Comparing Population, Commute and Freight Patterns in the Puget Sound and Five Peer Regions

A recent comparison of the central Puget Sound region with the metropolitan areas of Portland, San Francisco, Denver, Phoenix, and Atlanta found that compared to these other regions, the central Puget Sound area has:

• challenging geography (water and mountains constrain development)
• well-defined travel corridors
• low mixed land use
• many centers
• good transit service
• high-value freight

The following maps show the respective urbanized areas (including adjacent smaller urbanized areas) in the same scale, along with each area’s 2006 population and average density. Water and mountains constrain development and create specific travel corridors in both the central Puget Sound and the San Francisco regions.

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**Urbanized Area** | **Population** | **Density**
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Atlanta | 4,155,148 | 3.16
San Francisco | 5,436,560 | 8.88
Central Puget Sound | 3,084,054 | 4.21
Phoenix | 3,316,194 | 6.07
Portland | 1,742,900 | 5.75
Denver | 2,123,000 | 6.20
In 1970, the population of the central Puget Sound region was larger than all regions but the San Francisco Bay Area. By 2006, both the Phoenix and Atlanta regions were larger than central Puget Sound. Over that time period, only the San Francisco Bay Area grew more slowly than the central Puget Sound region. The population of central Puget Sound now is about the same as the population of San Francisco in 1970 (Figure 1).

In 2002, Smart Growth America published the report “Measuring Sprawl and Its Impact.” Analysts created indices for four factors which contribute towards sprawl, including “Mixed Use” (mix of job types and household access to jobs and other needs) and “Centeredness” (clustering of residential density relative to a single regional center). Figure 2 shows how these six regions compare, on a scale where 100 is the average of the 83 metropolitan regions considered in the report. According to these calculations, the central Puget Sound region has less mixed use than all but Atlanta, and is less centered than the San Francisco, Portland, and Denver regions.

Figure 2. Urban Form Components

Carpooling is remarkably consistent at about 11 percent for all regions (Figure 3). The central Puget Sound region’s rate of transit usage for commuting is exceeded only by the San Francisco Bay Area, which also has higher percentages of walk, bike, and work-at-home. Because the central Puget Sound and San Francisco regions have similarly constricted geographies, including major bodies of water, it is possible that an increase in mixed-use neighborhoods and transit service could accommodate the central Puget Sound region’s growth over the next 30 years in a way that would result in central Puget Sound in 2040 resembling San Francisco today.
Freight transportation is one measure of the vitality of a region’s economy. The value of freight flowing into and out of the various regions is approximately proportional to their populations. But the central Puget Sound region has a greater value of international freight flowing through it than any other region in this comparison. The San Francisco Bay Area is a distant second (Figure 4).

For additional comparisons of these and other regions, see www.psrc.org/projects/mtp/2010/presentations/growth-trans3_101107.pdf. For further information about these comparisons, contact Larry Blain at 206-971-3287 or lblain@psrc.org.