City of Tacoma Memorandum

TO: Hyun Kim, Interim City Manager
FROM: Maryam Moeinian, Senior Planner, Planning and Development Services
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SUBJECT: South Tacoma Groundwater Protection District Code Update
DATE: August 6, 2025

OVERVIEW:
On August 12, 2025, Planning and Development Services (PDS), Environmental Services (ES) and Tacoma Water staff will share the Planning Commission's recommendation on the South Tacoma Ground Water Protection District (STGPD) code update in preparation for a public hearing scheduled for later that day.

BACKGROUND:
Established in 1988 by Ordinance No. 24083, the STGPD is an overlay zoning district created in response to area's high vulnerability to contamination of the underlying aquifer system. The original ordinance introduced regulations related to land use, stormwater infiltration, and the handling, storage and disposal of hazardous substances. It also established technical standards, identified prohibited uses, and created enforcement provisions. Notably, the STGPD was established before the development of state requirements related to Critical Aquifer Recharge Areas (CARAs) under the Growth Management Act (GMA), which requires cities to identify and protect critical areas, including CARAs, to prevent harm to public health and natural resources.

The City is currently updating Tacoma Municipal Code (TMC) 13.06.070.D, which contains the primary regulations for the STGPD. In addition, updates are being made to other sections of the code, TMC 13.06.040.J, 13.06.060, 13.06.090.B, and 13.06.090.J, to revise landscaping, tree canopy, and lot coverage standards that apply across various zoning districts. These changes are consistent with the updated STGPD Work Plan and reflect a broader effort to strengthen groundwater protection through updated land use policy.

In March 2021, the South Tacoma Neighborhood Council (STNC) submitted an application during the 2022 Comprehensive Plan Amendment cycle, seeking to:

a) Update the One Tacoma Plan and the TMC applicable to the STGPD and the aquifer recharge areas to address environmental and health risks and further prioritize protection of the STGPD; and
b) Transform the South Tacoma Manufacturing/Industrial Center into an Economic Green Zone (EGZ) that fosters environmentally sustainable industry specifically within South Tacoma, above and near this water source.

The Planning Commission conducted an assessment of the STNC's application, considered public comments received through a public scoping hearing in June 2021, and made a determination in July 2021 to move the application forward for technical analysis following a phased approach:

- Phase 1A: Work Plan (2022) – Develop a STGPD Code Update Work Plan during the 2022 Amendment cycle. (Adopted via Amended Substitute Resolution No. 40985 on June 28, 2022)
- Phase 1B: STGPD Code Amendments (2023–2025) – Update TMC 13.06.070.D pertaining to STGPD based on the adopted Work Plan.

- Phase 2: Creation of an EGZ – Explore establishing an EGZ to attract green industry to the City's manufacturing/industrial centers, aligning with the 2030 Climate Action Plan and Climate Adaptation Strategy (Resolution No. 40878, November 30, 2021), pending budget and staffing requests to the City Council.

The Planning Commission forwarded its recommendations to the City Council in May 2022, supporting adoption of the STGPD Work Plan and encouraging the Council to consider a moratorium on future developments during the code amendment process to prevent pre-emptive land use decisions.

STGPD WORK PLAN

In June 2022, the City Council adopted Amended Substitute Resolution No. 40985, which:

- Approved the STGPD Code Update Work Plan; and
- Directed the Planning Commission to consider whether a moratorium on heavy industrial uses and hazardous material storage in the STGPD was warranted during the code update process.

STGPD MORATORIUM

Following public review and technical analysis, the Planning Commission submitted its findings on August 17, 2022, recommending a targeted moratorium on certain high impact uses within the STGPD. The Commission determined that a broad, blanket moratorium could result in disproportionate and inequitable impacts to diverse industrial and small businesses. Instead, it recommended temporary restrictions on the following uses:

- Underground storage tanks
- Metal recycling/auto wrecking
- Vehicle service and repair (later removed by the Infrastructure, Planning, and Sustainability Committee (IPS))
- Vehicle service and repair – industrial (later removed by IPS)

The IPS Committee reviewed the Commission's recommendations and opted to narrow the moratorium's scope, citing insufficient risk to groundwater resources from vehicle service and repair uses. The Committee also emphasized the importance of allowing reasonable improvements to existing facilities that would reduce environmental risks, even if those improvements involve limited expansions.

On March 7, 2023, the City Council passed Ordinance No. 28872, enacting a one-year moratorium (effective March 20, 2023) on:

- Underground storage tanks
- Metal recycling/auto wrecking

The moratorium has since been extended three times:

- March 5, 2024 – Extended via Ordinance No. 28958
- August 27, 2024 – Extended via Ordinance No. 28977
- February 25, 2025 – Extended via Ordinance No. 29020 (expires: September 20, 2025)

STGPD UPDATED WORK PLAN

Following the initial STGPD Work Plan adopted by the City Council in June 2022, the Planning Commission updated the Work Plan on December 20, 2023. The updated Work Plan reflects a more comprehensive and forward-looking approach to groundwater protection. The expansion of scope was driven by substantial community input, emerging research, and newly available resources.

The updated Work Plan broadened the scope of the STGPD code update to include additional policy and technical areas such as landscaping and tree canopy standards, impervious surface standards, a Health Impact Assessment (HIA), integration with the Critical Areas Ordinance, and potential refinements to STGPD boundaries.

The full scope of work includes:

- Prohibition of additional high impact land uses including underground storage tanks and metal recycling/auto wrecking facilities
- Improvements to enforcement and monitoring provisions
- Defining the timing and frequency of future code review and updates (also known as a Periodic Update)
- Evaluating the location of the STGPD code within the TMC and exploring options for potential relocation
- Improving coordination between the STGPD Overlay Zone and the Critical Areas Preservation Ordinance (TMC 13.11)
- Reviewing infiltration policy and stormwater treatment best management practices (BMPs)
- Impervious surface standards
- Updating maps of the STGPD Overlay Zone and CARAs
- Improving landscaping and tree canopy standards for industrial zones in STGPD, South Tacoma Manufacturing and Industrial Center (STMIC), and Tacoma Mall Regional Growth Center (RGC)
- Improving general program awareness
- Conducting HIA for the STGPD Overlay Zone
- Strengthening inter-departmental coordination related to permitting and land use amendments

JANUARY 2025 IPS COMMITTEE MEETING

On January 22, 2025, staff presented the initial findings and recommendations from the code review to the IPS Committee. This presentation also included updates on recent engagement activities, a review of the best available science, and an overview of state mandates aimed at strengthening groundwater protection efforts in Tacoma.

PLANNING COMMISSION REVIEW OF THE DRAFT CODE

From April through June 2025, the Planning Commission conducted its review of the STGPD code. The Commission applied the review criteria outlined in TMC 13.02.070.H.1 and TMC 13.05.030, which evaluate whether a proposed amendment benefits the City as a whole, supports public health, safety, and welfare, and aligns with state law, regional policy, and the Comprehensive Plan.

During this period, the Commission received staff presentations on the draft code, reviewed findings from the HIA, held a public hearing, and deliberated on public comments. The Commission finalized recommended amendments and voted to forward the draft code to the City Council for consideration.

The Planning Commission's Findings of Fact and Recommendation can be found here:

- Planning Commission Recommendation Package

ENGAGEMENT AND OUTREACH

Extensive engagement was conducted to ensure the STGPD code update is informed by broad community input, technical expertise, and alignment with citywide goals. Outreach has targeted residents, businesses, and partner agencies, with a focus on accessibility, transparency, and community relevance. Between early 2024 and spring 2025, the City participated in a range of public events and forums to share information, gather feedback, and answer questions about the STGPD and its connection to public health, environmental protection, and land use policy. These events included:

- Spotlight on South Tacoma Series (January–March 2024): Neighborhood-focused outreach that elevated local concerns and surfaced early feedback on groundwater protection.
- Sustainability Expos (April 13, 2024 & April 26, 2025): Opportunities to connect with hundreds of community members around sustainability, water protection, and environmental health.
- Día de los Niños / Eastside Mini-Olympic Games (May 4, 2024)
- Nine One Tacoma Visioning Workshops (May–June 2024) and four One Tacoma Workshops (February–March 2025): Broader comprehensive planning events where groundwater protection and the STGPD code update were discussed alongside citywide planning goals.
- Ocean Fest (August 2024)
- South Tacoma Neighborhood Plan Steering Committee (August 22, 2024): Focused dialogue on community priorities, including landscaping and tree canopy standards and land use compatibility.
- Tacoma Permit Advisory Group (September 18, 2024) and South Tacoma Business District Association (September 19, 2024): Targeted engagement with development, permitting and business stakeholders.
- Community informational meeting at STAR Center (May 15, 2025): A focused public meeting providing an overview of the STGPD code update, best available science, and ways to provide feedback on the draft code.
- The STNC, as the original applicant for the code amendment, was regularly informed and engaged throughout the process. Their input helped shape the initial work plan and direction of the STGPD Code Update.

Two advisory groups were also convened to provide focused guidance:

- STGPD HIA Advisory Group: formed by the Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department, brought together nine representatives from the public, businesses, and the STNC to ensure the HIA reflected community health priorities. This group met five times between July 2024 and March 2025.
- Tacoma Water Integrated Resource Plan (IRP) Public Advisory Committee: Established to support the IRP update, this committee included representatives from local jurisdictions, the Washington State Department of Health, and a member of the STNC. This Committee met five times between May 2024 and January 2025 to provide technical input on water supply and demand with consideration of future climate risks.

Feedback gathered across these engagement efforts played a significant role in shaping the STGPD code update, particularly in identifying high impact uses and refining strategies to better protect South Tacoma's groundwater resources.

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE

Date	Meeting	Action
August 12, 2025	Study Session	Public Hearing Preparation
August 12, 2025	Council Meeting	Public Hearing
August 19, 2025	Study Session	Public Hearing Debrief
August 26, 2025	Council Meeting	Ordinance (First Reading)
September 9, 2025	Council Meeting	Ordinance (Final Reading)
September 20, 2025	N/A	Current Moratorium Expires

PROJECT INFORMATION:

The proposed STGPD code, Work Plan, moratorium and other relevant materials are available for public review at: www.tacoma.gov/stgpd

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