



Puget Sound Regional Council

MEMORANDUM

October 27, 2020

TO: PSRC Membership

FROM: Josh Brown

SUBJECT: VISION 2050 Amendment Proposal

IN BRIEF

Snohomish County Executive Dave Somers proposes an amendment to the VISION 2050 Regional Growth Strategy to adjust Snohomish County Rural growth allocation. This amendment will be brought forward for consideration by the General Assembly at the meeting on October 29, 2020.

Action

The proposed amendment would adjust the Snohomish County growth allocation and amend RGS-Action-4 as follows:

	Metropolitan Cities	Core Cities	High Capacity Transit Communities	Cities & Towns	Urban Unincorp.	Rural	Total
Snohomish County	20%	12%	50%	41% 10%	4%	3% 4.5%	100%
	87,000	51,000 50,000	210,000	45,000 40,500	18,000	13,000 18,500	424,000

RGS-Action-4 Rural Growth: PSRC, together with its members and stakeholders, will explore and implement, as feasible, opportunities for local, regional and state-wide conservation programs to reduce development pressure in rural and resource areas, to facilitate regional Transfer of Development Rights, and to explore additional techniques to conserve valuable open space areas, including Purchase of Development Rights and open space markets.

- Establishing a regional structure for Transfer and Purchase of Development Rights and open space markets.
- Publishing a toolkit of open space conservation and other rural protection strategies.
- Working to facilitate city and urban development consistent with VISION 2050 that reduces rural development pressure.

A motion will be made at the General Assembly meeting to make this change to VISION 2050. No other amendments are anticipated. PSRC's Executive Committee has asked staff to provide information about the implications of the proposal and about the options that had been

considered by the boards in the development of the recommended VISION 2050 plan on which the General Assembly will take action on October 29.

DISCUSSION

A central feature of VISION 2050 is a Regional Growth Strategy that allocates the growth of jobs and population to each geographic area of each county. The Regional Growth Strategy is a key tool to guide the setting of local growth targets and for making assumptions for the update to the Regional Transportation Plan.

The Regional Growth Strategy for VISION 2050 is designed to continue to support greater growth in cities and urban areas, while working to preserve farms, forests, and open space. It seeks to guide a large portion growth to areas well-served by transit and the region’s investments infrastructure as a means to make it easier to for people to access jobs, services, and amenities, and to reduce environmental impacts. Attachment A illustrates the Regional Growth Strategy.

The proposed Snohomish County amendment would change the allocation of population growth planned for its Rural area from 3% of the county’s growth in the current draft plan to 4.5% and make corresponding reductions to the allocations for Core Cities and Cities & Towns in the county as shown. This change would not impact the growth allocations for other counties.

In support of the Rural allocation, the county noted that 4.5% would be less than half of the rate included in VISION 2040 (10%) and that the existing platted lots in its Rural area allows for a potential population growth of about 22,836 people or about 5.4% of the county’s overall growth by the year 2050. The county also noted the important work it has done to reduce the historic rate of rural growth of about 21% to just 10% in 2015.

The VISION 2050 alternatives considered in the Supplemental EIS considered a range of growth allocations for the county’s Rural area from 2% to 10%. The public review draft of VISION 2050 issued in July 2019 included a 6% rural share requested by Snohomish County in spring 2019. The recommendations from the Growth Management Policy Board and the Executive Board both included 3% for the Rural allocation. More about the process of developing the Regional Growth Strategy is provided below.

	Metropolitan Cities	Core Cities	High Capacity Transit Communities	Cities & Towns	Urban Unincorp.	Rural	Total
GMPB / Exec Board Recommendation – Population	20% 87,000	12% 51,000	50% 210,000	11% 45,000	4% 18,000	3% 13,000	100%
Snohomish County Proposed Amendment - Population	20% 87,000	12% 50,000	50% 210,000	10% 40,500	4% 18,000	4.5% 18,500	100%
VISION 2050 Public Review Draft (July 2019) - Population	20% 87,000	11% 47,000	50% 210,000	9% 37,000	4% 18,000	6% 25,000	100%

What are the Implications of the Change?

The Regional Growth Strategy is a guide for setting growth targets in each county that work to support the regional vision and policy objectives. Targets, which will be set for the year 2044, not 2050, often do not precisely align with the Regional Growth Strategy. As countywide planning groups adopt targets, it is expected that they will demonstrate how their targets work towards and substantially support VISION 2050 and the Regional Growth Strategy.

Cities and counties are expected to adopt comprehensive plans that include and plan for their adopted growth targets. When PSRC certifies local comprehensive plans, staff review that the plans are consistent with their adopted targets. The certification process evaluates the plans and policies; it does not evaluate actual development activity or development regulations. The certification process ensures that jurisdictions are planning to support VISION 2050 in a manner that is generally consistent across the region, while providing flexibility for local circumstances and recognition that many factors are beyond the control of the local jurisdiction.

Changes to the county's Rural allocation has two primary implications:

- The county's overall allocation is held constant. Therefore, an increase or decrease in the Rural allocation reduces or increases the allocations for other geographies. In this case, the growth targets for Core Cities and Cities & Towns would be set lower than under the Executive Board recommendation. Put another way, those groups of cities would need to accommodate about 5,500 fewer people or about 2,100 fewer households by the year 2050 if the Rural allocation for the county was set at 4.5% versus 3%. Environmental review for VISION 2050 showed that growth in urban areas generally has lower environmental impacts.
- The Rural allocation may influence how aggressively the county needs to plan to reduce the rate of rural growth. One would expect correspondingly more aggressive measures to reach the lower Rural allocation of 3%. However, both options call for less growth in the rural area than VISION 2040 (10%) or than has occurred historically, and in both scenarios, VISION 2050 policies call on all counties to work toward reducing rural growth.

The Regional Growth Strategy is not a direct allocation of development activity or permits. While the objective is to reduce the rate of rural growth, there is no requirement to limit or meter permits or to down zone. Jurisdictions are not penalized through PSRC's certification process and transportation funding is not at risk even if actual development activity exceeds planning levels. (Past conditional certifications were for *plans* that were not aligned with targets; not due to actual rates of growth.)

Success in reaching either of the numeric objectives for reducing the rate of rural growth will require a range of strategies that go beyond county actions and zoned densities, such as protection of open space, transfer and purchase of development rights, and open space conservation by non-profits. VISION 2050 includes several policies related to the growth strategy and that support reducing the rate of rural growth, including that:

- Provide flexibility in establishing and growth targets

- Reduce rural growth rates over time to maintain rural landscapes and lifestyles and protect resource lands
- Support the establishment of regional funding sources to acquire conservation easements in rural areas
- Identify, preserve, and enhance significant regional open space networks
- Avoid new fully contained communities outside of the urban growth area
- Work to conserve valuable rural and resource lands through techniques, such as conservation programs, transfer of development rights, and the purchase of development rights

VISION 2050 also includes two specific actions to initiate work to enhance conservation and reduce growth pressure on rural areas and to establish a regional funding source for conservation:

RGS-Action-4 Rural Growth: PSRC, together with its members and stakeholders, will explore and implement, as feasible, opportunities for local, regional and state-wide conservation programs to reduce development pressure in rural and resource areas, to facilitate regional Transfer of Development Rights, and to explore additional techniques to conserve valuable open space areas, including Purchase of Development Rights and open space markets. *(this action would be amended as shown above)*

RGS-Action-5 Regional Conservation Fund: PSRC, in collaboration with its members and other partners, will explore and support the establishment of regional funding sources to acquire conservation easements in rural areas.

These policies and actions ensure that, regardless of the growth allocations, all of the counties in the region will work to reduce growth to rural areas and work to maintain rural character and intensities over the long-term.

If the amount of rural growth can be reduced from past rates, PSRC's environmental analysis shows that it will result in less land consumption, fewer environmental impacts, less vehicle travel, fewer greenhouse gas emissions, and less risk to potential climate impacts. More information about the impact analysis is provided in the [Draft and Final SEIS documents](#). However, simply having a lower target (3% vs. 4.5%) in VISION is not a guarantee of less actual growth or ultimately achieving fewer environmental impacts.

What is the legislative history of this amendment?

During the initial development of the Regional Growth Strategy, PSRC staff and the Growth Management Policy Board analyzed the preexisting growth strategy, actual growth patterns, and trends, and reviewed land uses, public comments, and other information. PSRC initially developed three distinct growth pattern alternatives that compared a pattern similar to VISION 2040 to a more transit focused strategy and to a more distributed strategy. The Growth Management Policy Board considered comments from Snohomish County/Snohomish County Tomorrow, Pierce County, Kitsap County and others to help create a preferred alternative to include in the draft plan.

Snohomish County and Snohomish County Tomorrow voiced support for the Transit Focused Growth alternative while advocating for an allocation for the county’s Rural geography that reflected vested lots and potential development. Snohomish County documents that historic Rural growth comprised as much as 21% of the county’s overall growth and that the county has successfully reduced that amount to about 10% as recently as 2015. The county stated that, “Current conditions show that, even without factoring in growth from additional rural subdivisions, there are enough existing and vested vacant lots in the rural areas to accommodate 22,836 people, or about 5.4% of 424,000 population growth allocated to Snohomish County.” The Transit Focused Growth included a 2% rural allocation, and the county requested an adjustment to 6% of total county growth.

In response to comments, the board used the Transit Focus Growth alternative as a starting point to develop the Regional Growth Strategy and made adjustments to it for Kitsap, Pierce, and Snohomish counties. In July of 2019, PSRC released a draft public review version of VISION 2050 that included a growth strategy with a 6% growth allocation for Snohomish County’s Rural geography.

Notably, the draft plan included an allocation *range* for Pierce County’s Rural geography (of 3% to 6%) rather than a single number, which the county later agreed to establish at 3%. Pierce County stated that achieving 3% would be dependent on purchasing rural development rights and advocated for establishing a regional funding source for rural lands conservation (see MPP-RGS-15 and RGS-Action-4 that were added to VISION 2050).

Snohomish County	2015 Actual Rate	VISION 2040	Stay the Course Alt.	Transit Focused Growth Alt.	Reset Urban Growth Alt.	Public Review Draft	GMPB & Exec Board Rec’d	Snohomish Co. Amendment
Rural Pop. Share	10% ¹	10%	9%	2%	10%	6%	3%	4.5%

During its review of the draft plan, the Growth Management Policy Board considered more than 1,600 individual comments on the draft version of VISION 2050 and established a list of more than 400 potential amendments to VISION 2050 for deliberation. PSRC received several public comments addressing the rural growth allocation for Snohomish County.

In fall 2019, the GMPB Snohomish County Other Cities and Towns representative identified a potential amendment to reduce the county’s Rural allocation from 6% included in the public review draft to 3%. A Seattle representative requested changing to an allocation of 2% as provided by the Transit Focused Growth alternative. There were several board discussions about the Regional Growth Strategy over the fall of 2019. The board made a final vote to include the 3% amendment for Snohomish County Rural and to recommend VISION 2050 to the Executive Board at its meeting in December 2019. The vote on the 3% amendment passed 9 to 7.

The Executive Board took up VISION 2050 in January 2020 and began discussion of the Snohomish County Rural allocation in February. Snohomish County proposed an amendment to change its Rural allocation back from 3% to 6% and then subsequently modified the amendment proposal to 4.5% at the September Executive Board meeting. That amendment

¹ Snohomish County Tomorrow letter dated September 12, 2019

proposal failed at the Executive Board's September 24, 2020, meeting. Some board members expressed that they would like to have had more time to consider the 4.5% option, which was not introduced until shortly before the vote.

In addition to the discussion in this memorandum, information about VISION 2050, including the full recommended plan, comment letters, environmental review documents, background papers, and other materials, is available on the [VISION 2050 website](#). PSRC received numerous public comments on the Snohomish County amendment considered by the Executive Board. They are available on the [Executive Board website](#) (see February, July, and September 2020 meeting materials).

For questions, please contact Paul Inghram at 206-464-7549 or pinghram@psrc.org or Ben Bakkenta at 206-971-3286 or BBakkenta@psrc.org.

1. Related policies from VISION 2050 are included on Attachment A.
2. A slide showing the recommended Regional Growth Strategy is provided as Attachment B.

Attachment A

Policies and Actions Related to Rural Growth

MPP-RGS-4 Accommodate the region's growth first and foremost in the urban growth area. Ensure that development in rural areas is consistent with the regional vision and the goals of the Regional Open Space Conservation Plan.

MPP-RGS-3 Provide flexibility in establishing and modifying growth targets within countywide planning policies, provided growth targets support the Regional Growth Strategy.

MPP-RGS-14 Manage and reduce rural growth rates over time, consistent with the Regional Growth Strategy, to maintain rural landscapes and lifestyles and protect resource lands and the environment.

MPP-RGS-15 Support the establishment of regional funding sources to acquire conservation easements in rural areas.

MPP-En-12 Identify, preserve, and enhance significant regional open space networks and linkages across jurisdictional boundaries through implementation and update of the Regional Open Space Conservation Plan.

MPP-DP-34 Avoid new fully contained communities outside of the designated urban growth area because of their potential to create sprawl and undermine state and regional growth management goals.

MPP-DP-44 Work to conserve valuable rural and resource lands through techniques, such as conservation programs, transfer of development rights, and the purchase of development rights. Focus growth within the urban growth area, especially cities, to lessen pressures to convert rural and resource areas to residential uses. **MPP-DP-45** Avoid growth in rural areas that cannot be sufficiently served by roads, utilities, and services at rural levels of service.

VISION 2050 also includes two specific actions to initiate work to enhance conservation and reduce growth pressure on rural areas:

RGS-Action-4 Rural Growth: PSRC, together with its members and stakeholders, will explore and implement, as feasible, opportunities for local, regional and state-wide conservation programs to reduce development pressure in rural and resource areas, to facilitate regional Transfer of Development Rights, and to explore additional techniques to conserve valuable open space areas, including Purchase of Development Rights and open space markets.

RGS-Action-5 Regional Conservation Fund: PSRC, in collaboration with its members and other partners, will explore and support the establishment of regional funding sources to acquire conservation easements in rural areas.

**Attachment B
Draft Regional Growth Strategy**

Population Growth - Draft Preferred Alternative

