

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY – DRAFT 6/2/09

## INTRODUCTION

Thurston County's culture and economy are deeply rooted in the soils of its working lands. From fresh food, to green vistas, to money earned and spent from the riches of the land -- local forest and agricultural lands nourish the region today as they have for centuries. Yet today Thurston County also stands at an important crossroads. Urban growth is pressuring the region's working lands, threatening to erase the important benefits these lands offer to the community.

The goal of the Working Lands Strategic Plan is to help ensure the economic viability of farm and forest lands so property owners are more likely to stay in business rather than convert their land to urban uses. Thurston County and its residents will benefit from a healthy agricultural economy, the protection of irreplaceable growing soils, and the continuity of the rural character that makes the region such a desirable place to live.

This plan is the result of many years of dedicated work by the Thurston County Agricultural Advisory Committee and contributions from the county's working lands community. It contains ideas, suggestions and recommendations presented by stakeholders at a focus group meeting, a public meeting, and at Agricultural Committee meetings. The strategies presented in this plan are based, in large part, on their input.

The strategic plan will also compliment the agricultural goals contained in the county's Comprehensive Plan, and position Thurston County to seek state and federal grant funds.

## BACKGROUND

Thurston County's farmlands are a patchwork of large croplands, berry farms, pasturelands, livestock areas, and specialty crops interspersed among urban lands and in rural areas. These working lands generate benefits for the economy and environment. According to the most recent Federal Agriculture Census estimates, Thurston County farms generated \$117 million in market value sales in 2007 alone. The county also features hundreds of acres of forestlands which provide valuable fiber for commodities and acres of green respite from concrete and asphalt.

Thurston County's working lands benefit the environment. Working lands remain truer in many ways to the natural environment than highly developed lands, because the working lands are used less intensively. For example, working lands have a smaller percentage of impervious surface than housing developments. Well managed lands may play an important role in preserving open space and fish and wildlife habitat. Moreover, having local farm and forest lands in the community reduces the need for long-distance transportation of food and fiber products, which conserves energy and assures that Thurston County has local access to these life necessities.

### The County Comprehensive Plan

The 1990 Washington State Growth Management Act (GMA) is a state law that requires cities and counties of a certain size to write comprehensive plans to manage growth and prevent urban sprawl. Comprehensive plans are not just vision statements -- they are the driving force behind county decisions related to land preservation, zoning and development regulations, and the construction of capital facilities such as parks, roads, water systems and sewer systems. Put another way, comprehensive plans provide the framework for virtually all major county decisions regarding growth and land use, and the facilities needed to support growth.

This Working Lands Strategic Plan expands on the goals outlined in Chapter 3 of Thurston County's Comprehensive Plan (Natural Resources). It is not intended for the designation of agriculture lands of long term commercial significance under the GMA.

Although working lands are crucial to the fabric of Thurston County, they are under increasing pressure from urban development. The very quality of life we enjoy here – thanks in large part to our working lands -- has made Thurston County one of the fastest growing counties in Washington State. While growth is a key reason for the loss of working lands, other factors also come into play and can include:

- farm profitability
- residential development
- encroachment that limits the operator's ability to work the land
- land values
- personal decisions about work and retirement
- community expectations
- taxes and government programs
- incentives and regulations

This plan contains a wide array of strategies to help overcome these issues, recognizing that a loss of working lands is a loss to all citizens of Thurston County, rural and urban alike.

## SUMMARY OF KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

All of the strategies listed below expand on the goals outlined in chapter three (Natural Resources) of Thurston County's Comprehensive Plan. They represent the Agricultural Committee's top priorities for preserving working lands. These strategies are designed to equip working-land owners with the tools they need to thrive financially and withstand pressure to develop their properties.

### **Advocacy**

Thurston County should take the lead in creating a staff position for a Working Lands Advocate to carry out the strategies identified in this Strategic Plan. (Working Lands Advocate Strategy)

### **Land Incentives**

Thurston County should provide more opportunities for working-land owners to sell their development rights without having to sell their entire property for development. Under this approach, the rural character and agricultural economy of Thurston County is preserved, and working-land owners have the opportunity to realize some of the true market value of their land without having to sell the land altogether for urban development. (See the next section on Purchase of Development Rights for more information.) With fewer development rights still attached to the land, the land then becomes more affordable to other farmers or family members who may wish to continue using the land for agriculture or forestry.

**Economic sustainability:** Thurston County should encourage the Northwest Agricultural Business Center (NABC) to bring its programs to the county. NABC provides business resources and hands-on guidance to new or existing businesses that provide value-added or innovative agricultural products and services. Funding for the NABC was included in the 2009-2011 operating budget approved by the Washington State Legislature. (Economic Sustainability Strategy)

**Continuity:** Thurston County should provide information and resources for transitional planning. Programs should build connections between current and future generations of farmers and family forest owners so that they can take advantage of the strategies contained in this plan, as well as state and federal assistance programs. (Economic Sustainability Strategy)

**Fees and regulations:** Thurston County should investigate fees that are applied to working lands and identify those that could be eliminated or modified. (Regulatory and Political Strategy)

**County Regulations:** Thurston County should review regulations to determine appropriate standards for working lands that would still protect the safety of workers and the public. (Regulatory and Political Strategy)

**Applications:** Thurston County should provide assistance to working-land owners. The working lands advocate can guide applicants through permitting processes. (Regulatory and Political Strategy)

**Mitigation Strategies:** Thurston County should consider adding to the comprehensive plan and development regulation “mitigation strategies” that would require developers, including governments, to avoid or minimize damage to working lands. Just as developers are now required to mitigate for the loss of wetlands – for example, by providing cash or providing other comparable wetland sites – so too could developers and cities be required mitigate any damage their projects cause to working lands. This approach would not only apply to buffer areas between developed properties and working lands, but also to cases where city urban growth areas are expanded into rural areas. For example, a city or developer could be required to buy development rights to offset growth into a previously rural area (see “Development Rights Programs” below).

#### FUNDING SOURCES

The main seed money for the preservation strategies in this plan will come from Thurston County Conservation Futures, matched with state, federal, and private grant money. The Washington State Farmland Preservation Program and the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resource Conservation Services both have matching grant programs.

Funding for a “land advocate” position will require money from Thurston County’s general fund.

#### Conservation Futures

Virtually all state and federal grant programs require applicants to come up with matching money. Here in Thurston County, one such source of matching money is the “Conservation Futures” program. Under this program, Thurston County levies a tax of 5 dollars per tax parcel to purchase and protect undeveloped lands and open spaces (2009 rates).

This plan will strengthen the ability of Thurston County and other organizations to obtain money from the Conservation Futures program to preserve farm and forest lands. Once awarded, the Conservation Futures funding can then be used to secure matching grants from state and federal agencies, and private organizations.

#### DEVELOPMENT RIGHTS PROGRAMS: WHAT THEY ARE, HOW THEY’RE USED

**Purchase of Development Rights:** This plan calls for Thurston County to prioritize working lands in the county and create an ongoing “Purchase of Development Rights” program which would be funded in the annual budget and included in the county Capital Facilities Plan. (The Capital Facilities Plan is the county’s spending plan for parks, roads, utilities, open space and other physical purchases. It is tied into the Comprehensive Plan, described above.)

Purchase of development rights programs provide a way for private property owners to realize the development value of their land without having to actually develop it. Landowners can sell part or all of the development rights on the property and use the proceeds for a variety of individual needs to keep their family on the land. The purchaser (such as a county or conservation group) obtains a legal deed and sometimes a conservation easement; meanwhile, the property owner continues to own the land and can develop it at the remaining development right density. For example, a landowner who had 5 development rights and sold 4 would have 1 right left, which would allow the owner to place one single residence on the property. The landowner would still

own the land and could use or sell it for purposes specified in the easement, such as farming, timber production or hunting.

These programs are entirely voluntary, and can benefit the owners of working lands who wish to preserve their lands yet still receive some financial benefit from the market value of the property.

This plan also calls for priority working lands to receive an appropriate portion of Conservation Futures funding, and encourages Thurston County to consider additional sources of funding; one example could be revenue bonds.

**Transfer of Development Rights:** Like a “purchase of development rights”, a “transfer of development rights” program allows farmers to sell their development rights and thereby receive some of the benefit of the land’s market value without actually developing it. The difference is that with a transfer program, the rights are sold in the form of “credits,” and the purchaser of those credits (usually a developer) uses the credits to develop his or her land at a different density than the local zoning would normally allow. The sale is negotiated directly between the buyer and seller.

These programs are usually used to shift development away from rural areas and into urban areas. Of course, the urban areas – usually cities – must have a provision in their own zoning ordinances that allow for the planned use of development credits. For example, Thurston County code requires people who own land in urban growth areas to use credits if they fail to meet the minimum or maximum densities required in a residential area zoned 4-8 units per acre.

This plan calls for Thurston County to strength its existing Transfer of Development Rights program by working with the community and the cities to help create incentives and a robust market of buyers interested in purchasing development rights. This approach will also help cities advance their own goals for planned growth. This effort will involve educating working-land owners about the program, and providing technical help for those landowners who wish to transfer development rights.

#### About Development Rights

When people buy undeveloped property, they usually get more than just the land. The owners also get rights over how the land is used, including mineral rights, development rights and water rights. Those rights can be sold or transferred independent of the land itself – in other words, the owner can continue own the land yet sell certain rights. Just as water rights attached to a parcel of land may be bought and sold, the right to subdivide and develop a piece of property can also be bought and sold.