the region.

Each of the geographies potentially affected by the alternatives has its own unique visual character, based on landforms, ecology, human history, and current land uses. Successful mitigation of potential affects to the built environment will most likely be based on an approach to planning and design that fully considers all of these influences.

The alternatives presented here entail many challenges and opportunities, related chiefly to denser development and increasingly urban environments. Changes to the visual environment due to urbanization and density may be addressed with some success at the local or even site-specific level. However, a more comprehensive approach to planning and design would allow for sharing of objectives and planning/design resources, review to assess successful implementation of goals beyond narrowly defined geographies, avoidance of unnecessary eclecticism, and creation of unified aesthetic character or spirit of place. For these reasons and others, comprehensive planning and design would likely be the most critical mitigation element with regard to visual resources and visual character.

5.12.5 Significant Unavoidable Adverse Impacts

Although the visual and aesthetic features of some areas within the region have the ability to absorb changes without affecting the overall look and feel, and growth and change have the potential to improve the aesthetic qualities from many perspectives, many areas in the region will experience fundamental adverse changes to both overall visual character and specific visual elements. Specific potential impacts would include:

• Obstructing or altering scenic views.
• Displacing natural resources.
• Displacing historic structures or structures with architecture that provides a sense of place.
• Development of open space.
• Increase in transportation related elements like roadway, parking, congested streets, and high traffic volumes.

Changes to the overall character of geographies could include:

• Increase in density (although this is not always an adverse impact).
• Low-density development patterns (not always adverse).
• Increase in height, bulk, and scale of structures (again, not always adverse).
• Loss of visual cohesion or intactness within a given area (e.g., extensive development within a historic neighborhood).