



# Planning for Rural Lands

Growth Management Services  
*Rural quality of life in rural areas*



## Description

“The central question in defining rural is how to accommodate the demand for a rural lifestyle without diminishing the rural setting in the process.” – Yakima County Comprehensive Plan

Rural lands are those lands in a county that have not been designated as natural resource lands of long-term commercial significance and have not been designated for urban growth. Rural lands do not include incorporated rural towns or cities, but can include existing rural communities that have not been incorporated. County planning for development in rural areas needs to include goals and policies to provide for a variety of rural densities and to protect rural character.

In response to a concern that the Growth Management Act (GMA) did not clearly state what type of development is appropriate in rural areas, additional statutory guidance was provided in 1997. The GMA now: (1) provides definitions of rural character, rural development, and rural governmental services, and (2) clarifies definitions of urban growth and urban and rural governmental services.

Optional tools for reconciling past development and allowing limited residential and economic development have also been provided. The options include: (1) designating limited areas of more intense rural development in areas where development already exists, (2) providing for master planned resorts, small-scale recreational or tourist uses, or cottage industries, and (3) maintaining or enhancing natural resource based industries.



## Background

Counties fully planning under GMA are to include a chapter in their comprehensive plans on planning for rural lands. The rural chapter is to include policies to protect rural character outside urban areas.

Most of the 29 counties fully planning under the GMA have adopted their first comprehensive plans under the act. All counties, whether or not they have adopted plans, are continuing to work on rural

development issues. They are looking at how to protect rural character, how to reconcile existing development in rural areas with the need to protect rural character, what level of services to provide for rural development, and what types of economic development are appropriate in rural areas.



One big challenge facing counties is providing for development consistent with rural character. Rural character is defined under the GMA as the patterns of land use and development established by a county in which open space and the natural environment predominate over the built environment.

In rural areas, land use patterns need to: (1) foster traditional rural lifestyles and rural-based economies; (2) provide traditional rural landscapes; (3) reduce sprawl and extension of urban services; and (4) protect surface water flows and groundwater recharge areas.

Each county is to define rural character and determine how rural character will be protected based upon natural environmental features.

## Rural Development Issues

Many developments were built in rural areas before the adoption of county comprehensive plans. Existing developments may be located in unincorporated towns, areas that have grown up around roadside commercial establishments, sprawling low-density subdivisions, or widely scattered subdivisions. These developments may or may not be served by sewer, water, fire protection, and other public services. Counties have struggled with the issue of what to do about existing areas of development in light of the need to prevent further sprawl and protect the remaining rural character. Determining what public facilities and services are appropriate in rural areas is difficult for many counties. Under the GMA, counties, with input from towns and cities, designate urban growth areas (UGAs). Establishing UGAs involves designating an area for urban growth separate from rural areas and resource lands. UGAs include all incorporated towns and cities and, often, land adjacent to them to allow space for the town or city to grow over a 20-year period. Locating population growth in UGAs is encouraged in growth management planning.



What, then, should be done about providing services outside these urban areas? Under the GMA, urban governmental services are not to be extended or expanded in rural areas except in a very limited number of cases – when such services are necessary to protect public health, safety, and the environment, or if the services are financially supportable at rural densities and do not support urban development.

Counties also are struggling to determine what economic development is appropriate in rural areas. One of the goals of the GMA is economic development. This goal encourages economic

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development throughout the state within the capacities of the state's natural resources, public services, and public facilities. Economic development is to be encouraged in areas experiencing insufficient economic growth. Counties are deciding how to provide for economic development in rural areas consistent with rural character.

## What's Being Done

The options contained in the 1997 legislative changes to the GMA focus on economic development that is sustainable and consistent with maintaining rural character. Sustainable development is development within the capacity of an area's natural resources and ability to provide for public needs.

A county may designate limited areas of more intense rural development to recognize existing areas or existing uses and may provide for infill, development, or redevelopment within these areas. Existing uses may include commercial, industrial, residential, or mixed use. Mixed use is typically a combination of commercial and residential development, for example, when apartments are located above shops.

Logical outer boundaries are established to minimize and contain areas of more intense rural development. The boundaries are to be drawn mainly based on the built environment, such as the existence of buildings or other development. Public facilities and services are provided in a manner that does not promote low-density sprawl in the surrounding rural area.

Limited areas of more intense rural development may be set out in the comprehensive plan and included in development regulations that carry out the plan.

Many counties have taken advantage of these options to recognize existing rural communities and neighborhoods and to provide for a variety of economic development opportunities in the rural area. They have developed criteria for designating limited areas of more intense rural development. County plans allow some infill, development, and redevelopment within logical outer boundaries of these areas consistent with the rural character of the community.

## What's Next

Planning is an ongoing process. Counties with adopted comprehensive plans and those with plans in progress will continue to consider issues of rural development as growth occurs. Development will need to be monitored to determine whether growth management policies on encouraging urban growth in urban areas and maintaining rural character outside urban growth areas are being achieved.

## Publication Available

A publication, *Keeping the Rural Vision: Protecting Rural Character & Planning for Rural Development*, that discusses the options and what some counties have done in rural areas is also available by calling 360.725.3000.

### For More Information

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