

September 16, 2019

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Chairman Albert Roberts and Planning Commissioners
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Sent via U.S. Mail and E-Mail to: cingle@co.okanogan.wa.us

Re: Public Comment on Draft Comprehensive Plan (11/05/2018) and DEIS

Dear Chairman Roberts and Planning Commission Members,

On behalf of the Board of Directors of the Methow Conservancy, thank you for this opportunity to provide input as part of the current Okanogan County Comprehensive Plan update.

As a constructive participant in the County's comprehensive planning process for nearly 13 years, the Methow Conservancy has a sincere appreciation for incredible number of hours many of you serving on the Planning Commission have already invested in conducting hearings and deliberations.

With that in mind, we have organized our comments around the elements of the draft Comprehensive Plan we hope you will maintain, and those where we feel more detail is needed.

What We Hope You Maintain in the Draft Comprehensive Plan:

More Completely Planned Areas

More Completely Planned Areas (sometimes known as Sub-Area Plans) have proven to be a great tool for responding to the unique needs of local communities in our very large county, including in the Methow Valley. In recognition of this fact, the Planning Commission and County Commissioners identified the criteria and process through which other sub-area plans (now called More Completely Planned Areas) could be created in the future.

We thank the Planning Commission for your long-standing support of the More Completely Planned Area tool in the Methow Valley, and ask that your recommendation support the provisions of Chapter 8, along with a re-adoption of the existing Methow Valley "More Completely Planned Area" plans, while also supporting new sub-area planning efforts where there is citizen interest.

In contrast to some of the public comments you received during the public hearing, we do not believe that it is in the long-term best interest of County's land use planning for the existing Methow Valley Plans to simply be "expanded" to cover the lower Methow Valley.

The reason for this is because we have observed the formation and existence of the Mazama Advisory Committee to be an essential ingredient in the success of the implementation of the Methow Valley Sub-Unit "A" Plan over the past 30+ years. **Local knowledge and engagement is key to sustaining this work over time, as land use planning processes never end.** These ingredients of interest and engagement are clearly present in the lower Methow Valley.

In light of this, we would encourage the Planning Commission to recommend that the County Commissioners utilize the process set forth in Chapter 8 and immediately convene a citizens' advisory group for the Lower Methow Valley. This will allow those who live and work in the lower watershed an opportunity to inform their own More Completely Planned Area plan, and then play an active role in stewarding this plan into the future when it requires updates, etc.

One reason these More Completely Planned Areas are an especially effective tool in Okanogan County is that they provide a platform for issues of local concern to be addressed in a county that is otherwise quite large and diverse. **For Example:** If there is significant concern over issues such as ridgetop building, or dark skies, as is the case here in the Methow Valley, the Advisory Committee assigned to that area can work to recommend goals, policies, incentives or other tools for adoption within that specific area – without raising concerns in other parts of the County where the issue may not have shared interest.

Note: As has been noted in the record, some of the data in the Methow Valley Plans is out of date with respect to demographic data and discussion. At the time the Comp Plan was adopted in 2014, the Planning Director advised that it was the County's goal to get the Plans adopted, and that any updating could happen as part of a subsequent update. **We understand that it is difficult to do everything at once, but would certainly support an updating of this demographic data by the Mazama Advisory Committee either as part of this process, or in the near future.**

Water Resources

As you are aware, the Planning Enabling Act (RCW 36.70) requires the Comprehensive Plan to address water quality and quantity. It is our understanding that this is one of the driving issues behind the litigation that has led to this current update process.

We applaud the inclusion of Goal and Policy language in Chapter Three of the Draft Plan supporting a "clear, conscious connection between watershed planning and land use planning in Okanogan County."

Additionally, we strongly support the language included in the 11/05/2018 Draft Plan which speaks to the importance of developing **new tools such as water banks or density bonuses** to help keep water resources in our County. Once water rights are sold downstream, they are lost forever, and it is not in the long-term economic interest of Okanogan County to see the loss of water than can never be returned for use in our communities. We should do everything within our power to incentivize the keeping of water in our watersheds.

We also would encourage the development of policy language in the Comprehensive Plan that supports future amendment of WAC 173-548 (the Instream Flow Rule for the Methow River) with respect to Group Domestic wells, and the transfer of water from the Early Winter's Reach to the towns of Winthrop and Twisp. By using our water resources most efficiently, we can both eliminate the drilling of unnecessary residential wells (instead serving multiple homes in future Planned Developments with one well) AND encourage future development to occur within the water service areas of our towns where infrastructure and services exist to serve this growth.

Wildfire Planning

We are pleased to see the topic of wildfire addressed in Chapter 12 – Natural Environment of the Draft Plan, and feel that this section could be strengthened through better organization and the presentation of some clear Goal and Policy statements that can be used to show Okanogan County's support for the various actions and investments we need to be taking in our communities to be better prepared for wildfire. We would be happy to offer Methow Conservancy staff who have been active in the Methow Valley Long Term Recovery Organization to work with County Planning Staff or the Planning Commission in further refining this section of the Comprehensive Plan.

Where We Hope You Will Focus Your Energy in Support of More Clarity in the Draft Comprehensive Plan:

Land Use Element

One of the requirements of RCW 36.70 for a Comprehensive Plan is the inclusion of:

“A land use element which designates the proposed general distribution and general location and extent of the uses of land for agriculture, housing, commerce, industry, recreation, education, public buildings and lands, and other categories of public and private use of land, including a statement of the standards of population density and building intensity recommended for the various areas in the jurisdiction and estimates of future population growth in the area covered by the comprehensive plan, all correlated with the land use element of the comprehensive plan. The land use element shall also provide for protection of the quality and quantity of groundwater used for public water supplies and shall review drainage, flooding, and stormwater runoff in the area and nearby jurisdictions...” – RCW 36.70.330

As drafted, the Comprehensive Plan does not appear to fully meet this core requirement of the RCW. It appears the best way to bring the Plan into compliance would be to revise and expand what is currently included as Chapter 5 – Rural Lands, into a Land Use Element.

We would recommend that the Planning Commission direct Staff to provide support in developing a Land Use Element and Land Use Map using the language from RCW 36.70 as a check-list, and then provide opportunity for public review prior to recommending adoption.

In doing so, the Planning Commission should consider developing clear Goal and Policy language for each of the land use designations, so that when development proposals come forward for a particular use, the Planning Commission or Hearing Examiner have something to evaluate the proposal against to determine if it is an appropriate use in that location. Having clear Goal and Policy language like this will go a long way toward making it easier to administer the Comprehensive Plan and subsequent Zoning Code.

Lower Methow Valley Zoning

At issue is the action taken by the County Commissioners in July, 2019 whereby they effectively re-zoned the entire lower Methow Valley (from 1 to 5 acre minimum lot sizes) by way of an emergency action related to limited water resources.

Because this action to “re-zone” came without a Comprehensive Plan amendment, it appears necessary for the Planning Commission to include in their recommendations a land use map designation that is consistent with the County Commissioner’s action. It may also be necessary to adopt by reference, the “findings of fact” from that County Commissioner action as part of Chapter Three to document the County’s “accounting” of available water in that reach of the Methow watershed.

Given that the County Commissioners have already taken action to define this sub-area of the County through a unique zoning designation provides further support for the establishment of a More Completely Planned Area in the lower Methow Valley.

Resource Lands

The designation of Resource Lands is one of two requirements of all Counties in Washington. The purpose of these resource lands designations are to ensure that as growth occurs, it does not harm the viability of our resource lands.

Unfortunately, there has been much confusion and conflict around this requirement in Okanogan County.

Chapter Four of the current Draft Comprehensive Plan appears to do an accurate job of reflecting the resource lands Designation Criteria established by WAC 365-190-050. Unfortunately, it is not clear that any of the DEIS alternatives reflect a direct application of those designation criteria.

We would recommend that the Planning Commission request that Staff apply the criteria included in Chapter Four of the Draft Comprehensive Plan for the designation of agricultural, forest and mineral resource lands, and then produce a map and table which show the designated lands by resource type (how many acres required for each resource v.s. existing acres) along with a system for tracking the conversion of resource lands over time.

(Note: We do not believe that designating every single rural property in the County is the right approach to this requirement.)

From there, we would recommend that the County develop clear Goal and Policy language to make it clear to landowners what it means to have their property designated as a Resource Land, and to make it clear that the purpose of a resource lands overlay designation is to protect the resource so that farming, forestry and mining can occur into the future.

We believe that the data will show that there is ample private and public resource land available to accommodate existing agricultural, timber and mineral resource needs, as well as continued rural development in Okanogan County. This balance can be maintained into the future through the application of clearly defined zoning designations and allowed uses which allow agriculturalists flexibility to diversify their operations, and through tools which incentivize clustering of development away from areas of high resource value when they are converted as has been accomplished in the upper Methow Valley for many years. By documenting and accounting for these resource lands in a clear and systematic way, we believe much of the tension around this requirement can be resolved.

Population Projections

In the current draft Comprehensive Plan, it is not clear to us what population “target” the County is choosing to plan for? The DEIS goes on to include a fairly detailed analysis of alternatives based upon building permit data. Whichever alternative the Planning Commission chooses, the Draft Comprehensive Plan needs to be amended to reflect that choice.

We would note that the Medium Range projection detailed in the DEIS would yield approximately 65 new residential units per year county-wide over the next 23 years. This is very close to the current average of new units being constructed each year in the Methow Valley alone. For this reason we would suggest that a population target somewhere between the Medium Range and High Range is more likely given recent trends, while recognizing that many owners of the new units in the Methow Valley are not counted in the population totals owing to their seasonal occupancy.

Additional Elements

RCW 36.70.350 gives the County flexibility to create additional Comprehensive Plan elements beyond those required to satisfy the minimum requirements. Given the increasingly important role of recreation throughout Okanogan County, we offer the following recommendations:

- **Create a Recreation Element** – Recreation continues to be a growing part of our Okanogan County economy, and our proximity to public land provides significant opportunities for trail and other recreational use connectivity that is unique and in-demand by the public. By creating a Recreation Element or otherwise adopting by reference other existing Park or Recreation plans, the County would be better positioned to seek grant funding for future recreational facilities, and support organizations when they seek grant funding. We support Methow Trails and others who have commented in support of a Recreation Element as part of the Comprehensive Plan.

In closing, we thank you again for this opportunity to participate in the County's land use planning process, and look forward to your continued deliberations!

Sincerely,



Jason Paulsen
Executive Director for
Methow Conservancy Board of Directors