

# Regional Efforts to Achieve Sustainability in Seattle: Skinny Latte or Double Fat Mocha?<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

The Seattle metropolitan area contains two metropolitan areas anchored by five central cities—Tacoma, Bremerton, Seattle, Bellevue, and Everett, Washington. Aside from rain, grunge music, Starbucks coffee, and Ken Griffey Jr., the region has several important characteristics that are worth understanding before examining its regional efforts to achieve sustainability.

First, the economy is dominated by the old industrial giant The Boeing Company. With nearly 100,000 employees in the region, as goes Boeing, so goes the region. Despite a rapidly growing and highly influential high-technology sector, including Microsoft, the region's fortunes very much remain tied to airplane manufacturing.

The Seattle region is also rapidly growing. In 1997, the population was estimated to be 3.1 million. This is about 600,000 more residents than were in the area in 1985, and about half a million less than are forecasted for 2005 (Puget Sound Regional Council 1995). Using just about any measure, the region is one of the fastest growing in North America.

Threatened and endangered species are struggling to remain viable in many locations throughout the region. Once-great salmon runs are disappearing. Great old growth forests are dwindling. Wetlands are disappearing and both floods and landslides are becoming ever more common.

Powerful political forces have interests at stake in the region. Environmentalists are organized, sophisticated, and well-financed. Business organizations are as well. Neighborhood groups have organized to defend their territory, as have property rights activists. Newly incorporated cities have very motivated leaders, as do older cities. Women voters, labor unions, church councils, conservative talk radio, and brilliant newspaper editorial writers on the right and the left are all interested in urban and environmental issues and call for action whenever they think it necessary.

The region is governed by a complex array of federal, state, regional, and local agencies. Dozens of cities, and even more special districts, have control over local policy, while single-purpose regional, state, and federal agencies control much of the infrastructure spending and resource management.

## Planning Framework

Any conception of a broad-based regional approach to sustainability in the Puget Sound area would have to include an understanding of the planning framework created by state laws, regional and county plans, and city and neighborhood plans. In principle, all of the neighborhood, city, and regional planning in the region are part of a vertically and horizontally consistent policy framework established by state law. Moreover, the policy content of these plans are consistent with principles of

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sustainable urbanization both because of legal mandates and local priorities.

Three major planning laws govern urban planning in Washington State: the Shoreline Management Act, which requires local planning for the protection of coastal resources; the State Environmental Policy Act, which requires impact studies and mitigation on public and private actions; and the Growth Management Act, which requires local comprehensive planning, consistent with state planning goals and requirements.

The Growth Management Act (GMA) contains several explicit regional elements. It requires the Puget Sound Regional Council and other metropolitan planning organizations to adopt a Regional Transportation Plan; it requires counties and the cities within them to work together to adopt countywide growth management policies that frame and guide local planning; and it requires cities and counties to adopt comprehensive growth management plans that are consistent with one another and the countywide and regional plans. Furthermore, the city and county plans must identify open space corridors within and between urban growth areas, including lands useful for recreation, wildlife habitat, trails, and the connection of critical areas. The Regional Council is given the responsibility of ensuring consistency between the transportation elements of the city and county plans and the regional transportation policies.

The GMA requirement that countywide policies be adopted are the closest thing to comprehensive regional planning in the law. According to the statute, "a countywide planning policy is a written policy statement or statements used . . . for establishing a countywide framework from which county and city comprehensive plans are developed and adopted . . ." Countywide policies must contain: (a) policies to implement the Growth Management Act; (b) policies for promotion of contiguous and orderly development and provision of urban services to such development; (c) policies for siting public capital facilities of a countywide or statewide nature; (d) policies for county-wide transportation facilities and strategies; (e) policies that consider the need for affordable housing, such as housing for all economic segments of the population and parameters for its distribution; (f) policies for joint county and city planning within urban growth areas; (g) policies for countywide economic development and employment; and (h) an analysis of the fiscal impact.

The Growth Management Act contains several goals and mandates that are essentially consistent with sustainability and must be reflected in all local and regional planning. These include mandates to reduce urban sprawl, contain urban growth within urban growth areas, preserve environmentally sensitive or hazardous areas, and conserve resource lands. It also requires land use planning to be linked to infrastructure planning that is based on financial capabilities. Land use plans that require levels of infrastructure services that cannot be financially sustained are not permitted.

### **Vision 2020**

The Growth Management Act was adopted in the same year as Vision 2020, the regional vision of the Puget Sound Regional Council. The Vision 2020 plan began before the GMA was even conceived, but both are based on concerns for similar issues. It was adopted collectively by the region's cities, towns, and four counties following three years of public discussion. Vision 2020 responded to the need for "a shared vision . . . that fosters a range of strategies to achieve containment of growth and conservation of open space, better transit and ride-sharing use, reduced dependence on single-occupant vehicles, more energy efficient and less-polluting development patterns, and a more equitable distribution of economic growth that benefits all areas of the region" (Puget Sound Regional Council 1995). The physical plan emphasizes both the containment of urban sprawl with an open space system as well as the organization of urban development into compact communities and a hierarchy of central places.

### **Countywide Policies**

As required by the Growth Management Act, countywide policies set forth a framework for subregional growth. Within the Puget Sound Region, each of the other four counties has separate countywide frameworks. In addition, multicounty policies, based on Vision 2020, are in place pursuant to the GMA.

Each set of countywide policies was created by a unique governing board or structure designed by the cities and county involved. In the case of King County, the structure created by the cities and county was the Growth Management Planning Council (GMPC). The GMPC board is composed of one caucus from the City

of Seattle, one from King County, and one representing suburban cities. The seats in each caucus are filled by city or county council members.

All of the countywide frameworks include policies on the topics required by the GMA. In King County, detailed policies are also included on the location, size, and design of regional and subregional mixed-use activity centers.

### **Seattle Plan**

Under the GMA, each city and county adopts a comprehensive plan that is consistent with this state and regional planning framework. In the Puget Sound region, the City of Seattle's plan has received particular notoriety. Called *Toward a Sustainable Seattle*, the plan aims to increase the density of jobs, housing, and amenities in the city in a number of urban village centers, in order to reduce sprawl outside the city in rural areas while maintaining the character of Seattle's neighborhoods. The plan has been very controversial, suggesting serious citizen opposition to broad-based regional densification strategies.

### **Neighborhood Planning**

The last step in the regional planning framework is neighborhood planning. While not required by the GMA, it is being pursued, particularly in larger cities and counties. In Seattle, the Office of Neighborhoods is overseeing the process as a follow-up to the comprehensive plan. It has engaged 30 neighborhoods in a two-to-four year planning process. The goal is for each neighborhood to design a plan for the future consistent with the city's overall objectives for sustainability, yet uniquely appropriate to each neighborhood.

### **Non-Governmental Organizations**

In addition to the governmental planning framework, there are several important nongovernmental organizations with missions that more or less directly support progress toward regional sustainability. Most explicitly regional in their view are The Mountains to Sound Greenway Trust which is planning and implementing a 90-mile open space corridor from the peaks of the Cascade Range to the shores of Puget Sound; People For Puget Sound, which focuses on upland and offshore activities that threaten the long term viability of Puget Sound itself; AltTrans, which as its name suggests promotes

alternatives to single occupant vehicles; and Sustainable Seattle, which has a regional focus and has adopted the internationally known Indicators of Sustainable Community. Other important NGOs with local or statewide interests that indirectly support regionalism include 1000 Friends of Washington, which defends and promotes the Growth Management Act; the Duwamish Coalition, which is pursuing the reuse of older industrial lands in the City of Seattle; and the Bullitt Foundation, an environmental foundation that funds virtually all of these NGOs and many others.

### **The Six Cs: Sustainability Northwest Style**

As is perhaps becoming obvious from what has already been said, there are certain themes that run throughout most planning for sustainable urban growth in the Pacific Northwest. I call these the six Cs (Pivo 1996). A review of planning documents from throughout the region showed them to be consistently represented in regional and local policy. The first C is Compactness, or the desire to curtail sprawl and contain urban growth. The second is Completeness, or the idea that cities and neighborhoods should provide a wider mix of land uses so that people can live, work, and recreate with less travel between destinations. The next is Conservation, or restoring, protecting, and conserving natural assets for generations to come. The fourth C is Comfort, or streets and public spaces that are human-scaled and pedestrian friendly. The fifth is Coordination so that multiple jurisdictions will move together as a single region toward a shared or common vision. And the sixth C is Collaboration, in recognition of the idea that in order to implement anything significant, power, trust, and information must be shared among the various interests groups who are capable of blocking collective action.

### **Indicators Movement**

One of the more interesting things that is happening in the Seattle area is the resurrection and expansion of the indicators movement. First arriving to the region as the statewide Oregon Benchmarks program of the Oregon Progress Board (Oregon Progress Board 1991), indicators are now commonly talked about in the Puget Sound area as a way to monitor progress toward or away from sustainability.

Sustainable Seattle, which introduced the idea to the region in its 1993 Indicators of Sustainability, defines indicators as "bits of information that reflect the status of large systems" (Sustainable Seattle 1993). After two years of work, Sustainable Seattle published its first report on indicators in 1993 (Sustainable Seattle 1993). It contained data on 20 measures. Sadly, it reported movement toward sustainability in just four areas: air quality, water consumption, economic diversification, and libraries and community centers. Their 1995 report expanded this effort to 40 indicators related to the environment, population and resources, the economy, youth and education, and health and community. It showed that 20 percent of the indicators were improving, 35 percent were declining, and 45 percent remained unchanged or showed no discernible progress (Sustainable Seattle 1995a, 1995b).

King County followed suit recently with its own set of benchmarks related to the Countywide Policies (King County Growth Management Planning Council 1996). The Puget Sound Regional Council is expected to publish a regional set of benchmarks as well.

### **Progress Made**

The proof is in the pudding, as they say, and the real test of a regional planning framework is whether things are happening that are moving a region toward increased sustainability. One of the great frustrations in Washington is the lack of systematic reporting on how all of these policies and programs are paying off. Nevertheless, based on the few reports that have been done—and some very noticeable events—we can observe some positive things occurring.

The Washington State Department of Community, Trade, and Economic Development track compliance with the GMA (CTED 1997). As of February 1997 about 90 percent of all cities and 75 percent of all counties that are required to have adopted ordinances protecting resource lands and critical areas. Ninety-five percent of the counties that are required to have adopted countywide planning policies and 88 percent have adopted urban growth areas. Eighty percent of the counties and 57 percent of the cities have adopted comprehensive plans, and 35 percent of the counties and 61 percent of the counties have adopted development regulations to implement the comprehensive plans. While this represents a great deal of progress, it also

indicates that 128 counties and cities had not yet adopted development regulations seven years after the adoption of the Growth Management Act.

According to a 1994 progress report on Vision 2020, published by the Puget Sound Regional Council (Puget Sound Regional Council 1994) a number of examples can be cited as evidence that steps are being taken toward implementing the regional vision. For example, a million acres of forest land and thousands of acres of other land in the region have been designated for protection, two counties have created special funds for farmland preservation, and King County passed a 117 million dollar open space bond. Urban centers have been designated in 18 jurisdictions and downtown Bellevue, probably the most successful center, now has around 30 mixed-use projects in the development pipeline. Smaller pedestrian-oriented, mixed-use town centers are also being planned in at least a dozen cities.

Perhaps the biggest event has been the passage of the Regional Transit Plan. Last year, voters passed a 3.6 billion dollar regional transit package that will build light rail, commuter rail, high occupancy vehicle lanes, and improved bus service systems. Even more recently, voters in the City of Seattle voted to extend the famous Monorail throughout the city if funding can be obtained.

### **Problems Confronted**

Despite the progress to date, not everything is going well. Various sources suggest plenty of reasons for concern.

The benchmark projects are one source of worries. As already noted, the Sustainable Seattle report shows no change or decline in 80 percent of the indicators. The King County benchmarks study showed similar numbers of problems. In the economy, real wages are declining and poverty is rising. In the environment, salmon runs are disappearing. Home ownership is falling and housing prices are rising. While residential development is shifting from rural to urban areas, it is not happening fast enough to achieve planned expectations and much too little housing is being developed in centers and through redevelopment to meet planning objectives. Vehicle miles traveled are also on the rise.

Politically, there are many examples of resistance or outright revolt against plans for sustainable development. The statewide property rights initiative was defeated

but the sentiment that government is over-regulating property remains in many locations. Fast-growing rural counties have resisted growth management planning, and even though recent elections appear to have changed the councils to a more sympathetic view, the vocal anti-planning constituency remains. The result is compromised visions and energy spent defending progressive ideas. In Seattle, the urban villages plan stimulated a strong anti-density citizen backlash and a major plan for building a new central park and mixed-use district in Seattle were defeated at the polls by infill-leery citizens. In Kirkland, down-zoning has followed public opposition to downtown condominiums. In the State Legislature, bills are introduced each session to weaken the Growth Management Act. At the present time, bills in committee would allow rural counties to opt out of planning under the law, delay coming into compliance until July 1, 2000, and ease restrictions on industrial development in rural portions of rural counties.

One view of these problems is that the new plans have not had time to work and that over time, things will get better. It is true that in many jurisdictions, new plans and regulations have only recently been adopted. But this one of the problems—the GMA was passed eight years ago. What irreversible losses have occurred while all this planning has been happening? Moreover, the early returns on plan implementation suggest that the trends toward sustainability are mixed at best and certainly not good enough to predict radical change toward truly sustainable urbanization.

### Unfinished Agenda: Jackson Foundation Report

Clearly, there is an unfinished agenda at best or a stillborn regional framework at worst. So, what must be done? One place to look for answers is the meeting held last February entitled Land Use Issues in the Pacific Northwest, sponsored by the Henry M. Jackson Foundation (Pivo 1997). Eighteen top people in government, business and the professions came together and identified several needed actions including:

- more leadership from the governor in articulating the state's interest in local land use planning;
- greater capacity for land use program monitoring and information sharing
- better avenues for citizen input on regional issues, new means for educating citizens about planning issues, and

more efficient and effective mechanisms for citizen participation;

- more innovations in "co-development" whereby the public sector has greater responsibility for working together with the private sector in building the future city;
- better strategies for paying for what we value, including convincing the public to increase their tax effort in support of public goods and services;
- new visions for growing in rural, ex-urban areas and sustainable economic development policy.

The Seattle region has clearly done a lot to try and move toward more sustainable urban growth. The fundamental question is whether it's enough. Looking back and forward, I would have to conclude that no, we have not done enough. Much more will be needed if we are to sustain the ecological, social, and economic well-being of the region. This is a monumental task that I fear is beyond our present capabilities.

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