

# KING COUNTY LAND CONSERVATION ADVISORY GROUP

## FINAL REPORT

December 2017

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We live in a place of spectacular natural beauty, yet our region is changing quickly. We all feel it. Whether newcomers, or rain-soaked natives, we value our parks, natural resources, and open space. Being outdoors, in a community park or in the wilderness, is a way of life for us all. It helps us to de-stress, it brings us peace of mind, and makes us healthier and our neighborhoods more livable – and these benefits are ever more important as our cities grow and densify.

King County Executive Dow Constantine has proposed a countywide initiative to “finish the job of protecting our great places forever.” The Land Conservation Initiative (“Initiative”) sets forth the goal of conserving and preserving remaining high conservation value lands throughout King County within a generation, that is, within the next 30 years.

The Initiative is the next, and perhaps final, step in a long tradition in this county to preserve conservation lands which will be enjoyed by generations of us to come. This work is grounded in an inter-generational agenda to preserve and protect our natural resources and the quality of life in our region. It is based on a thoughtful and thorough assessment of what it will take to protect the quality of life for all to enjoy. It builds on our city and county conservation successes over the last fifty years, starting with the Forward Thrust bond program of the 1960s, to the Farmlands Preservation Program of the 1980s, the Open Space Bond efforts of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the series of regional County parks levies beginning in 2002.

The County, cities, non-profits, and other partners have invested a great deal of work over the decades to create the system of protected open spaces that we enjoy today.



photo: Mountains to Sound Greenway

This Initiative builds on this heritage and strives to carry this momentum forward into the 21st century. Our generation has more to do to ensure that all communities can access green spaces - particularly those most impacted by a historic and unequal lack of investment in this important piece of neighborhood infrastructure. We have more to do to ensure farms and working forests continue to provide local food, wood, and jobs. We have more to do to protect the rivers, streams, and natural areas that connect our communities providing recreation, respite, and habitat for wildlife.



Whether we live in dense core cities, mid-size suburban cities, or rural areas, we all directly benefit from ecological services our healthy ecosystems provide – such as clean air, clean water, and resiliency to a changing climate. These are essential services which we as a region must steward and uphold by preserving what we can of our natural systems and green spaces.

We are inspired by the generations before us who rose to meet the challenges of their day. We believe our action today will leave lasting impacts and similarly inspire our children and grandchildren to take action so our landscape will continue to sustain us – all of us, in all our neighborhoods.

This Advisory Group was convened by the Executive in September 2016 and tasked with reviewing and proposing refinements to the Executive’s proposed Land Conservation Initiative. During its two phases of work in fall 2016 and in fall 2017, the Advisory Group has had the opportunity to work closely with King County staff to develop a set of recommendations on the Executive’s proposed Initiative.

Over the last two years the County and its cities have mapped, priced, and prioritized 65,000 acres of land remaining to protect. These lands fall into six categories: natural areas, farmland, forests, river land, urban green space, and trail corridor connections. These are the highest ecological value, most at risk lands that exist in and around our cities and towns and rural areas. When accounting for existing funding sources and 30 years of real estate appreciation, the additional funding needed to protect these lands is \$1.9 billion. We have recommended a funding source to fill this gap that would cost the owner of a median-value home in King County an additional \$10 per year.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The actual additional cost per home will vary by geography and individual assessed home values. For example, the cost would be \$12 for the median assessed value home in Seattle, \$15 for the median assessed value home in Bellevue, and \$6 for the median assessed value home in Federal Way. \$10 is based on the median assessed value home countywide in 2017 (\$450,000). (<http://www.kingcounty.gov/depts/assessor/Reports/annual-reports/~media/depts/assessor/documents/annualreports/2017/17AVByCity.ashx?la=en>)

We recognize there are multiple issues demanding attention in our region, including homelessness and housing affordability. We believe that this Initiative can be part of the solution to solve our region's affordability challenge. If the region is to significantly and rapidly increase the supply of housing, then we need to ensure new dwelling units are built in neighborhoods where people across all incomes levels will enjoy living. These



neighborhoods need to be where everyone chooses to live because they want to, not because they are forced to out of economic necessity. This Initiative targets investments in neighborhoods lacking basic open space infrastructure. It will broaden the areas of housing desirability beyond those that exist today. To succeed, these investments need to be paired with smart affordable housing policies and participation of the community to ensure existing residents are not displaced.

We believe the region has the vision and ability to act on this Initiative alongside and simultaneous with action on multiple pressing issues. Open space is infrastructure. Investing in our natural infrastructure is part of the solution package, and will yield dividends well beyond its up-front cost, just as investments in utilities, affordable housing, and transit.

Having deliberated for the last sixteen months upon the vision and the work plan to accomplish the Initiative we issue this final report and provide the following final recommendations:

## **VISION**

- We endorse the goals and strategies of the Executive's Initiative to protect and secure the 65,000 acres of remaining high conservation value lands within the next 30 years.

## **EQUITY**

- Equity must be an over-arching theme across this entire Initiative. Land protection is a region-wide benefit; the County and cities must ensure these benefits accrue to all residents.
- Set a base level of investment in open space equity by dedicating at least \$160 million specific to the task of eliminating disparities in access to public open spaces and trails in communities with the greatest and most acute needs. This dedicated funding is in addition to all the rest of the funding raised in the Initiative for which these priority areas are equally eligible.

- Advance Open Space Equity work early next year to engage cities and communities about the opportunities through this Initiative, and to establish community readiness in two or three initial priority areas.
- Establish an Open Space Equity cabinet to set policy, and oversee and monitor progress towards the addition of green spaces in priority areas.

## **OPERATIONS & MAINTENANCE**

- Provide funding in the King County Parks Levy to adequately fund operations and maintenance (O & M) of newly acquired lands to ensure new lands acquired by the County and by cities retain their conservation value, are clean, safe, and welcoming to the public; funding should be adaptable to the County's and cities' unique needs.

## **ONGOING WORK WITH CITIES**

- Work with city partners to identify the remaining city acquisition priorities.
- In partnership with cities, develop a fair and transparent system of allocating funding that balances the need to bring funding forward through bonds to accelerate major acquisitions, with the need for continued flexibility to respond to emergent acquisition opportunities.
- Continue on-going County-city dialogue regarding implementation of the Initiative that is beyond the scope of this Advisory Group's recommendations.

## **FUNDING & PACE**

- Pursue all available opportunities to further accelerate the acquisition pace, as real estate prices rise and development pressures continue to grow, including updating the King County Conservation Futures Tax Levy (CFT) policies to allow bonding against more than 50% of CFT revenue. Accelerating the pace to within 30 years will save an estimated \$15 billion and make it possible to secure these lands before they are lost.
- Rely on the Current Use Taxation (CUT) program as a strategy for protecting high conservation value lands that are not immediately at risk of development and implement a CUT "enrollment drive" for high conservation value lands that may not be immediately available for conservation acquisition; prepare to act swiftly if a CUT-enrolled property becomes vulnerable to withdrawal from the CUT program.
- Leverage public dollars from the Initiative to help steer philanthropic and other private funding to this Initiative in partnership with non-profit organizations.



- Reset the CFT levy to its original 6.25 cents/\$1,000 assessed value (AV), and consider up to two additional future resets of CFT to fill the funding gap. This will have a \$10 per year impact to the median value home in King County.

In summary, we are blessed with a strong community ethic in this region. We understand the need to come together across many jurisdictions, in all our diversity, to protect this very special place where we live. We can protect the livability, health, and ecological integrity of our region—for everyone—if we act now. We choose action. And we are convinced that the people who live here today and in generations to come – with their great energy, engagement, and dedication – will agree.

Full version of this report is available at: [kingcounty.gov/land-conservation](http://kingcounty.gov/land-conservation)

