



Comprehensive Plan Update

Growth Management Act

What is the Growth Management Act?

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):

Urban Growth:	Encourage urban growth where facilities are adequate to meet service needs.
Reduce Sprawl:	Eliminate sprawling, low-density development that is expensive to deliver services to and is destructive to critical areas, rural areas, and resource values.
Transportation:	Encourage efficient, multimodal transportation.
Housing:	Encourage a variety of affordable housing for all economic segments of the population.
Economic Development:	Encourage economic development consistent with resources and facilities throughout the state.
Property Rights:	Protect property from arbitrary decisions or discriminatory actions.
Permits:	Issue permits in a timely manner and administer them fairly.
Natural Resources:	Maintain and enhance resource-based industries.
Open Space/Recreation:	Encourage retention of open space and recreational areas.
Environment:	Protect the environment and enhance the quality of life.
Citizen Participation:	Encourage citizen involvement in the planning process.
Public Facilities/Services:	Ensure that adequate public facilities and services are provided in a timely and affordable manner.
Historic Preservation:	Identify and encourage preservation of historic sites.
Shoreline Management:	The goals and policies of the SMA are added as one of the goals of GMA

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 11 counties had originally opted to fully plan, although one county (Ferry County) later opted out under EHB 1224 (2014), which gave counties under 20,000 population the option to opt out by December 31, 2015. The 28 "fully planning" counties make up about 95% of the state's population. The 10 counties that opted to "fully plan" 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 and identify steps to preserve them. In addition, all cities and counties in Washington are also required to adopt critical areas regulations. As defined in RCW 36.70A.030(6):

"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. "Fish and wildlife habitat conservation areas" does not include such artificial features or constructs as irrigation delivery systems, irrigation infrastructure, irrigation canals, or drainage ditches that lie within the boundaries of and are maintained by a port district or an irrigation district or company.



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). Jurisdictions must demonstrate that the best available science has been considered when creating their critical areas ordinance by documenting scientific sources that support their approach to regulating critical areas and explaining when policies depart from science-based recommendations. Chapter 365-195 of the Washington Administrative Code (WAC) serves as a guide for establishing what is considered the best available science.

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 by elected officials and local government staff.

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

Mandatory Elements:	Optional Elements:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Land Use • Housing • Capital Facilities Plan • Utilities • Rural Development (counties only) • Transportation • Ports (mandatory for cities with annual maritime port revenues exceeding \$60 million) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic Development* • Parks and Recreation* • Conservation (RCW 36.70A.080) • Solar Energy (RCW 36.70A.080) • Recreation (RCW 36.70A.080) • Subarea Plans • Ports (optional for cities with annual maritime port revenues of \$20 million to \$60 million)
<p><i>*Elements listed as mandatory in RCW 36.70A.070(7) and (8), but they are actually optional because funds have not been appropriated to help pay for preparing them, per RCW 36.70A.070(9).</i></p>	

The land use element sets the direction of future growth in a community and is usually depicted as a future land use map. The future land use map, which is policy-oriented, is then implemented in large part by the official zoning map, a regulatory tool.

Comprehensive plans must also address "essential public facilities" that are typically difficult to site, such as airports, educational facilities, transportation facilities, and correctional facilities.

Each Washington city and county must periodically review and, if needed, revise its comprehensive plan and development regulations every ten years to ensure that they comply with the GMA, as per the schedule provided in RCW 36.70A.130. Comprehensive plan amendments may be adopted on a more frequent basis (with some communities having established a formal annual amendment process), but no more than once per year.

The GMA places a strong emphasis on implementation, since most goals, objectives, and policies in a comprehensive plan cannot be achieved without strong regulatory and financial support (such as zoning, capital spending, and non-capital spending). Under the GMA, a local agency's development regulations (such as zoning) and capital budget decisions must be made in conformity with its comprehensive plan (RCW 36.70A.120).

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, Thurston, and Whatcom, 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.

Each county that designates UGAs under RCW 36.70A.110 is required to review patterns of development occurring within the UGA. If the review determines that patterns of development have created pressure in areas that exceed available developable lands within the UGA, the UGA may be revised subject to certain requirements.

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 Washington, Central Puget Sound, and Western Washington.

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).

