

INTRODUCTION

The use of land is a major factor in a community's sense of place and livability. It includes how and where housing, business, and public spaces are located.

The Growth Management Act requires that each local comprehensive plan has a Land Use Element (chapter) that identifies information about the land base and intended patterns of development. Other elements of the plan must be consistent with it.

BACKGROUND

Mountlake Terrace encompasses approximately four square miles within the central Puget Sound region. It is located at the southern boundary of Snohomish County, a few miles north of Seattle and almost entirely surrounded by other cities. According to the 2002 estimates from the state Office of Financial Management, 20,470 people live in Mountlake Terrace. The City contains a variety of land uses.

Regional Information

Puget Sound is a key geographic feature of western Washington. At its center lies the central Puget Sound region, which is generally considered to be the area of Snohomish, King, Pierce, and Kitsap counties. With a mild climate, marine access, and abundant natural resources, this region has attracted many people. Its population, according to the most recent Census data, is 3.28 million and growing. Land here is used more intensively than in other regions of the state.

Adjacent to Mountlake Terrace are the cities of Edmonds, Lynnwood, Brier, Lake Forest Park, and Shoreline, along with small portions of the unincorporated urban growth area for southwest Snohomish County.

Land Use Trends

Through many millennia, humans have settled in compact areas near the natural resources they needed. Early villages were small in size and population. Gradually, cities developed and grew, with people living, working, and socializing close together. Outside the cities, lands were either left in their natural state or used to supply food and other resources.

This pattern of compact development was predominant in North America during the 17th, 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries. Cities and towns had a mix of land uses and buildings, connected by a grid or semi-grid of streets. Every city had a "downtown" or central area where businesses and civic buildings were concentrated. The countryside was rural with large areas of open space.

By the 1950s, the combination of inexpensive automobiles and abundant new roads in the United States helped create a new pattern of development, sometimes called sprawl. In this pattern, people did not need to walk from place to place. In fact, walking to get somewhere would be difficult, since greater distances began to separate each type of land use, and automobiles were given space and priority over pedestrians. The size of residential lots became bigger too. For example, where typical residential lots in the 1940s were 3000-5000 square feet, lots in later subdivisions would be 7500-10,000 square feet.

Sprawl development had certain benefits, but it created new problems too. Farmlands and forests were rapidly eliminated in favor of subdivisions and strip malls. Flooding and drainage problems multiplied, exacerbated by increasing amounts of pavement and other surfaces that blocked natural stormwater absorption. Traffic congestion increased too, as more automobiles filled the roads. Their emissions led to greater air pollution. In Washington State alone, motor vehicles account for 57% of the air pollution. As Americans drive more and walk less, they have tended to become overweight. A 1996 study showed that 22 percent of American children were obese, twice the level of ten years before.

“Every place looks the same” and “there is no there there” are common refrains about the worst of sprawl development. The complaints echo the sense that wherever you go, you see the same lay-out of parking lots, fast-food chains, and traffic lights. In many suburbs, houses are hidden by their garages and separated from each other on dead-end lanes. Public spaces are rare. It is difficult for people to feel part of a community in these circumstances.