

Island County economic development strategies will encourage appropriate development, consistent with the County's rural character and protection of its environment

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

2.1 INTRODUCTION 1

2.2 BACKGROUND INFORMATION 2

2.2.1 Issues Affecting Existing Economic Activity 2

2.2.2 Issues Affecting New Economic Development 2

2.3 DIVERSIFIED ECONOMY 3

2.4 GOALS AND POLICIES 4

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2.1 INTRODUCTION

Since its earliest settlement, Island County has experienced slow but unmistakable development. The 21st century will see this trend continue. Since economic factors significantly affect Island County's quality of life, a critical issue is to establish an Island County economic development strategy that will encourage appropriate economic development, consistent with the County's rural character and protection of its environment. The need for long-term economic vitality mandates a vision for Island County communities: one that allows flexibility while encouraging development consistent with their history, assets, and long-term goals. This Element is intended to guide long-term improvements in the use of land, labor, and capital resources in Island County.

Adequate transportation, water, and sewer has been a limiting factor in the economic development of Island County for many years.

However, with proper planning and policies, Island County has qualities that can provide a strong economic future for its citizens. The county is remote enough from metropolitan areas to retain rural character, yet close enough to provide reasonable access to urban markets, business centers, and amenities. This strategic location, along with attributes of charm and quality of life, provides a setting for a diversified economy.

The scale, type, and intensity of economic development must be compatible with Island County's basic assets, as well as particular regional differences. Appropriate development for North, Central and South Whidbey, and Camano Island will vary widely. Close coordination is crucial between these regions and the Cities, the Port, Water, Fire, School, Park and Recreation Districts, Ebey's Landing National Historical Reserve, and the Public Transit Benefit Area. One of the issues that needs to be addressed is the definition of appropriate small scale and tourism uses that should be allowed to expand or locate in the rural area of Island County.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ELEMENT GOAL

1 **Encourage diverse economic development consistent with adopted comprehensive plans.**

2.2 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

2.2.1 ISSUES AFFECTING EXISTING ECONOMIC ACTIVITY

The development of Island County's economy is crucial in determining the nature and pattern of overall development. Currently, the County's economic base depends heavily on the Whidbey Naval Air Station and on commuter accessibility to mainland employment opportunities. Lack of a diversified economic structure makes the County dependent on a few employers. Reliance on off-island employment sources can add stress to the County's limited transportation accessibility to the mainland. The lack of strong, county-oriented economic centers has fostered a unique dispersal pattern of small commercial centers. Despite these challenges, Island County will continue to encourage compatible and complementary land uses, policies, and strategies to support existing economic drivers.

2.2.2 ISSUES AFFECTING NEW ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

If Island County truly is to diversify its economy, new business development is essential.

1. The County should strive to attract and site desirable business and commercial development that is best suited to the Islands' environment, given transportation, water and sewer limitations. In addition, the County should strive to attract and site business and commercial development that supports urban growth center development, provides living wage jobs, and provides locally needed goods and services. Examples include academic and research organizations, high tech companies, magazine or catalogue companies, light industries and financial service firms, as well as consultants, engineers, writers and artists operating by themselves or within small-to-medium-sized companies.
2. Changes in the workplace, such as advances in computer and telecommunications technology, will affect the County's economy. As telecommunications advances, it will be increasingly feasible to work from home for at least a portion of the workweek, and this will impact island life. The County should support changes that would make both islands more self sufficient and less subject to drastic change by outside economic interests.
3. As a haven for retirees, Island County should establish policies to promote suitable housing including retirement hotels, congregate care, nursing homes, and Planned Residential Developments consistent with senior citizen needs.
4. "Primary" businesses that inject new money into Island County's economy, while helping stabilize and enhance economic opportunity, potentially could add new supporting businesses/ job opportunities for low and moderate income families. Businesses that reduce commuting and make the Island economy less dependent on transportation should be encouraged. The County should promote activities that fit into the rural lifestyle, provide relatively high wages, and offer advancement and career opportunities.
5. Businesses and commercial developments designed to enhance and complement Island County's beauty, heritage, culture, and environment should be encouraged. Activities that help preserve existing scenic highway corridors and vistas, and encourage air and water conservation should be pursued.

2.3 DIVERSIFIED ECONOMY

Any vision for a diversified economy must include partnerships among numerous public and private organizations. For example, new technical business enterprises require a well educated and trained work force. All Island County public schools, as well as Skagit Valley Community College, Everett Community College, Western Washington University, WSU-Everett and private schools and colleges play a vital role in this process. Mutual support, cooperation and participation between schools and the County cannot be overemphasized. Unified planning between the County, schools, and economic development agencies will assure a well-trained, capable work force able to turn ideas into competitive products.

Besides training and education, a diversified economy requires affordable housing consistent with job locations and wages, particularly when the County tries to expand its job base so that residents are not required to commute off island for well paying jobs. Housing itself is only one link in providing viable, sustainable communities that can furnish transportation, public safety, public works and public services to employers and employees alike.

This vision for Island County's economic future has enormous significance for land use, zoning, regulations, policies, and procedures. Mechanisms for encouraging and assisting desired economic activity urgently need implementation. A vital, resourceful economy is the only sure way to provide services, opportunities, and benefits for ourselves and our future.

2.4 GOALS AND POLICIES

2016 UPDATES

NEW **New goals and policies are indicated with *red italicized* numbering**

REVISED **Goals and policies that have been revised (more than minor text edits) are indicated with *blue italicized* numbering**

Goal 1. **Encourage diverse economic development consistent with adopted comprehensive plans.**

ED 1.1. Strive to increase locally based non-military jobs from the current 50% of the County labor force to 60% of the labor force by the year 2020 (this would result in a 4,000 job increase above the 1996 level of locally based jobs).

ED 1.2. Encourage a diverse range of economic activities within appropriate areas of Island County.

ED 1.3. Acknowledge as a basis for planning that the goals of preserving rural lands and enhancing economic vitality are complementary and not mutually exclusive, as the County's rural character is a direct economic asset.

ED 1.4. Overall, economic development with regional orientation will be pursued in cooperation with local governments and the private sector, targeting specific projects aimed at diversifying and stabilizing the economy.

ED 1.5. Retain existing businesses in the region and minimize obstacles to their expansion, where appropriate.

ED 1.6. Reduce the inappropriate conversion of undeveloped land into sprawling, low density development.

ED 1.7. The development of "living wage" employment opportunities is actively encouraged to reduce off island commuting and provide career opportunities.

ED 1.8. Pursue the development of a diversified economy that attracts business activities that inject "new money" into the local economy (i.e. academic and research organizations, light industries, financial services, information processing, engineers, and home businesses) and includes appropriate service industries such as health care and professional services.

ED 1.9. Commercial development must be designed and located to provide goods and services in a convenient, safe, attractive and environmentally responsible manner.

ED 1.10. Regional shopping centers must locate within municipal UGAs.

ED 1.11. Marinas and water related commercial uses will develop in accordance with the SMP.

ED 1.12. Encourage and support public/farmers markets and small scale farming operations.

ED 1.13. Encourage and support efforts to enhance the profitability of agriculture and forestry operations with value added and specialty products and cooperative marketing programs.

ED 1.14. Encourage the development of appropriate support facilities and programs for the retirement industry.

ED 1.15. Encourage home occupations and home industries.

ED 1.16. Existing businesses that serve municipal UGAs will be encouraged to remain within these areas and expand as needed.

ED 1.17. Encompass isolated non residential uses.

ED 1.18. Island County's land use decisions will support the retention and future use of NAS Whidbey, including OLF Coupeville and the Seaplane Base for use by military aviation. In the event that any military facilities are removed, downsized or closed, the County will promote the future use of these facilities for aviation related activities. Should this not be economically viable, Island County will aggressively work to convert these capital assets into comparable economic benefits for the County and adjacent developed areas.

ED 1.19. Encourage agricultural and forestry land uses that help farmers and foresters stay on the land thus protecting the County's rural character, which in turn, attracts other economic activities.