The Eleventh Annual Report on Progress in Implementing the King County Countywide Planning Policies

King County Benchmarks

2009 Environment

Encouraging Trends Could Benefit Environmental Health

Several factors that influence the health of our environment in King County show sustained positive trends through 2008. Total gasoline consumption in King County declined 4% since 2001, nearly 32 million gallons, despite population gains. Meanwhile, a drop in annual vehicle miles traveled (VMT) per capita is also noticable, declining 479 miles (5%) from its peak in 1999 to 2007. VMT includes commercial and private vehicles, so both economic activity and personal travel patterns influence the total. Yet certain trends have continued regardless of economic highs or lows.

Because on-road vehicles are responsible for nearly half of all greenhouse gas emissions, the decline in gasoline consumption and VMT per capita are encouraging trends. Concerned about greenhouse gas emissions, the governor signed House Bill 2815 last year, requiring long-term reductions in per capita VMT statewide. In the near future, the downward trends in VMT and gasoline consumption are likely to continue as bittersweet symptoms of a weakened economy.

For instance, the recent drop in diesel consumption likely reflects a decline in commercial traffic. The economic well-being of the region is cause for concern; meanwhile diesel particulate matter is a major contributor to cancer-causing air toxics, and diesel exhaust is a component of greenhouse gas emissions. The goal is to find solutions that sustain both economic and environmental health, as both are important components of a high quality of life.

Worth noting particularly as we head into summer: a distinct downward trend in water consumption continued through 2008. SPU retail customers decreased water consumption more than 40% over the last 18 years. The largest annual change in consumption occurred in 1992 as a result of severe drought conditions and mandatory water use restrictions. Since then, a number of factors have kept water demand down including higher water rates, conservation efforts and improved system operations.

These bright spots should not distract attention away from declining trends in surface water quality, also described inside. This envirnomental bulletin receives its guiding principles from the King County Countywide Planning Policies which state: “all jurisdictions shall protect and enhance the natural ecosystems through comprehensive plans and policies, and develop regulations that reflect natural constraints and protect sensitive features. Land use and development shall be regulated in a manner which respects fish and wildlife habitat in conjunction with natural features and functions, including air and water quality. Natural resources and the built environment shall be managed to protect, improve and sustain environmental quality while minimizing public and private costs.” This report measures countywide progress toward these goals.

What’s Inside

Over one-half of King County’s ***Land Cover*** is forested (Indicator 9, page 3).

For the last two years, King County has experienced ”good” ***Air Quality*** nearly 80% of the time (Indicator 10, page 4).

Per capita ***Energy Consumption*** in the form of gasoline has decreased 10% since 2001 (Indicator 11, page 6).

From 1999 to 2007, per capita ***Vehicle Miles Traveled*** in King County declined 5% (Indicator 12, page 7).

Of the streams monitored in WRIA 8 for ***Surface Water Quality***, two-thirds were rated to be of “high concern” in 2007 (Indicator 13, page 8).

Seattle Public Utilities estimates that total ***Water Consumption*** by retail customers decreased more than 40% in the last 18 years (Indicator 14, page 12).

With wells providing drinking water to almost 30% of the county’s population, ***Groundwater Quality and Quantity*** rated good or higher in monitoring results from 2004 (Indicator 15, page 13).

Due to the lack of new data regarding ***Wetland Acreage and Function***, please refer to the 2005 Environmental Bulletin for the most recent analysis.

Almost one-half of King County’s acreage consists of publicly protected lands, providing opportunities for the ***Continuity of Terrestrial and Aquatic Habitat Networks*** (Indicator 17, page 14).

The annual ***Number of (Chinook) Salmon*** returns remain well below 2055 targets (Indicator 18, page 15).

16% of households in King County identified neighborhood street ***Noise*** as bothersome in 2004 (Indicator 19, page 16).

In 2007, both ***Waste Disposed and Recycled per Capita*** increased from the previous year (Indicator 20, page 18).

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King County Benchmark Program

In 1990 the Washington State Legislature passed the Growth Management Act (GMA). For the first time in the state's history, all urban counties and their cities were required to develop and adopt comprehensive plans and regulations to implement the plans. To achieve an interjurisdictional coordinated countywide plan, GMA further required that King County and its cities first develop framework policies, the King County *Countywide Planning Policies*, to guide the development of the jurisdictions' plans.

The *Countywide Planning Policies* define the countywide vision for the county and cities' plans. The policies were developed by the Growth Management Planning Council, a group of elected officials representing all King County citizens, adopted by the Metropolitan King County Council and ratified by the cities in 1994.

Established by the Growth Management Planning Council (GMPC) in 1995 as required by the WA State Growth Management Act, the King County Benchmark Program monitors 45 indicators that measure the progress of the King County *Countywide Planning Policies*.

The indicators are intended to collectively articulate the impact of land use and development policies and practices on our natural, built and social environment. Rather than focusing on the local programs of the county's 40 jurisdictions, the Benchmarks provide a high level analytical view of change within the geographic boundaries of King County.

As one of the first and most durable efforts at monitoring outcomes in the public sector, the King County Benchmark Program demonstrates how measurement of broad quality-of-life outcomes can help determine if public policy and programs are making a difference. Public outcome monitoring is a strategy for change: it alerts us to what we are doing well and where we need to do better. It is closely connected to both the policy goals that it monitors, and to the strategic planning, programs, and services that are intended to implement those goals.

The Benchmark Program reports cover five policy areas: land use, economic development, transportation, affordable housing and the environment. All reports are available on the Internet at http://your.kingcounty.gov/budget/benchmrk/bench08/. For information, please contact Lisa Voight, Program Manager (206) 263-9720 or e-mail: lisa.voight@kingcounty.gov.

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