

# Has Planning Made a Difference?

## A Review of Thurston Region's Progress in Growth Management

Thurston Regional Planning Council Technical Brief  
March 2012

The Thurston Region has shown leadership in growth management and sustainability for decades. In 1983, seven years *before* Washington State adopted the Growth Management Act, regional partners signed their first Urban Growth Boundary interjurisdictional agreement. This action directed urban growth to urban areas protecting forest and agricultural lands.

The region has long understood the connection between transportation and land use planning. For many decades the region has focused investment in transportation infrastructure that supports local land use plans and the regions' long term quality of life and sustainability goals.

These focused investments along with land use plans and regulations have made a difference in where and how growth has located in Thurston County. This has increased choices for travel, reduced per capita impacts on the environment, and created more housing opportunities.

### Key Dates in Thurston County Planning History

1988 – Urban Growth Boundaries adopted

1990 – State Growth Management (GMA) passed

1990 – County passes a residential downzone of 1 unit per five acres in most of county

1995-1996 – Zoning Regulations adopted (in all jurisdictions) that are consistent with updated Comprehensive Plans

2007 – County passes rural rezone, adding more variety in rural densities

### Why was the Growth Management Act Passed?

The Growth Management Act was triggered by voter frustration over the effects of rapidly increasing sprawl. Sprawl is difficult to define, but people know it when they see it. It typically has the following characteristics:

- Unlimited outward expansion of development
- Low-density commercial and residential settlement
- Leap frog development
- Dominance of transportation by private automotive
- Widespread strip commercial development

The Growth Management Act required fast growing counties to:

- Conduct comprehensive land-use and transportation planning based on growth forecasts
- Concentrate new growth in compact “urban growth areas”
- Protect natural resources and environmentally critical areas

## Has Planning made a Difference?

In short – yes. For the last 15 years the Thurston Regional Planning Council has collected data on building permits, subdivision densities, and other land use data to monitor the Region’s progress in achieving their goals.

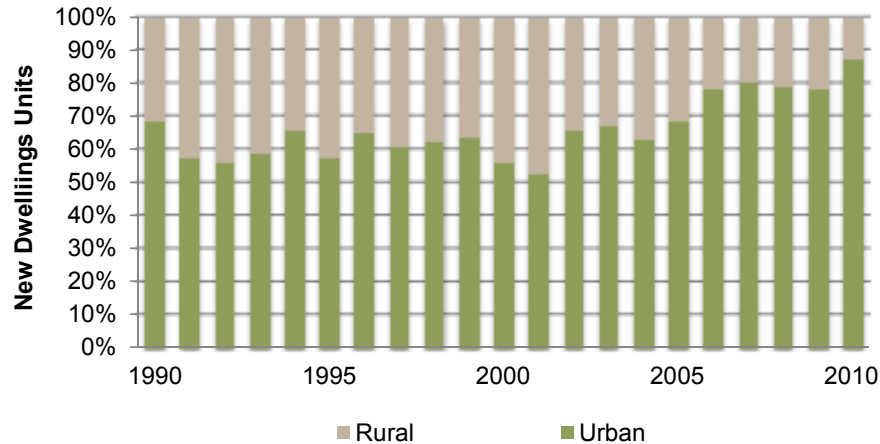
### Location of Housing

The Region’s comprehensive plans call for a greater share of growth to be located in urban areas, or areas where urban services such as city water and sewer are already available or nearby. Concentrating urban growth in urban areas allows us to protect our rural and resource lands from urban sprawl. It also allows for more efficient delivery of urban services – since the cost of many services is related to the miles of pipes necessary to deliver the water or remove the waste.

We have seen progress in this area, especially in the last five years. There were many factors that led to this change, including:

- *Changes in rural zoning.* In 1990 much of the rural County was zoned to one unit per five acres. In 2007 a range of rural zoning densities was adopted ranging from one unit per five acres to one unit per twenty acres.
- *Increased attractiveness of urban living and planned communities.* During the housing boom in the mid-2000s, single family attached and detached homes on small urban lots in planned communities captured a very large share of Thurston County’s market. These planned communities offered residents a walkable, attractive urban setting with a mix of housing styles.

**New Dwellings Permitted in Thurston County, 1990 to 2010**



Source: TRPC data program.

## Urban Densities

As cities grow – they can either grow out or grow up.

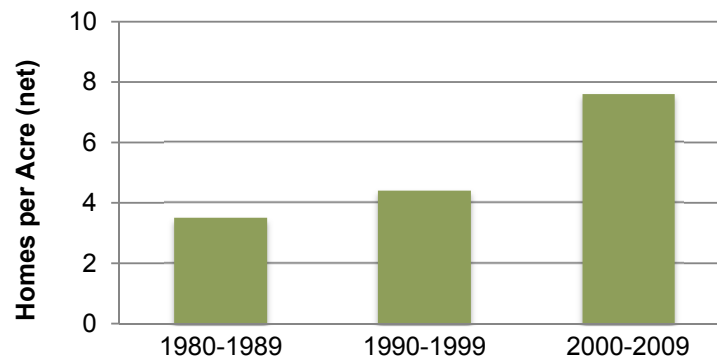
- Growing out means that the urban footprint or city limits expand.
- Growing up means that the density of development begins to increase within city limits with the addition of multi-story buildings, infill of vacant parcels and more compact development.

Under the state’s growth management act, cities and counties put regulations in place that encourage urban areas to become more dense with a mix of activities in close proximity. This is beginning to occur in Thurston County both at a broad scale, where infill or tracts of land within existing urban areas have started to fill up and at the neighborhood scale, where residential lot sizes have gotten smaller. Density is one of several important factors in supporting a wider range of transportation options – such as transit and walkable neighborhoods. Other factors are diversity – the mix of uses; distance – the distance to activity centers; design – neighborhood walkability and design features; and destination – access to goods, services, and activity centers.

The rule of thumb is that:

- Basic 30-minute bus service needs at least seven units per acre to work.
- Higher-frequency urban transit service of 15 minutes or better needs at least ten units per acre and/or 25 employees per acre to be viable. Key to effective urban transit service is having a rich mix of residential, employment, and other activities in the same area.

**Thurston County Urban Area Subdivision Density**



Source: TRPC data program.

Consistent with zoning densities put into place under the growth management act, new urban subdivisions are being built at densities that can better support 30-60 minute bus service. As the density and mix of land use activities increase, these areas will be able to support more frequent and longer-duration service. It has taken many years to achieve this, but much more density and mix of uses is needed to create truly viable transit options for more of the north urban area.

One of the main reasons for the slow progress in achieving urban development patterns is that at any given time there is a 5-7 year inventory of lots that were already vested or approved but not built at the time the current density rules were put into place. These lots are typically lower density than what is allowed under current urban regulations or higher density than what is allowed under current rural regulations.

## What If?

What if the Region hadn't taken steps to manage urban growth? It is possible - by making a reasonable set of assumptions - to answer that question. Thurston Regional Planning Council conducted a sketch analysis, in which growth from the past 20 years was redistributed into pre-growth management patterns.

The basic assumptions are:

- Start with what was on the ground in 1990
- Roll back rural zoning to pre-1990s
- Assume rural growth occurs at 1980-1990 densities for each zone
- Assume each rural zone would continue to be developed at 1980s densities
- Assume urban growth occurs at pre-GMA zoning densities
- Assume no change in commercial/industrial growth as most post-Growth Management Act changes in zoning affected residential zoning districts
- Assume no change in other non-residential uses such as parks, open space, Fort Lewis, commercial forest lands, etc.
- The amount of growth county-wide remained the same – some 42,000 dwelling units.

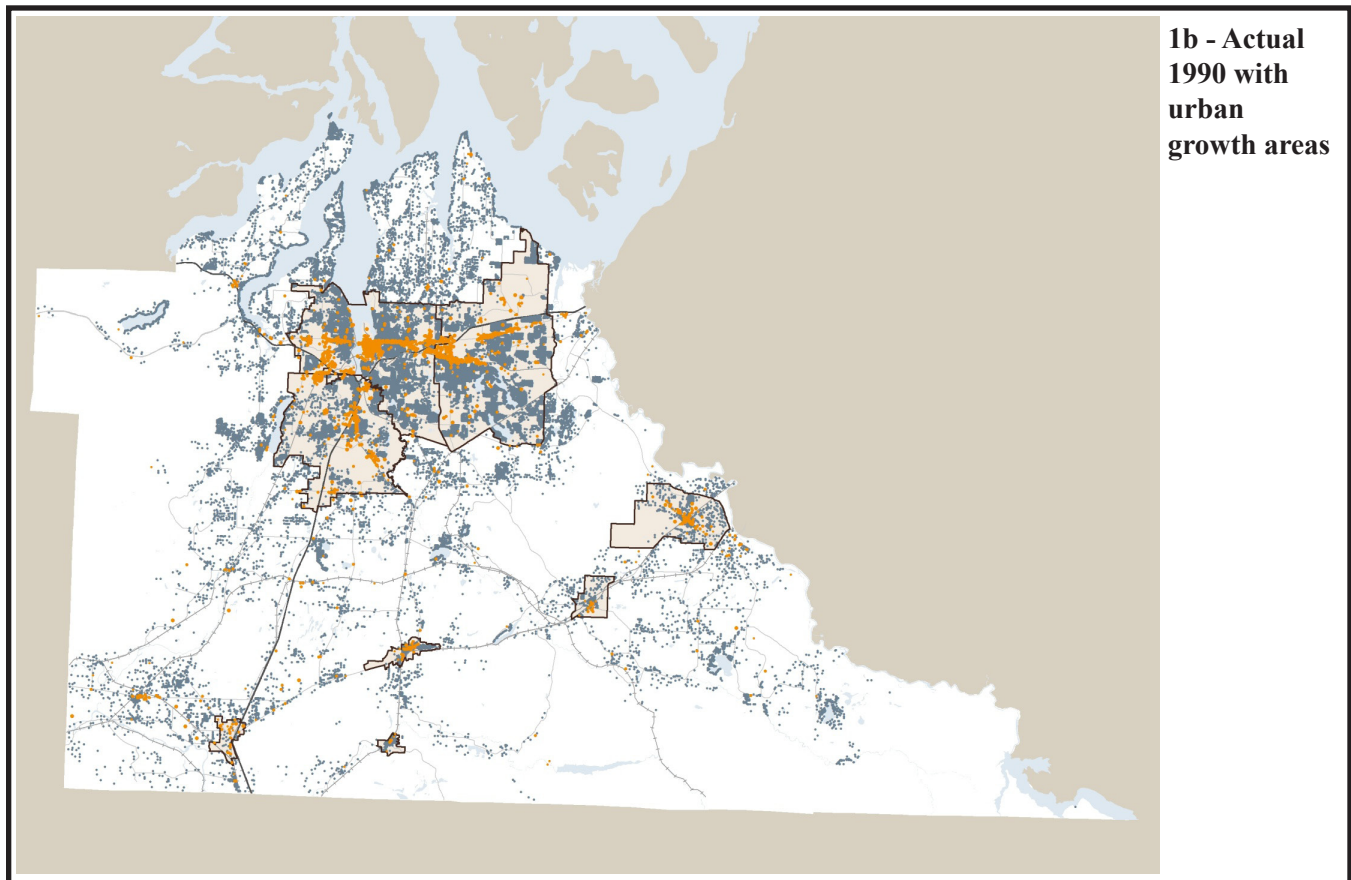
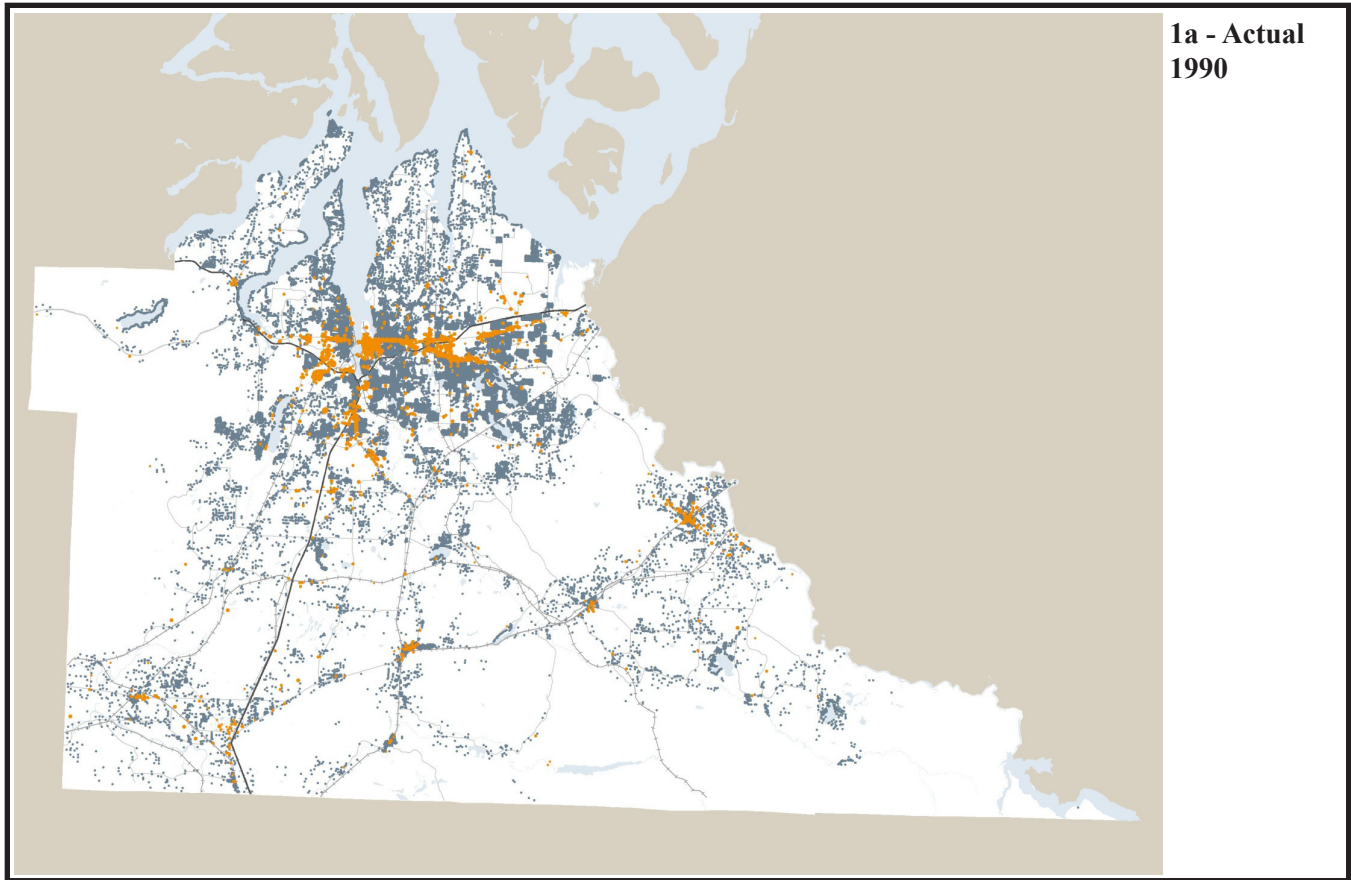
Growth was re-allocated based on the following assumptions:

- Growth was likely to locate in a similar pattern – just at different densities.
- As the urban areas fill up (they fill up faster because they are developed at lower densities) – it is likely that growth will expand out from existing city/town centers and along major roads.

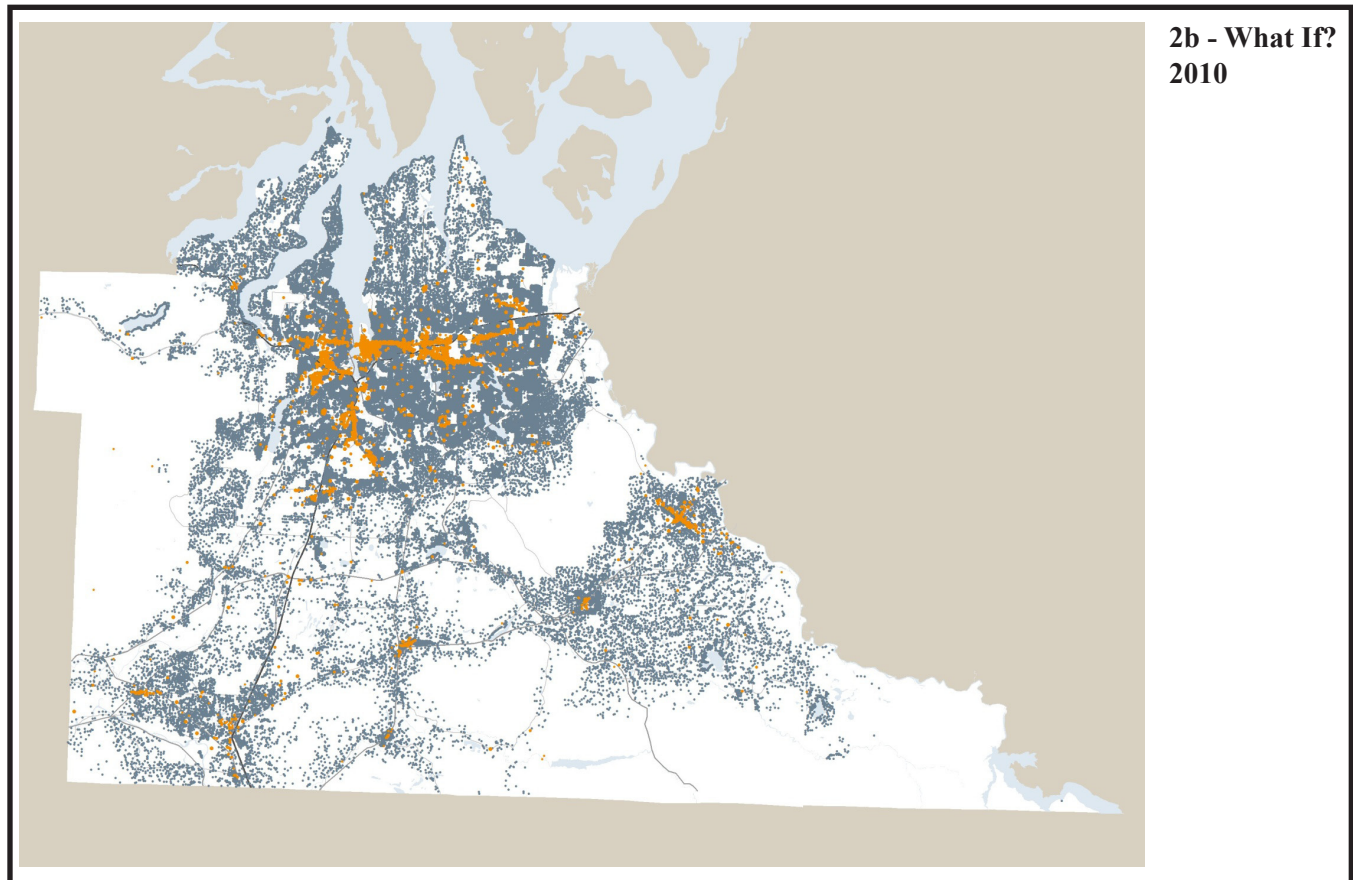
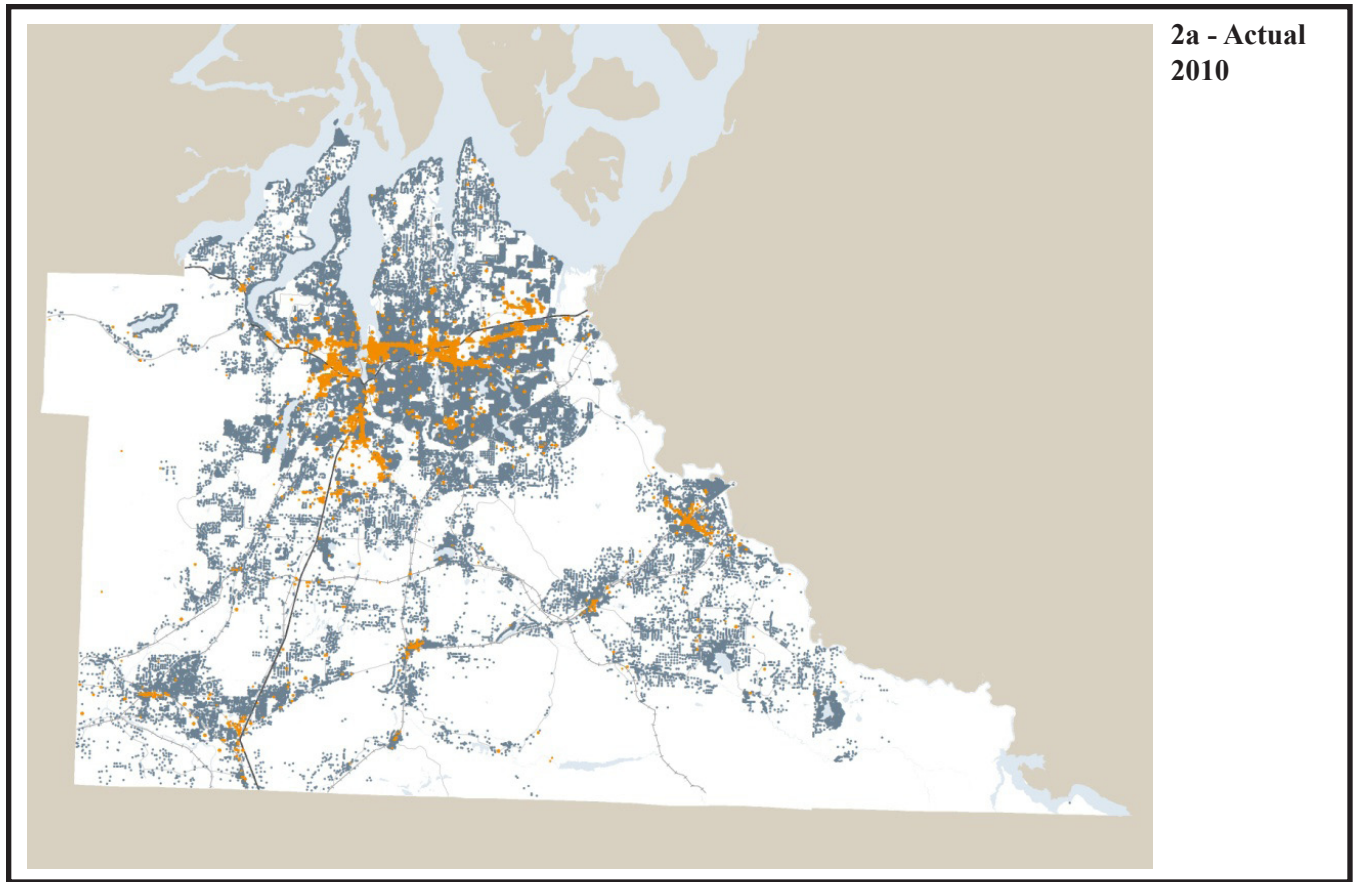
## The Results

Under the What If? Analysis:

- Sprawl increases, with the urban areas consuming an additional 8 square miles of land for development than was used up over the last 20 years. For comparison, Yelm is 5.7 square miles in size.
- Impervious area increases by around 700 acres. For comparison, the City of Tenino is 924 acres in size. This would have required more investments by local governments to manage stormwater runoff .
- Fewer people live near transit. The percent of the region's population estimated to live within a quarter mile (typical distance people are willing to walk) of an Intercity Transit bus stop drops to about 40% compared to the 45% we have today. This would have made it difficult to justify the higher frequency urban transit service enjoyed today, and made what services were offered less efficient.
- More households would be vehicle dependent and would drive more miles to satisfy their day to day needs.
- Increase in energy usage. Both home and auto energy consumption would have been higher – by around one percent overall. This is related to both an increase in vehicle miles traveled with more homes locating in rural areas – and also a decrease in smaller, more efficient homes.
- Increase in costs providing and maintaining capital facilities and services.



Actual growth patterns in Thurston County - 1990. Dots show buildings on the ground in 1990. Orange dots are commercial/industrial buildings; blue are residential. Map 1b shows growth with Urban growth area boundaries that were put into place to limit the sprawl of urban growth.



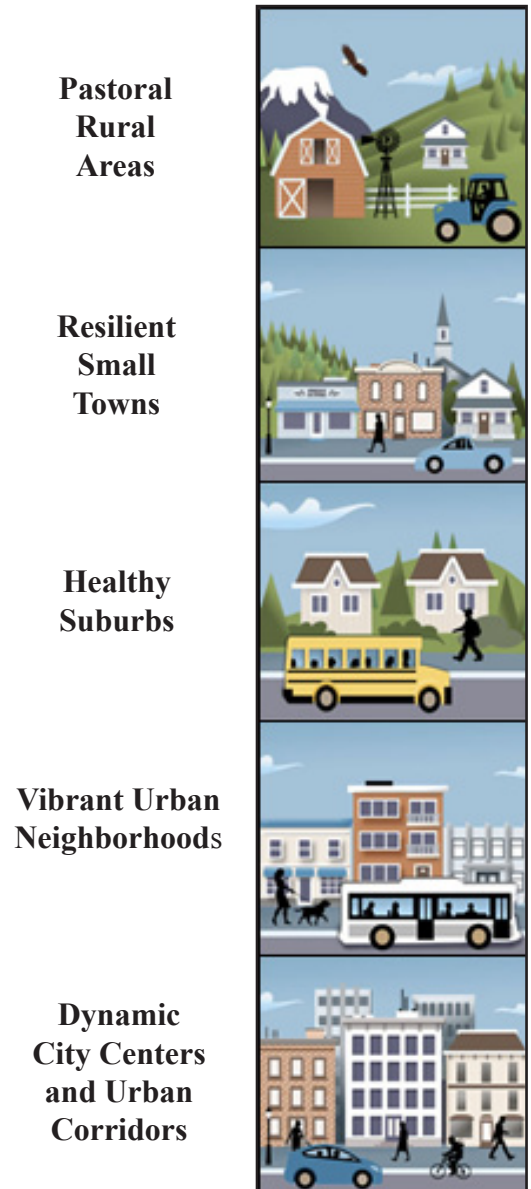
Comparison of actual growth versus What If? Scenario for 2010. What If? Scenario shows residential growth spread over a larger land area of Thurston County. Orange dots are commercial/industrial buildings; blue are residential.

## Summary

There is no question that a lot of difficult work remains to be done. However, it is also clear that many accomplishments have been made. Establishing a community vision, setting goals, and developing policies and implementing tools to achieve the vision does make a difference. It takes time - perhaps more time than we thought it would take - but changes are happening.

We have changed our direction with planning - to move our community closer to the collective vision of:

### Distinct, Livable Communities



**All supported by an appropriate mix of transportation facilities and services**

For more information contact:  
Thurston Regional Planning Council  
[info@trpc.org](mailto:info@trpc.org)