

Public Services

Goal: *The region supports development with adequate public facilities and services in a timely, coordinated, efficient, and cost-effective manner that supports local and regional growth planning objectives.*

Public services are essential to the day-to-day operation of the region, helping make communities safe, healthy, prosperous, and resilient. As the region grows, public services will need to continue to adjust and evolve to meet the region’s changing needs.

Public services are provided by local governments, special purpose districts, and private entities. They include drinking water, solid waste management, sewage treatment, stormwater management, energy, telecommunications, emergency services, schools, libraries, law and justice services, health and human services, and community centers.

New or expanded public services and infrastructure are needed to support new development. At the same time, existing infrastructure requires ongoing maintenance and upgrading. Using more efficient designs and technologies can curb some of the need for new infrastructure. A commitment to sustainable infrastructure ensures the least possible strain on the region’s resources and the environment, while contributing to healthy and prosperous communities.

Aligning the provision of public services with the Regional Growth Strategy allows services to be provided more efficiently and at lower operating costs. Providing urban services in urban areas can reduce travel time and transportation impacts and make services more accessible. Locating services in communities also supports local investments in neighborhoods and centers, reinforcing the desired growth pattern and curbing rural growth. This is consistent with the Growth Management Act which allows certain services, such as sanitary sewers, only in the urban growth area – with few exceptions (RCW 36.70A.110 (4)).

The health of the region’s residents depends on whether they have fair and timely access to high-quality, affordable, and conveniently-located public services. Equitable access to these services will require identifying gaps in services and planning for expanded or improved services and facilities, which represent significant investment. As the internet has become an increasingly important resource, the widespread availability of affordable, reliable internet and telecommunications services has become a priority for communities. Inadequate provision of some services, particularly in underserved areas, such as water, wastewater, and stormwater could become public health, safety, and environmental justice issues. Coordinated planning between PSRC, counties, cities, and service providers will help make public services more affordable, effective, sustainable, and equitable.



Many parts of the region, especially the unincorporated urban growth area, receive a variety of services through special purpose districts. Special purpose district boundaries often overlap with municipal boundaries and the urban growth area boundary. Special purpose districts and local jurisdictions need to coordinate to plan for future capacity, but the lack of uniformity among special purpose districts and local jurisdictions can make coordination challenging. The Growth Management Act states that cities are the preferred providers of urban services (RCW 36.70A.110 (4)).

Cities that own or operate their utilities and public services are more directly capable of planning for their operation and service. Cities that do not own such utilities and services have less ability to directly plan for the infrastructure needed to support long-term development and redevelopment, increasing the challenge of implementing planning policies.

Special Purpose Districts

Washington state law allows special purpose districts to be created for a variety of services, including sewer, water, drainage, flood control, parks and recreation, fire, libraries, public hospitals, schools, and public transportation. There are more than 330 special purpose districts in the central Puget Sound region. The Growth Management Act requires counties and cities to work together but does not place the same obligation on all special purpose districts.

Sustainable and Resilient Public Services

Many of the resources the region depends on are finite and vulnerable. Continued growth, with more demand for water, energy, wastewater management, and other utilities, can threaten the region's ability to maintain current level of service standards and protect resources.

Resources like water and energy can be managed in a way that conserves them for future generations. Conservation and evolving management practices, such as water reuse, play key roles in efficient use of resources. Improving wastewater treatment and stormwater management is crucial in recovering the health of Puget Sound and surrounding water bodies. Consistent with VISION 2050, public service providers are striving to decrease environmental and community impacts. Many providers are educating the public to be partners in these efforts.

Transitioning to low carbon energy will require retrofitting infrastructure to reduce energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions. Understanding the impacts that climate change will have on future conditions and infrastructure is an important part of planning for public services.

The central Puget Sound region is vulnerable to natural hazards like earthquakes, landslides, and wildfires, and is also threatened by sea level rise. Community resilience is the ability to prepare for anticipated hazards, adapt to changing conditions, and withstand and recover rapidly from disruptions. Public services play roles in community resilience through siting, designing, building, and operating public services and infrastructure that avoid or withstand hazards and ensure that services can continue or quickly resume after a disaster or emergency. Lack of planning for resilience leads to disproportionate impacts on vulnerable populations, who tend to have greater exposure to hazards and fewer resources to respond.



Capital Facility Siting

Expanding public services to accommodate growth can create challenges in how and where to site new facilities. While capital facilities are essential to communities, commerce, and quality of life, they often affect the environment and adjacent communities. Infrastructure such as sewage treatment plants and power transfer stations become hard to site and must be designed and operated without being nuisances to neighbors. High land costs make it difficult and costly to build new facilities like schools and libraries close to where people live. However, innovative practices such as joint siting and sharing of facilities that provide multiple benefits (such as playgrounds shared by schools and the public, stormwater parks, and collocated services) can reduce costs.

Siting capital facilities to support local and regional growth plans includes investing in capital facilities and amenities to support regional and local centers and siting capital facilities according to the populations they serve. Cultural and civic facilities contribute to building social capital and creating a sense of community. They best serve their populations when located in central places that people can reach by walking, biking, or using transit. Facilities serving urban populations are more efficient and cost-effective when sited in urban areas, while facilities serving rural populations are more effective when designed at the appropriate scale and located in adjacent towns or communities.

School Siting

School district boundaries have been long established, and some districts that were historically rural have become major suburban education providers. As a result, there are some districts that provide school services to both urban and rural populations, and some that own sites outside the urban growth area intended for future schools. Developing urban-serving schools on these outlying locations often requires expensive programs to transport students and encourages students to drive or be driven to schools.

Schools should be encouraged to become the hubs and gathering places of their communities by locating urban-serving schools in urban settings and designing facilities to better integrate with their urban neighborhoods. Collaborative planning between school districts and local governments on siting urban schools has been successful in identifying locations, problem-solving development challenges, and encouraging walking and biking to schools.

In 2017, the Washington State Legislature amended the Growth Management Act to allow, under certain circumstances, schools serving urban and rural populations outside the urban growth area if certain conditions are met.

Careful consideration of equity can help ensure that the benefits and impacts of capital facilities are shared by communities throughout the region. The historic provision of public services often systematically and disproportionately created worse conditions for people of color and people with low incomes, which lowered access to opportunity and quality of life. To this day, people in these communities may lack access to reliable services and infrastructure, such as sewers, broadband, and parks. Looking to the future, there are opportunities to correct these past inequities and increase access to opportunity for groups who have been historically marginalized. While certain facilities generate unavoidable adverse impacts, they can be mitigated by adjusting service priorities and not siting facilities in a manner that unduly burdens certain communities or population groups.





Manchester Stormwater Park, Kitsap County

Public Services Policies

MPP-PS-1

Protect and enhance the environment and public health and safety when providing services and facilities.

MPP-PS-2

Promote affordability and equitable access of public services to all communities, especially the historically underserved. Prioritize investments to address disparities.

MPP-PS-3

Time and phase services and facilities to guide growth and development in a manner that supports the Regional Growth Strategy.

MPP-PS-4

Promote demand management and the conservation of services and facilities prior to developing new facilities.

MPP-PS-5

Do not provide urban services in rural areas. Design services for limited access when they are needed to solve isolated health and sanitation problems, so as not to increase the development potential of the surrounding rural area.

MPP-PS-6

Encourage the design of public facilities and utilities in rural areas to be at a size and scale appropriate to rural locations, so as not to increase development pressure.

MPP-PS-7

Obtain urban services from cities or appropriate regional service providers. Encourage cities, counties, and special purpose districts, including sewer, water, and fire districts, to coordinate planning efforts, agree on optimal ways to provide efficient service, and support consolidations that would improve service to the public.

MPP-PS-8

Develop conservation measures to reduce solid waste and increase recycling.

MPP-PS-9

Promote improved conservation and more efficient use of water, as well as the increased use of reclaimed water, to reduce wastewater generation and ensure water availability.



MPP-PS-10

Serve new development within the urban growth area with sanitary sewer systems or fit it with dry sewers in anticipation of connection to the sewer system. Alternative technology to sewers should be considered only when it can be shown to produce treatment at standards that are equal to or better than the sewer system and where a long-term maintenance plan is in place.

MPP-PS-11

Replace failing septic systems within the urban growth area with sanitary sewers or alternative technology that is comparable or better.

MPP-PS-12

Use innovative and state-of-the-art design and techniques when replacing septic tanks to restore and improve environmental quality.

MPP-PS-13

Promote the use of renewable energy resources to meet the region's energy needs.

MPP-PS-14

Reduce the rate of energy consumption through conservation and alternative energy forms to extend the life of existing facilities and infrastructure.

MPP-PS-15

Support the necessary investments in utility infrastructure to facilitate moving to low-carbon energy sources.

MPP-PS-16

Plan for the provision of telecommunication infrastructure to provide access to residents and businesses in all communities, especially underserved areas.

MPP-PS-17

Coordinate, design, and plan for public safety services and programs, including emergency management. These efforts may be interjurisdictional.

MPP-PS-18

Locate community facilities and health and human services in centers and near transit facilities for all to access services conveniently.

MPP-PS-19

Support efforts to increase the resilience of public services, utilities, and infrastructure by preparing for disasters and other impacts and coordinated planning for system recovery.

MPP-PS-20

Consider climate change, economic, and health impacts when siting and building essential public services and facilities.

MPP-PS-21

Consider the potential impacts of climate change and fisheries protection on the region's water supply.

MPP-PS-22

Provide residents of the region with access to high quality drinking water that meets or is better than federal and state requirements.

MPP-PS-23

Promote coordination among local and tribal governments and water providers and suppliers to meet long-term water needs in the region in a manner that supports the region's growth strategy.

MPP-PS-24

Reduce the per capita rate of water consumption through conservation, efficiency, reclamation, and reuse.

MPP-PS-25

Protect the source of the water supply to meet the needs for both human consumption and for environmental balance.

MPP-PS-26

Work cooperatively with school districts to plan for school facilities to meet the existing and future community needs consistent with adopted comprehensive plans and growth forecasts, including siting and designing schools to support safe, walkable access and best serve their communities.

MPP-PS-27

Site schools, institutions, and other community facilities that primarily serve urban populations within the urban growth area in locations where they will promote the local desired growth plans, except as provided for by RCW 36.70A.211.

MPP-PS-28

Locate schools, institutions, and other community facilities serving rural residents in neighboring cities and towns and design these facilities in keeping with the size and scale of the local community, except as provided for by RCW 36.70A.211.

MPP-PS-29

Site or expand regional capital facilities in a manner that (1) reduces adverse social, environmental, and economic impacts on the host community, especially on historically marginalized communities, (2) equitably balances the location of new facilities away from disproportionately burdened communities, and (3) addresses regional planning objectives.

MPP-PS-30

Do not locate regional capital facilities outside the urban growth area unless it is demonstrated that a non-urban site is the most appropriate location for such a facility.



Public Services Actions

Regional Actions

PS-Action-1

Utility and Service District Planning: PSRC will work with electrical utilities, water providers, special purpose districts, and other utilities to facilitate coordinated efforts to develop long-range plans that comply with the Growth Management Act and implement VISION 2050.

PS-Action-2

Facilities Siting and Design: PSRC will facilitate cooperative efforts with special purpose districts and local jurisdictions to site and design facilities that enhance local communities in accordance with growth management goals and VISION 2050.

PS-Action-3

School Siting: PSRC will initiate and support discussions with the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction to facilitate updates that modernize school siting standards, especially those related to site area requirements. Updates should work to align school siting standards with the goals of the Growth Management Act and facilitate school districts' ability to better meet urban capacity needs.

PS-Action-4

Regional Support for School Siting Best Practices: PSRC will research and develop guidance on innovative methods to update regulations and local plans to develop a regional approach to school siting and to assist local jurisdictions and school districts in siting new schools in urbanized areas.

