

PLANNING STRATEGIES

Introduction

Whatcom County is changing. It is growing in population and economic diversity. Predicted population increases and economic growth may alter the region, bringing diverse communities together and changing lifestyles.

As the amount of trade and travelers crossing the U.S. – Canada border into Whatcom County continues to increase, additional demands are being placed upon the region’s aging transportation system, and area jurisdictions must meet the growing needs with diminished resources. The recent recession substantially impacted available funds, and increased fuel costs have set the stage for costlier transportation services. All of these factors challenge Whatcom County’s jurisdictions as they find ways to fund needed maintenance, preservation, and improvements to the transportation system.

This plan recommends a multi-modal and multi-faceted approach to address these challenges, and to meet predicted transportation needs in 2032. Through specific programs and select projects, Whatcom Council of Governments (WCOG)¹ member agencies hope to improve the system as a whole to accommodate increased trade and travel in a way that fits the region’s objectives of remaining environmentally sustainable, healthy, and cost-effective.

About the Whatcom Council of Governments (WCOG)

WCOG was formed in 1966 under Washington Administrative Code along with other councils of governments in the state. In 1981 it was named the region’s Metropolitan Planning Organization

¹Refer to *Appendix A: Glossary of Transportation Terms* if you have questions regarding transportation abbreviations and definitions.

(MPO) and in 1990 also became the Regional Transportation Planning Organization (RTPO) under the Washington State Growth Management Act (GMA). In these roles, WCOG is charged with meeting transportation planning requirements specified by U.S. Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and U.S. Federal Transit Administration (FTA) as well as the GMA.

WCOG is governed by a Full Council consisting of fifteen elected officials of Whatcom County jurisdictions, the Port of Bellingham, and two water districts, as well as several non-voting members from regional agencies.

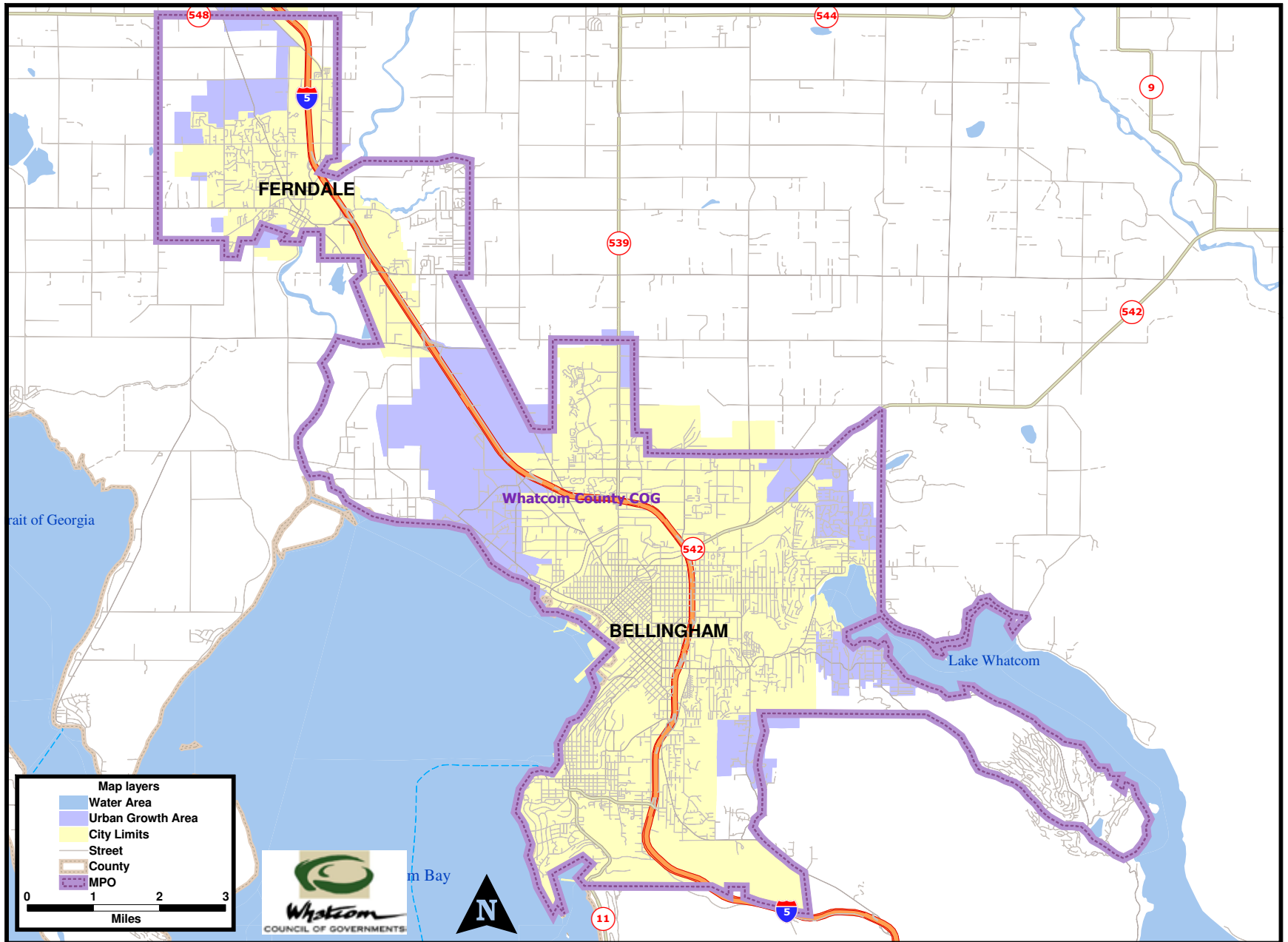
An eight-member Executive Board carries out Full Council policy decisions and supervises the administration and functions of WCOG.



The Whatcom Transportation Policy Board (WTPB) is the decision-making body for MPO and RTPO matters and works to improve intergovernmental coordination in transportation planning and project programming.

MPO planning focuses on the Metropolitan Planning Area (MPA). See Figure 1.

Figure 1: Whatcom Council of Governments planning area



Federal planning requirements

This plan meets Federal and State transportation planning requirements contained in the 2005 Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient, Transportation Equity Act A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) and the Washington State Growth Management Act (GMA). SAFETEA-LU is the current version of the 1991 Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA). ISTEA was modified in 1998 by the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21), and again amended by SAFETEA-LU in 2005. Each new program added features and programs to ISTEA in the way it addressed issues such as safety, equality, innovative financing, congestion relief, mobility/productivity, efficiency, environmental stewardship, and environmental streamlining. SAFETEA-LU expired September 30, 2009 but a series of continuing resolutions have sustained its planning requirements and programs until a new act is passed and signed. At the time of this plan update, it is unclear when that might happen.

WCOG is responsible for metropolitan transportation planning within the Whatcom County Metropolitan Planning Area. This responsibility is established by Title 23, (Highways) and Title 49, (Transportation) Code of Federal Regulations when the Governor of the State of Washington designated the WCOG as the “Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO)” responsible for carrying out federal transportation planning requirements within the Metropolitan Planning Area of Whatcom County.

Federal CFR planning requirements administered by the U.S. Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) call for each urbanized area with population over 50,000 to prepare a transportation plan reflecting existing and future conditions. A current Metropolitan Transportation Plan is required for receipt of federal transportation funds and must be updated every five (5) years.

As an MPO, WCOG is required to update a metropolitan plan every five years to serve as a blueprint for transportation planning and implementation over at least a twenty year period. Planning factors defined in the U.S. Code of Federal Regulations (CFR)² guide the objectives of this plan and help define the strategy to meet anticipated future needs:

- Support the economic vitality of the metropolitan area, especially by enabling global competitiveness, productivity, and efficiency.
- Increase the safety of the transportation system for motorized and non-motorized users.
- Increase the security of the transportation system for motorized and non-motorized users.
- Increase accessibility and mobility for people and freight.
- Protect and enhance the environment, promote energy conservation, improve the quality of life, and promote consistency between transportation improvements and State and local planned growth and economic development patterns.
- Enhance the integration and connectivity of the transportation system, across and between modes, for people and freight.
- Promote efficient system management and operation.
- Emphasize the preservation of the existing transportation system.

² 23 CFR 450.306(a) Scope of the Metropolitan Transportation Planning Process: <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CFR-2011-title23-vol1/pdf/CFR-2011-title23-vol1-sec450-306.pdf>

MPO plans and programs include:

Whatcom Transportation Plan – this plan serves as a strategy to meet the future transportation needs of the community. The plan is fiscally constrained and described programs and projects designed to improve the region’s transportation network over the next twenty years.

Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) – The TIP is a requirement every year and developed in conjunction with the WA State Department of Transportation (WSDOT). The TIP provides a comprehensive six-year listing of transportation improvements within the county that are on the regional transportation network and/or include projects with federal transportation funding.

Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP) – The UPWP is developed annually and serves as a guide for transportation planning activities conducted over the course of a fiscal year. Details include specific transportation planning tasks, a summary of the amount and source of state and federal funds used for planning activities, and what products will be produced that serve to meet CFR and RCW requirements.

Public Participation Plan (PPP) – WCOG crafted its PPP to provide guidelines for establishing and maintaining a high level of public involvement and to assess tools for evaluating the effectiveness of outreach efforts. The plan was developed in coordination with member organizations, federal, state, and local governments as well as a citizen advisory committee. The plan is attached as *Appendix B: Public Participation Plan*.

Title VI Plan – Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, sex, or national origin in programs or activities receiving federal financial assistance. WCOG evaluates its plans and programs for sensitivity to minority, low-income, and other disadvantaged populations as per the objectives within this plan, and the requirements for environmental justice. The plan is attached as *Appendix C: Title VI Plan*.

Whatcom Regional ITS Architecture – the Regional Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS) Architecture is designed to show what advanced technology systems are currently deployed or being planned in Whatcom County with the objective of illustrating both opportunities for sharing resources and highlighting areas to improve overall system functionality. The most recent version has been developed based on the U.S. National Architecture version 7.0. The current version of the architecture is available as *Appendix D: Whatcom Regional ITS Architecture*.

Employment Access and Coordinated Human Services Transportation Plan (EACH) – As required by state and federal law, WCOG has developed this human service transportation plan based on the efforts of a committee comprised of representatives from special needs populations and a citizens advisory group. The plan sets forth strategies to improve service and efficiency so that public investments in transportation work better for the population as a whole. The plan is attached as *Appendix E: EACH plan*.





State planning requirements

As a result of provisions of the Washington State Growth Management Act, a Regional Transportation Planning Organization (RTPO) was formed in Whatcom County and WCOG was appointed by the governor as lead agency for regional transportation planning requirements imposed by the Washington State Growth Management Act (GMA), and subsequently codified in the Revised Code of Washington.

RTPO required duties include:

(1) Prepare and periodically update a transportation strategy for the region. The strategy shall address alternative transportation modes and transportation demand management measures in regional corridors and shall recommend preferred transportation policies to implement adopted growth strategies. The strategy shall serve as a guide in preparation of the regional transportation plan.

(2) Prepare a regional transportation plan as set forth in RCW 47.80.030 that is consistent with county-wide planning policies if such have been adopted pursuant to chapter 36.70A RCW, with county, city, and town comprehensive plans, and state transportation plans.

(3) Certify by December 31, 1996, that the transportation elements of comprehensive plans adopted by counties, cities, and towns within the region reflect the guidelines and principles developed pursuant to RCW 47.80.026, are consistent with the adopted regional transportation plan, and, where appropriate, conform with the requirements of RCW 36.70A.070.

(4) Where appropriate, certify that county-wide planning policies adopted under RCW 36.70A.210 and the adopted regional transportation plan are consistent.

(5) Develop, in cooperation with the department of transportation, operators of public transportation services and local governments

International Mobility & Trade Corridor Project (IMTC) – The International Mobility and Trade Corridor Project (IMTC) is a U.S. - Canadian coalition of business and government entities that identifies and promotes improvements to mobility and security for the Cascade Gateway, four border crossings that connect Whatcom County, Washington State and the Lower Mainland of British Columbia.

Whatcom Smart Trips - Whatcom Smart Trips provides education and encouragement to help community members make more of their trips by walking, bicycling, sharing rides and riding the bus, instead of driving alone. Participants are encouraged use these modes for any trip purpose. This is accomplished using websites, incentives, brochures, maps, public relations campaigns, promotional events, public presentations, educational courses, and partnerships with employers and schools. Whatcom Smart Trips programming and materials are varied to suit all ages and interest groups. Program participants learn about the costs and benefits of all transportation modes and their rights and responsibilities as they use them.

within the region, a six-year regional transportation improvement program which proposes regionally significant transportation projects and programs and transportation demand management measures. The regional transportation improvement program shall be based on the programs, projects, and transportation demand management measures of regional significance as identified by transit agencies, cities, and counties pursuant to RCW 35.58.2795, 35.77.010, and 36.81.121, respectively. The program shall include a priority list of projects and programs, project segments and programs, transportation demand management measures, and a specific financial plan that demonstrates how the transportation improvement program can be funded. The program shall be updated at least every two years for the ensuing six-year period.

(6) Designate a lead planning agency to coordinate preparation of the regional transportation plan and carry out the other responsibilities of the organization. The lead planning agency may be a regional organization, a component county, city, or town agency, or the appropriate Washington state department of transportation district office.

(7) Review level of service methodologies used by cities and counties planning under chapter 36.70A RCW to promote a consistent regional evaluation of transportation facilities and corridors.

(8) Work with cities, counties, transit agencies, the department of transportation, and others to develop level of service standards or alternative transportation performance measures.

(9) Submit to the Agency Council on Coordinated Transportation, as provided in chapter 47.06B RCW, beginning on July 1, 2007, and every four years thereafter, an updated plan that includes the elements identified by the council. Each regional transportation planning organization must submit to the council every two years a prioritized regional human service and transportation project list.



Six statewide transportation policy goals guide the work of RTPOs in Washington State:

Preservation: To maintain, preserve and extend the life and utility of prior investments in transportation systems and services.

Safety: To provide for and improve the safety and security of transportation customers and the transportation system.

Mobility (addressing congestion): To improve the predictable movement of goods and people throughout Washington state.

Environment: To enhance Washington’s quality of life through transportation investments that promote energy conservation, enhance healthy communities and protect the environment.

Stewardship: To continuously improve the quality, effectiveness and efficiency of the transportation system.

Economic Vitality: To promote and develop transportation systems that stimulate, support, and enhance the movement of people and goods to ensure a prosperous economy.

With these goals in mind, WCOG has developed this plan to remain consistent with statewide policies.

Contributing committees

In making transportation decisions, WCOG considers recommendations from numerous regional transportation committees. These committees represent a fundamental means for the community to get involved in transportation project planning. Input and efforts of these committees have been integral in crafting the strategies and programs within this plan.

Transportation Technical Advisory Committee

The Transportation Technical Advisory Committee (TTAC) is comprised of technically qualified representatives from cities, tribes, Whatcom County government, WSDOT, the Port of Bellingham and the Whatcom Transportation Authority (WTA). TTAC meets monthly to discuss planning and project funding, and to make recommendations to the WTPB.

Whatcom ITS Subcommittee

This subcommittee of TTAC members who control or maintain ITS components within Whatcom County meets on an as-needed basis to make changes to the architecture and discuss ways to better integrate ITS systems in the region.

Community Transportation Advisory Group (CTAG)

The Community Transportation Advisory Group (CTAG) is a citizen-based committee that meets monthly and advises the WTPB on the community's concerns to help reach a collaborative vision for Whatcom County's transportation system. CTAG was established in 2003, and its membership, along with some additional citizens, comprises the WTA Citizen Advisory Panel.

Employment Access and Coordinated Human-services Transportation (EACH) Stakeholder Group

The EACH stakeholder group is comprised of representatives from local social service agencies, transportation service providers, human services non-profit agencies, and transportation planners. The primary purpose of the group is to advise WCOG on the preparation and periodic update of the EACH Plan. Other goals of the stakeholder group include:

1. Identifying effective and efficient transportation services for people with special needs and strategizing methods to maintain or expand those services
2. Identifying gaps in the human services transportation system where additional service may be needed and defining project priorities for future funding
3. Coordinating transportation services among agencies to reduce duplication and increase efficiency.

Since 2007, EACH has served as a forum for improved transportation coordination among local and regional agencies and has helped secure over \$13 million in grant funding for projects, such as WTA bus fleet replacement.



Farmhouse Gang

The North Sound Connecting Communities group, called the Farmhouse Gang, is a coalition of elected, agency, and citizen representatives from a five-county region: Whatcom, Skagit, Island, San Juan, and Snohomish. The group focuses on developing better ways to move people through the five-county region using all available modes with a focus on alternatives to single-occupancy automobiles.

International Mobility & Trade Corridor Project (IMTC)

As mentioned above, the IMTC coalition provides input to WCOG planning activities from the perspective of improving cross-border trade and travel.

Regional considerations

Whatcom County, with over three million people within 60 miles of the U.S. – Canada border to the north and to the south, experiences impacts from much higher levels of travel demand than other counties its size. To the north, the Lower Mainland of British Columbia, Canada produces substantial vehicle flow in



trade, tourism and commuting. Similarly, Central Puget Sound to the south generates substantial cross-border movement in autos and commercial vehicles. The five border crossings between Canada and the United States are also international trade routes with national significance.

Over 32,000 cars and 2,700 trucks cross Whatcom County’s border every day, carrying over \$30 million in daily trade³.

Whatcom County’s location between two urban giants connected by a major trade route means it experiences increasing demands on transportation infrastructure that cannot be supported by shrinking local resources. Therefore the regions’ planning objectives must strive to build and maintain a system that will serve a community greater than its own, in a way to assure the continued movement of goods and people to benefit not only Whatcom County, but the state and larger bi-national region as a whole.

Whatcom Transportation Plan strategies

To guide regional efforts to meet the transportation needs of the future, this plan has developed a series of strategies which represent the goals and interests of the region. CFR law also requires that MPO/RTPO goals must be coordinated so they don’t conflict, and they must not conflict with the plans of jurisdictions within the region. Consistency is a requirement for all transportation plans beginning with the statewide transportation plan, and including metropolitan, regional and comprehensive plans.

The following strategies reflect recommendations from TTAC, CTAG, and WCOG staff. Implementation of these strategies will be accomplished through the coordinated work of member agencies and the WTPB.

Strategies have been organized to tie in with the eight planning

³ 2012 IMTC Resource Manual, Whatcom Council of Governments, 2012: <http://resources.wcog.org/border/2012manual.pdf>

factors required of MPOs and the Transportation Policy Goals (RCW 47.04.280) for RTPOs. More than half these strategies serve both MPO and RTPO requirements. Each strategy is marked as to whether it applies to MPO goals, RTPO goals, or both.

1. Public Information and Education *MPO/RTPO

WCOG will use multiple methods of outreach to raise public awareness about regional transportation issues, laws, and regulations pertaining to all transportation modes.

Outreach through specific projects, websites, citizen-based advisory teams, and educational programs will provide information to the public about the transportation planning process, including meeting schedules, available data, and ways to consider all modes of transportation.

2. Safety *MPO/RTPO

WCOG encourages maximizing the safety and security of transportation facilities and all transportation planning and project activities throughout Whatcom County. In coordinating with member jurisdictions, emergency access, deployment of ITS technologies, and bicycle, transit, pedestrian, and bicycle safety and education improvements are emphasized.

3. Access *MPO/RTPO

Access refers to the need for a transportation system that is relatively free from gaps, impediments and hardships in the movement of people and goods. WCOG will work with regional jurisdictions and agencies to provide balanced access to transportation facilities, jobs, education, and services for all users.

Highway system access may be restricted by congestion. People may have difficulty reaching destinations if rail, transit, or walking is not possible. Those with disabilities or lacking resources face the



greatest challenges in accessing mobility. And vehicle access may be impeded by weather, or a degrading system that is not properly maintained. WCOG therefore encourages emphasizing system preservation across all modes to avoid degradation, and on ITS technologies to warn of unsafe weather conditions.

4. Environmental Justice *MPO

WCOG will address the potential adverse effects of transportation plans and projects on low-income, disability and minority populations, and encourage consideration of their needs during any member-jurisdiction’s environmental review process.

WCOG will implement these strategies by, wherever possible, ensuring that transportation decisions serve the needs of and do not have disproportionate adverse impacts on low-income, disabled, elderly, and minority populations. WCOG will also encourage WTA and local jurisdictions to seek input from low income, disability and minority populations early in their planning processes.

5. Connectivity *MPO

WCOG will continue to encourage efficient connections among routes and modes and political boundaries, and provide for aquatic and terrestrial habitat connectivity.

For the economic vitality of the region, WCOG will continue to encourage provision of intermodal transportation facilities to provide more coordinated, efficient, safe and integrated system links for both private and public commuter services. In addition, WCOG will work with member jurisdictions in promoting street and trail system completeness and connectivity, and encourage them to maintain and restore ecological connectivity and natural ecosystem processes. WCOG will also encourage local and state agencies to provide safe and secure areas for public commuter services and commerce.



6. Freight Mobility *MPO/RTPO

WCOG supports improving freight-related transportation infrastructure, data analyses, border operations, public education, and multi-modal solutions to provide for the safe, efficient movement of goods by all freight modes.

WCOG will contribute its ability to collect and provide freight and commercial vehicle movement data as a way to provide a robust foundation for member jurisdictions to implement improvements.

7. Congestion and Mobility *RTPO

WCOG strives to address roadway congestion by identifying existing and future congestion points in the system, targeting projects on those locations, and developing alternatives such as increased transit and infrastructure for non-motorized transportation, and encouraging telecommuting and related options.

To sustain mobility, WCOG will promote and encourage new arterial connections that include multimodal features such as transit prioritization, pedestrian accommodation and dedicated bicycle lanes.

8. Transportation Demand Management *MPO

Transportation Demand Management (TDM) includes a variety of techniques aimed at reducing the number of trips made in single occupant vehicles. Whatcom is an “affected county” under the WA State Commute Trip Reduction Law. WCOG continues to work with employers and schools to encourage people to walk, bicycle, share rides and ride the bus to work and school. WCOG’s Whatcom Smart Trips program partners with area merchants to provide incentives for people make smart trips, and also with WTA to create an ongoing public relations and advertising campaigns to exceed regional TDM goals. Students of all ages are also encouraged, in the classroom, to walk and use bicycles whenever possible.



9. Multi-modal Transportation *MPO/RTPO

As part of plan consistency review, WCOG will review member jurisdiction transportation elements for inclusion of alternatives to single occupancy vehicles, and the incorporation of multi-modal facilities in road and development projects whenever possible. The national Complete Streets program provides a comprehensive approach to improve connections among roadways, transit, pedestrians and cyclists. WCOG will continue to encourage implementation of Complete Streets, and acknowledge those jurisdictions that are currently implementing multimodal transportation networks.

10. Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS) *MPO

Through the Whatcom Regional ITS Architecture, WCOG assists member jurisdictions and regional agencies in providing transportation network improvements through ITS investments, and seeing that these investments are coordinated to improve their cost-effectiveness.

11. Land Use *RTPO

WCOG will encourage transportation project designs that support all system users and modes in cities, urban growth areas and employment centers in unincorporated areas. As a step toward more comprehensive application of concurrency principles, member jurisdictions will be encouraged to use Bellingham’s model of allowing concurrency credit for development providing enhanced access for transit bicyclists and pedestrians, to the extent this is practicable for them.

12. Health *MPO

To improve the physical health of community members, WCOG will work with jurisdictions to provide safe and convenient routes and infrastructure to encourage increased active transportation choices such as bicycling and walking.

13. Public Participation *MPO/RTPO

WCOG will provide increased opportunities for residents to be engaged and informed throughout all stages of the planning process. WCOG will continue to develop benefits-based messaging to affected groups or individuals, and contact interest groups to provide additional access to transportation information on planning and projects.

Implementing the strategies

WCOG works with all member agencies and all regional stakeholders to ensure their programs, projects and plans are consistent and supportive of the strategies listed above. In addition, WCOG has instituted other regional programs and methodologies for realizing the intent of the strategies. The remainder of this plan identifies how that will be accomplished over the twenty year planning period. Member agency goals and policies are located in *Appendix F: Agency goals and policies*.