



Critical Areas Protection Ordinance 2026 Update

Planning and Development Services
City Council Study Session
May 12, 2026
Item #2

Agenda

- Critical Areas Protection Ordinance (CAPO)
- Critical Areas Code Update Process
- Public Engagement
- Planning Commission Recommendations
- Next Steps



What Are Critical Areas?

Defined under Washington's Growth Management Act (GMA)

Critical areas are lands and waters that require special protection under State law because of their ecological sensitivity and services, or the hazards they present.



Wetlands



Fish & Wildlife
Habitat Conservation
Areas



Critical Aquifer
Recharge Areas



Geologically
Hazardous Areas



Flood Hazard
Areas

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Regulatory Requirements for Critical Areas

GMA:

Requires all cities and counties to adopt and periodically update regulations that conserve the functions of critical areas and protect the public from harm:

- Requires no net loss of ecological functions and values of critical areas.
- Requires the use of best available science (BAS) in developing policies and regulations to protect the functions and values of critical areas.

Federal and State Policy and Guidance:

- Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)
- Washington State Department of Ecology (Ecology)
- Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW)
- Washington State Department of Natural Resources

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Regulatory Requirements for Critical Areas

How are critical areas protected?

Local critical area codes protect critical areas through development regulations that:

- Define and categorize
- Create protective buffers
- Limit development in critical areas and buffers

Can properties in critical areas or buffers be developed?

Yes

- Relief provisions for sites fully or mostly within critical areas or buffers
- Development may be limited and mitigation would be required

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CAPO Update Process

Best Available Science Review and Gap Analysis

Wetlands	New buffer recommendations
Streams	New buffer recommendations
Fish & Wildlife Habitat Conservation Areas (FWHCA)	Update biodiversity corridors and Oregon white oak standards
Critical Aquifer Recharge Areas (CARA)	Update CARA maps, uses and standards
Geological and Flood Hazards	Update definitions and classifications

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Public Engagement

- Social media posts, webpage updates, emails and phone calls to contacts on listserv and other interested parties, neighborhood councils, community organizations and agencies
- Individual meetings with Tribal fisheries staff and other interested Tribal members, environmental organizations, development community, and agencies
- Tacoma Permit Advisory Group (4 meetings)
- Climate and Sustainability Commission (2 meetings)
- Community Informational Meetings
 - Salishan, Nature Center, Virtual event
- South Sound Sustainability Expo

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Planning Commission Policy Recommendations

Wetland buffers:

- Option 1 from Ecology BAS and model ordinance to best fit Tacoma's urban environment
- Allows smaller buffers under certain circumstances
- Most flexible of the three Ecology options
- Buffers now must be vegetated

Stream buffers:

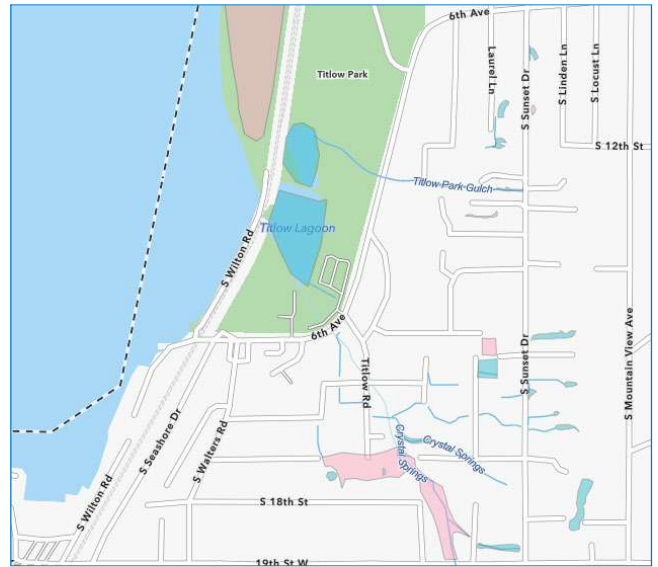
- Buffers determined based on the stream type rather than potential tree height
- Minimum buffer increased to 100 feet per WDFW BAS
- Buffers now must be vegetated

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Stream Buffer example

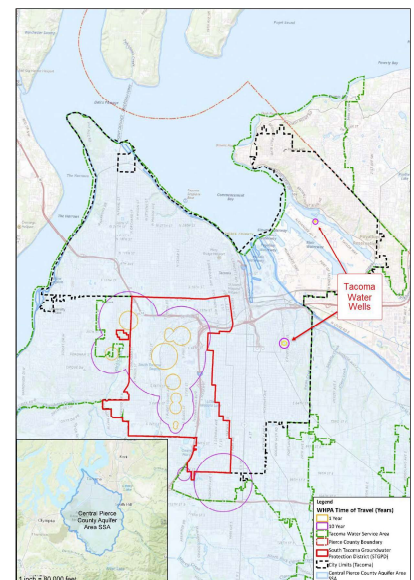
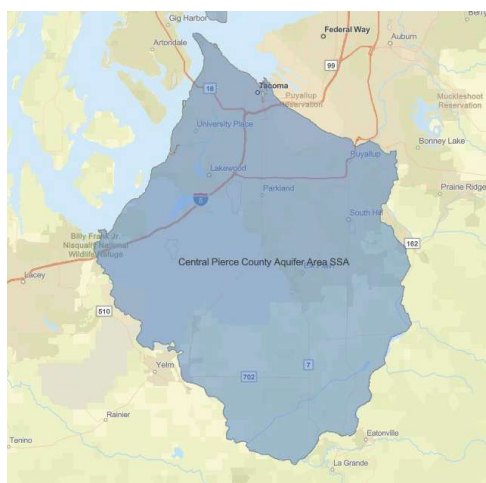
Stream Type	Buffer (feet)
Type S or Streams of local significance	150
<u>Streams of Local Significance</u>	<u>200</u>
Type F+ (<u>Salmonids</u> Fish)	150
Type F2 (<u>Non-Salmonids</u>)	100
Type Np (<u>Non-fish Perennial</u>)	100
Type Ns1 (<u>Non-fish Seasonal; c</u> Connected to S, F, or Np)	<u>100</u> 75
Type Ns2 (<u>Non-fish Seasonal; N</u> not connected to S, F, or Np)	25 <u>100</u>

- Larger streams already had 100 foot or larger buffers
- Buffer increase impacts Streams of Local Significance (salmon bearing) and smaller seasonal streams

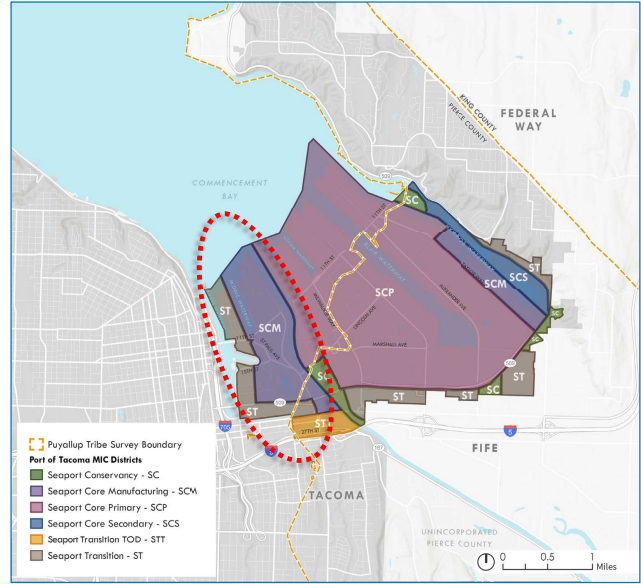
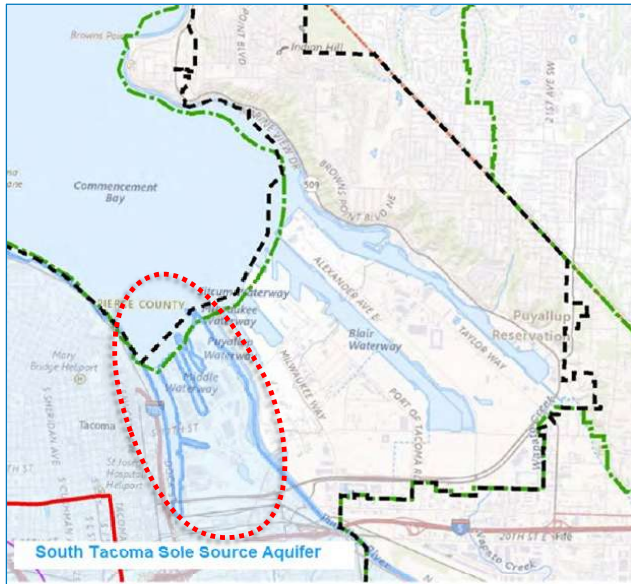


Critical Aquifer Recharge Areas (CARA)

- Adopt the Environmental Protection Agency map of the Central Pierce Sole Source Aquifer
- Add regulatory framework similar to but more flexible than the South Tacoma Groundwater Protection District



CARA and Tideflats Overlap



CARA, Tideflats and High Impact Uses

- Differences between allowed uses in the Seaport Core Manufacturing Zone in the Tideflats Subarea and Commission recommendation for CARA

High Impact Uses	Tideflats	CAPO Draft
Asphalt/cement batching	Permitted	Prohibited
Metal recycling	Permitted	Prohibited
Chemical manufacture/ processing/storage	Permitted or Conditionally Permitted (CU)	Prohibited

Planning Commission Recommendation

The Commission unanimously recommended adoption of the CAPO update with the following priorities also highlighted for Council:

- **Tribal Consultation** -- government-to-government, not a subset of public engagement; initiate early; sustain throughout.
- **Staffing and Enforcement** -- regulations are only as strong as their implementation; the Commission urges Council to treat staffing adequacy as integral to adoption, not a separate budget matter.
- **Mapping and Public Information** -- current, accessible critical areas maps are essential to regulatory credibility; invest in ongoing maintenance.
- **Public Education and Pre-Purchase Awareness** -- prospective buyers and property owners need accessible information about critical areas before they invest.
- **Land Acquisition** -- regulatory protection alone is insufficient; the Commission encourages proactive acquisition strategies.



Current Council Schedule for 2026

May 12	Resolution to set public hearing date
June 2	Council Public Hearing
June 16	Ordinance – First Reading
June 23	Ordinance – Final Reading



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