

Whidbey Environmental Action Network

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Board of County Commissioners, Island County [CommentBOCC@islandcountywa.gov](mailto:BOCC@islandcountywa.gov)

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Thursday, September 10, 2026

Dear Board of Island County Commissioners (cc Planning Staff and Ecology Staff),

On behalf of Whidbey Environmental Action Network (WEAN), and consistent with our July 20, 2026 letter on Ecology's required change REQ-10, I write regarding the erosion-demonstration language in the Shoreline Master Program now before you for final adoption (Ord. C-47-26 / PLG-004-26). We have reviewed the adopted text of ICC 17.05A.095.C.1, 17.05A.110.A.2.d(ii), and 17.05A.110.A.5.f(i) as it appears in the final approval package.

We want to begin by acknowledging your progress. Much of the revised text responds directly to concerns we raised in July. First, ICC 17.05A.095.C.1.a reinstates the "conclusive evidence" standard, as Ecology required. Second, the adopted 095.C.1.c restores the WAC's analytical method—"by estimating time frames and rates of erosion and report on the urgency associated with the specific situation"—which the July 15 substitute had stripped out, leaving only the conclusion clause. That addition resolves the circularity we identified in paragraph 1 of our July 20 letter. We appreciate the responsiveness.

We remain concerned on one point—across all three provisions, the adopted text deletes "based on a trend analysis of prior rates of erosion". We ask the Board not to adopt the SMP with that deletion, for the following reasons:

1. This is a reduction below the existing SMP, not merely conformance to the WAC, and it comes at a time when we know habitat loss on shorelines is accelerating with very real consequences. The state guidelines are a floor. No, the phrase "based on a trend analysis of prior rates of erosion" does not appear in WAC 173-26-231—but it is a specific protection that the current

Island County SMP already contains, requiring a documented, quantitative, historical basis for the erosion finding. Substituting the bare WAC minimum for an existing, more-rigorous local standard during a periodic review lowers the demonstration-of-need threshold for hard armoring. That is inconsistent with the no-net-loss obligation of WAC 173-26-186(8) and with the last-resort policy for structural stabilization under RCW 90.58.020, and periodic review is not the vehicle for weakening a protection the program already provides. Staff's own presentation to the Board confirms the effect: it describes the revised language as "allowing more flexibility for Coastal Engineers performing risk analysis of structures." The Act and the Guidelines call for shoreline decisions to rest on scientific and technical information (WAC 173-26-201(2)(a)), and "flexibility" in this context means an erosion-threat determination that need not be anchored in measured data—a professional judgment call the that record may not support. A trend analysis of prior erosion rates supplies that evidentiary anchor; the standard should require it regardless of who performs the analysis.

2. The County already treats a trend analysis as the appropriate basis elsewhere in the same section. New subsection ICC 17.05A.095.C.1.f retains the trend-analysis standard for replacement and expansion of existing stabilization, allowing a detailed onsite evaluation as a substitute only "where a trend analysis of prior rates of erosion may not be feasible to obtain." If a documented trend analysis is the appropriate and attainable basis for authorizing replacement and expansion, there is no principled reason new stabilization—the category with the greatest potential for net loss of ecological function—should be held to a lesser, estimate-only standard. Reinserting the clause in the new-construction provisions simply brings them up to the standard the County already applies to replacement and expansion.

WEAN urges the Board to reinsert "based on a trend analysis of prior rates of erosion" in ICC 17.05A.095.C.1.c, 17.05A.110.A.2.d.(ii), and 17.05A.110.A.5.f.(i), retaining the estimate-and-urgency method language now in the text, so that both the documented historical basis and the WAC method are required.

This is a small fix with a large payoff for the durability of the program. Reinserting a single clause the current SMP already contains would align the three new-construction provisions with the standard the County already applies to replacement and expansion, and preserve a protective standard the County has relied on for years. We share the Board's interest in bringing this long process to a close on a footing that will hold up over time, and we believe this change gets you there.

We understand there are voices asking for this change. When shoreline property owners and their consultants ask for more flexibility, accommodating them can feel like responsive governance. It is important to be clear-eyed about the trade. A bulkhead protects a single parcel, while the beach it scours, the habitat it erases, and the landward migration it blocks are losses borne by the whole community and by the species that depend on a functioning nearshore. Lowering the bar for making data-informed decisions about armoring is a move in the wrong direction.

Please include this letter in the record of the SMP periodic review.

Sincerely,

Marnie Jackson

she/her

Executive Director

call 360-222-3345, text 360-404-7870

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