



# Critical Areas Ordinance Update

Planning and Development Services  
City Council Meeting  
June 2, 2026  
Public Hearing

## Agenda

- Critical Areas Ordinance (CAO)
- Critical Areas Code Update Process & Draft Code Changes
- Public Engagement
- 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

# 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
- Requires the use of best available science (BAS)

## 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

# CAO Update Process

## BAS Review and Gap Analysis

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

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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:

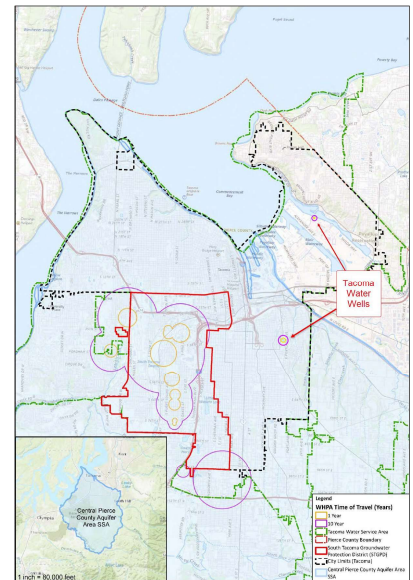
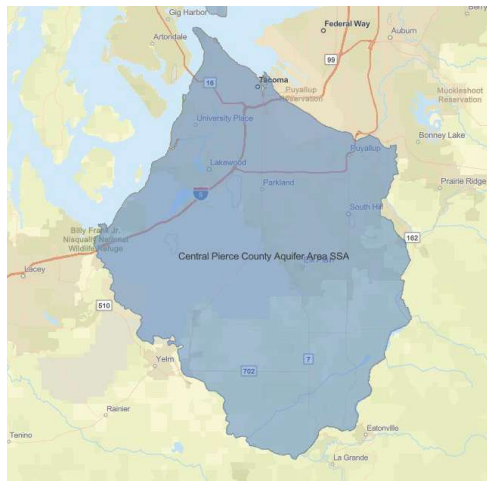
- Buffers determined based on the stream type
- Buffer increase for Streams of Local Significance (salmon bearing) and smaller seasonal streams
- Buffers now must be vegetated

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# Critical Aquifer Recharge Areas

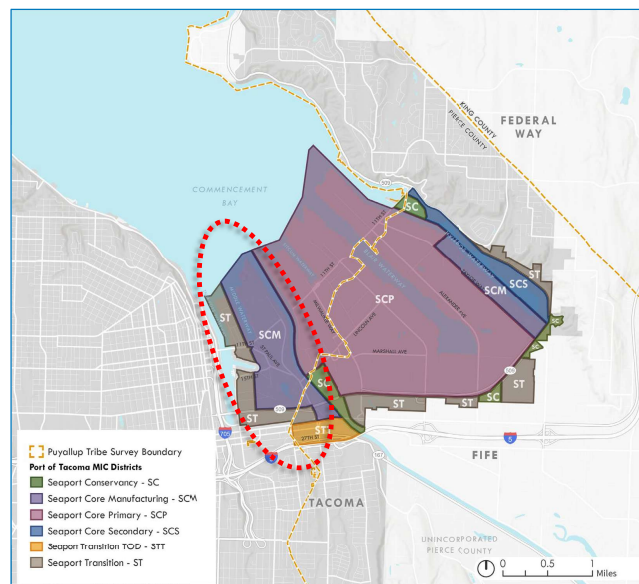
- Adopt the Environmental Protection Agency map of the Central Pierce Sole Source Aquifer
- Add regulatory framework similar to but more flexible than the South Tacoma Groundwater Protection District



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# CARA, Tideflats and High Impact Uses

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



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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
- Meetings with Tribal planning and fisheries staff
- Meetings with 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
- Code Amendment Open House



## Current Council Schedule for 2026

June 16	Ordinance – First Reading
June 23	Ordinance – Final Reading



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