

Local Comprehensive Plans Certification Report

Pierce County Comprehensive Plan

June 26, 2025



The Puget Sound Regional Council conducted a certification review of the Pierce County comprehensive plan. Pierce County adopted its 2024 comprehensive plan update on December 3, 2024. PSRC staff provided comments on the draft plan in November 2024 to inform the final plan adopted by the county.

This document is organized into two primary parts: a statement of certification and any applicable conditions to certification; and a discussion of conformity with the Growth Management Act and consistency with VISION 2050 by topic area.

Certification Action

The Puget Sound Regional Council certifies that the transportation-related provisions in the Pierce County 2024 comprehensive plan conform to the Growth Management Act and are substantially consistent with multicounty planning policies and the Regional Transportation Plan.

Within the central Puget Sound region, local governments and PSRC have worked together to develop an overall process for reviewing and certifying local, countywide, regional center, and long-range transit plans.¹ Transportation-related provisions that are key for certification are based on RCW 47.80.026 and the Growth Management Act (RCW 36.70A). This report may recommend additional work to fully address the requirements of the Growth Management Act, VISION 2050, or the Regional Transportation Plan, although such revisions may not be strictly required for certification. Jurisdictions are encouraged to address those items during upcoming comprehensive plan updates and other planning efforts.

Conformity with Growth Management Act Transportation Planning Requirements and Consistency with Regional Plans and Policies

OVERVIEW

This section discusses conformity with the Growth Management Act (RCW 36.70A.070(6)) and the transportation-related requirements for local comprehensive plans. It also discusses consistency with the adopted multicounty planning policies (established regional guidelines and principles under RCW 47.80.026) adopted in VISION 2050 and the Regional

¹ The certification requirement in the Growth Management Act is described in RCW 47.80. The specific requirements for transportation elements in local comprehensive plans are spelled out in RCW 36.70A.070. PSRC's Interlocal Agreement, Section VII, also provides direction for the review of local comprehensive plans and countywide policies (Resolution A-91-01, amended March 1998). The Council's Executive Board last updated its process for Policy and Plan Review in September 2003. The process is also described in [VISION 2050: Implementation](#).



Transportation Plan. In addition to the multicounty planning policies, VISION 2050 contains a regional growth strategy with a preferred distribution of the region's residential and employment growth, as well as several implementation actions for local governments to carry out. Each policy area addressed in VISION 2050 is discussed in turn below. More information about the requirement to review and certify local plans is provided in the [Adopted Policy and Plan Review Process](#).

Plans are reviewed using PSRC's [VISION 2050 Consistency Tool](#). This report documents where the plan meets requirements, highlights outstanding provisions of the plan, and identifies where additional work is needed to fully address VISION 2050, the Regional Transportation Plan, or Growth Management Act planning requirements. This section is organized by the sections in VISION 2050. While this may align with plan elements, many of these concepts may be addressed in various parts of local comprehensive plans.

Regional Collaboration

Scope of Review

The Growth Management Act (RCW 36.70A.070(6)) and VISION 2050 call for local comprehensive plans to:

- **Coordinate** with other jurisdictions, agencies, tribes, ports, military installations, and special purpose districts.
- Prioritize **access to opportunity** for people of color, people with low incomes, and historically underserved communities.
- Address opportunities and challenges related to **military installations** when applicable.
- Prioritize investments in **centers**.
- Explore **funding sources** and fiscal tools to meet infrastructure and other needs.

Certification Findings

The Pierce County comprehensive plan effectively addresses regional collaboration policies in VISION 2050. The plan includes policies to collaborate with jurisdictions, agencies, service providers, and other organizations. New policies were added to the plan to support equity in planning and public engagement. The plan includes policies to coordinate with Tribes to protect and mitigate against adverse impacts on cultural resources, invite early participation with Tribes in the planning process, and protect and restore ecosystems to support Tribal treaty rights that could be adversely impacted by climate change.



Regional Growth Strategy

Scope of Review

VISION 2050 calls for local comprehensive plans to:

- Incorporate **housing and employment targets**.
- Use **land use assumptions** substantially consistent with countywide growth targets.
- Demonstrate sufficient zoned **development capacity** to accommodate targets.
- Use consistent **land use assumptions** throughout plan.
- Maintain a **stable urban growth area** with densities that support the Regional Growth Strategy.
- Support growth in designated **centers and high-capacity transit station areas**.
- Manage and reduce **rural growth** and protect natural resource lands.

Certification Findings

The Pierce County comprehensive plan effectively addresses the Regional Growth Strategy policies in VISION 2050. The plan documents capacity to accommodate the allocated growth targets in the urban unincorporated area. The county is commended for a thorough review of the urban growth area, which resulted in redesignating 1,541 urban acres to rural. The plan focuses planning for existing growth in the urban growth area, particularly in unincorporated areas that are planned to be served by high-capacity transit. The county repealed a rural density incentive during the comprehensive plan update that would have permitted up to twice as many residential units in rural areas if a portion of the parcel was designated as open space. New policies also prohibit rezones to Rural 5 land use designation from less intensive zoning.

The county should address the following comments in future updates to the plan:

- Following the guidance in VISION 2050, the county planned for growth near designated high-capacity transit routes. Significant investments in high-capacity transit service will be needed to realize the benefits of dense development along these corridors and manage growth overall. The county should continue to actively work with Pierce Transit to support robust investments in frequent, high-capacity transit. If plans for high-capacity transit investments in these areas change, the county should consider future updates to the plan.
- Growth assigned to Pierce County's Urban Unincorporated regional geography during the growth target setting process was higher than established in the Regional Growth Strategy. To serve this growth, the plan should identify strategies to manage growth in urban unincorporated areas and expand access to Pierce Transit service for residents across the county to connect to employment and other opportunities. The county should continue to monitor actual growth trends. Future updates to county growth targets should be consistent with the Regional Growth Strategy.
- The rural growth targets reflect a commitment to reduce the rate of rural growth, and the county is commended for making changes to rural development regulations. Managing rural growth consistent with the Regional Growth Strategy will be a long-



term effort. The county should continue to identify strategies, tools and development regulations to help reduce rural growth consistent with the Regional Growth Strategy.

Environment

Scope of Review

VISION 2050 calls for local comprehensive plans to:

- Ensure **air quality standards** are met and reduce emissions of air toxics and greenhouse gases.
- Protect **critical areas and habitat** through coordination and environmental stewardship.
- Plan for **park, trail, and open space** resources and needs.
- Protect and enhance **tree canopy and native vegetation**.
- Protect and restore **water quality**, including actions to restore shorelines and estuaries, remove fish-passage barriers, reduce toxic products, and manage stormwater.
- Ensure **access to healthy environments** for all residents, prioritizing the reduction of impacts for vulnerable residents.

Certification Findings

The Pierce County comprehensive plan effectively addresses the environmental policies in VISION 2050. The plan includes policies to conserve habitat, provide access to open space, meet air quality standards, and coordinate ecosystem recovery strategies with tribal, federal, state and local jurisdictions. The plan includes policies to further environmental justice, including collaborating with communities on adaptation to climate impacts, developing leadership capacity in underserved communities to engage in environmental decision-making, and using data to prioritize tree retention and planting in overburdened communities. The plan includes policies to implement a 40% urban tree canopy coverage target and prioritize urban tree canopy in underserved communities.



Climate Change

Scope of Review

VISION 2050 calls for local comprehensive plans to:

- Reduce **greenhouse gas emissions** in support of state, regional, and local reductions goals.
- Protect and restore natural resources that **sequester and store carbon**.
- Address impacts to **vulnerable populations** that have been or will be impacted by climate change.
- Retrofit **existing buildings** to reduce building energy use.
- Increase **resilience** by identifying and addressing the impacts of climate change and natural hazards.
- Address **rising sea levels** by siting and planning for relocation out of the floodplain.

Certification Findings

The Pierce County comprehensive plan effectively addresses the climate change policies in VISION 2050. The plan includes an Environment and Climate Change element with policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and advance community resilience to the impacts of climate change. The plan supports adoption of regional greenhouse gas emission reduction targets and incorporates information from the countywide emissions inventory. Pierce County developed a Climate Vulnerability Assessment that identified specific risks associated with climate change, including longer extreme heat events, sea level rise, and wildfire risk. The vulnerability assessment also identifies populations and areas vulnerable to climate stressors.

The county should address the following comment in future updates to the plan:

- The county has made important progress on addressing climate change in the comprehensive plan. The Department of Commerce plans to release final guidance on climate planning consistent with House Bill 1181 in 2025, which will apply to the implementation progress report for jurisdictions in the Puget Sound region. The county should be aware of this upcoming deadline and monitor whether the plan's current state reflects the new requirements.



Land Use/Development Patterns

Scope of Review

VISION 2050 calls for local comprehensive plans to:

- Build **thriving urban communities** through inclusive engagement.
- Support **centers** as connections to opportunity.
- Address **healthy environment**, physical activity and well-being, and safety, while reducing disparities.
- Support **annexation and incorporation** by planning for phased growth of communities.
- Preserve **rural areas and natural resource lands**.
- Evaluate potential **residential and commercial displacement** and mitigate impacts.
- Limit **incompatible uses** adjacent to military lands, industrial centers, and tribal reservation lands.

Certification Findings

The Pierce County comprehensive plan effectively addresses the land use and development patterns policies in VISION 2050. The plan includes policies addressing the urban growth area, centers, rural and resource areas. The plan supports work with cities and towns to annex urban unincorporated areas by affiliating unincorporated areas with cities, outreach to stakeholders, financial incentives, joint planning agreements, and policies on logical boundaries for annexation. The county's plan designates Potential Incorporation Areas in Tehaleh and South Hill, which may become cities in the future. The plan recognizes the importance of Joint Base Lewis-McChord to the county and includes policies to ensure compatible land uses adjacent to the facility. The plan also includes policies to ensure that land use planning minimizes exposure of residents and workers to pollutants and promotes sustainable development that achieves healthy environments.



Housing

Scope of Review

The Growth Management Act (RCW 36.70A.070) and VISION 2050 call for local comprehensive plans to:

- Provide an **inventory and analysis** of existing housing and housing needs at each income level.
- Document **sufficient land capacity** to accommodate housing for all income levels and emergency shelters.
- Identify **actions** to provide housing for all income levels.
- Identify and address **racially disparate impacts, displacement, or exclusion** in housing.
- Expand housing capacity for **moderate-density housing**.
- Promote **jobs-housing balance**.
- Support the **development and preservation of affordable housing** by considering inclusionary and incentive zoning and promoting affordable housing near high-capacity transit.
- Promote **homeownership** opportunities.

Certification Findings

The Pierce County comprehensive plan effectively addresses the housing policy topics in VISION 2050. The plan documents capacity to accommodate the county's allocated share of countywide housing need by income level in the unincorporated area. The plan provides supporting data and analysis on racially disparate impacts, exclusion, and displacement and includes an analysis of barriers to housing production. The county added a new middle housing zone, and the plan includes policies to explore innovative approaches to meeting farmworker housing needs.

The county should address the following comments in future updates to the plan:

- The region is facing a housing crisis, and jurisdictions should act with urgency to address the housing needs of all residents. PSRC encourages the county to continue to work with regional partners to monitor housing conditions, to implement housing strategies, and to amend the plan periodically to adjust to changing conditions.
- The plan does not provide an analysis of capacity for emergency housing. RCW 36.70A.070(2)(c) requires that jurisdictions document sufficient capacity for all housing types, including emergency housing and emergency shelter, in the housing element. The county has updated development regulations since the plan was adopted to allow emergency housing in all zones, subject to additional permitting requirements. In addition to recent changes to development regulations, the plan documents a significant surplus residential and commercial capacity overall. Commerce provides [examples](#) of an emergency housing capacity analysis and [guidance](#) on how to complete the work (see p. 43). PSRC encourages the county to address capacity for emergency housing and barriers to development as a priority in future plan amendments.



Economy

Scope of Review

VISION 2050 calls for local comprehensive plans to:

- Identify and enhance **industry clusters**, including those that provide goods and services for export.
- Support retention and recruitment of **family wage jobs** and small businesses that are **locally, women-, and minority-owned**.
- Develop a **range of employment opportunities** to create a closer balance between jobs and housing.
- Address and prevent potential **physical, economic, and cultural displacement** of existing businesses.
- Expand **access to opportunity** and remove barriers for disconnected communities.
- Recognize and empower the contributions of the region's **culturally and ethnically diverse communities**.

Certification Findings

The Pierce County comprehensive plan effectively addresses the economy policies in VISION 2050. The Economic Development element includes policies to promote jobs-housing balance, support business growth and development, and access to opportunities for underrepresented communities. The plan also supports arts and culture, seeks to prevent business displacement, encourages green and sustainable business growth, and recognizes the economic contributions of the military and Tribes.



Transportation

Scope of Review

The Growth Management Act (RCW 36.70A.070(6)) requires local comprehensive plans to:

- Use **internally consistent land use assumptions** and forecasts of travel demand and that are consistent with growth targets.
- Provide **inventories of existing facilities**, and level-of-service standards and concurrency provisions that address multiple modes of travel, planned land uses and densities, and state highways.
- Include a **multiyear financing plan** and reassessment strategy to address potential funding shortfalls.
- Direct **demand management**, including programs to implement the Commute Trip Reduction Act.
- Plan for **pedestrians and bicycles**, including capital investments, education, and safety.
- Discourage **incompatible uses adjacent to airports**.
- Address **air quality** and the reduction of pollutants consistent with WAC 173-420-080.

VISION 2050 also calls for local comprehensive plans to:

- Plan for **system maintenance, safety and emergency management**.
- Support the **Regional Growth Strategy**.
- Provide **alternatives to driving alone**.
- Plan facilities and services for **special needs transportation**.
- Avoid the creation of new and expanded facilities in **rural areas**.
- Identify **racial and social equity** as a core objective when implementing transportation projects.
- Protect the **environment** and reduce stormwater pollution.

Certification Findings

The Pierce County comprehensive plan effectively addresses the transportation planning requirements of the Growth Management Act and the transportation policies in VISION 2050. The Transportation element includes information on demographics and travel patterns to understand mobility needs. The plan includes policies to reduce vehicle miles traveled per capita and to encourage walk, bike, transit, and other strategies to manage transportation demand. The plan includes policies to designate some roadways as “ultimate capacity” to focus on transportation demand management, operational strategies and active transportation solutions in lieu of adding additional roadway capacity. The plan includes policies to discourage impacts on water quality, including upgrading culverts consistent with the county’s fish passage program and designing culverts and bridges to be climate resilient.



The county should address the following comment in future updates to the plan:

- Consistent with VISION 2050, the plan references policies and measures to implement multimodal level of service standards. The state will require multimodal level of service standards by 2029, and additional guidance may be available in the future to refine adopted standards.

Public Services

Scope of Review

VISION 2050 calls for local comprehensive plans to:

- Promote **coordinated and efficient** use of public services.
- Protect **water quality** by serving urban development with sewer systems and replacing failing septic systems.
- Consider the **impacts of climate change on public facilities** and promote renewable energy.
- Promote **affordable and equitable access to public services**, especially for underserved communities.
- Promote working with school districts on **school siting and design** to support safe, walkable access.

Certification Findings

The Pierce County comprehensive plan effectively addresses the public services policies in VISION 2050. The plan promotes coordinated and efficient use of public services, for example coordinating with providers with all utilities and infrastructure to promote equitable and affordable access for all county residents. The plan includes policies to integrate mitigation for potential climate hazards and impacts into the design, construction and management of capital facilities. The plan includes a new policy to explore the potential for the county to create a full-service regional water utility.

Conclusion and Next Steps

PSRC found the Pierce County comprehensive plan is substantially consistent with the transportation-related provisions of the Growth Management Act, VISION 2050 and the Regional Transportation Plan.

PSRC encourages the county to address areas identified for additional work in upcoming plan updates and other planning efforts. These may be areas where additional work would make the plan more consistent with the Growth Management Act or VISION 2050 and areas that may be necessary to address prior to the 2029 Growth Management Act Implementation Progress Report.

PSRC is available to provide assistance with future plan updates. Find additional planning resources on [PSRC's Plan Review webpage](#). If the county has questions or needs additional information, please contact Liz Underwood-Bultmann at 206-464-6174 or LUnderwood-Bultmann@psrc.org.

