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COMMUNITY PLANNING & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

Creating Solutions for Our Future

Joshua Cummings, Director

MEMORANDUM

TO: Thurston County Planning Commission
FROM: Bryan Benjamin, Community Planning
DATE: February 21, 2024
SUBJECT: Introduction to Nisqually Subarea Plan Update

BACKGROUND

The Growth Management Act (GMA) authorizes local jurisdictions to include a variety of optional elements in its Comprehensive Plan. Subarea plans are an optional element of comprehensive plans and create a distinct vision for a smaller geographic area within a jurisdiction through creation of goals and policies that are tailored to the needs and wants of the community. Thurston County has three subarea plans: the Grand Mound Subarea Plan, the Rochester Subarea Plan, and the [Nisqually Subarea Plan](#). The Grand Mound and Rochester Subarea Plans plan for urban intensities of growth and land use, while the Nisqually Subarea Plan is a rural land use plan.

Zoning in the Nisqually Valley supported urban and suburban densities prior to the creation of the Nisqually Subarea Plan. In response to community feedback that the Nisqually Valley's rural character should be protected, Thurston County's Board of County Commissioners established the Nisqually Planning Committee—comprised of Nisqually Valley community members and residents—to work with staff in developing new subarea boundaries and a community vision. The Nisqually Planning Committee was established in 1989, and the Nisqually Subarea Plan was adopted in 1992. The Nisqually Subarea Plan is the result of a grassroots initiative to protect rural and natural character of the Nisqually Valley and entailed three years of close collaboration with subarea residents to create regulatory and programmatic approaches that would protect a variety of interests in the subarea.

The Nisqually Subarea Plan has had two partial updates since adoption in 1992. The first update in 1996 created and implemented the Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) program, which was developed to allow farmers and property owners in flood hazard areas to sell their development rights to the County. The next update in 2016 allowed recycled asphalt processing operations as a permissible use within existing mining facilities. The Nisqually Subarea Plan was added to the 2022/2023 final docket in response to Nisqually Valley community members' request for an update of the whole plan in response to changing conditions in the subarea. This update is the first time the entire subarea plan is open for review since adoption in 1992.

SUMMARY OF WORK TO DATE

In 2023, staff completed an internal review of existing goals and policies within the plan in preparation for community engagement. This review was a fact-finding process only and reviewed the status the subarea plan's policies to determine what initiatives had been completed since plan adoption. Staff also developed a communications plan for the update and presented the communications plan to the Nisqually River Council to get feedback on the engagement process and timeline. The Nisqually River Council recommended that Thurston County consider hosting an open house to kick off the project and to allow more time and add more topic areas for focus group engagement. A [Community Survey](#) for the project was also developed and is available online.

The Nisqually Indian Tribe's Planning staff agreed to co-host and provide a location for the open house, which was held in January 2024. The Washington State Department of Transportation and the Nisqually River Council were invited and agreed to host a table at the event, as each organization has ongoing work in the Nisqually Valley impacting change in the subarea. 54 community members were in attendance.

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE

Community Planning is considering the following as the schedule for review of this item:

- February-March 2024 – Focus group engagement, Nisqually River Council facilitation.
- March-April 2024 – Report outreach results, incorporate community input into the plan.
- May-July 2024 – Planning Commission work sessions and recommendation.
- August-November 2024 – BoCC work sessions and final action.