San Juan County Shoreline Master Program Update

September 2011 Visioning Summits Summary

Prepared by:

Norton-Arnold & Company

and

Prepared for:

San Juan County Department of Community Development & Planning

February 2012
September 2011 Visioning Summits Summary

Introduction

State law requires San Juan County to update its Shoreline Master Program (SMP) by June 30, 2013. County citizens, landowners, businesses, various groups and organizations, and visitors all have a vested interest in this irreplaceable resource. To ensure all citizens are informed and engaged in the SMP Update, the County is conducting a comprehensive public involvement program throughout the process which includes three island summits (public meetings) held over the course of the SMP Update to inform and involve the public, and to ensure the public is given opportunities to provide input at key Update milestones. This report documents the results of the second series of island summits advertised as the Visioning Summits. Key elements are highlighted in large bold text to help formulate an understanding of public sentiment and guide the future SMP development.

The Visioning Summits were held on September 20 (Outer Islands and San Juan Island), September 21 (Orcas Island), and September 22 (Lopez Island) to:

- Provide an overview of the SMP update process and schedule;
- Provide a brief summary of the Draft Inventory and Characterization Report; and most importantly,
- Engage the public in the development of long-term vision statements that represent how they want the shorelines to look and function in the future.

Each Visioning Summit consisted of the following:

1. A sign-in table where participants signed in and picked up a meeting agenda, an handout of the vision presentation, and comment forms; sign-in table staff informed attendees about the format of the meeting and how they could participate.
2. Three presentations where participants heard about: the SMP Update, and its purpose, process, schedule, and key issues; the Draft Inventory and Characterization Report, and its methodology and results; and the Visioning process, and its role in the Update process and the methodology for conducting it.
3. A small group visioning breakout session where participants developed, discussed, and prioritized their vision statements. Participants engaged in self-facilitated small group discussions where they a) individually wrote down their vision statements on index cards, b) shared their statements with one another and wrote them down on large flip charts, and c) placed 5 red dots on the statements on the flip charts they thought were the highest priority.
4. An electronic, instantaneous polling session where participants “voted” on the extent they agreed or disagreed that the prioritized vision statements from all small groups represented their desired future for the County’s shorelines; participants also voted on several photographs using the same agreement scale. The poll results have been compiled by meeting and are presented in Appendix E.
The main goal of this visioning process was to identify shoreline problems and opportunities which could shape a strategy for future changes to the County’s existing SMP in the fields of shoreline uses and modifications, public access, resource protection and restoration, consistent with the Shoreline Management Act and Washington State Department of Ecology (Ecology) SMP Guidelines.

Prior to the visioning breakout sessions, summit participants were provided with background information about what visioning is, why it is important, and what visioning statements typically include. Participants were asked to develop relatively short, positive, present tense statements that describe desired future conditions and that address water-oriented uses, private property rights, environmental protection and restoration, public access. They were asked to think about how they wanted shorelines to look and function over a twenty year horizon. To provide some context they were provided examples of vision statements from other jurisdictions going through the SMP update process and the County’s current 1998 vision as stated in the Comprehensive Plan.

San Juan County’s current vision (from the 1998 Comprehensive Plan) is a balanced statement of the community and surrounding environment as a whole. It reads:

The unique character of our shorelines is protected by encouraging uses which maintain or enhance the quality of the shoreline environment. Through innovative land use strategies, our citizens and institutions balance and protect private property rights, public rights, and our natural environment.

Summit Results
A total of 199 people signed in for all four meetings: 16 for the Outer Island Summit, 57 for San Juan, 81 for Orcas, and 45 for Lopez. Consultant staff from The Watershed Company, Herrera Environmental Consultants, and Norton-Arnold & Company facilitated the Summits and made the presentations. The results from the Visioning Summits are representative of the individuals who attended the events and/or sent in comments afterwards. While participants were self-selected (i.e. the results cannot be extrapolated to represent the view and opinions of the County as a whole), they do represent a sample of the public’s thoughts and opinions that will help guide the County update process.

Many participants made statements that, by definition, were not vision statements. It was apparent that many participants generally opposed any change of the regulatory environment and in particular had a negative view of the SMP Update. Many participants expressed concerns about the possible negative impact of the SMP Update on their property values and their rights to enjoy their properties as they see fit. This, in combination with a perceived potential development of new, more restrictive regulations, led some participants to provide declaratory statements about what they generally didn’t want to occur (no infringement on property rights, no new regulations, etc.) or that jumped directly to expressed regulatory preferences (no new docks, maximize setbacks, etc.).

Summit participants developed a total of 297 statements; while many met the definition of a visioning statement others, as noted, voiced opposition to any new regulations or asserted specific desired or
undesired conditions or results. The statements covered a range of topics, including property rights, environmental restoration and protection, public access, and specific regulations and policies. The complete list of statements is provided in Appendix A of the Visioning Results; all statements are broken out by island.

After participants developed statements individually, each table at each summit was asked write the statements on large flipcharts and then to prioritize the most important statements by placing five dots on the statements they thought most important. Using a polling software program, all attendees were then asked to determine their level of agreement with the statements identified as most important by the small groups. The statements participants “voted” on were different at each summit which makes a comparison between them impossible.

Some common themes of priority statements; however, emerged, including:

- Opportunities for public access should be increased on publicly-owned lands;
- Property rights should be protected;
- Any new regulations should recognize and account for site specific conditions;
- The term and definition of “non-conforming,” and any associated regulations should be removed from the current code and should not be included in the updated code;

Other, more minor themes included:

- Incentives should be provided to property owners for low impact development, mitigation, and restoration;
- The current vision is adequate.

It is noted that many of these themes did not emerge at the Outer Island Summit. Concerns about property rights, new regulations and non-conformity were either not mentioned or were not identified as priorities in the break out groups or as a result of polling. The majority of Outer Island participants agreed that shorelines should be managed to benefit wildlife and that new shoreline armoring should be restricted.

At the majority of the meetings, participants prioritized statements that appeared to be mutually exclusive or potentially in conflict. For example, a majority of participants supported the “maximum use of property.” A majority; however, also agreed with the notion to “maintain rural character.” The conflict between the underlying values and impacts implicit in these statements indicates an inconsistency between what participants say about what they want to be able to do on their property and what they think should be done on the shoreline as a whole.

**Picture Polling**

After the statement polling, participants were asked to register their level of agreement on the extent to which a series of nineteen pictures represented their visions for shorelines in the future. Pictures were divided into three categories – water-oriented uses, environmental protection and restoration, and
public access – and were intended to represent a range of structures and uses. In summary, participants had:

- Stronger levels of agreement with pictures that depicted less dense and less visible residential development than with pictures that depicted more intense and more visual residential development. This appears to support the notion of “maintaining rural character” and also fits with the existing Comprehensive Plan vision which emphasizes providing “for commerce and community activities without losing their small scale and attractive island ambiance.”
- By and large, strong levels of agreement with the pictures that depicted marinas and other boating facilities. Again, this emphasizes support for the current vision which notes, “(T)he unique character of our shorelines is protected by encouraging uses which maintain or enhance the quality of the shoreline environment.”
- Very strong levels of agreement with all pictures of environmental protection and restoration, with exception of the picture that depicted a very aggressive form of beach erosion control.
- Broadly had strong levels of agreement with all pictures that depicted various types of public access opportunities.

**Written Comments**

Ninety-two written comments were received via comment forms, emails, and letters (see Appendix B of the Visioning Report). A total of seventy-nine comment forms and other written comments were received via email after the summits, and are provided verbatim in Appendix C of the Visioning Report. The comments focused on private property rights and values and environmental protection and restoration, and echoed many of the sentiments shared at the summits. Again, there were a mix of visioning statements, comments about what they did not want, and statements of regulatory preference. While the majority of participants at the summits made statements in support of property rights and against new regulations roughly two thirds of written comments indicated support for environmental protection and restoration. It is interesting to note that although participants and commenters had different viewpoints on how to achieve what they want, it is apparent that the majority of participants and commenters share similar ideas about what they want.

**By and large, what commenters want is a regulatory environment that allows for use and enjoyment of private property and that ensures ecosystem values are protected and restored.**

**Summary**

In reviewing all the statements and comments received during and after the summits it is apparent that participants and commenters place tremendous value on the County’s shorelines. There are strong feelings about the individual citizens’ rights to use and enjoy their properties and the collective stewardship of and responsibility for the County’s natural resources. The apparent contradiction
between many participants level of agreement with robust property rights statements and very strong levels of agreement with pictures representing environmental protection and restoration is perhaps only on the surface.

Devising regulatory mechanisms which protect the rights of private property owners while also ensuring the long-term protection of existing environmental conditions along San Juan County’s shorelines is the ultimate end product of the SMP Update process but also the vision of the majority of residents.

It is clear that many participants and commenters felt threatened as individuals due to perceptions about the SMP Update as a threat to “take something away” from what they value personally. Understandably, these perceptions are more direct and powerful than the collective benefits associated with environmental protection and restoration. Nonetheless, participants and commenters demonstrated that they desire both and that the vision, and resultant policies and recommendations need to reflect this desire.

The statements made here-in reflect the overall vision strategy based on current public input for the future development of an updated SMP. There was clear majority support for continued use of the existing 1998 Vision Statement. Overall, in keeping with the requirement to ensure consistency with the Shoreline Management Act and Ecology Guidelines, future modifications to the County’s SMP should be in-line with this vision.
Appendices

The following appendices are included:

- Appendix A – Visioning Statements
- Appendix B – Comment Forms Received at the Summits
- Appendix C – Written Comments Received After the Summits
- Appendix D – Future Vision Pictures
- Appendix E – Comment Results by Summit