THE ROLE OF RIPARIAN AREAS

Riparian habitat is found along waterbodies such as rivers, streams, lakes and marine (salt water) shorelines. These areas may also be referred to as buffers.

Riparian habitats:

• refer to the transitional areas between the upland environment and the water;

• moderate the temperature of waterbodies, help prevent erosion, and provide a home for many types of animals and vegetation;

• are located alongside the water, but also provide habitat within the water. Trees that fall into the water form sheltered pools where fish can lay eggs. The trees and pools also supply insects and organic materials for the aquatic food chain.

• Are used by 90 percent of wildlife for all or part of their life cycles.

The purpose of maintaining riparian habitat areas is to maintain habitat and healthy, functioning ecosystems in order to support viable populations of fish and wildlife in Thurston County.

WATER TYPE CLASSIFICATIONS

• Like the existing Critical Areas Ordinance, the potential amendments would set riparian areas according to how the streams and waterbodies are classified or “typed” by the Department of Natural Resources.

• The water types are based on either a stream or waterbody’s designation as a significant water, on the likelihood that a stream is potentially used by fish based on its size and gradient, and/or whether a stream flows year-round (perennial).

CONSIDERATIONS IN CRITICAL AREAS ORDINANCE

STREAM AND MARINE RIPARIAN AREAS (FORMERLY KNOWN AS “BUFFERS”)

The potential amendments would set stream riparian areas at 100 to 250 feet, depending on how the streams are classified by the state. Stream riparian areas/buffers are now between 25 and 100 feet.

The width of the riparian area would vary, depending on the size of the stream, water quality and fish and wildlife habitat provided by the given stream. The potential amendments would also establish 50-foot riparian management zones* adjacent to those areas for certain, more significant streams (Type F and Type S).

CHANNEL MIGRATION HAZARD AREAS

Channel migration is the area where the active channel of a stream is prone to movement over time. In channel migration areas, development is currently regulated from the ordinary high water mark out to a distance that equals 100 times the annual rate of erosion. The potential amendments would establish 100-foot channel migration hazard area management zones* adjacent to the hazard areas.

MARINE (SALT WATER) RIPARIAN AREAS

The potential amendments would establish 150-foot-wide marine riparian areas along marine shorelines, and 100-foot marine riparian management zones* adjacent to those areas.

* ABOUT RIPARIAN MANAGEMENT ZONES: Development could still occur within riparian management zones, however, standards would be set for uses or activities that would generate excessive nutrients, sediments, or pollutants that could reach the riparian area or stream, or that could significantly alter the quantity or the timing of water reaching the stream.

PONDS

Ponds are defined as having less than 20 acres of open water. Potential amendments would increase buffers for naturally occurring ponds from about 50 feet to 100 feet to protect water quality. Thurston County could reduce the buffer width down to 50 feet under certain circumstances, such as when water quality would not be impaired. Smaller ponds that are 1,000 square feet or less in size would not be included.

THE SHORELINE MASTER PROGRAM

Type S streams, marine shorelines, lakes (lakes are defined as having 20 acres or more of open water) and portions of the 100-year floodplain are also regulated under a different ordinance: the Thurston County Shoreline Master Program, which is also currently under revision. In areas subject to regulation under both the Critical Areas Ordinance and the Shoreline Master Program, the most protective criteria will apply until Thurston County completes its Shoreline Master Program update, which will then take precedence.