

City Supports Whatcom County's Bellingham UGA Boundaries
Bellingham Herald Guest Editorial
By Bellingham Mayor Dan Pike
June 6, 2008

In 2004, Whatcom County adopted population growth forecasts for the City of Bellingham requiring the City plan for urban area population growth of 31,600 during the 2002-2022 planning period. In June 2006, the City adopted a new Comprehensive Plan establishing that the city would accommodate this growth through a combination of expansion of its UGA boundary, infill within existing city limits, and increased densities in the existing UGA. As part of the City's Comprehensive Plan update, the City Council adopted Resolution 2006-15 recommending that Whatcom County significantly expand Bellingham's northern UGA to accommodate future population growth.

During last year's election campaign, and since then as Mayor, I've consistently opposed the City's 2006 decision and recommendation to the County promoting expansion of Bellingham's UGA boundaries. Such an expansion fails to support transportation choices, protect the environment, promote sustainability, or encourage infill. An overly broad expansion also devalues our waterfront redevelopment by subsidizing less appropriate alternatives. In sum, an oversized UGA encourages economically and environmentally inappropriate sprawl.

The underlying assumptions supporting the City's 2006 recommendation must be reexamined. Many City residents have appropriate concerns regarding the validity of those assumptions. The City can and should accommodate its share of anticipated population growth with a much smaller expansion of the UGA, through appropriate infill protective of our neighborhoods. Erring on the side of a smaller UGA leaves unlimited opportunities to increase our UGA boundaries; an excessive expansion of the UGA is nearly irreversible.

In late January 2008, I presented City Council with a resolution supporting Whatcom County's decision to accommodate future population growth with a more limited expansion of the City's UGA boundaries than the City originally recommended. On February 4, 2008, the City Council adopted Resolution 2008-03 by a vote of 4 to 2. This resolution was a public show of support for the County's decision; however, it changed neither the Comprehensive Plan nor the Land Supply Analysis. The resolution stated the City would undertake amending these GMA planning documents after the County's UGA decision was found compliant with the Growth Management Act (GMA).

On February 12, 2008, Whatcom County passed Ordinance 2008-003, adopting a more limited expansion of the City's UGA boundaries than originally proposed by the City. Both the County's ordinance adopting the new UGA boundaries and Bellingham's resolution supporting the County action were appealed to the Western Washington Growth Management Hearings Board (Growth Board).

To settle the Growth Board appeal of our resolution, the City adopted Resolution 2008-17 to clarify that while Bellingham remains committed to the County's adoption of a smaller UGA, it has not yet amended its Comprehensive Plan and Land Supply Analysis to reflect this smaller UGA boundary. Under City and State law, the City cannot change these GMA planning documents to reflect these tighter UGA boundaries without conducting an extensive public process, including multiple hearings before our Planning Commission and City Council.

Under the GMA, counties—not cities—determine UGA boundaries. A majority of City Council and I continue to support Whatcom County's adoption of a more limited expansion of Bellingham's UGA boundaries. City amendment of its Comprehensive Plan and Land Supply Analysis to reflect a smaller UGA and identifying alternative means for accommodating population growth will begin as soon as the Growth Board upholds the County's Bellingham UGA boundaries.

Besides political posturing, there is no benefit in going to Court over a pre-ordained outcome: the February resolution was simply a means of communicating the preference of the City Council and Mayor for the narrower UGA as proposed by the County. It is simply a more efficient use of City resources to wait until we know what the UGA boundaries are before we undertake the significant public planning process that is required to modify our GMA planning documents to reflect those new boundaries. I will not waste resources to engage in meaningless fights, particularly with so many critical issues needing attention, such as infill, transportation, the Lake Whatcom watershed, and the Waterfront redevelopment.