

Public Participation and Partners



Community members talk about their priorities at an Imagine Olympia event



Community members participating in a Homeless Response meeting

What Olympia Values:

Olympians value their right to participate in city government, and to engage in meaningful, open and respectful community dialogue regarding decisions that affect our community.

Our Vision for the Future:

Through collaborative and open discussions, Olympians embrace a shared responsibility to make our community a better place.

Read more in the [Community Values and Vision chapter](#)

Introduction

Successful communities face their challenges collectively and **harness employ** the energy of different stakeholders. Without diverse participation in community decision-making, it is all too easy to descend into political gridlock over **difficult-complex** problems.

The voices of residents, local business owners and organizations provide the perspective and information that are absolutely essential to effective planning and decision-making regarding issues that will shape our community for generations to come. For this reason, the City has a strong, ongoing program to reach out and partner with all sectors of the community.

The City has found cooperative relationships between members of the community and policy-makers that will continue to be essential if we are to achieve the collective vision and goals described in this Plan. It ~~understands and makes use of effective and tested~~ **will continuously work to improve upon** methods for encouraging community members to engage at multiple levels as we continue to look for creative solutions to the challenges we all share.

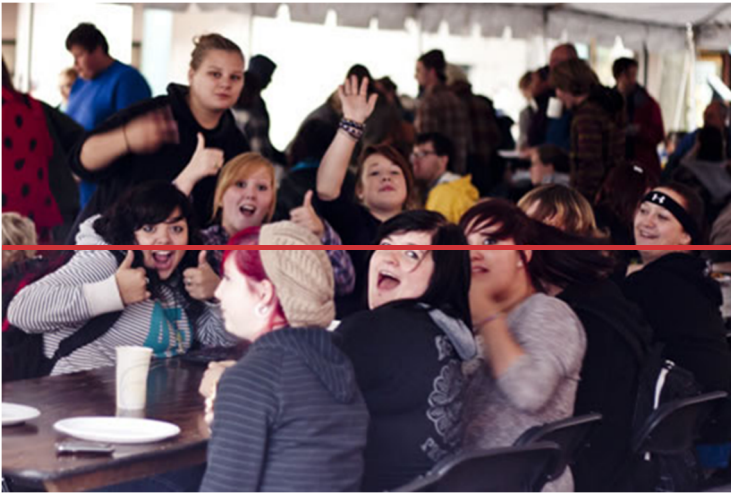


A young child enjoys a beautiful day in Olympia.

Public Participation is Essential

Active participation in civic affairs is an important part of life in Olympia,

and the City has a long history of providing ~~a~~ forums for community members to get involved. Our open government policies are essential to ensure residents, business owners, employees and other community members are able to effectively participate in any number of issues.



~~Young people having fun at a community event.~~



Olympia Youth Council and the Olympia City Council (2024)

There are several ways to participate in local government planning and decision-making in Olympia:

- Run for [City Council](#) or vote in the election
- Serve on an [advisory board](#). Olympia has ~~several more than a dozen~~ volunteer ~~citizen~~ advisory boards that study critical issues and provide careful advice to the City Council.
- Testify at a public hearing, share your ~~opinion~~ perspective or experience in a letter, or participate in a community workshop or

- meeting, [and participate in opportunities to provide online, digital feedback through Engage Olympia](#). The City keeps a [calendar](#) and posts [online agendas](#) of such events.
- [Participate as a work group member focused on diving deep into a specific challenge within a set period of time. Stipends are often available to help reduce barriers to participation.](#)
 - [Volunteer](#) in one of many City programs aimed at helping the community help itself, such as Stream Team, Volunteers in Police Services, and [Volunteers in Parks Park Stewardship](#).
 - Get involved with [neighborhood programs](#). The City provides notification of certain development proposals, grant opportunities and other benefits to Recognized Neighborhood Associations (RNA) and the Council of Neighborhoods Associations (CNA).
 - Partner with the City to help implement the Comprehensive Plan. The City looks for partners from all sectors of the community to be involved in implementation ~~through “Imagine Olympia, Take Action”~~ [of the Comprehensive Plan](#).
 - Participate in planning for a “sub-area” that could include your own neighborhood. As Olympia grows and changes, the City will be collaborating with local residents and business owners to make key planning decisions on roads, walkways, bike paths, housing densities, and transit – to name a few.


Public outreach is essential, but also challenging [due to the following factors](#): ~~Some key challenges include:~~

- Our population is more diverse than ever, but our outreach resources are limited.
- Our desire to be responsive to community concerns must be balanced with very real legal and fiscal constraints, finite resources, and with our responsibility to make decisions for the overall public good, rather than for the benefit of individuals.
- ~~Residents, business owners, and local organizations need to~~ [may not fully understand the land-use development process so they can be which can make it difficult for them to be](#) involved in a meaningful way.
- [Community members don’t always agree on issues and may have significantly different views or opinions.](#)
- [Community members may have limited availability and/or free time to respond to outreach efforts and utilize participation opportunities due to other responsibilities in their lives.](#)

To address these challenges, the City has begun to diversify methodologies and processes for community outreach and participation opportunities while ensuring that they are equitable and inclusive. The City will seek to reach those members of the community most impacted and least able to participate, including vulnerable and overburdened populations and communities on the frontline. The City will work to go into the community to meet with people where they live, work, and play.

~~To address these challenges,~~ The City is always looking for new and creative ways to engage the community, including using ~~new~~ technologies, such as social media, online discussion portals and high-quality visual maps. The City strives to create clear, concise, and jargon-free information so that people from all walks of life can easily and quickly understand the issues and provide input. The City hopes this will inspire partnerships that will help the community to pool its resources so that needed changes can be made more quickly and efficiently.

While Olympians are involved in all aspects of community planning, the land development process is often where neighborhood organizations and community members first engage. The experience tends to be frustrating because influence over decisions at this stage is somewhat limited. The City's intent in initiating sub-area planning is to give community members a chance to get involved early in the planning process for a relatively small area that includes their own neighborhood. Many communities refer to this type of planning process as "neighborhood planning." To avoid confusion with Olympia's numerous Recognized Neighborhood Associations, the City refers to the process as "sub-area planning."

Through sub-area planning, the City, Recognized Neighborhood Associations , and ~~Coalition~~ the Council of Neighborhood Associations work with stakeholders to identify neighborhood assets, challenges and priorities for development. Activities are geared toward learning; for the City to learn about neighborhood needs and desires, and for these groups to learn about the plans and regulations that guide development in their area; and how land use decisions also must comply with federal, state and local laws. Although this process does not guarantee a neighborhood will get everything it wants, sub-area planning can help it get organized for future projects that will influence the direction of community decisions.



A community member discusses neighborhood issues with City staff at a public meeting.



Community members engaged in discussion during a meeting on the Downtown Strategy

Goals and Policies

GP1 The City, individual community members, other agencies and organizations all have a role in helping accomplish the vision and goals of the Comprehensive Plan.

PP1.1 ~~Develop a strategy~~ The City will actively employ innovative and inclusive methods and strategies to implement the Comprehensive Plan goals and policies. ~~€The city will continue to c~~ collaborate with partners, including City Advisory Committees and Commissions, neighborhoods, and other community groups, so that the strategy implementation of the Comprehensive Plan reflects community priorities ~~and actions~~.

PP1.2 Annually measure and highlight progress towards achieving the Comprehensive Plan goals and policies, including how well we are achieving our engagement goals. ~~Engage the community in updating the strategy, publish performance reports, Continue to inform the community of the progress~~ and recognize community partners who contribute to achieving the vision.

PP1.3 As the ~~action plan is developed and carried out, Comprehensive Plan is implemented,~~ the City will provide education, technical assistance, volunteer opportunities and other methods to include the community in this work.

GP2 People of all ages, backgrounds and physical abilities can access public meetings and information.

PP2.1 Make information and outreach materials available through a variety of means for all community members including, but not limited to, youths, seniors, those with disabilities, and under-represented groups.

PP2.2 Use and consistently evaluate new technologies to improve ways for community members to receive information and provide input.

PP2.3 Evaluate and pursue creative-intentional methods to inform and engage community members, vulnerable and/or overburdened populations, communities on the frontline, and under-represented groups who may not ordinarily get involved in civic affairs.

GP3 City decision processes are transparent and enable effective participation of the public.

PP3.1 Support ~~and encourage~~ City staff and encourage other community

leaders to strengthen their capacity to design and implement effective public involvement strategies.

PP3.2 Help the general public understand the structure of local government, how decisions are made, and how they can become involved.

PP3.3 Give community members, neighborhoods, and other interested parties opportunities to get involved early in land use decision-making processes. Encourage or require applicants to meet with affected community members and organizations.

PP3.4 Create structured opportunities for people to learn about city issues, share their experiences and motivations, and discuss public issues productively.

PP3.5 Partner with recognized neighborhood associations and other organizations in the community to host engagement opportunities on issues of common interest.

PP3.65 Develop public participation plans when amending or updating the Comprehensive Plan or master plans. Develop public participation or communication plans for other major projects.

PP3.76 Amend the Comprehensive Plan each year to incorporate the updated Capital Facilities Element and act upon other proposed changes to the Plan. Adopt these amendments only after notifying the public and providing opportunities for public comment.

PP3.87 Seek input from the community, including neighborhood associations and other groups, before final decisions are made to site public and private utility facilities, especially when they may have a significant impact.

PP3.9 The City will strive to hear from all demographics of the community in an equitable way.

~~**PP3.8** Respect property owners' legal rights when implementing this plan. Regulations should provide for compensation for the property owner or waivers from requirements if the implementation of the regulation would otherwise constitute a legally defined "taking."~~

~~PP3.9 Adopt a moratorium or interim zoning control only in cases of an emergency as defined by State statute.~~

GP4 Community members and other key stakeholders feel their opinions and ideas are heard, valued, and used by policy makers, advisory committees, and staff.

PP4.1 Build trust among all segments of the community through collaborative and inclusive decision making.

PP4.2 Replace or complement the ~~three-minute~~ one-way testimony format with an approach that allows meaningful dialogue between and among community members, stakeholders, City Council members, advisory boards, and staff.

PP4.3 Clearly define public participation goals and choose strategies specifically designed to meet those goals.

PP4.4 Evaluate public participation strategies to measure their effectiveness in meeting desired goals.

PP4.5 Select strategies from the full spectrum of public participation tools and techniques and utilize existing and emerging best practices.

PP4.6 Strive to inform the community about how their comments are considered and used in the decision-making process.

GP5 Sub-area planning is conducted through a collaborative effort by community members and the City, and is used to shape how neighborhoods grow and develop.

PP5.1 Work with neighborhoods to identify the priorities, assets and challenges of designated sub-area(s), as well as provide information to increase understanding of land-use decision-making processes and the existing plans and regulations that could affect them.

PP5.2 Encourage wide participation in the development and

implementation of sub-area plans.


PP5.3 ~~Define~~Recognize the role that sub-area plans play in City decision-making and resource allocation.


PP5.4 ~~Allow~~Provide opportunities for initiation of sub-area planning by either neighborhoods or the City.

PP5.5 Encourage collaboration between neighborhoods and City representatives.

PP5.6 Engage in collaborative and continued partnerships with sub-area representatives.

Our Partners: Strong Interjurisdictional Partnerships Help Our Region Thrive

Our City has strong planning partnerships with other area jurisdictions, and these have helped our region thrive. The [Thurston Regional Planning Council](#)  (TRPC), plays an important role in fostering this collaboration. TRPC consists of decision makers from numerous jurisdictions and organizations in Thurston County who meet regularly to discuss important regional issues. They also prepare a variety of plans and studies on environmental quality, land use and transportation, demographic trends, and other issues – all of which provide a framework for making informed decisions. Its work has influenced many parts of this Plan.

Because the City recognizes that our community is affected by forces outside our jurisdictional borders, we regularly coordinate with Thurston County and its other cities. We share [County-Wide Planning Policies](#) , which ensure our comprehensive plans are coordinated and consistent. These policies express shared regional goals to:

- Improve livability
- Preserve and enhance the quality of our environment
- Preserve open spaces
- Offer varied and affordable housing
- Provide high-quality urban services at the lowest possible cost
- Plan for development in the urban growth area so that upon

annexation, these areas transition from the county to cities (from rural to urban) in an organized way



Kids plant a tree sapling at a local park.

In addition to our County-Wide Planning Policies, the cities of Olympia, Lacey and Tumwater work with Thurston County to establish and periodically review Urban Growth Areas, where high density, urban growth is encouraged (See Land Use and Design chapter).

Olympia's Urban Growth Area includes areas in unincorporated Thurston County the City expects to eventually annex. For this reason, it's important for the City of Olympia and Thurston County to establish and maintain common zoning and development regulations for these areas and avoid annexations that create illogical boundaries, which increase the cost of city services. The City and County periodically review the Urban Growth Boundary to get an accurate picture of future urban development.

Because this Plan applies, in part, to unincorporated Thurston County lands, it guides Thurston County decisions within Olympia Urban Growth Areas. The parts of this Plan that apply to these overlapping areas are often referred to as the "Joint Plan" for Olympia's Urban Growth Area and are also part of the [Thurston County Comprehensive Plan](#) [🔗](#).

The City also works closely with policy-makers from the State of Washington, Port of Olympia, Olympia School District and other jurisdictions to share information and collaborate when public resources can be pooled.

In 2022, the Olympia City Council and the Squaxin Island Tribal Council

signed an accord [🔗](#) that commits the two governments to work together on several long-term actions, including supporting economic and infrastructure opportunities and responding to climate change, and promoting a healthy exchange of cultures through public art and community service. The accord formalizes the bond of respect and friendship between the two governing bodies. It lays out a shared commitment to work in harmony for the economic, environmental, and cultural future for both communities.



Celebration at Squaxin Park on Indigenous Peoples Day.

The goals and policies below relate to partnerships focused on growth management.

Goals and Policies

GP6 Olympia accommodates growth in a way consistent with the regional goals expressed in [County-Wide Planning Policies](#).[🔗](#)

PP6.1 Cooperate with Thurston County and its other municipalities to ensure comprehensive plans are coordinated and consistent.

PP6.2 Cooperate with Thurston County and the cities of Lacey and Tumwater to ensure our Urban Growth Boundaries are consistent with [County-Wide Planning Policies](#) [🔗](#).

PP6.3 Work with Thurston County on its land-use designations for unincorporated county areas within the city's Urban Growth Boundary so they will be compatible with the City's policies and development standards ~~when-if~~ they are annexed.

PP6.4 Coordinate the hearings and actions of the Olympia and Thurston County planning commissions when amendments are proposed to the City's Comprehensive Plan that could affect unincorporated growth areas.

~~**PP6.5** Participate in a County-wide " program in which some portion of the density range within low-density residential districts is achievable through purchase of transferred development rights.~~

~~**PP6.6** Periodically compare housing densities with Thurston County to establish density targets, update population forecasts, and adjust zoning requirements and incentives if needed.~~

~~**GP7 Logical boundaries and reasonable service areas are created when areas within the Urban Growth Area are annexed.**~~

~~**PP7.1** All property within the Urban Growth Boundary may be annexed into the City.~~

~~**PP7.2** Evaluate the Urban Growth Boundary and remove properties unlikely to develop at urban densities in the future.~~

~~**PP7.3** Before annexing areas, evaluate the City's capacity to provide services efficiently and effectively.~~

~~**PP7.4** Encourage and assist property owners in existing unincorporated "islands" to annex into the City. Avoid annexations that create "islands" of unincorporated land within city limits.~~

~~**PP7.5** Evaluate all proposed annexations on the basis of their short- and long-term community impacts and how they adhere to the Comprehensive Plan's goals and policies. If a proposed annexation includes proposed development, analyze its short- and long-term impacts on the neighborhood and city, including all required water, sewer, roads, schools,~~

open spaces, police and fire protection, garbage collection and other services.

~~**PP7.6** Confer and assess the potential impacts and boundary issues of proposed annexations with special purpose districts and other jurisdictions. Resolve boundary issues with affected jurisdictions before taking any final action on a formal annexation petition.~~

~~**PP7.7** Use readily identifiable boundaries, such as lakes, rivers, streams, railroads, and highways, for annexation boundaries wherever practical. streets,~~

~~**PP7.8** Work with the County to make sure the standards for utilities, roads, and services in the urban growth areas are compatible.~~

~~**PP7.9** Provide that applicants for annexation pay their fair share for any utility and service extension and development, as well as for capital facilities needed to provide these services.~~




~~**PP7.10** Require that all fees and charges be paid or payment arrangements be made prior to annexation. Property owners within an annexing area may be required to assume a share of the city's bonded indebtedness.~~

~~**PP7.11** Discourage annexations for the sole purpose of obtaining approval of uses not allowed by County regulations unless the proposal is consistent with an adopted joint plan and with City standards and policies.~~

~~**PP7.12** Decisions on requests to increase the size of a proposed annexation must be made by the City Council on a case by case basis. It may expand proposed boundaries if:
The expanded annexation would create logical boundaries and service areas; or
Without the proposed annexation, the additional area was unlikely to be annexed in the foreseeable future; or
The additional area would eliminate or reduce the size of an unincorporated County island.~~

For More Information

- Olympia has a Council-Manager form of government. [The Constitution and laws of Washington State](#) and the [Olympia Municipal Code](#) authorize the City Council to make decisions regarding City affairs. The City Council is elected by the public; the City Manager is appointed by the Council and is responsible for administration and staff
- State and local laws establish minimum requirements for public participation. Such laws include: parts of the [Growth Management Act](#) (GMA) and [State Environmental Policy Act](#) (SEPA), the [Open Public Meetings Act](#), [Public Records Act](#), and Olympia's Comprehensive Plan and Municipal Code
- The Washington State [Growth Management Act](#) establishes rules to guide the development of comprehensive plans and development regulations that shape growth over a 20-year horizon
- [County-Wide Planning Policies](#) establish how Thurston County and the cities and towns within will work together to achieve our regional goals
- The [Buildable Lands Report](#) prepared for Thurston County by the staff of the [Thurston Regional Planning Council](#) helps Olympia to determine the quantity of land to provide for population and employment growth
- The parts of this Plan that apply within unincorporated Thurston County are part of the [Thurston County Comprehensive Plan](#)
- The City of Olympia [Advisory Committees web pages](#) have information about the role and work of advisory committees
- The City of Olympia [Neighborhood Programs web pages](#) have information about how to form a Recognized Neighborhood Organization and how neighborhoods can get involved and make a difference
- The City of Olympia ~~[participates on a broad range of interjurisdictional committees and boards such as the Economic Development Council, Animal Services, Law and Justice Council, Regional Housing Council, and the Deschutes Estuary Restoration Committee. Councilmembers are given committee/board assignments as a way for the City to participate and be represented on a broad variety of interjurisdictional issues. Intergovernmental Boards and Committees web pages have information about the City's partnerships with other jurisdictions](#)~~
- The [Centennial Accord between the Federally Recognized Indian Tribes in Washington State and the State of Washington](#) and

- [Millennium Agreement](#)  outline the City's government-to-government relationship with federally recognized Indian tribes
- [Municipal Resource Services Center](#)  (MSRC) provides information about issues and laws that shape local government
 - The City often references information from [\[The International Institute for Public Participation\]](#)  Iap2 has developed a core set of public involvement principles, and a Spectrum of Public Participation that outlines participation approaches along a continuum.