

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

VISION FOR THURSTON COUNTY

People have chosen to live and work in Thurston County for many reasons. The county provides a diversity of environments and lifestyle choices such as urban, rural, and small town, all within a short distance of one another. The wholesome quality of life offered by the county includes a clean environment, job opportunities, easy access to work, recreation and shopping, regional health facilities, education and cultural activities, a variety of human services and a peaceful, uncrowded atmosphere.

Thurston County is anticipating continued high growth. That growth presents a challenge for the future. The county seeks to maintain and enhance its quality of life while achieving the benefits of growth and minimizing any negative side effects. The vision for Thurston County defines the future toward which the county is moving. It identifies how the county will respond to growth and change. This vision is expressed in terms of the following value statements.

Support and Preserve the Human Environment: Promotion of the human environment encompasses a range of activities including social and health services, job opportunities, education, public safety, recreation, and cultural events. Variety and accessibility of services and activities are important aspects of a quality human environment.

Continue Commitment to Public Participation: Thurston County has a strong tradition of open government and public participation in its policy making. County officials are highly committed to the principle that people affected by decisions should be given every opportunity to be involved in the decision-making process. Early and continuous public participation is encouraged through the amendment process for this Plan and associated regulations. See Chapter 12 for a description of the plan amendment process, and visit the Thurston County web page at www.thurstonplanning.org for more information on how you can participate.

Preserve the Natural Environment, Water Quality and Open Spaces; Conserve the Natural Resource Base: We recognize our role as stewards of our natural resources and trustees for the future quality of human life. The quality of our county environment is a special feature that draws people to our area. We must monitor, protect, and enhance that environment. Maintenance of the quality of our water resources is an important concern because of human health, recreation, fisheries and aquaculture activities. Conservation of our farm and forest land base is important to ensure that these lands will be available to future generations. Our open spaces are valuable as visual and physical buffers, wildlife habitat and recreation sites. Open spaces can separate land uses and provide relief from homogeneous developments.

Promote Economic Health and Diversified Economic Activities: ~~Support for new and existing businesses is essential to Thurston County's financial well-being. Active support of Thurston County Economic Development Council's mission of job creation is of special importance because of the need to diversify our economic base. It is now heavily reliant on state government.~~

Economic activities provide jobs and income for county residents and tax base for our public services. A local economy that encompasses a wide spectrum of commercial and industrial

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endeavors provides wider job opportunities suited to all skill levels in the work force. Recognition and support also needs to be extended to the job creating opportunities in natural resource based economic activities including forestry, agriculture, aquaculture and mining as well as in residential and other construction activities. Tourism's economic impact is of increasing importance and value to the county.

Enough land needs to be available for a variety of economic activities to operate in convenient and appropriate locations. Roads, sewer, water, and other services required by economic activities need to be planned. Responsive and understandable permit processes are also important to a positive business climate. Development requirements should consider the long-term effects of any new development. Such requirements and processes need to resolve key questions of impact on the community's natural resources and ability to provide services to the development.

It is an important premise of this plan that the whole document relates to the county's economic development. For example, the county's educational, health, and recreational facilities, and its environmental quality, all play an important role in the area's economic health and attractiveness for economic development.

Promote Variety and Accessibility of Living Environments: The diverse environments ranging from urban to rural, small town, shoreline, agriculture, and forest contribute to choice in lifestyles available to county residents.

Manage Growth Effectively: Effective management of growth can protect the variety of living styles in the county, keep service costs to a minimum and preserve the natural environment. Concentration of urban growth in existing centers will protect rural and resource areas from urban sprawl. At the same time, urban areas can provide diversity through varied densities, land uses, parks, open spaces, and environmentally sensitive areas.

Maintain and Improve a Safe, Effective Transportation System: Our transportation system is a key to the economic vitality of the region. Safe bike and pedestrian facilities, public transportation and linkages between all modes (bus, train, air) are important elements of the system.

II. AUTHORITY FOR PLANNING

Thurston County adopts this Comprehensive Plan under the authority of the Washington State Growth Management Act (GMA), RCW 36.70A. Other legislation, including the Planning Commission Act (RCW 35.63), provide additional authority for and the procedures to be followed in guiding and regulating the physical development of the county.

GROWTH MANAGEMENT GOALS

The following goals from the Act (RCW 36.70A.020) are used to guide the development and adoption of this Comprehensive Plan and its associated development regulations:

1. Urban growth. Encourage development in urban areas where adequate public facilities and services exist or can be provided in an efficient manner.
2. Reduce sprawl. Reduce the inappropriate conversion of undeveloped land into sprawling, low-density development.
3. Transportation. Encourage efficient multimodal transportation systems based on regional priorities and coordinated with county and city comprehensive plans.
4. Housing. Encourage the availability of affordable housing to all economic segments of the population of this state, promote a variety of residential densities and housing types, and encourage preservation of existing housing stock.
5. Economic development. Encourage economic development throughout the state that is consistent with adopted comprehensive plans, promote economic opportunity for all citizens of this state, especially for unemployed and for disadvantaged persons, and encourage growth in areas experiencing insufficient economic growth, all within the capacities of the state's natural resources, public services, and public facilities.
6. Property rights. Private property shall not be taken for public use without just compensation having been made. The property rights of landowners shall be protected from arbitrary and discriminatory actions.
7. Permits. Applications for both state and local government permits should be processed in a timely and fair manner to ensure predictability.
8. Natural resource industries. Maintain and enhance natural resource-based industries, including productive timber, agricultural, and fisheries industries. Encourage the conservation of productive forest lands and productive agricultural lands, and discourage incompatible uses.
9. Open space and recreation. Encourage the retention of open space and development of recreational opportunities, conserve fish and wildlife habitat, increase access to natural resource lands and water, and develop parks.
10. Environment. Protect the environment and enhance the state's high quality of life, including air and water quality, and the availability of water.
11. Citizen participation and coordination. Encourage the involvement of citizens in the planning process and ensure coordination between communities and jurisdictions to reconcile conflicts.
12. Public facilities and services. Ensure that those public facilities and services necessary to support development shall be adequate to serve the development at the time the development is available for occupancy and use without decreasing current service levels below locally established minimum standards.
13. Historic preservation. Identify and encourage the preservation of lands, sites, and structures that have historical or archaeological significance.
14. Shoreline management. Address the goals and policies of the Shoreline Management Act (RCW

The Comprehensive Plan provides for the county's physical and other development and is designed to:

Encourage the most appropriate use of land.

Lessen traffic congestion and accidents.

Secure safety from fire.

Provide adequate light and air.

Prevent overcrowding of land.

Avoid undue concentration of population.

Promote coordinated development of unbuilt areas.

Encourage formation of neighborhood or community units.

Secure an appropriate allotment of land area in new developments for all the requirements of community life.

Conserve and restore natural beauty and other natural resources.

Encourage and protect access to direct sunlight for solar energy systems.

Facilitate the adequate provision of transportation, water, sewerage, and other public uses and requirements, including protection of the quality and quantity of ground water used for public water supplies.

Review [the] drainage, flooding, and stormwater runoff in the area and nearby jurisdictions and provide guidance for corrective actions to mitigate or cleanse those discharges that pollute Puget Sound or waters entering Puget Sound.

The GMA is designed to reduce or mitigate the negative effects of uncoordinated and unplanned population growth. The following goals from the Act are used to guide the development and adoption of this Comprehensive Plan and its associated development regulations:

1. — *Urban growth.* Encourage development in urban areas where adequate public facilities and services exist or can be provided in an efficient manner.
2. — *Reduce sprawl.* Reduce the inappropriate conversion of undeveloped land into sprawling, low density development.
3. — *Transportation.* Encourage efficient multimodal transportation systems that are based on regional priorities and coordinated with county and city comprehensive plans.
4. — *Housing.* Encourage the availability of affordable housing to all economic segments of the population of this state, promote a variety of residential densities and housing types, and encourage preservation of existing housing stock.
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III. THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN AND ITS ROLE IN THE COUNTY'S PLANNING SYSTEM HOW THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN IS USED BY THURSTON COUNTY

A. THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN, JOINT PLANS AND OTHER SPECIALIZED PLANS

The content of the Comprehensive Plan is guided by the Growth Management Act and the Thurston County County-Wide Planning Policies, a regional framework adopted by the Board of County Commissioners, in collaboration with the seven cities and towns within Thurston County.

The Comprehensive Plan contains goals and policies to govern the unincorporated areas of Thurston County. In turn, the Plan guides several other kinds of specialized plans: joint plans, subarea plans, and functional plans. [Map I-1](#) shows Thurston County jurisdictional boundaries.²

Joint Plans

Joint plans serve as the Comprehensive Plans for the unincorporated areas within the urban growth boundaries for the cities and towns within the county. They are integral parts of this Comprehensive Plan, although they appear in separate documents. Joint plans are further discussed in [Chapter 2-Land Use](#).

Subarea Plans

Subarea plans are detailed plans for specific geographic areas of the county. These types of plans are discussed in [Chapter 2-Land Use](#).

Special Purpose (Functional) Plans.

Functional plans cross subarea or urban growth boundaries and pertain to a certain subject such as sewers, stormwater, open space, or historic resources. As with the sub-area plans, functional plans use goals and policies and the urban-rural framework from the Comprehensive Plan to guide their development and implementation. Examples of functional plans include the [Transportation Improvement Plan](#), [Stormwater Management Program Plan](#), and the [Parks, Recreation, Trails and Natural Resource Preserve Plan](#). Some of these plans are developed for the county as a whole; others apply to parts of the county.

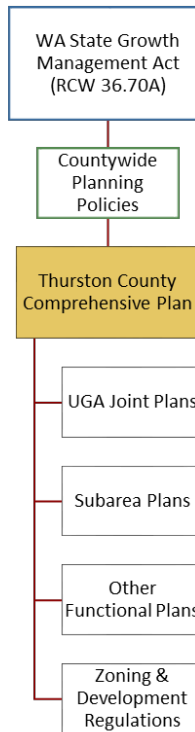


Figure 1. Planning Hierarchy

- SEE [CHAPTER 2 – LAND USE](#) FOR GOALS, OBJECTIVES, AND POLICIES ON THE COUNTY'S PLANNING SYSTEM
- SEE [APPENDIX C](#) FOR A LIST OF RELATED PLANS

BA. THE ROLE OF THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN:

The [Thurston County Comprehensive Plan](#) provides a legally recognized framework for making decisions about land use in Thurston County. [Thurston County's](#)

The Plan directs the county's future physical growth through several mechanisms.

Guidance for Development Regulations. The County's development regulations, such as the zoning ordinance, must be consistent with the policies in this Comprehensive Plan ~~as well as related plans, like the Thurston County Sewerage General Plan.~~

Guidance for Capital Facilities Planning. The County's Capital Facilities Plan must include the public facilities needed to accommodate the population growth anticipated in the Comprehensive Plan. It also must ensure that levels of service adopted within the Plan can be maintained. Secondly, the Comprehensive Plan provides the framework for decisions about public facilities and services (such as where facilities should be located to support planned growth). ~~It is intended that special districts and other agencies use the plan in preparing their functional plans for delivering services.~~

Guidance for Specific Land Use Permit Applications. In reviewing applications for land use permits, such as special use permits or large residential developments, the staff or hearings examiner refer to the Comprehensive Plan or more specific related plans, such as joint plans, in determining whether the application should be approved.

Guidance for Related Plans. Plans that are adopted by reference within this Comprehensive Plan (see discussion of joint plans and specialized plans below) must be consistent with the policies contained within this Plan, which serve as the overall framework for all County land use policies.

Guidance for Related Inter-Local Agreements. Occasionally the County and other jurisdictions within the County enter into voluntary agreements for various purposes, such as to coordinate policies of mutual interest, the use of shared facilities, and the accomplishment of mutual goals. Examples include annexation agreements with cities and the LOTT agreement for the regional sewage treatment facility. Such agreements are useful tools for implementing Comprehensive Plan policy when interjurisdictional cooperation is necessary or just more efficient.

Guidance for Various County Programs. Many of the policies within this Plan refer to County programs or projects needed to fulfill the goals of the Plan. ~~For example, one of the strategies for conserving farmlands in the County is to develop and implement a, such as the~~ Purchase of Development Rights program.

B. JOINT PLANS AND OTHER SPECIALIZED PLANS:

~~The Comprehensive Plan is the plan that guides several other kinds of specialized plans undertaken by the county: joint plans, subarea plans, and functional plans. Plans prepared to date in each of these categories are described in Appendix C. Goals, objectives, and policies on the county's planning system, citing its types of plans, and their interrelationships, is found in the section of policies on "Land Use Decision-Making" in Chapter Two, Land Use.~~

Joint Plans

~~Years prior to the GMA, the cities of Lacey, Olympia and Tumwater, and the county established a ground-breaking agreement for managing growth around the cities (the Urban Growth Management Agreement). This agreement established an urban growth boundary, and called for an innovative, collaborative approach to planning for the unincorporated portion of the urban growth~~

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area: joint planning. The joint planning concept was carried over to the County Wide Planning Policies, and is now required for all unincorporated urban growth areas around cities and towns. (Refer to Appendix C for further discussion of the County Wide Planning Policies.)

Joint plans serve as the Comprehensive Plans for the unincorporated areas within the urban growth boundaries for the cities and towns within the county. They are integral parts of this Comprehensive Plan, although they appear in separate documents. Joint plans are further discussed in Chapter 2 Land Use.

Subarea Plans

Subarea plans are detailed plans for specific geographic areas of the county. These types of plans are discussed in Chapter 2 Land Use.

Special Purpose (Functional) Plans:

Functional plans cross subarea or urban growth boundaries and pertain to a certain subject such as sewers, stormwater, open space, or historic resources. As with the sub-area plans, functional plans use goals and policies and the urban-rural framework from the Comprehensive Plan to guide their development and implementation. Examples of functional plans include the County Bicycle Plan, the Stormwater Management Plan, the Boston Harbor Sewerage Plan, and the Comprehensive Parks, Recreation, Trails and Natural Resource Preserve Plan 2020. Some of these plans are developed for the county as a whole; others apply to parts of the county.

C. TIME HORIZON:

The Comprehensive Plan is meant to be a long-term guide for development in the county. The GMA requires the county to plan for and to accommodate the population growth projected over the next 20 years. This plan shows how the county will accommodate the 20-year projected growth. In determining the extent and distribution of uses permitted on the land, this plan focuses primarily on the physical characteristics of the land. To assure that the Comprehensive Plan, joint plans and subarea plans keep pace with any changing conditions and citizen desires, periodic review and evaluation of the land use designations and policies should be undertaken.

IV. HOW THIS DOCUMENT IS USED BY OTHERS

Besides guiding the County's own decisions, this plan is intended to aid a broad range of public and private users, including community groups, builders, developers, Thurston County officials and other government agencies.

It Informs the Public: As the framework for other plans and regulations that govern the location and intensity of land uses throughout unincorporated Thurston County, the plan indicates, in a general sense, how and where development will change the County's landscape. The plan also indicates to the public how likely Thurston County would be to approve changes in plans, zoning, or other regulations that apply to an area or a specific parcel.

It Informs Other Public Entities: It is intended that cities and other public agencies use the Comprehensive Plan as they develop plans and make project decisions. The cities, in cooperation with Thurston County, will use the plan in updating their own comprehensive plans, growth policies, joint plans with the county and proposals to annex county territory. Federal, state, and regional agencies also will use the plan in making project decisions. It is intended that Special

districts, such as school and fire districts, and other agencies use the plan in preparing their functional plans for delivering services.

Why It Uses “Should” Instead of “Shall”: The Comprehensive Plan is a broad policy document intended to guide more specific land use decisions in the future. Regulations, such as zoning and building codes or road construction standards, are detailed rules applied uniformly, with little discretion. Therefore, although the Comprehensive Plan carries legal weight when applied to specific land use decisions, it uses the word “should” rather than the nondiscretionary “shall” found in regulations.

V. HISTORY OF AMENDMENTS TO THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

Thurston County’s first Comprehensive Plan was adopted in 1975. This initial plan set the stage for the introduction of countywide zoning and environmental protection regulations--critical features of land development in that period of very high population growth; the County’s population grew by more than 60 percent during the 1970’s. The 1975 Plan also introduced policies for economic development, the provision of public services, transportation, natural resource protection, and other features typical of comprehensive plans.

The first major overhaul of the Comprehensive Plan was adopted in 1988 after four years of preparatory work, extensive public review, and policy development. Among the changes introduced in 1988 was a greater emphasis on concentrating population growth in existing urban areas where the necessary public services and facilities could be provided more cost-efficiently. That plan included the State’s first urban growth management boundaries which were established for the north county cities. Another innovative approach to growth management in the Plan was the concept of joint planning between the County and cities. Joint planning enabled the County to better coordinate land development policies in areas likely to be annexed by cities or towns in the foreseeable future. This early experience with coordinated, cooperative planning with its neighboring jurisdictions put the County ahead of the pack when the Growth Management Act was passed in 1990, requiring coordination in planning.

The 1988 planning process also involved a close examination of natural resource lands issues, particularly, how best to preserve scarce agricultural lands and forest lands. These proved to be difficult issues to address. The 1988 Plan added detail to the County’s housing strategies, included a chapter on Historic Resources, reinforced economic development efforts, and expanded policies to correspond to increasing information about environmental protection needs. The Plan stepped up the County’s sophistication in public services and facilities planning, paying ~~particular~~ attention to maximizing efficiencies and reducing costs. While the 1975 Plan’s transportation chapter focused on needed road improvements, the 1988 Plan recognized the relationship between land use and a variety of transportation needs. In summary, the 1988 Comprehensive Plan left the County well-positioned to respond to the requirements of the 1990 Growth Management Act; whereas many jurisdictions were required to make quantum leaps in policy direction in a very short timeframe.

The 1995 update of the Comprehensive Plan brought the Plan into full compliance with the Growth Management Act (GMA). All the changes made were either to respond to GMA requirements or to update the 1988 material. The work needed to comply with the GMA began with the adoption of County-Wide Planning Policies (by the cities and county) to ensure a consistent planning approach

throughout the County. Next came the classification and designation of natural resource lands, moving forward in an area of high importance and interest in Thurston County. That work was integrated into a rural zoning analysis that resulted in a stronger delineation of urban lands from rural lands in the County's zoning regulations, also required under the GMA. At the same time, the County developed the GMA-required critical areas ordinance for the protection of important and vulnerable environmental features. Additional chapters of the plan were added to comply with the elements required under GMA.

Under the framework of the County-Wide Planning Policies, the County developed joint plans with each city and town that proposed an urban growth area that extends into the unincorporated county. Joint Plans provide the Comprehensive Plan for these urban growth areas and are adopted as a part of this Comprehensive Plan, although they appear in separate documents.

The 1995 Comprehensive Plan was developed in the context of the timelines provided under the GMA. Public participation improved the direction of the Plan through comments made at Open Houses held both at the beginning of the Plan development, and after the first draft was reviewed by the Thurston County Planning Commission. Public hearings were held before both the Planning Commission and the Thurston County Board of Commissioners to further involve the public in the Plan's development. Separate joint plan adoption processes provided additional opportunities for the public to direct the County's growth.

~~The Plan is periodically amended according to an annual amendment process and a seven-year review cycle required by the Growth Management Act (RCW 36.70A.130).~~ In 2003, major amendments to Chapter 3 -- Natural Resource Lands and Chapter 9 -- Natural Environment updated county policies for natural resource protection. The 2004 amendments to the Comprehensive Plan and associated development regulations updated the remaining chapters of the plan under the GMA. In 2007, Chapter 2 – Land Use was further updated for GMA compliance.

[The 2018 periodic update included revised goals and policies to address affordable housing, transportation, including bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure, and a review and update to the mineral resource lands criteria and policies. This update also included major amendments to Chapter 8 – Economic Development and Chapter 11 – Human Health.](#)

[The Comprehensive Plan is periodically amended according to an annual amendment process and an eight-year review cycle required by the Growth Management Act \(RCW 36.70A.130\).](#) Annual and periodic reviews ensure that the Plan keeps pace with changing legal requirements and community needs. The plan amendment process is described in [Chapter 11.2](#).

The participation of the County's citizens in shaping the County's physical and social landscape has [been](#), and will continue to be, the most important feature of Thurston County's planning history.

VI. SETTING

[A. GEOGRAPHY, AREA, & CLIMATE, ECONOMY, POPULATION PROJECTIONS](#)

Thurston County, situated at the southern end of Puget Sound, includes land forms varying from coastal lowlands in the north county, to cascade foothills in the southeast ([See Map 1.2](#)). Generally [though](#), the county is a region of prairies and rolling lowlands, broken by minor hills and a few

peaks which rise to elevations of about 2,600 feet. There are over 90 miles of Puget Sound coastline, three major river basins, and over 100 lakes and ponds in Thurston County.

The county contains a total area of 737 square miles, or 471,713 acres. Approximately 688 square miles (440,545 acres), or 93 percent of the total area, lies in unincorporated Thurston County. The remaining seven percent is divided among the seven incorporated cities and towns of Olympia, Lacey, Tumwater, Bucoda, Rainier, Tenino, and Yelm (See [Map I-1](#)). [Timber harvest and other natural resource uses historically covered much of the region, and still dominate land use across rural parts of the county \(See Map I-3\). Residential uses spread from urban areas along transportation routes, up through the Puget Sound peninsulas in the northern end of the county, and around many lakes.](#) Major landowners in the unincorporated county include the State of Washington (including Capitol Forest), the federal government (including ~~Fort Lewis~~ [Joint Base Lewis-McChord](#) and Nisqually Wildlife Refuge), and private timber companies.

Thurston County's climate is influenced by Puget Sound and the marine air masses that move through the region from the Pacific Ocean. Summers are warm and generally dry, while winters are mild and wet. Yearly rainfall [averages vary across the county; they are](#) highest in the northwest ~~county~~ [at about up to 96](#) inches per year [near Summit Lake, and decrease](#) towards the southeast to about 40 inches per year around ~~Alder Lake Lawrence~~. Mean annual temperature in Olympia is 50.50 degrees Fahrenheit.

[The effects of climate change, already observable in 2018, will have an increasing impact through the 20-year planning horizon and beyond \(see sidebar\). Locally, Thurston County is vulnerable to impacts from warmer summers, winters, and water temperature, increasing drought, intensifying precipitation, sea-level rise, and population change related to climate-driven migration. The \[Thurston Climate Adaptation Plan \\(TRPC, 2018\\)\]\(#\) lays out actions to help the region prepare for and remain resilient to this change. Climate change is discussed further in \[Chapter 9 – Environment\]\(#\), and adaptation actions are integrated throughout many chapter of the Comprehensive Plan.](#)

B. POPULATION & DEMOGRAPHICS

IMPACTS OF A CHANGING CLIMATE

[Thurston County may experience increasing impacts in the coming decades:](#)

Temperature

[Average temperature in the Puget lowlands has increased by 1.3° F since the 1890s, and could increase an additional 4-6° by the 2050s. The hottest days could be 6.5 degrees warmer than currently.](#)

Precipitation

[Warmer winters could lead to less snowfall in upper elevations like the Black Hills, and rainstorms of greater intensity. The number of heavy rain events in the winter could increase from two days per year to seven. In the summer, rainfall may decrease by 22%, leading to drier conditions.](#)

Sea-Level Rise

[Rising sea levels could flood low-lying areas, particularly during storms and high tides, and permanently the Nisqually Estuary.](#)

SOURCE: THURSTON CLIMATE ADAPTATION PLAN: VULNERABILITY ASSESSMENT (TRPC, 2016)

Population in Thurston County has grown steadily since it was formed in 1852. The economy of Thurston County is greatly influenced by state government. As the seat for state government, Thurston County is home to the full range of state offices. In addition to state government, the other economic base industries involve the manufacturing and agricultural forestry/fisheries sectors. Also very important as a major employer is the trade and services sector, including health services. Thurston County serves as a regional health care center.

Thurston County, and has been among the fastest growing counties in the state since the 1960s (See

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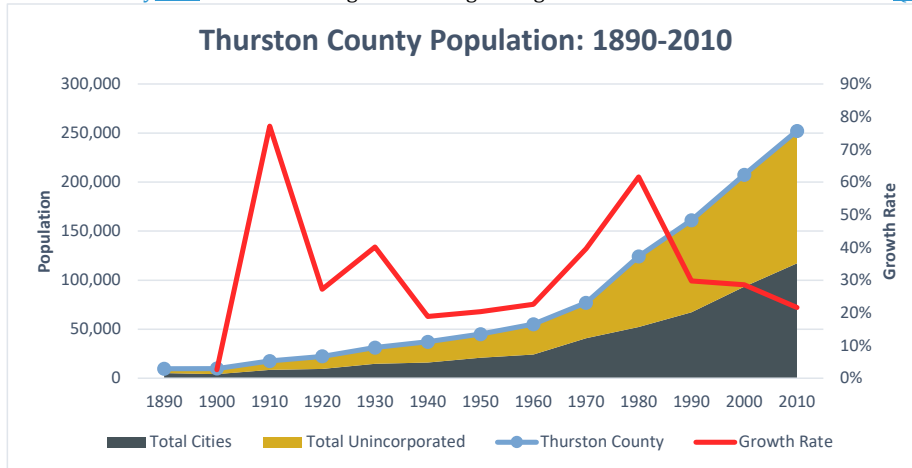


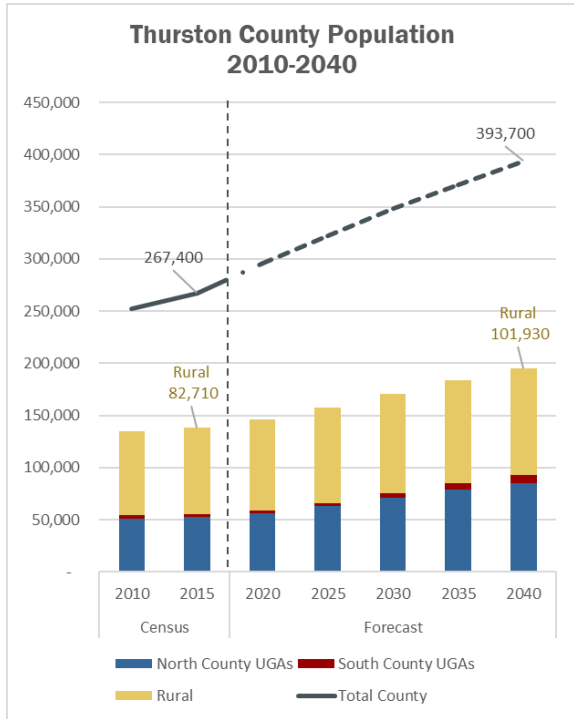
Figure 2. Thurston County Population: 1890-2010

SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU; WASHINGTON STATE OFFICE OF FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

Figure 2). Unincorporated areas of the county, including urban growth areas, have consistently made up around half of the total population of Thurston County. Although the rate of growth has slowed since 1980, overall population has more than doubled, increasing by an average of 4,500 new residents each year since 1990.

More information on Thurston County Population data is available in *The Profile* updated annually by Thurston Regional Planning Council

During the 1990s, the County grew at an annual rate of 2.5 percent, adding over 46,000 new residents between 1990 and 2000. The cities and urban growth areas experience the fastest growth rates. Most of the County's population growth is due to in-migration, and the majority of new residents settle in cities and urban growth areas, which have seen the highest rates of growth.



The In 2003-2017, Thurston County's population was approximately 214,800¹276,900. Projections show over more than 330,000 people living in the county in the year 2025²2040¹, an increase of 4235 percent (see Figure 3). Just over half of that growth is projected to be in the cities, with another third estimated for the unincorporated urban growth areas. Approximately 14 percent of population growth is estimated to be in the rural parts of the county. Chapter 2 – Land Use describes population growth trends in the urban and rural areas of the county.

Thurston County's population is highly educated – greater than 90 percent of residents graduate high school, and more than a third go on to earn a Bachelor's degree or additional graduate work. The presence of Joint Base Lewis-McChord has a strong effect on Thurston County, and 14 percent of the County's residents are

veterans. Approximately 11 percent of all residents speak a language other than English at home² – Spanish, Vietnamese, Korean, Tagalog, German, and Hindi are among the most commonly spoken foreign languages.

Figure 3. Thurston County Projected Population: 2010-2040
SOURCE: THURSTON REGIONAL PLANNING COUNCIL (TRPC) POPULATION & EMPLOYMENT FORECAST, 2017

Thurston County has a slightly older

population than Washington state overall, and preparing for and responding to an aging population will be a major trend over the 20-year planning period. Figure 4 shows how Thurston County's population is distributed by age at three points across a 50-year time span: 1990, 2015, and 2040. The Baby Boom

➤ **CHAPTER 2 – LAND USE**
DESCRIBES POPULATION GROWTH TRENDS IN URBAN AND RURAL AREAS OF THE COUNTY

¹ Thurston Regional Planning Council, Population & Employment Forecast, 2017
² 2016 American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates

[generation \(those born between 1946 and 1965\), who were in their 30s and early 40s when the Growth Management Act was passed, are nearing or entering retirement, while the Millennial generation \(roughly, those born between 1980 and 1995\) are approaching their prime working years. Net migration of working-age people moving into Thurston County, rather than the natural increase of current residents \(births minus deaths\), has helped to fill out the age curves. People aged between 20 and 64 attributed for more than 60 percent of the growth between 1990 and 2015 \(see Figure 5\). In 2040, a child born in 2018 will be in his or her 20s, entering the workforce, starting a family, looking to buy a first home; Millennials will be in their mid-40s to 50s and today's mid-career](#)

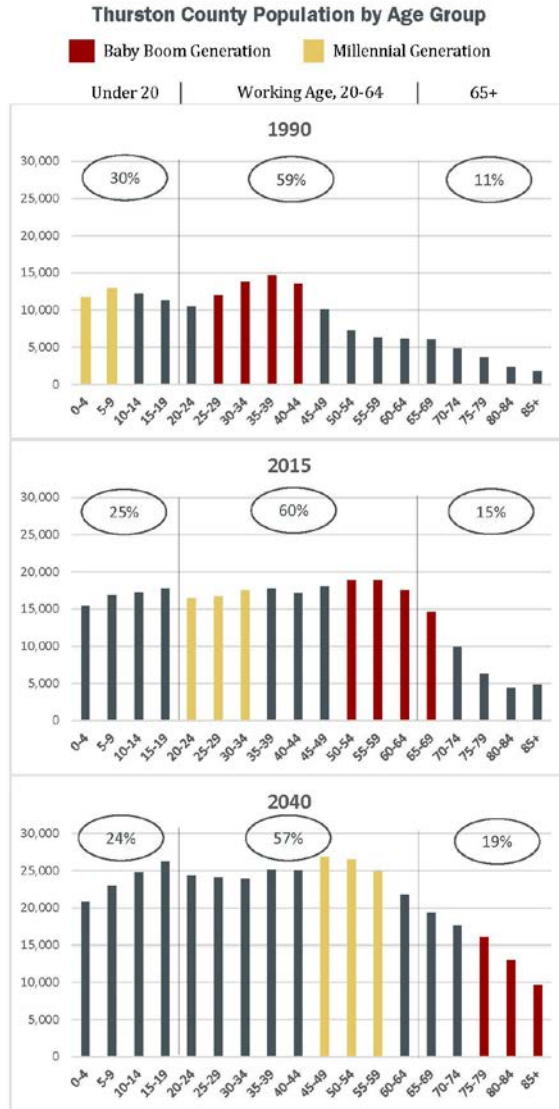
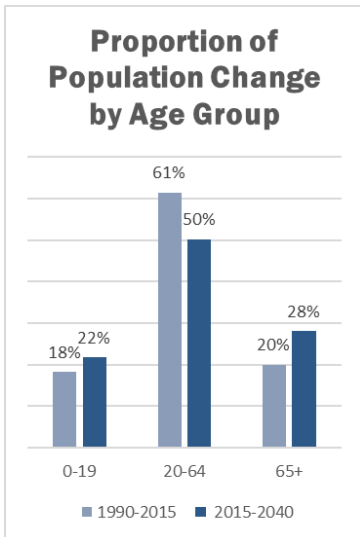


Figure 4. Thurston County Population by Age Group: 1990, 2015, 2040
 SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, TRPC POPULATION & EMPLOYMENT FORECAST, 2017



[professionals \(in their 40s\) will be retired or close to retirement \(unless retirement age is pushed to 70+\), while Baby Boomers will be over 75. The proportion of residents aged 65 or older is projected to increase to nearly a fifth of the population by 2040, while growth among age groups of prime working age is projected to slow.](#)

C. INCOME & ECONOMY

[Thurston County's median household income was \\$63,286 as of 2016³. Although this is a 15 percent increase from 2005, Thurston County's average income is now less than that of the Washington State as a whole for the first time since 1990 \(see Figure 6\). The statewide household income trend has been driven by a dramatic increase in wages in King County, in response to growth of the tech sector.](#)

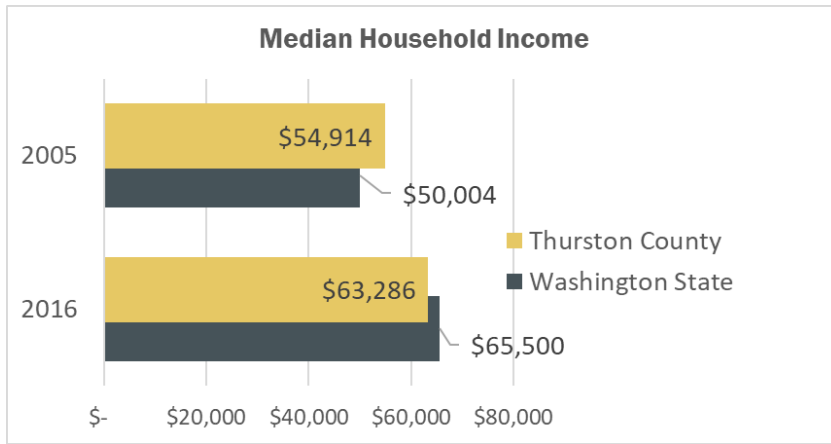


Figure 6. Median Household Income: 2005-2016

[SOURCE: WASHINGTON OFFICE OF FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT; US CENSUS BUREAU](#)

[Thurston County has the fifth-highest median household income of all counties in Washington State, falling behind King, Snohomish, Clark, and Kitsap counties, but ahead of Pierce, Mason, and Lewis counties. This geographic variation in income can be paired with a comparison of relative cost of living \(see Figure 7\). Thurston County has a lower cost of living than many of the counties to its north along the Interstate-5](#)

- [CHAPTER 8 – ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COVERS COUNTY ECONOMIC TRENDS](#)
- [CHAPTER 4 – HOUSING DISCUSSES HOUSING AFFORDABILITY](#)

³ [Washington Office of Financial Management; US Census Bureau](#)

[corridor, particularly when it comes to housing costs. This trend has driven some of the migration into the county; since 2010, the largest source of residents moving into Thurston County are from the Seattle, Bellevue, and Tacoma areas, many of whom are attracted by the lower cost of living⁴.](#)

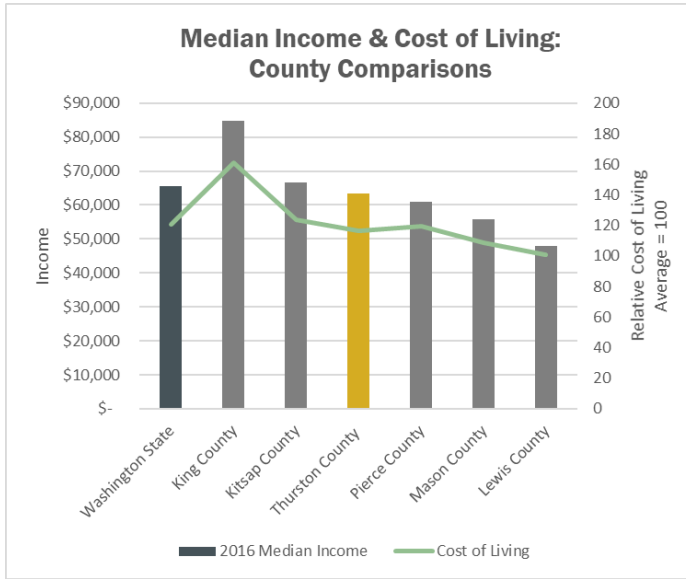
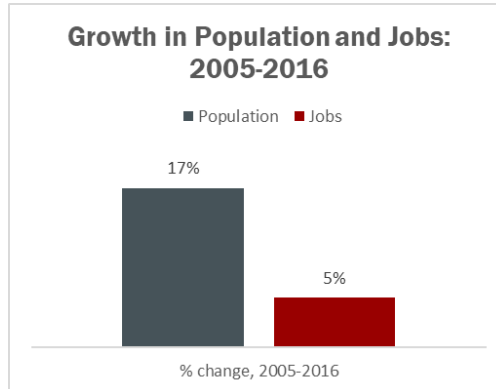


Figure 7. Median Income and Cost of Living, County Comparisons

SOURCE: WASHINGTON OFFICE OF FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT; SPERLING'S BEST PLACES, 2017

[Although lower cost of living may be a factor in Thurston County's population growth, the number of jobs has not increased at the same rate – since 2005, the population of Thurston County has grown by 17 percent, but the number of jobs has only increased by 5 percent \(see Figure 8\). Higher wages and increased job opportunities may lead more people to live in Thurston County while commuting to employment elsewhere. Since 1990, the share of Thurston County](#)



⁴ [Housing and Urban Development 2016 Comprehensive Housing Market Analysis](#)

[residents whose workplace is outside the county has increased by 5 percent.⁵](#)

[Income levels vary within Thurston County.](#)

[According to the 2012 to 2016 American Community Survey, residents of Rainier \(\\$66,620\) and Tumwater \(\\$62,050\) have the highest median incomes, while Bucoda \(\\$35,000\) has the lowest \(see Figure 9\).](#)

Figure 8. Comparison of Thurston County Population and Job Growth: 2005-2016

SOURCE: TRPC POPULATION & EMPLOYMENT FORECAST, 2017

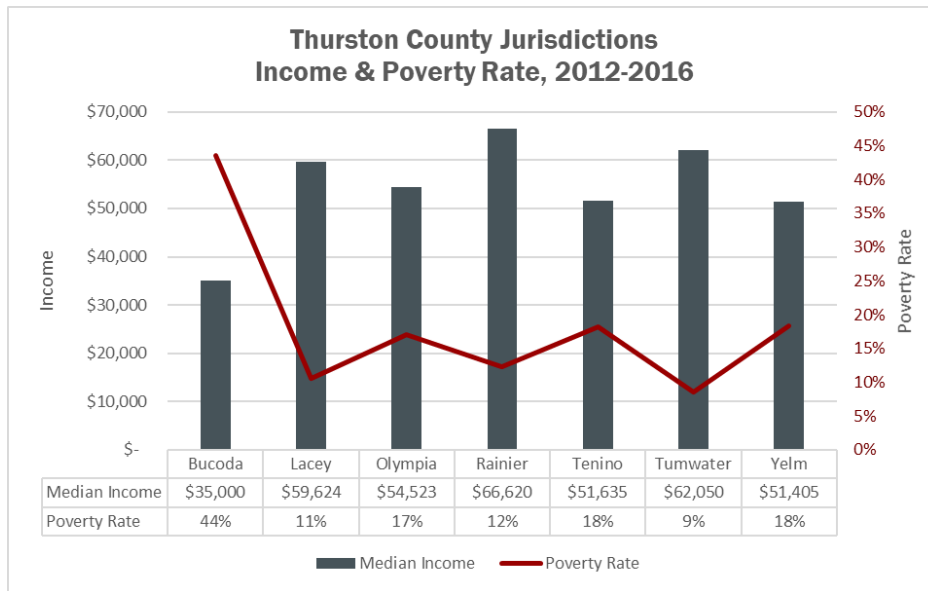


Figure 9. Thurston County Jurisdictions, Income and Poverty Rate: 2012-2016

SOURCE: US BUREAU OF THE CENSUS, AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY

[While average incomes have gone up, the proportion of Thurston County residents living below the federal poverty level also has increased to 12 percent in 2016 from 10 percent in 2005. Geographically, low-income families and individuals live throughout the county, but are most concentrated in the areas around Bucoda, Tenino, Yelm, Rochester, and west Olympia.](#)

[Poverty levels are higher among certain populations in the county. Single mothers have the region's highest rate of poverty among families – 34 percent of female-headed households with no husband present and children under 18 are living on incomes below the federal poverty limit, compared to just 5 percent of married-couple families with children under 18.](#)

⁵ From 19% to 24%, source: US Bureau of the Census, American Community Survey and Census Transportation Planning Products

In Thurston County, approximately 33,500 people have a disability. A person with a disability is defined as: “a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities.”⁶ Of these individuals, U.S. Census Data shows that in 2016, 35 percent were 65 years of age or older and 16 percent had incomes that were below the poverty level.

Poverty rates are also higher than average among minority groups, including American Indian and Alaskan natives (25 percent) and Hispanics (21 percent). Those who rent their homes are four times as likely to be living in poverty as those who own their home (17 percent versus 4 percent).



Considering the combination of trends described above – including rapid population growth, an aging general population, increased income disparity, and climate change – Thurston County is likely to continue to undergo dramatic change over the next several decades. The background information, goals, and policies included in this Comprehensive Plan are intended to help the county prepare for and address these changes, and achieve the community’s vision, while protecting the qualities people value about Thurston County to ensure they are available to future generations.

⁶ Americans with Disabilities Act <https://adata.org/faq/what-definition-disability-under-ada>