

## County Council unanimously approves new King County Comprehensive Plan on April 8, 1985.

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**O**n April 8, 1985, all nine members of the King County Council vote to approve a new Comprehensive Plan to replace the document that has guided land use and development in the county since 1964. The unanimous approval, which wins praise from both developers and environmentalists, is the somewhat surprising culmination of an often-contentious seven-year planning process and months of Council debate, including a lengthy session preceding the final vote in which numerous amendments are approved. The Plan anticipates many requirements of the Growth Management Act (GMA) that Washington will adopt in 1990, including identifying Urban Areas where most new growth will occur while seeking to preserve Rural Areas and Resource (agriculture and forestry) Lands.

### Unforeseen Problems

When King County adopted its first true Comprehensive Plan in 1964, many of its features were innovative for the time. It relied largely on detailed policy statements rather than a land use map for guiding land development and created an "Urban Center Development Concept" in an attempt to reduce suburban sprawl and protect rural and resource areas. However, the 1964 Plan did not establish a firm line between urban areas where growth would be encouraged and the rural and resource areas. And as within any forecast of the future, the plan did not foresee or provide for many problems that appeared during the next two decades, including energy shortages, traffic congestion, pollution, disappearance of farmland, and skyrocketing housing costs.

In 1978 County Executive John Spellman (1926-2018) established a Growth Management Program to reexamine and revise the 1964 Plan, setting in motion the process that ultimately led to the entirely new 1985 Plan. The revision process sparked heated debates between environmentalists and developers and soon became a political issue. After Spellman was elected governor in 1980, Democrats sharply criticized the draft plan proposed by his conservative Republican successor Ron Dunlap (b. 1937). Democratic challenger Randy Revelle (1941-2018) accused Dunlap of turning King County over to speculators and special interests, a charge some observers credited with allowing Revelle to eke out a narrow victory in the 1981 County Executive race.

The Executive Task Force on Growth Management that Revelle set up in 1982 worked for two years to present a completely new proposed plan to the County Council. When it arrived in the spring of 1984, many Councilmembers pronounced it "dead on arrival" (Crowley). However, the draft had the strong support of Cynthia Sullivan, a new member who was the chair of the Planning and Community Development Committee. With the aid of fellow Democrats Audrey Gruger (d. 2010) and Gary Grant, Sullivan succeeded in reporting a draft Comprehensive Plan out of her committee early in 1985. The draft included most of Revelle's proposals, including a demarcation between Urban and Rural areas, but included compromise Transitional Areas (where densities would remain low but more intense growth might be allowed later) for some of the areas where growth limits were most controversial.

### **Surprising Unanimity**

The Council voted to have Council President Gary Grant chair the final debate and amendment of the Plan. To the surprise of many observers including Sullivan, who expected a close vote, Grant, an experienced politician and labor-movement veteran, won unanimous approval at the Council's April 8, 1985 meeting. Before the final vote the Council considered dozens of amendments and approved many. Most were technical clarifications, but developers were able to move some areas they were interested in into the Urban category. Sullivan noted that the compromises on some amendments may have paved the way for the 9 to 0 vote.

County Executive Randy Revelle said he was "ecstatic" at the Plan's enactment, Gerrit Moore of the environmental group Friends of Washington called himself "euphoric," and Wally Toner, a lobbyist for developers, was also enthusiastic (Coughlin). Revelle signed the Plan, one of the major goals of his administration, into law on April 15.

The new Comprehensive Plan divided the unincorporated area of King County into five major land use designations as a means of "indicating clearly where new housing, shopping, and economic development should be encouraged and where open space, rural areas, farmlands, and forests should be protected." The designations were:

- Urban Areas ("where most new housing and jobs will locate, and where most public spending for facilities, services and open space will be focused");
- Transitional Areas ("where development densities and services will remain low" until included in an Urban Areas or given a long-term Rural designation);
- Open Space ("which will consist of valuable scenic, recreational, and environmentally sensitive lands");
- Rural Areas ("where development densities and service levels will remain low so that their primarily undeveloped and pastoral character, small farms, and wood lots may continue"); and
- Resource Lands ("where incentives and land use regulations will promote long-term agriculture, forestry, and extraction of mineral resources").

In these and other provisions, King County's 1985 Plan anticipated many of the provisions of the Growth Management Act that the Washington State Legislature passed five years later. GMA required large and fast growing counties such as King to adopt comprehensive plans that concentrate new growth in compact

"urban growth areas" and to protect natural resources and environmentally critical areas. Although the 1985 Plan complied in many respects, the 1990 legislation triggered a four-year process leading to adoption of a new GMA Comprehensive Plan for the County in 1994.

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**Sources:**

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