

Planned Growth Committee

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Topic: Lewis County Urban Growth Area Review and Right-Sizing

INTRODUCTION

In 2027, Lewis County will evaluate the size of existing UGA boundaries to determine whether they are appropriately sized to accommodate projected growth over the next 20 years. The County will work directly with affected cities through the Planned Growth Committee, monthly individual coordination meetings and community engagement to review population projections, growth allocations, land capacity, development patterns, and other relevant factors. Proposed UGA boundary amendments are anticipated to be presented to the Lewis County Board of County Commissioners in fall 2027.

1. Urban Growth Areas: Background and State Requirements

Urban Growth Areas (UGAs) are designated areas where urban growth is planned to occur over a 20-year planning period. Washington State's Growth Management Act (GMA), Chapter 36.70A RCW, requires counties to designate UGAs and establish boundaries that accommodate projected urban growth.

UGAs are intended to accommodate urban levels of residential, commercial, industrial, and other development supported by appropriate infrastructure and public services. Counties retain land use and public road authority within the unincorporated UGA until annexation occurs; however, cities are generally the primary providers of urban governmental services, including water, sewer, and other public facilities within the UGA. Urban services may not be extended into rural areas outside UGAs except under limited circumstances allowed by state law.

The primary statutory requirements governing UGAs include:

- **RCW 36.70A.110 – Urban Growth Areas:** Requires counties to designate UGAs and establish sufficient areas and densities to accommodate projected urban growth for the succeeding 20-year period, based on the applicable Office of Financial Management (OFM) population projection.
- **RCW 36.70A.115 – Sufficient Land Capacity:** Requires comprehensive plans and development regulations to provide sufficient land capacity to accommodate allocated housing and employment growth, including related facilities and services, consistent with applicable countywide planning policies and the 20-year population forecast.

- **RCW 36.70A.130 – Comprehensive Plan Review and Updates:** Requires periodic review of designated UGAs, development patterns, and permitted densities. Counties and cities must revise their plans as necessary to accommodate projected urban growth over the succeeding 20-year period. The Comprehensive Plan map, including UGA boundaries, may be amended not more than once per year.
- **RCW 36.70A.210 – Countywide Planning Policies (CWPPs):** Establishes the framework for coordination between counties and cities. These policies address UGA implementation, orderly development, urban services, joint planning, housing, transportation, economic development, and related regional considerations. Lewis County's CPP are found here [https://lewiscountywa.gov/documents/11608/2023-06-13 CountywidePlanningPolicies UpdatedOrdinance1346 FINAL.pdf](https://lewiscountywa.gov/documents/11608/2023-06-13%20CountywidePlanningPolicies%20UpdatedOrdinance1346%20FINAL.pdf)

Together, these requirements establish that UGA boundaries must be based on projected growth and coordinated planning, rather than simply reflecting the amount of land available for development. UGA planning must also account for land capacity, infrastructure, service availability, and the range of uses needed to support anticipated growth.

2. Responsibility for Urban Growth Area Planning

Under the GMA, Lewis County is responsible for designating and periodically reviewing UGAs in coordination with the cities located within the County. This process is guided by state law, the County's Comprehensive Plan, and the adopted Countywide Planning Policies.

The County and cities have related but distinct planning responsibilities:

- **Lewis County:** Coordinates countywide growth planning, designates UGA boundaries through the Comprehensive Plan, evaluates whether the designated areas and permitted densities can accommodate projected growth over the 20-year planning period and maintains land use and public road authority within the unincorporated UGA.
- **Cities:** Plan for growth within the incorporated city limits, establish appropriate land-use designations and development regulations, and plan for urban services and infrastructure necessary to support anticipated development. Capital facilities planning must include both the incorporated and unincorporated UGA.
- **Joint planning:** The County and cities coordinate population and growth allocations, land capacity, infrastructure needs, and future development patterns to maintain consistency between countywide policies and local comprehensive plans.

UGA planning is therefore a coordinated process. Although the County has a central role in establishing UGA boundaries, the planning process is to consider city growth plans, anticipated annexations, the availability and timing of urban services.

The intent is to ensure that growth occurs in appropriate locations and that sufficient land and infrastructure are available to accommodate anticipated development without unnecessarily expanding urban areas into rural lands.

3. Annual Comprehensive Plan Amendments and UGA Adjustments

Washington State law under RCW 36.70A.130(2), provides a process for counties to consider amendments to their Comprehensive Plans, including UGA boundary adjustments, through an annual comprehensive plan amendment process, no more frequently than once per year, with any and all proposed amendments considered concurrently.

This annual process provides an opportunity for Lewis County to consider proposed changes to UGA boundaries, rather than waiting until the next 10-year periodic Comprehensive Plan update. Potential amendments may include correcting mapping discrepancies, evaluate boundary configurations, or considering more substantive adjustments supported by appropriate growth projections, land-capacity analysis, and coordination with affected cities. Annual amendments provide a mechanism to consider other qualifying changes between periodic updates, subject to applicable statutory requirements.

For Lewis County, this means UGA planning can be approached as an ongoing and iterative process. The County can continue to evaluate whether more substantive boundary changes are needed to accommodate projected growth and maintain consistency with state requirements.

4. 2026 Minor Technical Amendments to UGA Boundaries

In 2026, Lewis County completed minor technical amendments to address mapping inconsistencies and other technical issues identified within the existing UGA boundaries. The amendments were intended to improve the accuracy and consistency of the County's official UGA mapping, including correcting minor issues involving split parcels.

These amendments were technical in nature and were not intended to change the County's overall growth strategy, establish new growth allocations, or substantially expand or reduce the areas planned for urban development.

The technical amendments are separate from a broader evaluation of whether the existing UGAs are appropriately sized to accommodate projected population and employment growth over the next 20 years.

5. Right-Sizing Urban Growth Areas for the Next 20 Years

Lewis County will be evaluating the size and configuration of existing UGA boundaries to determine whether they are appropriate to accommodate projected growth over the next 20 years.

Under RCW 36.70A.110 and RCW 36.70A.115, UGA planning must be supported by population projections, growth allocations, and an assessment of the land capacity needed to accommodate anticipated development. This provides an opportunity to evaluate whether existing UGAs have sufficient capacity for projected growth and whether the amount and location of land designated for urban development remain appropriate.

The objective is not necessarily to minimize UGA acreage, but to ensure that designated areas are appropriately sized, located, and configured and protective of resource lands (e.g., agriculture and forestry). This includes considering housing, employment, commercial and industrial development, public facilities, infrastructure, environmental constraints, and the availability of land suitable for development.

The evaluation will consider whether existing UGAs contain more land than is reasonably necessary to accommodate allocated 20 year population growth. The fact that a UGA has substantial acreage does not, by itself, demonstrate a need to retain its current boundaries or establish that sufficient land is appropriately located and developable to meet future needs. UGA boundaries must be supported by population projections, land-capacity analysis, and applicable GMA requirements including protection of critical areas, shoreline, resource lands and rural areas.

Where the County's analysis identifies excess urban-designated land, the County will work with affected cities to evaluate appropriate boundaries that accommodate anticipated growth while reducing unnecessary encroachment into rural areas and protection of critical areas and shoreline. This effort is intended to ensure that UGA boundaries are based on documented needs and sound planning analysis, rather than the assumption that existing boundaries, establish 20 to 30 years ago, should remain unchanged.

Considerations for Future UGA Planning

As the County evaluates whether existing UGAs are appropriately sized, the following considerations may inform future discussion:

- **Projected growth:** Confirm the applicable 20-year population forecast and adopted growth allocations for Lewis County and each city.
- **Land capacity:** Evaluate the amount of developable land within each incorporated city and unincorporated UGA and the ability to accommodate allocated housing, employment, and other associated urban uses.

- **Infrastructure and urban services:** Consider whether water, sewer, transportation, and other public facilities can support anticipated development, including planned improvements and service expansion plans.
- **Development patterns and densities:** Evaluate whether existing land-use designations (aka zoning) and permitted densities provide sufficient capacity for projected growth.
- **Land constraints and compatibility:** Consider critical areas, shoreline environments , agricultural and resource lands, and the relationship between urban and rural development.