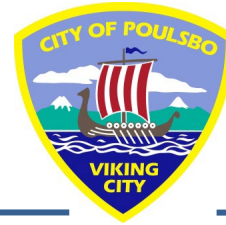


# City of Poulsbo

## Planning & Economic Development



To: City Council  
From: Nikole Coleman, AICP, Planning Manager  
Date: October 7, 2025  
RE: 2025 Critical Areas Ordinance Update, Phase 1 | Background, Requirements, and Next Steps

This memo provides background on the state requirements for critical areas regulation, outlines the history of the City of Poulsbo's Critical Areas Ordinance (CAO), explains the rationale for the 2025 review, and outlines the goals for this current update process. The intent is to prepare the City Council for your upcoming review of Phase I of the CAO update, which begins on November 5, 2025.

### State Requirements for Critical Areas Ordinances

The Washington State Growth Management Act (GMA, [RCW 36.70A](#)), adopted in 1990, requires all counties and cities planning under the Act to identify, designate, and protect critical areas, which include:

- [Wetlands](#) (click for an info card with more information)
- [Fish and Wildlife Conservation Areas](#)
- [Critical Aquifer Recharge Areas](#)
- [Frequently Flooded Areas](#)
- [Geologically Hazardous Areas](#)

In accordance with [RCW 36.70A.172\(1\)](#), jurisdictions must incorporate Best Available Science (BAS) into the development of regulations intended to protect these areas. The GMA also requires local governments to periodically review and, if necessary, revise their comprehensive plans and development regulations—including the CAO—on a 10-year cycle.

The [Washington State Department of Commerce](#) (Commerce), in coordination with the Departments of Ecology (Ecology) and Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), provides guidance to assist jurisdictions in complying with these mandates. The most recent technical guidance, including a [Critical Areas Checklist](#) (2024) and Best Available Science documents, informs the City's current review.

Poulsbo's CAO is codified in [Chapter 16.20](#) of the Poulsbo Municipal Code. The current ordinance was last comprehensively updated in 2017. The CAO provides the regulatory framework for development review and environmental protection in areas designated as critical under the GMA.

### Why the CAO is Being Updated in 2025

Poulsbo is required to complete its next GMA periodic review and adopt any necessary CAO updates by December 31, 2025, in compliance with [RCW 36.70A.130](#). As part of this effort, the city is reviewing its CAO against state requirements, recent changes to scientific guidance, and updated regulatory expectations from Commerce, Ecology, and WDFW.

Key drivers of the 2025 update include:

- New Best Available Science guidance
- Changes in state law and administrative rules since 2017
- Commerce's 2024 Critical Areas Checklist, which identifies required and recommended updates
- Updated mapping and inventory data for streams and wetlands

### Phased Approach to Updating the CAO

To manage workload and provide adequate time for thoughtful review, the City is completing the CAO update in two phases:

- Phase I (2025): Required Amendments

This phase focuses on amendments required to bring the CAO into compliance with state law and BAS. These include revised stream buffers, updated definitions, and clarifications to ensure consistency with state-mandated standards. A community open house was held at a Planning Commission meeting in December 2024 with Planning Commission review beginning August 26, 2025.

- Phase II (2026): Discretionary Amendments

Phase II will include discretionary changes aimed at improving implementation, usability, and alignment with local planning priorities. Topics may include buffer averaging procedures, low-impact development integration, streamlining permit processes, and strengthening adaptive management strategies. This phase is anticipated to begin in winter 2026.

### Proposed Amendments for Phase I

Key revisions involve updating definitions, clarifying applicability, and enhancing protections for wetlands and fish and wildlife habitat conservation areas (FWHCAs). The draft also integrates updated mapping, buffer standards, mitigation sequencing, and development standards to better reflect the scientific understanding of habitat protection and riparian function. These changes are not optional - they are required to maintain legal defensibility and ensure environmental resilience.

#### General Provisions and Definitions

- Updated applicability section (16.20.115) to:
  - Update CAO map numbers and names per recently adopted Comprehensive Plan.
  - Update to reference D.2, Comprehensive Plan Maps: Definitions and Citations
- Added an additional general exemption (16.20.120) to:
  - Allow the maintenance, operation, or repair of parks, trails and publicly improved recreation areas as long as any such alteration does not involve the expansion of improvements into previously unimproved areas or new clearing of native vegetation beyond routine pruning and related activities, and the activity has been minimized to the extent feasible.
- Expanded definitions (16.20.155):
  - Added or revised terms like “adaptive management,” “anadromous fish,” “riparian management zone,” “ecosystem function,” “ecosystem values” and “species of local importance”
  - Aligns “Candidate species (state-listed)” with WDFW Priority Habitat and Species List

#### Wetlands (Section 200)

- Revised wetland buffer widths and habitat scores (Table 16.20.230.B):
  - Adjusted habitat score ranges for buffer width tables to match 2018 Ecology guidance (e.g., <6 points, 6–7 points, 8–9 points)
- Wetland alternations (16.20.240):
  - Updated wetland replacement ratios per 2018 Ecology guidance (Table 16.20.240)

#### Fish and Wildlife Habitat Conservation Areas (FWHCAs) (Section 300)

- Replace “buffer” with “riparian management zone” throughout section.
  - Include Channel Migration Zones (CMZs) in buffer areas (WDFW 2020)
  - Increase buffers per WDFW Best Available Science guidance, as outlined below and visualized on the map [here](#).

Table 16.20.315—Fish and Wildlife Habitat Conservation Area Development Standards		
Riparian Management Zone Setback Requirements		
Water Type	RMZ Width <b>Current</b> (feet, each side of stream)	RMZ Width <b>Proposed</b> (feet, each side of stream)
F1 (salmonids)	200	200
F2 (nonsalmonids)	150	150
Np	100	100
Ns 1 (connected to S, F, Np)	75	100
Ns 2 (connected to S, F, Np)	50	100

South Fork Dogfish Creek Stream-Reach-Specific RMZ Requirements		
Tidewater/estuarine*	100	100
Lower forested	75, or top of adjacent slope, whichever is greater	100
Urban/commercial	50 for new development and redevelopment; extent of existing constraints for existing development	100
Canyon	Park boundary or top of slope, whichever is closest to stream, otherwise 100 or top of steep slope, whichever is greater	Park boundary or top of slope, whichever is closest to stream, otherwise 100 or top of steep slope, whichever is greater
Headwater	50	100

- Amended building setback from 25 feet to 15 feet.
- Removed “additional protections required...” as this section is repetitive.

### Review Process/Next Steps

The Planning Commission, in its role as the City’s primary land use advisory committee, held a workshop on the proposal amendments on August 26, 2025, and identified modifications. The Planning Commission modifications are shown in blue underline for proposed new language or additions or blue strikeout for deletions. Initial staff proposed amendments are represented as red underline and red strikeout. In addition, the Washington State Department of Natural Resources recommended amendments are shown in green underline and strikeout and the Washington State Department of Ecology recommended amendments are shown in purple underline and strikeout. These amendments are outlined in Exhibit A, attached to this memo.

On October 7, 2025, the Planning Commission held a duly noticed public hearing and after considering the testimony received at the public hearing, the Planning Commission voted to recommend approval to the City Council.

City Council review of the draft Phase I amendments will begin at a public workshop on November 5, 2025, as outlined below.

TASK	DATE
City Council Workshop 6 p.m.   Council Chambers and via Zoom	November 5, 2025
City Council Workshop 6 p.m.   Council Chambers and via Zoom (if needed)	November 12, 2025
City Council Public Hearing 6 p.m.   Council Chambers and via Zoom	November 19, 2025
<i>*All dates and times subject to change, please check the project website for up-to-date information*</i>	

### Property Owner Notification

As part of our public outreach efforts for the 2025 Critical Areas Ordinance update, postcard notifications were mailed to property owners whose parcels may be impacted by proposed increases to critical area buffer widths. These notifications were targeted to ensure that potentially affected property owners are aware of the changes and have an opportunity to participate in the public review process.

### Project Documents

Full project review documents can be viewed on the project website: <https://cityofpoulsbo.com/criticalareasupdate/>