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PLANNING DEPARTMENT

Creating Solutions for Our Future

Scott Clark
Director

MEMORANDUM

TO: Thurston County Planning Commission
FROM: Jeremy Davis, Senior Planner
DATE: February 15, 2012
SUBJECT: Critical Areas Ordinance Title 20 (Rural) Zoning Density Requirements

As part of the critical areas update, staff have proposed to move the density requirements from the Critical Areas Ordinance (Chapter 17.15) where they currently reside, to the applicable zoning ordinance chapters.

Prior to the public hearing during the dialogue on density changes to Title 20 (Rural) Zoning, the Planning Commission and staff discussed the impact of changes in critical areas regulations on permitted densities in the Rural Residential One Unit per Five Acres (RR 1/5) and Rural Residential and Resource One Unit per Five Acres (RRR 1/5). Currently there are 4,046 acres zoned RR 1/5 and 166,540 acres zoned RRR 1/5 for a total of 170,586 acres that would be affected by changes in critical areas definitions.

During the rural rezoning in 2007, residentially zoned properties outside of urban growth areas were rezoned and the density limitations for the RRR 1/5 and RR 1/5 zoning districts were modified. The changes were intended to provide a variety of rural densities and to reduce densities overall in the rural area. In the RRR 1/5 and RR 1/5 zoning districts, the permitted density is reduced by the following:

- Documented high groundwater hazard areas, wetlands, marine bluff hazard areas to the top of the bluff and landslide hazard areas
- All rivers, streams and marine shorelines up to the ordinary high water mark
- 100-year floodplains
- Submerged land of lakes;
- Critical area buffers are not subtracted for the purpose of determining density

The most significant impact on density of the above list is the change in the jurisdictional size of wetlands in the rural area. Currently, jurisdictional wetland size is 22,000 square feet in the rural county or 2,500 square feet if adjacent to a stream or within its 100 year floodplain. Generally, the size is proposed to be 1,000 square feet after consideration of best available science and

2000 Lakeridge Drive SW, Olympia, Washington 98502 (360) 786-5490/FAX (360) 754-2939
TDD (360) 754-2933 Website: www.thurstonplanning.org

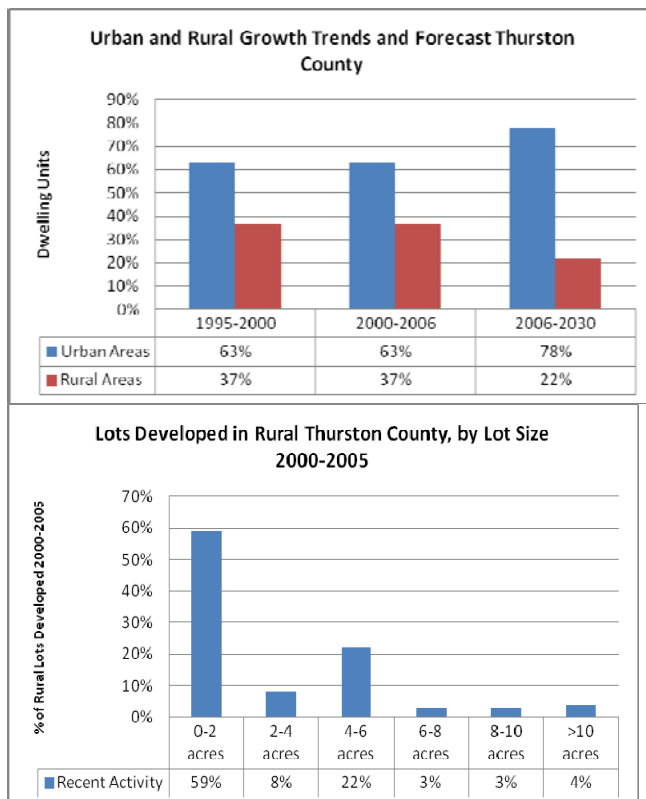
consultation with the state Department of Ecology. This change will result in a down zoning for properties that have smaller wetlands, and so has a much broader policy connotation than protecting wetlands under the critical areas ordinance.

Rural Residential Land Supply

Residential land supply in Thurston County is described in the Buildable Lands Report for Thurston County. The last edition was released in September 2007, and has been amended twice since to accommodate adjustments in Urban Growth Area (UGA) Size.

The purpose of the buildable lands report is to gauge whether residential development is developing in the UGA as envisioned and if there is adequate land supply in urban areas to accommodate future population growth. The report also includes information on rural residential development. An excerpt of this information is located in Attachment A.

The chart titled “Urban and Rural Growth Trends and Forecast Thurston County” shows the distribution of dwelling units constructed in urban and rural areas in Thurston County through 2006, and forecasts growth share for 2006-2030. It is projected that a lower share of dwelling units will be accommodated in the rural area in the future. The variety of reasons for this change include the availability of undeveloped lots smaller than 4 acres in size, the availability of lots in the UGAs, and the inability to create many new smaller lots in the rural area due to the zoning changes that occurred with the rural rezoning project in 2007.



The above table “Lots Developed in Rural Thurston County, by Lot Size 2000-2005” shows the percent of developed lots by size. Lots 0 to 4 acres in size accounted for 67% of the lots developed between 2000 and 2005, with lots 4-6 acres in size the next most popular at 22%. There is a projected nine year supply of available lots 0-4 acres in size (3,800 lots) and a

projected seven year supply of lots 4-8 acres in size (1,200 lots). The availability of lots less than five acres in size is diminishing because of the limits set with the 2007 rural rezoning.

The impact on the supply of five-acre lots in the rural area by the change in jurisdictional wetland size is difficult to quantify based on the information available at this time. Not all wetlands are mapped in Thurston County, and not all mapped or delineated wetlands are included on the county's Geographic Information System wetland map. Finding smaller wetlands can also be difficult due to forest/land cover, shading, and other factors involved with remote sensing. Additionally, some areas shown as wetlands based on remote mapping may not actually have wetland conditions present on site, a determination which cannot be made without site verification. However, it is safe to say that the availability of lots five to ten acres in size will likely diminish because of the change in jurisdictional wetland size.

Proposed Density Limitations

The new proposed density section for the RR 1/5 district is proposed to be located in Section 20.09.050 Density, and the new proposed density section for the RRR 1/5 district is proposed to be located in Section 20.09A.040 Density. The text indicating the maximum number of dwelling units is the same and reads as follows:

“The maximum number of dwelling units allowed shall be determined by:

- a. Subtracting from the parcel area: documented high groundwater hazard areas, wetlands, marine bluff hazard areas to the top of the bluff and landslide hazard areas; all rivers, streams and marine shorelines up to the ordinary high water mark; 100-year floodplains; and submerged land of lakes;
- b. Critical area buffers shall not be subtracted from the parcel for purposes of making the density calculation; and
- c. The zoning density shall be applied to the remainder of the parcel.”

Options:

Option 1:

Do not adjust the proposed density language in the RRR 1/5 and the RR 1/5 from the proposed jurisdictional wetland size in the proposed Title 24 (1,000 square feet) to current jurisdictional size (22,000 square feet or 2,500 square feet if associated with a stream or floodplain). This would result in a rural down zoning.

Option 2

Adjust the proposed density language in the RRR 1/5 and the RR 1/5 zoning districts from the jurisdictional wetland size in the proposed Title 24 to the current jurisdictional size. This would maintain the current rural density rules in relation to wetlands.

If this option were selected by the Planning Commission, then the proposed density limits would be adjusted as follows:

“The maximum number of dwelling units allowed shall be determined by:

- a. Subtracting from the parcel area: documented high groundwater hazard areas; wetlands 22,000 square feet or more and 2,500 square feet or more if adjacent to a stream or within its 100 year floodplain; marine bluff hazard areas to the top of the bluff and landslide

hazard areas; all rivers, streams and marine shorelines up to the ordinary high water mark; 100-year floodplains; and submerged land of lakes;

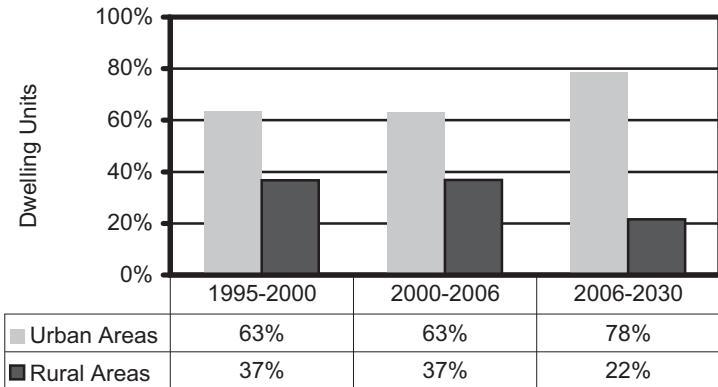
- b. Critical area buffers shall not be subtracted from the parcel for purposes of making the density calculation; and
- c. The zoning density shall be applied to the remainder of the parcel.”

Attachment A: Excerpt from 2007 Buildable Lands Report for Rural Growth

Rural Growth

Between 1995 and 2000, almost 37 percent of new residential buildings¹ were built in rural areas of Thurston County. Between 2000 and 2006, rural growth had dropped to around 35 percent of total residential growth.

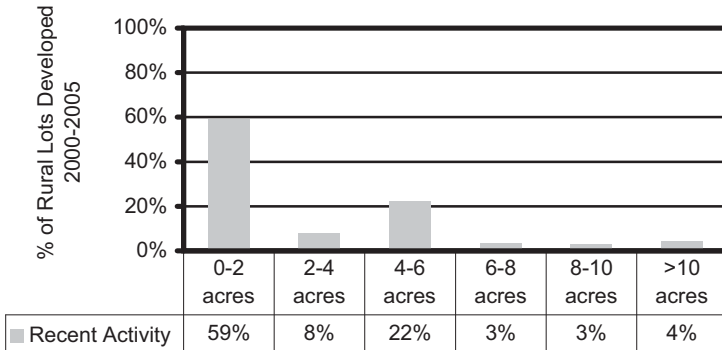
**Urban and Rural Growth Trends and Forecast
Thurston County**



In the future it is expected that rural growth will continue to be steady, but urban growth will continue to increase, resulting in a change in growth shares. Going out to 2030, it is estimated that just over 78 percent of residential growth will locate in urban areas. There are a variety of reasons for this:

Approximately 67 percent of rural growth in the last five years has taken place on lots that are 4 acres or smaller in size. Many of these lots are ‘legacy lots’ and were platted before 1995 when GMA Comprehensive Plans were adopted. Others were platted in rural one and two acres zoning districts. Some were created as part of cluster subdivisions.

**Lots Developed in Rural Thurston County, by Lot Size
2000-2005**



Although an approximate 9 year supply of these small lots are available for development, it is likely that less small lots will be created in the future. In July 2007, Thurston County modified rural zoning to reduce the number of small lots that could be platted in the future. The population forecast for Thurston County was adjusted to respond to these changes. Earlier changes to cluster zoning – placing limits on the number of lots and removing the density bonuses has also led to a reduction in new small lots being created in the rural county.

**Rural Lot Consumption
Compared to Supply of Vacant Lots**

Lot Size	Lots Developed 2000-2005	Inventory of Vacant Lots	Estimated Supply*
0-4 acres	2,000	3,800	9 years
4-8 acres	800	1,200	7 years

In addition, there are far more lots in various stages of application in the urban areas, compared to rural areas. One of the reasons for this might be that rural areas were placed under a moratorium for subdivision for approximately two years (which was lifted on August 27, 2007).

Number of Dwelling Units in Various Stages of Application for Development

	Number of Dwellings	Percent
Urban Areas	27,300	94%
Rural Areas	1,600	6%

¹excluding replacements which are a large component of rural growth. Replacements often occur as one mobile home is replaced by another, or a manufactured home is replaced by a stick-built home. TRPC dwelling unit estimates for 2006 are lower than State estimates, as care is taken not to double count replacement units.