

Chapter 1: Introduction

OVERVIEW OF THE PLAN AREA

The Upper Nisqually Valley Community Plan area is located in southeast Pierce County, Washington. The plan area is approximately 18 miles in length beginning slightly north of Alder Dam and extending eastward along the State Road 706 highway corridor through the communities of Alder, Elbe, and Ashford, terminating at the Nisqually entrance to Mt. Rainier National Park. The southern border of the plan area is the Nisqually River and Lewis County.

The northern border follows the northern boundary of the Upper Nisqually River Watershed. Major highways within the plan area are SR 7 and SR 706. The plan area consists of approximately 27,000 acres. Roughly 50 percent of this area is public lands held by the Federal, State, or local government. The majority of the public lands are designated forests which provide significant recreational opportunities and conservation of wildlife habitat. Population in the plan area is approximately between 1,100 - 1,200 persons. Population density is approximately 28.1 persons per square mile.



Alder Church

THE UPPER NISQUALLY

The community of Alder, at an elevation of 1,220 feet, is characterized by a series of homes, the Alder General Store, Alder Church and Alder Community Club, and a Washington State Department of Transportation maintenance facility. Alder is located on a gently sloping hillside above Alder Lake at the entrance to Alder Lake Park. The first vista of Mount Rainier from within the plan area for east-bound travelers is visible as one leaves Alder heading east. The west end of the valley consists of rolling foothills with a combination of open pasture and hardwood and coniferous forests.

The Cascade foothills occupy the northern edge of the plan area and begin just east of Alder Hill. The central valley contains large pasture areas which provide beautiful views of Mount Rainier. The highway corridor throughout the central valley is characterized by tall evergreen trees that align the roadway. The east end of the valley is a combination of forests, pastures, and commercial nodes. The entrance to Mount Rainier National Park borders the easternmost end of the plan area. The south side of the plan area is bounded by the Nisqually River which divides Pierce and Lewis Counties.

ALDER, ALDER LAKE AND LA GRANDE RESERVOIR

The west end of the plan area is dominated by two man-made bodies of water, Alder Lake and La Grande Reservoir, which were formed by the Alder and La Grande Dams, respectively. The dams were built for hydroelectric generation and include powerhouses at Alder Dam and at La Grande, downstream from La Grande Dam. The dams are owned and the reservoirs managed by Tacoma Power under license from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

ELBE

The Elbe area is distinct because the Cascade foothills fall steeply to the shore of Alder Lake, allowing only enough room for SR 7. The community of Elbe, at an elevation of 1,210 feet, serves as the western terminus of the main portion of the Nisqually River Valley floor. The unincorporated community of Elbe lies between the steep hillside of the Cascade foothills to the north and east and Alder Lake and the Nisqually River to the south and west. Elbe is comprised of a platted townsite with small residential home sites along streets off SR 7 and primarily tourist-oriented commercial development along the SR 7 corridor through the community. The community is dominated by the train-oriented facilities located between SR 7 and Alder Lake.

The train facilities include lodging, a restaurant, and the terminus for an excursion train that runs approximately six miles south to Mineral in Lewis County. There is a dinner train operating from Elbe. The historic Elbe General Store and the Elbe Evangelical Lutheran Church provide two more unique sites in the community. Several other commercial businesses, a second church and a fire hall are also located in Elbe. Elbe sits at the junction of SR 7, which runs west to Tacoma and south to Morton, and SR 706 which runs east to Mount Rainier National Park. The southern highway entrance to the plan area is by way of the SR 7 bridge over the Nisqually River at Elbe.

The hills above Elbe to the north and east are part of the DNR's Elbe Hills State Forest, an area of recreational trails for hikers, horseback riders, and cross-country skiers, in addition to being an active commercial forest. The Elbe Hills State Forest contains two identified trail systems: the Sahara Creek/Nicholson Horse Trail System for horseback riders and hikers, running along lower slopes of the Elbe Hills from Elbe east approximately six miles to the Sahara Creek Campground; and the Elbe Hills Off-Road Vehicle (ORV) Trail System for jeeps, motorcycles, and mountain bikes, located higher up in the Elbe Hills.

ASHFORD AND NATIONAL

The Ashford community is located in along SR 706 at an elevation of 1,769 feet. It is characterized by a mix of homes, restaurants, stores, lodging, a post office, fire hall, small to medium sized residential lots, and vacant, wooded lots. The hillside above the west end of Ashford, to the north, has a large recent clearcut. The area between the highway and the Nisqually River contains homesites with pastures and a large clearcut.

The community of National has not existed for decades but, at one time was the site of a large timber mill. The area currently consists of large, vacant tracks of land which are mostly owned by the Washington Department of Natural Resources. The water district also has some facilities in the area. The road system within National is currently comprised of dirt and gravel logging roads.

The east part of Ashford is characterized by two motels, one of which includes several cabins and a restaurant. A large subdivision composed of 305 small lots (Echo Valley) is located on the southeast side of Ashford. Over half of the lots within Echo Valley are vacant. Along Mount Tacoma Canyon Road is a moderate-size subdivision of 55 small lots (High Echo), the majority of which are vacant.

PARK ENTRANCE

For about one mile from Goat Creek to the entrance to Mount Rainier National Park, at an elevation of 2,000 feet, there are visitor-oriented commercial activities and small residential home sites. The commercial development is characterized by restaurants, an inn, a motel, commercial cabins, RV park and camping facilities, and a few retail businesses. Near the entrance to the Park is a large subdivision of 145 small lots (Nisqually Park), which is only about half developed. The eastern entrance to the plan area is at the gate to Mount Rainier National Park.

MOUNT RAINIER NATIONAL PARK

The campaign to establish a national park emerged in the 1880s when several influencing factors converged to give the park movement momentum. Among those who played important roles were the local commercial interests in Tacoma and Seattle that aggressively promoted tourism to the future park area, especially through the operations of the grand Northern Pacific Railroad hotel, *The Tacoma*, which opened its doors in 1884. No less significant were the string of small hotels and inns stretching between Tacoma and Longmire Springs, and the discovery of Paradise Valley as a popular destination point. Organized political pressure to create the national park came from various individuals and groups.

Mountaineering clubs, local newspapers, commercial clubs, and national scientific and geographic interests lent their weight. Notable individuals, particularly prominent European visitors to Mount Rainier, and John Muir who climbed the mountain in 1888, gave the park movement strong support through newspapers and other publications. With the creation of the State of Washington in 1889 and the Pacific Forest Reserve in 1893, the proposal to create the nation's fifth national park moved a step closer to reality. Conservation was, for the first time in American history, a priority of the federal government in the 1890's, and local congressmen joined Interior Department officials in pushing for the establishment of a park area surrounding Mount Rainier within the larger Pacific Forest Reserve. Throughout the 1890s the park proposal in Congress was introduced six different times and finally passed on March 2, 1899.

Mount Rainier National Park is predominantly a one-day visitor park, and the overwhelming majority of visitors enter at the Nisqually Entrance on the southwest corner of the park. Along the 19-mile road between the entrance and Paradise Valley there are hotels, campgrounds, overlooks, and trailheads. At Paradise, 5400 feet in elevation, is the park's major visitor center and the 126-room historic Paradise Inn which opened in 1917. The Stevens Canyon Road, a paved highway, connects Paradise Valley with the east side at State 123. In the northeast section of the park a highway off State 410 climbs to Yakima Park, elevation 6400 feet, with limited services during summer months.

GIFFORD PINCHOT NATIONAL FOREST

The USDA Forest Service (USFS) manages an area along the eastern edge of the plan. The National Forest lands are technically part of the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest, but are administered by the Gifford Pinchot National Forest. Congressional action would be necessary to formally transfer the lands between the two forests. The Gifford Pinchot National Forest runs from Mount Rainier south to the Columbia River Gorge and from Mount Saint Helens east to Mount Adams and the crest of the Cascade Mountains. The Gifford Pinchot National

Forest is responsible for administering 1,371,720 acres, including the portion of the forest within the plan area. The forest is managed through the Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (hereafter referred to as the "forest plan") of 1990 as amended by the Northwest Forest Plan of 1994 which guides all natural resource management activities and establishes management standards for the forest. The forest plan establishes multiple use goals, management direction for future activities, the allowable sale quantity for timber, and the identity of lands suitable for timber management.

The forest plan was revised by Amendment 11 in February 1995 to institute changes resulting from the development of President Clinton's 1994 plan for managing habitat for species found in late-successional and old-growth forests in the range of the northern spotted owl.

The forest contributes to the quality of life for the people of the Upper Nisqually Valley and the greater Puget Sound region. Outdoor recreation opportunities, including backpacking, hiking, and mountain-biking, are readily available. Old-growth trees provide aesthetic and recreational value. Scenery includes snow-capped mountains, glaciers, lakes, streams, waterfalls, and rock outcrops. The forest has a diverse population of plant and wildlife species.

WASHINGTON STATE DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES ELBE HILLS STATE FOREST

The Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR) manages approximately 23,000 acres of land as the Elbe Hills State Forest which is located within the plan area. Elbe Hills State Forest is part of an original 1889 land grant from the Federal government. The DNR manages the State forest for both timber production and recreational use.

In January of 1997, the Federal government signed agreements allowing for implementation of the DNR's Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) for managing lands containing northern spotted owl

habitat. The HCP is a way for the State to obtain relief from the prohibition on removing habitat of species covered under the Endangered Species Act, including the northern spotted owl and marbled murrelet. An HCP is a plan generated by a landowner, in this case the DNR, that provides long-term conservation measures for a listed species in exchange for the right to take a portion of its habitat. The HCP offsets the harm to individually listed animals with a plan that promotes conservation of the species as a whole. The DNR's approved HCP provides mitigation for removal of habitat through timber harvest by providing habitat areas for the northern spotted owl and marbled murrelet.

The HCP manages land to minimize the harm done to the habitats of seven other listed species within the range of the spotted owl. The HCP conserves habitats for numerous unlisted species west of the crest of the Cascade Range, including western Washington runs of salmonids. In addition to the protection of northern spotted owl, marbled murrelet, and aquatic habitat, the HCP identifies and protects cliffs, caves and cave passages, oak woodlands, and talus fields that provide habitat for various other species.

HISTORY OF THE UPPER NISQUALLY VALLEY

Native American groups inhabited the Upper Nisqually Valley for thousands of years. The Nisquallys were the primary group that occupied the area and had many permanent villages along the Nisqually River. Other groups, from both the west and east sides of the Cascades, used the mountain as a hunting ground and considered it sacred. After the Indian War of 1855-1856, the Nisquallys were not allowed to return to their villages.

European settlement of the Pacific Northwest did not occur until the early part the nineteenth century. The original impetus for settlement was the desire to control areas for fur trapping. The Native Americans showed the early settlers where to find and how to utilize wild plants that provided food such as potatoes, onion, carrots, water lily roots, and skunk cabbage roots.

In the latter half of the 1890's through the early 20th century, the Klondike gold rush in Alaska created a boom in the Seattle area as a center for outfitting and supplying prospectors on their way to the mines. Although gold and silver mining in the Cascades was fairly limited, coal was extracted from mines near Mount Rainier including Wilkeson, Carbonado, Mineral, and just north of Ashford. Numerous mine claims in and around Mt. Rainier were established beginning in 1898. Coal mining declined when hydropower generated electricity and oil replaced coal as energy resource in the 1920's.

Prior to the establishment of a national park in 1899, residents in the Puget Sound area traveled to Mount Rainier during the summer to recreate. Although mountain climbing expeditions were most notable, many groups also traveled to the Mountain to horseback ride, fish, and camp. The railroad companies and local residents recognized the potential for tourism and invested in various endeavors to accommodate visitors from the Puget Sound region.

German immigrants and homesteaders settled at the Elbe town site in the late 1800's. A plat for the town of Elbe was filed in 1903. In the early days, the town functioned as a market center where loggers, Native Americans, and farmers came to exchange goods and produce. The town hall, completed in the 1890's, functioned as a gathering place for the surrounding communities

and drew people from Longmire to Tanwax when there were special events such as elections, dances, or holiday celebrations.

The first logging and milling operation in Elbe started in the early 1900's. Many mills were in operation by the time Tacoma Eastern Railroad reached Elbe in 1904. In 1936, the passenger railroad service stopped with the completion of the Mountain Highway. During the depression of the 1930's, youths came from all parts of the country to work on the construction of trails, roads, and buildings within Mount Rainier National Park. One of the compounds erected to house the workers was located near Elbe.

THE ASHFORD AND THE HERSHEY FAMILY C. 1915



The Ashford and the Hershey family c.1915

Mining prospects initially attracted settlers to the Ashford area. Although some coal mining occurred, the logging and milling industry soon became the economic focus. The town became an important log-shipping center. In 1904, anticipating growth in the valley, Walter and Cora Ashford platted the townsite in their name. In the same year, the Tacoma Eastern Railroad Company extended its railroad line to Ashford. By the early 1940's, with the decline of the logging industry, the town's economy relied on recreation and tourism.

The Pacific National Lumber Company established the town of National in 1905. This company-owned town rented housing to its employees in addition to operating a general store. The employees of the company either worked as loggers or as part of its milling operation. The company holdings were sold and eventually bought by the Weyerhaeuser Company in the 1950's. By this time the town began to decline.

Homes were bought by individuals and moved off the site. The Washington State Department of Natural Resources now owns the properties. Farm settlement began in the Alder area in the early 1890's. After the Tacoma Eastern Railway lines reached La Grande and became available to transport milling equipment and logs, a shingle and saw mill located at the north fork of Alder Creek. Shortly after railroad spurs were built to reach the new mills, a hotel and store were built by the Alder Mill Company. The Alder Dam was completed in 1940's to supply electric power to the City of Tacoma. The Alder Lake (reservoir) covered more than 200 acres of farm land and the original town of Alder.

PLANNING HISTORY

COUNTY PLANNING

1962 PIERCE COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN AND ZONING

The first Pierce County Comprehensive Land Use Plan was adopted on April 2, 1962. The Pierce County Zoning Code, which implemented the Comprehensive Plan, was adopted on October 8, 1962. The 1962 Pierce County Comprehensive Plan designated the Upper Nisqually Valley, along with the rest of southern and eastern Pierce County, as “rural residential.” The purpose of the rural residential designation was to “...identify an area which lies outside the path of immediate urban expansion, and to delineate a boundary of suburban residential development which is consistent with adequate public service being provided.” Low density residential use was recommended in rural residential areas to: “...avoid premature and uneconomic extension of public facilities and services; reserve potential residential land in sufficiently large ownership parcels to permit proper subdivision at a future date; and provide areas within reasonable commuting distance of major employment centers where rural living can be enjoyed with a minimum of use restrictions.”

From 1962 until 1990, the plan area was zoned General Use, which allowed a wide range of commercial, industrial, residential, and resource uses. In July and November of 1990, the General Use Zone was amended to require multifamily residential and most commercial and industrial uses to go through the conditional use public hearing process. Also in 1990, per Ordinance No. 90-178S, the Pierce County Council approved an area-wide rezone of forest lands of long-term significance to a Forest Land zone, which primarily allowed the growing, harvesting, and processing of forest products. With regard to the plan area, the Forest Land zone encompassed most of the foothills and mountains north and east of Elbe. In 1993, per Ordinance No. 93-84S2, most of the remaining plan area was rezoned from the General Use to General Rural zone. The General Rural zone required a minimum lot size for residential subdivision of land of 10 acres, as was the minimum lot size for non-residential uses. There were three areas of the Upper Nisqually Valley which remained zoned General Use: the Elbe area; the Ashford area, west of Mount Tahoma Canyon Road; and the Park entrance area, between Kernahan Road and Mount Rainier National Park.

1994 PIERCE COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN AND DEVELOPMENT REGULATIONS-ZONING

In 1990, the Washington State Legislature passed legislation referred to as the Growth Management Act (GMA). GMA required Pierce County to develop and adopt a comprehensive plan which would control residential, commercial, and industrial growth. Thirteen goals are listed in GMA to guide policy development in nine required elements. The required elements include land use, housing, capital facilities, utilities, rural, and transportation. Pierce County also elected to include four additional elements: environment and critical areas, economic development, community plans, and essential public facilities. Each of the nine GMA required elements must conform to specific standards set in the legislation. The rural element

requirements in the originally adopted GMA contained very general standards. It stated that “...Counties shall include a rural element including lands that are not designated for urban growth, agriculture, forest, or mineral resources. The rural element shall permit land uses that are compatible with the rural character of such lands and provide for a variety of rural densities...”

In 1997, the Growth Management Act was amended to provide more flexibility and detail in the type of development allowed in the rural areas of counties. The new provisions recognize that rural characteristics and land use patterns are different between counties across the State. Counties are now allowed to consider local circumstances in the development of policies and regulations for a designated rural area. As a consequence, limited areas of more intensive uses may be planned. The new requirements specifically addresses infill development, recreational and tourist uses, and cottage industries.

In 1994, per the requirements of the Washington State Growth Management Act, Pierce County adopted a new Comprehensive Plan. The 1994 Pierce County Comprehensive Plan replaced the 1962 Pierce County Comprehensive Plan in its entirety. The 1994 Comprehensive Plan identified the entire Upper Nisqually plan area as “rural.” The new plan contained the following land use designations for the valley: Rural 10, which encompasses the floor and western end of the Upper Nisqually Valley; Rural Neighborhood Centers, in Ashford and Elbe; Designated Forest Land, in the hills and mountains north and east of Elbe; and Rural 20, which encompasses a narrow buffer along the western edge of the Designated Forest Land--east of the Eatonville Cut-off Road.

These land use designations are further described within the Land Use element of this plan. In July 1995, per Ordinance No. 95-79S, the Pierce County Council adopted the Pierce County Development Regulations-Zoning which implemented the 1994 Pierce County Comprehensive Plan. The Development Regulations-Zoning created zoning districts which mirrored the names and locations of the Comprehensive Plan designations.

Projects received by Pierce County Planning and Land Services are vested under the rules and regulations that apply at the time the development application is submitted. There are several projects in the Upper Nisqually Valley that are presently undergoing County review that were received before the community planning process had even begun. The community plan policies and regulations do not directly apply to these projects and cannot be used to influence the types of uses allowed.

COMMUNITY PLANNING

Pierce County Comprehensive Plan policies found in the Community Plans Element address community autonomy, community character, new community plans, consistency with the Comprehensive Plan, consistency with the Development Regulations-Zoning, transition strategies, and joint planning agreements.

The Community Plans element of the 1994 Pierce County Comprehensive Plan envisions a local voice in how the Comprehensive Plan and its Development Regulations will be carried out in communities. Community plans exemplify how the objectives and policies of the

Comprehensive Plan play out when applied to detailed and specific conditions. They indicate specific land use designations, appropriate densities, and the design standards that should apply in community planning areas. Preserving and building community character while ensuring an efficient and predictable development approval process is a central theme. Community plans are a unifying force for communities. They identify local characteristics. They survey population, employment, transportation, building, and social attributes. Community plans help citizens decide what they want to nurture and what they want to change at the local level, where citizens live and interact.

Although the Growth Management Act (GMA) does not require comprehensive plans to provide for community plans, Pierce County Ordinance 90-47S directs County officials to prepare a Community Plans element of the Comprehensive Plan. The majority of unincorporated County population resides in community plan areas. The Community Plans element spells out how to coordinate consistency between community plans and the Comprehensive Plan. Community plans must be consistent with the Comprehensive Plan and the GMA. Flexibility exists only in the interpretation of how Comprehensive Plan policies apply in a given community or in areas where the Comprehensive Plan is silent on an issue or does not provide detailed guidance. Ensuring such consistency requires comparing proposed community plan policy and land use designations against each policy of the Comprehensive Plan. If a community plan policy would mean that a Comprehensive Plan policy could not be met in the community planning area, the policies would be incompatible and therefore inconsistent.

If a community plan vision or policy can be determined to have County-wide value, then the Comprehensive Plan policy may be altered. Otherwise, modifications to any inconsistent community plan policy will be necessary until it meets the consistency test. Changes to any community plan will be developed collaboratively by citizens with County staff and adjacent jurisdiction's staff for adoption by the County Council. To avoid unnecessary and undesired inconsistencies between a community plan and the Comprehensive Plan, the unique values and community desires reflected in individual community plans should be reflected, built upon, and incorporated into the Comprehensive Plan.

UPPER NISQUALLY VALLEY COMMUNITY PLANNING EFFORTS

In the summer of 1996, Pierce County Planning and Land Services Department began to develop an integrated community plan and environmental analysis for the Ashford/Elbe community. This effort was the first sub-area plan to be initiated since the adoption of the County's GMA comprehensive plan. But prior to Pierce County's involvement, the community had already begun outlining visions for the future. These visions, articulated in the 1992 Upper Nisqually Community Report and the 1994 Upper Nisqually Community Workshop Report, became the basis for the visions and policies of the Upper Nisqually Valley Community Plan.

1992 UPPER NISQUALLY COMMUNITY REPORT

In the spring of 1992, students from The Evergreen State College conducted a community survey and in person interviews with the Upper Nisqually community. The students' efforts

resulted in the Upper Nisqually Community Report, also known as the “Evergreen Study.” The students mailed approximately 1,100 surveys out to the community and received back 226 completed survey forms, a 20.08 percent return rate. In addition to the analysis of the survey results, the

Community Report includes anecdotal history and opinions from valley residents. Three proposed visions for the future were identified by the students: no change, bedroom community, and tourist service community. The survey showed the community would like to see future growth directed into towns or centers.

1994 UPPER NISQUALLY COMMUNITY WORKSHOP REPORT

In the winter and spring of 1994, the Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program of the National Park Service, along with a non-profit facilitation organization known as the Sonoran Institute, worked with the Upper Nisqually community to develop two community visioning workshops. The workshops were held in June 1994. The residents attending the workshops identified and prioritized values the community held, visions the community had for the future, and actions to implement the top priority visions and values of the community. This effort also led to the formation of the Upper Nisqually Community Forum. This group of community representatives was responsible for carrying out the actions identified in the visioning process. As the County’s planning efforts materialized, this group eventually disbanded.

SCOPE OF THE COMMUNITY PLAN

LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY TO DEVELOP THE PLAN

In the Community Plans element of the 1994 Pierce County Comprehensive Plan, the Upper Nisqually Valley, i.e., Ashford-Elbe area, was identified as a community for which a future community plan would be developed. Pierce County Resolution R96-68S, passed June 11, 1996, directed the Pierce County Planning and Land Services Department to develop an integrated community plan and environmental analysis for the Upper Nisqually Valley, i.e. Ashford-Elbe community. The resolution establishes that the community plan should seek to: maintain the rural character and natural beauty of the area which draws both residents and visitors and to encourage appropriate tourism and provide economic opportunities for community residents.

In March 1996, Pierce County Planning and Land Services was awarded a grant which partially funded the community planning effort for the Upper Nisqually Valley area. The state legislature made the grant monies available through its Planning and Environmental Review Fund. The

Washington Department of Community, Trade, and Economic Development administers the grant program. The intent of the grant funding was to assist communities that are attempting to integrate environmental analysis into growth management planning efforts. The State hoped that the communities using these grant monies would develop plans that could serve as models for other communities in Washington State.