



December 12, 2016

THE REALITIES OF MAINTAINING NORTH BEND'S SMALL TOWN CHARACTER

From the City Council to the Citizens of North Bend:

There has been much public dialogue and understandable frustration as our City has faced the pains of rapid growth since the lifting of the water moratorium several years ago. The City Council shares both the concerns expressed by citizens and the desire to maintain the vision of small town character and high quality of life for this town we love. In this statement, we wish to share information which we hope will enhance citizen understanding of the challenges and constraints involved, along with steps being taken to ensure our community vision will be met.

Nobody said it was going to be simple.

Since 1990, the population of King County has grown by over 35% - from about 1.5 million residents to about 2.1 million residents. Most of this growth occurred within city limits throughout the county and city populations have also been increased by annexations. As a result, the population of unincorporated King County has actually decreased by over 50%, from 51,300 to 25,300 people. The latest projections show that another 500,000 will be added to our King County population over the next 15 years. ¹

How does the Growth Management Act affect our local decisions?

In 1990, the Washington State Legislature signed the Washington State Growth Management Act (GMA) into law. ² The GMA requires state and local governments to manage Washington's growth by identifying and protecting critical areas and natural resource lands, designating areas for urban growth, and calling for consistent comprehensive planning by local jurisdictions. This approach to growth management is unique among states, and can without a doubt be considered as visionary for the time.

Among other things, the GMA aims to concentrate growth inside city limits and also mandates cities to produce comprehensive plans, which are implemented through local development regulations and capital investments. The GMA also requires counties to assign growth targets to local jurisdictions in order to proportionately allocate the growth burden. Those targets, which were based on each city's size at the time, were meant as minimum targets, meaning cities could grow faster.

When the City adopted its first Comprehensive Plan under the GMA, it was under a building moratorium, which lasted from 1999 to 2009, because it did not have water capacity to support growth. The moratorium halted development inside the City Limits. The immediate areas around North Bend are either zoned Rural (meaning you are allowed to build one residence per 5 acres) or as Public Lands (Department of Natural Resources or Forest Service). The net effect of this was that very little development happened in or around North Bend during a time when King County overall saw explosive growth. When the City was finally able to acquire more water rights in 2010, the building moratorium was lifted and the result was an uncorking of a large pent up demand. Request upon request for development came flooding into the City Planning Department. In fact, there are currently 1,205 units submitted for permitting. This includes 568 Single Family Residences, 429 Apartments/Condominiums/Duplexes, 101 Cottages (homes less than 1700 sq. ft. in size), and a mixed use building containing 32 units.

Why is development allowed before adequate city-wide infrastructure is in place?

State law permits cities to collect impact fees for new construction inside the city limits, which help pay for the increased demands on schools, parks, fire services and transportation. However, those funds are not received until after a housing development is built and sold. Last year, that lag was compounded when the legislature made a change to impact fee laws that allows developers and builders a longer deferment period.³ The result is that developments are built before the City receives the impact funds to make infrastructure improvements. Ultimately though, the City of North Bend will receive the funds, which will support several major transportation improvement projects, as well as parks, schools and fire services. Unfortunately, this requires patience during the “growing pains” process.

Why doesn't the Council just stop further growth?

Currently, there are several hundred homes either being built or going through the permitting process in North Bend. This is alarming to many local residents and, frankly, also to the City Council. We have already reached our 2030 growth target, so why not stop further development? The reason is simple: Property Rights. The City Council is legally and ethically constrained from creating a zoning plan that would substantially hinder the property rights or potentially reduce property values for property owners who want to sell their buildable land to a developer.

So, how are we going to be a part of inevitable growth in King County and still retain our beloved small town character?

As we said, it is not a simple task. The City must remain compliant with county and state regulations, be mindful of property rights, and pace growth so that we can develop the community in accordance with our vision to create a premier outdoor recreation town while maintaining a small town rural feel.

As the Council has faced the challenges of competing desires and regulations, we have striven to continue to shape the progress of development for more desirable results. For example:

- We have rezoned large sections of the City for growth of no more than 2 dwelling units per acre.
- We have imposed a city-wide moratorium on cottage housing, which was created to provide a more affordable housing product, but due to the current housing market has become a higher priced product than the Council envisioned. The Council will continue to refine its objectives with respect to cottage housing, and then adopt new regulations.
- We have changed the street standards to require wider streets with more on-street parking.
- We have adopted a policy to refrain from promoting annexation and to decline to consider any developer-initiated annexation of UGA territory until traffic and infrastructure concerns are better addressed.
- The Council's Community and Economic Development Committee has embarked upon a comprehensive review of all design standards and bulk and dimensional requirements, which is one of the most influential ways to change the look and feel for future development in our city. It is through bulk and dimensional standards that we can adjust everything from the width of the sidewalks to the proximity of homes to the street and adjacent properties. This is an arduous process that must go through numerous reviews by the Planning Commission, public hearings, and deliberation with the full Council.
- We recently started adding non-motorized transportation infrastructure to the City's 6-year TIP (Transportation Improvement Plan), and have amended the development standards to increase housing diversity, housing set-backs and green spaces.
- We are about to embark on a major downtown plaza project (anticipated for 2017).
- Our newly formed Economic Development Commission will help us put a strategic brand implementation plan in place to bring life to the City's brand as a premier outdoor recreation destination. Ultimately, this will influence the events we sponsor, the alliances we forge, and the businesses we recruit.
- We intend to preserve a 32 acre wooded site south of I-90 and, instead of allowing 101 residential units, a forested park is envisioned with connection to hiking and biking trails.

North Bend will grow - there is no way around that, considering the City's location in King County, proximity to jobs, and immediate access to outdoor recreation. We intend to manage the pace and appearance of this growth, with more amenities and restaurants, better roads to ease traffic congestion, even better parks, bike and pedestrian-friendly infrastructure. We are

committed to listening to you, our citizens and neighbors, to make North Bend an even more livable community and to capture and maintain your vision of a small town, and to promote its greatest asset of outdoor recreation opportunities.

¹ <https://www.theurbanist.org/2014/04/11/king-county-2030-introduction-to-housing-and-employment/>.

² <http://mrsc.org/Home/Explore-Topics/Planning/General-Planning-and-Growth-Management/Comprehensive-Planning-Growth-Management.aspx>

³ <http://lawfilesexternal.wa.gov/biennium/2015-16/Pdf/Bills/Session%20Laws/Senate/5923.SL.pdf>; see Chapter 17.40 NBMC.