

Community Character

WHAT YOU WILL FIND IN THIS CHAPTER:

- A basic framework that celebrates Tukwila’s history, builds on its diversity, and fosters civic engagement while accommodating growth that furthers the community’s vision;
 - A discussion of issues that shape Tukwila’s identity and describe the community’s vision for safety and security, healthy living, communication, and public engagement;
 - Goals and policies for promoting the positive community character envisioned; and
 - Goals, policies, and strategies to achieve a stronger community and expand regional opportunities
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PURPOSE

The Community Character element establishes the framework that celebrates the City’s history and environment – both physical and social. The community’s character reflects both the values placed on the views of Mt. Rainier, the Cascades, and the Green/Duwamish River system, but also the social values surrounding the community’s diversity and vision for compassion and support, governmental responsiveness, civic engagement, and the components that are essential to making Tukwila a safe, secure, successful, forward-looking community.

ISSUES

Tukwila is an economically and geographically unique community. It has a large proportion and expanse of commercial and industrial activity compared to the amount of residential development.

It is divided into distinct areas by freeways and crisscrossing arterials, with the Green/Duwamish River winding throughout the entire length of the City. The hillsides and valleys in the area further split the City into numerous, almost disconnected segments. Local streets and major arterials do not follow a predictable grid pattern. Large industrial and commercial developments, together with associated parking, tend to dominate the City’s landscape when seen from freeways and major arterials. This persists as the overall image of the City despite the community’s many areas of quiet residential streets and abundant vegetation. This geology also contributes to a sense of division between neighborhoods, resulting in the challenge of developing solutions that serve all the residents.

Spectacular views of Mount Rainier, the Cascade Mountains and even the Seattle skyline are available from many hillsides around the City. In addition, numerous streets run along the hillsides and afford sweeping vistas of land and greenery. And finally, the Green/Duwamish River and Tukwila Pond could serve as prominent and dramatic elements of the community's image and identity. The potential of these two natural features as unique amenities has yet to be fully realized.

Despite the region's wealth and the ongoing investments in public and human services, inequity persists and has in some cases expanded. Historical data has consistently revealed disparities in social, educational, health and economic outcomes based on race, income, and other factors. Tukwila's community, similar to other South King County cities, has experienced lower incomes, less educational attainment, higher rates of chronic disease and morbidity, and a higher percentage of residents needing human services assistance.

Tukwila's high numbers of immigrants, refugees and their children may struggle as they seek employment or services or when in the classroom, trying to learn English while receiving limited support for their home language and culture. Long-time residents, including minorities, seniors, adults, and families, may face challenges in meeting basic needs.

Native American Culture and Settlement in Tukwila Area¹

[“In days gone by, there was once a war between the North Wind people and the Chinook Wind people. Chinook Wind was married to Mountain Beaver Woman, the daughter of North Wind. The people of North Wind village did not like the man and so they killed him and his tribe. The only one left alive was Chinook Wind's mother, an old woman who lived on a stone mountain down along the Duwamish River.”](#)

[So begins the *Epic of the Winds*, a story told by Southern Coast Salish peoples that recounts the creation of the post-glacial landscape and climate of the Duwamish/Green River valley. The tale is one of the best-known indigenous stories of the central Puget Sound region and prominently features locations that are in what is now known as Tukwila.](#)

¹ Sources:

[David B. Williams, *Homewaters: A Human and Natural History of Puget Sound* \(Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2021\). Excerpted in *Seattle Times*, June 20, 2021. <Link>](#)

[Alan Stein, *Story of the Origin of the North Wind Weir on the Duwamish River* \(HistoryLink.org, 2000\). <Link>](#)

[Alan Stein, *Fort Dent Park* \(HistoryLink.org, 2003\). <Link>](#)

[The Waterlines Map, Burke Museum, 2014. <Link>](#)

[Coll-Peter Thrush, *The Lushootseed Peoples of Puget Sound Country* \(University of Washington Libraries\). <Link>](#)

[Muckleshoot Indian Tribe: https://www.muckleshoot.nsn.us/about](https://www.muckleshoot.nsn.us/about)

[Duwamish Tribe: https://www.duwamishtribe.org/culture-today](https://www.duwamishtribe.org/culture-today)

[Cultural Resources Assessment for the 42nd Avenue South Bridge Replacement Project, prepared by Cultural Resource Consultants, 2024.](#)

North Wind’s Weir, a rock formation in the river channel near Cecil Moses Park; beaver lodge (stxəqáx^w), now known as the Duwamish Hill Preserve; and Grandmother hill, across the river from the Allentown Bridge and Tukwila Community Center, are elements of a landscape that was imbued with meaning and power.

Prior to dredging, damming, and re-channelization by Euro-Americans, the Duwamish watershed connected a huge, well-populated area via the Black River (connecting to Lake Washington, Lake Sammamish, and the Cedar River), the White River (connecting to Enumclaw plateau and Mt. Rainier foothills), the Green River valley, and the vast Salish Sea. This river system provided both a travel network and, with seasonal salmon harvests, an abundant source of food. The confluence of the Black and Duwamish rivers, a place known as sq^wuʔalq^wuʔ or “meeting of rivers” at what is today Tukwila’s Fort Dent Park, was among the most important places in this river system and was the site of a permanent winter village.

Villages like this included several long, communal cedar plank houses, which served as the central hubs for activities and were the heart of social and ceremonial life. Every year, with the arrival of spring and warmer weather, families would disperse from winter villages, traveling by canoe to hunt, fish, gather, and trade at long-accustomed sites. This was part of a sustainable and resilient lifestyle based on collaboration between groups inhabiting different watersheds. Through these patterns of travel and interaction, native tribes established a rich and enduring culture across the region over thousands of years.

The cultural identity of the Southern Coast Salish peoples, shaped over millennia, faced an existential threat with the occupation of native lands by Euro-American settlers. This displacement was codified by the treaties of Medicine Creek and Point Elliot in 1854/55, which gave legal sanction to the removal of native people and established designated tribal reservations. Tribal sovereignty was further threatened by the 1887 Dawes Act, which permitted the sale of already limited reservation lands to settlers. These events, aimed at fundamentally altering or erasing indigenous ways of life, continue to profoundly shape life in Tukwila in ways both seen and unseen.

Despite these challenges, Southern Coast Salish peoples remain resilient and strong. Landmark legal victories, such as the Boldt Decision of 1974, represent ongoing efforts to reclaim and protect treaty-established sovereign rights. Today, local tribes and organizations, including the federally recognized Muckleshoot, Tulalip, and Suquamish tribes and the Duwamish tribe, which seeks federal recognition, continue to serve their communities and honor tribal heritage through preservation of traditional language, fishing and culinary practices, music, art, and dance, canoe journeys and cultural celebrations.

Historic Preservation and Cultural Awareness

While Tukwila has a rich history that has involved farming, the river, rail transportation and the development of the aircraft industry, there are few visible indications of its earlier days. With the exception of the Museum of Flight, the Duwamish Hill Preserve and some interpretive markers along the Green/Duwamish River, there are no explanations or celebrations of the major features of the community’s heritage, such as the Interurban rail line. Only a few places are given any degree of commemoration with respect to their role in the history and growth of Tukwila.

Due to Tukwila’s location on the Green/Duwamish River, the area has been home to many Native American settlements and plays an important role in local Native American culture. Development along certain portions of the river has exposed artifacts from the days when Native Americans travelled the river and camped along its banks. These artifacts require protection from future development, and improved interpretation so that the public can appreciate their origin and significance. The Muckleshoot Tribe continues to be actively involved in preserving and improving the habitat quality of the Green/Duwamish River.

Cultural Diversity

Tukwila’s demographics have changed significantly in the nearly 30 years since the original Comprehensive Plan was adopted. Similar to changes seen throughout all South King County, Tukwila has become home to a diverse mix of people from many backgrounds and countries. Our challenge is to create a community where residents – including both the long-term and the recently-arrived, with varied backgrounds, traditions, languages, and countries of origin – feel connected and committed to each other, their neighborhoods, their community groups and organizations, and to the City as a whole.

Many people feel involved in their own piece of Tukwila, be it a block, a neighborhood, a business park or a particular linguistic, cultural or interest group. In planning for the whole community, Tukwila has sought to ensure that its planning efforts provide a shared sense of belonging and involvement in Tukwila as a whole. To achieve that, the City has conducted culturally appropriate and language-specific approaches to encourage participation in City planning efforts that include the development of the City’s Strategic Plan (2012), as well as the City’s Comprehensive Plan.

City Boundaries

There is little sense of entering or leaving either the community as a whole or individual neighborhoods, because in many areas the City limits are irregular or do not coincide with natural boundaries. In addition, Tukwila’s growth through petitioned annexations has created certain boundary anomalies:

- The border configuration between Tukwila and Seattle in the King County Airport area, in which the boundary crosses Interstate 5 more than once and splits certain industrial properties, creates a number of jurisdictional issues, including police response.

- On the southwest, the boundary between Tukwila and SeaTac crosses Interstate 5 and other streets in several places, creating difficulties for the reasonable provision of services. With major expansion largely ended, there is an opportunity to make Tukwila’s size and extent more visible by providing identifiable boundary markers.

Commercial Development, Urban Design, and Safety

Previous planning strategies noted that residents and businesses want a safe and visually attractive community. The design of residential and commercial development is key to accomplishing this goal. Visually attractive development occurs through the application of design criteria that are functional, attractive, and safe. Safe and visually attractive communities are also achieved through the enforcement of existing standards.

City planning and investment in infrastructure promotes safe, attractive neighborhoods and business districts, and supports and enhances Tukwila’s position as a major shopping and employment center. Areas of focus include making the City more accessible for bicyclists and walkers, and engaging residents and businesses in setting expectations for how Tukwila’s public and private spaces will look.

Perceived or actual lack of safety and security can hinder both individual and community development and feelings of well-being. The City continues to seek opportunities to collaborate with the whole community to reduce and prevent crime and enhance the overall sense of safety and security.

Security also extends to emergency planning for natural and man-made emergency events, such as earthquakes, terrorism, or the effects of climate change. The City anticipates and has planned for these types of situations through efforts such as its Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan, and Continuity of Operations Plan. Strategies that enhance public safety and security will ultimately strengthen the community.

Healthy Living and Parks, Recreation and Open Space

The urban form – including the infrastructure and built environment – affects the health of residents and workers, as well as the overall community identity. The proximity of trails, sidewalks for safe walking, transit connections to reduce the use of single-occupant vehicles that contribute to air pollution, the availability of recreation programs, and access to healthy and affordable food choices all contribute to the health of a community.

The importance of providing healthy living choices is reflected throughout the Comprehensive Plan especially in this element, as well as in the Parks, Recreation and Open Space, Economic Development, and Transportation elements.

In the past, community members have consistently expressed their desire for better access to recreational opportunities, safer routes to schools for children, and better access to affordable, good quality food, including fresh fruits and vegetables. The U.S. Department of Agriculture identified Tukwila as a “food desert,” based on its definition that Tukwila’s low-

income census tracts show a significant number of residents are located more than one mile from the nearest supermarket.

Expanding access to healthy food and providing job training opportunities is an important City goal. The City will continue to seek out opportunities to ensure that community members have access to hands-on vocational training that provides the opportunity to become better integrated into local communities and economies.

Community Image

Tukwila’s image, as perceived within the community and region and portrayed by the media, is often at odds with its many positive attributes. The City faces challenges in shifting negative perceptions about public safety and crime to create and communicate an image that better reflects reality, engages residents, and attracts visitors and businesses.

Communication and Involvement

Meetings at City Hall, printed mailings and website articles often have been used to inform citizens about issues and events and solicit their opinions and involvement in City affairs. While these methods are effective with some people, a broader approach is necessary to communicate to the full community. Some Tukwila residents may choose to be involved in City activities, while others may not be involved or represented due to cultural differences, language issues, age, economic status, or lack of time or awareness. Diverse communities may require the use of new methods of communication and engagement.

City processes and regulations that seem confusing and difficult for the public may present an additional obstacle to clear communication and engagement between the community and the City. A key challenge is developing communication tools that are clear, effective, and appropriate, so that all residents are aware of and can choose to participate in the processes and decisions that affect them. Communication within and across City departments is crucial for developing a coordinated approach to problem-solving.

Regional Opportunity and Role

Many issues that the City faces are not exclusive to Tukwila and are prevalent throughout the region. City representatives participating in various regional forums can both drive and support policy and strategy that benefits Tukwila. The City’s activities in regional partnerships can help it achieve its long-term goals.

For example, the City’s Human Services program has long engaged with other cities and King County to craft more efficient ways to plan and deliver services and provide strategic direction about how the County allocates funds for housing and community development. Emergency Management staff participate in multiple regional planning efforts, including maintaining the Regional Coordination Framework so that resources can be shared between jurisdictions and efficiencies gained. Community Development staff are involved with inter-jurisdictional groups to analyze, develop, and share data, policies, and standards. Participation by elected officials in local, regional, Statewide, and national

organizations provides many benefits, including education on emerging issues and forging valuable partnerships.

GOALS AND POLICIES

Overall Community Design

GOAL CC-1 A community of inviting neighborhoods and vibrant business districts that are visually attractive, draw visitors, add value to the community and encourage people to walk, bike and use transit.

POLICIES

Policy CC-1.1 Encourage the creation of locations and facilities where residents of all ages and cultures can gather for activities and events, such as public markets, parades, and festivals, including those that are representative of the City’s diverse population.

Policy CC-1.2 Capitalize on the potential that public projects, arts, and cultural facilities have for serving as symbols of the community, catalyzing local development, and contributing to a unique sense of place within a neighborhood.

Policy CC-1.3 Expand the system of incentives, tools, and supports that encourage investment in and maintenance of private and public spaces.

Policy CC-1.4 Encourage placemaking through creative use of signage, art, landmark designation and improvement, and streetscape improvements.

Policy CC-1.5 Require that sites have adequate lighting and are designed using crime-reduction principles to increase safety.

Policy CC-1.6 Seek opportunities to integrate public art into public improvements.

GOAL CC-2 Design streets to create a cohesive network, including continuous non-motorized improvements that connect to the surrounding business and residential neighborhoods and enhance the visual quality of the community.

Policy CC-2.1 Where appropriate and feasible, provide lighting, seating, landscaping, and other amenities for sidewalks, walkways, and trails.

- Policy CC-2.2 Provide street lighting where needed and appropriate based on neighborhood context to improve visibility and safety while minimizing light/glare spillover.
- Policy CC-2.3 Maintain, improve, and expand distinctive gateway features located at freeway off-ramps and at City limit lines where they cross major arterial streets; use graphics, orientation maps, informational signage, lighting, specimen trees, plantings with seasonal color, artwork, monument forms, or combinations thereof.
- Policy CC-2.4 Promote the planting of street trees and other landscaping standards to enhance corridor appearance, neighborhood identification and streetscape unity.
- Policy CC-2.5 Where possible, encourage developments to include pedestrian weather protection, see-through glass, and distinctive rooflines in new and redeveloped building facades.

Tukwila’s Past, Present, and Future

GOAL CC-3 Paleontological and archaeological artifacts and sites with cultural and Native American significance are protected and preserved.

POLICIES

- Policy CC-3.1 Ensure that the potential for the existence of paleontological and archaeological sites is considered during development of new construction projects.
- Policy CC-3.2 Identify and protect archaeological resources and culturally significant sites and develop interpretive information that fosters public appreciation of historical traditions and practices.

GOAL CC-4 A heritage conserved and interpreted so that Tukwila’s citizens recognize connections with the past and celebrate the diverse cultures represented in the community today.

POLICIES

- Policy CC-4.1 Identify, protect, and designate historically significant properties, structures and sites.

- Policy CC-4.2 Provide prominent public art and interpretive markers that celebrate the City’s history of important buildings, sites, events or persons.
- Policy CC-4.3 Establish a process for providing incentives for the preservation and reuse of historic landmarks.
- Policy CC-4.4 Develop and implement plans, projects, and programs to protect and promote the historical legacy of the Green River Valley and its natural and built environment.
- Policy CC-4.5 The Tukwila Arts Commission shall ensure that Tukwila’s characteristics, such as its history and cultural diversity, are considered in public art projects.
- ~~Policy CC-4.6 Coordinate with tribes in regional and local planning, recognizing the mutual benefits and potential for impacts between growth occurring within and outside tribal boundaries.~~

GOAL CC-5 The Tukwila community is proud of its cultural diversity, distinctive identity, and unique character.

POLICIES

- Policy CC-5.1 City staff and leaders seek opportunities to generate positive media coverage of the community and its attributes.
- Policy CC-5.2 Promote Tukwila’s international diversity as a strength.
- Policy CC-5.3 Actively promote community engagement of all sectors of the City’s diverse population using a wide range of innovative methods responsive to variety of communication requirements.
- Policy CC-5.4 Encourage and support communities in celebrating, preserving, and transmitting their traditions through cultural and heritage activities and education.
- Policy CC-5.5 Develop programs and City-wide events to celebrate the City’s cultural diversity.
- Policy CC-5.6 Enhance linkages with the school districts serving Tukwila to recognize and support the strengths of Tukwila’s multi-lingual student body.

GOAL CC-6 A healthy community where active living and access to affordable, culturally appropriate, and nutritious food is available to all.

POLICIES

Policy CC-6.1 Encourage the development of public, private and non-profit partnerships to support the goal of healthy eating and active living, including education and awareness.

Policy CC-6.2 Develop and implement a communication plan and Healthy Tukwila website with information and links about healthy eating, active living, and related topics – including strategies for reaching communities who do not speak English or use computers (e.g., translated written as well as verbal).

Policy CC-6.3 Provide healthy and culturally appropriate food and beverages in City programs and facilities to promote healthy eating habits.

GOAL CC-7 Food security, local food production and public health are promoted.

POLICIES

Policy CC-7.1 Explore incentives or regulatory changes to encourage location of healthy food purveyors in underserved areas.

Policy CC-7.2 Support the Tukwila Food Pantry and other organizations that help provide food assistance to low-income residents so that all families, seniors, schools, and community–based organizations are able to access, purchase and increase intake of fresh fruits, vegetables, and other nutritious foods.

Tukwila Government - Service to the Community

GOAL CC-8 Provide a high-performing, service- and results-oriented government that works with citizens, citizens groups, institutions, and service providers to recognize and solve problems within the community.

POLICIES

- Policy CC-8.1 Support the City’s human services program in providing a solid foundation for all Tukwila residents through high-quality services and actively collaborating with service providers to help meet basic needs and job readiness, including:
- Safety net for urgent and basic needs,
 - Positive and healthy relationships,
 - Support for self-sufficiency, and
 - Information referral (and system navigation).²
- Policy CC-8.2 Enhance and encourage effective partnerships across City departments and with providers to meet community needs.
- Policy CC-8.3 Ensure that land use, urban design, transportation, economic development, and other policies, plans and projects in Tukwila consider human services impacts, and benefit existing and future populations in an equitable manner.
- Policy CC-8.4 Promote health, safety, and quality of life through responsive and responsible investment of public funds in social and human services.
- Policy CC-8.5 Enable culturally and linguistically appropriate equitable access to programs and services and help connect residents to service options, particularly for those most disproportionately cost-burdened or historically excluded.
- Policy CC-8.6 Adopt and use an equity impact review tool when developing plans and policies to test for outcomes that might adversely impact Black, Indigenous, and People of Color communities; immigrants and refugees; people with low incomes; people with disabilities; and communities with language access needs. Regularly assess the impact of policies and programs to identify actual outcomes and adapt as needed to achieve intended goals.
- Policy CC-8.7 Involve community groups especially immigrant, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color communities continuously in planning processes to promote civic engagement, government accountability, transparency, and personal agency.

² [DCD and Human Services staff recommended version of the policy.](#)

POLICIES

Communication and Engagement

- Policy CC-8.8 Use frequent and open communication and collaboration as an operating principle in all affairs of the City.
- Policy CC-8.9 Design and implement processes and programs to be user-friendly for the public and efficient for City staff.
- Policy CC-8.10 Strengthen the City’s ability to engage with diverse populations within the community, particularly those that do not participate in traditional formats, by using a variety of participation techniques to reach all segments of the population.
- Policy CC-8.11 Build meaningful and trusting connections between the City and the diverse communities that make up the broader Tukwila community to foster their participation and involvement in City affairs and decision-making processes.
- Policy CC-8.12 Encourage the participation of dedicated, community-oriented volunteers on City boards and commissions, striving to achieve a broad and balanced representation of members from the entire community.

Safety, Security, and Emergency Preparedness

- Policy CC-8.13 Foster an environment of safety and security for those who live in, work in, and visit Tukwila, through a broad and collaborative approach to reducing and preventing crime.
- Policy CC-8.14 Equip residents, businesses, and community service providers through education and training to be active participants in public safety (including, but not limited to, emergency preparedness, crime prevention, first aid, fire prevention, and climate-related hazards).
- Policy CC-8.15 The City Police Department works with community members and businesses to identify approaches to addressing crime in the City.
- Policy CC-8.16 Maintain and update as required a City-wide Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan (CEMP) and program, that:
- Establishes a comprehensive all-hazards approach to incident management;
 - Ensures ongoing operation and continuity of City government;
 - Uses the National Incident Management System (NIMS);
 - Serves to inform and educate City employees and the community about emergency preparedness measures for all hazards, including flood and climate-related emergencies;

- Effectively utilizes available resources from all City departments and mutual aid partners, in an adequate and timely response to emergency situations; and
- Addresses emergency preparedness for those with access and functional needs, coordinating a broad range of stakeholders to improve planning and responsive service.

- Policy CC-8.17 Continue to meet or exceed federal minimum standards for the National Flood Insurance Program to better protect public health and safety, and to achieve flood insurance premium discounts.
- Policy CC-8.18 Ensure the City of Tukwila’s continued participation in the National Flood Insurance Program through periodic review and updating of flood plain management standards and the flood zone construction permit process.
- Policy CC-8.19 Encourage long-term community environmental security by supporting and implementing the U.S. Conference of Mayor’s Climate Protection Agreement, climate pledges and commitments undertaken by the City, and other multi-jurisdictional efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, address climate change and other impacts of changing global conditions.
- Policy CC-8.20 Lead by example to establish policy decisions and priorities, and design programs and facilities that consider long-term impacts on natural and human environments to address sustainability and climate change.

Regional Responsibility

GOAL CC-9 Foster a strong sense of Tukwila’s regional responsibility and accountability balanced by an awareness of regional impacts on the City and its citizens.

POLICIES

- Policy CC-9.1 Accept Tukwila’s responsibility to coordinate regionally on the siting or expansion of Essential Public Facilities (see Land Use policies).
- Policy CC-9.2 Site public capital facilities of a Countywide or Statewide nature to support the Countywide land use pattern, support economic activities, mitigate environmental impacts, provide amenities or incentives, and minimize public costs. Amenities or incentives shall be provided to neighborhoods/jurisdictions in which facilities are sited.

Policy CC-9.3 Work with affected citizens, property owners and the neighboring cities of SeaTac, Kent, and Seattle to develop interlocal agreements that may be necessary to address concerns regarding shared borders.

GOAL CC-10 Benefit the community by participating in regional, State, and national forums.

Policy CC-10.1 Enhance Tukwila’s interests through participation in regional, State, and national organizations and committees, and by developing partnerships that can benefit the City, its residents, businesses, and the natural environment.

RELATED INFORMATION

[Tukwila Strategic Plan](#), 2012, amended 2018

[Tukwila Capital Improvement Program](#), Biennial Budget 2023-2024

[Food Access Research Atlas](#), U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service

[Food Innovation Network](#)