Washington State Department of Commerce

Collaborative Roadmap, Phase IV: Preliminary report on integrating water, sewer, school, and port districts into the GMA planning process

Pursuant to Chapter 376, Laws of 2024 (SB 5950, Sec. 128(34))

July 31, 2025

Report to the Legislature

Director Joe Nguyễn

GROWTH MANAGEMENT SERVICES

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Acknowledgments

Washington State Department of Commerce
Dave Andersen, Managing Director, Growth Management Services

Valerie Smith, Deputy Managing Director, Growth Management Services

Mary Reinbold, Senior Policy Analyst, Growth Management Services

Clay White, Principal Planner, LDC

1011 Plum St. SE
P.O. Box 42525
Olympia, WA 98504-2525

www.commerce.wa.gov

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Executive summary

The Collaborative Roadmap is a multi-year research and analysis project led by the Department of Commerce (Commerce) to make recommendations to update the state's growth policy framework. This framework consists of state laws that govern/influence the strategies state agencies and local governments use to plan for, implement, and manage land use policy, permitting and appeals, infrastructure, and environmental protections.

Authorizing legislation

Chapter 376, Laws of 2024 (SB 5950, Sec. 128(34)) requires Commerce to continue the Growth Management Collaborative Roadmap. Now in its fourth phase, Commerce must:

> [C]onvene a task force to make recommendations on integrating water, sewer, school, and port districts into the growth management act planning process. The task force shall build upon the findings, concepts, and recommendations in recent reports, including the "collaborative roadmap phase III" report prepared for the department in 2023 and the "roadmap to Washington's future" issued by the William D. Ruckelshaus center in 2019. The task force must involve diverse perspectives including but not limited to representatives of state agencies, cities, counties, special districts, tribal governments, builders, and planning and environmental organizations that have experience with local or special purpose district planning processes. [Commerce] must provide a preliminary report on the task force's activities and progress by June 30, 2025. It is the intent of the Legislature to continue funding the study in the 2025-2027 fiscal biennium, with a final report with recommendations due December 1, 2025.

Past reports and studies, which include the Land Use Study Commission (1998), Governor's Land Use Agenda (2006), A Road Map to Washington's Future (Phase I, 2019), Updating Washington's Growth Policy Framework (Phase II, 2021), and the Collaborative Roadmap Phase III (Phase III, 2023), provide a foundation for Phase IV of the Collaborative Roadmap (2025).

The project is focused on identifying options to increase coordination between jurisdictions and special districts, such as school districts, ports, and water/sewer/public utility districts (PUD). Increased planning and coordination will better implement utility and capital facility planning requirements under the Growth Management Act.

Identifying opportunities to increase coordination between jurisdictions and special districts has been a consistent theme throughout the Roadmap projects. A Road Map to Washington's Future (2019) included a recommendation to find ways to integrate water and sewer districts, school districts, and port district planning into the Growth Management Act (GMA). The Collaborative Roadmap Phase III project built upon this recommendation and forwarded the Legislature the following recommendations:

- Convene a collaborative process(es) with, at a minimum, representatives of state agencies, cities, counties, builders, special districts, Tribal governments, and planning and environmental organizations that have experience with local and/or special district planning processes.
- Focus on increasing planning between jurisdictions and special districts to better implement utility and capital facility planning requirements under the Growth Management Act.
- Focus on methods to help ensure that special districts can more fully incorporate local comprehensive plans as they plan for the utilities and capital facilities necessary to accommodate growth during the planning period.
- Focus on identifying legislative changes that will increase coordination during permitting processes that impact special districts while limiting new planning requirements.

This project is complex because cities and counties are not the only service providers for capital facilities that are necessary to support growth (population, housing, and jobs). School districts, port districts, and water/sewer/PUDs

are often distinct from cities and counties. In many cases, special districts work under separate state laws and rules and have separate administrative structures and cross multiple city and county boundaries.

The purpose of this report is to summarize the progress made on the Phase IV project and present the project schedule and the scope of issues and initial recommendations under consideration.

Issue areas and initial recommendations

Eight issue areas organize 19 initial recommendations that are under consideration with the Task Force.

1. Timing of public and special district participation in growth management planning.
2. State guidance and other assistance
3. Integration of school siting during growth management planning.
4. Coordination of utility relocation and improvements.
5. Protection of transition zoning outside of ports.
6. Planning for a variety of employment types.
7. Grant incentives.
8. Coordination on emergency planning.

These issues will continue to be discussed and refined through future Task Force and working groups meetings throughout 2025. **Appendix A** details the 19 initial recommendations for each of these eight issue areas.

Project schedule and progress

Project information and reports

Commerce created a Collaborative Roadmap webpage to allow for convenient and accessible information sharing. All project reports will be made available on the project webpage, as well as the project timeline and project contact information. Reports from previous projects are also available on the website. Recordings or minutes from Task Force meetings will also be posted to the webpage along with information on when, how, and where to attend.

Completed reports

Project Framework and Path to Success (September 2024)

The Project Framework and Path to Success report has been prepared and published. The Framework report:

- Provides a background and foundation for the project
- Outlines project goals and objectives
- Provides a project schedule
- Establishes a detailed plan for engagement with the Taskforce and working groups
- Identifies communication protocols, contacts, and responsible parties between the project team and Commerce
- Outlines keys to the overall success of the project
- Identify potential project risks upfront and strategies to address risk

Review of Prior Studies and Findings (September 2024)

The Review of Prior Studies report has also been prepared and published. The report provides an overview of prior studies which provide the foundation for this project. This report consolidates and provides a succinct overview of previous report findings which led to Phase IV.

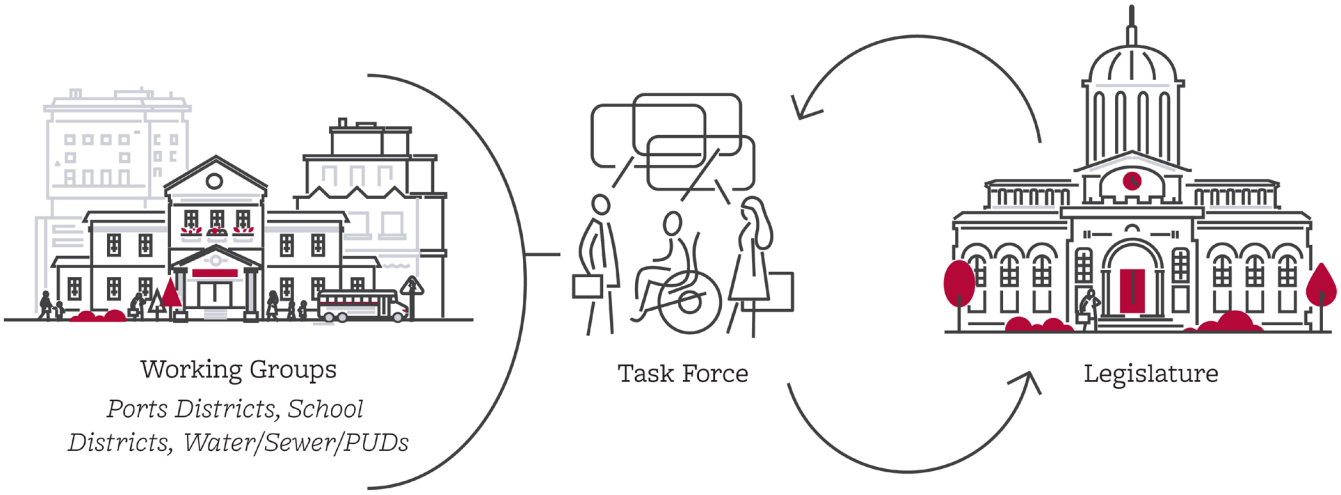
Project schedule

The project schedule below outlines key dates when project reports and recommendations are due. The schedule also provides a high-level overview of when the project Task Force and working groups will meet. This is critically important as the Task Force recommendations will be the foundation for future reports. This includes the final report that is due to the Legislature on December 1, 2025.

- September 6, 2024: Collaborative Roadmap, Phase IV, begins.
- November 2024 to November 2025: Task Force and workgroup meetings.
- June 30, 2025: Preliminary report to the Legislature.
- December 1, 2025: Final report to the Legislature.
- June 30, 2026: Develop final outreach tools and best practices recommendations, and project closeout.

Engagement - Task Force and working groups

The process for making recommendations to the Legislature will be similar to the process behind Collaborative Roadmap, Phase III. Working groups were formed to assist the Task Force with its efforts. Separate working groups for ports, schools, and water/sewer/PUDs will meet throughout 2025 to provide specific recommendations for Task Force consideration. These groups contain representatives with diverse perspectives, including, but not limited to, representatives of state agencies, cities, counties, special districts, tribal governments, builders, and planning and environmental organizations that have experience with special purpose district planning processes.



By forming separate working groups, focused time can be spent on port, school, and water/sewer/PUD topics and issues. This process allows for greater inclusion of people and groups from organizations throughout the state of Washington. It also allows the Task Force to be smaller in size so that the project can fulfill its mission to provide the Legislature with a wide variety of options and ideas to better integrate capital facility and utility planning as cities and counties plan for growth.

Task Force members

The project Task Force is made of representatives with diverse perspectives including, but not limited to, representatives of state agencies, cities, counties, special districts, builders, and planning and environmental organizations that have experience with local or special purpose district planning processes. Task Force members are organized by interest area, member, organization:

- Builders: Andrea Smiley, Building Industry Association of Washington
- Cities: Carl Shroeder, Association of Washington Cities
- Counties: Paul Jewell, Washington State Association of Counties
- Environment: Bryce Yadon, Yadon Consulting
- Planning: Robin Proebsting, American Planning Association-WA
- Ports: Eric Ffitch, Washington Public Ports Association
- Public utilities: Travis Nelson, Washington Public Utility Districts Association
- School districts: Jeff Mann, Bethel School District
- State agencies:
  - Dave Andersen, Washington State Department of Commerce
  - Brian Sayrs, Washington State Department of Health
- Water and sewer districts: Kathy Curry, Woodinville Water

Meeting #1 - November 4, 2024

The initial Task Force meeting was held on November 4, 2024. The meeting provided an overview and history of the project, established goals, and initiated brainstorming of issues that will need to be considered and addressed in future meetings and via the working groups. The project team held separate one-on-one meetings with Task Force members not in attendance.

As part of the first Task Force meeting, a high-level discussion was conducted on key questions. Questions included:

- If local jurisdictions and special districts were successfully coordinated in their planning,
  - How would you know? What does success look like?
  - How can this project result in better planning outcomes?
  - Where are the areas of coordination that are working well and can be built on?
  - What are the areas of concern we should be aware of?

In brief, Task Force feedback on how to approach this project includes:

- Recommendations that do not create additional planning burdens and are appropriate for the need and staff capacity.
- Strive to help special districts succeed in their missions, acknowledging the scale and resources of unique special-purpose districts.
- Improve planning efficiency by creating communicative relationships and harmonize timing, especially for smaller jurisdictions.
- Encourage a culture of collaboration (in addition to policy changes).
- Goal of certainty and predictability through communication, shared forecasting and data, and behavioral changes that lead to improved coordination.
- Utilize existing resources and examples to foster improved planning and engagement. Build on the coordination between entities that is working.

Meeting #2 - May 21, 2025

Prior to the May 21 Task Force meeting, the Project Team sent the Task Force a package of 19 concepts for consideration. These concepts were organized by the scope of issues they addressed. The concepts also included detail about which working groups either supported them or indicated that more consideration was needed.

During the meeting, the Project Team reviewed the concepts with the Task Force members and sought their direction on which concepts to proceed with and which to remove entirely from the process.

In brief, feedback in this meeting from the Task Force includes:

- Consideration to reassess current growth planning coordination issues to better evaluate potential solutions.
- Supportive discussion for concepts that provide resources, trainings, and templates from the state and that support collaboration and coordination between jurisdictions and special districts.
- Concerns about establishing new public participation requirements into law or policy without thoughtful consideration.

Additional Task Force meetings are scheduled July 16, September 17, October 15 and two to finalize the final report and recommendations in mid-November.

Working groups

The intent of the working groups is to bring together subject-matter experts to provide input and recommendations for the Task Force to consider. Three working groups have been established:

- Ports districts
- School districts
- Water, sewer, and public utility districts

Each working group met three times between January and April. Working groups comprise 10 to 15 members from the respective special district types and cities/counties, including diverse representatives from across the state.

At the first meeting, working groups brainstormed ideas to improve coordination. The project team synthesized the input into a list of concepts that each working group discussed at the second and third meetings. The Project Team compiled the concepts and Working Group input into a package for discussion by the Task Force at their May 2025 meeting.

Other engagement efforts

Throughout the Phase IV project duration, the project team will continue to seek opportunities to disseminate knowledge of the project and foster interest in the issue at hand. The project team presented at the following conferences and meetings in 2024:

- Washington Public Utility District Conference (WPUDA) - September 26, 2024.
- Infrastructure Assistance Coordinating Council Conference - October 22, 2024.
- Grant County LEAD Summit - November 14, 2024.
- Washington State Association of Regional and County Planning Directors - November 20, 2024.

Attendance at these events assisted with identifying volunteers for the working groups. Task Force members also received materials and information to assist them with engaging people and groups to participate in the project. The project team will continue to engage at conferences throughout the rest of 2025.

Legislative engagement

Legislators, at their discretion, may be involved as part of the process. Members may attend and listen in to Task Force meetings and/or request one-on-one meetings with the project team to receive project updates. The project team is also able to provide project updates to appropriate legislative committees, as requested. Project updates will be in conjunction with legislative reports due December 15, 2024, and November 15, 2025.

House Local Government Committee

On December 10, 2024, the Project Team presented to the House Local Government Committee. The presentation provided the following:

- Project background
- Goals and issues Phase IV addresses
- How the recommendations will be formed
- A schedule overview
- A project status and progress made to date

The Committee stated support for the project and eagerness to receive recommendations.

Tribal Nations engagement

Tribal Nations have been invited to participate in the process. Specific engagement remains dependent on feedback and engagement will focus on the issues that Tribal Nations determine they would like to consider.

Outreach to Tribal Nations:

- Communication through Commerce's Tribal Liaison.
- Engagement at the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians (ATNI) meeting - September 29, 2024.
- Engagement at the Tribal Planning Gathering - October 11, 2024.

Identifying the scope of issues and initial recommendations

Scope of issues

Currently, numerous services are required to implement the growth plans of jurisdictions. Despite this, laws and processes do not align. Increasing the challenges jurisdictions and special purpose districts face are limited staffing and time availability, the number of jurisdictions and special purpose districts to coordinate with, and differing needs between jurisdictions and special purpose districts.

The goal of this project is to find solutions for increasing coordination between jurisdictions and special districts. This includes looking for opportunities to balance appropriately sized statutes, rules, and processes to ensure that requirements are aligned with the capacity and size limitations of both jurisdictions and special purpose districts.

More coordination may help with:

- Better overall planning.
- Increasing understanding between jurisdictions and special purpose districts.
- Providing opportunities to link resources and provide support to each other, focusing on better outcomes.

As part of the working group meetings, the following issues were specially identified:

- Timing of public and special district participation in growth management planning.
- Assistance from the State of Washington.
- Integration of school siting during growth management planning.
- Coordination of utility relocation and improvements.
- Protection of transition zoning outside of Ports.
- Planning for a variety of employment types.
- Urban service extensions in rural areas for schools.
- Grant incentives.
- Coordination on emergency planning.
- Planning alignment in the fastest-growing communities.

These issues will continue to be discussed and refined through the future Task Force and working groups meetings throughout 2025. **Appendix A** details the initial recommendations for each of these eight issues.

Initial recommendations

As of June 2025, both the Task Force and the working groups have seen an initial draft of concepts that will ultimately become recommendations. The concepts will continue to evolve as feedback from the Task Force and working groups is applied. The next version of the draft is anticipated for July, ahead of the third Task Force meeting.

These initial recommendation concepts fall into two types:

1) State law or rule changes focused on increased coordination and efficiencies in planning and permitting processes
2) Tools, studies, funding, and training to increase knowledge and understanding

The initial recommendations were presented to the Task Force and working groups. The Task Force was asked to answer the following two questions as part of the feedback process:

- Any concepts that should not be taken further for analysis by the project team?

- Any concepts that could be removed because it is not a good use of the Task Force and project team's time to consider further?

The working groups were asked to vote on each concept via Zoom, noting whether it was a concept that should be considered and further researched.

Appendix A: Initial recommendation concepts

The following initial recommendations are organized within eight issue areas. After consideration in working groups and the full Task Force, they may become a final recommendation in the complete legislative report to be published after December 1, 2025. An initial recommendation may not advance pending full development of the proposal, discussion of prioritization and its merits and final vote of the Task Force.

The type of each initial recommendation follows in parenthesis and will be either:

- A potential change to statute or rule, or
- A potential tool, training or funding.

Issue area #1: Timing of public and special district participation in growth management planning

1. The Legislature could amend the Growth Management Act (GMA) public participation requirements (RCW 36.70A.140). Specific language should be included to ensure special districts, who provide capital facilities and utilities to cities and counties, are engaged throughout the periodic comprehensive plan update process. Public participation plans should also address how cities and counties will communicate throughout the update process (potential change to statute or rule).

2. The Legislature could amend the Growth Management Act (GMA) countywide planning policy (CPPs) requirements (RCW 36.70A.140) to increase early coordination with special purpose districts early in the planning process (potential change to statute or rule).

3. The Legislature could amend GMA Capital Facility and Utility Element (RCW 36.70A.070(3) and (4)) requirements to better outline how non city/county service providers, special districts, and state agencies, where necessary, participate and assist in developing long term capital facility and utility policies and plans. The Legislature should also amend statutes for special purpose districts to outline connecting language back to the GMA Capital Facility and Utility Element requirements to facilitate greater planning and communication. Lastly, the Legislature should right size new requirements to focus efforts on the fastest growing counties, cities, and special purpose districts (potential change to statute or rule).

4. The Legislature could consider updating statutes, where appropriate, to better align the preparation of comprehensive plans under RCW 36.70A.130 and plans by special purpose districts which are utilized to plan for capital facilities and utilities (potential change to statute or rule).

5. The Legislature could consider changes to city and county notification requirements for large land use and zoning changes which could impact service providers ability to provide services. This could result in changes to RCW 36.70B.110 for permits or the GMA if land use map changes are made. This is intended to increase coordination on large land use and zoning changes considered outside of the periodic comprehensive plan update. A separate recommendation has been prepared addressing coordination during the periodic comprehensive plan update process (potential change to statute or rule).

Issue area #2: State guidance and other assistance

6. The state could provide cities, counties, and special districts, especially those with fewer resources, additional technical resources to assist in meeting capital facility and utility element requirements under the Growth Management Act (RCW 36.70A.070(3) and (4). This could include:

a. Templates to gather existing condition and financial data from special purpose districts for capital facility plans (potential tool, training or funding).

b. Text templates which explain the purpose of capital facility plans and why gathering information from special districts is critical (potential tool, training or funding).

7. The state could prepare guidance to assist counties/cities and special purpose districts can jointly identify early indicators of growth or constraints, outside of the periodic comprehensive plan update process, which could impact the future ability to accommodate growth which is planned for (potential tool, training or funding).

8. The state could find ways to more broadly share information between cities, counties, and service providers. Having one place where vital information is located could increase coordination between service providers (potential tool, training or funding).

9. The state could be a clearinghouse for example agreements, such as franchise agreements for public-right-of-ways, between cities/counties and service districts for how collaboration may be structured. Having one place to find common agreements would provide efficiencies and opportunities to share information (potential tool, training or funding).

10. The state could develop best practices, webinars, and guidance for Capital Facilities Plan (CFP) and Utility Element planning and/or provide training opportunities to bring city, county, and other service providers together, to provide education and increase coordination (potential tool, training or funding).

11. The state could prepare guidance and information regarding how counties/cities and special purpose districts can be more transparent about who needs to be involved in the related planning processes, such as a guide or directory (potential tool, training or funding).

Issue area #3: Integration of school siting during growth management planning

12. The Legislature could amend the GMA (RCW 36.70A.212 and RCW 36.70A.210) to right-size planning requirements and provide opportunities for discussions about school siting criteria at the countywide planning policy level as opposed to each individual comprehensive plan. The Legislature could also amend corresponding school statutes to connect this requirement for planning (potential change to statute or rule).

Issue area #4: Coordination of utility relocation and improvements

13. To foster coordination and cost-effective infrastructure improvements, the Legislature and state could require that water, sewer, and PUDs are provided with a 3-year notice for potential utility relocation related to road maintenance (potential change to statute or rule).

Issue area #5: Protection of transition zoning outside of ports

14. The Legislature could amend the GMA Ports Element requirements (RCW 36.70A.085), including potential requirements to protect ports and transition zoning between industrial and residential properties. Amendment likely also needs to include modifying who is subject to developing a Ports Element (potential change to statute or rule).

Issue area #6: Planning for a variety of employment types

15. The Legislature could amend the GMA to address the need to preserve, maintain, and enhance industrial lands to a greater extent, including a job density and land capacity analysis process. Cities and counties plan for employment capacity (RCW 36.70A.115 and RCW 36.70A.215). However, planning for employment growth does not address different types of employment, such as commercial or industrial. This could be addressed in the GMA similar to how the GMA Housing Element addresses the need to plan for a variety of different housing types (potential change to statute or rule).

Issue area #7: Grant incentives

16. The Legislature could readdress provisions which permit the extension of urban services into rural areas (RCW 36.70A.213) for schools. It will be important to consider if changes to this specific section of RCW may be warranted based upon other recommendations to better coordinate growth planning (potential change to statute or rule).

17. The Legislature and state agencies could consider options to incentivize infrastructure grants (road, water, sewer, power) within road right-of-ways so that applicants earn points or credit for collaborating with other service providers and local jurisdictions. To maximize funding, this could include:

    a. Requiring documentation at the time of a state grant application that demonstrates coordination has occurred with other agencies that have utilities in the project area (potential tool, training or funding).

    b. Incentivizing projects where multiple utility projects are addressed within one project, such as dig once (potential tool, training or funding).

Issue area #8: Coordination on emergency planning

18. The Legislature could consider funding options to enhance coordination and cohesion for cities, counties, and special purpose districts on emergency planning efforts (potential change to statute or rule).

19. The Legislature could consider language from the law that founded the GMA (HB 2929 (1990)) and require that all special districts shall perform their activities which affect land use, including capital budget decisions, in conformity with the state policy goals and the comprehensive land use plan of the county or city having jurisdiction in the area where the activities occur. The Legislature could consider only applying this planning requirement to the fastest growing cities, counties, and special purpose districts (potential change to statute or rule).