

Ratio of Land Consumption to Population Growth

OUTCOME: MAKE EFFICIENT USE OF URBAN LAND

Countywide Planning Policy Rationale

“The land use pattern for the County shall protect the natural environment by reducing the consumption of land and concentrating development.” (CPP FW-6)

This indicator compares the rate of population growth to the consumption of urban land for development during a given period. It is intended to answer the question of whether the remaining undeveloped urban land is being developed at a rate that is less than, or greater than, our rate of population growth. Since the goal is to use urban land efficiently, a rate of land consumption lower than the rate of population growth is desirable.

Measurement of population growth is straightforward. Determining the rate of land consumption is more problematic for two reasons. First, it is not easy to define what constitutes “consumption” of land. For example, if a large wetland is preserved as part of single-family subdivision, that acreage could be identified as either “consumed” or “preserved” from development. Secondly, there is not one unequivocal measure of whether land that is being developed is truly “newly-developed” (or vacant) land, or if it is at least partially “redeveloped”.

The best surrogate measure for newly-developed land is the net acreage of land that is formally platted during a given period. Some multi-family and commercial-industrial development also takes place on vacant land, without a formal platting process. Much multi-family and commercial development occurs on redeveloped land. This indicator includes 50% of the acres of multifamily development and 50% of the acres of commercial-industrial development, in addition to 100% of the gross acreage of all new plats in the estimation of newly-developed land. This combination should approximate the actual consumption of new land during the period studied. Since much of the gross acreage that is platted actually preserves sensitive areas and open space, this measure is more likely to overestimate than underestimate the amount of newly-developed land.

As shown in Figure 33.1, King County’s urban population growth has outpaced the rate of urban land consumption over the last 10 years. Increasing about 1% per year, King County’s urban population grew from 1,510,000 in 1996 to 1,671,000 in 2005. This was about twice the rate at which land was consumed. Between 1996 and 2005, approximately 14,000 of King County’s 294,000 urban acres were newly developed.

Based on development data analyzed for the 2002 King County Buildable Lands report, about 5,900 acres of King County’s urban land was newly developed between 1996 and 2000, a consumption rate of 2%. At the same time, King County’s population increased by over 6%, reaching 1,737,000 in 2000. Over one-half of the county’s population growth in this five-year period occurred in 2000, with an increase of over 50,000 people in the urban area in that year alone.

During the 2001-2005 Buildable Lands evaluation period, an additional 8,200 acres of urban land were newly developed. Though this represents an increase from the previous evaluation period, much of this development occurred at higher densities. Commercial development density increased countywide, with notable increases in Seattle and Bellevue, which can be seen in multi-story commercial development in these cities’ Urban Centers. Residential plat and multifamily permit densities also increased, as illustrated in Indicator 34.

Figure 33.1

Ratio of Land Consumption to Population Growth: Urban King County				
	Urban Land Consumption		Urban Population	
	Acres Newly Developed	Percent of Urban Acreage Newly Developed	Urban Population Growth	Percent Growth in Urban Population
1996-2000	5,870	2.0%	92,470	6.1%
2001-2005	8,223	2.8%	49,364	3.0%
1996-2005	14,093	4.8%	161,736	10.7%

source: King County Buildable Lands Report (2002 and 2007), 2007 Annual Growth Report