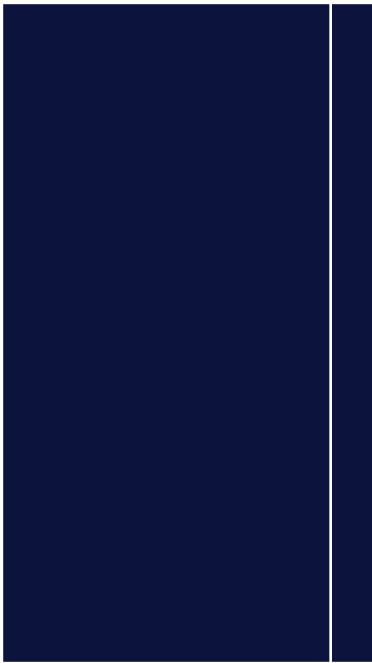
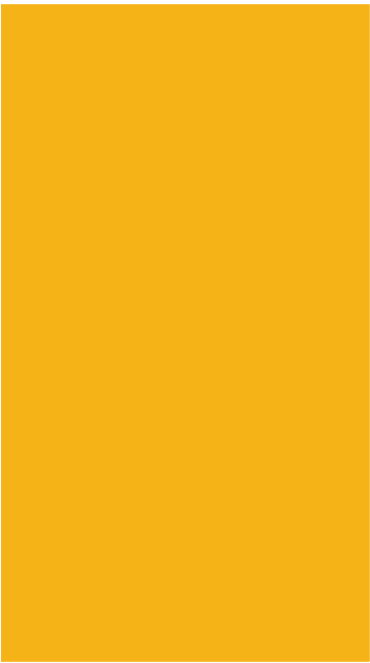
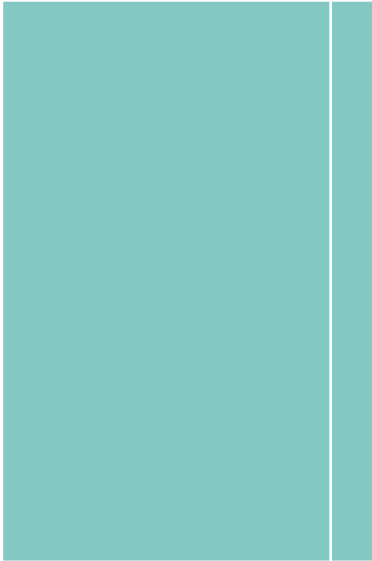


The Community of South Hill
Existing Conditions Report

March 18th, 2026



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Home to nearly 70,000 residents, South Hill is an unincorporated, census-designated place (CDP) located in central Pierce County, WA (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.d). This suburban community has the highest population of any CDP in the state. As the community considers whether incorporation is the right path forward, this Initial Conditions Report offers a foundation for discussion about South Hill as a distinct urban area and offers recommendations for future community outreach to gain a better understanding of the desires of South Hill residents. Research gathered for this report is presented in five sections: People, Place, Public Services, Community Engagement, and Incorporation.

The ‘People’ section examines who lives and works in South Hill and key social organizations, both online and in-person, that form the fabric of the community. Demographic and past population growth rates show how South Hill is continuing to expand, with a large youth population and many families living in the area. South Hill has an educated workforce and is not dominated by any industry. This research highlights opportunities for further workforce development in the healthcare and aviation industry with other key findings showing that despite a lack of political unity, South Hill finds a strong community in their many recreational leagues and volunteer clubs. This preliminary research into the people of South Hill will help identify communities to engage with in future outreach.

The ‘Place’ section provides an overview of the current conditions of the natural and built environment in South Hill. This section discusses environmental assets and risks, the area’s urban form, and community assets such as parks, trails, and historic sites. Understanding its physical form clarifies how incorporation could influence future development, public space investment, and long-term planning. South Hill’s community assets, growing housing market, and existing zoning provisions are strengths within the physical environment. However, the community faces equity in access to assets, and high demand for

housing coupled with rapid population growth could create a challenge for capacity. Despite these challenges, South Hill has opportunities to address these obstacles to facilitate community connections. Existing natural and built assets provide a foundation for community-building. Furthermore, findings suggest that with incorporation, the community of South Hill could gain more autonomy over local development decisions.

The ‘Public Services’ section explores South Hill’s urban services, such as transportation, utilities, schools, public safety, and emergency infrastructure. Each of these topics consider what is currently provided within South Hill, who is currently providing these services, and how these services could change if the community undergoes incorporation. This section found that South Hill has a strong foundation of existing utilities. Several services such as water, transportation (both public transit and roadway facilities), solid waste, education, and public safety are strained by population growth. In a scenario where South Hill remains unincorporated, there are long term concerns of maintaining levels of service due to identified budget constraints in Pierce County. While scenario modeling for incorporation is preliminary, this section found incorporation offered opportunities in both utilities and public transit to improve level of service through the consolidation of providership and possible tax levies.

The ‘Incorporation’ section presents an overview of the current governance structure of South Hill and how it could change after incorporating. This section looks at the legal process that South Hill would follow to become a city, South Hill’s first attempt at pursuing incorporation, and tax and financial considerations based on learnings from recently incorporated cities in Washington State. One key finding shows that if South Hill were to incorporate, it would become the second-largest city in Pierce County and among the top 20 most populous cities in Washington. One major benefit that communities gain from incorporation is the reinvestment of all local tax revenues towards city projects rather than the distribution of

funds across the county. Additionally, critical planning decisions that would affect South Hill's growing population, such as zoning, transportation, and utilities, would be made by South Hill elected officials, city employees, and the community rather than the County. A key factor of successful incorporation efforts for other recently incorporated cities was the organization of community support. After incorporation, cities often leaned on nearby communities and the county for continued administrative support of urban services as the newly-formed city gradually took over those services. Equally critical to a successful first few years was a strong understanding of opportunities available to cities like tax revenue, grants, and bonds to ensure financial solvency.

Finally, the 'Community Engagement' section proposes best practices and methods for an effective and equitable public engagement process in South Hill. This section draws on past research by Berk Consulting, academic literature, and case studies to inform future engagement efforts in South Hill. The first recommendation is focused on the process of building partnerships. This was an effective method for other incorporated

cities and provided a means to quickly become connected to the community and ensure the input of those with specialized knowledge. The second recommendation is to thoughtfully plan public meetings to make them appealing and accessible for a diverse population in order to engage a wider audience on the nuances of incorporation. The final recommendation is focused on youth engagement, a high priority group that makes up over one quarter of South Hill's population. Engaging youth requires a process of hearing and respecting experiences, education about civic processes, and support and encouragement of future visioning. Following these proposed best practices and engagement methods would allow South Hill residents to identify their own shared values and develop a united plan for what the next steps are for their community.

This report serves as a foundation for future community outreach and dialogue as residents weigh the benefits and responsibilities associated with incorporation and the long-term vision they have for their community.



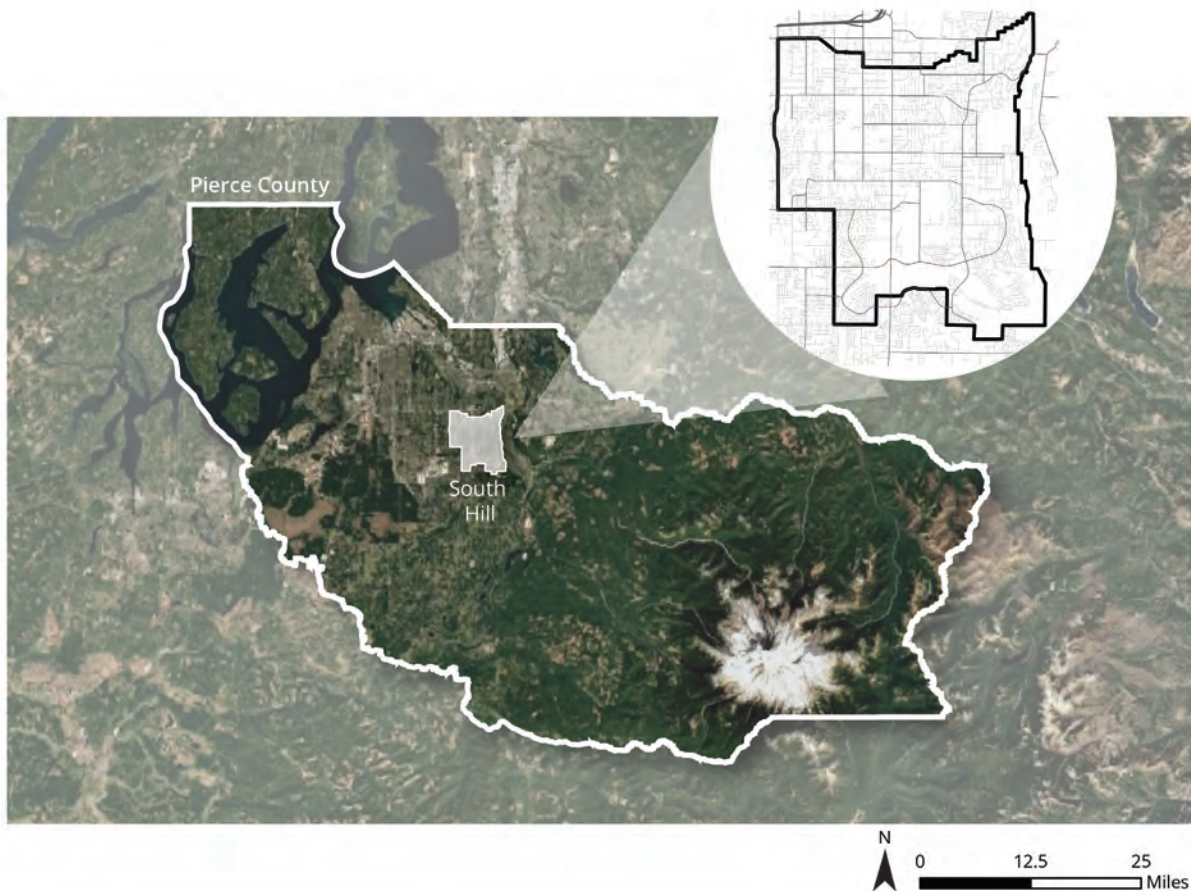
PROJECT INTRODUCTION

Located southeast of Tacoma and directly south of Puyallup, South Hill is a census-designated place (CDP) in central Pierce County in Washington. As the largest unincorporated urban area in the state, South Hill would be the second-largest city in Pierce County and among the largest 20 cities in Washington by population if the area were to be incorporated.

Pierce County Planning & Public Works has partnered with the Livable City Year program and the University of Washington (UW) Master of Urban Planning (MUP) students to create

a Pre-incorporation Community Plan for the community of South Hill. Having already kicked off initial conversations with some local leaders and compiled a community atlas for South Hill, planners at Pierce County Planning & Public Works are preparing to engage with more South Hill residents to understand their desires for their community and to discuss incorporation as a possible future for South Hill.

SOUTH HILL



SOUTH HILL HISTORY & BOUNDARIES

Prior to occupation by white settlers, the land now known as South Hill was inhabited by the Puyallup, Nisqually, Steilacoom, and Muckleshoot Tribes. These tribes were displaced from their lands in the Treaty of Medicine Creek in 1854 and the Treaty of Point Elliott in 1855 (Governor's Office of Indian Affairs, n.d.). These communities retain treaty rights and are acknowledged as the original stewards of these lands.

Indigenous communities established trade routes along the Cowlitz Trail (Pierce County, 2015). With the encroachment of American settlers into the area in the mid-19th century, these trails began to be used as a connection point between rural settlements and the Puget Sound region.

Between the mid-19th century and the mid-20th century, logging and agricultural products were early drivers of economic growth. Meridian Avenue East, formerly known as Ball-Wood Road, was established in the 1890s to provide local farmers a route to bring their goods to markets (Vest, n.d.a). While people continued to move to South Hill over the first decades of the 20th century, the rural identity of the community remained prominent.

The rural identity of South Hill shifted with the construction of State Route 512. This made the area a prime location for suburban development. The suburban character of South Hill is now at odds with current population growth, outpacing the capacity of suburban services and infrastructure. South Hill continues to be a desirable place to live for both newcomers and long-time residents, and a discussion of whether to become a city will be a critical question as residents consider the future of their community.

The current boundaries of South Hill are defined by a variety of geographical features, adjacent city boundaries, and the less clearly-defined boundaries of adjacent census-designated places (CDP). If South Hill were to incorporate, its boundaries would be defined more clearly. As stated in the 2022 South Hill Community Plan, residents' input can help formalize these

boundaries (Pierce County, 2023, pg J-38).

South Hill is bordered to the north by Puyallup. There is some land between the two areas that is part of Puyallup's urban growth boundary. South Hill's eastern boundary abuts McMillin, a CDP. The boundary is defined by a steep slope that separates the two communities. South Hill's western boundary abuts Summit View, another CDP. This boundary is designated as Woodland Avenue. The elevation changes along the road form a natural boundary. South Hill's southern boundary abuts Graham, another CDP. The 2006 community plan for Graham and the 2023 community plan for South Hill align on this boundary.

INTRODUCTION

To build an understanding of South Hill residents, workers, and frequenters, this chapter focuses on general demographics such as age, race, and population, as well as other factors such as economy, politics, culture, and health. Visualizations such as maps, charts, and diagrams are provided alongside text to facilitate understanding.

To accurately capture the people of South Hill, data were pulled from a variety of sources, including the American Community Survey, Pierce County Open GIS, Walk Score, and the Climate Impacts Group. While most data were available at the census tract level, some data were available only at the county level. Data pulled from the American Community Survey is provided at the census tract level. Since South Hill's boundaries divide some census tracts, American Community Survey-derived statistics are an approximation.

GENERAL DEMOGRAPHICS

Population

South Hill, and Pierce County in general, has a growing population. In 2010, South Hill census-designated place (CDP) had an estimated population of 52,431 people (Puget Sound Regional Council, 2011.b), and in 2020, South Hill had a population of 64,708 people (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.d). In 2010, Pierce County had an estimated population of 795,225 people. (Puget Sound Regional Council, 2011.a), and in 2020, Pierce County had a population of 921,130 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2025). South Hill grew by 23.4% from 2010 to 2020. In comparison, Pierce County grew by 15.8%. During the decade studied, South Hill has grown at nearly 1.5 times the rate that

Pierce County's population grew.

South Hill's large and growing population size is also evident when compared to Tacoma and Lakewood. In 2020, Tacoma had a population of 219,756 people, and Lakewood had a population of 63,619 people (World Population Review, 2026). As the largest unincorporated urban area in Washington, if South Hill were to be incorporated, South Hill would be the second-largest city by population in Pierce County.

Figure 1.1A in Appendix A shows the population density of South Hill by census tract. The most populous areas are in the northwest section and the least populous are in the southwest section. A greater portion of adults over 65 live in the northern part of South Hill, while a greater portion of children live in the southern part. When planning for community engagement, these areas with greater proportions of older folks and children may need more accessible forms of communication, flexible hours, and support services.

Gender, Age, and Household Size

The data in this section is pulled from the 2020 - 2024 American Community Survey. Regarding gender, South Hill has an even gender ratio of men and women similar to Pierce County. In 2024, Pierce County had a gender ratio of approximately 49.9% men to 50.1% women, whereas South Hill had a gender ratio of approximately 50.0% men to 50.0% women (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.a). Regarding age, 27.8% of people in South Hill were under 18 years old, 11.1% of people were over 65 years old, and the rest of the population (61.1%) were between the ages of 18 and 65 (see Figure 1.1). By comparison, around 23.4% of the population in Pierce County were under 18 years old. Understanding these percentages of gender and age can help better tailor community engagement strategies.

Pierce County had an average household size of 2.66 people, and South Hill had an average household size of 3.05 people (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.a). When planning community outreach events, there should be a special consideration for families with children since South Hill has a relatively higher average household size than the rest of the county.

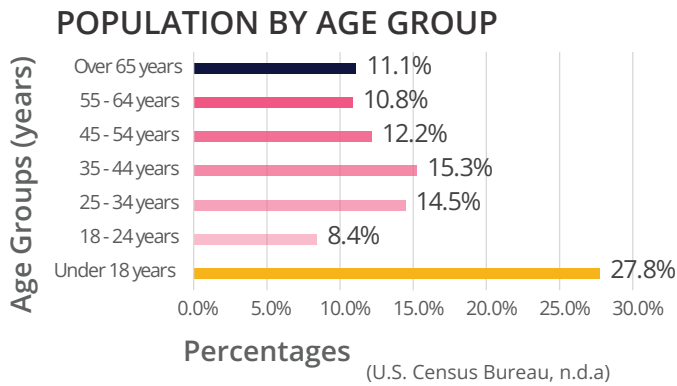


Figure 1.1: Population by Age Group

Race and Language

While South Hill represents a variety of racial demographics (see Figure 1.2), the majority of the population is White at 61.2%. The next largest demographics are Two or More Races at 18.5% and Hispanic or Latino at 11.3%. The two smallest demographics in South Hill are Indigenous and Alaska Native at 0.8% of the population, and Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander at 1.6% (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.d). South Hill’s White population is 10-14% lower than the county and state, and its Two or More Races population is 10-13% greater than the county and state. Outside of this difference, South Hill’s racial demographics are mostly parallel to those of the county. They differ from the state’s percentages in terms of a larger Black and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander population percentage and lower Asian and Hispanic/Latino population percentage (U.S. Census Bureau, 2025; U.S. Census Bureau, 2024.b).

More than one-fifth (22.3%) of South Hill residents over the age of five spoke a language other than English at home in 2023 (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.f). By comparison, only 15.7% of Pierce County

Race Percentage Demographics of South Hill Compared to Pierce County and Washington State

x	South Hill	Pierce County	Washington
White	61.2%	71.1%	75.4%
Black	7.8%	8.5%	4.8%
Indigenous/ Alaska Native	0.8%	1.9%	2.1%
Asian	7.5%	8.1%	11.5%
Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	1.6%	2.1%	0.9%
Two or More	18.5%	8.3%	5.4%
Hispanic/ Latino	11.3%	13.5%	15.0%

(U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.d) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2025) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024.b)

Figure 1.2: Diagram of Racial Percentage Demographics of South Hill Compared to Pierce County and Washington State

residents spoke a language other than English at home (Pierce County Human Services, 2025). After English, the next most spoken languages in South Hill CDP were Spanish with 6.0% of residents speaking the language, other Asian and Pacific Island languages at 1.6%, and other Indo-European languages at 1.6% (BERK, 2025). With this diversity in languages spoken, language accessibility must be considered when engaging with South Hill residents.

Education

Among adults aged 25 and older, South Hill has education levels similar to those of Pierce County. In 2024, 92.5% of Pierce County adults had a high school diploma, and 30.4% had a bachelor’s degree (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.c). In South Hill CDP, 93.5% of adults have a high school diploma or equivalent, and 32.9% have a bachelor’s degree (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.d). Given that Congress

has declared that the national high school graduation rate should increase to at least 90 percent as part of the National Education Goals (20 USC 5812: National Education Goals, 2024), South Hill has an educated population.

ECONOMY

Employment

As shown in Figure 1.3, as of 2024, there were 52,273 (70.1%) people of working age in South Hill, and 15,640 (29.9%) were not in the workforce (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.e). This rate is lower than that of Tacoma at 34.3% and Pierce County as a whole at 33.7%. The unemployment rate in South Hill is 3.4%, which is similar to the unemployment rates found in Tacoma and Pierce County, which are 3.5% and 3.0%, respectively.

Of the working-age residents living in South Hill, only 23.8% actually work there (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.b) meaning that the remaining 76.2% of working-age residents leave South Hill CDP to go to their place of employment, usually Seattle, Tacoma, and Puyallup. (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.l) This is lower than Tacoma's "worked in place of residence" rate of 50.3% (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.h) and Pierce County's rate of 28.9%. (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.i). It is also slightly lower than the rates of similarly sized cities like Marysville at 30.9% (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.j) and Shoreline at 29.7% (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.k).

Industry

As seen in Figure 1.4, education, healthcare, and social assistance jobs make up the largest portion of South Hill's workforce with 24.2% of jobs. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 2,104 people (6.1%) work as healthcare practitioners and technicians and in healthcare and support occupations. There are 1,293 people (3.8%) working in education instruction and library occupations. Finally, 5,177 people (15.0%) work in social service jobs such as healthcare support, firefighting, law

Employment Statistics in South Hill, WA 2024

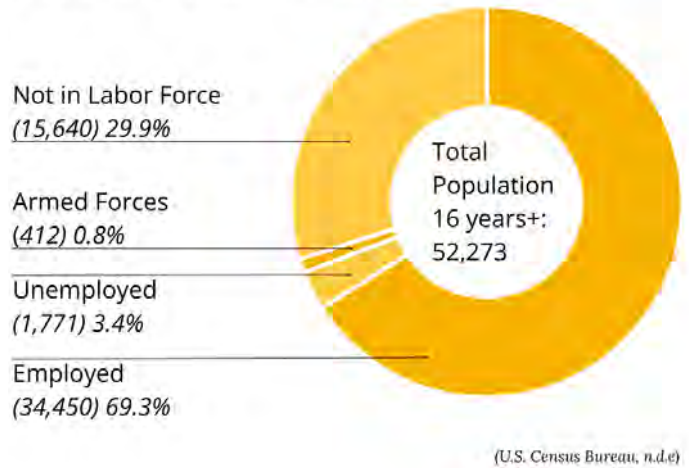


Figure 1.3: Employment Statistics in South Hill, WA 2024

enforcement, food preparation, buildings and ground cleaning, and personal care and assistance (U.S. Census Bureau, 2026). It is important to note that "industry data describe[s] the kind of business conducted by a person's employing organization" (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024.a) and is not necessarily reflective of the employment available in South Hill.

This is notable because, as mentioned prior, nearly three-quarters of workers do not work within South Hill CDP. With just one neighborhood emergency room in South Hill and 6.1% of the working-age population working in healthcare, a gap is highlighted in South Hill's in-area employment opportunities. Expanding beyond the mostly elder care and the urgent care facilities that exist in South Hill could capture this workforce's expertise within South Hill.

Another industry that has potential to grow in South Hill is the aerospace and manufacturing industry. With an existing airfield and aviation program at Clover Park Technical College (see Figure 3.4), South Hill could tap into the aerospace manufacturing or science industry that is mostly located around Kent, WA. (Kent Valley Economic Development, 2026) This utilization of the airport could support potential tourism due to its proximity to Mt. Rainier and hobby pilot groups like that of Bremerton's Avian Flight Center (Avian

Flight Center, 2019) or Everett’s Puget Sound Flyers (Puget Sound Flyers, 2018).

Median Household Income

In 2024, the median household income of South Hill CDP was an estimated \$113,130 per year (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.d). In comparison, the median income in Pierce County was an estimated \$99,564 per year (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.c). Figure 1.2A in Appendix A shows how the median household income varies between each census tract in South Hill, with the highest household median incomes in the southeast region of the area, near gated communities, and the lowest household median incomes in the northern half of South Hill near Meridian Avenue East. Although South Hill has a higher median income than Pierce County, differing household incomes and their corresponding needs and resources must be considered when engaging with the community.

POLITICS

The political landscape in South Hill is divided between both jurisdictional boundaries and attitudes. The spatial relationship between South Hill residents and the bodies of government they depend on puts them in a very weak position to influence policy. Its representation at the federal and state levels is diluted by larger population centers elsewhere in the districts which are not divided the way South Hill is.

At the county level, South Hill is divided between three different county council districts, with larger intact population centers elsewhere in the district that could preoccupy the council member’s political will (see Figure 1.5). The dilution of county council representation is outsized; at higher levels of government, the residents still represent a large constituency, but at the county level their representation is effectively gerrymandered. The lack of municipal government in South Hill means that Pierce County is the primary service provider and the most localized form of government available to the citizens.

Political Districts

Pierce County is divided into two federal congressional districts. The unincorporated area of South Hill lies in Districts 8 and 10, with the majority of people and land located in District 10. District 10 is represented by Congresswoman Marilyn Strickland (Democrat), and District 8 by Kim Schrier (Democrat). As South Hill is currently split between congressional districts, the attention of congressional delegates may again be drawn away from South Hill. The only district of government that entirely encompasses South Hill is the 25th state legislative district, whose delegation consists of Representatives Michael Keaton and Cyndy Jacobson, and Senator Chris Gildon. Further discussion with electeds regarding their positions on incorporation will be necessary during our community engagement phase.

Industry Employment Percentages of South Hill, WA 2024

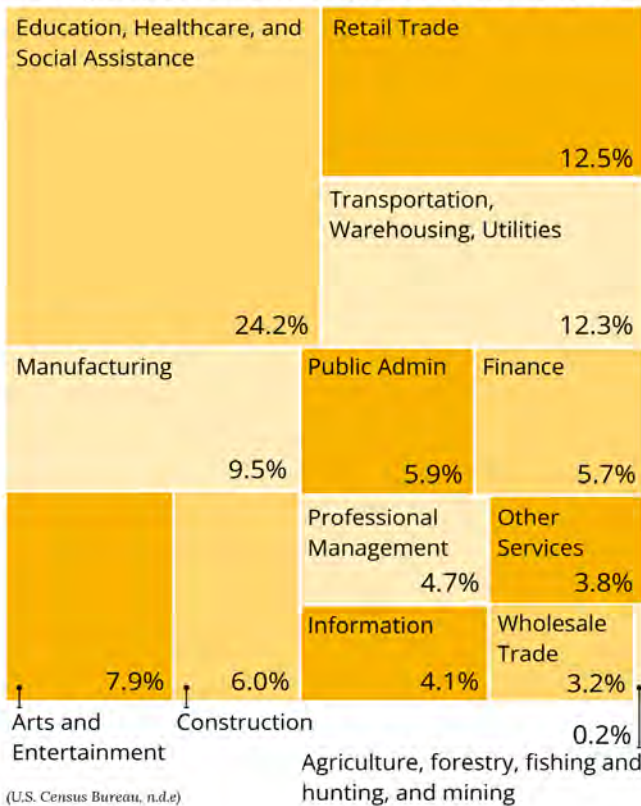


Figure 1.4: Industry Employment Percentages of South Hill, WA 2024

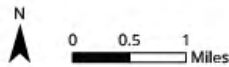
Political Trends

South Hill comprises 74 precincts of the 732 total electoral precincts in Pierce County. In the 2024 general election, this constituency voted for Kamala Harris by a margin of 600 votes out of 39,890 cast (Pierce County Auditor, 2024). Meanwhile, Harris carried the rest of Pierce County by 10.7% (Pierce County Auditor, 2024). Voter turnout increased by 683 people further down the ballot, showing that one in every hundred voters abstained from a socially tense election (Pierce County Auditor, 2024). While still leaning toward the Democratic party, South Hill is less Democratic-leaning than the county in general.

Down the ticket, South Hill voted by a margin of 3,145 for Dave Reichert in the gubernatorial contest. While Kamala Harris outperformed Bob Ferguson by 1,531 votes, Dave Reichert

outperformed Donald Trump by 2,214 votes (Pierce County Auditor, 2024). The increased voter turnout for Dave Reichert over Donald Trump, both Republicans, suggests that many in South Hill are voting based on their positions on social issues and the provision of public services. Because the provision of public services is pertinent to the process of incorporation, this is a trend worth exploring through further public engagement. The narrow margins by which these elections were decided show a tension in South Hill at the levels of government available to them. However, given that South Hill precincts voted for a county government that supports incorporation, and state legislators who do not, their electoral preferences are not a good indication of support for incorporation. Rather, it suggests that a government body that could tailor its policies to South Hill would better represent the population's needs than its existing bodies of government currently do.

County Council Districts



Legend

- Dist. 1 - Dave Morell (Republican)
- Dist. 2 - Paul Herrera (Republican)
- Dist. 3 - Amy Cruver (Republican)

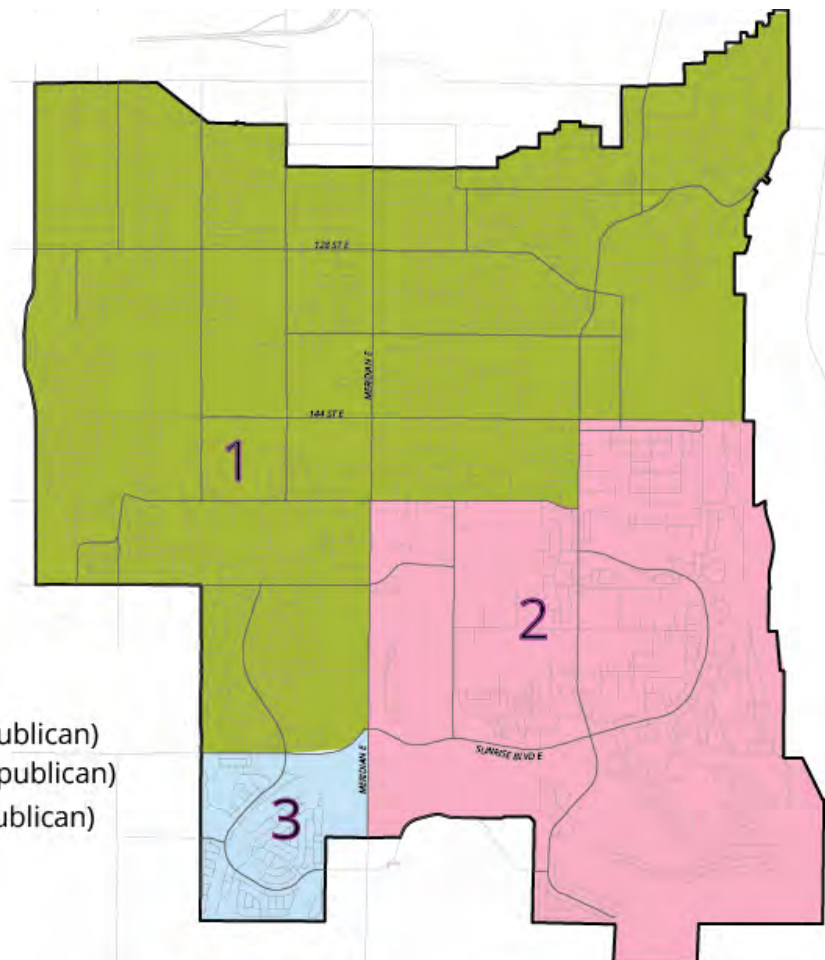


Figure 1.5: County Council Districts Map

CULTURE

Sports

High school, youth club, and adult recreational sports leagues in South Hill are among the strongest threads of community. Puyallup Parks & Recreation hosts adult softball and basketball leagues in the Heritage Recreation Center on Meridian Avenue East. Softball games are frequent from May to July, and basketball games are played more often and year-round. Athletics at Rogers High School and Emerald Ridge High School are well furnished, with football, basketball, golf, track, gymnastics, and wrestling available to students. A pool at Rogers High hosts aquatic sports for students at both high schools. Because of their proximity to one another and shared facilities, there is little animosity between Rogers High (The Rams) and Emerald Ridge (The Jaguars). In one interview, alumni of these high school sports programs said that post-event social activities usually took place outside of South Hill or within the housing developments (Personal Communication, Feb. 22, 2026).

Community Organizations

The Puyallup South Hill Rotary Club is the largest community or fraternal organization exclusive to South Hill. It is distinct from the Puyallup Rotary Club in Puyallup. This club is a prominent pillar of the community, bringing people together through regular meetings and organizing events such as cornhole tournaments and cleanups at Meridian Habitat Park & Community Center. The club's president, Michael Mayor, may be an important collaborator because of his administrative involvement in such a communal space.

The Puyallup South Hill Lions Club is another community organization that focuses on charitable outreach for residents of South Hill with disabilities or those fighting hunger. Other community organizations are specific to the area's large housing developments, for instance the Uplands development, which uses its clubhouse and recreational facilities for community gatherings and events (see Figure 2.8).

Digital Community

The online footprint of South Hill's population is found in the Reddit community r/PuyallupWA (reddit.com/r/puyallupWA) and a host of rival Facebook groups, the largest of which is "Being Neighborly: South Hill" with 22,000 members (Being Neighborly: South Hill, n.d.). The subreddit is the most accessible, as no admittance is needed, and is often used by people moving to the area or asking questions. Meanwhile, the Facebook group is more community-oriented, offering business reviews or recommendations, notice of community events, wild animal sightings, etc. Posts in the Facebook group are less general and public, for example, "I got this person's mail, does anyone know her?" (Being Neighborly: South Hill, n.d.), showing a source of community support in the digital space.

HEALTH

Between Pierce County and South Hill, there are only minor differences in health insurance coverage and disability rates. 94.0% of individuals in Pierce County have health insurance coverage, compared to 94.8% of individuals in South Hill (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.a). Regarding disability rates, 10.2% of individuals under 65 years old in Pierce County had a disability in 2024 (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.c). Only 8.4% of the population in South Hill had a disability (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.d). Although rates of health insurance coverage are high and disability rates are relatively low in South Hill, there is a percentage of the population with disability and/or without health insurance that needs to be considered when discussing community needs.

FURTHER DISCUSSION

A growing, younger population creates a strong foundation for community establishment and further growth; an educated, working-age population residing in South Hill provides opportunity for economic and amenity expansion; and multiple existing resources like an airport and proximity to Mt. Rainier opens doors to expanding industries like the healthcare, aerospace, and tourism industries. As seen in the SWOT Analysis of Table 1.1, the community of South Hill is ripe for even more opportunity than already exists. South Hill is also beloved for its ability to provide a space for young couples to start families or for older folks to retire or get away from denser, urban areas. Despite a fondness of South Hill, a majority of South Hill's workforce leaves their community, and politically, the community is fragmented across jurisdictions, leaving them prioritized by none. All of these factors constitute the foundations of a socially and economically strong community that, if incorporated, would be drawn even closer together around their unique needs and interests.

Table 1.1: SWOT Analysis

INTERNAL FACTORS	<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growing, younger population • Educated working age population • Existing small community groups 	<p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commuter workforce • Political representation is split between multiple districts
EXTERNAL FACTORS	<p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional economic activity, upzoning • Greater social and civic connectivity • Increase tourism opportunities 	<p>Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Industry centers are outside of the area • Influence of neighboring municipalities

INTRODUCTION

The 'Place' section is an overview of the natural and built environmental conditions in South Hill. This inventory of physical conditions aims to answer the question: What is South Hill? Research and analyses are conducted at local and regional scales. A variety of focuses and methods are employed to perform an overview and analysis of the existing environmental conditions. This approach aims to provide a holistic account of what South Hill looks and feels like as a distinct urban area, as well as an understanding of the potential built and natural environmental assets and threats posed to the area. Through a comprehensive inventory, this section provides the necessary background to understand the past, present, and potential future of South Hill.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS

Hydrology

South Hill's hydrologic conditions provide unique opportunities and challenges for its communities. Roughly 6% of land within South Hill is considered wetlands, or areas of land surrounding water that retain saturation. These critical areas act as entry points to many of Pierce County's waterways. Wash. Rev. Code § 90.48 Water Pollution Control designates wetlands as areas of protection due to their critical role in protecting waterways, mandating that municipalities, or the governing bodies of such areas, maintain the water to a certain established quality as a public right. South Hill is generating urban-level stormwater runoff using county-level infrastructure, making it at risk for future noncompliance when factoring in population growth (See Demographics in Section 1: People for population growth rates).

Additionally, there are 100-year floodplain designations within South Hill, particularly near these wetland areas (see Figure 2.1B in Appendix B). This poses flooding risks, as each year there is a 1% risk of flooding within these areas. Surrounding municipalities are under further threat of catastrophic flooding due to existing locations within the Puyallup Valley, which can pose the risk of large populations evacuating to South Hill in times of extreme flooding. Current evacuation plans for such events are delegated to the most local governing body, with many other eastern Pierce County municipalities converging under one coalition, excluding South Hill due to its unincorporated status. This leaves South Hill at risk for local flooding catastrophes as these services are supported at the county level (See Emergency Infrastructure in Section 3: Public Services for more information).

Geology

South Hill is at risk for soil failure threats due to flooding risks and current geologic conditions such as times of extreme rainfall, seismic events, or unstable slopes (USGS, 2008). Although the majority of the soil types within South Hill lend themselves to stable development, like gravelly and sandy loams, the extreme slopes of certain areas, especially around wetlands, lead to risks of erosion and eventual landslides (USGS, 2008). 23% of buildings in South Hill are located within these landslide risk zones.

Roughly 8% of soil types within South Hill are structurally prone to soil failure due to higher silt contents (see Table 2.1B in Appendix B), though all soils at steep grades are susceptible to failure and landslides (See Figure 2.2B in Appendix B). This can cause destruction of property and loss of life. Emergency management plans and services are held at the county level due to South Hill's

unincorporated status, leading to risks of delayed response times (See Emergency Infrastructure in Section 3: Public Services for more information). Incorporation could allow for more local emergency management plans and community-contextual developments that ensure these impacts are felt less (See Section 2: Place, Land Use for more information).

Tree Cover

The 2023 South Hill Community Plan states that maintaining tree canopy for South Hill is an integral goal. Future residential growth and developments must happen with a lens of visual and auditory screening, especially around the airport and commercial areas in relation to residential uses, to help with incompatibilities between land uses and shield from noise pollution. (Pierce County, 2023). Though this goal is highlighted as an important factor for the community, newer developments in the southeastern portion of South Hill have removed significant tree cover from the area without adequate replacement (See Figure 2.3B in Appendix B). The overall tree canopy has decreased in South Hill by 4% from 2020 to 2024, exceeding national averages of around <1% annually (Greenfield & Nowak, 2018)

Incorporation could provide the local legal framework to require tree cover quotas within developments at the parcel level, including requirements for tree type, amount, and density. Currently, this is managed at the county level, which does not provide the specificity and autonomy needed to accurately lead local land use and zoning discussions.

THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Zoning

Zoning in South Hill is determined by Pierce County and outlined in the County Code (Title 18A, 1981 & Rev. 2025). It was most recently updated in

the 2023 Pierce County Comprehensive Plan and the accompanying South Hill Community Plan. There are 16 zone categories in the South Hill area, seven of which are residential zones (see Figure 2.4B in Appendix B). All urban growth areas and high-capacity transit areas are determined by the Regional Growth Plan (Pierce County, 2025.f). See Table 2.2B in Appendix B for a complete list of zone classifications. High-density zoned areas are primarily concentrated along Meridian



Figure 2.1: Photo of Longston Towne Center in South Hill.

Avenue East. These areas allow a mix of multi-family residential, local retail, office, and civic uses. High-density zones include Towne Centers, Urban Corridors, and Neighborhood Corridors, where residential density is a minimum of 24 units per acre (du/ac). Within Towne Centers, there is a possibility of increasing allowable density to 80 units per acre upon availability of Bus Rapid Transit in the area, making it the highest density zone in South Hill (see Figure 2.5B in Appendix B). These areas also have the highest maximum building height at 65 feet, which equates to a five- or six-story building. By contrast, Moderate Density Single Family and Middle Housing zones have a minimum residential density of eight du/ac, High Density Residential zones have a minimum density of 10 du/ac, and Suburban Residential zones have a minimum density of four du/ac.

There is a current lack of multi-family mixed use development across all high-density zoned areas. Although they are zoned for higher density, the buildings in the Towne Centers and other high-

density zone areas are considered low-density, with primarily stand-alone, one-or two-story buildings (see Figure 2.1). These areas represent an opportunity to accommodate population growth and leverage current connections to commercial centers in future development, concurrent with Bus Rapid Transit development. (See Section 3: Public Services for more information on potential Bus Rapid Transit development.)

Comparing zoning and land use reveals this current use pattern. Over 90.0% of the total structures currently in South Hill are in residential zones (see Table 2.3B in Appendix B). Additionally, Pierce County Code does not use Floor Area Ratio (FAR) as a metric in density requirements. FAR-based codes expand the type and density of building allowances within a parcel for development, incentivising taller designs especially along transit corridors. Zoning in Towne Centers and other high-density areas present an opportunity to shift these spatial use patterns, and incorporation could allow South Hill to change their code to allow for even greater density and diverse development, such as including FAR requirements.

New Zoning Legislation

Two pieces of legislation from the Washington state legislature relating to middle housing will need to be considered in relation to South Hill's zoning and residential density: HB 1337 and HB 1110. HB 1337 was passed in 2025 and requires local governments that plan under the GMA to allow two accessory dwelling units (ADUs) in all single-family zoned areas. Areas must not mandate ADUs to be less than 1,000 square feet and must allow heights of at least 24 feet (Butler, 2023). This bill applies to all cities and counties within Urban Growth Areas, including unincorporated areas. South Hill is impacted by this bill and is required to comply through changes in the Pierce County code, which were passed in December 2025 and are reflected in Chapter 18A.37, Section 120 (Title 18A, 1981 & Rev. 2025).

The second bill, HB 1110, was passed in 2023 and requires cities to allow minimum densities that

accommodate middle housing. Middle housing refers to housing types with residential densities that fall between single-family homes and multi-family mid-rise developments. This bill applies to cities that are within or contiguous with Urban Growth Areas, with different required minimum densities based on population, proximity to major transit stops, and affordable housing inclusion (Puget Sound Regional Council, 2023). South Hill is not currently impacted by this bill as it does not apply to unincorporated areas. However, if South Hill were to incorporate, future zoning would be required to comply with HB 1110 as a "Tier Two" city. Tier Two cities have a population greater than 25,000 and less than 75,000, which pertains to South Hill given its 2020 Census estimate of 64,708 people (See Section 1: People Demographics).

Compliance with HB 1110 as a Tier Two city would require a minimum of two dwelling units per acre in predominantly residential zones. ADUs can count toward this requirement. It also requires a minimum density of four dwelling units per acre in residential areas within a quarter-mile radius of major transit stops, and a minimum of four dwelling units per acre if at least one unit is affordable. Population growth after incorporation is also a factor. If South Hill's population continues to grow, the area will most likely eventually reach a population of more than 75,000 people, making it subject to Tier One density requirements.

Many of South Hill's residential zoning allowances under the Pierce County code already allow for Tier Two levels of density. However, middle housing types are absent in many of these residential zones, despite higher density allowances. If South Hill incorporated, these zones would be officially required to comply with middle housing allowances. As a city, South Hill could have more influence on dense development through incentives for infill and middle housing development. Codifying middle housing allowances by officially being subject to HB 1110 could enable more middle housing development and a greater variety of residential housing densities within South Hill.

Land Use

In 2003, Pierce County wrote a community plan for South Hill within its Comprehensive Plan mandated by Washington state's Growth Management Act (GMA). This act requires urban areas to factor in projected population growth in comprehensive plans by providing directed attention and regulation to certain aspects of the urban environment. This includes the location and intensity of land uses within urban areas to inform policy about future developments (Pierce County, 2023). Within the 2020 revised Land Use section, land uses were designated to inform future development decisions to facilitate anticipated growth. For land use map and total structures by land use type, see Figure 2.6B and Table 2.3B in Appendix B.

Within South Hill, 61.6% of buildings exist within designated residential uses. 61.5% of these buildings are single-family housing. This low-density residential usage provides a suburban character that could attract growing families.

Master Planned Communities accommodate growth by offering more flexible and compact, high-density developments such as mid-rise apartment complexes and condominiums, primarily concentrated in the newer southeastern communities, with notable communities such as the Sunrise Master Planned Community (see Figure



Figure 2.2: Photo of High-Density Housing in South Hill

2.2). This land use designation allows for flexibility of development type with a focus on transit, recreation, and community development through planned unit developments, which allows for faster turnaround of developments at higher densities than traditional residential areas. This aids in facilitating the growth of South Hill by providing new housing opportunities at lower barriers of entry. One notable issue is the lack of public transportation infrastructure within these areas, which fails to meet the intended nature of its designation to promote active transit. If South Hill were to incorporate, it could study these areas as possible expansions to future transit service. (see Section 3: Public Services Transportation).

The Employment Center land use designation provides an area for concentrated economic growth within South Hill by centralizing industry and manufacturing around the Thun Airfield corridor. One drawback of this plan is its proximity to high-density residential and master planned communities, which can lead to land use compatibility issues such as pollution. The South Hill Community Plan attempts to address these issues, but more local knowledge could be consulted in order to mitigate these effects.

Incorporation could allow South Hill to transform land use into a contextual local policy driver and planning tool, putting the power of future land use decisions and growth management into local hands. This can help shape South Hill's future land use into a more representative plan of community growth.

Housing Market

There are three overarching trends regarding these metrics in the South Hill housing market: South Hill's housing market has grown in tandem with population growth, although prices have risen sharply in recent years. Demographics have also shifted in the market. Finally, most of the development has taken the form of single-family homes. These trends all will run into challenges with requirements from the Growth Management Act.

(1) Price Increases despite Growth: Over the five-year period from 2019 to 2024, South Hill has seen a 13.1% increase in population. That growth has been met by 3,011 new housing units, a 14.5% increase. Both of these growth factors outpace every geographic area included in the comparative analysis except Graham, located south of South Hill. However, this growth is still insufficient; occupied housing units have increased by 17.6%, and the vacancy rate has dropped from 4.8% to 2.2% (see Table 2.4B in Appendix B). Typically, a vacancy rate of 5% is considered an indicator of a healthy market, with lower rates indicating low availability and sellers having a relative advantage. In South Hill, it means housing stock is being filled more quickly than it is being built. This unmet demand has come at the same time as the median property value surging 79.4%, from \$303,100 to \$543,600. The percentage growth in both vacancy rate and property value again outpaces corresponding values for the United States and Pierce County (See Table 2.5B in Appendix B). This comes amidst trends of a larger “housing crisis” in Pierce County (Borst, 2023).

(2) Demographic Shifts: Demographic shifts are reflected in the housing market. Most notable is that persons per housing unit (PPHU) has decreased by 3.8% from 2019–2024, a larger decrease than any other geographic area considered (see Table 2.6B in Appendix B). Other lenses of analysis highlight the young families and couples moving to South Hill (See Section 1: People Demographics). As these smaller family units move into the community, PPHU declines from South Hill’s previous highs. However, South Hill still has a slightly higher PPHU compared to nearby cities, at 2.92 compared to 2.73 (see Table 2.5B in Appendix B).

(3) Typology: Growth in South Hill continues to be overrepresented by single-family housing units. For this analysis, we considered all housing units located within structures containing solely one Housing unit to be part of single-family homes. 78.1% of housing units in South Hill are in these structures. Of the 3,011 new Housing Units built from 2019–2024, 2,047 were in these structures, about 68.0% of new construction. This proportion

is higher than Puyallup (6.80%), Tacoma (45.6%), Parkland (37.2%), and Lakewood (5.50%), but slightly lower than Pierce County (73.5%). While the ratio of single-family construction is higher in Graham and Bonney Lake, South Hill has outpaced those areas in number. For comparison, those values are South Hill, having built 2,047 single-family homes, while Graham constructed 1,993 and Bonney Lake 750.

These housing market trends run into challenges with projected population growth under the Growth Management Act. Unincorporated Pierce County has a housing unit growth target of 32,048 units from 2020–2044. 17,833 of these units are expected in High-Capacity Transit (HCT) areas, including South Hill. The Pierce County land use strategy assumes up to 9,255 housing units would be built in South Hill specifically. This is the largest allocation for housing of any HCT Community in the county, and accounts for about 29% of all housing within the county through 2044 (BERK, 2025). The required housing unit growth is over 3 times the amount measured from 2019–2024.

At the same time, a visual figure-ground analysis shows that almost all land within South Hill is developed already. Moreover, the largest portions of undeveloped land are part of the Sunrise Master-Planned Community (see Figure 2.7B in Appendix B). While this area has many multifamily structures, cohesive growth is necessary throughout South Hill to avoid infrastructure strain. The only way for the area to meet its required growth targets is to build more multifamily housing.

Incorporation can grant jurisdictions more local control of housing type and location. To accommodate future population growth and higher-density development, incorporation can give South Hill a more robust toolset to shape its future.

COMMUNITY ASSETS AND PUBLIC SPACE

Parks and Recreation

South Hill has three public parks and 46 private parks. Despite the seemingly large amount of parkland, quick access to parks is not enjoyed by the entire community. 71.3% of homes in South Hill are not located within a 15-minute walk of a park (see Figure 2.8B in Appendix B).

Municipalities of similar size and population in Pierce County, such as Lakewood, designate 21.0% of land to parks (City of Lakewood, 2024.b). By contrast, South Hill has roughly 1.4% of land designated to public parks. While some residential communities contain private-access parks, these parks are contained within fencing or are outfitted with minimal installations. 70.4% of homes in South Hill are located more than a quarter mile from private parks (Layton, 2017). These smaller neighborhood-based private parks do not adequately serve all neighborhoods, with noticeable gaps in the western and southeastern parts of South Hill.

Trails

The Pierce County Regional Trails plan includes existing and planned recreational trails within South Hill. The regional plan is outlined in the Pierce County Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Plan for 2020-2030. Pierce County Parks manages 40 miles of trails and walking paths across the county, providing options for recreation and regional connectivity for pedestrians and cyclists (Pierce County Parks, 2020). There are three components of the Pierce County trails system, one existing and two planned, that fall within the South Hill area.

Nathan Chapman Memorial Trail: This is a 1.6-mile route that connects the South Hill Community Park with the Heritage Recreation Center. It also provides pedestrian access between these parks and Rogers High School and Zeiger Elementary School (Pierce County, 2026).

South Hill Community Trail: This planned

Pierce County Parks project will create a 3-mile community trail within South Hill boundaries. This proposed trail expansion would further connect parks with schools around the South Hill Community Park (Pierce County, 2026).

Pipeline Trail: This is an ongoing larger-scale project extending the existing Pipeline Trail in Tacoma, connecting it to the Nathan Chapman Memorial Trail in South Hill. This 5.5-mile extension will connect parks in South Hill to the recently completed trailhead in Tacoma's Orangegate Park (Pierce County, 2026).

Public parks and trails within South Hill are currently developed and operated by Pierce County Parks and Recreation. The funding for park maintenance is determined through the Pierce County biennial budget, which means South Hill's parks funding is allocated from a county-wide source. Parks funding is collected through the Parks Construction Fund, the Parks Impact Fee, the Parks Sales Tax, and the Second Real Estate Excise Tax (REET), the last of which is collected on all property sales within unincorporated Pierce County. 25.0% of the revenue from the Second REET is allocated to Parks and Recreation projects (Pierce County, 2025.a). Notably, the 2026-2027 Pierce County budget allocates funds from these sources to improvements for only one park within South Hill boundaries, Meridian Habitat Park.

If South Hill were to incorporate, there could be an opportunity for greater control over parks and recreation funding. Currently, taxes collected for Parks and Recreation are not being redirected exclusively back to facilities within the South Hill community. This is especially important given that South Hill's community is currently underserved in terms of public parks relative to their population and land usage.

Community Assets

The South Hill area includes several community assets (see Figure 2.8). Included are places of worship, school grounds, public art, cooling centers, public trails, the South Hill Pierce County library branch, and the South Hill post

office. An evaluation of asset locations shows a concentration along major arterial streets and in the northern part of South Hill closest to Puyallup. There is only one public library location and one U.S. post office serving the South Hill area. Meanwhile, school grounds, public trails, and parks make up the public space within the area. These community assets make up a landscape of public life within South Hill. It is important to note that the boundary of South Hill is not definite, given that the area is not incorporated. Because of this, many community assets that serve the South Hill community lie slightly outside of the boundary.

Historic Places

Multiple designated historic places are located in and around South Hill. Compiling sites from multiple historic survey sources provides an inventory of historically significant sites and structures in the South Hill area (see Figure 2.8). There are five designated historic sites in and immediately around South Hill, including historic schools, roads, trails, and sites that are now vacant. As mentioned in previous sections, the boundaries of South Hill are not definite. The list of historic sites reflects this, including sites that are slightly outside of the designated boundary. South Hill's designated historic sites provide an opportunity to build community identity around a shared past.

There is already a basis for this kind of community function: the South Hill Historical Society. This organization was established in 2001 with the express purpose of investigating and cataloging the history of the area. Its mission lies in “captivating history of South Hill, shedding light on its people, events, and significant periods” (South Hill Historical Society, n.d.). The Historical Society has already done significant work in documenting South Hill's physical and social history through oral histories and archival research. This work presents a jumping-off point for connecting community members to a shared, local history. If South Hill were to incorporate, there could be an opportunity to potentially formalize, fund, and prioritize the Historical Society's work through

more dedicated historic preservation and planning efforts.

Other Major Community Assets

Many of the most significant community assets located in South Hill do not fit neatly into any category already described. They are included in this section due to their financial, marketing, identity, or community significance to the area. All are located within South Hill's boundaries.

Thun Airfield is perhaps the largest landmark in South Hill and is a major community pillar (See Figure 2.3). Its importance is further corroborated by its presence in the Capital Facilities Plan (Pierce County, 2024.a), with a \$200,000 deck for recreation and \$10.5 million runway renovation both planned. It is also home to the technical education facility of Clover Park Technical College. Incorporation could mean being able to better plan around this asset and use it more as the cultural space it can be.

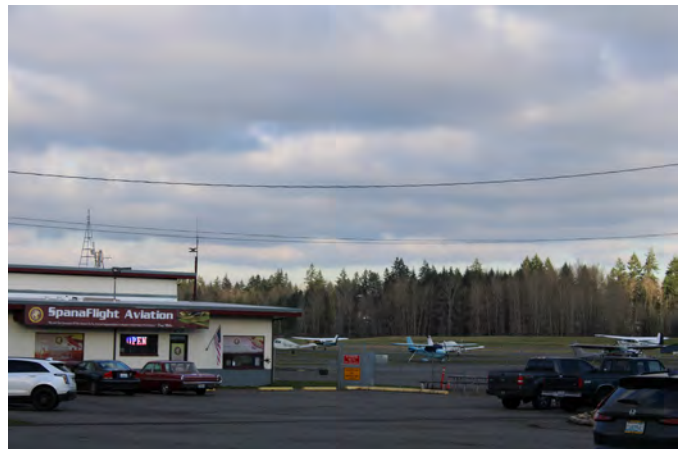


Figure 2.3: Photo of Thun County Airfield.

Meridian Avenue East is the main retail axis of South Hill (See Figure 2.4). With over 200 businesses along the corridor within our boundary, it represents a major financial asset for the area. It is also home to South Hill's only cinema.



Figure 2.4: Photo of Meridian Avenue.

Heritage Recreation Center is home to recreational fields, an elementary and high school, and senior living centers (See Figure 2.5). There are further assets in the form of a gym and several churches on surrounding parcels. It boasts a path connection into South Hill community park, and will connect to the planned Pipeline Trail. It is located on the South Hill Heritage Corridor, which runs along and describes historic trade routes running through the area. It is a true multigenerational and multipurpose space with multimodal connections, a clear asset, and a central space to build upon.



Figure 2.5: Photo of Heritage Recreation Center. From Bruce Dees Associates, n.d.

Homeowners Associations shape much of the housing stock of South Hill (See Figure 2.6). Roughly 91% of park spaces are privately owned within HOA's, even if often small ones. Many HOA's are constructed around central courtyards. These are likely community gathering spaces, though confirming this will require community conversations (See Section 4: Community Engagement). These institutions publicize their community and have communal social media groups (Sunrise, n.d.).



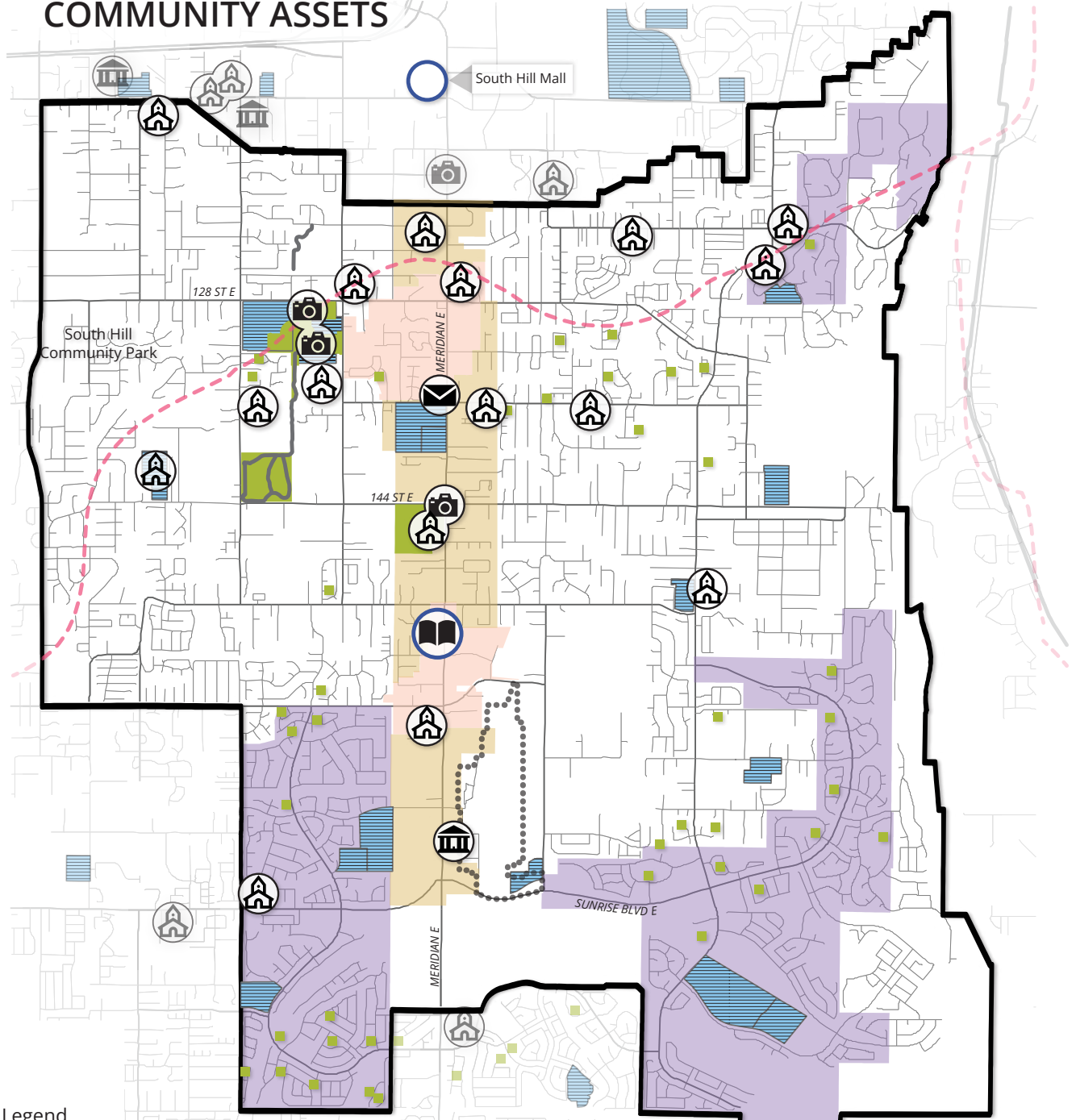
Figure 2.6: Photo of High-Density Housing in South Hill

Environmental Assets include the well-documented views of Rainier (See Figure 2.7), which are used as a selling point for properties throughout South Hill (Sunrise, n.d.).



Figure 2.7: Photo of Rainier Overlooking Housing in South Hill

COMMUNITY ASSETS



Legend

- | | | |
|------------------|----------------|----------------------------|
| Place of Worship | Cooling Center | Meridian Retail |
| Public Library | Public Trail | Towne Center |
| Historic Site | Historic Road | School Grounds |
| Public Artwork | Historic Trail | Parks |
| U.S. Post Office | Thun Airfield | Master Planned Communities |

Source: Pierce County Open GeoSpatial Data Portal



Figure 2.8: Map of Community Assets in and around South Hill

FURTHER DISCUSSION

The goal for this section is to outline the built and natural environments in South Hill in order to describe what South Hill is. Several central themes emerge: South Hill is growing, and its built form will likely continue to be defined by this population growth. The single-family, low-density nature of South Hill can be seen as an opportunity for development to meet the area's housing needs, increasing density through code change in compliance with statewide mandates. The area has numerous existing natural and community assets that could serve as a jumping-off point for teasing out a communal, place-based identity. There are also multiple environmental hazards facing the area, which will have to be taken into account in future development. If South Hill were to incorporate, there is an opportunity for greater control and agency in asset management and community development, including funding public parks projects, supporting historic preservation, incentivizing more dense, mixed-use development, and improving responses to natural hazards.

Table 2.1 outlines a SWOT analysis that assesses the built and natural environmental features of South Hill. There are two different categories of analysis: internal features that South Hill has and external factors that South Hill faces. This analytical method provides a holistic view of the challenges and opportunities facing South Hill.

Table 2.1: SWOT Analysis

INTERNAL FACTORS	Strengths <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessibility to greater Western Washington: access to regional resources • Strong growth-driven housing market • Natural resources and viewsheds of Mount Rainier: potential for identity-building 	Weaknesses <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of placemaking and place-based identity: decentralized community and spatial alienation • Lack of pedestrian and cycling infrastructure: car-dominant form controls public realm • Low level of service relative to population
EXTERNAL FACTORS	Opportunities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growing population: increasing community, workforce, and consumer base • Potential tourism activity from nearby natural features: increased revenue • Greater local autonomy over physical assets makes a compelling case for incorporation 	Threats <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growing population and increased level of need: limited capacity for growth • Environmental hazards, including floods, landslides, and volcanic activity: risks and liabilities • Effects of climate change, including heat island effect: reduces livability, desirability, and quality of life

INTRODUCTION

The ‘Public Services’ section explores the urban governmental services that South Hill residents use every day. The relevant services discussed include transportation, education, utilities, public safety, healthcare, and emergency infrastructure services. These services are administered by a variety of providers such as Pierce County, nearby cities, and private companies. An overview of the existing conditions of each public service is provided to help guide the discussion of incorporation in South Hill. Making an assessment of what is available to the community currently is critical for understanding how incorporation may impact the welfare of residents. South Hill’s current unincorporated status means that many services are provided by the county. However, a growing population and increasing development puts public services at risk of not meeting growing demands. Analysis is provided to highlight the strengths and opportunities of South Hill’s public services and envision a path forward.

TRANSPORTATION

Roadway Classifications, Jurisdictions, and Maintenance

Pierce County has a roadway classification system that distinguishes between major arterials, secondary arterials, collector arterials, and local roadways (Pierce County, 2003). These classifications determine design standards for the different roadway types and help guide improvement plans. South Hill has 136 miles of roadways that are maintained and managed by Pierce County. If South Hill were to incorporate as its own city, it could take over the ownership, maintenance, and design of most of these

roadways. It would not subsume ownership over Meridian Avenue East because it is a state highway and falls under WSDOT jurisdiction.

Car Travel

South Hill has a large percentage of commuters who travel to nearby cities for work (see Section 1: People for employment statistics). More than 31.0% of South Hill commuters travel to the nearby cities of Tacoma, Puyallup, and Seattle. The mean travel time to work for South Hill residents is 32.8 minutes (U.S. Census Bureau, 2025), nearly five minutes greater than Washington State’s average of 27.2 minutes (AWB Institute, n.d.). 77.6% of South Hill residents commute alone via a car, truck, or van (see Table 3.1C in Appendix C).

People not only drive more, they drive for longer distances compared to the larger Pierce County area. South Hill has an average annual vehicle miles traveled (VMT) per household of 19,596, compared to Pierce County’s average of 18,325 (The H+T Index, n.d.). Areas with upward of 21,000 annual VMT per household include low-density single-family neighborhoods and the master planned community in southeast South Hill (The H+T Index, n.d.). Households closer to the South Hill transit center and near multifamily developments on the northern end of Meridian Avenue East have less than 16,000 annual VMT (The H+T Index, n.d.). These car travel trends reflect the prevalence of car-oriented infrastructure and the lack of alternative transportation options in the area. Even though only 1.5% of commuters use public transportation (see Table 3.1C in Appendix C), Pierce Transit’s Transit Propensity Index

has found that South Hill is among the top seven areas in Pierce County that have residents who are more inclined to use transit (Pierce Transit, 2025). This shows that despite limited transit

infrastructure, the community still has a desire to take public transit instead of driving.

Roadway Congestion

In the South Hill Community Plan, residents identified traffic as a growing concern, especially as more residential and commercial development occurs (Pierce County, 2003). Meridian Avenue East is the principal arterial in South Hill and serves more than 30,000 vehicles per day. This is the largest average daily traffic of any road in the area and results in stop-and-go traffic during peak hours (see Figure 3.1C in Appendix C) (WSDOT, n.d.). County roadways, such as 94th Avenue East, 160th Street East, 122nd Avenue East, Shaw Road East, and Military Road East, are also experiencing level of service gaps (see Figure 3.1) (WSDOT, n.d.).

These gaps on South Hill roadways will only worsen as the area sees more population growth. The South Hill Community Plan has stated goals which prioritize the development of north-south corridors and improve congestion, but it is unclear if any policies have been acted on. Engagement with Pierce County officials conducted by BERK Consulting revealed that roadway improvement projects will be a top priority for the South Hill community (BERK, 2025). However, insufficient county funding threatens the feasibility and scale of roadway improvement projects occurring in South Hill. Pierce County is expected to be in a \$344.1 million transportation dedicated funding deficit between 2024-2044 (Pierce County, 2025.b). This deficiency could impact taxes paid by residents in South Hill if Pierce County decided to raise traffic impact fees, initiate a property tax levy lid lift, or use bond funding to supplement revenues.

Currently, the taxes paid by South Hill residents are used for projects under the discretion of Pierce County, so there is no guarantee that residents directly reap the benefits. If incorporation were to occur, South Hill could consider tax frameworks for improving roadways and reducing congestion. While this responsibility of roadway maintenance may require extensive resources, it could also

ensure that taxes are administered in a way that directly benefits improvement projects within the community.

Traffic Safety

When accounting for traffic volume differences, Meridian Avenue East experienced the highest crash rate of 3.47 per million entering vehicles compared to other South Hill roadways between 2019 and 2023 (see Table 3.2C in Appendix C). During the same period, seven out of the top ten intersections in South Hill with the most traffic accidents were along Meridian Avenue East (see Table 3.3C in Appendix C). Furthermore, Meridian Avenue East had the most fatalities and accidents involving pedestrians and bicyclists (see Figure 3.2C and Figure 3.3C in Appendix C).

The South Hill Community Plan recommended implementing traffic calming and speed control measures to increase traffic safety (Pierce County, 2003). The successful implementation of these measures relies on the collaboration of the South Hill Advisory Committee, WSDOT, and Pierce County Planning & Public Works.

Non-Motorized Travel

South Hill currently lacks a well-connected pedestrian infrastructure. Most sidewalk infrastructure is located in residential areas outside of Meridian Avenue East (see Figure 3.2), including some within planned communities. There are many sidewalks that connect to the main street and end once they enter a residential area. This is partially attributed to the legal processes for creating sidewalks in South Hill. Since South Hill is unincorporated, development of sidewalks is managed by Pierce County. The Pierce County Design Guidelines state that sidewalks will be constructed in urban growth areas where roads are being constructed or repaired (Pierce County, 2022). This poses a problem for roads that lack existing pedestrian infrastructure and are not currently zoned for redevelopment.

Bicycle infrastructure is similarly sparse (see

Figure 3.2). There is one officially designated bike trail and a few bikeable paved routes within park areas. Unofficial bike routes or other roads suggested by Pierce County's cycling community generally avoid Meridian Avenue East going north of 152nd Street as the state highway merges into State Route 512.

The lack of bike and pedestrian infrastructure is not due to a lack of community interest. The 2003 South Hill Community Plan Vision Statement states, residents envision "a location where neighborhoods are connected to businesses, schools, and services through a functional transportation network that includes roads, sidewalks, bike lanes, and transit services" (Pierce County, 2003). As South Hill residents consider their community's future, developing tangible plans for non-motorized transit offers an opportunity to fulfill community needs.

PUBLIC TRANSIT

South Hill's public transit system consists of three bus routes managed by Pierce County Transit. The single bus route that operates in South Hill is Route 402 (see Figure 3.3). North of Puyallup is the South Hill Mall Transit Center. This hub is a transfer point for routes 4, 400, and 402, along with additional service for runners and shuttles (Pierce Transit, 2026.b). Routes 400 and 4 do not pass through South Hill but act as connections to the rest of Pierce County.

Route 402 starts at Meridian Avenue East and 171st Street Court East in South Hill and travels north, serving Puyallup and Milton, before ending at the Federal Way Downtown Station. This route has 30-minute headways on weekdays from 5:30-7:00 am, with hourly headways at other times. The service operates on weekdays 5:30-8:00 pm, on Saturdays 7:27 am-6:27 pm, and on Sundays 9:26 am-5:31 pm (Pierce Transit, 2026.a).

While ridership trends have not returned to pre-pandemic numbers, Route 402 has seen a steady increase from approximately 140,000 boardings

in 2021 to 242,404 in 2024 (Pierce Transit, 2024.b). Growing ridership is accompanied by changes in employment and household trends in South Hill. Pierce Transit anticipates a 51.0% employment growth and a 57.0% household growth within a half-mile of the Route 402 corridor by 2040 (Pierce Transit, 2023). This projected growth ranks third amongst the four main transit corridors in Pierce County. Comments received during public outreach conducted by Pierce Transit during a 2023 BRT Expansion Study reveal community interest in extending Route 402's level of service and deviating the route to Walker High School north of South Hill (Pierce Transit, 2024.b).

Route 402's classification as a connector route by Pierce Transit means it has the lowest frequency targets and serves the least densely populated areas in Pierce County. Compared to the other six connector routes in Pierce County, Route 402 outperforms in both boardings per revenue mile and boardings per service hour rating (see Figures 3.4C and 3.5C in Appendix C). Despite high boarding performance ratings, Route 402 has long wait times and offers the third lowest number of trips, reflecting discrepancies in level of service (see Table 3.4C in Appendix C).

To address the level of service gaps, Pierce Transit produced the 2045 Destination Long Range Plan, with scenarios created in alignment with local and regional plans. Since South Hill is unincorporated, the South Hill Community Plan is less influential on Pierce Transit's Long Range Plan than other municipalities. Despite having less say in the creation of long-range scenarios, South Hill does anticipate benefits from the proposed transit improvements. Pierce County's proposed Scenario A is the preferred alternative, which would increase the frequency of buses on Route 402 from once per hour to every 30 minutes on weekdays and Saturdays (Pierce Transit, 2025). Additionally, Route 402's service would run later until 10:00 pm on weekdays and Saturdays and 8:00 pm on Sundays (Pierce Transit, 2025). These improvements could help capture more riders who currently don't view public transit as a feasible option due to the low level of service offered.

Pierce Transit is governed by a 10-member Board of Commissioners, with nine voting members and one non-voting union representative (Pierce Transit, n.d.). Cities throughout the county, including Tacoma and Puyallup, are represented on the board, but there are currently no board members who exclusively represent South Hill. If South Hill were to incorporate, it could have a seat at the table with Pierce Transit. To achieve this, South Hill would need to remain within the Pierce Transit benefit area, which is funded through levies that the northern part of South Hill already has. Pursuant to RCW 36.57A.055, transit agencies are required to hold a meeting every four years to review how the agency's seats are allocated to represent its various communities (Pierce Transit, 2024.a). While South Hill would have an opportunity to have a board position, it is not guaranteed.

If South Hill becomes a city and gains a seat on the Pierce Transit Board of Commissioners, the community would be able to advocate for the public transit future they want. This advocacy can take various forms, such as requesting higher frequency or additional routes through Pierce Transit. South Hill would also be able to raise additional funds to provide services itself, if interested, through levies, and to expand public transit, such as on-demand transit similar to King County's Metro Flex. These actions allow residents to decide what future they want public transit to serve, and adjust accordingly.

UTILITIES

Water

South Hill is divided into several districts of water purveyorship, including both public (the City of Tacoma) and private (Firegrove Mutual Inc.) providers (see Figure 3.6C in Appendix C). Assuming South Hill's current population growth of 2.0% per year, there will be an insufficient supply of water to accommodate the community (Community Attributes, Inc. & Maul Foster &

Alongi, Inc., 2022). This concern has been tacitly addressed in the South Hill Community Plan, with requests that Pierce County amend laws to allow for water to be transferred among pressure systems and water purveyors to best serve growth (Pierce County, 2003).

Sewer

South Hill's sewer system is fully integrated with Pierce County's sewer system. While integration would not need to be considered in discussions about incorporation, the administration of Utility Local Improvement Districts (ULIDs) is an area of concern. Several areas of South Hill have been listed as ULIDs (see Figure 3.7C in Appendix C). Per RCW 36.94.220, a county can create ULIDs to offer long-term exempt financing to property owners in exchange for property owner-led utility infrastructure improvements (RCW 36.94.230). Discussion about the ULID agreement with Pierce County should be considered when engaging with the community about incorporation. Additionally, Pierce County is working on a new unified sewer plan (USP). This document will be essential in informing any changes that need to be made to the city-wide sewer system.

Electricity

Electricity is provided by three companies: Puget Sound Energy, City of Tacoma, and Firegrove Mutual Inc (see Figure 3.8C in Appendix C). South Hill should consider how to approach electricity providership prior to incorporation. In neighboring cities that incorporated, such as Lakewood, the provision of electricity is also split between the City of Tacoma and private providers like Puget Sound Energy. This offers a potential model to follow. See Section 5, Incorporation, for more information about Lakewood's incorporation.

Gas

Natural gas service is entirely provided by Puget Sound Energy (PSE). PSE is a privately-owned energy and gas company that primarily serves the Puget Sound Region (Puget Sound Energy, 2025). They are beholden to the Clean Energy

ROADWAY LEVEL OF SERVICE GAPS IN SOUTH HILL

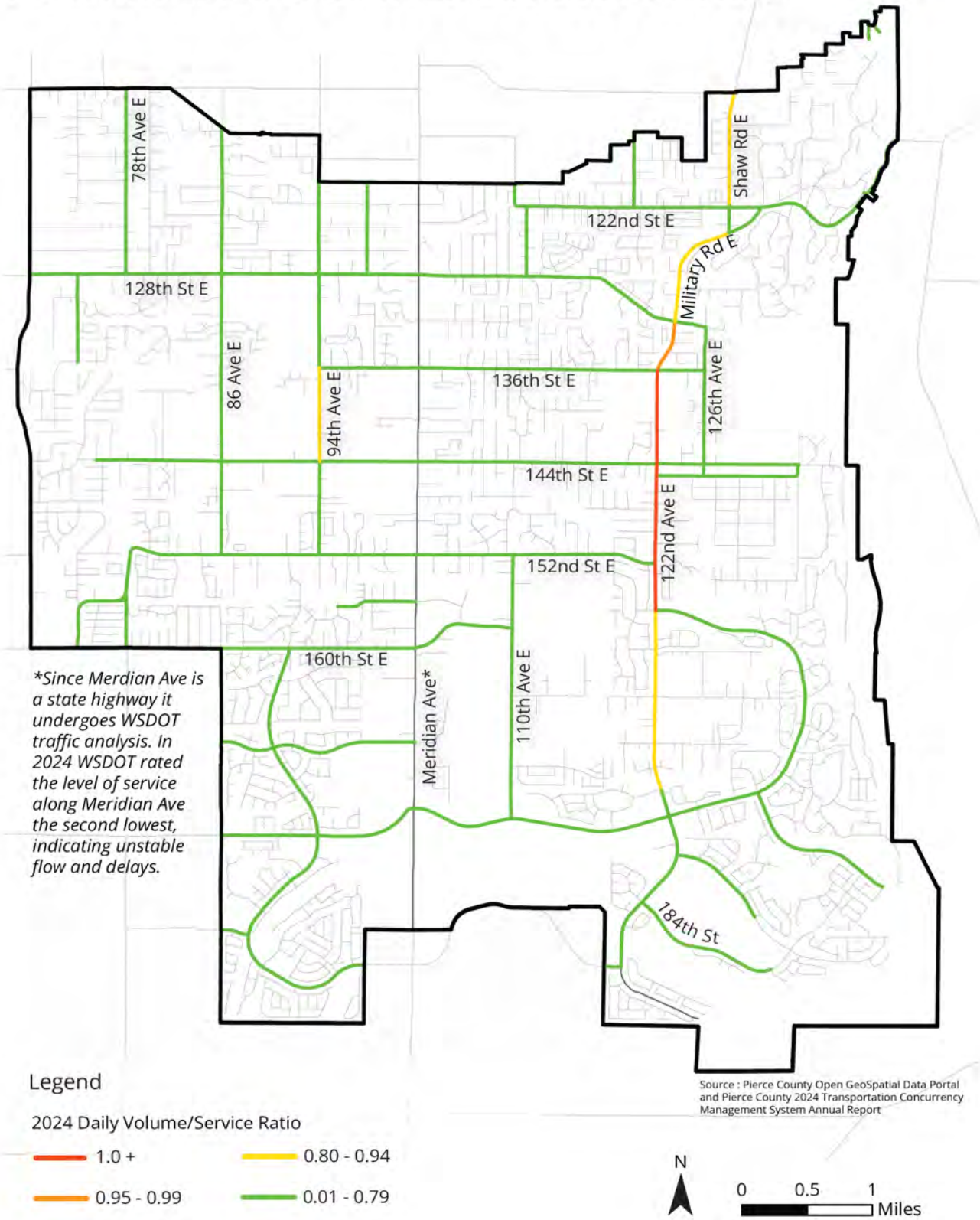


Figure 3.1: Roadway Level of Service Gaps in South Hill Map

PEDESTRIAN AND BIKE INFRASTRUCTURE IN SOUTH HILL

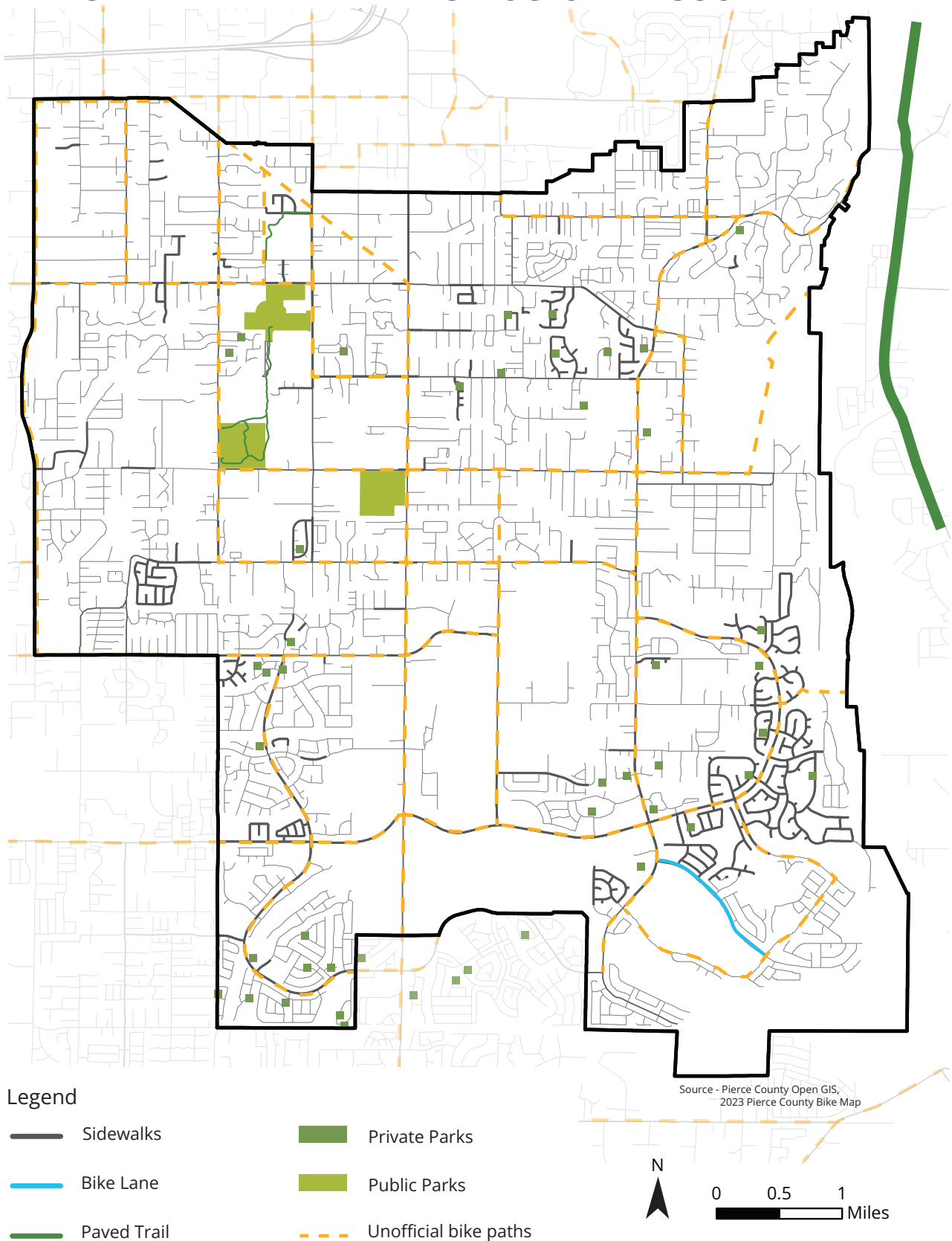


Figure 3.2: Pedestrian and Bike Infrastructure in South Hill Map

SOUTH HILL PUBLIC TRANSIT

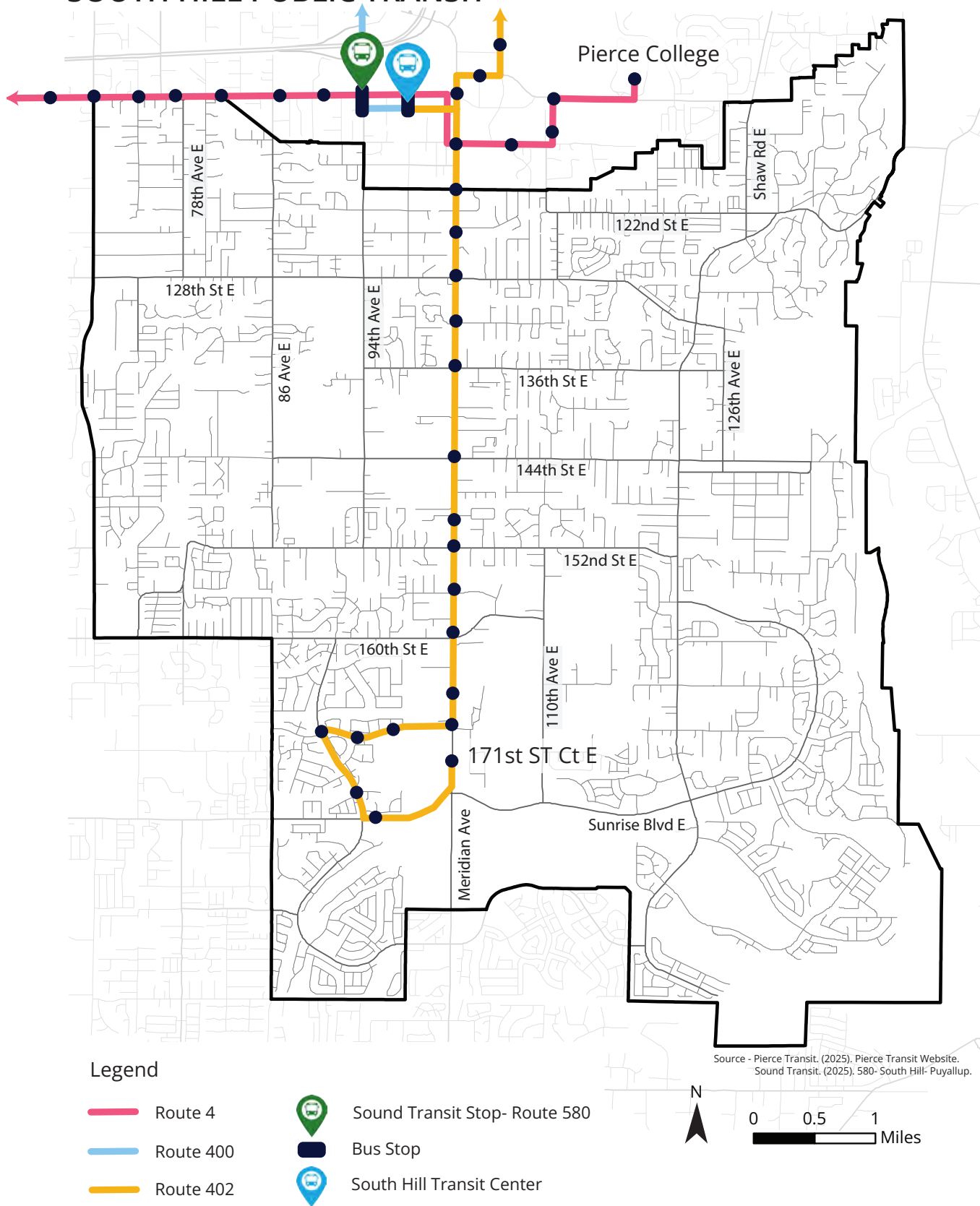


Figure 3.3: South Hill Public Transit Map

Transformation Act (2019), which sets strict emission reduction targets. By 2030, PSE must generate 80% of its energy from renewable sources and 100% by 2045. In addition to this, PSE must implement renewable natural gas projects. With PSE experiencing pressure from state legislature to meet targets, there is an opportunity for South Hill to consider how sustainability projects could be leveraged with PSE.

Solid Waste

Waste disposal pick-up services are managed by contracted waste disposal service providers. Service is split by Le May's and Murray's Disposal Pick Up, with Meridian Avenue East acting as the boundary between the two providers' service areas. In the 98373 zip code, providership overlaps (see Figure 3.9C in Appendix C). Le May's and Murray's Disposal Pick Up operate as contractors under Pierce County that also collect tipping fees from both commercial and residential customers (Land Recovery, Inc., 2025).

Existing infrastructure within South Hill includes a solid waste management facility: Hidden Valley Landfill and Transfer Station. The facility is privately owned and operated by Land Recovery, Inc. (LRI), also known as Pierce County Recycling, Composting and Disposal, LLC (Land Recovery, Inc., 2025). The Solid Waste Management Plan estimates the LRI Landfill will reach capacity between 2032 and 2036. According to the Pierce County Capital Facilities Plan, a new facility is not being considered (Pierce County, 2024.a). Capacity issues are being mitigated by diverting portions of incoming waste by long-haul rail and truck. The provision of solid waste infrastructure is a long term consideration for the public services of South Hill.

EDUCATION

Public Schools

There are approximately 18,122 students in South Hill (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.a). The Puyallup School District covers the majority of South

Hill. Sumner, Franklin Pierce, and Orting School Districts cover the margins of the South Hill area. There is a diverse range of K-12 schools with nine elementary schools, two junior high schools, and two high schools (see Figure 3.4).

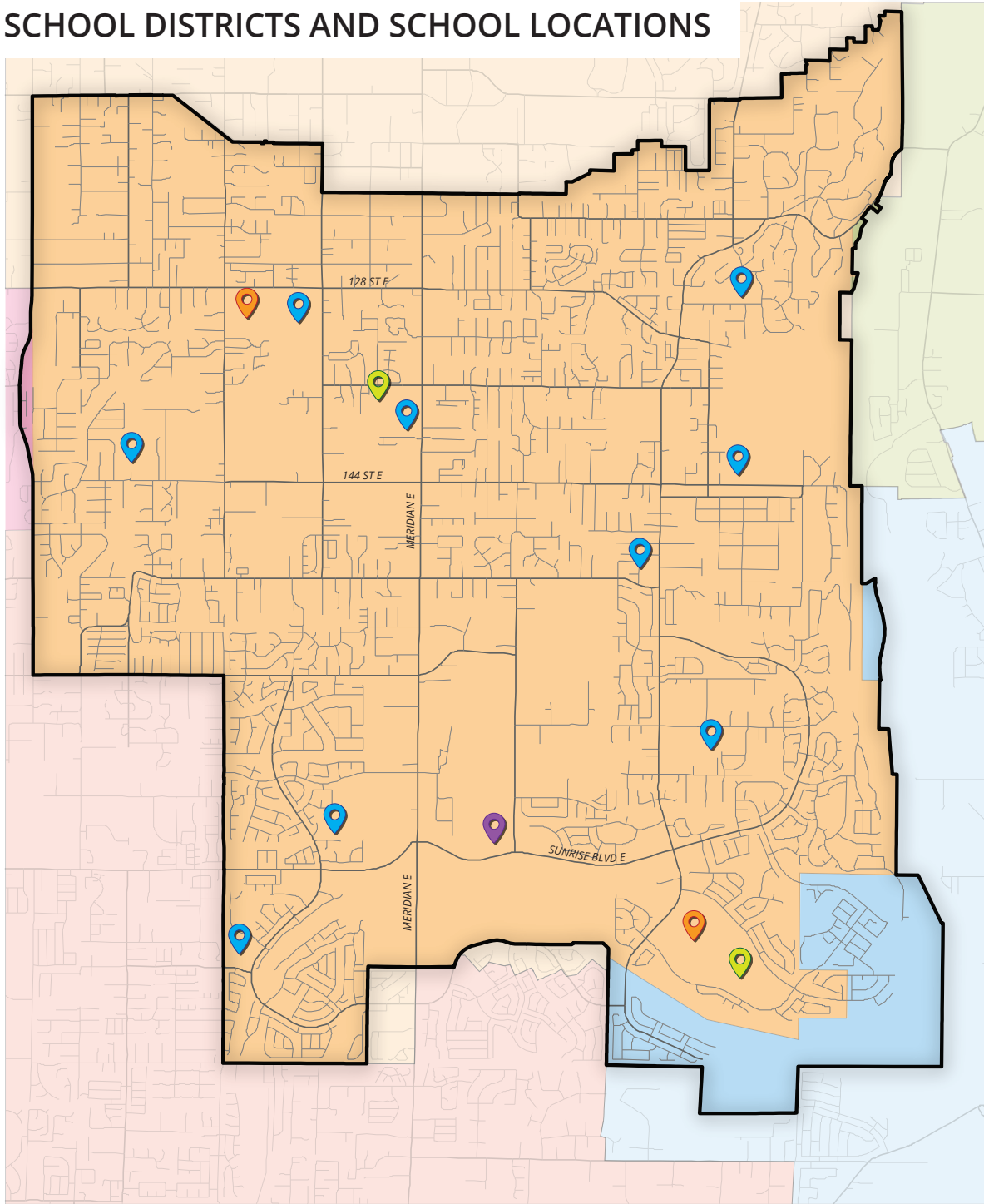
Puyallup and neighboring school districts face overcrowding due to population growth. The Puyallup School District has added over 200 portable classrooms to accommodate this growth, and two elementary schools, Spinning and Waller Road, are at risk of closing due to the poorly maintained school infrastructure (Lund, 2025). In February 2025, an \$800 million bond was proposed by Puyallup School District to build new elementary schools, expand high school capacity, and address projected growth needs. Even with a 63% approval rating and a bond that would not increase the property tax rate, the bond failed because it did not reach the 60% majority vote of 28,216 ballots (Lund, 2025). While the future of Puyallup's funding is unclear, overcrowded schools and an underfunded school district poses a major risk to the student population of South Hill.

Post-Secondary Education

There are two post-secondary education facilities in South Hill, namely Clover Park Technical College and Pierce College Puyallup. Clover Park Technical College's (CPTC) South Hill campus is located at Thun Airfield and offers several aviation programs. During the 2023-2024 school year, 227 students were enrolled at CPTC's South Hill campus (CPTC, 2025). CPTC has industry partnerships with companies like Boeing, which is a possible linkage to explore in the community engagement phase of this project.

Pierce College is the largest college district in Pierce County and serves more than 12,000 students across its Puyallup, JBLM, and Fort Steilacoom campuses (Pierce College, 2025). Regionally, it acts as an educational hub for business, technical training, and liberal arts and sciences. Both Pierce College Puyallup and CPTC are public community colleges that are overseen by the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges. If South Hill were to

SCHOOL DISTRICTS AND SCHOOL LOCATIONS



Legend

- Puyallup School District
- Orting School District
- Sumner School District
- Franklin Pierce School District
- Bethel School District

- Elementary School
- Junior High School
- High School
- Technical College



0 0.5 1 Miles

Source: Pierce County Open GIS

Figure 3.4: School Districts and School Locations Map

incorporate, it would not gain any oversight or jurisdictional power over either educational entity.

PUBLIC SAFETY

Sheriff

South Hill has one sheriff station, the Pierce County Sheriff's Office precinct, which serves the South Hill community and nearby areas. Local staff handle day-to-day work at the precinct, including routine patrols and responding to 911 and non-emergency calls. Pierce County Sheriff's Office leadership manages policy, budgeting, and specialized units. The South Hill precinct also houses the K9 training and kennels (Pierce County, n.d.b). Pierce County funds the precinct through the county General Fund, which is primarily from property and sales tax revenue (Pierce County, 2024.b). The South Hill Community Plan only lightly mentions the sheriff and generalized, non-specific goals for South Hill (Pierce County, 2003). Expansions could be made based on residents' feedback on what they consider safety to look like.

If South Hill were to incorporate, it could form its own sheriff department with control over policies, staffing, and budgets. Managing a local sheriff department could be helpful for traffic enforcement, given the current shortage of Pierce County sheriff officers. Alternatively, South Hill could continue to contract with Pierce County or adopt a hybrid model where South Hill could fund basic levels of sheriff service for day-to-day functions of patrols and answering calls, while contracting out specialized law-enforcement units such as SWAT or forensics. Peer cities of Puyallup and Lakewood have their own sheriff's forces, showing that it is a reasonable step for communities to take after becoming a city.

Fire

South Hill has two fire stations and a single fire district. Until 2026, South Hill was served by three fire districts: Central Pierce Fire & Rescue, Graham Fire & Rescue, and Orting Valley Fire & Rescue. On April 22, 2025, voters approved the merger of these three into a single fire district of Central Pierce

Fire & Rescue, which took effect on January 1, 2026 (Central Pierce Fire & Rescue, n.d.). This merger aimed to maximize existing resources to better serve the community through faster response times, improved community outreach, and enhanced education programs. As a result, Central Pierce Fire & Rescue is now the second-largest fire district by population served in Washington State. They provide 24-hour emergency medical services and fire suppression protection to 328,000 community members across 178 square miles.

While there is a possibility for an incorporated South Hill to form its own fire department, it is unlikely due to upfront costs for infrastructure development and supply purchase. Peer cities of Puyallup and Lakewood continue to use Pierce County's fire services. With the merger of Central Pierce Fire & Rescue and the improved services, it would be less likely to be a high priority for South Hill than the potential creation of its own sheriff department, unless new concerns arise about service levels.

Emergency Medical Services

South Hill has no hospitals within its boundaries. The nearest hospital, Good Samaritan Hospital, is located to the north in the City of Puyallup. South Hill does have a mental health facility and several alternate care facilities, mostly located on Meridian Avenue East (see Figure 3.10C in Appendix C). The mental health facility is the Social Treatment Opportunity Program (STOPWA) and focuses on mental health, drug and alcohol treatment, domestic violence treatment, and anger management (StopWA, n.d.).

In northern South Hill, there is an alternative care facility Sea Mar Community Health Center, which specializes in primary care and family medicine, including preventive health and minor procedures (Sea Mar Community Health Centers, n.d.). MultiCare has several medical facilities in the area, including family medicine, urgent care, and a newly opened emergency room (MultiCare, n.d.b). MultiCare Primary Care provides comprehensive care for adults and children (MultiCare, n.d.a). While these medical facilities provide a baseline of

health care infrastructure, there is an opportunity to expand urgent and primary care services. area, including family medicine, urgent care, and a newly opened emergency room (MultiCare, n.d.b).

MultiCare Primary Care provides comprehensive care for adults and children (MultiCare, n.d.a). While these medical facilities provide a baseline of health care infrastructure, there is an opportunity to expand urgent and primary care services.

FURTHER DISCUSSION

Table 3.1 outlines the strengths, weaknesses, and threats that South Hill presently faces. This table also shows potential opportunities in South Hill in both an incorporation scenario and scenarios where South Hill maintains its status as unincorporated. A growing population and increasing development present a challenge for South Hill’s public services. Utilities and resources for public safety are at risk of service quality reduction. Transportation facilities are currently burdened with congestion and offer limited options for alternative modes, whether public transit, cycling, or walking. Despite potential challenges, incorporation also presents opportunities for improvement of urban services. There is community interest in improving bus services that could be capitalized in the event of incorporation. Additionally, greater control over services enables the community to develop goals and policies that satisfy its public safety, utilities, and transportation needs.

Table 3.1: SWOT Analysis

<p>INTERNAL FACTORS</p>	<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Existing utilities framework similar to an incorporated city. Integrated sewer system, so there is no need for reliance on septic tanks. 	<p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Economic loss from large outflow of jobs is reinforced by commuter trends. Congested roadways inhibit efficient traffic flow through South Hill.
<p>EXTERNAL FACTORS</p>	<p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Through incorporation, citizens of South Hill could advocate for improved public transit services. Leverage public-private partnerships to develop sustainable energy solutions and industry. Formalizing pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure by utilizing existing networks. 	<p>Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pierce County sheriff deputy shortages present service gaps for traffic safety monitoring. Overcrowded and underfunded school districts threaten the student population.

INTRODUCTION

South Hill is the largest unincorporated urban area in Washington with a population of more than 64,000 people and a population growth rate of 23.4% from 2010 to 2020 (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.d). Given its size and rapid growth, South Hill's demand for reliable urban services, such as utilities, transportation, fire, and police, continues to increase. Incorporation offers a possible future where residents have greater local control over urban services, taxation, and planning decisions.

By understanding the implications, opportunities, and challenges of incorporation, South Hill residents can make informed decisions about the path forward for their community.

transportation and public-works services" (Carter, 2026).

Some of the departments within the Pierce County government that make decisions that impact South Hill include Pierce County Planning & Public Works, Assessor/Treasurer, Auditor, Prosecuting Attorney, and Sheriff (Pierce County, n.d.a.).

The Pierce County Council is another part of the county government that makes decisions that affect South Hill. The Council is a 7-member elected legislative body that represents Pierce County. South Hill's boundaries fall within three of these Districts: District 1, 2, and 3. Councilmembers are listed in Appendix D.

The Washington State legislature also makes decisions relevant to South Hill. South Hill's boundaries fall within two state legislative districts: Districts 2 and 25. Each District is represented by one Senator in the State Senate and two Representatives in the State House. Representatives are listed in Appendix D.

CURRENT GOVERNANCE OF SOUTH HILL

South Hill exists as an unincorporated area, or census-designated place, in Pierce County. Because South Hill does not have a local governing body, most planning decisions and policy changes that impact the area are made by the Pierce County government. Taxation and administration of urban services are also under the jurisdiction of Pierce County (Pierce County, n.d.a.).

The top elected official of Pierce County is Executive Ryan Mello. Executive Mello is responsible for implementing council and commission policies and overseeing the day-to-day operations of county government (Pierce County, n.d.c.). Mello has acknowledged that the unincorporated parts of the county like South Hill have "begun to act and feel like cities, but those areas haven't been able to access city-like services or receive city-like attention toward parks, police,

SOUTH HILL AND INCORPORATION

As South Hill residents consider whether incorporating into a new city makes the most sense for their future, it is worth considering the history of South Hill as it relates to incorporation and the process for pursuing this path. See Appendix D for information about first-class cities versus code cities and types of city governance including mayor-council and council-manager.

An Attempt At Incorporation, South Hill In 1998 South Hill was first settled in the 1880s and was a rural community of farmers, loggers, and hunters during its early years. While population growth

was slow for its first 100 years, there were media reports from the 1970s that expressed resident dissatisfaction with the County government and the “perceived lack of attention the area was getting”. From 1980 to 2000, South Hill saw exceptional population growth, growing from around 7,000 people to more than 31,000 people. What was once a rural area was rapidly becoming a suburban community with urban issues to address. In the early and mid-1990s, local activists organized to express their desire for greater say in local planning and decision-making (Vest, n.d.b).

On May 6, 1998, a petition for incorporation was submitted to the County Auditor with signatures from ten percent of registered voters, as required by state law. While there was demonstrated popular support for incorporation, opposition emerged from land developers and others who lived outside of the proposed city boundaries, who were worried about the potential for more restrictive development regulations and advocated to keep the area unincorporated. Ultimately, in November 1998, South Hill voted against incorporation at a rate of two to one. While the proposal for incorporation was defeated, the urban issues that inspired the movement remain (Vest, n.d.b; Pierce County, 2023).

The Process for Pursuing Incorporation

For South Hill residents to pursue another attempt at becoming a city, Washington state law outlines a path that involves several steps.

First, a community must have at least 1,500 inhabitants. South Hill meets this requirement with 64,708 inhabitants as of the 2020 Census. Second, a petition for incorporation must be signed by 10% of registered voters within the proposed city boundaries and filed with the Pierce County auditor who validates the signatures (MSRC, 2025.a).

Third, the proposed city boundaries are reviewed by a boundary review board.

Finally, an election may be held for the community to decide whether or not to incorporate (Pierce County Planning and Public Works, 2023).

A Potential New Path for Pursuing Incorporation

In early January 2026, Senate Bill (SB) 6181 concerning city incorporation was introduced in the Washington State Legislature. The proposed bill says that “the county legislative authority of a county located west of the Cascade mountains with a population of more than 900,000 but less than 2,000,000, by ordinance, may file a petition for incorporation without gathering resident signatures if the area is fully contained within the urban growth boundary, and the population is over 25,000.” Several of the census-designated places in Pierce County meet these requirements: South Hill, Parkland, Spanaway, and Graham. If passed, this bill would simplify the incorporation process by not requiring signatures of 10% of registered voters prior to putting the question on a ballot for voters. As of late February 2026, SB 6181 is stalled in committee and further action has yet to be taken (Washington State Legislature, 2026). If South Hill residents want to see this path made possible, there is an opportunity to contact state legislators and ask that they prioritize this bill.

TAX AND FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

South Hill residents would experience a change in taxation if they were to incorporate as a city. This section considers the current taxation structure for South Hill residents and considerations for taxation and grants if the area were to incorporate.

Current Taxation in South Hill

Because South Hill is not a city, Pierce County administers and collects taxes, fines, and fees. Tax revenue from South Hill may be used across the county and not necessarily redistributed back into local projects or programs. Residents may pay lower taxes than some cities, but those taxes aren't always spent to directly benefit them.

As an unincorporated community with several tax district boundaries, tax rates vary across South Hill. The Regional Transit Authority (RTA) for the area is the Sound Transit District. The northern part of South Hill is in the Public Transportation

Table 4.1: Tax Code Area Rates for South Hill

	Tax Code Area 195	Tax Code Area 220	Tax Code Area 401	Tax Code Area 412
2025 Levy Rate	\$10.57 per \$1000	\$10.52 per \$1000	\$8.35 per \$1000	\$8.21 per \$1000
Transit	14,110	\$0.16	\$0.16	\$0.16
Conservation Futures	68,480	\$0.03	\$0.03	\$0.03
County Tax	24,520	\$0.72	\$0.72	\$0.72
Road	22,160	\$0.96	\$0.96	\$0.96
Flood	29,340	\$0.09	\$0.09	\$0.09
Fire	14,120	\$1.50	\$1.55	\$1.41
Port	64,670	\$0.13	\$0.13	\$0.13
Library	63,740	\$0.33	\$0.33	\$0.33
Local School	36,140	\$4.21	\$1.98	\$1.98
State of Washington	13,880	\$2.39	\$2.39	\$2.39

Benefit Area (PTBA) of Pierce County, which imposes an additional 0.06% sales tax, bringing the total local sales tax to 0.36%. The rest of South Hill does not have a PTBA and no additional sales tax, leaving the local sales tax at 0.30% (Washington State Department of Revenue, n.d.).

There are four Tax Code Areas within South Hill for levies: 195, 220, 401, and 412. These levies range from \$8.21 to \$10.57 per \$1,000 of value, with the difference due to different rates for fire and school districts (see Table 4.1). As of January 1, 2026, the fire districts for South Hill merged, resulting in a unified tax authority moving forward.

Future Taxation Considerations

If South Hill were to incorporate, several of the previously mentioned tax levies would change or be replaced completely. South Hill would have the choice to collect several city-specific taxes, such as property, sales, and utility, that previously belonged to the county. The county road tax, for example, would be levied by the city because Pierce County would no longer be responsible for the tax. Other additional taxes like a brokered natural gas tax and a criminal justice sales tax

would need to be decided by residents because these additional taxes would be invested in voter-approved funds. These two taxes would be additional to the existing utility and sales taxes after incorporation. South Hill would also have to decide if they want to impose shared-state taxes like a business and occupation (B&O) tax, cannabis excise tax, and gambling taxes. These taxes share revenue with the state and the city and would need approval by residents in order to be levied. Taxes like the business and occupation tax and the gambling tax are decided on the city level and would also need resident approval. South Hill would also have the power to levy fees, fines, and licenses for businesses, residents, and the ability to collect revenue from other governments if incorporated. Special revenue funds would levy taxes or dip into revenue streams to set aside funds for special projects such as conservation, parks, and transportation (Pierce County, 2023).

South Hill may wish to take out a Tax Anticipation Note (TAN) to finance city operations until taxes are levied and city services can expand. Two recently incorporated cities took out TANs including Lakewood, which took out a \$1.5 million TAN (City of Lakewood, 1996), and Federal Way,

which took one a \$1 million TAN. Since the TANs in these examples were taken out approximately thirty years ago, South Hill would need to take inflation into account and calculate what rate would make the most sense for them.

Future Grant Considerations

As an incorporated area, South Hill would also gain the ability to apply for county, state, and federal grants. Grants are important when financing certain capital projects in a city that may not have all of the funds necessary from strictly revenue. Grants that can upgrade infrastructure include economic development grants, capital improvement grants, community development block grants, public safety and emergency management grants, and environmental, conservation, and energy grants (Pierce County, 2023). These grants are often non-discretionary and funds received must go towards fulfilling project requirements. If South Hill decides to incorporate, it is imperative to have multiple streams of revenue and funding to support infrastructure projects.

Upon incorporation, the City of Lakewood gained control of administering local sales and use taxes, utility taxes, business and occupation taxes, and property taxes (Community Attributes, Inc. & Maul Foster & Alongi, Inc., 2022). By the early 2000s, Lakewood had built a positive general fund reserve, maintained lower per-capita expenditures than peer cities due to the new revenue streams, and generated enough wealth to create in-house services for future use (Community Attributes, Inc. & Maul Foster & Alongi, Inc., 2022).

After incorporating as a city, Lakewood became eligible for many state and federal grants reserved for municipalities. According to RCW 35, cities are eligible for grants that are used to assist in infrastructure development and improvement projects (Community Attributes, Inc. & Maul Foster & Alongi, Inc., 2022). Some grants that Lakewood immediately received were Transportation Improvement Board (TIB) grants, Transportation Safety Grants, and Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) (Community Attributes, Inc. & Maul Foster & Alongi, Inc., 2022).

Utilities and Local Services

Before incorporation, Lakewood relied on services from Pierce County and contracted partners. Pierce County Works was responsible for infrastructure like roads, street frontage, and stormwater drainage. Pierce County Planning was responsible for zoning and land use designation. Utilities like sewer, water, and power were handled by Pierce County Works, separate water districts, and Puget Sound Energy, respectively. To avoid large capital expenditures after incorporation, the City of Lakewood continued to contract their services out to Pierce County Sheriff's department for public safety, fire service with prior firefighting districts, public works, planning, IT, HR, and finance to other partners, and also by hiring a minimal workforce in the city. This helped Lakewood in the early stages of being a city by reducing capital costs, as well as gradually increasing services over time (Community Attributes, Inc. & Maul Foster & Alongi, Inc., 2022).

LESSONS LEARNED: LAKEWOOD

About Lakewood

The City of Lakewood is located in northwestern Pierce County and west of Interstate 5 (I-5). According to the 2020 Census, Lakewood has a population of 63,612 people. The city consists of 17.1 square miles of land and 1.8 square miles of water in Steilacoom Lake. Lakewood has more than 27,000 homes and 2,700 businesses.

Local Finance Initiatives

After incorporating in 1996, the City of Lakewood took out a tax anticipation note of \$1.5 million to keep cash flow moving while undergoing a restructuring of urban services. This was a one-time note to help fund government services until the city started collecting tax revenue (City of Lakewood, 1996).

Today, Lakewood is known for its financial strength and investment in infrastructure. It operates on a pay-as-you-go system, a form of payment where municipalities pay for projects with existing funds rather than with borrowed money, preventing the city from getting into significant debt (City of Lakewood, 2024.a).

Overall Learnings

Lakewood's incorporation in 1996 enabled the city to secure startup funding that was critical to establishing a strong foundation. Incorporation allowed the community to take control of various revenue streams and build a strong general fund that positioned the city for long-term financial stability. Incorporation also opened up opportunities for federal and state grants to fund critical infrastructure without dipping into tax revenue. The city's strategy to contract out most public services at the start minimized capital expenses and allowed for a gradual transition to taking on administration of those services.

When the City of Lakewood incorporated, they had nearly 60,000 residents, slightly less than South Hill's current population. Thanks to an effective financial strategy at the start, Lakewood has remained a financially stable city. Their strategy is something South Hill residents could consider if they decide to pursue incorporation.

LESSONS LEARNED: FEDERAL WAY

About Federal Way

Located in King County, the City of Federal Way sits between Tacoma and Seattle along the Puget Sound and west of the Green River Valley. According to the 2020 Census, Federal Way has a population of 101,300 people that reside within its 21.5 square miles. The city was incorporated in 1990 and continues to see population growth and development. The city is home to more than 2,000

businesses, 1,141 acres of parkland, and a new light rail stop along Sound Transit's 1 Line (City of Federal Way, n.d.).

Local Finance Initiatives

Federal Way's path to incorporation included three failed motions for incorporation in 1971, 1981, and 1985 before eventually passing in 1990. During these attempts, a building boom in the area raised concerns among many residents (Hobbs, 2010). During an attempt to preserve park space, citizens voted to become a city in 1989.

City leaders responded to the demands of their growing city by passing ordinances prior to their first day as a new city. Federal Way passed one of its first ordinances on October 24th, 1989 – Ord. 89-001 established a loan of “no more than \$1 million” (City of Federal Way Ordinance Index, n.d.). The loan helped maintain the city's general operation services until the next tax cycle took place. This ordinance also established the Federal Way Tax Anticipation Note Redemption Fund. This helped to finance infrastructure projects before the City of Federal Way started to collect taxes.

The second ordinance passed by the town took out a loan from the state of Washington for \$50,000 in start-up funds at a 0.0% interest rate (City of Federal Way Ordinance Index, n.d.). This loan gave reason for Federal Way to seek help from other municipalities. During this time, they called on the City of Auburn to enter into an “interlocal cooperation agreement” in which Auburn would act as a depository for Federal Way (City of Federal Way Ordinance Index, n.d.). In 1989, Federal Way continued to pass ordinances that established a budget for the city's departments and set up a sales tax within its jurisdiction.

Utilities and Local Services

Once the financial groundwork was laid, public services followed shortly after. Starting with the formation of offices within their local government, Federal Way packaged ordinances that established the office of the City Manager, the office of the

Chief Law Enforcement Officer, and many more, which all passed on January 30th, 1990 (City of Federal Way Ordinance Index, n.d.). Fire services were passed through Ord. 89-010, which stated that the City of Federal Way would be annexed into King District 39 (City of Federal Way academic literature, case studies, and previous community engagement in South Hill, this section proposes a set of best practices and three methods of community engagement for the South Hill context: partnerships, public meetings, and youth engagement.

Overall Learnings

There are many lessons to be learned from the incorporation of Federal Way. First, the passing of the incorporation itself only came when there was extensive community involvement and residents who backed it up. This was prompted by an issue that most people in the community wanted to support: preserving local parks. Second, the city leaned on several financial resources to ensure its success. This included taking out loans, finding help in surrounding cities, and developing financial systems early on to ensure longevity. Finally, the establishment of local services and utilities were strategic and brought about in ordinances that made sense for the city. The City of Federal Way understood how much they were able to take on and were thoughtful on when to establish local services. These steps during the incorporation process ensured the success of the city. Applying this detailed thinking to South Hill could help to have a similar effect and ensure a successful incorporation if that is the path South Hill chooses.

FUTHER DISCUSSION

A SWOT analysis is a structured analytical framework that can offer an assessment of what a place has internally and what a place faces externally. The items listed as part of this SWOT analysis in Table 4.2 offer some thoughts around a No Action alternative in Weaknesses and an Incorporation alternative in Strengths, Opportunities, and Threats.

Table 4.2: SWOT Analysis

<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">INTERNAL FACTORS</p>	<p>Strengths</p> <p>A large population of more than 64,000 people ensures a strong tax base for financing of public services. The Pierce County Executive has expressed support for the incorporation of South Hill and is committed to whatever is necessary to make incorporation successful. Many folks in the community are ready to talk and offer their thoughts on incorporation and desires for the future of the area.</p>	<p>Weaknesses</p> <p>If the community does not seek incorporation, they may see safety get worse, a decline in the level of service of public services, and no significant future investments in roads and public transit. It may also be harder to incorporate in the future without momentum from the community and inflation.</p>
<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">EXTERNAL FACTORS</p>	<p>Opportunities</p> <p>If the community does incorporate, they will be able to make changes to improve the level of service of public services. They would be able to assemble a local city government that could focus on the needs and desires of South Hill, rather than let their future be decided by county officials whose attention is divided among communities across the county. With incorporation, the community would gain local control over zoning, roads, parks, and more, which would allow them to shape their own destiny.</p>	<p>Threats</p> <p>There are some details that still need to be ironed out such as how taxes will change and whether debt will need to be taken on to finance the incorporation.</p>

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

INTRODUCTION

As shown throughout this report, the South Hill area has many of the building blocks of a strong community. Building on these foundations and helping the South Hill community identify what it wants for its future requires a comprehensive and equitable engagement process that seeks out the various experiences and perspectives held by South Hill residents. Based on a review of academic literature, case studies, and previous community engagement in South Hill, this section proposes a set of best practices and three methods

BEST PRACTICES

To prepare for effective community conversations about incorporation in South Hill, Table 5.1 presents best practices that should be followed to ensure a community engagement process with thoughtful preparation and follow-through.

BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

Lakewood Case Study

Building partnerships with community groups can offer insights into the needs and desires of residents. For Lakewood, its successful incorporation process was rooted in partnerships with government, agencies, and non-profits (Speir, 2023). A 2023 APA Washington Annual Conference presentation on Lakewood's incorporation efforts reveals how partnerships can provide resources and address community concerns with incorporation.

The partnerships that supported Lakewood's incorporation process included the military, utility and transit agencies, the Nisqually tribe, non-profits and community organizations, as well as neighborhood and cultural groups. These different partnerships have helped Lakewood advance as a city, addressing various concerns pertaining to the area. For instance, partnerships with utility and transit agencies have assisted with coordinating "land use development and redevelopment" (Speir, 2023). While non-profits and community organizations have helped Lakewood address concerns like "shoreline maintenance and restorations" (Speir, 2023). These partnerships have encouraged Lakewood to establish and strengthen groups to ensure an open channel of communication between residents and government (Speir, 2023).

South Hill Context

Lakewood's process provides an initial framework for potential partnerships in South Hill during community engagement efforts prior to incorporation. Table 5.2 explains the insights that different partnerships have brought. It also uses community groups identified by earlier sections in the report to envision possible partnerships for South Hill. This can assist South Hill in building various relationships that will inform the decision about whether incorporation is the appropriate next step for the community. Table 5.1E in Appendix E further lists possible community contacts that could be explored within South Hill.

Table 5.1: Best Practices for Community Engagement

Mode	Estimate
Clearly Identify Purpose	Clearly Identify Purpose Both the overall engagement process and each engagement opportunity should have a defined purpose that is understood by the facilitators and participants ^a
Identify stakeholders and promote equitable participation	A thorough analysis should be completed to identify the key stakeholders. Engagement events and activities should be tailored to ensure all identified stakeholders have access to the process ^b
Provide timely and complete information	Community members should be given complete and accurate information and adequate time to review it before requesting their input ^c
Recognize power dynamics and encourage community control	Facilitators should be aware of the power dynamics at play in government/ community member and expert/layperson interactions. Proactive steps should be taken to hand some control off to community members in both the process and outcomes of engagement ^d
Evaluate and modify engagement as needed	Evaluation should be done throughout the engagement process to ensure that it is achieving its purposes. If problems are identified, the engagement approach should be modified ^e
Youth engagement	Tailor engagement activities to the appropriate age group of participants. Integrate education about civic processes into engagement activities. Train and empower youth to lead engagement processes ^f
Non-Citizen/Immigrant engagement	Take time to build trust with non-citizen community members through repeated outreach and culturally and linguistically appropriate engagement methods. Identifying alternative spaces of engagement such as more informal meeting spaces can make non-citizens feel safer. Examples include immigrant-serving nonprofits, religious institutions, and informal conversations in people's everyday lives. If time and resources don't allow for trust to be built, partnering with nonprofits that already engage non-citizens can help jumpstart relationship building ^g

Sources: From aBryson et. al, 2013. bBryson et. al, 2013. cBrody et. al, 2003; Bryson et. al, 2013. dArnstein, 1969; Bryson, et. al, 2013. eBryson et. al, 2013. fBotchwey et. al, 2019; Oregon Metro, 2016. gLee, 2019

Table 5.2: Partnerships in the Lakewood and South Hill context

Types of Partnerships	South Hill Context	Recommended Engagement Effort
Utility and Transit Agencies	Partnerships with agencies can help inform future development and improvements. Creating partnerships with the following agencies could be beneficial in future efforts for incorporation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pierce County • Pierce Transit • Puget Sound Energy • Central Pierce Fire & Rescue 	Partnering to inform communities of existing agencies and resources.
Non-profits and Community Organization	Recognizing organizations within South Hill can give insight into the history of the area and the different community members of South Hill. Identified organizations that could be collaborated with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • South Hill Historical Society • Puyallup South Hill Rotary Club • Puyallup South Hill Lions Club • Uplands development 	Inviting members of these organizations to a focus group meeting or attending community events hosted by organizations.
Neighborhood and Cultural Groups	Public community events hosted in South Hill can help identify the different identities that exist within the area. By partnering with the following groups, building trust and community identity can commence: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Puyallup Park and Recreation • Pierce County Recreation 	Table community events to inform residents of emerging policies and opportunities to engage local politics.

PUBLIC MEETINGS

Public engagement meetings are one of several options for general community engagement, see Table 5.2E in Appendix E for others. The primary goal of public engagement meetings is to get people talking. It is a chance to generate real dialogue and for people to share their varying perspectives. This will be an essential form of community engagement in the South Hill context. Because incorporation can be complicated, the best way to understand the different points of view that may be held by the public is by engaging with a diverse segment of the community. While

consensus may not be the goal, public engagement meetings create the opportunity for many different viewpoints to be heard.

According to the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation, almost all dialogue and deliberation techniques involve: Utilizing facilitators and ground rules to create a safe atmosphere for honest, productive discussion. Framing the issue, questions, and discussion material in a balanced and accurate manner. Having citizens and decision-makers on all sides of the issue talk to each other face-to-face in multiple small groups.

Using the input and outcomes generated to inform the decision-making process (NCDD, 2010).

In the context of South Hill, these techniques could look as follows:

A designated facilitator from Pierce County could run the engagement meeting. Ground rules of respect should be set by the facilitator, but it is also wise to have the members of the meeting create their own ground rules at the beginning of the meeting. These self-identified ground rules are more likely to be followed.

Framing the issue means participants of the meeting will first be informed of what incorporation is. They will be briefed on its definition and on the potential outcomes of South Hill becoming a city.

Ideally, the meeting would have South Hill residents from different walks of life. Pierce County can inform the public about this meeting through online engagement and by informing prominent community organizations. This would gather the “citizens and decision-makers” needed for small-group and eventually large-group discussions.

After hearing what the participants have to say, Pierce County can use that information to gauge community readiness for incorporation.

In order to create a comfortable setting in which diverse opinions can be shared, the following recommendations should be considered:

Treat the meetings as a “hang out”. Offer food, arrange a meeting space without visual hierarchy, and keep the setting casual. By keeping the meeting low-stakes or informal, participants will be more likely to open up and share their opinions. Be mindful of the access needs of diverse community members. Avoid setting the meeting at a time when target participants are commuting to work or dropping kids off at school. Picking a time and meeting place that is accessible and feasible for the target audience is essential.

Accommodate for different age groups, linguistic needs, and abilities. This could include considering accessibility for disabled or elderly individuals, offering translation services, and providing play stations for parents with children.

A well-run public meeting could provide invaluable insight into the desires of South Hill residents for their community and their hopes and concerns as it relates to incorporation as a possible future. Ideally, Pierce County would host multiple meetings to provide opportunities for a wide array of perspectives to be shared. The overarching goal of these meetings would be informing and hearing from local residents, so that next steps for potential incorporation can be identified with input from the South Hill community.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Youth involvement is a pivotal aspect of any community engagement strategy which desires to meet the needs of all residents. This requires a process of partnership, learning, education, and synthesis (Derr et al., 2019). The proportion of residents under 18 years old in South Hill is 8% higher than the proportion in Washington state (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024.b), which emphasizes the importance of engaging young people in planning for this area.

A proposed process for youth engagement in South Hill is outlined below. This process could be adapted for different organizations and clubs with engagement activities appropriate for a variety of ages. Additional suggested engagement activities are described in Table 5.3E in Appendix E.

Pre-Engagement: Build Partnership

The first step in effective youth engagement is developing effective partnerships with youth-serving organizations. In South Hill, this includes local schools, school clubs, the South Hill Little League and other sports leagues or teams, and places where young people can volunteer (e.g. Pierce County Library’s South Hill Teen Council, Coordinators of the Junior and High School service hours programs).

An example of what this might look like would be partnering with Roger’s High School to include engagement sessions in their 11th and 12th-grade

civics class. The engagement team would work with the teacher to determine what students already know and what relevant educational information the team would need to incorporate in their sessions.

Session 1: Learn about Initial Connections

To understand the perspectives that young people bring, the engagement process should begin with a session focused on understanding what young people value about their South Hill community, using activities that foster students' own interest and excitement for the topic. Engagement methods that may be effective include appreciative inquiry, model making, participatory mapping, photovoice, or walking tours. Additionally, youth engagement exercises similar to the mental mapping done at schools by University of Washington Tacoma professor Matthew Kelley could be used. This session could elicit responses to overarching questions about what students like about South Hill and what they wish could be better.

Session 2: Educate about Incorporation

Any youth engagement approach should include education at its core because young people often lack the lived experience to contextualize the topics they are being asked to engage with (Derr et al., 2019). This is particularly true in the context of the complicated decision of whether or not to incorporate. For young people to understand this process, a significant amount of foundational information needs to be provided to them.

An engagement session should incorporate activities that give young people the ability to understand the complexity of government in a hands-on way. Engagement methods that may be effective include walking tours and storytelling. In South Hill, these methods would allow the participants to see the real-world impacts of existing government structures and to respond with narration of how these facts about their community shape their own experiences.

Topics for youth education in the South Hill engagement process should include:
Levels of government, such as the city and county
What governments do, such as build and maintain infrastructure, ensure public safety, and maintain public parks
What incorporation is, with examples of what has happened when other cities incorporated
Current conditions in South Hill and what they mean for daily life.

Session 3: Synthesize Ideas and Vision

To make the learnings from the first two sessions impactful for future planning, the final session should focus on the future, using activities that allow young people to express what they would like to see change and improve in the South Hill community. Participants should be guided in identifying whether incorporation would aid or hinder these visions. Engagement methods that may be effective include appreciative inquiry, model making, or storytelling. This session could invite responses to overarching questions about what students want for South Hill and what it would take to make those things happen.

Youth Engagement is essential for connecting South Hill's youth with the decision-making process for their community's future and requires a well-planned process like the one outlined above to inform them and learn from their perspective.

FURTHER DISCUSSION

Planning an effective community engagement strategy for South Hill is essential to develop community knowledge about incorporation and to understand what the community values and hopes for in the future. Following the best practices and recommendations above would provide a strong foundation for achieving the community engagement goals of this pre-incorporation process.