Twenty people who envisioned, debated, and ultimately created Washington’s Growth Management Act 15 years ago recently shared “inside” stories to mark this anniversary. The act requires that communities work together on planning for future growth.

The state’s Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development (CTED) interviewed these leaders who inspired the act’s creation. They also asked others how growth management is working in communities statewide. The interviews outline the state’s successes and struggles in a new report called Creating Livable Communities: Managing Washington’s Growth for 15 Years. The full report can be reviewed by visiting www.cted.wa.gov/growth.

“Everybody was interested in doing something about growth management because they wanted to stop the tidal wave that was coming in – and that included people in the Legislature, environmentalists and the business community… and it included party officials, a whole variety of people.”

— Governor Booth Gardner

What happened?

- Between 1960 and 1990, Washington added 1,813,000 new residents, an increase of 41 percent. By the late 1980s, Washington State’s quality of life was threatened by traffic congestion, the loss of open space and farmland, and the rapid spread of suburbs.
- Speaker of the House of Representatives Joe King and six committee chairs led an effort to craft a growth management law to fit the state. After fiery legislative debate, Governor Booth Gardner signed the Growth Management Act (GMA), SHB 2929 in July 1990.
- In 1991, the second part of the GMA, ReESHB 1025, spelling out how the law would be carried out, was signed.
- Under Washington’s unique GMA law, the state requires that communities work together to wisely manage future growth while they protect the most sensitive lands.
- Twenty-nine of Washington’s 39 counties now must adopt and carry out GMA comprehensive plans.
The success and benefits of growth management across Washington State

Economic Development
Pierce County decision makers now work together to stop sprawl in rural areas. “Fifteen years after the GMA went into effect, developers and environmentalists, cities and counties, and regional agencies and local government have stopped bickering and are involved in beneficial, productive discussions,” said Pierce County Executive John Ladenburg.

Parks, Recreation, and Open Space
As Issaquah grows, the city is working with developers to conserve open space, the third largest amount in King County. This would not have been possible without the opportunity the GMA provided to create a permanent legacy, said Mayor Ava Frisinger.

Citizen Participation
Bainbridge Island uses planning surveys to understand residents’ vision for the future. “The citizens of Bainbridge Island are fortunate to have the GMA as a primary tool to assist them in defining the future livability of their island,” said Larry K. Frazier, AICP, Bainbridge Island director of Planning and Community Development.

Regional Planning
A commercial investor who built Redmond Town Center said he wouldn’t have tried the experimental concept without growth management. “He relied on the regional plan indicating there wouldn’t be another large retail area springing up in the rural areas east of the city,” said Roberta Lewandowski, former planning director, City of Redmond.

Natural Resource Lands
GMA planning offers the tools local officials need in Franklin County to effectively designate agricultural lands. A result of a recent growth plan update was the designation of 62,000 additional acres of agricultural land, said Frank H. Brock, Neva J. Corkrum, and Robert E. Koch, Franklin County commissioners.