

**WHATCOM COUNTY
PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT SERVICES**

**COUNTY-WIDE POPULATION GROWTH
MONITORING REPORT**

I. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The purpose of this report is to compare population growth estimates for Whatcom County's Urban Growth Areas (UGAs) and non-urban areas with the population growth planned for in the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan (WCCP), Chapter 1, Table 4. WCCP policies 2S-5 and 2DD-1 call for monitoring of growth in urban and non-urban areas, respectively.

Policy 2DD-1, adopted in 2012, requires that "By February 1 of each year the department will publish a report that monitors residential development activity outside the urban growth areas during the previous year and compares that data with the adopted population growth projection for those areas. If it is apparent that growth occurring outside the urban growth areas is inconsistent with adopted projections, the County shall take action to address the discrepancy." Whatcom County PDS has published these reports on January 24, 2013 and January 31, 2014.

WCCP Policy 2S-5, adopted in 2009, requires the County to work with the cities to monitor land capacity and growth within UGAs on an annual basis and compare the data with adopted growth projections for the UGAs. The policy requires the County to "coordinate with the cities to amend growth projections, or amend urban growth area densities or boundaries if, over several years, the data indicate that growth is occurring at a significantly different rate than adopted projections."

Since 2012 the County and the seven cities within the County have been coordinating on updating the land capacity analyses for each of the UGAs. These jurisdictions also contracted with Berk and Associates to compile estimates of population growth between 1990 and 2010 in preparation for the UGA review component of the GMA-required 2016 Comprehensive Plan update.¹

Beginning with the 2010 Census, the Washington State Office of Financial Management (OFM) has published population estimates for UGAs through its Small Area Estimate Program (SAEP). The SAEP estimates have been published in late

¹ Berk and Associates, "Whatcom County Population and Employment Projections and Urban Growth Area Allocations Phase I Technical Report" November 1, 2013. This report contains population data for each UGA and the non-UGA areas between 1990 and 2010, including growth shares and annual growth rates, and was used extensively by the County and cities in preparing recommended growth allocations for the 2013-2036 period. Berk methodology differs from OFM SAEP methodology, resulting in slight differences in estimates.

September, and apply to years measured from April 1 to March 31 rather than on a calendar year basis.²

The WCCP's 2008-2029 growth projections were adopted in 2009 and modified in 2010. As the County and cities prepare to update the growth projections for the 2016 comprehensive plan update, the population estimates can be compared with the adopted growth projections "over several years," per WCCP Policy 2S-5. The data in this report has already been presented to the Planning Commission and County Council as part of the process of developing revised population allocations for the County's UGAs as part of the 2016 Comprehensive Plan Update.³ This report compiles the data into one reference document.

II. POPULATION GROWTH ESTIMATE

Table 1. OFM SAEP Population Growth Estimates (April 1)						
UGA	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2008-13 Total
Bellingham	807	510	157	296	948	2,718
Blaine	66	50	23	54	26	219
Everson	27	19	14	25	30	115
Ferndale	167	127	121	281	454	1,150
Lynden	172	131	67	280	390	1,040
Nooksack	38	33	12	20	40	143
Sumas	25	21	48	44	50	187
Birch Bay	274	247	102	64	65	751
Columbia Valley	59	49	27	10	14	159
Non-UGA	426	217	389	326	283	1,642
Total	2,061	1,404	960	1,400	2,300	8,125

Table 1 shows annual estimated growth for each UGA over the most recent five years for which OFM SAEP April 1 estimates are available, between the April 1, 2008 and the April 1, 2013 estimates. The drop-off in population growth during the

² OFM's regular April 1 estimates, typically published in June, provide estimates for cities and the overall County but not for UGAs. Because OFM's data are based on April 1 years, the data shown in this report are also on an April 1 basis. The 2013 and 2014 Non-Urban Population Growth Monitoring Reports, published in January of those years per WCCP Policy 2DD-1, are based on building permit data for the previous calendar years. Due to the difference in the time periods and in methodology (OFM's SAEP methodology vs. 2DD-1's use of building permit data only) the annual estimates for the non-UGA areas will differ between the two reports. The 2014 Non-Urban report includes an estimate for calendar year 2013 while the most recent annual estimating period in this report is April 1, 2012 through March 31, 2013.

³ See WCPDS staff presentations for the [December 12, 2013](#) Planning Commission meeting and the [January 28, February 11,](#) and [February 25, 2014](#) County Council meetings.

recessionary years, particularly in the larger UGAs, is clearly shown (see also Chart 1 below). OFM does not provide an estimate for the remaining non-UGA portion of the County; that estimate is derived by subtracting estimated UGA population from OFM's total County estimate.

III. COMPARISON WITH PLANNED POPULATION GROWTH

WCCP Chapter 1, Table 4 contains the population growth projections adopted for the UGAs and the non-UGA areas for the 21-year planning period 2008-2029. The projections will be revised as part of the 2016 Comprehensive Plan Update. For illustration purposes, Table 2 shows the currently adopted growth projections as well as a proration of those projections to a 5-year period, assuming an equal annual distribution of projected growth. As PDS staff has shown in recent presentations to the Planning Commission and County Council⁴, growth has fluctuated widely in the County in past decades and has rarely matched the twenty year annual average figure in any given year.

UGA	2008-2029	5-year Proration
Bellingham	22,477	5,352
Blaine	4,249	1,012
Everson	1,228	292
Ferndale	8,688	2,069
Lynden	5,175	1,232
Nooksack	944	225
Sumas	793	189
Birch Bay	3,825	911
Columbia Valley	1,076	256
Non-UGA	8,300	1,976
Total	56,755	13,513

Table 3 compares the five-year OFM SAEP estimates with the 5-year prorated allocation from the WCCP. For all UGAs and the non-UGA portion of the County, estimated growth was below the WCCP growth projections, as would be expected given the severe economic downturn experienced during this period.

⁴ See WCPDS staff presentations for the [July 25, 2013](#) Planning Commission meeting and the [January 28, 2014](#) County Council meeting.

Table 3. Comparison of OFM SAEP Estimates with WCCP Growth Allocations			
UGA	OFM SAEP April 1 2008-2013	WCCP Growth Allocations 5-year Proration	Surplus (Deficit)
Bellingham	2,718	5,352	(2,634)
Blaine	219	1,012	(793)
Everson	115	292	(177)
Ferndale	1,150	2,069	(919)
Lynden	1,040	1,232	(192)
Nooksack	143	225	(81)
Sumas	187	189	(1)
Birch Bay	751	911	(159)
Columbia Valley	159	256	(97)
Non-UGA	1,642	1,976	(334)
Total	8,125	13,513	(5,388)

Chart 1 includes SAEP growth estimates going back to 2000 and compares them with the annual proportion of the WCCP's adopted 2008-29 population growth projections (far right column).⁵ In the five years since the beginning of the 2008-29 planning period the overall population growth has been below the annual average projection, though in the preceding economic boom years, growth had been significantly higher than the annual average projection.

Tables 2 and 3 compare estimated growth with planned growth in terms of absolute numbers. It is also helpful to compare estimated and planned "growth share," or the proportion of the total County growth going to individual UGAs and the non-UGA areas. For comparison purposes, Chart 2 shows the distribution of growth among the UGAs first as estimated by OFM SAEP, then as allocated in the adopted growth projections of WCCP Table 4. For example, the WCCP currently plans for Bellingham to receive 39.6% of the County's growth between 2008 and 2029 but OFM estimates it only received 33.5% from 2008 through 2012. And while growth in the non-UGA area was below its WCCP growth allocation during that five-year period in terms of absolute numbers, its growth share was larger than 14.6 percent because growth was relatively slow in several UGAs during the recent recessionary period.

⁵ The WCCP annual growth projections are derived by taking the overall 2008-29 growth allocations for each area in WCCP Chapter 1 Table 4 and dividing by 21 years.

Chart 1. 2000-13 OFM SAEP UGA Growth Estimates and WCCP Annual Average Growth Projections

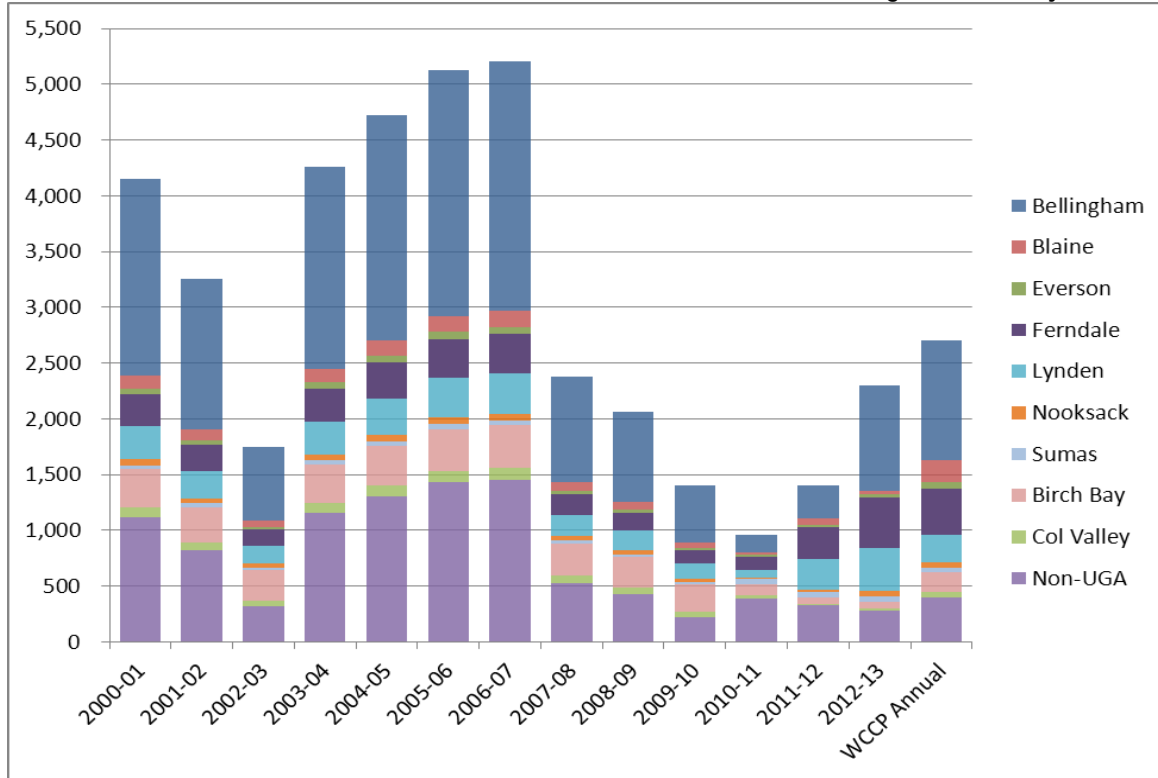
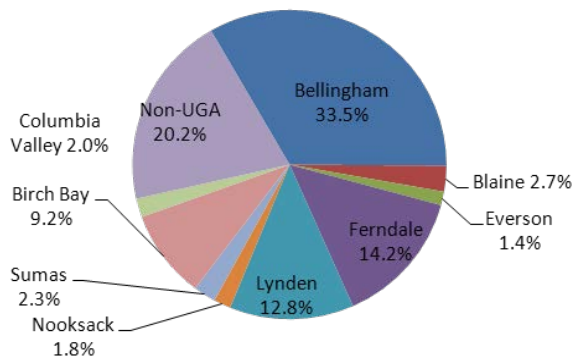
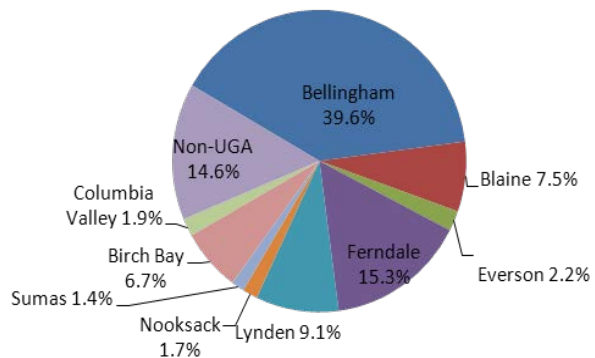


Chart 2. 2008-2013 Growth Share Comparison

SAEP-Based Est. Share of 2008-13 Growth



2008-2029 Growth Share per WCCP Projections



WCCP Policy 2S-5 calls for the County to “annually monitor land capacity by compiling annual reports from the cities on development activity, and comparing that data with adopted growth projections for the urban growth areas.” As discussed above, the County and the cities send annual reports of permit activity to OFM, who uses them to prepare the population estimates shown in Table 1 of this report. Whatcom County PDS and the planners for the seven cities have been working to update the land capacity analyses (LCA’s) for each UGA in preparation for the 2016 WCCP update.

At this writing, the County and the cities are in the process of approving a joint resolution that establishes a set of preliminary twenty-year population and employment growth allocations for the UGAs and the non-UGA area. This set of allocations can be used to define one of the alternatives for the WCCP 2016 Update Environmental Impact Study. The city and county elected officials and planning commissions who approved the preliminary allocations were presented proposed allocations accompanied by preliminary LCA estimates of population and employment capacity.

The preliminary LCA’s were based largely on current UGA boundaries⁶ as well as the cities’ and County’s assumed densities and market factors. Recent development activity has been factored into both the inventory of available land and the determination of assumed densities.

Table 4 compares the joint resolution’s proposed population projections with the preliminary land capacity estimates for each UGA. As the County and cities work together to approve the population and employment allocations by 2016, the LCA’s can be adjusted to reflect changes to assumed densities, market factors, or UGA boundaries.

UGA	Proposed 2013-2036	Prelim. LCA Pop. Capacity
Bellingham	35,918	28,600
Blaine	4,414	6,634
Everson	1,242	1,293
Ferndale	6,833	6,427
Lynden	6,403	6,934*
Nooksack	1,035	913
Sumas	874	884
Birch Bay	5,500	5,202*
Columbia Valley	1,345	1,377

*Includes areas currently designated as UGA Reserve

⁶ The preliminary land capacity analysis results for the Lynden and Birch Bay UGAs assumed UGA boundaries that would include areas currently designated as UGA Reserve.