

Steering the Shoals

Communicating Shoreline Management Planning



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SHORELINE MANAGEMENT: REGAINING MOMENTUM

Puget Sound shoreline communities from Poulsbo to Port Angeles, and from Friday Harbor to Olympia, are beloved by their inhabitants for their beauty, natural bounty, and accessibility. It's no wonder that the region's population is projected to nearly triple between 1960 and 2040, with central waterfront communities counted among the fastest growing in the state. Scores of communities are updating their Shoreline Master Programs (SMP) to ensure intact, functioning shorelines that will continue to provide habitat for fish and wildlife, support salmon, protect water quality and preserve our historic shellfish industry – all while providing possibilities for safe commercial and residential development.



Many of these efforts have encountered stiff opposition. Despite the work of both government leaders and conservationists, property owners find the complex SMP process opaque and confusing, so that even those who want to “do the right thing” on their property, or could support the new plans, end up disaffected. And in the media, opposition to SMP updates has created a troubling conversation in which the importance of strengthened protections has been lost in an upsurge of property owner concern.

WHY A MESSAGE GUIDE

Today's challenge for planners and advocates is twofold: to communicate the benefits of robust SMP updates in an accessible, inclusive way to residents, and to address property owners' concerns comprehensively and realistically. This Message Guide offers guidance on both counts, and will, we hope, help practitioners build support for strengthened shoreline protection. It is based on a comprehensive media audit, interviews with participants on all sides of the debate, and relevant public opinion data. The guide provides a framework and specific tools to tell the compelling story of the benefits of SMP's, so that strong, effective plans can take root around the Sound, with the full support of the communities they are designed to serve.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Put People at the Center

Focusing on the role people play in their environment, and the tremendous benefits to people and communities that accrue from strong SMP's, is the building block of effective communications for the update process.

Hearken Back to History

Tell residents about the inspiring story of the first shoreline planning, and of the visionary group of citizens who worked to protect our special way of life.

Avoid Jargon

As challenging as it may be, avoid planning jargon. The use of acronyms and jargon sends the wrong message, and makes it harder for would-be supporters to connect to the issue.

Define the Problem

Connect the dots between the science and the shorelines for residents; show them why the SMP process will help their specific community and the very specific problems it faces. Instead of relying on scientific generalization, meet the community where it is and focus on particular problems in your particular place.

Offer Solutions

Tell property owners what they *can* do. Talk about the possibilities for growth and development that a strong program allows, and the incentives for property owners to do the right thing. Assume they want to do the right thing, and support them in making it happen.

Reframe, Don't Rebut

Don't rebut the "anti-government" frame – this just strengthens it. Instead, reframe the SMP conversation around deeply held values like health, safety, and the interests of future generations.

Tell How the Story Ends

Paint a picture of a healthy, thriving shoreline community once an SMP is complete. You can contrast this with examples of shoreline planning gone awry – and the unchecked growth that has hurt some communities. But don't rely on threats alone. Look to a positive future.

Use Imagery

A picture is worth a thousand words. Instead of relying solely on words, charts and tables, use photographs and other images to convey the beauty and power of Puget Sound shorelines, the threats they face, and local examples of bluff loss, channel migration, and species loss.

VALUES IN THE CURRENT SMP MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Media Scan

To better understand the current state of play around SMP updates, we conducted a comprehensive media analysis of SMP media coverage in Puget Sound outlets between June 2011 and June 2012. We analyzed all 53 relevant news stories, 18 opinion pieces, and scores of blogs, tweets and Facebook posts, with particular focus on identifying trends in values-based messaging.

Values-Based Messaging

People are more likely to believe in and act on messages that tap into their core values – the concerns at the heart of their lives. Safety, prosperity, the health of future generations – these are bedrock values for most Americans. When conservation advocates speak to these shared values, our messages are persuasive and generate community support. Conversely, when advocates neglect to include appeals to fundamental shared values, our ability to tap into existing support and catalyze new engagement will fall short. In the SMP context, a focus on shared values is particularly important because of the charge associated with government regulatory processes.

Key Findings

Current media coverage of SMP updates reflects two problematic dynamics. First, opposition messaging is well-disciplined, loud, and focused almost exclusively on core values like freedom and prosperity. Our audit shows that opponents currently dominate the SMP conversation, alienating potential supporters, and creating a false impression that whole communities oppose these protective plans.

In contrast, SMP proponent messaging highlights the bureaucratic process of program revisions at the expense of shared values. The pro-SMP community's messaging has centered, understandably, on the details of the updates. While informative to insiders, this emphasis has meant that most messages do not resonate with the average reader, who is concerned with on-the-ground impacts of proposed regulations. Speaking to the bureaucratic processes involved in SMP updates means missing the chance to speak to the values underlying these processes, values that will galvanize support among communities.

In contrast to a focus on process, values-based messaging is the most effective way to help audiences understand why they should care about, and support, new SMP's. Pro-update messaging must center on important core concerns such as the safety of homes and families, and the legacy we will leave our children and grandchildren in Puget Sound.

Traditional Media Coverage

For example, among the 53 news stories we analyzed:

- 80% of stories were process-heavy – meaning they centered on administrative proceedings with little focus on core values;
- 60% of stories featured SMP opponents messaging on threats to property rights or property values;
- Only 10% of stories featured pro-SMP values-based messaging.

Among the 18 opinion pieces we analyzed, including op-eds, editorials and letters to the editor:

- 35% of opinion pieces were process-heavy;
- 60% of opinion pieces featured opponents focused on property rights or property values;
- Only 15% of opinion pieces featured pro-SMP values-based messaging.

Digital Media Coverage

The most active and influential blogs covering SMP revisions are the Bainbridge Shoreline Homeowners and the Kitsap Alliance of Property Owners (KAPO) Wordpress blogs. Bainbridge Shoreline Homeowners represent the moderate opposition; KAPO, on the other hand, expresses the rhetoric of the property rights movement. These opposition blogs reflect both confusion (many bloggers and residents do not understand SMP political jargon), as well as alarm, fear and anger at “new” land use regulation. The property rights movement has also invested considerable resources in Freedom Foundation-sponsored YouTube video attacks against the Friends of the San Juans, though this approach does not yet seem to have spread beyond San Juan County.

Twitter conversation on SMPs is incredibly thin. Only 28 posts in the past year were relevant to the topic. Of those, most were simple tweets about the news stories we reviewed in our audit. The one influencer who stood out was @thegreengod of Bainbridge Island – a very high-authority user worth reaching out to on SMP updates.

On Facebook, the SMP conversation is also missing in action. With the exception of the San Juan County “Eco-Faux Disguised as Friend” page, there is no significant conversation of SMP revisions. Again, as with Twitter, this absence of conversation creates an opening for new SMP messaging and outreach.

The upside of this dearth of digital and social media conversations? Opportunities abound. Values-based, pro-SMP coverage is almost completely absent from the blogosphere. The Twitter field is also wide open, with opportunities to push out better messaging both within news stories and independently. Government, NGO players and other allies might consider an integrated blog/Twitter/Facebook campaign with innovative, values-based messaging to reach new audiences.

The Messenger

As important as message is the messenger. Government officials – both elected and appointed – currently dominate media coverage on the pro-SMP side. But officials are, unfortunately, among the least credible messengers for most audiences, according to extensive public opinion data. While opposition messengers project a grassroots image as homeowners talk about their own properties, fears and needs, government officials may appear, at worst, as out-of-touch bureaucrats. We strongly recommend that government messengers work closely with community supporters to put property owners at the forefront of the media conversation whenever possible.



The Powel family on Bainbridge Island, kicking off a public-private shoreline preservation partnership.

Public Opinion Research

By definition, persuasive messaging addresses a threat that audiences believe is real. Extensive polling tells us that most Puget Sound residents are not aware of the threats to the Sound’s waters and shorelines. Most residents see beautiful shorelines and seemingly pristine waters as they travel by ferry or car. They don’t see the hidden damage the Sound has suffered, nor do they see the threats that unchecked development poses to the future of our estuary. Many believe that the most serious threats to the health of the Sound disappeared with the demise of major paper mills and industrial plants – the point-source polluters who are no longer hurting water quality as they once did. SMP opposition blogs, letters and quotes reflect this data: opponents continually return to their belief that our shorelines are not in danger, and that SMP revisions are an unnecessary solution.

For that reason, SMP advocates must be very specific, detailed and clear in their explanation of the problem that updated programs will solve. One leverage point, borne out by public opinion research, is the widespread and deep concern about water pollution. This concern provides an opening. Two very recent polls tell us that Puget Sound residents believe that water pollution is the most pressing environmental issue facing the state. Notably, this is in contrast to their less urgent concern when asked more generally about “the health of Puget Sound.” Essentially, voters are moved by talk of specific pollutants in specific waterways. Oil and copper in the Sound; toxic runoff in local streams and rivers; declining salmon numbers in particular cities and rural areas. One important caveat: in many locales shoreline development has little to do with pollution. Be careful not to overplay this point. When pollution is really not the issue being addressed by an SMP update, be clear about that fact, and about the other reasons enhanced protection is so important. Addressing specific threats in specific places with specific solutions is the key to effective pro-SMP messaging.

In addition, because SMP updates are such a deeply local exercise, we urge planners and advocates not to rely too heavily on statewide polling data. Instead, delve into the local interests and concerns – receding bluffs, migrating river channels, loss of salmon streams – that residents intuitively understand. Focus on these threats and illustrating them with concrete examples and compelling visuals.

SMP MESSAGE AND STORYTELLING: BRINGING VALUES TO LIFE

Understanding the current media and public opinion landscape is the foundation for new, more effective messaging strategies. The next challenge is to develop compelling values-based messaging and deploy it through engaging stories.

Stories matter more than facts, more than figures, more than data. Human brains are wired to understand information through story, and we ignore this wiring at our peril. When we talk data and our opponents tell stories, we lose. Communications professionals often speak of message; message is all about the story. A strong, coherent values-based message is important. The stories that deploy that core message are just as important.

So let's begin with a core message. A message is the basic building block of strategic communication. A message is not a quote or a sound bite or list of talking points. A message is a basic explanation of your work – defining the problem and how you intend to fix it. Effective messages are factual, but contain more than facts alone. They speak to the heart first, and the head second. And all successful messages follow a simple formula: Values + Threat + Solution.

Recommended SMP Core Message

Our shorelines are changing. As the density of our communities increases, we want to ensure smart, safe growth that protects homeowners, public access to beaches, clean water, and the salmon, orcas and shellfish that make our way of life so special. Communities can work together to create sensible, comprehensive Shoreline Management Programs to protect our shorelines and ensure a healthy, prosperous future for our communities.

This message is based on the threat of poorly regulated growth. It activates the values of environmental stewardship, safety, and economic prosperity. And it offers SMP updates as a solution that includes everyone's input and serves the larger community for the long term.

Two SMP Stories

How do we tell a compelling SMP story – one that resonates, inspires, informs? Four elements are essential for any good story: a hero, a mission, tension or a villain, and a resolution.

Current SMP coverage makes the program itself the protagonist of the story, unfortunately. There is little evidence of mission, tension or resolution. Instead, the SMP story is told almost entirely from a

bureaucratic, process-oriented perspective, one that is unlikely to catalyze engagement in the larger community. A typical SMP story lead paragraph reads as follows:

After two years of drafting updates by section, a completed draft of the city of Poulsbo's Shoreline Master Program was presented to planning commissioners on Tuesday. It was the first time the commission has seen the document in its totality.

The Kitsap Sun, August 10, 2011.

Stories like this make it difficult for community members to connect with the values underlying revisions to the SMP. For those already interested, and activated both in opposition and support, these stories may transmit valuable information. For the rest of the community, they fall flat.

An alternative story can be told – one that activates core values and inspires support and engagement from a broad spectrum of residents. Here's a recent example:



[Residents] won't have to sit in a restaurant, won't have to join a yacht club...won't have to own a boat and pay for marina costs. They will be able to be down at the shoreline, and I think that's a pretty terrific thing. Because we have shoreline where people have public access, and that's what we reaffirmed tonight.

Poulsbo Mayor Becky Erickson, *The North Kitsap Herald*, May 3, 2012

The threat or tension here is an inaccessible shoreline; the hero is the public; the resolution is a plan that allows real access to a community treasure. This kind of story engages audiences by showing what's at stake, and that a solution is in sight. Refocusing the SMP story in this way is essential to long-term success of the programs.

MESSAGING RECOMMENDATIONS

We suggest eight best practices when delivering the core message recommended above. These practices will help ensure that your pro-SMP message is as accessible and impactful as possible:

1. *Put People at the Center*: Putting people at the center of the story matters most. Whether it's building on hazardous receding bluffs, or addressing the value fish stocks have for communities, connecting the dots between people and our natural areas is the key to effective SMP storytelling. Community leaders who've been through the update process recommend speaking early and often to the benefits that SMP's generate for

Sample Soundbite:

Strengthening shoreline protections today means safe homes, smart development and healthy salmon runs tomorrow, for our kids and grandkids.

families and communities, including the long-term benefits to future generations of preserving Puget Sound. While wildlife and ecosystem preservation are polestars of the update process, that mission alone will not galvanize widespread support. Remember to consider your audience and their values, and focus on those values, with people as the stars of the show. And remember to do this as soon as possible; starting out on a “people-centered” note helps defuse opposition before it takes hold.

2. *Hearken Back to History:* Many of the planners and elected officials we interviewed noted the deep importance of educating their communities on the history of shoreline planning. Help residents connect with the inspiring story of the Sound’s early preservation movement. Way back in 1971, there was a very real chance that Puget Sound would end up looking like San Francisco Bay (or, closer to home, some of the more developed Lake Washington cities if you’re speaking to audiences on the West side of the Sound) – polluted, devoid of fisheries, and built up to the very water’s edge with high-end residential and commercial development. A group of visionaries saw the challenges to come, and set out to preserve the special Puget Sound way of life. Reframe the updates as an extension of a grassroots movement to save the Sound, instead of as a government scheme. Explain that the update process is an opportunity to reflect on how much we have saved, and to ensure the Sound’s future, and the future of the communities who depend on it. Helping new arrivals to the Sound appreciate and resonate with those who have kept the Sound a special place to live, and recruiting them to see themselves in the same light, has proven powerful in Poulsbo, and in Clallam and Jefferson counties.

Sample Soundbite:

40 years ago Puget Sound residents pushed hard on state government to preserve our special way of life around the Sound, by protecting our shorelines from runaway development. Today we’re continuing the work they began, making sure our shorelines stay healthy and safe for people and wildlife.

3. *Avoid Jargon:* As challenging as this may be, it’s crucial to avoid planning jargon when talking with the public and the media about shoreline protection. The use of acronyms and insider jargon (like SMP, CAO, or “no net loss of ecological function”) sends the wrong message – that the update process is only for those who are already involved and who understand the issues. A useful tactic to help curb the use of acronyms and jargon: Talk about planning updates with family members who aren’t familiar with the issues. Explain why they matter and how they work using simple, clear language. Find out

Instead of SMP say “shoreline protection”

Instead of “no net loss” say “keeping our shorelines healthy” or “restoring our shorelines”

Instead of “ecosystem” name your particular body of water – the Stillaguamish River, Puget Sound, Lake Washington.

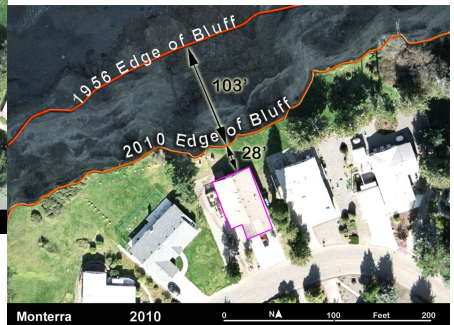
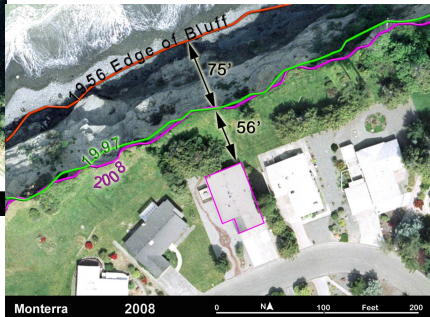
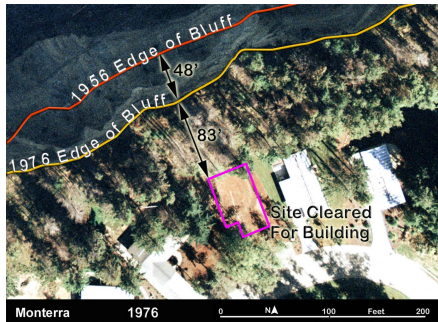
what's easy to understand and what's not, and use these lessons as you talk to reporters and the public.

4. *Define the Problem/Connect the Dots between Science*

and Shorelines: Extensive public opinion and survey data tells us that Puget Sound residents do not understand the precarious state of the Sound, and the impact their actions have on its health or decline. That lack of understanding is heightened when property owners become fearful about land use regulations. For this reason it's absolutely critical to walk audiences through the need for shoreline protection – the why of the update process in your particular community – and to distill scientific findings into plain English. Don't

assume that audiences understand the threats facing the Sound; and *never* assume they understand how buffers, setbacks and other interventions help protect our waters and their property values. Instead, explain the mechanisms at play in your jurisdiction. For example, talk about how plants stabilize the shoreline and uplands, and protect property. Talk about how trees and shrubs help reduce erosion and protect homes, and shade beaches to protect salmon and birds.

Led by consultants Jim Kramer and Margaret Clancy, Clallam and Jefferson Counties used time-lapse photography of receding bluffs in their public outreach work. Homeowners and consultants alike told us that this presentation was game-changing in enlisting support for a strengthened plan.



Courtesy of Margaret Clancy

5. *Offer Solutions/Tell People What They Can Do:* Updated shoreline plans offer powerful solutions to protect the Sound, but when framed purely as “don’ts,” they lose some of that power, and can activate a deep resistance to “big government,” even among progressive audiences. Whenever possible, talk about the possibilities for growth and development that a strong program allows, the incentives for landowners to do the right thing, and the benefits that accrue to them when they do. The specifics will vary from county to county, but keeping focused on the positives and the possibilities is an important way to promote a productive conversation. If at all possible, be available to property owners to help them navigate the new rules before conflict erupts.

Sample Soundbite:

Our new shoreline protection plan honors (our town’s/county’s) tradition of stewardship, encouraging homeowners to build smart, and rewarding those who protect their shores.

6. *Reframe, Don’t Rebut:* Anti-government rhetoric is on the rise locally and nationally. And the SMP media conversation is dominated by it. Instead of rebutting this frame, shift the conversation. For example, telling property owners that they have no natural right to increase their property values, or that there is no evidence SMPs have a negative impact on property values simply feeds into the frame that regulations are a burden that property owners should either get used to or believe in. A more persuasive way to address these concerns and messages is to step outside the frame altogether, and remind your audience of the “why” behind SMPs: the safety and health of our region, our homes, our families and the natural world we depend on. Move from there into a conversation about what’s possible, and what works, instead of trying to refute an inaccurate claim. This guidance applies to media and public conversations that feature highly-charged anti-government rhetoric. When in smaller or private discussions with property owners, it can be profoundly important to acknowledge their concerns, their expertise in caring for their land, and their desire to do the right thing for their property and the larger community.

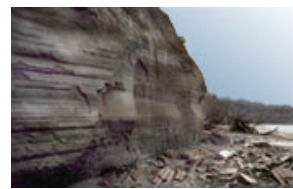
Instead of saying “don’t worry about property values” or “property values always go up and down,” say “what’s most important is to make sure that our town is healthy and safe for the families and wildlife that call it home. And updating our shoreline protection plan is the tool we have to make that happen.”

7. *Tell How the Story Ends:* Cognitive research tells us that people are willing to sacrifice and consider novel options when they can see a positive future that will result from their actions. For the shoreline protection conversation, this means talking about what a healthy Sound will look like, and what a healthy community will look like, in the longer term and for future generations. Threats alone are not convincing. A focus on what success will look like – for individual homeowners and for the larger community – is an important element in boosting morale for supporters and helping defuse negativity for opponents. For example, paint a picture of our grandchildren enjoying the Sound, healthy salmon runs and orca pods, and houses that will last decades instead of years even as bluffs recede and rivers change course.

Sample Soundbite:

Strengthening our shoreline protections is an investment with a big payoff: our children and grandchildren will have healthy waters to fish, clam and sail in, and clean beaches that they don't have to join a yacht club to access.

8. *Use Imagery as Much as Possible:* As the saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words, and a lot more than a thousand words of bureaucratese! The aerial time lapse photography discussed above, the reality of what unchecked development looks like in other cities and states; these startling images are far more convincing than reams of scientific data in showing property owners why setbacks just make sense. Similarly, searching for images that illustrate the loss of our salmon streams, the changing course of rivers, and the long-term effects of shoreline armoring are always more persuasive than the “long way around,” explaining findings in words. So whenever possible, make use of visuals to tell the SMP story.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

Margaret Clancy – ESA Consulting
Becky Erickson – Mayor, City of Poulsbo
Ryan Ericson – Shoreline Planner, City of Bainbridge
Stephanie Buffum Field – Executive Director, Friends of the San Juans
Hilary Franz – Executive Director, Futurewise
Ed Kilduff – Common Sense Alliance, Lopez Island
Jim Kramer – Kramer Consultants
Aaron Laing – Bellevue Planning Commissioner
Michelle McConnell – Associate Planner, Jefferson County
Sandra Romero – Thurston County Commissioner
Andy Stevenson – Jefferson County homeowner
Heather Trim – Policy Director, People For Puget Sound
Tim Trohimovich – Director of Planning and Law, Futurewise

MEDIA OUTLETS SURVEYED

Arlington Times	San Juan Islander
Bellingham Herald	San Juan Record
Crosscut	Seattle Post-Intelligencer
The Daily Herald	Seattlepi.com
Edmonds Beacon	Seattle Times
Everett Leader	Seattle Weekly
Everett News Tribune	Skagit Valley Herald
Everett Herald	Seattle Post Globe
Green Acre Radio – KBCS-FM	Snohomish County Tribune
Islands’ Sounder	Stanwood/Camano News
Journal of the San Juan Islands	Tacoma News Tribune
Journal Newspapers	Tacoma Weekly
Kitsap Sun	KIRO-FM
Mukilteo Beacon	KRKO-AM
North County Outlook	KSER-FM
The Olympian	KOMO-AM & FM
On the Green Front (radio—based on Bainbridge)	KUOW- FM
Port Townsend Leader	PubliCola (blog)
Puget Sound Business Journal	Sightline (blog)
Renton Reporter	Twitter
	Facebook