



**King County**

# Summary of the King County Four-to-One Program

July 2025

## Overview

The King County Four-to-One Program is an innovative land use management technique authorized under the Washington State [Growth Management Act](#) that seeks to create a contiguous band of natural areas running along the original Urban Growth Area boundary adopted in the 1994 King County Comprehensive Plan.

For properties that meet the criteria, the program allows willing Rural Area landowners to voluntarily apply to have their land considered for conversion to urban development whereby, for every one acre of land added to the Urban Growth Area, four acres of rural land are permanently protected as natural areas. Four-to-One projects are approved at the discretion of the County as part of an update to the [Comprehensive Plan](#) and ratified as an amendment to the Urban Growth Area boundary in the [Countywide Planning Policies](#).

Since inception of the program, about 360 acres have been added to the Urban Growth Area, while nearly 1,300 acres of permanent natural areas have been conserved.

## Summary

The following summarizes the *typical* approach for Four-to-One proposals, including the program criteria and process. Given the voluntary and discretionary nature of the program, process variations may occur in the course of the initiation, review, and decision-making.

## Criteria

### General Provisions

- Rural Area zoned land may be added to the Urban Growth Area in exchange for dedication of at least four times the amount of land added as permanent natural area within the regional open space system.
- The new urban land must be adjacent to the original Urban Growth Area boundary adopted in the 1994 King County Comprehensive Plan, unless there are limitations due to the presence of critical areas. Four-to-One projects may not expand the Urban Growth Area from a location that was previously expanded through the Four-to-One program.

- The Four-to-One Program cannot result in more than a total of 4,000 acres being added to the Urban Growth Area (as of 2025, approximately 360 acres have been added).
- Properties must be at least twenty acres in size. Smaller parcels may be combined to meet the twenty-acre minimum.

### Additional Project Requirements

New Urban Land	New Natural Area
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Must currently be zoned Rural Area and not be designated as Natural Resource Land</li> <li>• Must be developed only for residential uses and at a density of at least 8 dwelling units per acre. If 10 or more dwelling units are proposed, affordable housing must be included consistent with King County Code 21A.48.060 and 21A.48.080 (with limited exceptions)</li> <li>• Must follow topographical features that form natural boundaries, not extend beyond natural boundaries that would impede the provision of urban services, and not interrupt an existing contiguous band of public open space, parks, or watersheds along the Urban Growth Area boundary</li> <li>• Facilities and services supporting the new urban area, including but not limited to drainage facilities and roads, cannot cross or be located in the Rural Area or on Natural Resource Land. Urban land added for drainage facilities and roads do not require associated dedication of natural areas</li> <li>• Must sufficiently free of environmental constraints to be able to support urban development without significant adverse environmental impacts, unless the area is designated as an Urban Separator by interlocal agreement between King County and the annexing city</li> <li>• If adjacent to a city or town, development cannot occur until the land is annexed into the city</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Must be at least 4 times the acreage as the new urban land</li> <li>• Must preserve high quality habitat, critical areas, or unique features that contribute to the band of permanent natural area along the edge of the Urban Growth Area</li> <li>• At least 3/4 of the required natural area must be on the same site as the new urban land and must fully surround the portion of the new urban land that is adjacent to Rural Area and Natural Resource Lands</li> <li>• Must be at least 200 feet in depth (with limited exceptions), generally parallel the Urban Growth Area boundary, and configured in such a way as to connect with open space on adjacent properties</li> <li>• A 50-foot landscaped buffer of the new urban land is required</li> <li>• Must retain its Rural Area land use designation</li> <li>• Must be used only as a natural area or for passive recreation, farming, or forestry. Limited trails or active recreation may be allowed, subject to conditions in King County Code 20.18.180.C.</li> </ul>

## Process

### Initiation

- Four-to-One projects initiated by the public must be proposed via the Comprehensive Plan docket process (King County Code 20.18.140). More information about the docket process can be found [here](#).
- Four-to-One projects initiated by the Executive or County Council must be proposed in the scoping motion for a Comprehensive Plan update and/or in evaluated an Area Zoning and Land Use Study (King County Code 20.08.037) that is included in the Public Review Draft of a Comprehensive Plan update.
- Four-to-One projects may be proposed as part of an annual, midpoint, or 10-year Comprehensive Plan update.

### Review and Potential Approval

- Four-to-One proposals are reviewed Executive Branch staff and analyzed in an Area Zoning and Land Use Study included in the Public Review Draft of a Comprehensive Plan Update. Proposals are reviewed for both the quality of the natural area and the feasibility of urban development and annexation, including, but not limited to consideration of:
  - Preservation of fish and wildlife habitat, including wildlife habitat networks, and habitat for endangered and threatened species;
  - Provision of regional open space connections;
  - Protection of wetlands, stream corridors, groundwater, and water bodies;
  - Preservation of unique natural, biological, cultural, historical, or archeological resources;
  - The size of natural area dedication and connection to other open space along the Urban Growth Area boundary;
  - The ability to provide extensions of urban services to the redesignated urban areas;
  - Public input;
  - Consultation with adjacent jurisdictions, tribes, service providers, and/or state agencies, as applicable; and
  - Equity impact review.
- The highest quality proposals are proposed by the Executive as a land use and zoning map amendment to the Comprehensive Plan. The Executive proposed Comprehensive Plan is then submitted to the County Council for consideration for possible adoption.
- The Council will review, potential amend, and potentially adopt the proposal as part of the Comprehensive Plan update. This process may include, but not be limited to: public comment opportunities; committee review and amendment; a public hearing; and final

review, amendment, and potential adoption by the full Council. Prior to final adoption of a Four-to-One proposal:

- The city or town adjacent to the area must agree to add the new urban area to the city's Potential Annexation Area;
- The [Growth Management Planning Council](#) must review and make a recommendation on the proposal; and
- A term conservation easement must be placed on the natural area.
- An ordinance amending the [Countywide Planning Policies](#) to reflect the change to the Urban Growth Area and Potential Annexation Areas is required. The ordinance must be transmitted and adopted prior to or concurrent with the Comprehensive Plan update.
- An ordinance adopting a tri-party agreement with the property owner, city or town affiliated for future annexation, and the County is required. The ordinance must be transmitted and adopted concurrent with the Comprehensive Plan update. The city or town must also adopt the agreement, and the agreement must:
  - Require that the new urban land be added as a Potential Annexation Area in the comprehensive plan of the adjacent city or town after the Countywide Planning Policy amendments are ratified;
  - Require the permanent dedication of the natural area to King County (in the form of on-site or off-site fee simple, off-site conservation easement, or an on-site subdivision tract) before final plat approval;
  - Specify conditions including, but not limited to, restrictions on residential uses, required minimum density, timing and sequencing of development, or annexation requirements; and
  - For projects adjacent to a city or town, prohibit development activity until after until the land is annexed into the city or town.

### **Project Cancellation**

- If the Countywide Planning Policy amendments are not ratified, or if the project proponent decides not to pursue urban development after the Four-to-One proposal has been approved, the triparty agreement will be void and the urban properties will be restored to a Rural Area land use designation and associated zoning during the next update to the Comprehensive Plan.

## **To Learn More**

The primary provisions guiding the program are found at [Countywide Planning Policies](#) DP-17 and DP-18B, [Comprehensive Plan](#) policies RP-120 through RP-126, and [King County Code](#) sections 20.18.170 through 20.18.190. Parties interested in the program should familiarize themselves with these provisions and, following this, contact County staff.