

YAKIMA COUNTY PUBLIC SERVICES DEPARTMENT

Planning Division, Long Range Planning Section

TO: Yakima County Planning Commission

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DATE: January XX, 2026

ISSUE: Periodic Update – Chapter 9, Utilities Element

Introduction

The Washington State Growth Management Act (GMA), adopted in 1990, requires Yakima County to plan strategically for long-term growth and the public infrastructure that supports it. Under the GMA, counties must adopt countywide planning policies (RCW 36.70A.210), identify and protect resource lands such as agriculture, forest, and mineral areas (RCW 36.70A.060), establish Urban Growth Areas (UGAs) where urban services can be efficiently provided (RCW 36.70A.110), and adopt comprehensive plans and consistent development regulations (RCW 36.70A.040).

A central goal of the GMA is to ensure that growth occurs where capital facilities and public services such as water, sewer, roads, and schools can be provided in a cost-effective and environmentally responsible manner. Directing development to areas with existing or planned infrastructure reduces the strain on rural systems, protects resource lands, and helps local governments make efficient use of public investments. Growth outside of UGAs is expected to occur at rural or agricultural densities, without creating demand for urban-level facilities and services.

In addition to the annual docket process that allows for incremental updates, the GMA requires a periodic review of comprehensive plans and development regulations under RCW 36.70A.130. This review ensures that local plans, including the Capital Facilities Element, remain consistent with state law, reflect updated inventories and population forecasts, and continue to coordinate land use with infrastructure capacity and funding. Yakima County's deadline to complete its current periodic update is December 31, 2026.

Yakima County adopted its first GMA-compliant comprehensive plan, Plan 2015, on May 20, 1997, following years of community collaboration. That plan introduced both Upper Valley and Lower Valley Vision Statements, which continue to guide policy direction for infrastructure investment and service delivery.

The County completed its last full GMA periodic update on June 27, 2017. Since then, *Horizon 2040* has been maintained through the annual amendment process, which provides an opportunity for both the County and private applicants to propose targeted updates to land use and capital facility policies.

In addition to meeting GMA requirements, staff have updated the Utilities Element with current information for all relevant public utility providers, including water and sewer districts and

associations, and other service providers. Updates reflect revised facility counts, system capacities, service areas, and planned or completed capital projects. Publicly available contact information for each utility has also been added to enhance transparency and accessibility. The element has been revised to accurately represent existing infrastructure and planned improvements, supporting efficient service delivery and future growth.

As part of the required periodic update under the Washington State GMA, Yakima County is conducting a thorough review of the Utilities Element using the Department of Commerce's Periodic Update Checklist. This checklist provides a structured framework to evaluate the comprehensive plan for consistency with current GMA requirements, recent legislative changes, and updated planning guidance.

The following section walks through each checklist item in detail, assessing how well the existing Utilities Element meets the applicable requirements and noting any revisions to ensure full compliance.

Utilities Checklist item A.

"The general location, proposed location and capacity of all existing and proposed utilities, to include telecommunication."

Analysis: Washington's Growth Management Act (RCW 36.70A.070(4)) requires that the Utilities Element provide, at a minimum, (1) where utilities are located now, (2) where future utility extensions or facilities are expected to occur, and (3) the capacity of both existing and proposed systems. Commerce's periodic update checklist interprets this requirement broadly and expects a direct, explicit statement on these components rather than relying on inference from technical descriptions.

How the Current Horizon 2040 Utilities Element Meets the Requirement:

The adopted Utilities Element contains extensive information on the County's utility systems. The document already provides detailed descriptions, tables, and map references showing the *existing locations* of water systems, sewer systems, solid waste facilities, electrical service territories, natural gas infrastructure, and irrigation districts. It also documents *existing utility capacity* through water system characteristics, sewer treatment capacity, solid waste facility lifespan, and related service information. In this respect, the element is robust.

However, the Utilities Element is less explicit in two areas that Commerce routinely flags:

1. Proposed utility locations. While adopted utility plans are incorporated by reference, the document lacks a clear narrative describing where future facility expansions or line extensions are generally expected to occur based on planned growth patterns.
2. Telecommunications capacity. The telecommunications section identifies service providers and facility types, but does not address system capacity or how capacity expands over time to meet demand.

Why Additional Text Is Needed:

Commerce expects plans to explicitly state how the Utilities Element responds to RCW 36.70A.070(4), particularly for telecommunications and future utility expansion. The existing document contains the substance, but the connections are implicit. The added text creates a clear, traceable link between the substantive content and the checklist

requirement. It also creates a concise “landing place” where Commerce can see compliance without having to interpret from context.

Proposed Text:

This section clearly identifies where the plan addresses the general location, existing capacity, and future expansion of all utilities, creating an explicit statement of compliance with RCW 36.70A.070(4). It ties together the dispersed utility information in Chapter 9 and confirms the inclusion of telecommunications as required by the checklist.

9.2.1 Summary of Existing and Proposed Utility Facilities

To satisfy RCW 36.70A.070(4), this Utilities Element identifies the general location, existing capacity, and planned future capacity of all major utility systems serving Yakima County, including water, sewer, solid waste, irrigation, electrical power, natural gas, and telecommunications. Existing utility facilities are mapped or described in Sections 9.4 through 9.12, including service areas for public water systems, sewer districts, solid waste facilities, irrigation districts, electrical service territories, and natural gas transmission and distribution systems.

Proposed future utility improvements and expansion areas are identified through adopted water, sewer, and utility system plans, which are incorporated by reference. These plans guide future facility locations and capacity upgrades needed to serve the anticipated 2046 growth. Telecommunication utilities, including telephone, cellular, and broadband providers, operate throughout the County using existing electrical corridors, wireless communication facilities, and fiber or cable systems. Future telecommunication facility expansion is expected in areas of new residential and commercial development based on market demand and federal licensing.

This clarifies the general location of proposed future utility extensions by linking them to planned growth areas and transportation corridors, directly satisfying the requirement to identify proposed utility locations.

As development expands within Urban Growth Areas and rural communities, future water, sewer, natural gas, electrical, and telecommunication facilities will generally follow areas designated for residential, commercial, and industrial growth in the Land Use Element. Future utility extensions will occur along established transportation corridors, consistent with utility system plans, interlocal agreements, and adopted LOS standards.

This addition provides the required description of electrical system capacity and how utilities plan for future demand, satisfying the checklist requirement to address both existing and proposed capacity for electrical utilities.

Electrical utilities serving Yakima County, plan system capacity based on adopted population projections and anticipated land use patterns. Pacific Power and Light, Benton REA, and Yakama Power maintain adequate transmission and distribution capacity to serve existing customers and planned 2046 growth. System capacity is expanded through phased upgrades to substations, transformers, and transmission lines as growth occurs.

This statement documents how telecommunication systems maintain and expand capacity to meet current and future needs, ensuring the element explicitly addresses capacity for telecom utilities as required by the checklist.

Telecommunications providers maintain system capacity through upgrades to fiber infrastructure, wireless communication facilities, and switching equipment. Capacity expansion occurs in response to new development, population growth, and increases in data demand. Although providers do not publish specific system capacities, they maintain sufficient bandwidth and coverage to serve existing users and planned future development within Yakima County.

Staff finding: *The current Horizon 2040 Utilities Element substantially addresses the existing locations and capacities of water, sewer, solid waste, electrical, natural gas, irrigation, and telecommunication utilities through maps, tables, and system descriptions. However, the element does not fully satisfy Checklist Item A because it lacks (1) an explicit summary identifying where the plan addresses the general location, proposed location, and capacity of utilities, (2) statements describing future utility expansion areas consistent with land use patterns, and (3) capacity information for electrical and telecommunication systems.*

To address these gaps, staff have added a new summary section clarifying where existing and proposed utilities and their capacities are documented, added capacity descriptions for electrical and telecommunication utilities, and established a general narrative describing how and where future utility extensions are expected to occur based on adopted system plans and the Land Use Element. These amendments provide a clear, defensible link to RCW 36.70A.070(4) and bring the Utilities Element into full compliance with Checklist Item A.

Utilities Checklist Item B.

“Identify and include information and contact information about all public entities, including special purpose districts that own utility systems.”

Analysis: Checklist Item B requires the County to identify all public entities, including special purpose districts, that own utility systems within the jurisdiction and provide contact information. County staff have completed a comprehensive review of the Utilities Element and have compiled a detailed Appendix II, which lists all identified public utility providers, including water and sewer districts and associations, and other relevant entities. Each entry includes publicly available contact information, websites, phone numbers, and physical addresses where available, as well as updated information on facility counts, system capacities, service areas, and planned or completed capital projects. These updates ensure the Utilities Element reflects current conditions and facilitates public access and interagency coordination.

Proposed Text:

Appendix II provides a comprehensive list of all public entities owning utility systems in Yakima County, including updated facility data, service areas, planned projects, and publicly available contact information. See Attachment B **for Appendix II.**

Contact information for all public utility providers and special-purpose districts referenced in this chapter is included in Appendix II.

Staff finding: *Staff finds that the updated Utilities Element, along with Appendix II, fully addresses Checklist Item B. The element demonstrates a thorough and systematic identification of all relevant public entities, provides clear and accessible contact information, and meets GMA and Department of Commerce guidance. Adoption of these updates will ensure the Utilities Element accurately reflects existing infrastructure and planned improvements while supporting effective coordination and service delivery throughout Yakima County.*

Recommendation

Staff finds that the updated Utilities Element of Horizon 2046 substantially addresses GMA and Department of Commerce requirements. The element provides a strong framework for planning, coordinating, and maintaining public utility infrastructure, including water and sewer systems and other utility services, and establishes policies for service area planning, system capacity management, capital project coordination, and interagency communication.

Staff recommends adopting the amendments outlined in Attachment A. These edits reflect a comprehensive review of the Utilities Element against GMA requirements and Department of Commerce guidance. These refinements do not alter the County's overall policy direction but enhance clarity, consistency, and compliance with the GMA. Adopting the recommended edits will ensure that Horizon 2046 continues to serve as a legally defensible and forward-looking blueprint for Utilities planning in Yakima County through 2046.