

Chapter 1

Introduction

Purpose

The Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) serves as a strategic blueprint for the region's transportation system to the year 2040. Regional planning "makes sense," and policy makers would engage in the process even absent state and federal requirements. A continuous, collaborative, and coordinated planning approach addresses the needs of the entire region. Beyond a simple statement of purpose, the RTP serves many functions –

- Implements transportation elements of *Creating Places, Preserving Spaces – A Sustainable Development Plan for the Thurston Region* (Sustainable Thurston Plan).
- Supports local, county, state, and tribal governments' efforts to create and maintain livable communities throughout the region.
- Promotes movement of people, goods, and services in ways that minimize social, fiscal, and environmental costs and impacts.
- Emphasizes taking care of the existing system through safety, maintenance, and preservation programs.
- Embodies the philosophy that land use and transportation are inextricably linked and must be managed cooperatively to meet both land use goals and transportation needs.
- Recognizes that the rural and resource lands, walkable neighborhoods, city/town centers, urban corridors, and vital and diverse economies called for in local and tribal plans require a supportive transportation system.
- Seeks to improve the efficiency of the transportation system through a variety of means, such as using new road-building materials, trip reduction strategies, transportation technology, and alternative fuels.
- Acknowledges the diversity of need in the region and identifies strategies to improve mobility for all people – regardless of age, income, or ability.

- Meets fiscal constraints, with revenues identified in the RTP sufficient to fund the listed projects and maintain the existing system.
- Meets state and federal planning requirements and specific regulatory guidelines.
- Acknowledges that while the region has made progress since the last RTP, many challenges remain.

Planning Timeline

Thurston Regional Planning Council (TRPC) is required to update the long range transportation plan at least every four years (federal requirements) and review it biennially (state requirements). TRPC may make annual revisions to the plan to keep it current. These annual reviews typically include changes to the project list and limited changes to other parts of the plan. The RTP must look a minimum of 20 years into the future. This includes projections for population, employment, transportation demand, and costs and revenues.

Roles and Relationships

TRPC coordinates the RTP planning process with a variety of partners. At various stages in the process and at various levels of formality, the policies, plans, and projects of the many partners connect.

A high degree of communication and coordination is necessary to serve the region

and each individual partner effectively. In some cases, the coordination is required, and in others, it's just logical. At the more formal level, state and federal laws mandate certain reporting relationships and consistencies. The RTP must be consistent with local comprehensive plans, which in turn must be consistent with the Washington State Transportation Plan, and all must fit within the federal and state policies and guidelines.

TRPC develops and maintains both the regional population and employment forecast, and the regional transportation model, which provide the basis for our region's shared planning assumptions. We work closely with local, state, tribal, and federal governments, special districts, the private sector, other interest groups, and the general public to coordinate and validate

Figure 1-1: Policies, Plans, and Projects Are Influenced By Local, Regional, State, Federal, and Tribal Partners



Figure 1-2: Federal and State Requirements for the RTP

FEDERAL	COMBINED	STATE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address 20+ year planning horizon • Include short- and long-range strategies • Incorporate transportation technology strategies • Review and update every 4 years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address all modes of travel • Preserve existing system • Make efficient use of system • Reflect long-range land use plans • Model future travel demand • Identify projects and strategies • Conform with air quality rules • Address environmental impacts • Be financially feasible • Promote public involvement • Use performance measures to evaluate system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflect county-wide planning policies, local comprehensive plans, and the Washington State Transportation Plan • Include goals, objectives, and land use assumptions • Establish level of service standards • Review biennially for currency

data and planning assumptions. These regional models are then used by local agencies in their land use and transportation planning; by the state as part of their freeway and highway analysis; and by many other users as a basis for capital, business, and transportation planning. TRPC updates its regional models with refinements from local and state analysis. In this way, all the regional partners maintain a well-integrated planning process.

The RTP also recognizes that just as policies, plans, and projects do not stop at a specific geographical or political boundary within the county, neither do they stop at the county line. Many Thurston County residents travel to Lewis, Grays Harbor, Mason, Pierce, Kitsap, and King counties for work and leisure, just as residents of the surrounding counties travel to and through Thurston County.

Regional policy makers understand that land use, transportation, environmental, and economic policies and conditions outside of the county may greatly affect this region. To that end, the RTP calls for appropriate levels of communication and coordination outside county borders.

Requirements

State and federal guidelines stipulate the elements and processes for creating and maintaining the RTP. In many instances the requirements overlap, emphasizing the connection between state and federal regulation and goals.

Federal:

Federal law requires the RTP to plan for 20 years into the future and project the region's needs, conditions, and resources. Within that 20-year horizon, the RTP must contain short and long-range strategies.

Federal emphasis is on a continuous, cooperative, and comprehensive planning process. The process is to provide consideration and implementation of projects, strategies, and services addressing:

- Economic vitality of the metropolitan area, especially by enabling global competitiveness, productivity, and efficiency.
- Increased safety of the transportation system for motorized and non-motorized users.
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- Increased accessibility and mobility of people and freight.
- Environmental protection and enhancement, energy conservation, improved quality of life, and consistency between transportation improvements and state and local planned growth and economic development patterns.
- Enhanced integration and connectivity of the transportation system, across and between modes, for people and freight.
- Efficient system management and operation.

- Emphasized preservation of the existing transportation system.

This is to be accomplished through performance-based planning, a strategic approach that uses data to support decisions to help achieve desired outcomes. Specific United States Department of Transportation (USDOT) performance goals and targets are currently under development. These will be incorporated into the RTP planning process as they are defined, in a cooperative effort with WSDOT and transit providers. The RTP planning process already incorporates many state and regional performance measures and indicators. (For more information see Appendix L on Performance Measures.)

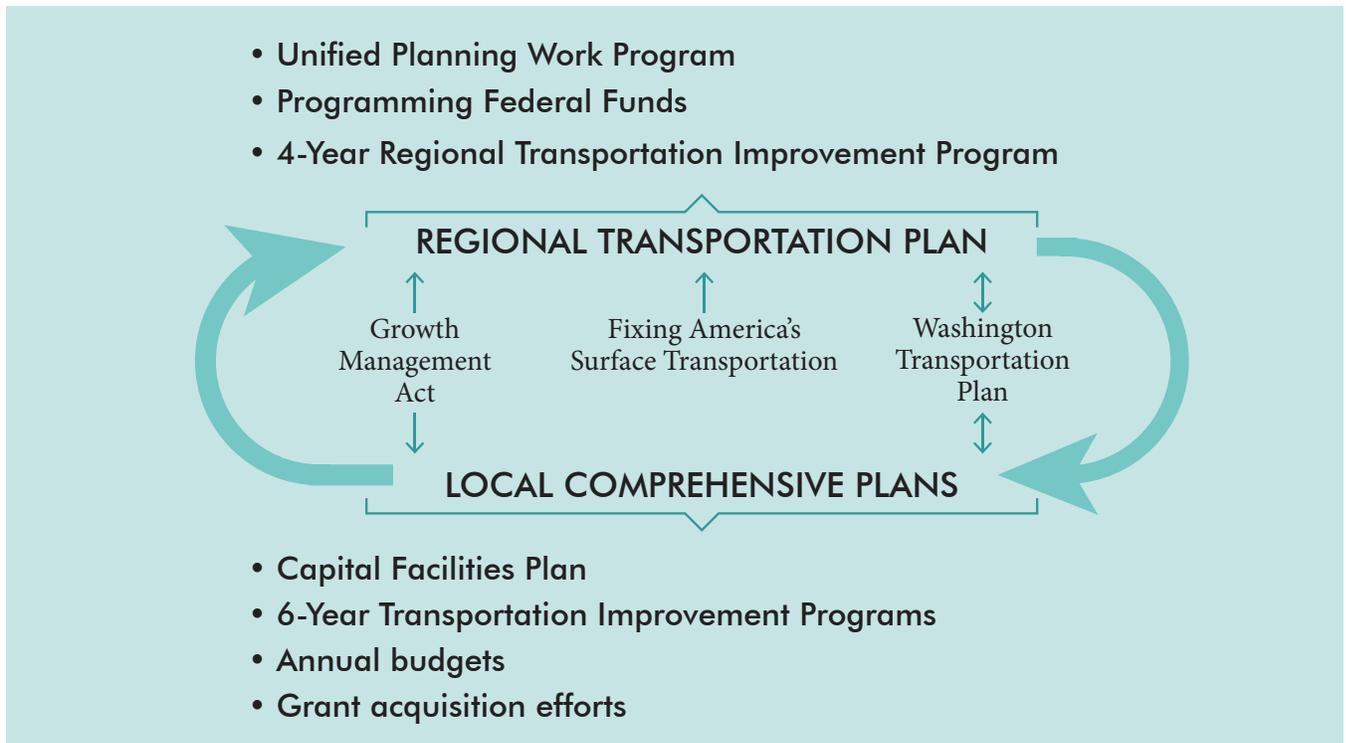
State:

The state calls for integration and compliance among local land use plans, county-wide planning policies, and the State Transportation Plan. Like the Thurston region, the state also recognizes the relationships between land use and transportation, and requires inclusion of land use assumptions.

Standards and measurements are a state focus. For state approval, the RTP must determine regional level of service (LOS) standards, and how system performance and the effectiveness of strategies will be measured over time. The state also asks that the plan be reviewed biennially to keep it current.

As state law envisions, the RTP guides development of the region's integrated, multimodal transportation system, including

Figure 1-3: Relationship Between RTP and Local Comprehensive Plans



capital investments, service improvements, programs, and transportation demand management measures.

Combined:

Overarching themes permeate both state and federal guidelines. At both levels, the RTP must:

- Actively engage the public in both planning and implementation.
- Comply with laws governing civil rights; respect the needs of older people and persons with disabilities; and foster social equity.
- Promote efficiency, security, safety, and maintenance of the system.

- Focus on both people and freight, calling for integration of all modes.
- Consider the environment and quality of life, comply with specific air quality rules, and address environmental impacts.
- Encourage the use of technology to support planning and operations.
- Carefully appraise the relationship between community desires and community resources, and realistically outline financial and policy solutions.
- Target investments to address performance.

Retrospective

“I had lived through a period of time when there were advances in the mode of transportation. First there was the ox team. In the 80s the demand for speed brought the democrat wagon, with which we could make the round trip to Olympia in one day. Then in the 90s there was the “hack,” and folks then remarked, “This is the way to travel.” This was soon supplanted by the two-seated buggy, and with the improved roads one could drive to Olympia in two hours. Then came the automobile and paved roads, and the round trip to Olympia could be made in less time than it formerly took to curry, harness, and hitch the team to the carriage.”

*Mrs. Elmira Whitaker,
Bush Prairie 1938*

The Thurston region enjoys a rich and varied history. Over the years, transportation included political, gender, cultural, and economic overtones:

- From Indian water routes, to ferries across the Nisqually River, to the Mosquito Fleet.
- From a stage line between Olympia and Cowlitz via Grand Mound, to Northern Pacific Railroad’s selection of Tacoma – not Olympia – for their western terminus.
- From citizen complaints - 1889: “What’s the use of a street car if it don’t

go where you want to go?” and “The town...is reached only by boat or over a little, jerk-water railroad.”

- To citizen compliments, the same year: “The Olympia dude can now make the circuit of the Public Square, arm in arm with his dudine, on a good sidewalk.”
- From women’s bicycle clubs, to a bond issue for a new bridge to the West Side.
- From a Capitol Campus “rhubarb” about the 60-mile per hour speed limit, to the pressure on early commissioners for road building and other transportation programs.

One major event forever shaped the Thurston region. The location of Interstate 5 (I-5) – with its connection to US 101 and local interchanges – continues to impact land use and transportation opportunities and challenges.

1960s

When TRPC was established in 1967, the Council addressed growth management issues even before it was fashionable or required, responding to pressures generated by the new interstate highway. Policy makers began to understand the connections between land use and transportation.

1970s

The regional policy makers considered the first “Thurston Regional Comprehensive Transportation and Planning Study” in 1975.

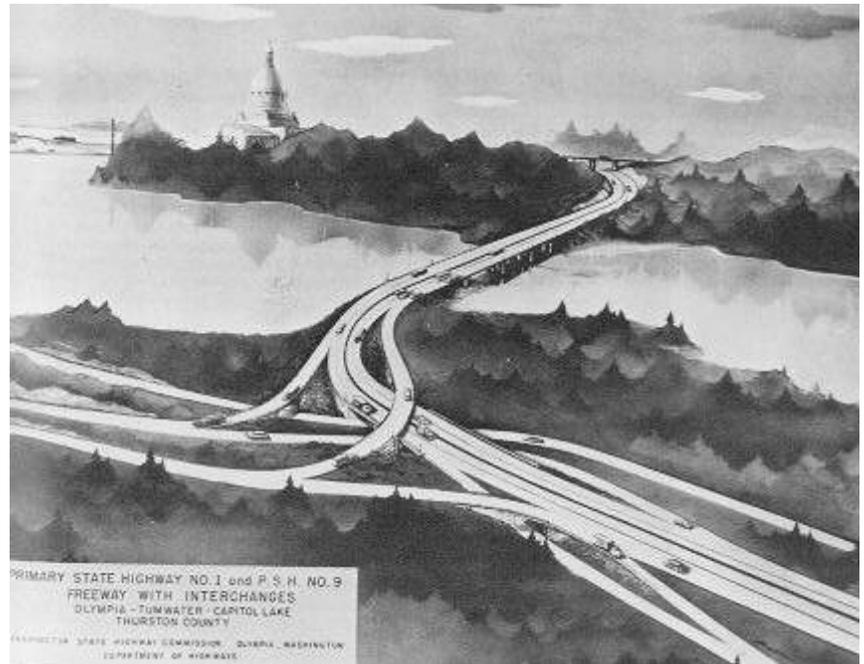
It dealt with the benefits and residue of all the previous transportation decisions. Even that early in the planning process, the region recognized the importance of a multimodal system and collaborative planning, listing objectives:

- Establish the relationship of land use options to transportation alternatives.
- Employ the latest transportation technology on an area-wide basis to serve as a model for local jurisdictions.
- Include all jurisdictions involved in transportation decisions.

1980s

A little over 10 years later, regional decision makers struggled with freeway congestion, and recommended adding lanes and modernizing interchanges. They also encouraged a concentration of employment and housing in downtown Olympia, and began to add elements of transportation demand management (TDM) to the mix. These low-cost, high-benefit ideas included regional ridesharing programs, park-and-ride lots, and employer-supported flextime. Growth in the urban fringe areas of the region generated a focus on deficiencies in the east-west and north-south travel corridors.

Figure 1-4: Sketch of Interstate 5 and Highway 101



Source: *Highway Study for Interstate-5*

1990s

By 1993, state and federal thinking aligned with regional vision. The state adopted the Growth Management Act (GMA) and the Commute Trip Reduction (CTR) Law, and the federal government enacted the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA).

As part of GMA implementation, the region re-examined and reaffirmed the Urban Growth Area (UGA) boundaries set in the late 1970s. This was a significant decision to try to curb urban sprawl. In the Thurston region, “Transportation Futures 2010 – Making Connections” included a land use element that helped shape local comprehensive plans

required under GMA. The plan set an ambitious goal of reducing the share of drive-alone commuters to 60 percent and called for high density, well-designed, mixed-use urban forms. Another major theme – connections – promoted projects around the region that connected existing infrastructure.

“Transaction 2020,” the 1998 RTP update, included a number of “firsts” –

- First to incorporate adopted land use plans and regionally-coordinated population and employment forecasts.
- First to recognize that the region cannot “build its way out of congestion” and placed limits on road width.
- First to require “financial constraint,” calling for new taxes to fund programs, projects, and services.

The region assessed the success of the 2010 plan and made some course corrections:

1) adjusted goals for drive-alone trips, focusing on reducing the growth in per capita vehicle miles traveled, and 2) acknowledged that rectifying old land use patterns would take more time than anticipated, suggesting several new tools and policies to ease the transition.

The 2020 RTP stood fast in its emphasis on alternatives and choice – calling for a doubling of transit service by 2020; more capacity for pedestrians and bicycles on sidewalks; additional trails and bicycle lanes; and an increase in amenities such as park-and-ride lots. Once again, the region prioritized caring for the existing system over roadway expansion.

2000s

Ten plus years into comprehensive planning under the Growth Management Act, policy makers asked about a vision-reality disconnect between land use visions and how development was playing out on the ground. Their analysis found that one substantial contributor to this disconnect was the increase in Thurston residents commuting out-of-county to work (primarily going to Pierce County). The Nisqually Delta was no longer a great divide between central and south Puget Sound.

The voter-approved Initiative 695 roll back of the Motor Vehicle Excise Tax forced Intercity Transit to drastically cut service at the beginning of the decade. But by the end of the decade, service had returned to previous levels in urban areas and ridership shot up in response to skyrocketing gasoline prices and the Great Recession after the financial industry crisis.

The Rural & Tribal (RT) Transportation Program filled a remaining gap in bus service in southern and eastern Thurston County, outside the Intercity Transit service area. Collaboration among local communities, tribes, and TRPC makes this critical service viable and popular today.

Transportation agencies experienced some wild swings in the cost of completing projects, when for several years construction bids came in well under estimates, and then reversed, becoming far more expensive than expected.

The backbones of the regional trail network – the Chehalis Western Trail and the Woodland Trail – were completed, with the exception of one big gap. Regional policy makers committed to “Bridging the Gap,” using regional transportation funding to seed state and federal support for a series of three pedestrian and bicycle bridges. These bridges now span Martin Way, Pacific Avenue, and I-5, connecting the northern part of the Chehalis Western Trail to the Woodland Trail and southern portion of the Chehalis Western Trail.

Through the many ups and downs, the vision, principles, and policies of the RTP proved sound, and policy makers re-affirmed them in the 2025 RTP.

2010s

Most recently, efforts especially focused on three key themes: corridors and communities; the interwoven ties of land use, transportation, and economic development; and the need to flourish sustainably.

The Urban Corridors Task Force concentrated on understanding background conditions along the region’s key urban corridors, barriers to achieving adopted land use visions, and potential opportunities for addressing those barriers. This spurred and supported corridor redevelopment projects in Lacey, Olympia, and Tumwater.

In the Main Street 507 study, Rainier and Tenino defined ways to better balance the roles of State Route 507 as a highway and a pedestrian-

oriented Main Street in their communities. Initiatives such as STEDI (South Thurston Economic Development Initiative) and the Bountiful Byway highlight growing business and agriculture in the more rural communities and corridors.

Focus also sharpened on the I-5 and US 101 corridors. The South Sound Military & Communities Partnership brought local, regional, state, and federal interests together to address I-5 congestion from Lacey to Lakewood. This focus is extending south to the I-5/US101 interchange and Tumwater’s I-5 interchanges, recognizing the connection between growing south sound congestion and its impacts on the greater Puget Sound economic engine.

The *Sustainable Thurston Plan* underpins all these efforts, recognizing the interconnected nature of land use, housing, energy, emergency services, transportation, food, health, the environment, and all the other elements of how we live. Through the *Sustainable Thurston Plan*, the community identified a vision for a vibrant, healthy, and resilient future, as well as the actions and responsibilities to achieve it.

The values and goals laid out in the RTP over past decades still ring true, reflecting a continuing community vision where the transportation system supports mobility for all our lives and needs.

See Appendix J for a comprehensive review of accomplishments since 2004.

Regional Conditions

Unique geographical factors in Thurston County guide land use and transportation policies and strategies. The Puget Sound lowlands, prairies, Cascade foothills, and numerous lakes, rivers, and wetlands draw people to the area, but also direct where development and transportation facilities can locate.

Despite only 52 clear days a year and an average annual rainfall of 51 inches, many residents engage in year-round biking or walking. Gray days and early winter nightfall require a transportation system with safe, well lit, well maintained, clearly marked sidewalks, roads, crosswalks, and trails. Because of decreasing revenues, local jurisdictions and the state face increasing challenges to preserve and maintain the system.

The Interstate 5 corridor runs through the heart of the region, providing direct access to neighboring communities. However, the freeway also divides some of our region’s communities, creating gaps for travelers, whether by foot, bicycle, or automobile.

Since the 1960s, Thurston County has been among the fastest growing counties in the state – doubling population between 1980 and 2010. Just over half of residents (53.6 percent) lived in unincorporated Thurston County in 2010. The urban portions of Lacey, Tumwater, and Yelm outpaced their fellow jurisdictions in growth, with Yelm experiencing the highest rate of increase in the past two decades.

Forecasts predict that the county’s 2015 estimated population of 266,400 will grow to 393,600 by 2040. Because of the nation’s aging population and the community’s many amenities – a multimodal transportation system, and advanced health care and retirement facilities – older adults will comprise a larger percentage of the total population. Especially for seniors “aging in place” in the more remote areas of the county, transportation and other social systems will be under pressure to expand to match changing needs.

Currently, one in three workers commute outside the region to work, more than travel to Thurston County for employment. These outbound commuters are projected to represent an even greater percentage of the labor force by 2040. Since the economic downturn in 2008, the distance people traveled annually leveled off and then declined for several years.

Crossing the Border

The number of commuters crossing the Thurston County border daily will double by 2040.

	2013	2040
Outbound	33,000	65,700
Inbound	18,000	40,400

Source: Census, TRPC population and employment forecast.

However, with economic recovery and growth, the upward trend is expected to continue through 2040.

The government sector continues to provide the largest share of jobs in the region – 25 percent in 2014. However, in recent years, large retail chains supplied jobs, goods, and services for local residents, and also attracted consumers from neighboring counties.

Employers and workers are scattered throughout the region. The system does not carry workers from large residential community X to large employment site Y, but instead must provide a variety of routes and travel options.

The region also reflects the recent general economic downturn. Increasing unemployment and other social conditions have multiplied the number of families in crisis. Exacerbated by recent voter initiatives, state and local governments, school districts, and transit agencies struggle to provide infrastructure and services to meet the demand.

Without reliable, predictable revenues, communities will struggle to serve residents' needs.

Despite growing challenges, the region successfully maintains and operates a system comprised of dozens of transit routes and services, over 2,000 miles of roadway, hundreds of miles of bike lanes, trails, and sidewalks, almost 90 miles of rail, a marine terminal, and a regional airport. Looking to future needs in 2040, the community must

continue to seek new methods and creative funding to maintain this diverse system.

The Challenge

As the region examines current realities and looks out to 2040, many questions arise.

- How do we sustainably build, maintain, and operate the transportation system?
- What additional steps will we need to take to reach our vehicle miles traveled goals?
- Does new development match growth management goals?
- How does the transportation system adapt to address barriers based on age, language, physical ability, and income?
- Does the transportation system increase economic vitality, bringing new business to the community, and efficiently moving goods?
- What role do federal, state, and local regulations play in where and how growth occurs?
- Are community resources and the burden of payment distributed equitably?
- What are the environmental and infrastructure costs of current patterns and trends?

The Thurston region continues to monitor the land use and transportation vision against evolving reality.

Regional policy makers strive to create a transportation system that easily moves people and freight as efficiently as possible. Opinions vary widely on what that system should look like and how travel should occur. Some members of the community want more bike facilities and some want less. Some value speed, others safety. Some prioritize the needs of freight, others the needs of people. A number of residents use I-5 for local trips and others never use the freeway unless leaving the county. Many people face financial or physical challenges in traveling – no matter the mode.

The challenge is in the balance. Balancing individual and community needs. Short- and long-term strategies. Costs weighed against benefits. Urban and rural considerations. Investing now and sustaining the future. All hard choices, with no simple solutions. Balance.

These challenges will require learning together as a region and resolving to make plans, invest in, and create a future that will be sustainable. As we learned during the Sustainable Thurston discussions, these will not be easy conversations, but they are necessary and we should begin as soon as possible.