

Long Range Planning in Washington State

The Growth Management Act (GMA) is a series of state statutes, first adopted in 1990, that requires fast-growing cities and counties to develop a comprehensive plan to manage their population growth. It is primarily codified under [Chapter 36.70A RCW](#), although it has been amended and added to in several other parts of the RCW.

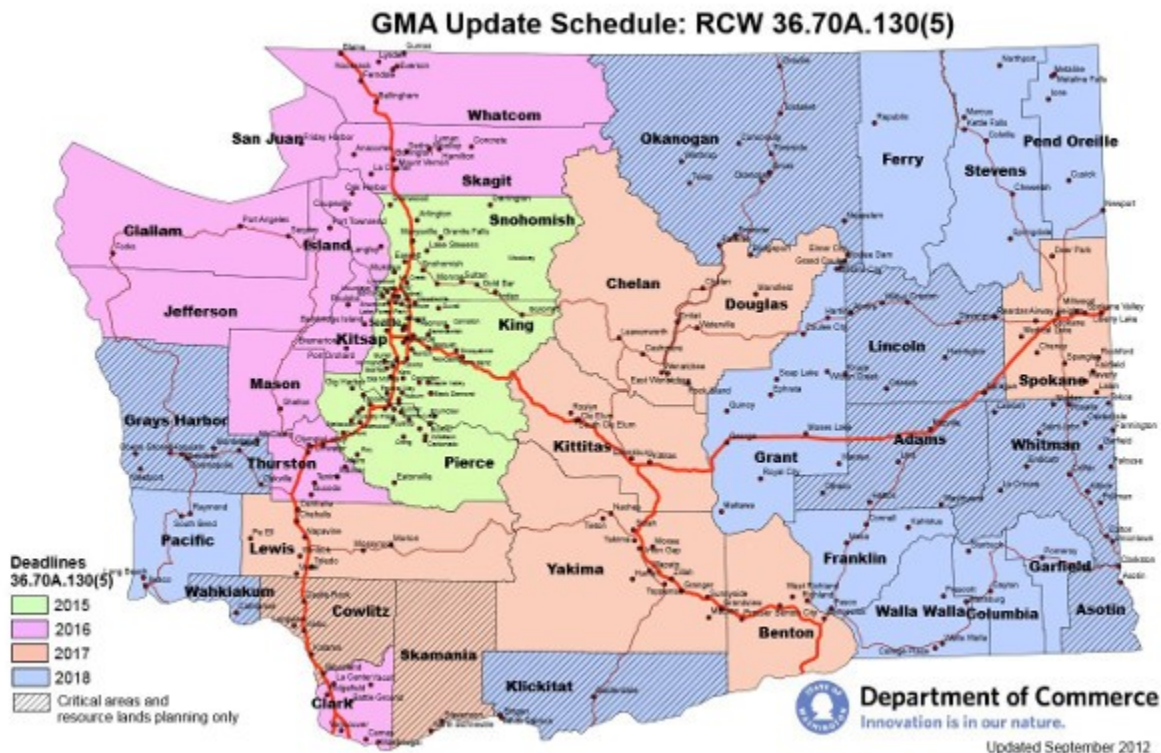


Under [RCW 36.70A.020](#), the GMA establishes a series of 13 goals that should act as the basis of all comprehensive plans. The legislature added the goals and policies of the Shoreline Management Act as the fourteenth GMA goal ([RCW 36.70A.480](#)). The shoreline goals may be found at [RCW 90.58.020](#).

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|---------------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| Concentrated urban growth | Property rights | Public facilities and services |
| Sprawl reduction | Permit processing | Historic preservation |
| Regional transportation | Natural resource industries | Shoreline management |
| Affordable housing | Open space and recreation | Early and continuous public participation |
| Economic development | Environmental protection | |

Who is Required to Plan Under GMA?

Based on the requirements in [RCW 36.70A.040](#), 18 counties, and all the cities and towns within them, are required to "fully plan" under the GMA. An additional 10 counties have opted to fully plan. The 28 "fully planning" counties make up about 95 percent of the state's population. The other 11 counties must plan for critical areas and natural resource land only under the GMA.



Natural Resource Lands and Critical Areas

Under the GMA, all cities and counties - even if they are not subject to comprehensive planning - are directed to designate natural resource lands (including those related to forestry, agriculture, fisheries, and mining) and identify steps to preserve them. For more information, see the Department of Commerce's [Natural Resource Lands webpage](#).

In addition, all cities and counties in Washington are also required to adopt critical areas regulations. As defined in [RCW 36.70A.030\(5\)](#):

"Critical areas" include the following areas and ecosystems: (a) Wetlands; (b) areas with a critical recharging effect on aquifers used for potable water; (c) fish and wildlife habitat conservation areas; (d) frequently flooded areas; and (e) geologically hazardous areas.

Counties and cities are required to include the best available science in developing policies and development regulations to protect the functions and values of critical areas ([RCW 36.70A.172](#)).

Comprehensive Plans

The GMA establishes the primacy of the comprehensive plan. The comprehensive plan is the centerpiece of local planning and articulates a series of goals, objectives, policies, actions, and standards that are intended to guide day-to-day decisions be elected officials and local government staff.

The GMA lays out the following mandatory and optional comprehensive elements:

Mandatory Comp Plan Elements

Land Use
Housing
Capital Facilities Plan
Utilities
Rural Development (Counties Only)
Transportation
Economic Development
Parks and Recreation

Optional Comp Plan Elements

Conservation
Solar Energy
Recreation
Subarea Plans

Land Use Element

While all these elements are important, the land use element sets the direction of future growth in a community and is usually depicted as a [land use map](#). The land use map, which is policy-oriented, is then implemented in large part by the [official zoning map](#), a regulatory tool.

Since these maps are so closely linked, a zoning change *cannot* be approved unless it is consistent with the land use map.

Essential Public Facilities

Each comprehensive plan must also address "essential public facilities" that are typically difficult to site, which are usually included in the land use element. By statute ([RCW 36.70A.200](#)), essential public facilities include:

- Airports
- State education facilities
- State or regional transportation facilities (defined in [RCW 47.06.140](#))
- State and local correctional facilities
- Solid waste handling facilities

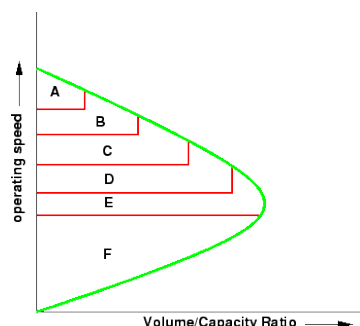


- Inpatient facilities including substance abuse facilities, mental health facilities, group homes, and secure community transition facilities (defined in [RCW 71.09.020](#))
- Regional transit authority facilities (defined in [RCW 81.112.020](#))

No local comprehensive plan or development regulation may preclude the siting of essential public facilities ([RCW 36.70A.200](#)). Cities and counties must develop criteria for siting essential public facilities (see also [WAC 365-196-550](#) and [WAC 365-196-570](#)).

It should be noted that such facilities do not necessarily have to be owned or operated by a public entity, as long as they provide a public service (for example, a group home offering inpatient services).

Levels of Service



Comprehensive plans also include level of service (LOS) standards – minimum standards for how many public facilities or services are required to adequately serve the population. Local governments are obligated to set LOS standards for certain transportation facilities to meet the GMA’s concurrency requirement – for example, a new development may not be built unless there are adequate transportation facilities to serve it.

While transportation is the only element requiring LOS standards and concurrency, local governments often include other LOS standards in their comprehensive plans as well. These standards can address a wide variety of other public facilities, such as (but not limited to) parks, schools, stormwater, solid waste, libraries, and police and fire protection services.

Transportation LOS standards are usually expressed as A through F, while for most other facilities LOS is typically expressed as an average or ratio (such as minimum park acreage per 1,000 residents, average emergency response times, or average class sizes).

Coordination with Neighboring Jurisdictions

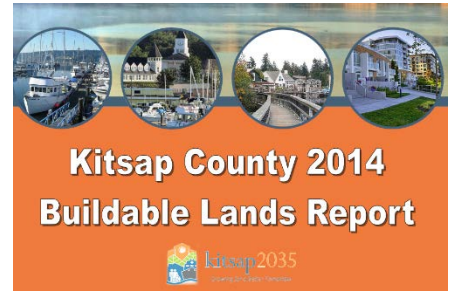
A city or county must coordinate its comprehensive plan with any other cities or counties with which it shares a common border ([RCW 36.70A.100](#)). To facilitate this, counties, in cooperation with cities within their boundaries, are responsible for establishing countywide planning policies that establish a framework for where population growth and infrastructure investment will be directed within a region ([RCW 36.70A.210](#)). Note that these countywide policies and decisions do not alter the land use powers of cities.

[Vision 2040](#) (adopted by the Puget Sound Regional Council during 2010) serves as the long-range growth management, environmental, economic development, and transportation strategy for King, Kitsap, Pierce, and Snohomish Counties. Vision 2040 includes the Regional Growth Strategy, Multi-County Planning Policies ([RCW 36.70A.210](#)) and Implementation Actions.

The [Kitsap Countywide Planning Policies](#) are the framework for growth management in Kitsap County. Under the Growth Management Act, the Puget Sound Region is defined as King, Kitsap, Snohomish and Pierce Counties. The Puget Sound Regional Council is responsible for developing the four-county regional transportation and land use vision. The Kitsap Countywide Planning Policies tailor the Puget Sound Regional Council’s regional growth management guidelines to Kitsap County and are the policy framework for the County’s and the Cities’ Comprehensive Plans. The Kitsap Countywide Planning Policies address 14 separate elements, ranging from urban growth areas to affordable housing.

Buildable Lands Program

The Review and Evaluation Program under [RCW 36.70A.215](#) is often referred to as the Buildable Lands Program. It was included as a component of the Growth Management Act (GMA) in 1997. It requires that Clark, King, [Kitsap](#), Pierce, Snohomish, Thurston and Whatcom (as of 2017) Counties and the cities within them complete a Buildable Lands Report every eight years. The Buildable Lands reports are a look back at actual development to determine if cities and counties have designated adequate amounts of residential, commercial, and industrial lands to meet the growth needs incorporated in their comprehensive plans. Except for Whatcom County, Buildable Lands counties have each produced three reports since 1997.



Comprehensive Plan Amendments and Updates

Each city and county planning under GMA must conduct a thorough review of its comprehensive plan every eight years, according to the schedule provided in [RCW 36.70A.130](#), and revise its plan if necessary.

In addition, these jurisdictions may consider smaller comprehensive plan amendments no more than once per year, with some exceptions ([RCW 36.70A.130\(2\)](#)). Rather than adopting changes on a piecemeal basis, proposed amendments must be considered “concurrently so the cumulative effect of the various proposals can be ascertained.”

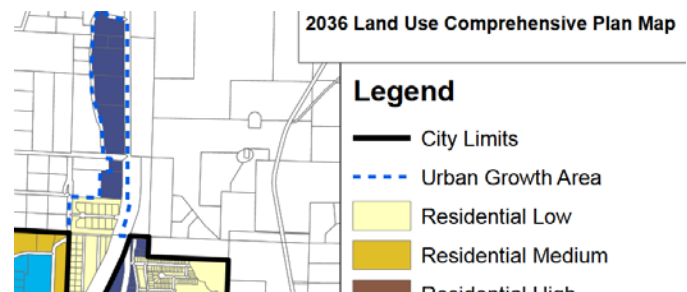
Urban Growth Areas and Accommodating Future Growth

Under the GMA, the state Office of Financial Management (OFM) develops [population projections](#) for the state and each county. Each "fully planning" county is then mandated to determine, in consultation with cities, where that growth should be directed to occur. Once these growth projections are adopted, then the county and cities are to use them in their comprehensive planning processes and make sure that their plans can accommodate the projected level of growth ([RCW 36.70A.115](#)).

The state’s Buildable Lands program has designated the counties of Clark, King, Kitsap, Pierce, Snohomish, and Thurston, as being counties that have to collect data about their development trends and undertake “reasonable measures” to show how they will be able to accommodate the expected amount of future development.

Part of a county’s long-range planning process involves identifying urban growth areas (UGAs), areas where “urban growth shall be encouraged and outside of which growth can occur only if it is not urban in nature” ([RCW 36.70A.110](#)). Counties are responsible for designating, expanding, and reducing UGA boundaries, although they are required to consult with the cities in their determinations.

Based on OFM population projections, UGAs and zoning densities within them should be set to permit urban growth that is projected to occur in the county or city over the next 20 years, although they can provide additional capacity to accommodate a “reasonable land market supply factor” ([RCW 36.70A.110\(2\)](#)). There are some limitations on UGAs, including limits in floodplain areas and in national historic reserves.



Areas within the UGA but outside of city or town boundaries should be addressed by the adjacent city and the county through the county-wide planning policies process. Outside of the UGA, cities and town are limited in the actions they can take regarding those areas.

For example, cities are highly limited in their ability to extend utilities and other governmental services outside the UGA. [RCW 36.70A.110\(4\)](#) states:

“In general, it is not appropriate that urban governmental services be extended to or expanded in rural areas except in those limited circumstances shown to be necessary to protect basic public health and safety and the environment and when such services are financially supportable at rural densities and do not permit urban development.”

The definitions of “urban” compared to “rural” services are defined in [RCW 36.70A.030](#). Similarly, cities or towns are not allowed to annex areas outside of a UGA.

Growth Management Hearings Board

The [Growth Management Hearings Board](#) resolves disputes concerning comprehensive plans and development regulations adopted under the GMA. The board is made up of seven members from three distinct geographic areas: Eastern, Central Puget Sound, and Western.

Challenges to the GMA are heard by a three-member panel comprised of two members residing in the geographic area of a challenge, with one acting as the presiding officer, and a third member drawn from one of the other regions. Each hearing panel must include an attorney and a former city or county elected official and must “reflect the political composition of the board” ([RCW 36.70A.260](#)).

The Governor has the authority to impose sanctions on cities, counties, and state agencies that do not comply with the GMA, as determined by the Growth Management Hearings Board (see [RCW 36.70A.340 -.345](#)). Sanctions may include withholding portion of one or more of the following:

- Motor vehicle fuel tax;
- Transportation improvement account;
- Rural arterial trust account;
- Sales and use tax;
- Liquor profit tax;
- Liquor excise tax; and/or
- Temporarily rescinding the city’s/county’s authority to collect REET

The Growth Management Hearings Board website contains numerous resources, including a [handbook](#) for practicing before the board and [digests of decisions](#).