In 1990 the Legislature found that uncoordinated and unplanned growth poses a threat to the environment, sustainable economic development, and high quality of life enjoyed by residents of this state. This became the foundation for the Growth Management Act (GMA). The (GMA) requires designation of agricultural lands that do not already have significant urban growth and that have long-term value for the production of food or other products. After recent public hearings and staff briefings, the Board of County Commissioners acted to protect 805 acres as agricultural lands of long-term commercial significance. Originally, the board designated 12,692 acres. However, additional acres (2,346) were added in December 2008, and then these recent 805. The total designation is now 15,943 acres, which is a 20% increase.

The agricultural history of Thurston County extends from the pre-historic period when Native Americans burned prairies to help the growth of crops. From this long history it can been argued that citizens and decision makers in Thurston County need to view these lands as essential to a diverse and healthy economy, and that efforts to improve the landscape for those who work these lands are very important.

The public was invited to learn about plans for additional preservation of these lands in Thurston County at a recent meeting. The county’s Agricultural Advisory Committee, made up of county residents, has developed a number of potential strategies designed to help conserve working lands. Working lands are defined as land used for agriculture, forestry or other resource industries. These strategies were discussed and the plan will be moving forward in the coming months.

Regional Transportation Systems: Planning for Similar Needs

Everyone is looking for innovative ways for government to reduce costs. Maintaining and operating separate transportation systems does not make sense. Even though we’re trying to be efficient, we’re duplicating each other’s efforts and needing to maintain our own equipment and staffing resources to do the same common functions. We should look at a coordinated regional approach for delivering common transportation functions like maintenance and operations. The LOTT Alliance and Intercity Transit are two local models where a regional approach has proven to be much more efficient and effective. Working together we can do more with the resources we’re already spending and provide better services to our constituents. Local residents and businesses should see their tax dollars go further towards maintaining and operating their transportation system as resources are pooled to create more efficient service delivery options. A coordinated approach can lead to better economies of scale for resources, materials, and specialty staffing skills. Regional coordination will be an emphasis in the next federal transportation act. Beginning work on this now will put us ahead of other regions and perhaps enhance our competitive ability to bring in critical federal funds. For next steps, we will organize a round-table of policy makers and public works directors with support from the Thurston Regional Planning Council. The group will begin to assess the benefits of this concept for our respective communities.