

Chapter Nine Recreation

Introduction

Recreational opportunities in Whatcom County are abundant. The County's geography and its natural features contribute greatly to opportunities for recreation. Bounded by sea and forested mountains, with wide open vistas, and vibrant flowing rivers, streams, and tranquil lakes, Whatcom County is a perfect spot for residents and visitors alike who seek a wide variety of outdoor recreational experiences as well as entrepreneurs looking for a great place to locate a business, attract employees, and grow recreation based and other types of businesses.

Recreation is a vital component to the rich quality of life enjoyed by many Whatcom County residents and visitors. Whether formal or informal, public or private, indoor or outdoor, Whatcom County has become a regional destination for many recreational enthusiasts, and has attracted many new residents who now call Whatcom County "home." This chapter explores many of the key issues involved in maintaining the high quality of Whatcom County's existing recreational services and facilities, and also outlines strategies in the form of goals and policies that support the provision of expanded recreational services and facilities.

Purpose

The primary focus of this chapter is on goals and policies that support park and recreation facilities designed to serve Whatcom County as a whole. Whatcom County's first Comprehensive Parks and Recreation Open Space Plan (CPROS Plan) was adopted in 1989 as part of Whatcom County's pre-growth management comprehensive land use plan. The CPROS Plan is regularly updated by the County Parks and Recreation Department in accordance with Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office requirements to retain eligibility for certain funding programs. This chapter relies on the CPROS Plan which includes historical information on Whatcom County's communities; on Parks and Recreation public participation processes; it outlines standards for park and trail development, recreation, senior services, and contains policies that support implementation of park and recreation facility goals. The goals and policies in this chapter echo many of the goals and policies found in the Comprehensive Park and Recreation Open Space Plan. In addition, the Whatcom County Pedestrian & Bicycle Plan and the 1991 Natural Heritage Plan also support and inform many of the goals and policies of this chapter.

Process

In August 1989, Whatcom County adopted its first *Comprehensive Parks and Recreation Open Space Plan*, and subsequently this plan was adopted as part of the Optional Recreation Element of the County's comprehensive plan. In 1991, the Whatcom County Council approved a resolution that endorsed "*Preserving a Way of*

Life: A Natural Heritage Plan for Whatcom County.” The *Natural Heritage Plan* focuses primarily on a vision that supports preservation and conservation of natural areas in the county without necessarily assuming the need for public ownership. This chapter specifically references the *Comprehensive Park and Recreation Open Space (CPROS) Plan*, the *Natural Heritage Plan*, and the *Whatcom County Pedestrian and Bicycle Plan*, all as background documents.

Existing Parks and Recreation facilities and services are responsive to an increasing resident population, and must also serve an increasing visitor population as Whatcom County increasingly becomes a regional and world class recreation destination.

In regards to existing Whatcom County Park system capacity, draft 2014 CPROS Plan, states, that: “In 2012, the Whatcom County Park system had over 732,000 visitations to parks and trails, and 186,000 visitations in senior services. In general, most park areas and facilities are currently meeting visitor needs. Many parks have additional capacity or with improvements can accommodate greater user numbers without compromising the visitor’s experience or the parks resources.”

A joint planning effort between Whatcom County Parks and Recreation Department and Whatcom County Planning & Development Services Department ensures that Parks & Recreation capital facilities improvement projects that are identified in the CPROS Plan, are consistent with Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan Parks & Recreation Level of Service (LOS) standards (adopted in WCCP Chapter 4), along with a six year financing plan for improvement projects, including senior centers, addressed as part of the WCCP Capital Facilities Element.

Whatcom County Parks and Recreation Department plays an essential role in providing recreation, senior services, and facilities to county residents and visitors, and in the long range planning that is needed to accommodate future parks, senior centers, recreation, and open space needs in the county during the next 20 years of growth that this chapter of the WCCP seeks to guide and support. The CPROS Plan is a separate document from the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan (WCCP), and is established for distinct but overlapping purposes. The CPROS Plan should be read alongside this chapter of the WCCP, as it informs many of the Issues, Goals, and Policies that are outlined in the following pages of this chapter.

GMA Goals and Countywide Planning Policies

This chapter supports fulfillment of several Growth Management Act (GMA) goals, including: Goal #9, Open Space and Recreation, GMA Goal #12, Public Facilities and Services, and Goal # 13, Historic Preservation by directly addressing parks, senior centers and recreation services and facility needs. Habitat and other open space resources are briefly considered in this chapter, but are more completely addressed in the land use and environment chapters of this plan, in Chapter 2 and Chapter 10, respectively. Similarly, this chapter addresses Section H, Open Space/Greenbelt Corridors of the Countywide Planning Policies (CWPP). It also partially addresses CWPP Policy K (1) by identifying needs for recreation facilities, including senior centers.

GMA Requirements

This chapter supports implementation of Growth Management Act (Chapter 36.70A RCW) provisions that encourage counties to adopt an optional “Recreation Element” under RCW 36.70A.080(1)(c). This chapter is coordinated and consistent with other GMA Comprehensive Plan elements such as the Land Use element which includes Open Space & Environment; Capital Facilities (including senior centers); Transportation; and Economics. It is responsive to, informs, and relies on the Whatcom County Parks, Recreation, and Open Space (CPROS Plan).

Background Summary

Recreation has always played an important role in the quality of life for Whatcom County residents. Choices to recreate abound with three national wilderness areas, a national forest, one national park, two national recreation areas, three state parks and multitude of county and local parks and trails all located within the County.

Recreation provides health and social benefits while contributing to the economics of the community supporting tourism, hospitality businesses, equipment manufacturers, and retailers, and area outfitters. Recreational opportunities and abundance of parks and trails is often used as a recruitment tool by area businesses and institutions.

Access to recreation areas provides significant economic benefits through tourism, and retail sales, and business retention and recruitment. In Whatcom County, recreation expenditures annually amount to \$705 million in spending. This spending supports over 6,500 jobs in a variety of industries. The recreation industry itself supports 279 businesses employing 3,728 persons with \$508 million in revenues. County residents spend an average of 78.1 days a year recreating compared to the state average of 59 days annually (Source: 2015: Economic Contribution of Outdoor Recreation to Whatcom County, Earth Economics).

The continued availability of diverse and numerous recreational opportunities will play a key role in ensuring a high quality of life for future generations in Whatcom County.

Issues, Goals, and Policies

The following policies and design standards apply to the acquisition and/or development of regional parks, multi-use camping areas, trail systems, specialized facilities, senior centers, and shoreline access areas (**Maps 9-1 and 9-2**).

Regional Parks

Regional parks include day use parks that are designed to offer a wide range of passive day use activities. They often contain facilities or recreation opportunities that county residents are willing to travel some distance to reach. In most cases, they are located in the rural areas of the county, although there are some exceptions. Often a feature will dominate the site. Examples are the farmstead at

Hovander Park, the nature interpretative areas at Tennant Lake and the lake shoreline at Samish Park.

Goal 9A: Address countywide recreational needs by adequate provision of regional parks.

- Policy 9A-1: Because the cities currently provide the highly developed urban parks, the County’s role should be to provide rural regional parks that are centered around a unique feature or recreation opportunity.
- Policy 9A-2: Because of the unique features of the site, location within the county is not as important as good road access.
- Policy 9A-3: Development standards will vary according to the use intended. For the intensive use park areas, all facilities and improvements should be built to a high standard and designed to be easily maintained.
- Policy 9A-4: All parks must be designed to create a minimal impact upon surrounding property and to the site itself.
- Policy 9A-5: Regional parks should be designed with one entrance and control point so that entrance fees can be charged.
- Policy 9A-6: If possible, regional parks should be located on existing or proposed trail routes and ideally should enhance countywide trail system connectivity.
- Policy 9A-7: The parks should be designed to accommodate a range of age groups, accessibility, and interests.
- Policy 9A-8: The County should only accept sites that meet the above standards.

Multi-Use Camping Parks

Multi-use camping parks provide camping opportunities in addition to other uses. Lighthouse Marine Park and Silver Lake Park fit this category. It should be recognized that much of the camping activity use will be from non-county residents.

Goal 9B: Provide multi-use camping parks to serve county resident needs as well as provide a tourism draw.

- Policy 9B-1: All the policy statements and design standards for regional parks should also apply to multi-use camping parks.
- Policy 9B-2: Because camping parks will attract many non-county residents, they should be recognized for their tourism value but at the same time county residents should not subsidize the cost of camping. Camping fees should pay for campsite expenses.

- Policy 9B-3: A wide variety of camping types should be offered including primitive sites, tent sites, full-service RV sites and group camping areas.
- Policy 9B-4: The camping areas should be physically separated from the other parts of the park with the ability to be closed off during winter months.
- Policy 9B-5: Most large camping areas should be designed to a high standard with full-service hookups, flush toilets and rest rooms, showers, laundry, and other support facilities.
- Policy 9B-6: Future Park development should consider the financial ability of the County, and should focus on existing park lands before considering further acquisition.

Trail Systems

Trail systems include unpaved foot trails, paved and unpaved multi-use trails, and paved bike paths. Multi-use trails are designed for two or more of the following activities: bicycle riding, mountain bike riding, walking and hiking, and horseback riding. Unpaved foot paths are primarily for walking and hiking, although a compacted gravel surface is suitable for mountain bikes as well.

While essentially all trails are suitable for foot traffic, bicyclists and horseback riders find many trails not adequately maintained or built to appropriate construction standards. Poorly built or maintained trails are less enjoyable to travel and can induce safety hazards and damage to the environment. User conflicts may occur between all three groups. Horseback riders often express concern with mountain bikes that suddenly appear at a bend or rise in the trail, spooking the animal and endangering both riders. Hikers complain about similar problems, but are generally more concerned with personal safety and damage to trails caused by the two rider groups. Motorized (ORV) use of trails is generally incompatible with nonmotorized use for similar reasons. Noise and safety issues and environmental impacts preclude motorbikes from most of the trails identified in this plan. Solutions to user conflicts require some separation of use by designating specific loops or segments for particular users. Hikers comprise the largest user group, but tend to have the lowest impact on the trail. Although all trails are essentially available for hiking, trails that are particularly narrow, steep, or fragile, and those subject to heavy pedestrian use should be designated for hikers only. In addition, trails, loops, or alternate routes should be designated for horseback and mountain bike rider groups where conditions warrant.

Properly built and maintained old logging roads in reforested areas provide some of the best riding trails since they are much wider than a footpath for easier passing, and their base is usually firm and less prone to damage. It is not enough, however, to simply direct horses and bikes to old road grades. They are often seeking the same views and aesthetic experience that hikers wish. Some trails will therefore need to be improved to a higher standard to accommodate the use. On shared

routes, appropriate design elements need to be implemented to avoid conflicts and to enhance the trail experience for each group.

The difficulties in obtaining continuous access through private lands is a major issue in trail development that can discourage residents, planners, and administrators from pursuing what might otherwise be a worthwhile project. Access is usually obtained by way of gift or purchase of an easement or parcel of land containing the trail corridor. On private timber land, access is normally permitted in most areas on an informal basis with the understanding that closures may occur due to logging, fire danger, or other circumstances. Horse club volunteers have been successful in obtaining permission to construct new trails on private and state timber land with and without formal easements.

In developed areas of the county where multiple properties are involved, the task becomes more complicated since lack of participation by one landowner can obstruct the trail. Concerns range from vandalism, fire and nuisances to liability and invasion of privacy. In most cases, trail design, careful facility planning, and public education will help avoid these problems. An existing statute (RCW 4.24.210) offers some protections to landowners from liability where they allow public access to their land without charge. Where access is denied, alternatives need to be considered.

In 2001, Whatcom County formed the Whatcom County Bicycle/Pedestrian Advisory Committee. The Whatcom County Bicycle/Pedestrian Advisory Committee (BPAC) developed the Whatcom County Pedestrian and Bicycle Plan. The plan makes recommendations with regard to facility type, primary and secondary routes, design guidelines, safety and education. Additionally the plan includes strategies for implementation that address priority projects, acquisition, development, maintenance, and administration of bicycle routes. The Whatcom County Pedestrian and Bicycle Plan provides a basis for many of the goals and policies of this chapter and is considered an important background/reference document that contributes to the Recreation optional element of Whatcom County's Comprehensive Plan.

Goal 9C: Expand outdoor recreation opportunities for county residents by providing enjoyable trails for hiking, horseback riding, bicycling, walking, boating, and other trail activities in a safe environment.

Policy 9C-1: Trails should be interesting and attractive. Trails which follow natural water courses, pass significant natural resources, traverse interesting scenery or cross areas of outstanding beauty provide interesting and enjoyable experiences for the trail user.

Policy 9C-2: Incorporate existing and proposed trails into a comprehensive and integrated system of looped and interconnected trails which give users a wide choice of routes and environments.

- Policy 9C-3: Trails should link other recreational uses in the Foothills area and connect to existing trail systems in the National Forest and state land.
- Policy 9C-4: The wet climate of Whatcom County may preclude extensive multi-use of some trails or require seasonal limitations. Trail routes should take into account soil conditions, steep slopes, surface drainage and other physical limitations that could impact the areas from overuse.
- Policy 9C-5: Bicycle trails should provide opportunities for recreational riders, as well as touring and commuter bicyclists.
- Policy 9C-6: Bicycle routes and paths should minimize the conflicts between motorists and bicyclists.
- Policy 9C-7: Hiking trails should have a variety of lengths and grades for casual strollers as well as serious hikers and when practicable, be accessible.
- Policy 9C-8: Hiking trails should reach areas of natural beauty with the purpose of permitting hikers to seek areas of solitude and get away from the built environment, especially noise and other pollution.
- Policy 9C-9: Equestrian trails should be usable most of the year. Some equestrian trails should be close to the urban areas.
- Policy 9C-10: Adequate parking, signage, trash receptacles, and toilet facilities should be provided at all major trailheads.
- Policy 9C-11: Where public funds are used to construct or maintain dikes, levees, or revetments, public access should be encouraged for trail purposes, where appropriate.
- Policy 9C-12: Water trails for nonmotorized boats should be identified with provisions made for parking, launching areas, and places of interest along the water route where boats can land.
- Policy 9C-13: Work toward partnering with other agencies and the public to accomplish recreational goals.
- Policy 9C-14: Investigate multi-solutions that will accommodate several county goals, such as recreation, water retention, and flood prevention measures, utilizing a similar piece of property.
- Policy 9C-15: Sharing of corridors for major utilities, trails, and other transportation rights-of-way is encouraged when not in conflict with goals to protect wildlife, public health, and safety.
- Policy 9C-16: Implement the goals, policies and recommendations of the latest Whatcom County Pedestrian and Bicycle Plan that are

- consistent with this plan and within the County’s fiscal capabilities.
- Policy 9C-17: Promote the integration of trails within subdivisions, planned unit developments, and other development proposals that provide internal circulation and connect to nearby recreational opportunities and ideally enhance countywide trail system connectivity.
- Policy 9C-18: Acquisition of and planning for trail corridors should be encouraged as new subdivisions and development occurs, if the trail has been identified in a park, trail, open space, or other plan adopted by Whatcom County.
- Policy 9C-19: Continue to update the trails inventory to identify all designated and non-designated trails in the county.
- Policy 9C-20: Continue to support the County’s long range parks and recreation vision of developing a countywide trail network, while respecting property rights, and working collaboratively with willing landowners to acquire easements or property for public trails, when opportunities exist.
- Policy 9C-21: Provide nonmotorized access to regional recreational and outstanding scenic areas in the county.
- Policy 9C-22: Reduce conflicts between the various trail user groups and provide appropriate signage.
- Policy 9C-23: Provide bike lanes or wide shoulders where appropriate in conjunction with major road improvements.
- Policy 9C-24: Coast Millennium Trail – Continue to develop trail corridors, particularly off-road segments such as the airport connector and shoreline access.
- Policy 9C-25: Hertz North Lake Whatcom Trail Extension – Develop and implement a plan to either acquire Rights of Way for a trail corridor along the abandoned RR R/W between the existing North Shore Trail and Blue Canyon Road or consider an alternative route to link these points.
- Policy 9C-26: Bay to Baker Trail – Develop and implement a plan to secure Rights of Way for trail segments along the abandoned RR R/W in conjunction with the Nooksack River Trail to achieve a contiguous trail system between communities and recreation areas.
- Policy 9C-27: Nooksack River Trail – Develop and implement a plan to acquire Rights of Way for a trail corridor and picnic areas along the Nooksack River between Ferndale and Glacier, to provide

recreation opportunities, inter-community transportation, and tourism development.

Policy 9C-28: Continue to collaborate with other organizations, groups, or individuals consistent with the goals identified in the Natural Heritage Plan for Whatcom County and the Whatcom County Pedestrian and Bicycle Plan.

Specialized Recreation Areas

Specialized areas include nature interpretative centers and small park sites, including those related to Urban Growth Areas, Rural Communities, and neighborhood developments.

Goal 9D: Provide specialized recreation areas taking advantage of unique opportunities to serve both county residents and visitors.

Policy 9D-1: Because these facilities are unique, adopt specific standards for each one individually.

Policy 9D-2: Explore need for community parks as undeveloped areas of county increase in density.

Policy 9D-3: Encourage development of sport field complexes to meet the needs of organized recreation activities, using public and private partnerships where possible.

Policy 9D-4: Promote the integration of recreational and open space opportunities in subarea planning, subdivisions, and other development proposals.

Policy 9D-5: The dedication and acquisition of open space and recreation opportunities should be encouraged as new subdivisions and development occurs.

Shoreline Access Areas

Shoreline access areas include saltwater beaches and bluffs, rivers and streams and lake frontage. Access may be via a public park area, a street end, or just a trail easement. Access includes both physical access to the water and visual access from points above. An excellent source of information about existing and proposed recreational opportunities featuring shorelines is the Whatcom County Comprehensive Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Plan (CPROS Plan). The CPROS Plan contains detailed information and maps which identify waterfront and shoreline recreational opportunities on both public and private shorelines across the county.

Goal 9E: Recognize the shoreline as one of Whatcom County's unique assets and provide adequate physical and visual access for present and future generations.

Policy 9E-1: As economically feasible, acquire for public use as much of the saltwater shoreline as possible. Public and private resources

should be explored to further this policy. A reasonable goal is to acquire for public access a minimum of 15% of the saltwater shoreline and adjacent tidelands in Whatcom County.

- Policy 9E-2: Continue to review the Nooksack River Plan (Jones and Jones, 1973) and implement those elements which are beneficial, appropriate, and economically feasible.
- Policy 9E-3: Provide pedestrian, interpretative, and small boat access sites for a diversity of public shoreline.
- Policy 9E-4: When the County acquires property for flood storage or fish and wildlife purposes, the County should consider secondary use for park and open space purposes.

Off Road Vehicle Riding Areas

Recognizing that it is better to regulate and manage where off-road vehicle (ORV) riding may occur, the county attempted twice to develop an area for exclusive ORV use. Both proposals were met with controversy and not pursued. However, ORV riding still occurs and in many instances on land not suitable for that use and without the owner's permission. The end result is that ORV riding is impacting neighbors and the land in which riding occurs, and is in general creating a problem for less intrusive recreational activities.

Goal 9F: Coordinate with the DNR to provide ORV opportunities.

- Policy 9F-1: Recognizing that there will continue to be a demand for ORV riding, the County should continue to assess its role in the ORV program. Between the Washington State Department of Natural Resources and the Forest Service, some joint solution may be possible.

Activity Centers

Activity centers are indoor facilities which provide recreational opportunities. They include the existing senior/community centers, Plantation Rifle Range, the Roeder Home, and indoor recreation centers (multi-purpose centers).

The eight senior/community centers are located in Bellingham, Ferndale, Blaine, Everson, Lynden, Sumas, Welcome, and Point Roberts. There is an increasing trend for use by different agencies and community groups and even church congregations who rent the facilities in Lynden and Bellingham. With appropriate scheduling, the existing senior/community centers have the capacity to absorb additional activity.

The Plantation Rifle Range includes two outdoor ranges, a trap field, an indoor range, and a meeting room. It is a unique facility which receives use from law enforcement agencies, educational activities, and recreation.

The Roeder Home, donated to the County and on the National Historic Register, is a unique facility which provides space for meetings, wedding receptions, special events, and classes.

As population numbers grow, the need for additional aquatic facilities should be re-evaluated.

The East Whatcom Regional Resource Center in Maple Falls provides community services such as early childhood education, family support and health services, transportation, and community gardens.

Goal 9G: Encourage multi-use indoor activity centers to meet the needs of the population, using public and private partnerships where possible.

Policy 9G-1: Support multi-use of the existing senior/community centers to maximize their full potential.

Policy 9G-2: Continue the cooperation between the County and the Cities and Point Roberts Park District on ownership and management of the existing senior/community centers.

Policy 9G-3: Evaluate the cost/benefit ratio of adding a multi-purpose facility on the property owned by the Parks Department at Smith and Northwest Roads to meet the expanding demand by all age groups in the Bellingham/Ferndale growth corridor.

Policy 9G-4: Expand the Plantation Rifle Range to meet the needs of residents, organizations, and law enforcement agencies.

Policy 9G-5: Acquire property for a buffer area around the Plantation Rifle Range to insure the ability to continue its use in the future.

Policy 9G-6: Continue to utilize the Roeder Home for cultural arts activities, community events, and gatherings, while utilizing partnerships, leased space, or creative opportunities to accommodate program expansion.

Policy 9G-7: Continue to monitor the need for additional aquatic facilities in the community, with the basic assumption that Whatcom County will not be an indoor aquatic provider in the near future.

Policy 9G-8: Continue to search for partnerships with other public agencies and private groups in providing recreation facilities such as golf facilities, camping, and resort centers.

Policy 9G-9: Expand the partnership concept to incorporate school buildings and other public or private facilities which can accommodate meetings and recreational functions.

Park Facilities

Goal 9H: As economically feasible, continue to implement the Whatcom County Comprehensive Park, Recreation and Open Space (CPROS Plan) goals and policies through adoption of the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan Six-year Capital Improvement Program (CIP).

- Policy 9H-1: Continue to monitor park and recreation service needs throughout the county and encourage others to provide the identified service needs.
- Policy 9H-2: Develop facilities and areas that will be particularly attractive to Whatcom County residents.
- Policy 9H-3: Develop and maintain facilities at a high standard. These standards should be established in accordance with the Whatcom County Comprehensive Park and Recreation Open Space (CPROS Plan) and the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan.
- Policy 9H-4: Design and develop recreation facilities for low maintenance.
- Policy 9H-5: In keeping with policies in other chapters of this plan, consider strategies for ensuring the provision of community parks in accordance with appropriate standards. In the residential UGAs not associated with cities and in Rural Communities, mechanisms are needed for acquisition, development, and subsequent maintenance and operations. Community Associations and Park Districts are options to be explored.
- Policy 9H-6: Continue to plan for full utilization of existing senior/community centers and explore partnerships to help absorb future need.
- Policy 9H-7: Continue to identify and develop major planning initiatives identified in the CPROS Plan.
- Policy 9H-8: Develop strategies to acquire land currently leased for the Plantation Rifle Range and a buffer around the rifle range.
- Policy 9H-9: Galbraith/Lookout Mt. – Develop and implement a plan cooperatively to acquire Rights of Way for trail corridors and for the purchase or lease of additional acreage, along with pursuit of formal usage and mitigation agreements with private individuals or land owners, to preserve or expand the recreational values for residents and tourists with reasonably limited impact on both local residents and the environment.
- Policy 9H-10: Stewart Mt. – Negotiate with current landowner to obtain formal usage agreements for access to logging trails, to open public access corridors between Lake Whatcom recreation areas and the South Fork Valley.
- Goal 9I: Develop a stronger financial base for recreational services:**
- Policy 9I-1: Design future recreation facilities and areas with the ability to charge user fees.
- Policy 9I-2: Explore new innovative methods of financing facility development, maintenance, and operating needs.

- Policy 9I-3: Consider joint ventures with private clubs, public agencies, commercial operations, and other groups to build and maintain facilities.
- Policy 9I-4: Seek to design and develop facilities that will encourage tourism.
- Policy 9I-5: Consider the establishment of park impact fees based on the Growth Management Act.
- Policy 9I-6: Experiment with novel public-private partnerships to provide facilities that will provide a quality experience to draw tourists to Whatcom County's parks. Some examples would be privately operated zip-line facilities and strategically located seasonal food trucks. Part or all of the "rent" provided could be by the provision of privately funded public use facilities such as toilets and shuttle buses used to service these private facilities.