

DRAFT

**EXISTING CONDITIONS REPORT
Tukwila's Urban Center**

The condition of the Tukwila's urban center, "Southcenter", at the inception of this Subarea Plan is detailed in this section. Ultimately, the implementation of the Plan's Phase I strategies will result in sufficient modification of these conditions as to make this Plan obsolete. At that point, a newly updated Southcenter Plan will need to be prepared to engage the problems and opportunities presented by the modified existing conditions. As change occurs, the community intends to measure those changes against the conditions recorded herein to monitor the degree to which the Plan remains sufficiently current.

A.1. INTRODUCTION

The City of Tukwila is located 12 miles south of downtown Seattle, 17 miles north of downtown Tacoma, and two miles from the Sea-Tac International Airport.

The Plan Area is comprised of approximately 1,000 acres located in the immediate southeastern quadrant formed by the crossing of Interstates 5 and 405. It contains the City's primary commercial center – featuring by far the greatest proportion of the City's development and its primary source of sales tax revenue. The Plan Area contains a sufficiently wide range of retail offerings to make it the largest shopping destination serving the South King County region. Its primary shopping anchor is Westfield Southcenter Mall, the largest mall in the state of Washington. The Mall recently went through a substantial expansion and renovation.

In addition to the wide range of shopping venues, the Plan Area also contains a substantial amount of other commercial uses, especially distribution, warehousing, office and lodging.

A.2. CONTEXT

1) History

The land area of Tukwila has historically been inhabited by the Duwamish, the Native Americans who made their homes along the Duwamish River. They were followed by Euro-American settlers in the 1850's who began the development of a small community based on farming and coal mining. Tukwila was incorporated in 1908, and its development was spurred by accessibility from the Duwamish, Green and Black Rivers; then by train lines that connected it to the major cities of Seattle and Tacoma, and finally by the construction of a regional freeway system. Over time, Tukwila has grown as a center of commerce due to its location at the crossroads of rivers, trails, highways and railroads.

The majority of growth in the City, and especially in the Plan Area, has occurred over the last fifty years. The area to be known as the Tukwila Urban Center was annexed to the City as an industrial park in 1956. The construction of Interstate 5 and 405 in the mid 1960's opened the area up for commercial development, and instigated a rapid transformation of what was largely undeveloped open land and dairy farms (see Photo 1). The Southcenter Mall (currently the Westfield Southcenter Mall) opened in 1968, becoming a commercial anchor for the area. Over the subsequent twenty years, more industry and commerce located in the area, providing space for over 1,000 businesses.



Photo 1.

2) Community

Population in Tukwila has almost doubled in the last 20 years, due to new residential construction and a land annexation in the early 1990's, to a current estimation of 19,107 (2010). While growth has slowed since the 1990's, population is again expected to significantly increase over the next twenty years. Many of Tukwila's newer residents are immigrants from outside the country, and this is expected to continue. Black or African American and Asian are the fastest-growing new groups. Median family income for Tukwila was \$44,530 in 2009, compared to \$67,076 in King County.

3) Regional Circulation

The City of Tukwila is well positioned in the regional transportation network: it is located immediately along the two primary regional freeways; I-5 and I-405 (see Photo 2). It is highly visible and accessible to motorists moving through on these major regional thoroughfares to and from downtown Seattle, downtown Tacoma and SEATAC International Airport.

Two regional transit operators provide service within Tukwila. King County Metro provides both local bus and paratransit services to Tukwila and the surrounding region. Sound Transit operates a three-county bus network, and a light rail and commuter rail system. The Sounder commuter rail line serves the Southcenter area via the Tukwila Longacres Station. Sound Transit's 14 mile LINK light rail line runs between Seattle and the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, stopping at South 154th Street and Tukwila International Boulevard, approximately two miles west of the urban center area. King County Metro provides frequent bus service between the light rail station, the Southcenter Mall area, and the Sounder Commuter Rail Station. Amtrak passenger train service is also available at the Tukwila Longacres Station.



Photo 2. Location at freeway crossroads

A.3. LAND USE AND DEVELOPMENT

Southcenter has become a commercial center for the City and the region. Development in the Southcenter area is exclusively commercial, with retail, office, lodging, warehouse and industrial uses. There is minimal residential development. Existing development patterns are primarily single-story, auto-oriented, commercial development. The northern portion of Southcenter is dominated by the super-regional Westfield shopping mall (the largest covered mall in Washington state – See photo 3) surrounded by parking lots and rings of associated smaller scale, surface parked commercial buildings. The southern portion is primarily a warehouse and distribution center that takes advantage of the area’s highway and railroad infrastructure, with some retail outlets and office buildings.

Major destinations include the Mall, the retail “power” centers lining Southcenter Parkway (see Photo 4) and portions of Strander Boulevard, and big-box retail along Andover Park East in the southeastern portion of Southcenter (see Photo 5). In addition, many chains that draw on a regional audience, such as Office Depot, Home Depot and Target, have located within Southcenter’s boundaries.

A large proportion of Tukwila’s jobs are located in the Southcenter area. More than half of these jobs are in retail, with the remainder primarily oriented towards manufacturing and industrial work. Boeing’s Longacres campus, located just outside of the Southcenter area and directly to the east of Sounder’s Tukwila Longacres station, is forecasted to provide over 10,000 jobs for the region.

As a result of Southcenter’s role as a popular commercial center, land values in Southcenter are expected to rise over time. The lower value office and warehouse uses (see Photo 6) that make up a large part of Southcenter’s land area are potential locations for higher-value uses, and various sites have transitioned to retail use. As a testament to the rising land values, the owners of Westfield Southcenter Mall intensified their property site with an expansion that increased its size by another 500,000 square feet, including a cinema, an expanded food court, additional smaller retail stores, new restaurants and the first structured parking garages serving retail to appear in the Southcenter area.

A market analysis conducted in 2002 showed that the development potential for the Southcenter study area for the near future was projected to include demand for more retail, more restaurants, and more industrial uses, with more office and lodging to follow in the long term. Market analysis of land constraints and demand pressures in the area pointed to the possibility of denser development and structured parking, justified by rising land values. Since that time, due to the downturn in the economy, many of the stakeholders in the Southcenter area have expressed concern that much of the draft Plan is based on a market analysis that is now outdated. The City’s consultants agreed that the 2002 analysis is not adequate now for use as a short-run analysis. Instead, the consultant’s conclusions are that the

vision is achievable, but in phases and over a period of time and only with significant, targeted public investments to catalyze and support development of the type that the City would like to see. Also, given the uncertainty in the current market, it is not effective use of City funds to do a new, detailed market analysis at this time.



Photo 3. Westfield Southcenter Mall



Photo 4. Parkway Super Center



Photo 5. Big box warehouse retail



Photo 6. Lower value office & Warehouse

A.4. EXISTING LAND USE POLICY

The City's Zoning Code is set forth in Chapter 18 of Tukwila's Municipal Code. All of the land area under study is contained within the area designated by the City's Comprehensive Plan and the City's Zoning Map as the *Tukwila Urban Center (TUC)*. The stated purpose for this zoning district is "intended to provide an area of high-intensity regional uses that include commercial services, offices, light industry, warehousing and retail uses. Development is intended to be pedestrian-friendly, with a strong emphasis on a safe and attractive streetscape." Uses permitted in the district include an extremely wide range of retail, entertainment, commercial and industrial uses. Residential uses are conditionally permitted on areas within 500 feet of the Green River, Tukwila Pond, or Minkler Pond (a maximum density of 22 units per acre; 100 units per acre for senior housing), and in mixed-use developments within one-quarter mile of the Sounder Commuter rail/Amtrak Station property (maximum density of 65 units per acre). Most of the uses that support residential, like churches, schools and recreational facilities, are also conditionally permitted. Buildings are allowed to a maximum height

of 115 feet. There are few policies setting standards for building design, orientation, massing, location of parking, block size, or the creation of new streets.

The Zoning Code requires design review for all commercial structures larger than 1,500 square feet and for all structures containing multi-family development, as well as for certain exterior repairs, reconstructions, alterations or improvements to buildings over 10,000 square feet. Design review for commercial structures between 1,500 and 5,000 square feet will be done administratively; for larger structures, by the Board of Architectural Review.

A.5. DEVELOPMENT AND REDEVELOPMENT POSSIBILITIES

Southcenter is almost 100% developed, with very little vacant developable land. The few areas that are untouched by development are either preserved as open space, environmentally sensitive wetlands and river areas, or dedicated towards public uses, such as utility sites. The most significant piece of vacant land that is available for new development lies on the eastern border of Southcenter, north of and adjacent to the Tukwila Longacres Rail Station. However, there are many obstacles to redevelopment of this area, such as underground and above ground utilities and limited access.

While there is very little undeveloped land in Southcenter available for new investment, the low-density nature of its development pattern points toward redevelopment opportunities. Its high-visibility location at the juncture of two freeways makes it a desirable location, especially since there is little developable area elsewhere. The other quadrants bordering the freeway intersection are filled with low-density residential neighborhoods, with little to no land open for development.

With heightened demand for retail space in Southcenter, and the rising land values that result from this demand, much of Tukwila's industrial and warehouse space is vulnerable to conversion to office (see Photo 7) or retail. Some of Tukwila's industrial uses have already shifted to retail uses, (See Fig.A.1) as evidenced by Costco Wholesale, Lowe's Home Improvement, Home Depot and Circuit City, all of which are located in former warehouse buildings.



Photo 7. Fatigue Technology

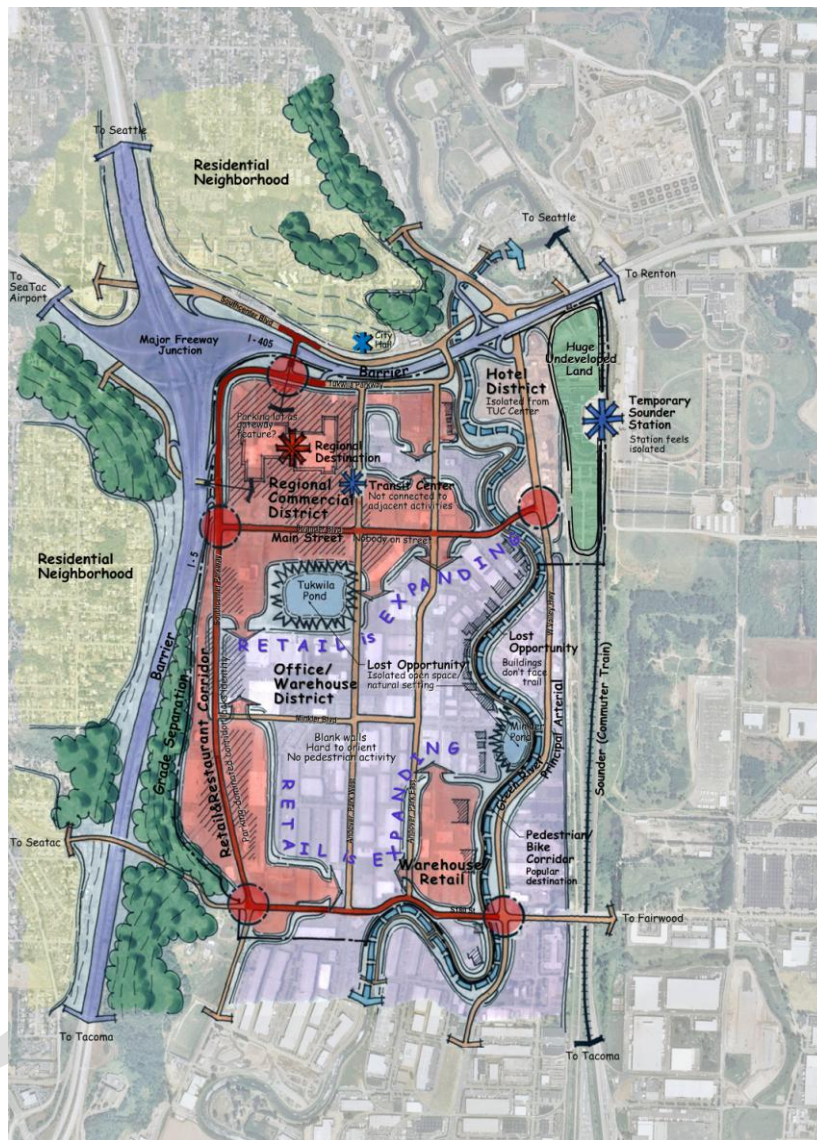


Fig.A.1. Patterns of Development and Change

A.6. LOCAL TRANSPORTATION AND CIRCULATION

1) Vehicular Circulation

Because Southcenter is geographically bounded by the two freeways and the Green River, primary entrance points into the study area are limited. From the north, traffic can enter over I-405 at 61st and 66th Avenues. From the south, access is limited to Southcenter Parkway, Andover Park West and East, and West Valley Highway. Traffic from the west can enter from I-5 at Southcenter Parkway, Klickitat Drive and South 178/180th Street, and traffic from the east is limited to Strander Boulevard and South 178/180th Street. Because of this limited access to the area and the small number of streets serving development, there can be delays at the entrance/exit ramps to the freeway, and there are frequent bottlenecks at the Klickitat Drive and Southcenter Parkway intersection and other intersections near Westfield Southcenter Mall. Traffic on the surrounding interstates is expected to increase in the future. Proposed long-term improvements include the relocation of the I-405 on-ramp from the Southcenter retail area to the east of 66th Avenue, extending Tukwila Parkway to West Valley Highway, and at the

188th Street freeway interchange. Also, with the Tukwila Urban Center access improvement project, bottlenecks in the Klickitat area and near the mall are expected to improve.

Major north-south arterials through the study area are Southcenter Parkway and West Valley Highway; east-west arterials are South 180th Street and Klickitat Drive/ Strander Boulevard. However, arterial routes are treated no differently than other streets in the network. All of the streets appear to be the same in width, design, and even in the types of buildings that line their edges. No priority is given to entrance routes or to important thoroughfares; there are no custom signs incorporated into the streetscape; and no landmarks or monuments mark special places along the street lengths.

The street network in the Southcenter area is designed solely for the automobile, and follows an oversized grid that limits internal circulation. Southcenter is divided into 38 blocks, with an average block size of 22 acres. The area contains over 14 linear miles of roadways, with an intersection density of one intersection for each 16 acres. The smallest blocks in the study are 1,000 feet in length by 1,000 feet in depth, compared to downtown Seattle, with an average block size of 1.5 acres and average block length of 250 feet. East-west streets are particularly limited. With increased success on this limited street network, congestion within Southcenter is becoming more common – peak times for congestion are the noon hour during the week, and Saturday's congestion is even greater around the Mall.

2) Pedestrian Circulation

Pedestrian activity is almost nonexistent in Southcenter, limited to the brief walks taken by people walking to their jobs or to shopping destinations from transit. There are several reasons for this - a street network scaled to the automobile creating block sizes that are too large to walk, long distances between intersections and destinations, narrow unprotected sidewalks along wide highly trafficked roads, large parking lots, and the fact that there are no residential uses in the area. In some areas, sidewalks were created as a part of adjacent development and end at the parcel limits, creating a pedestrian network that is interrupted and sporadic. Pedestrian access to the Tukwila Longacres Sounder/Amtrak station from the urban center is not clearly legible, but this should improve with the installation of a permanent station and a future pedestrian bridge over the Green River. Access to park and open spaces in the area can be difficult to find on foot, and are often hidden behind buildings. While Southcenter does not have many pedestrian or bicycle facilities, it does connect to the Green River and Interurban Trails, which connect to the regional trail system. However, these, too, are difficult to find and access.

3) Transit

Transit is provided to the area through King County Metro bus service, and Sound Transit's "Sounder" commuter rail service. King County Metro routes 110, 128, 140, 150, 154, 155 and 156 serve the Southcenter area. Routes 110, 126, 140, 154 and 156 all connect to the Tukwila Sounder Station during Sounder regular operating hours. Route 110 connects the Tukwila Station area at Longacres Drive with north Renton. Route 128 provides connections between Southcenter and White Center and West Seattle. Route 140 is a major east-west bus route connecting the mall to Burien, the LINK light rail station at South 154th Street, Southcenter, the Tukwila Longacres station and the Renton Park & Ride. Route 150 is the major north-south route connecting Tukwila with Kent and Seattle. Route 154 serves the Boeing Industrial site and connects to the Tukwila Longacres station. Route 155 provides service between Tukwila and north Kent, and Route 156 connects SeaTac, Southcenter and the Tukwila Longacres station. Bus rapid Transit connecting the Burien Park & Ride, Southcenter, the Tukwila Longacres Station and the Renton Park & Ride is planned to commence in 2013.

Sounder offers commuter rail service between Tacoma and downtown Seattle with stops in Puyallup, Sumner, Auburn, Kent, and Tukwila. The interim Tukwila Longacres station is located just south of

Longacres Way (see Photo 8); a permanent station is to be completed by 2013. The station currently accommodates Amtrak service as well as the commuter trains.

A study by Mirai Associates in 2002 indicates that transit accounts for about 2% of all trips into and out of the area. A great number of these trips are to and from the Westfield Southcenter Mall; the stop at this mall is the most highly used, and accounts for more than half of the total riders in the study area. However, existing facilities at this stop are inadequate for the large ridership at that location (see Photo 9), and City plans include design and construction of a new transit center in the vicinity of Andover Park West and Baker Boulevard. This, combined with a permanent Tukwila Longacres station, should make transit a more appealing option for the area.



Photo 8. Temporary Tukwila Longacres Station



Photo 9. Transit stop on Andover Park W.

A.7. OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION

There are many natural resources within the Tukwila Urban Center (see Fig.A.2.), the most noteworthy of which is Tukwila Pond (see Photo 10), a body of water created by a high water table and the runoff from all of the impervious surfaces of the area's rooftops and parking lots, that is now a significant wildlife habitat and a stop-over point for migrating waterfowl. Access to the pond's edges is restricted around most of its perimeter (see Photo 11), but a park has been preserved along the Pond's western edge. Tukwila Pond Park is located behind the commercial development along Southcenter Parkway and the Target store on Strander Boulevard, and accessed along foot trails from these roadways. Viewpoints of the pond and wetland are accessible along the eastern edge of the Pond, on Andover Park East.

Other amenities in the area include Minkler Pond and the Green River (see Photo 12). Minkler Pond is a smaller water body at the eastern terminus of Minkler Boulevard that flows into the Green River, but is inaccessible from the west because it is trapped behind several industrial buildings. The Green River Trail, 2.6-miles of which are within Tukwila, winds along the west bank of the Green River, and the Interurban Trail located on the old Interurban right-of-way east of West Valley Highway, provide recreational space for bike riding, jogging, walking and inline skating. Visual and physical access to these trails is difficult. Much of the Green River Trail is hidden behind the industrial development that lines the riverfront for most of its length through Southcenter.



Photo 10. Tukwila Pond



Photo 11. Tukwila Pond – north side



Photo 12. Green River

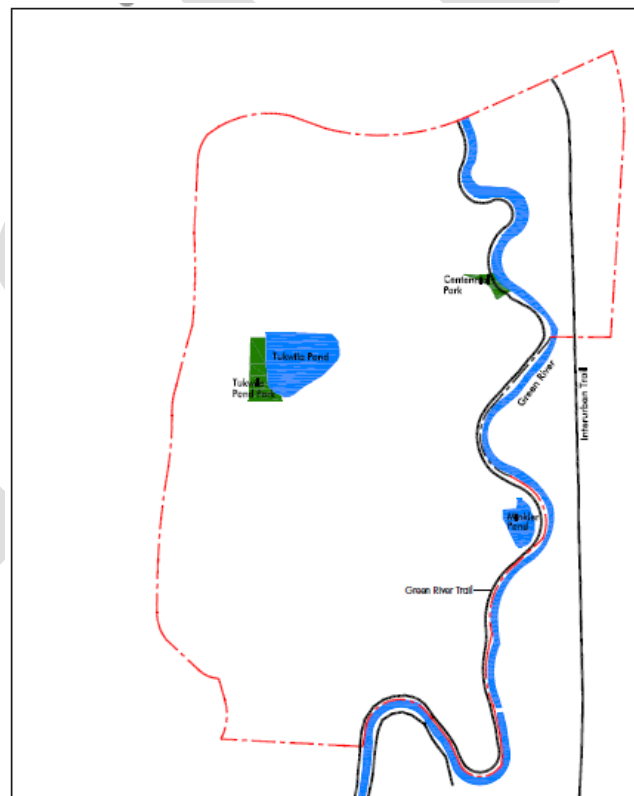


Fig.A.2. Existing Open Space Network

A.8. ARCHITECTURAL AND LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

While a distinctive building and landscape design has evolved in the Pacific Northwest region, this has had little influence on the design of buildings in Southcenter. Buildings are often separated from the street by large parking lots, and their entrances are hard to find. The well-designed buildings constructed after design review was implemented in 1982 are lost in the overall mix, and there are too few of them to create a visible theme that could unify the district with any sort of identity. The result is an unrelated hodge-podge of unarticulated buildings with little ornamentation or design. The highly

distinctive design context of the Pacific Northwest landscape (see Fig.A.3. Design Context) stands in contrast to the existing character of the Plan Area’s built environment.

1) Buildings

Buildings within Southcenter are generally reflective of auto-oriented development. Structures are reduced to the simplest, most economical form: often tilt-up construction, simply massed buildings with a box-like appearance. While buildings are allowed to a maximum height of 115 feet, few are more than 50 feet tall. The number of stories on the taller buildings is indiscernible as their architecture is not articulated by typical design cues like windows per floor or cornice lines. Ornamentation across the facades is limited, except for signage.

2) Streetscape

The site layouts and streetscapes surrounding the area’s development are primarily oriented towards the needs of motorists (see Photos 13-16). Primacy is placed on signage visibility and availability of parking. Parking fronts or surrounds the building, distancing the building from the street and the public realm. The overall impression of the area’s development pattern is of large, simple buildings fronted by asphalt, announcing convenience and ease of movement for automobiles. Very little effort is made to create site layouts that are amenable to the pedestrian, or to use pathways, trees or other site design elements that contribute to the pedestrian realm. While there are a few individual projects that have successfully used landscaping, streetscape and lighting along their edges, these fragments do not add up to create any consistent feeling throughout the district.



Photo 13. Andover Park West



Photo 14. Minkler Boulevard

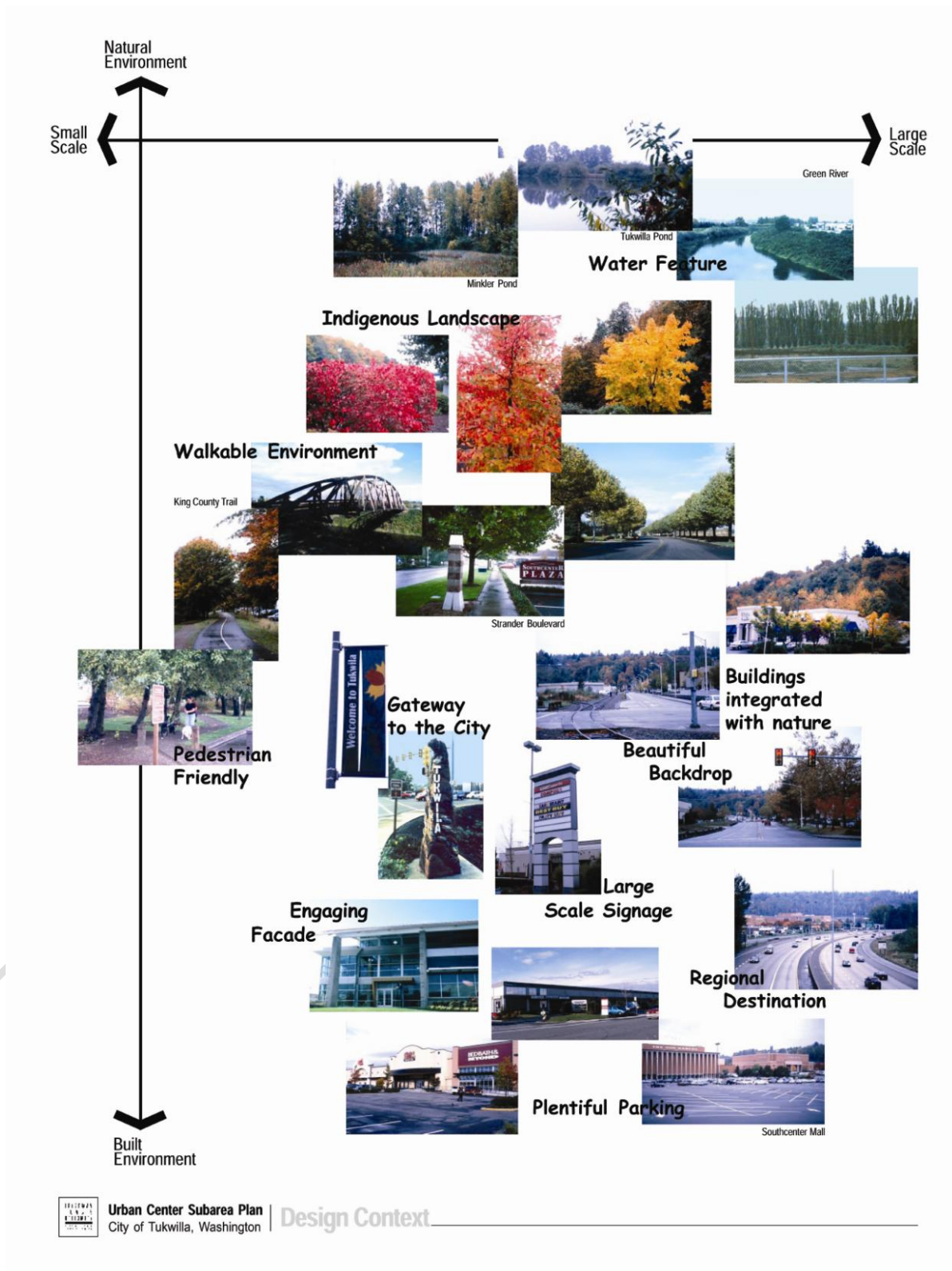


Fig.A.3. Design Context



Photo 15. Southcenter Parkway



Photo 16. Strander Boulevard

A.9. CONCLUSION

The Tukwila community has seen its “Urban Center” transform from farms and undeveloped open land to an industrial hub, and again to its current incarnation as an industrial and regional retail and employment center. Southcenter is very successful as a commercial district - it is “the place to shop” for the City and a large portion of the region. Tukwila is the sixth-largest city in the state for sales tax collections, and most of those dollars come from the stores located in Southcenter, with up to two billion dollars’ worth of retail activity generated annually by retailers in the Southcenter area. However, the success of the district has led to rapid growth that has sprawled in haphazard fashion across the enormous land area of Southcenter, resulting in a diffuse and exclusively auto-oriented environment that is confusing to shoppers and features little connection to the rest of the community.

Whereas Southcenter is the economic engine of the City, it does not function as any real center for the community. It is active primarily in the daytime, and there are few nighttime uses. Development within Southcenter is exclusively commercial and is characterized by low-rise structures surrounded or edged by surface parking. There are very few places to gather or meet other than in the interior pedestrian corridors of the Mall.

Southcenter is bounded by substantial natural and manmade features that separate the district from the residential neighborhoods to its north and west, and from commercial development to the east and south. Because of a lack of other connections to the district, most people get to Southcenter by car. Its development pattern is entirely oriented to automobile, with very little consideration given to the pedestrian or bicyclist. Wide streets lack distinctive treatments such as landscaping themes, interesting signage or architecture. While the City’s Zoning Code states that the TUC is intended to be “pedestrian-friendly”, the large scale of the district’s blocks and the speed of traffic on its streets create powerful disincentives to walking in the district. Sidewalks are inconsistent and narrow. Street crossings are few and far between, and the streetlights are timed for cars, not for pedestrians. This pattern of development is vulnerable to loss of value likely to stem from increasing gasoline prices and the popular embrace of sustainable patterns of development.

The City of Tukwila has a memorable natural setting, and Southcenter has several notable, if hidden, resources, including Tukwila Pond, Minkler Pond and the Green River. But these resources have thus far been a missed opportunity for the district - hidden from view, difficult to access, and therefore rarely used by most of the City’s population. Aside from these amenities, few natural site features remain - most have been developed and paved over with asphalt. Southcenter’s visual character stands in

contrast to the context that surrounds it - the incongruence between the green residential fabric of the City and the hard asphalt of its Urban Center is heightened by the lack of connections between them.

Tukwila's Urban Center does not reflect design character that is indigenous to the region or to the City. Buildings are similar in height and massing, and no different than those that can be found at any successful retail center in the country. The streets that make up the network of Southcenter are indistinguishable from one another in both aesthetics and importance. There are no landmarks to indicate important locations and anchors in the district, and no visual or physical connections to link these places together. Unremarkable building design, spread-out development patterns, and undefined streetscapes contribute to the character of a "placeless" setting.

But the opportunities inherent in Southcenter are strong. The area is easily reachable from surrounding cities, with good access via the interstate freeways, and as result, the regional mall remains successful. The recreational and natural amenities of the area make good incentives for residential development throughout the district, providing potential anchors for new neighborhoods. Transit options, including the King County Metro bus system, bus rapid transit, and Sound Transit's commuter and light rail service, can be improved and built upon, and combined with an improved pedestrian realm to provide an alternative to automobile travel. All of these factors provide the framework for positive change and offer the opportunity to direct future growth, to make Southcenter a true "Urban Center" for its community. The *Southcenter Plan* is intended to build upon and extend these assets while improving the character, connectivity and range of experiences offered in Southcenter for the community and the region.