2-D WORKING LANDS
STAFF REPORT
COMPREHENSIVE PLAN POLICY CHANGES

Date: January 6, 2010

Public Hearing Date: Projected to be in late January or early February

Prepared by:
Jeremy Davis, Associate Planner
Planning
Corina Hayes, Assistant Planner
Resource Stewardship
Thurston County

Proponent/Applicant:
Thurston County

Staff Contact, OTHER JURISDICTION
NA

Action Requested:
Amend Chapter 3 Natural Resource Lands to Facilitate Proposed Working Lands Plan

Proposal Description:
☐ Map Changes ☐ Text Changes ☐ Both ☒ Affects Comprehensive Plans/documents
☐ Affected Jurisdictions

ISSUE:
Consider proposed amendments to the Thurston County Comprehensive Plan that would better enable implementation of recommendations contained in the Thurston County Agricultural Advisory Committee’s Working Lands Strategic Plan.

BACKGROUND:
The Thurston County Agricultural Committee (Ag Committee) has over the past twenty-four months been developing a Working Lands Strategic Plan (WLSP). The WLSP provides recommendations that, if implemented by the County, may increase the conservation of working lands such as farms and timber lands. The recommendations would enable formalization of a purchase of development rights (PDR) policy, enable improvements to the existing transfer of
development rights (TDR) program and potentially create a Working Lands Advocate position within County government. It is the Ag Committee’s intent that the County’s Comprehensive Plan be amended to enable implementation of the WLSP.

DEPARTMENT ANALYSIS:
Currently, Thurston County does not have a formal policy for the purchase of development rights. The County has executed the purchase of development rights in the past based on unique and discrete opportunities, but has never developed a formal policy for how to rank properties, secure funding, and handle PDR real estate transactions. The WLSP makes recommendations that seek to fully develop the County’s PDR policy and program.

Regarding the transfer of development rights, Thurston County’s Comprehensive Plan and associated development regulations limit TDR programs to property that is designated as Long Term Agriculture. The WLSP would allow greater flexibility in the type of properties could be considered in a TDR transaction. Finally, the WLSP seeks to better manage working lands within Thurston County. In past years, working land issues have been addressed sporadically as limited staff resources and funding would allow. The WLSP advocates for the addition of a working lands staff position to manage working lands policy and program issues.

Several minor amendments to Chapter 3 Natural Resource Lands are necessary to add policies and action steps to support the WLSP and ensure consistency with the Thurston County Comprehensive Plan. The proposed amendments are shown in Attachment A, and detailed below. The proposed new goals are underlined, with staff comments.

Comprehensive plan amendments:

Goal 1, Objective A, Policy 6
The County should work with conservation groups and commercial farmland owners to encourage participation in a voluntary purchase of development rights program for the conservation of agricultural and working lands.

This new policy supports involving the land owner and conservation groups to propose and accomplish the purchase of development rights. This would allow conservation groups to manage the easements instead of the County. This also allows for the land owner to continue doing the day-to-day management and stewardship of the working land property.

Goal 1, Objective A, Policy 7
A purchase of development rights program (PDR) should be utilized as an incentive for farmers to stay in agriculture on agricultural lands within the County to ensure that agricultural and working lands stay available for such uses.

Goal 1 states: “AGRICULTURE LAND SHOULD BE PRESERVED IN ORDER TO ENSURE AN ADEQUATE LAND BASE FOR LONG-TERM FARM USE. (This applies to all agricultural land).”

Policy 7 provides another option for protecting these lands from the pressures of development by encouraging/allowing use of the purchase of development rights program to compensate property owners for their development rights. This incentive will help keep these lands from being converted to other uses.

Goal 1, Objective A, Action Needs for Objective (4)
The County should coordinate and collaborate with conservation groups, farmers, and others to develop funding sources and obtain matching funds for a Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) program.
Thurston County does not have adequate funds to make a purchase of development rights program effective. This action provides the County an opportunity to work with other funding sources to procure more money for working lands conservation.

**Goal 1, Objective C, Policy 2**
The County should provide the agricultural community with an advocate. The advocate will provide technical assistance, and facilitate objectives of the County's Working Lands Plan.

A major component of the working lands plan is a working lands advocate. This policy would support the creation of this type of position.

**Goal 4, Objective A, Policy 5**
Conservation futures funds should be used in conjunction with other funds to purchase development rights from willing forest landowners to preserve the resource for future generations.

Goal 4 states "FOREST LANDS SHOULD BE CONSERVED IN ORDER TO MAINTAIN A Viable FORESTRY INDUSTRY WHILE PROTECTING ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES." This minor policy amendment adds support for the County to obtain other funds for the purchase of development rights program. This will provide more opportunity to conserve additional lands, and will help the County seek grant funding for conservation purposes.

**Goal 4, Objective A, Policy 6**
The County should work with conservation groups, commercial family forest land owners, and others to encourage voluntary participation in a purchase of development rights (PDR) program for the conservation of managed working forest lands.

This policy supports involving the land owner and conservation groups to propose and accomplish the purchase of development rights. This would allow conservation groups to manage the easements instead of the County. This also allows for the land owner to continue doing the day-to-day management and stewardship of the working land property.

**Goal 4, Objective A, Action Needs for Objective (4)**
The County should coordinate and collaborate with other funding sources to obtain matching funds for purchase of development rights.

Thurston County does not have adequate funds to make a purchase of development rights program effective. This action provides the County an opportunity to work with other funding sources to procure more money for working lands conservation.

**Goal 6, Objective A, Policy 3**
A Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) should be utilized as an incentive for property owners to conserve forest lands within the county to ensure that working forest lands continue to stay available for such uses.

Goal 6 states: "RURAL FOREST LANDS ENROLLED IN A CURRENT USE TAX ASSESSMENT PROGRAM SHOULD BE PROTECTED FROM PRESSURES TO CONVERT TO OTHER USES". Policy 3 provides another option for protecting these lands from the pressures of development by encouraging/allowing use of the purchase of development rights program to compensate property owners for their development rights. This incentive will help to keep these lands from being converted to other uses.
OPTIONS:

Option 1: Adopt the proposed changes.
With this option, several minor text amendments would be made to Chapter 3 Natural Resource Lands to facilitate the implementation steps in the Working Lands Strategic Plan. Further changes to the Thurston County Code would follow at a later date.

Option 2: No Change
With this option, no change would be made to the Thurston County Comprehensive Plan.

SEPA:
An environmental determination has not been made at this time; however, this will be completed prior to final consideration of the proposed text changes in March of 2010.

NOTIFICATION:
Written notice of any future public hearings shall be distributed as required by State Law and the Thurston County Code.

PUBLIC COMMENT:
Since the April briefing, the Working Lands Strategic Plan has been available for public comment on the Agricultural Committee website. Also, members of the Agricultural Committee staffed a booth at the Thurston County Fair, and a public meeting was held in Tenino on October 1, 2009. No written public comments have been received as of this date. Discussion at the public meeting held on October 1, 2009, resulted in minor text changes to the Working Lands Strategic Plan.

DEPARTMENT COMMENTS:
This item was distributed to other departments for review over the summer and fall of 2009 as a package. The Resource Stewardship Department and the Planning Department have both contributed to the policies.

PLANNING DEPARTMENT RECOMMENDATION:
The Planning Department and the Resource Stewardship Department recommend Option 1.

ATTACHMENTS:
Attachment A Proposed Policy Changes to Thurston County Comprehensive Plan
Attachment B Working Lands Strategic Plan
Working Lands on the Web: http://www.co.thurston.wa.us/permitting/agriculture-advisory-committee/working-lands-strategic-plan.htm