

OPINION

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In Our View

COUNTY RIGHT ON GROWTH

**Management plan fulfilling purpose but
some changes may be necessary**

Before examining the latest ruling regarding Clark County's Growth Management Plan, it is instructive to revisit the purpose behind the system the state uses to manage growth.

At its heart is the notion that growth should be governed, rather than simply allowed to happen. The state's Growth Management Act was adopted by the Legislature in 1990 and designed to give power to local jurisdictions as they work within certain parameters. Those parameters are codified to help preserve rural spaces, agriculture and natural resource lands. The gist is that development is necessary in order to meet the demands of a growing population, but there should be an understanding that once rural spaces are paved over they likely are lost forever.

This provides some background for Thursday's decision from the state's Growth Management Hearings Board, which considered challenges to Clark County's latest plan and largely rejected those challenges. Clark County Citizens United, a group of landowners who advocate for smaller parcels of land in rural areas, argued that the planning process had eschewed appropriate public participation — an argument that was soundly rejected by the board.

Clark County Citizens United also argued that the county's population projections egregiously underestimate future growth in the county. Population projections are a science, but an imperfect one, and county officials apparently employed due diligence and accepted practices in coming up with the best possible predictions.

Meanwhile, the Growth Management Hearings Board agreed with some arguments from environmental groups. It ruled that the county erred in reducing the allowable lot size on agricultural and forest lands, and in creating a rural industrial land bank. Board members also said the county erred in allowing La Center, Battle Ground and Ridgefield to expand current urban growth boundaries.

This portion would seem to ignore the reality that growth is inevitable. A census update released last week estimated that Clark County's population is 467,018 — an increase of 1.88 percent over the previous year. And the costs of having population growth but clinging to policies that do not allow for that growth — essentially pretending that it is not happening — can be seen throughout the community.

Clark County, especially Vancouver, is facing a dire shortage of housing, which drives up costs and prices many people out of the market. There are two ways to deal with a housing crunch — increase density and expand growth boundaries — and both are necessary for mitigating the situation. Suggesting that enough housing can be created solely through infill and increased density is a shortsighted approach.

In other words, some balance is necessary, which makes management preferable to letting market forces create developments outside defined urban areas. Allowing for growth in rural Clark County would alter the nature of the region and would require the costly expansion of infrastructure services. It also would be bad for our health, as researchers have found that urban areas that are dense and compact have a strong correlation to reduced rates of obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease.

Not that the hearings board should be concerned with such things; its mission is to determine whether Clark County is complying with state law. Last week's ruling suggests that some changes are necessary, but county officials have largely adhered to their duty of providing an effective blueprint for future growth.

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