



Regional Centers Framework Update Project

BACKGROUND & FINDINGS | JUNE 2016

Executive Summary

The Puget Sound Regional Council is working with its members and other partners to evaluate how the region plans for all types of centers. The Regional Centers Framework Update Project is considering changes that will strengthen centers (including both regional and subregional).¹ The goal is to develop consistent designation criteria and procedures and other changes that will help achieve both local and regional visions for central places.

Reflecting the potential far-reaching influence of this project, the Growth Management Policy Board developed the following principles to guide this work. The new framework and procedures should:

- Support the Growth Management Act and VISION 2040
- Focus growth consistent with the Regional Growth Strategy
- Recognize and support different types and roles of regional and subregional centers
- Provide common procedures across the region
- Guide strategic use of limited regional investments
- Inform future planning updates at regional, countywide, and local levels

The project is proceeding in five phases, depicted below. This report summarizes findings from the Initiation and Research phases of the project.



¹ VISION 2040 defines “centers” as “A defined focal area within a city or community that has a mix of housing, employment, retail and entertainment uses. It is pedestrian-oriented, which allows people to walk to different destinations or attractions. Regional centers are formally designated by the Puget Sound Regional Council.” For the purpose of this project, “subregional centers” refer to central places not currently designated at the regional level. These include countywide centers identified in countywide planning processes, local centers identified in local comprehensive plans, and other central places that have been the subject of planning and investment and/or have experienced significant population and/or employment growth.

Research Phase Summary Findings

Overall, centers in our region are succeeding—not just by accommodating growth, but by becoming vibrant and thriving places that attract residents, employees, and tourists from around the region, country, and world.

At the regional level, designated centers represent a significant and growing share of the region’s population and employment. Success, however, has not been uniform. Much of this activity is clustered in a small handful of growing regional centers. Many other regional centers have experienced little to no growth and remain unconnected to high-capacity transit.

Subregional centers, while harder to quantify than regional centers due to varying geographies and designation processes, also show mixed indications of success. Countywide planning processes and local comprehensive plans have identified many diverse activity nodes for growth and investments, ranging from revitalized main streets in smaller cities to bustling neighborhood commercial districts in larger cities. Some of these centers have experienced more growth than those designated at the regional level, while others have future growth potential.

The first phases of the Regional Centers Framework Update Project included research and outreach activities to document how the framework has been used over the past twenty years to support centers at regional, subregional, and local levels. These activities included the following:

- Outreach to members and stakeholders across the region, including over 35 meetings and work sessions in all four counties
- Analysis of existing land use, transportation, and demographic trends and conditions
- Study of market indicators of successful centers and overall demand for mixed-use places
- Synthesis of previous PSRC data and planning efforts, including VISION 2040, the *Centers Monitoring Report* (2014), the *Industrial Lands Analysis* (2015), and the *Growing Transit Communities Strategy* (2013)
- Input from a nine-member Technical Advisory Group that includes representation from all four counties, key PSRC committees, and countywide planning groups
- Research on centers frameworks of ten peer regions for best practices

These efforts show that the central Puget Sound region has centers—some stable, and some growing—that serve different geographic scales, including local, subregional, and regional. The centers framework, however, only recognizes one scale: regional. In addition, the primary mechanism for supporting centers—the prioritization of regional transportation investments—does not address the broad needs for center planning and implementation and may create unintended consequences.

The following findings highlight some of the opportunities to improve and strengthen how the framework recognizes and supports diverse centers throughout the region. These findings will serve as a foundation for board member and stakeholder discussions on possible changes to the regional centers framework.

1: Regional Growth Centers (RGCs) and Other Growing Mixed-use Places

- 1A. *Growth*. Some regional growth centers have experienced significant population and employment growth, while other centers have seen little to no growth. Some mixed-use places that are not regional growth centers have experienced more growth than some regional centers.
- 1B. *Scale and function*. Centers at the regional, subregional, and local levels vary greatly in scale and function. Some regional growth centers do not meet the minimum activity levels for a new center today, while some mixed-use places that are not regional growth centers are denser and have a greater mix of uses. Some centers are predominantly focused on employment and have accommodated little housing growth, while others have experienced the residential or mixed-use development expected of centers.
- 1C. *Transit Access*. The regional growth centers do not align with the region's high-capacity transit system built to date. Some mixed-use places that are not designated centers have better transit and transportation access than some existing designated centers.
- 1D. *Military and tribal lands*. Some places, such as military installations and tribal lands, play important regional functions. However, these places vary in their urban form—from dispersed uses on rural or resource lands to denser, urban land use patterns—and they do not plan for growth subject to the Growth Management Act and VISION 2040.
- 1E. *Peer regions*. Research on peer regions provides other center framework models that have designated different types and scales of centers, and used different selection criteria, such as transit service, in designation processes.

2: Manufacturing/Industrial Centers (MICs), Industrial Lands, and Other Emerging Job Centers

- 2A. *Center type*. Manufacturing/Industrial Centers are very different types of places than regional growth centers in terms of planning expectations, growth patterns, infrastructure needs, and implementation strategies.
- 2B. *Growth and scale*. There is a wide range of manufacturing/industrial areas in the region, recognized at the regional, countywide, or local levels. These places vary greatly from each other in growth, infrastructure, and development patterns. Some emerging industrial employment districts have more jobs and have experienced more growth than some existing MICs.
- 2C. *Critical infrastructure and resources*. Some important industrial areas, infrastructure sites, and corridors are not part of the current MIC framework, while designated MICs have had mixed success in protecting industrial land and limiting incompatible, non-industrial uses.
- 2D. *Peer regions*. Research on peer regions reveals other structures for recognizing and preserving industrial lands and other key industrial resources.

3: Regional and Local Support for Centers

- 3A. *Consistent geographies.* The vast majority of PSRC funds may be used to support either regional centers, countywide centers, or local centers. However, unlike regional centers, there is no established definition or identified geographies for countywide or local centers that are consistent across the region.
- 3B. *Motivation for center selection.* Stakeholders have observed that competition for limited infrastructure funding may motivate the selection of some local centers that primarily address local transportation needs, rather than selecting locations that achieve the land use and growth objectives of VISION 2040.
- 3C. *Peer regions.* Research on peer regions reveals that there are other tools, such as planning grants and non-transportation related infrastructure funds, with which regions support centers in addition to those used in the central Puget Sound region.

4: Designation Processes

- 4A. *Expectations for new versus existing centers.* There are different administrative expectations for new centers compared to those centers designated prior to the current designation procedures. The result is that not all centers meet the same standards for planning and performance.
- 4B. *County designation procedures.* There are inconsistent designation procedures and selection criteria within counties for the nomination of regional centers and the designation of local and countywide centers. This may lead to disparate access to regional designation and access to PSRC funds.
- 4C. *The Big Picture.* There are neither policy guidelines nor a defined board process to discuss the strategic value or regional impacts of particular regional designations, including issues such as the total number of regional centers, their distribution in the region, or their impact on measures such as social equity and the environment.
- 4D. *Peer regions.* Research on peer regions reveals a variety of other models for center selection criteria and designation procedures.

Next Steps

PSRC staff solicited input on these summary findings through a series of outreach meetings from February through April 2016 to PSRC committees and countywide planning groups around the region. The Growth Management Policy Board then hosted a two-part joint board work session on April 7th and June 2nd to discuss the research phase findings and provide direction to staff on a Stakeholder Working Group that will recommend changes to the regional centers framework.

The board discussed outcomes statements that could be used as overarching goals for a new framework, as well as a means of evaluating alternative frameworks against each other. These statements were derived from adopted board policy and other board actions, including VISION 2040,

Transportation 2040, the Regional Economic Strategy, Transportation Prioritization, and the *Growing Transit Communities Strategy*.

- Growth: Centers attract robust population and employment growth—a significant and growing share of the region’s overall growth.
- Mobility: Centers provide diverse mobility choices so that people who live and work in centers have alternatives to driving alone.
- Environment: Centers improve environmental sustainability by diverting growth away from rural and resource lands, habitat, and other critical areas, and towards urban areas with existing infrastructure.
- Social Equity and Opportunity: Centers offer high access to opportunity, including affordable housing choices and access to jobs, to a diverse population.
- Economic Development: Centers help the region maintain a competitive economic edge by offering employers locations that are well connected to a regional transportation network, and attractive and accessible to workers.
- Public Health: Centers create safe, clean, livable, complete and healthy communities that promote physical, mental, and social well-being.

A stakeholder working group will meet June through December 2016 to discuss the successes and opportunities of regional, subregional and local centers in the central Puget Sound region, lend topical expertise and geographic perspective to the development of alternative frameworks that would recognize different types or scales of centers, and recommend implementation actions including timing and phasing of a new framework.

The stakeholder working group will produce a final report that will include a set of centers framework alternatives with proposed selection criteria and administrative procedures, with an identified preferred alternative. The alternative frameworks will be evaluated against the outcome statements described in the board guidance discussion above. Finally, the report will include implementation recommendations including how a new framework would interface with updates to Transportation 2040 (2018), the 2018 Project Selection Process, and the 2020 update to VISION 2040.

The Stakeholder Working Group findings and recommendations will be sent to the Growth Management Policy Board for additional discussion and possible action in early 2017, followed by consideration by the PSRC Executive Board. If adopted by the PSRC Executive Board, implementation of the new framework may include changes to multicounty planning policies and countywide planning policies, re-designation of existing regional centers into the new framework, changes to the policy framework for PSRC funds, and changes to other regional plans, policies, and procedures. The board may implement some of these components immediately, and others through future processes, such as the 2018 update to Transportation 2040 and the project selection process, and the 2020 update to VISION 2040.

