

Guest Editorial for [\[publication\]](#)
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Accuracy is the Best Growth Target Choice
[\[name\]](#)

You can't hit a target if you don't know where to aim. That's the philosophy behind offering Washington communities population targets, so they can plan for growth. If we choose accurate growth forecasts and plan well, growth can improve the quality of life for everyone.

State population growth experts are providing communities with a range of low, medium, and high estimates, or "targets," for expected population increases. The estimates are not "targets" in the sense that we can choose the one we like the most. The targets are not about choice, they are about inevitable growth, estimated ranges of what *will* happen. We may choose a low target because we believe our population has increased enough, thank you very much. But choosing a low target won't prevent people from moving here and it won't stop families in our community from growing. That's why it's important to determine which target is most accurate.

After extensive study, experienced demographers say that the middle range is the "most likely" growth reality for most areas. In fact, during the last decade, data shows that many communities actually grew slightly *more* than the mid-range forecasts predicted. We must establish the most accurate population target, and then build community plans that provide the public services, land for homes and businesses, and other things that a healthy and growing population needs.

Some communities may fall into the trap of thinking that they can choose how much to grow. They are communities that failed to anticipate growth and are now struggling with the results of poor planning -- from traffic congestion to scarce housing. Now they hope that choosing a low growth target means that actual growth also will be low. Wrong. We cannot choose *whether* to grow. But we can plan *how* our communities will take advantage of the prosperity wise growth planning can bring.

Crossing our fingers for low-growth means we risk being unprepared. If our community gets more growth than we're ready for, the results won't be pretty: traffic congestion, environmental degradation, and poor housing choices, will be a few of the consequences. New businesses and homes will spill out to rural lands, farms, and forests. In fact most of the negative things people associate with growth are really tied to bad growth *planning*. Planning for unrealistically low population growth doesn't mean the growth won't come. It just means we won't be ready when it does.

In fact, there is a danger to not growing at all. Communities that do not grow may be unable to attract new investment. With less investment, the quality of life begins to deteriorate. That's especially a problem for a community where incomes are already lower than average, where jobs are scarce, and where people have to drive long distances to get work. Communities that reject population growth may push population and development where we least want it: in environmentally sensitive areas and rural lands. When few people come to a community, the tax burden is greater for taxpayers who must support schools, road maintenance, and other public services.

The truth is, growth and development are signs of a healthy community. A growing population helps support community services. That adds up to fewer costs to existing residents for services, such as parks, recreation, schools, and transportation. New residents in a community enhance the vitality of

neighborhoods and commercial areas. New and expanding businesses mean more jobs and more choices for goods and services for everyone.

To avoid the consequences of *under*-planning, we should plan for the mid- to high-range growth targets. This will help ensure our community effectively plans to provide for adequate jobs, housing, and public services over the next twenty years. Of course, while the market will ultimately determine where growth will occur, by *planning* for the mid-range growth target, we'll prepare our community for the most likely growth scenario.

The key to making growth a positive force is to *plan effectively* for it. We are perfectly capable of planning for healthy growth and development. Local elected officials, community planners, businesses, and residents can work together to ensure we have the open space, sidewalks, roads, and utilities our community needs. Jobs and homes should be prominent in plans for improving quality of life. We must encourage a variety of housing choices and provide opportunities for businesses to start up or expand. By determining the most realistic, accurate growth target, we can prepare to prosper with new jobs, new neighbors, and new housing opportunities. Then, as families grow and business thrives, we will be able to support and improve our quality of life.

Editor's Note: [Name] of [city] is [community or organization affiliation.]

[For example: Mike Flynn, of Gig Harbor, is the president-elect of the Washington Association of Realtors.]