

# Foreword

The City of Olympia adopted its first Comprehensive Plan over fifty years ago. Although for a time, Washington’s Planning Enabling Act only required that land use and transportation issues be included, Olympia’s plans have also addressed other topics such as parks, schools, utilities and the local economy. In 1990, the State’s Growth Management Act (GMA) directed Olympia’s plan, and those of other growing cities and counties, to address statewide goals and include specific ‘elements’. The table below shows where the elements required by the GMA are addressed in this Comprehensive Plan.

This Comprehensive Plan reflects a major update which was completed in 2014 and further refined in 2025. It accommodates changes since the 2014 Comprehensive Plan was adopted and the changes projected over the next 20 years. Hundreds of community members participated. Under the GMA the City may amend the Plan annually, and must review the entire Plan and amend it as necessary every 10 years.

Olympia’s Comprehensive Plan is composed of two volumes, the first of which includes twelve chapters, including optional chapters. The second volume is the capital facilities element, including a 6-year financial plan for capital projects that is updated regularly. The plan should be read as a whole because topics are interrelated yet are typically addressed within a single chapter to avoid repetition. Thus, these chapters are only for organizing the plan’s content. They do not reflect the structure of the City’s government or any particular model of city planning.

The GMA establishes required elements that must be contained in all Comprehensive Plans. In the Growth Management statute these mandatory elements are listed under RCW 36.70A.070 in the following order:

1. Land Use
2. Housing
3. Capital Facilities
4. Utilities
5. Rural element for non-urban lands
6. Transportation
7. Economic development<sup>1</sup>
8. Parks and recreation<sup>1</sup>
9. Climate Change and Resiliency

Following is a table that summarizes the contents of each chapter of the Comprehensive Plan. Listed on the far right of the table below are the GMA-mandated element(s), which are addressed in each of the Comprehensive Plan Chapters. In some

cases, additional GMA requirements are noted as being addressed in Comprehensive Plan Chapters. If you are interested in a more detailed crosswalk between the City's Comprehensive Plan and the mandatory GMA elements, a "GMA Checklist" has been completed and can be provided to you upon request.

<b>Comprehensive Plan Chapter</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>GMA-Required Elements Addressed</b>
Volume 1:		
Introduction Community Values & Vision	Overview of the Plan and its setting <sup>2</sup> Summary of the foundations of the Plan	N/A Include a vision for the community at the end of the 20-year planning period; identify community values derived from public participation processes.
Public Participation and Partners	Description of the relationship between the City government and others who implement the Plan	Not a formal GMA element; does meet requirements of RCW 36.70A.035, 36.70A.130 and 36.70A.140
Natural Environment	Focused on elements of the community's environment that were not built by people; it includes the City's shoreline goals and policies, and addresses means of reducing land use impacts on the natural environment – such as urban forestry	Land Use; also addresses requirements of RCW 36.70A.170 and .172
Land Use and Urban Design	Addresses the pattern and form of land uses addressing the pattern and form of land uses like housing, businesses and industry and how to ensure compatibility, blending and adequate space for each (a GMA-requirement). This chapter encompasses topics like landscaping and architectural design, preservation and appreciation of historic resources. It also addresses the pattern and form of land uses, housing, businesses and industry, and how to ensure compatibility, blending and adequate space for each. This chapter encompasses topics like landscaping and architectural design, preservation and appreciation of historic resources, and more detailed planning for specific areas of the community.	Land Use (multiple elements); Housing (elements a-d); Transportation element 6(a)(i)

<b>Comprehensive Plan Chapter</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>GMA-Required Elements Addressed</b>
Transportation	Addresses all aspects of mobility including cars, buses, trucks, trains, bikes and walking	Transportation (all required elements)
Housing	Addresses the need for adequate housing supply for people of all income levels	Housing elements a-h
Utilities	Overview of plans for both private and public utilities (such as water, sewer, solid waste, and electricity) and their use of land; details regarding utilities are often included in separate "Master Plans"	Land Use (protection of drinking water, drainage, flooding and stormwater runoff); Utilities (multiple elements)
Parks, Arts and Recreation	Addresses the use of land for parks and open space and community activities such as recreation, the arts, and other aspects of mental and physical well-being	Parks and recreation elements a-c
Economy	Description of Olympia's approach to local investment, business and jobs within the context of the global economy	Economy elements a-c
Public Safety	Addresses safety services provided by the public sector, such as police and fire protection, the justice system, and code enforcement	Land Use; Transportation;
Climate Action and Resilience	Reduces greenhouse gas emissions and vehicle miles traveled; improves climate preparedness, response, and recovery efforts to enhance resiliency and avoid the adverse impacts of climate change; prioritizes environmental justice and avoid creating or worsening localized climate impacts to vulnerable populations and overburdened communities.	Climate Change and Resiliency (elements a-e), addressed in multiple chapters
Volume 2		
Capital Facilities	The <a href="#">Capital Facilities Plan</a> includes 20-year goals and policies, along with a 6-year plan that is updated annually, and can be found on the City's website	Capital Facilities (elements a-e)

<sup>1</sup>Economic Development and Parks and Recreation elements are required only if the state legislature provides funding (RCW 36.70A.070(9))

<sup>2</sup>When updated in 1994 and in 2014, respectively, an environmental impact statement (EIS) and a supplement EIS were prepared. A new EIS was created for the Olympia 2045 Plan, developed in 2025. Those documents provide more extensive background information regarding the state of the community at those points in time.

More information about how to use this document is included in the Introduction Chapter.

## Introduction to the Comprehensive Plan



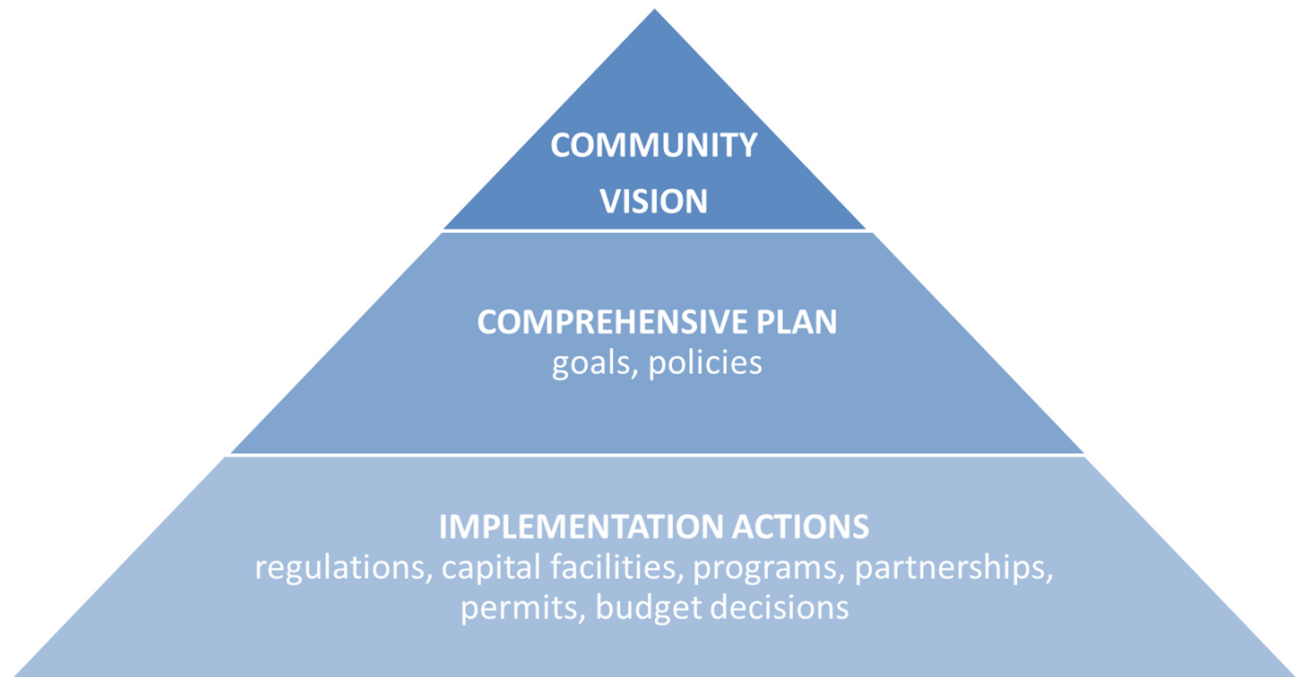
View of the Capitol Building from Heritage Park Fountain

The City of Olympia's Comprehensive Plan builds upon our community's values and our vision for the future. The goals and policies in this document provide high-level direction for actions the City and other community members may take to realize these values and vision. Goals and policies (including maps) also guide City budgets, master plans, development regulations and other decisions.

As many as 20,000 additional people are expected to join our community over the next two decades. This Plan is our strategy for maintaining and enhancing our high quality of life and environment while accommodating expected growth. Most readily-buildable parcels in the City are already developed to some degree. Thus, over the next 20 years, we expect to see more infill and redevelopment of existing developed areas. This presents our community with opportunities to restore degraded environments, create vibrant pockets of social and economic activity, and target investments to make more efficient use of and improve existing infrastructure.

The Comprehensive Plan is not just a plan for city government. Developed out of input from thousands of people in our community at different times over decades, the Comprehensive Plan truly is the community's plan. Many goals and policies call for coordination and collaboration among individual residents and community members, neighborhoods and civic groups, and city government. As always, there will be

challenges and change, but the intent is to build on the creativity and strength of our community to shape how we develop.



The Comprehensive Plan is based on community vision, and guides City and other community actions, such as regulations, programs and budgets.

## **How to Use this Document**

### **Chapters**

This Comprehensive Plan is separated into two volumes: the first with twelve chapters, and the second volume, which is the Capital Facilities Plan:

Volume I:

1. Introduction to the Comprehensive Plan;
2. Community Values & Vision
3. Public Participation and Partners;
4. Natural Environment;
5. Land Use and Urban Design;
6. Transportation;
7. Housing
8. Utilities;
9. Economy;

10. Parks, Arts and Recreation;
11. Public Safety; and
12. Climate Action and Resilience.

## Volume II: Capital Facilities

There are many issues that connect these chapters. For example:

- The Land Use Chapter, in conjunction with Public Participation & Partners, Natural Environment, Transportation, Housing, Parks, Utilities, Economy, Climate Action & Resilience, and Capital Facilities, all provide basic policy guidance for City land use regulations outlined in City codes. They describe generally where various types of land uses should occur, how intense they may be and how designed; types and locations of environmentally sensitive areas to be protected; and the general types of transportation, utility and park facilities that are planned, including locations for major facilities. More specifically:
  - Policies related to trees exist in the Natural Environment chapter as well as under [Land Use and Urban Design](#), Transportation, Utilities and even Economy.
  - Policies related to walkability are included under both [Land Use and Urban Design](#) and Transportation.
  - Policies related to greenhouse gas emission reduction and improving resiliency to impacts from climate change are included in all chapters.
- Various chapters include policies that influence City services, including fire, police, affordable housing, arts, recreation, volunteer services and overall public engagement in civic affairs.
- Some efforts, such as Expanding the Arts, Cultures and Heritage (ARCH) Profile in Olympia, are interdisciplinary by design. Policies that support ARCH are included in the Economy, Land Use and Urban Design, and the Parks, Arts, and Recreation chapters.

If viewing an electronic version, use the 'search' function to find all of the policies related to specific topics.

## Goals and Policies

The goals in this Plan identify what we hope to achieve as a community. Some goals will take longer than others to realize. Policies describe how the City will act in a broad sense to achieve these goals.

While some policies take a prescriptive approach by outlining what the City will specifically 'require' to achieve a goal, other policies present a more flexible approach whereby the City will 'encourage' or 'support' an action. Each type of approach has inherent trade-offs. Overall, the City's policy approach within the Plan seeks to balance these trade-offs while meeting community goals.

As an example of a prescriptive approach, one policy requires land uses to prevent and treat stormwater runoff, which provides certainty that the City will use its authority to enforce practices that achieve our clean water protection goals. In order for the City to 'require' an action, it must have authority under the law to enforce it.

Sometimes a more flexible policy approach improves the capability of achieving certain goals. Having some flexibility over the 20-year planning period enables the City to respond more quickly when environmental or market conditions change. It also allows for tailoring implementation to geographic or land use type conditions at the zoning level. For example, a policy in the Plan states the City will require development to incorporate measures that reduce risks associated with rising sea levels. The policy includes, as an example, higher finished floor elevations, but does not specify what that particular measure will be. In order to respond appropriately to sea level rise, the City will need an adaptive strategy based on new or updated information. The same adaptive methodology applies to policies regarding infill development. In order to meet our vision of a more vibrant and pedestrian-friendly downtown, the City will need flexibility to respond to changing market conditions over the 20-year planning period.

Where the City does not establish requirements, it may 'encourage' or 'support' actions. For example, one policy encourages the use of fruit and nut trees to support food self-sufficiency. This policy demonstrates the City's recognition of community support for trees that provide food, while also allowing flexibility for implementation through incentives or partnerships rather than regulation. To require fruit trees at the broad Plan level could hamper other goals during the implementation phase that call for providing a variety of tree species throughout neighborhoods and planting the right tree in the right place.

At times, goals or policies may seem to be in conflict with each other. For example, a goal to increase density may seem to be in conflict with a goal to preserve open space. Or a goal to increase tree canopy may seem to be in conflict with a goal to increase solar energy access. Over the next 20 years, the complex challenges and opportunities we face as a community will often require us to strike a balance between different goals and policies to provide the best outcome for the community as a whole. Thus individual goals and policies should always be considered within the context of the entire Plan.

Throughout each and every year, City officials, along with the public, make a range of decisions about how community resources will be used and managed, and how both public and private development will occur. Community plans and programs often result

from conscientious balancing among divergent interests based on the facts and context of a particular situation and on the entire set of Comprehensive Plan goals. Balancing these goals in a way that provides the best overall community benefit requires careful consideration, based on an understanding of multiple community objectives, the specific context and potential impacts.

Additionally, the City of Olympia strives to balance the Plan through a lens of equity for all community members. To build a truly livable and vibrant city, we understand that we must provide equitable access to the necessities of life. We must consider the diverse needs of our residents, business owners, employees and guests as we plan for the long-term growth and development of Olympia. Therefore, the plan should be read by broadly applying equity considerations in all of its goals and policies.

This type of strategic decision-making can often lead to a selection of options that realize multiple goals. For example, when we protect the quality of our air and water, we improve our health and attract long-term investment in our City.



Beautiful sunshine display at Procession of the Species.

## **Implementation**

This Comprehensive Plan does not include specific actions or measurements. A companion document to the Plan is the City Work Plan that will take the community's vision and goals as defined in the Comprehensive Plan, and lay out a path by which we can achieve them. Actions may take a variety of forms ranging from large construction projects to the creation of new guiding documents and plans.



This effort will also be heavily focused on tracking our effectiveness and demonstrating success. A set of performance measures will show where we began and where we currently are in relation to our desired outcomes, with results reported back to the community. The information will be updated annually or biannually through a collaborative community process and reported back to the community.

The City looks for partners from all sectors of the community to help implement the Comprehensive Plan. Partners may include residents, businesses, developers, non-profits, the faith community, schools, neighborhood associations, other government agencies and organizations. Partnerships will help our community work together to realize our common vision.

## **The Local Planning & Development Process**

Local planning depends heavily on community involvement. Public engagement is essential for many reasons, including that it provides for more holistic perspectives on City decisions that affect the entire community and it protects peoples' rights to influence public policy. In fact, the Growth Management Act calls for broad public involvement in creating and amending Comprehensive Plans and implementing development regulations.

Local planning is a phased process that also operates within a framework of federal, state, county and local laws. Our local codes and other decisions must be consistent with these laws, in addition to Comprehensive Plan goals and policies. For example, both the U.S. and Washington State Constitutions include private property rights that must be respected by local government agencies.

Once a Comprehensive Plan is adopted, it may be amended annually, with larger updates considered every 10 years. There may be a period of time after the City Council adopts changes to the Plan before staff, the public and policy makers are able to take action to implement it. The City will make every effort to quickly and reasonably develop, review and adopt any new or revised regulations to conform to this Plan.

Development codes to implement the Plan may be amended at any time during the year, but only following a public process guided by both state and local standards. The City Council makes final decisions on plan and code amendments. Typically, the Olympia Planning Commission holds a public hearing and makes a recommendation to the City Council on amendments to the Comprehensive Plan or implementing development codes.

There are further opportunities for the public to provide input and influence site-specific permitting decisions; however public influence may be more constrained at this stage.


This is because site specific permit decisions are largely based on whether or not proposals are consistent with established local codes and other laws. This gives predictability to both community members and developers, consistent with the intent of the Growth Management Act. Community involvement in Comprehensive Plan updates and amendments to the City code are encouraged and are the most effective way of guiding future development.

See the [Public Participation & Partners Chapter](#) for more information on how to get involved. (Note: UPDATE THE LINK TO NEW PP&P CHAPTER ONCE ADOPTED)

## **Context for the Comprehensive Plan**

In 1990, the Washington State Growth Management Act (GMA) was passed in response to rapid and sprawling growth in many parts of the state that was causing a decrease in quality of life, negative effects on the environment, and increased costs for municipal infrastructure and maintenance. Revision of our Comprehensive Plan was a requirement for Olympia under GMA and Olympia adopted a revised Comprehensive Plan under the Act in 1994.

The Act requires most urban counties and cities in the state to prepare comprehensive plans to address how they will manage expected growth. It directs urban areas, like Olympia, to absorb more of the state's population growth than rural areas, thereby preserving forests, animal habitat, farmland, and other important lands. Focusing growth in urban areas also reduces traffic, pollution, and the costs of providing city services that protect the health, safety and quality of life of community members.

The Act defines [15 goals](#)  to guide the development and adoption of comprehensive plans. These focus on "smart growth" principles that maximize use of land and existing utilities, protect historic and natural resources, and lower traffic and housing costs. Fortunately, Olympia has been taking this approach for a long time.

Olympia has long understood the merits of planning for the future and had a Comprehensive Plan as early as 1959.

In many ways, our earlier plans created the community we have today. For example, during community outreach for the 1994 plan, residents expressed a desire for Olympia to become a "City of Trees." In response, the community developed several goals and policies to guide a new Olympia Urban Forestry Program. Since then, we've planted thousands of street trees, and been consistently recognized by the National Arbor Day Foundation as a Tree City USA.

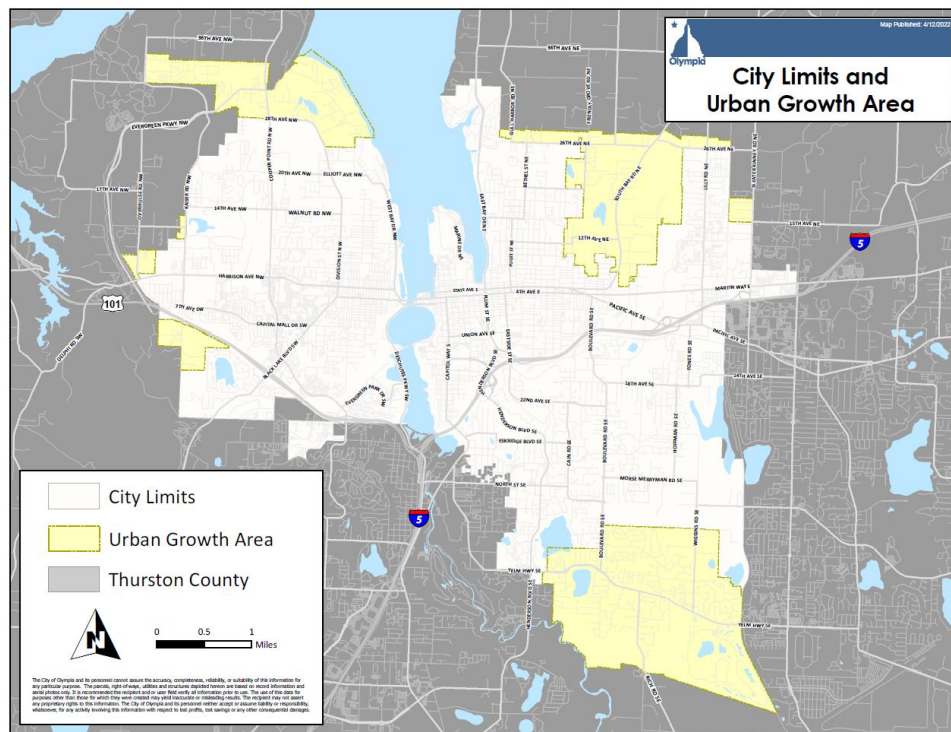


Community members volunteering at an Arbor Day event.

## **A Changing Community**

Since the 1970s, the population and economy of the Puget Sound region has been growing. According to the [Thurston County Profile](#), the county's population more than doubled between 1980 and 2010. Forecasters expect Olympia's population and employment will continue to increase over the next 20 years. In 2024, the estimated population of Olympia and its Urban Growth Area was 70,860 residents. Forecasters expect our population will increase to 87,650 by 2045, a rate of just over 1% per year. A majority of this increase will be due to in-migration. People are attracted to living here because we have a relatively stable economy, a beautiful environment, friendly and safe neighborhoods, good schools and lower living costs than our neighbors to the north. Many of these new residents will work within the current City limits and the unincorporated Urban Growth Area.

## OLYMPIA AND ITS URBAN GROWTH BOUNDARIES



Map of Olympia and its Urban Growth Boundaries

Olympia's urban growth area is about 16,000 acres. This includes about 12,000 acres within City limits and 4,000 acres in the unincorporated area, which may eventually be annexed into the City. In cooperation with Olympia, Lacey and Tumwater, Thurston County has established and periodically reviews Urban Growth Areas. In these areas, urban growth is encouraged; outside of them, rural densities and services will be maintained.

Much of the land in the City is already developed, but there is still adequate room to accommodate our expected population and employment growth. This land capacity analysis can be found in the Thurston County [Buildable Lands Report](#).

## Preserving our Sense of Place and Connections

The City embraces our Comprehensive Plan as an opportunity to enhance the things Olympians care about. As we grow and face change, Olympians want to preserve the unique qualities and familiarity of our community. We draw a sense of place from the special features of our city: walkable neighborhoods, historic buildings, views of the mountains, Capitol and Puget Sound, and our connected social fabric. These features help us identify with our community, enrich us, and make us want to invest here socially, economically and emotionally.

During development of this Plan, many people expressed a desire to maintain a “small town feel.” Olympians want to feel connected to each other and to our built and natural environment. We want to live in a friendly and safe community where we know our neighbors and shopkeepers, and run into friends along the sidewalk. We value harmony with nature, thriving small businesses, places to gather and celebrate, and an inclusive local government.



Neighborhood-scale shopping and gathering spaces

Olympians expressed that they are willing to accept growth as long as our environment and sense of place is preserved. That means protecting the places and culture that we recognize as “Olympia,” even if those things are a little different for each of us. It also means focusing on our community values and vision as we grow.

## Key Challenges

Our community will face several challenges as we move forward. We will need to balance these issues with intention for the best overall outcomes. There are major global, national and local influences that present both challenges and opportunities for our local community. Implementation of the vision and goals in this Plan will require creative solutions so that Olympia can:

### **Balance Protection of the Natural Environment as the Built Environment Grows:**

Our community will change over time, as we continue to grow and welcome new neighbors and businesses. We need to continue to work diligently to address the housing crisis by increasing housing supply that is affordable to people and families at all income levels. And we must provide space for the jobs, services, and activities people need. We can do this while protecting open spaces and environmentally

sensitive areas that make our community unique and special, to provide connections to nature, and to protect the functions and values of the natural environment.

**Take Action and Prepare for our Changing Climate:** Over the next twenty years, we will need deliberate action to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions while also taking measures to increase our resilience to anticipated impacts of our changing climate. Achieving our emissions reduction goals will require significant changes in how we produce and use energy, consume goods and services, and travel. However, we have the knowledge and technologies to address this challenge. As climate change worsens, we will need to prepare for, adapt to, and recover from acute events and long-term changes. Protecting our community's health, critical infrastructure, natural environment, and local businesses from extreme heat, wildfire smoke, and sea level rise are key challenges we will face. Together, we will strengthen all sectors of Olympia to build resilience to these impacts.

**Become a More Sustainable City:** As the capital of the State of Washington, Olympia has a unique opportunity to show leadership on key issues in the State, such as sustainability. The City needs to make investments based on an integrated framework that compares lifecycle costs and benefits of all City investments and to encourage sustainable practices by individuals and organizations through education, technical assistance, and incentives.

**Accommodate Growth:** Increased growth in Olympia is anticipated. Residents need to integrate the: quality of new residences, demographics, likely places of residence, housing typology, and prevention of rural and city sprawl. In addition, community members need to identify housing and service programs for increased populations of seniors and those who are homeless or insecure in their housing. We must find ways to add more housing that is accessible and affordable to the people who do or want to call Olympia home, while maintaining a variety of neighborhoods that people want to live and thrive in. This can and should be accomplished in ways that promote equity and social interactions for our community members.

**Integrate Shoreline Management Program (SMP):** Special coordination is necessary to integrate the SMP with the Comprehensive Plan. Olympians value ample public space along their marine shoreline and waterways to balance growth downtown.

**Revitalize Our Downtown:** Located on Puget Sound and along the Deschutes River, downtown is the site of many historic buildings and places, and is home to many theatres, galleries, and unique shops as well as the State Capitol. At the same time, Olympia's downtown has yet to fully become the walkable, comfortable place the community desires. To add vibrancy while retaining our desired small town feel will require more downtown residents, better amenities, attractive public spaces, green space, thriving local businesses, and integrated standards for design.




**Conserve and Protect Limited Natural Resources:** As we grow, Olympia will become a higher density city and our land and water supplies will need to support more people. We can take advantage of growth as a tool to reshape our community into a more sustainable form; to do so we must balance growth, use our resources wisely, and consider the carrying capacity of the land. Olympia supports the efforts to restore Capitol Lake to the Deschutes Estuary.

**Fund a Long-term Vision:** The economy fluctuates and funding circumstances change. This affects our ability to carry out planned actions over the years. Present resources are already stretched thin, and there is little ability to take on new programs without new revenue sources. We must identify funding strategies, explore operating efficiencies and develop partnerships to provide the diversity and flexibility to fund our vision.



People enjoying a sunny day along the waterfront.

## For More Information

- 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

- 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.
- Thurston Regional Planning Council's [The Profile: Thurston County Statistics & Data](#)
- Learn more about how the Comprehensive Plan guides City actions in the [City Work Plan](#).
-