



# ISLAND COUNTY PARKS AND HABITAT CONSERVATION PLAN

Planning Context Summary Memo

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# PLANNING CONTEXT

## 1. Introduction



West Beach Park

In Spring 2010, Island County and the Whidbey Camano Land Trust (WCLT) formed a collaborative partnership to develop a Parks and Habitat Conservation Plan for the County. The planning process creates a unique opportunity to systematically address declining funding resources that have made it difficult for the County to provide and care for parks and natural resources on Whidbey and Camano Islands.

The plan will focus on the role that Island County plays in managing and protecting parks and habitat areas, since many other jurisdictions also provide natural and recreational resources throughout the County. The Plan will provide strategies and directions to make the best use of existing resources and work with other providers as potential partners to ensure that parks, facilities, and habitat area remain vital assets for the community.

### *Planning Process*

Over the next 8 months, Island County will engage in a three-phased planning process (Figure 1). The process will rely on direction from the County and the WCLT, as well as feedback from the public during every phase of the plan.

Figure 1: The Planning Process



- *Phase 1: Where Are We Now?*  
The first phase includes a review and inventory of County-wide resources, as well as creation of maps. This phase includes an analysis of County demographics, land use and park operations to provide a foundation for the planning effort. Key findings from this analysis are presented in this document, as well as the forthcoming Existing Resources Summary Memo. Findings will be presented to the County and the public for further input.
- *Phase 2: Where Do We Want to Be?*  
Phase 2 includes a wide variety of forums for public outreach to assess the preferences and priorities of residents and key stakeholders in Island County. Along with the technical analysis conducted in Phase 1, this community feedback will be used to develop a Needs Assessment Report of current and future needs for parks, recreation facilities, trails and habitat areas.
- *Phase 3: How Do We Get There?*  
During Phase 3, the planning process will focus on identifying goals, strategies and actions that can achieve the community's vision identified in Phase 2. A development and operations cost model will be used along with recommendations to help the County identify priority projects. This final phase will result in a draft plan that will be presented to key County staff, the Board of Commissioners, the WCLT and the public for further refinement. Based on these revisions, the final plan will be submitted to the County for adoption, where it will be used for many years as a tool for achieving the desired park and habitat system.

### *Purpose of this Memo*

To establish a baseline of information for future planning phases, the Planning Context Summary Memo provides an overview of County characteristics and planning considerations that will influence the direction and focus of the Plan. The document defines the planning area, including land management characteristics and land use and development patterns, and identifies key demographic information as it relates to parks and habitat conservation in the County.

## 2. Planning Area



English Boom Park

The planning area for the Parks and Habitat Conservation Plan includes Whidbey and Camano Islands, bounded by Deception Pass to the north; the Strait of Juan De Fuca and Admiralty Inlet to the west and south; and Possession Sound, Port Susan and Skagit Bay to the east (Map 1).

Island County is located in the central region of Washington's Puget Sound. The Saratoga Passage separates the County into west (Whidbey Island) and east (Camano Island). The islands are distinctly unique from one another, with different land use and development characteristics. Whidbey Island is the larger of the two islands and has a larger population base with three incorporated cities and multiple unincorporated communities. Camano Island is more rural, and is predominantly composed of smaller residential parcels.

The County has a total land area of 130,779 acres (204 square miles) with more than 200 miles of shoreline. Island County is generally flat, with low rolling hills and gentle slopes that lead from shoreline to the islands' interior. Along the Strait of Juan De Fuca on the west side of Whidbey Island, the shoreline is more rugged and steep. There are several tidal estuaries and bays on the shoreline, as well as large inlets on the eastern side of the islands.

### *Transportation*

State Highway 20 connects the north end of Whidbey Island to the mainland via the Deception Pass Bridge. On the east side of Camano Island, the Mark Clark Bridge and State Highway 532 connects the island with the mainland and Interstate 5 to the east. There is also state ferry service that provides access between Clinton, in southern Whidbey Island, and Mukilteo, in Snohomish County. While Island Transit provides free public transportation within the County, there is no public ferry with direct connection between Whidbey and Camano Islands. As a result, access from one island to another is inconvenient and requires considerable time.

### *Climate*

Like most of northwest Washington, portions of Island County receive considerable precipitation. However, weather patterns and precipitation are strongly influenced by the Olympic Mountains and the Coastal Range

on Vancouver Island, which shields parts of the islands from winter storms moving inland from the Pacific Ocean. While central Island County, near Coupeville, receives an average annual rainfall of 18 inches, southern Whidbey Island receives averages between 30 and 60 inches a year.

### *Natural and Resource Lands*

Surrounded by the Puget Sound, Island County has diverse and abundant natural areas. These include wetlands, deepwater habitats, tributary streams and buffers, and shorelines. However, it also includes protected species habitat as well as altered landscapes with long-term commercial and environmental significance, such as agricultural land. The County's undeveloped areas can be categorized as natural lands (i.e., undeveloped land protected for natural or environmental benefits) and resource lands (i.e., land protected for its agricultural, forest product or mineral values). Both types of landscapes are valuable in this planning process, as are developed lands managed as parks and open space for recreational use.

### *Land Management*

There are several jurisdictions and property owners responsible for managing parks and habitat areas within Island County. For this reason, planning for parks and habitat conservation requires consideration of jurisdictional boundaries and responsibilities. It also creates a number of opportunities for partnerships and collaborative efforts. Land management jurisdictions in Island County include:

#### **Federal**

Two units of the Federal government are responsible for management of lands in the County. The Whidbey Naval Air Station and Ault Field air strip is located in northwest Whidbey Island and is owned by the U.S. Navy. The National Park Service manages Ebey's Landing National Historical Reserve on the west central shore of Whidbey Island.

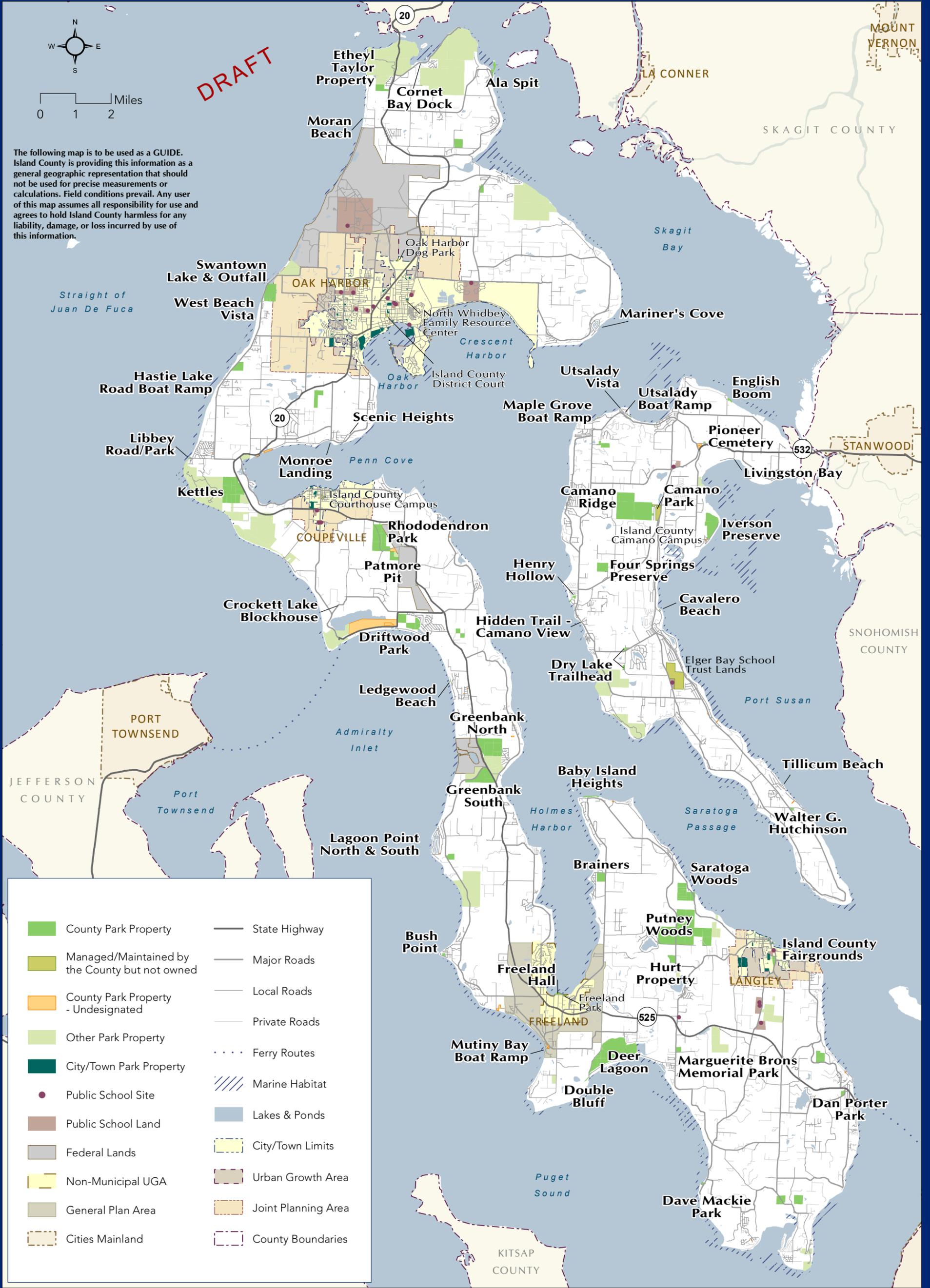
#### **State**

The State of Washington owns and manages approximately 590 acres of state parks and other lands in Island County. In addition to parks operated by Washington State Parks, this includes fishing and shellfish harvest areas managed by the Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) and forest lands and school trust lands managed by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR).



**DRAFT**

The following map is to be used as a GUIDE. Island County is providing this information as a general geographic representation that should not be used for precise measurements or calculations. Field conditions prevail. Any user of this map assumes all responsibility for use and agrees to hold Island County harmless for any liability, damage, or loss incurred by use of this information.



	County Park Property		State Highway
	Managed/Maintained by the County but not owned		Major Roads
	County Park Property - Undesignated		Local Roads
	Other Park Property		Private Roads
	City/Town Park Property		Ferry Routes
	Public School Site		Marine Habitat
	Public School Land		Lakes & Ponds
	Federal Lands		City/Town Limits
	Non-Municipal UGA		Urban Growth Area
	General Plan Area		Joint Planning Area
	Cities Mainland		County Boundaries



### Island County Parks & Habitat Conservation Plan

## Island County Study Area



May 2010 | Data Source: Island County Planning & Community Development



### **County**

County parks and lands include approximately 3,000 acres of inland parks, beaches, trails, habitat areas, and undesignated sites. Much of this land is undeveloped, although developed parkland may include facilities such as sports fields, boat ramps and dog parks. Responsibility for these lands is divided between the Island County Parks Department, Public Works and the General Services Agency.

### **Cities and towns**

There are two incorporated cities in Island County: Oak Harbor and Langley. Island County's largest city, Oak Harbor, has an extensive park land inventory with around 250 acres. Langley has several small parks and natural areas totaling 50 acres, and the Town of Coupeville has 22 acres.

### **Park Districts**

There are two park and recreation districts in Island County: North Whidbey and South Whidbey. Each manage several recreation facilities and provide recreation services for Whidbey Island residents.

### **Port Authorities**

Island County has three port authorities: the Port of Coupeville, the Port of South Whidbey and the Port of Mabana. The Coupeville and South Whidbey authorities provide three waterfront sites, in addition to a large farm (Greenbank Farm).

### **School Districts**

Island County's four school districts (Coupeville, Oak Harbor, South Whidbey and Stanwood 205) provide recreation and play facilities at local schools.

### **Other Special Districts**

The Whidbey Island and Snohomish County Conservation Districts help manage natural resources on Whidbey and Camano Islands. In addition, there are six dike and drainage districts in the County.

### **Non-Profits**

There are several active non-profits in the County. The Whidbey-Camano Land Trust owns 3,339 acres, and is responsible for protecting another 2,600 through conservation easements and other measures. Together with the Port of Coupeville and Island County, the Nature Conservancy also owns a large parcel of protected land.

### *Land Use and Development*

Land use plays an important role in the distribution of parks and protection of natural areas. Island County is largely rural, with small communities, farms and large forested tracts as the primary land uses. Island County's cities are contained within urban growth areas (UGAs). Land uses outside of and adjacent to a UGA must be reviewed by the nearest city as well as the County. These joint planning areas allow cities to regulate development in non-urbanized areas. There are also two unincorporated communities in Island County (Clinton and Freeland), as well as villages and rural service areas categorized as "Rural Areas of More Intensive Development." In 2007, the Freeland Community was designated as a Non Municipal (unincorporated) Urban Growth Area, allowing increased growth, and shifting development pressure away from rural areas.

Along with the natural environment, Island County identifies strongly with its rural character. The Island County Comprehensive Plan includes goals to protect the County's rural character, while at the same time planning for growth mandated by the state's Growth Management Act. According to the County, conditions that strengthen rural character include:

- Promoting open space, the natural landscape, and vegetation over the built environment;
- Fostering traditional rural lifestyles, rural-based economies, and opportunities to both live and work in rural areas;
- Providing visual landscapes that are traditionally found in rural areas and communities;
- Making compatible land use with wildlife and habitat;
- Reducing the inappropriate conversion of undeveloped land into sprawling, low-density development;
- Limiting the extension of urban governmental services; and
- Protecting natural surface water flows and ground water and surface water recharge and discharge areas.

Yet, the County's goals to protect its rural character and natural areas are in contrast to existing land use and development patterns. According to the Comprehensive Plan, about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of County parcels have undergone some form of development, while the remaining  $\frac{1}{4}$  are in some form of open space. Of the County's open space, a majority is not protected and may be developed in the future. Only ten percent of the County's land area is publicly owned and protected from development.

Development patterns have resulted in the clearing of much of the County's forest land. At the same time, population growth and development has resulted in the gradual conversion of agricultural land toward other rural uses. The popularity and draw of the County's extensive waterfront has also led to the adverse impacts on ground water, slope stabilization and wildlife habitat.

In 2008, the County updated its Critical Areas Ordinance to address these issues. Island County became one of the first counties in the state to adopt regulations protecting critical areas in 1984, which were used, in part, as a model for similar regulations adopted with the state Growth Management Act in 1990.<sup>1</sup> Based on the Island County Comprehensive Plan, critical areas are lands with certain development limitations, or areas that are important natural resources. Critical areas identified by the County requiring heightened consideration include:

- **Wetlands:** Waterways and surrounding lands that provide a number of benefits including flood and erosion reduction, ground water recharge and surface water flows and wildlife habitat;
- **Aquifer recharge areas:** Permeable subsurfaces that store, transmit and supply water;
- **Fish and wildlife habitat conservation areas:** Lands with regionally and locally significant native plant populations;
- **Frequently flooded areas:** Coastal areas subject to inundation by a major storm event; and
- **Geologically hazardous areas:** Areas that can be hazardous for development including vertical bluffs, ancient landslides and slopes with groundwater seepage and springs.

### *Zoning*

To protect the area's rural character and natural environment, and implement the Comprehensive Plan, Island County's zoning code directs growth towards incorporated areas, while seeking to retain the rural nature of the majority of County land. Land use in Island County is predominantly zoned Rural, allowing one dwelling unit per five acres.

Different residential zones allow for densities that range from one dwelling unit per five acres (Rural Zone) to one dwelling unit per 14,500

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<sup>1</sup> 2006 Island County Non-Motorized Trails Plan

square feet (Rural Residential Zone). Other land use zones include light manufacturing, airport and municipal urban growth area designations.

For nonresidential uses in rural areas, the code contains specific land use standards to insure compatibility with adjacent uses. The zoning code also implements scenic corridor standards to promote aesthetic improvements along the main entrance roadways to development areas. There are four zoning districts and one zoning overlay aimed at protecting natural areas and resource lands.

- Rural Agriculture (RA) and Rural Forest (RF): The primary purpose of these zones is to protect agricultural (RA) and forest land (RF) resources and provide scenic open space, wildlife habitat and watershed management. Each zone permits single family dwellings with a minimum of 10-acre lot sizes.
- Commercial Agriculture (CA): The CA zone is intended to protect commercially productive agricultural lands. The zone allows single family dwellings with a minimum of 20-acre lot sizes.
- Parks (PK): The PK zone implements the Parks and Recreation Element of the Comprehensive Plan. Permitted uses in this zone are limited to parks, recreation facilities and related development.
- Special Review District: Applies to large parcels (150-acres or greater), the Special Review District is used to protect the unique site or use characteristics of lands with historical, archaeological or environmental significance.

### 3. Demographics

Demographic characteristics are an important element of the plan foundation, helping to identify the size and scope of the County's population now and in the future. Demographic growth also plays a critical role in increasing community needs for parks and recreation opportunities, as well as the availability of natural areas and habitat areas as development pressures increase. The County's current estimated population is 80,300.<sup>2</sup> According to the Comprehensive Plan, the County's population is expected to grow to 118,800 by 2020.



Camano Park

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<sup>2</sup> Washington State Office of Financial Management Databook

Of Washington's 39 counties, Island County has the 14<sup>th</sup> largest population and second smallest land area. The majority of residents (67%) live in unincorporated areas of the County, compared to only 32% that live in one of the County's three cities. Although County residents identify with a rural lifestyle, Island County ranks fifth in terms of statewide population density.

### *Age and Growth*

Island County's population is mostly composed of older residents and retirees, with a smaller percentage of younger residents. Forty-four percent of residents are age 45 and older, while only 18% are 14 and younger. The County is also growing, with a 12.2% increase in population between 2000 and 2009. Table 1 shows the age distribution of Island County residents, as well as population growth by age group between 2000 and 2008.

Table 1: 2000-2008 Population Distribution, Island County

<b>Age Group</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>% Change</b>
14 and Under	15,219	14,800	-2.7%
15-19	4,734	5,305	12.0%
20-24	4,402	6,138	39.0%
25-34	9,144	9,284	1.5%
35-44	10,888	10,044	-7.7%
45-64	16,960	19,949	17.6%
65 and Over	10,211	15,529	52.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>71,558</b>	<b>80,300*</b>	<b>12.2%*</b>

\* OFM 2009 estimate (does not equal total of census data).

Age data not available for 2009 population estimates.

Source: ACS Demographic and Housing Estimates: 2000 and 2008

While the County's population has grown by 12% since 2000, the percentage of younger residents (age 14 and under) decreased by 2.7%. At the same time, the County's population of older residents and retirees (age 65 and over) increased by more than half (53%).

This trend will affect the community's needs for parks, recreation facilities and habitat areas in the future, since recreation preferences change as people age. In general, youth tend to favor more active and competitive activities, such as traditional sports (e.g., basketball, baseball, and soccer) and extreme sports (e.g., mountain biking, skateboarding, rock climbing). As people age, their participation in active or competitive recreation typically decreases. However, new trends show that seniors are staying active longer. Many older adults and seniors continue to participate in recreation activities that promote health and wellness, allow

them stay socially connected, allow them to make a difference in the world and encourage life-long learning. For Island County, this may mean a need for fewer sport fields, but more opportunities for low-impact recreation, including walking, birdwatching, nature interpretation, volunteerism, gardening, visiting dog parks, boating, strolling on the beach, digging clams, etc.

### *Employment*

County unemployment is relatively low at 2.2%, compared to 3.9% at the state level. The changing economy coupled with the protection and gradual conversion of resource land to urbanization is evident in the change in County employment characteristics. While service, sales and office, and construction, extraction and maintenance occupations have increased since 2000, farming, fishing and forestry occupations have decreased dramatically. Table 2 shows that production, transportation and material moving has also decreased since 2000. These numbers suggest that the rural based economy the County identifies with is changing. Not shown in the table is armed forces, which employs 12% of the labor force.

Table 2: 2000-2008 Employment, Island County

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>% Change</b>
Management, professional and related	9,145	9,854	7.7%
Service	4,750	6,093	28.2%
Sales and office	6,253	7,134	14.0%
Farming, fishing and forestry	238	126	-47.0%
Construction, extraction and maintenance	3,158	4,144	31.2%
Production, transportation and material moving	3,479	2,467	-29.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>27,023</b>	<b>29,818</b>	<b>10.3%</b>

Source: ACS Demographic and Housing Estimates: 2000 and 2008

Compared to the state, more County commuters walk to work. Of those in the labor force, Island County commuters are relying less on driving to work alone, and more on walking. With increasing jobs, these numbers suggest that local employment and jobs may be increasing. The percentage of commuters driving alone to work is 67.7%, compared to 73.6% in 2000. Almost four percent walked to work in 2000, increasing to 13.9% in 2008. The percentage of those working from home has remained nearly the same since 2000, at 5.5%.

### *Housing and Poverty*

Fifty-seven percent of residents moved to Island County from a different state, and more than half (57%) have moved into their home since 2000. When compared to the County's high percentage of older residents, and the high percentage of residents that do not have a mortgage (35%), the data suggests that many residents have recently moved to the County to retire. County data from 2000 shows that 10% of the population was seasonal. However, the Comprehensive Plan estimates that the percentage of seasonal homes will decrease to 1 or 2% by 2020.

The percentage of Island County families living below the poverty level has increased from 5.1% in 2000 to 6.3% in 2008. There are almost ten percent less renter-occupied housing units than the state percentage. Of those that rent, nearly half (45%) spend 30% or more of their household income on rent; housing affordability is typically defined as paying less than 30% of household income for housing costs.

The County's finite land supply and limited housing stock may be one of the factors leading to a slight increase in resident poverty and a high cost of living. While the per capita assessed value of Island County ranked third in the state, the per capita income ranked 12<sup>th</sup>. These numbers suggest that income levels are near average with the state, while property values are among the highest.

#### 4. Conclusion/Next Steps

This understanding of the land use, physical characteristics, demographics and land ownership of park and habitat areas provides a foundation for the Parks and Habitat Conservation Plan. Within this planning context, Island County will need to find their niche in providing recreation opportunities and protecting land assets—including parkland, habitat areas, and currently undesignated, undeveloped properties—in a manner that helps the County achieve its goals and vision for the future. The next step in this planning process is to map and inventory County resources, along with parks and habitat area provided by others, in order to determine county needs now and in the future.



Rhododendron Park

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