
Chapter 20.61

SMALL TOWN COMMERCIAL (STC) DISTRICT

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20.61.010 Purpose.

The Small Town Commercial Districts are located within rural communities and rural business areas identified in the Comprehensive Plan. This zoning district provides for an activity center where rural residents and others can gather, work, shop, entertain and reside. This district is to provide for a range of commercial uses and services to meet the everyday needs of rural residents and natural resource industries, to provide employment opportunities for residents of the rural area, and to provide goods, services, and lodging for travelers and tourists to the area. New development or redevelopment in an STC District located in a rural community designation is limited to that which is consistent with the character of the area on July 1, 1990, in terms of building size, scale, use, or intensity. New development in a rural business designation is limited to isolated small-scale businesses. (Ord. 2012-032 § 2 Exh. B, 2012; Ord. 2011-013 § 2 Exh. B, 2011; Ord. 99-012 § 1(2), 1999).

20.61.050 Permitted uses.

In a rural community designation, nonresidential uses listed below are permitted if a use of the same type existed in that same rural community designation on July 1, 1990, per WCC [20.80.100\(1\)](#). In a rural business designation all uses are permitted. Residential type uses listed below are permitted in rural community and rural business designations.

.051 Retail and office type uses.

(1) Automobile service stations.

(2) Service establishments with less than 2,500 square feet of floor area per establishment, including but not limited to barber and beauty shops, laundries, dry cleaners, printing establishments, furniture repair, frozen food lockers, funeral parlors, banks and financial institutions, fraternal organizations, neighborhood churches and professional offices.

(3) Veterinary practices and accessory kennels.

(4) Retail establishments with less than 2,500 square feet of retail floor area per establishment, including but not limited to liquor, drug, sundries, variety, clothing, florist, optical, sporting goods, appliance, craft, music, pet stores, and cannabis retail facilities.

(5) Tool and equipment rental, nurseries, hardware stores and building supplies with less than 5,000 square feet of retail floor area per establishment. The utilization of outdoor areas for display and storage purposes is permitted as an accessory use. Outdoor storage shall be within an enclosed fence.

(6) Grocery stores with less than 10,000 square feet of retail floor area.

(7) Day care centers.

(8) Public markets, subject to the following only:

(a) The applicant submits a plan which includes name, address, and phone number of the contact person; hours of operation; site layout indicating location of vendor stalls and plans for the stalls including provision for temporary tiedowns, trash disposal, and restroom facilities.

(b) The use is seasonal, restricted to a maximum of 150 days per calendar year.

(c) Provision is made for one parking space per 100 square feet of merchandise display area, sized in accordance with WCC [20.80.500](#).

(d) Perimeter stalls are oriented away from adjacent properties, with any outdoor equipment or trash receptacle screened from adjacent uses as per WCC [20.80.355](#).

(e) Hours are limited to 7:30 a.m. to 9:00 p.m.

(f) Accessible parking and restroom requirements of Chapter [51-30](#) WAC are complied with.

(g) Buffering or screening is provided from residences when a parcel adjoins an Urban Residential, Urban Residential Medium Density, Rural or Rural Residential District.

(h) Signage is consistent with WCC [20.80.440](#), except that, in addition, one placard not to exceed two feet by two feet shall be allowed for each individual stall.

(i) The use complies with the performance standards of WCC [20.64.700](#).

(j) No overnight camping or vehicle parking is allowed on site.

(k) Restrooms are adequately set back and buffered from adjacent properties.

.052 Self-service storage facilities totaling less than 2,500 square feet of floor area.

.053 Restaurant/lodging type uses.

(1) Eating and/or drinking establishments including restaurants and taverns, with or without on-site brewing facilities, and mobile food carts, including establishments with drive through facilities.

(2) Hotels, motels and conference centers.

.054 Automotive and equipment repair type uses.

(1) Motorized vehicles and equipment, motorcycle, marine, farm implement, light and heavy equipment and recreational vehicle service, repair, washing facilities, commercial storage or sale; provided, that:

(a) All repair services, other than replacement of lights, wiper blades, or other similar minor repairs or servicing shall be conducted within an enclosed building;

- (b) Adequate water supply and wastewater disposal for washing facilities shall be demonstrated by the applicant;
- (c) Security for the site shall be provided by the applicant;
- (d) Such a facility, and associated activities, shall not occupy more than four acres of a parcel;
- (e) The maximum permitted sales area for motorized vehicle and equipment sales shall not exceed one-half acre in size.

.055 Residential type uses.

(1) One single-family dwelling per lot of record, or duplexes subject to:

- (a) Health department requirements regarding soil type and water supply.
- (b) A deed restriction recorded with the Whatcom County auditor is attached to the lot(s) at the time of building permit issuance stating that the dwelling(s) is located in a Small Town Commercial Zone and buyers should be aware that commercial uses will be allowed on surrounding parcels and owners have no grounds for protest.
- (c) This permitted use is only allowed on lots created as of the effective date of the ordinance codified in this section.
- (d) Duplexes are subject to the density provisions of WCC [20.61.350](#).

(2) One residential unit per business establishment in a commercial structure subject to health department requirements regarding sewage disposal and water supply.

(3) Boarding homes that are similar in size, facilities and occupancy to other residential structures permitted in the zoning district.

.056 Public and community type uses.

(1) The operation of facilities intended to provide education related to forestry, agriculture and mining, including but not limited to demonstration forests and conservation laboratories.

(2) Public schools, and parochial or private schools; provided such schools shall be approved by the State Superintendent of Public Instruction.

(3) Public and community facilities including police and fire stations, libraries, community centers, museums, public parks and recreational facilities identified in an adopted city or county Comprehensive Plan or Park Plan, activity centers, tourist information offices and other similar noncommercial uses, excluding correction facilities.

(4) Post offices.

(5) Multi-use establishments; provided, that no more than 50 percent of the structure shall be used for residential dwellings.

(6) Trails, trailheads, restroom facilities and associated parking areas for no more than 30 vehicles.

(7) Adult family homes as defined in Chapter [70.128](#) RCW.

(8) Mental health facilities that provide residential treatment and are similar in size, facilities and occupancy to other residential structures permitted in the zoning district.

(9) Substance abuse facilities that provide residential treatment and are similar in size, facilities and occupancy to other residential structures permitted in the zoning district. (Ord. 2023-078 § 1 (Exh. A § 9), 2023; Ord. 2023-018 § 1 (Exh. A), 2023; Ord. 2022-012 § 1 (Exh. A), 2022; Ord. 2015-006 Exh. A, 2015; Ord. 2012-032 § 2 Exh. B, 2012; Ord. 2011-013 § 2 Exh. B, 2011; Ord. 2009-033 § 1 (Att. A), 2009; Ord. 2005-079 § 1, 2005; Ord. 2004-026 § 1, 2004; Ord. 2004-014 § 2, 2004; Ord. 99-012 § 1(2), 1999).

20.61.100 Accessory uses.

.101 Uses incidental to the primary permitted use.

.102 Type I home-based businesses pursuant to WCC [20.80.970](#).

.103 Assembly, crafting, or manufacturing of items of a type related directly to the character of a permitted use and sold at retail on the premises.

.104 Retail or service establishments accessory to a primary permitted use; provided, that it does not exceed 2,500 square feet of retail floor area.

.105 On-site treatment and storage facilities for hazardous wastes associated with outright permitted uses or approved conditional uses subject to the most current siting criteria under Chapter [173-303](#) WAC.

.106 Bed and breakfast establishments and bed and breakfast inns.

.107 One residential unit for owner-manager or caretaker when part of a building in which the primary use is located.

.108 Family day care homes and mini-day care homes; day care homes shall conform to the requirements of Chapter [110-300](#) WAC.

.109 Electric vehicle charging stations and battery exchange facilities.

.110 One one-story detached accessory storage building per lot; provided, that the floor area shall not exceed 200 square feet and shall only be used for personal storage and not for habitation or business; and provided further, that the storage building shall contain no indoor plumbing but may be served with electrical power for lighting.

.111 Vacation rental units. (Ord. 2025-020 § 1 (Exh. A), 2025; Ord. 2023-078 § 1 (Exh. A § 9), 2023; Ord. 2023-041 § 1 (Exh. A), 2023; Ord. 2019-013 § 1 (Exh. A), 2019; Ord. 2016-011 § 1 (Exh. D), 2016; Ord. 2012-032 § 2 Exh. B, 2012; Ord. 2012-001 § 1 (Exh. A), 2012; Ord. 2011-013 § 2 Exh. B, 2011; Ord. 2010-030 § 1 (Exh. A), 2010; Ord. 2009-033 § 1 (Att. A), 2009; Ord. 99-012 § 1(2), 1999).

20.61.150 Administrative approval uses.

In a rural community designation, uses listed in this section may be administratively permitted

pursuant to WCC [22.05.028](#) if a use of the same type existed in that same rural community designation on July 1, 1990, per WCC [20.80.100](#)(1). In a rural business designation, all uses listed in this section may be administratively permitted.

The zoning administrator may administratively permit other uses similar in nature to the permitted uses listed in WCC [20.61.050](#) or this section that the zoning administrator determines to be consistent with the purpose and intent of the district, have similar effects on surrounding land uses, and can meet the performance standards for this district.

.151 Retail and office type uses.

(1) Retail and service establishments with more than 2,500 square feet of retail floor area per establishment, but less than 5,000 square feet of retail floor area per establishment.

.152 Light fabrication type uses.

(1) Light fabrication and assembly, provided:

(a) Individual buildings will be limited to a maximum of 10,000 square feet of total floor area except for existing buildings.

(b) All work is conducted within a building, except for activities complementary to the intent of the STC District and which is harmonious with adjacent parcels.

(c) In the event materials will be stored outdoors, the administrator may require adequate landscaping, screening or other devices in order that the material will not be visible by surrounding uses or roads.

(d) Two signs are permitted. One nonilluminated freestanding and not to exceed six feet in height. One additional nonilluminated sign may be attached to the building for a maximum total signage of 16 square feet. No portion of any sign shall extend above the lowest portion of the roof.

.153 Residential type uses.

Accessory dwelling units, when consistent with WCC [20.80.910](#).

.154 Type II home-based businesses pursuant to WCC [20.80.970](#). (Ord. 2025-020 § 1 (Exh. A), 2025; Ord. 2023-018 § 1 (Exh. A), 2023; Ord. 2021-059 § 3 (Exh. C); Ord. 2016-043 § 1 Exh. A, 2016; Ord. 2012-032 § 2 Exh. B, 2012; Ord. 2011-013 § 2 Exh. B, 2011; Ord. 2010-016 § 1 (Exh. A), 2010; Ord. 99-012 § 1(2), 1999).

20.61.200 Conditional uses.

In a rural community designation, uses listed below may be conditionally permitted if a use of the same type existed in that same rural community designation on July 1, 1990, per WCC [20.80.100](#)(1). In a rural business designation all uses listed below may be conditionally permitted.

.201 Retail and office type uses.

(1) Retail and service establishments with more than 5,000 square feet of retail floor area per

establishment, but less than 7,500 square feet of retail floor area per establishment.

(2) Tool and equipment rental, nurseries, hardware stores and building supplies with more than 5,000 square feet of retail floor area, but less than 10,000 square feet of retail floor area per establishment. The utilization of outdoor areas for display and storage purposes is permitted as an accessory use. Outdoor storage shall be within an enclosed fence.

(3) Grocery stores with more than 10,000 square feet of retail floor area, but less than 35,000 square feet of floor area.

(4) Animal kennels not associated with a veterinary practice.

(5) Indoor commercial recreational facilities with less than 5,000 square feet maximum floor area.

.202 Residential type uses.

(1) Boarding homes that are larger than other residential structures permitted in the zoning district.

.203 Self-service storage facilities totaling less than 10,000 square feet of floor area.

.204 Restaurant/lodging type uses.

(1) Recreational vehicle parks for transient motor homes and tourist trailers.

.205 Recreational type uses.

(1) Outdoor commercial recreation on an area not to exceed three acres in size.

(2) Athletic fields.

(3) Public campgrounds, not to exceed three acres.

(4) Trailheads with parking areas for more than 30 vehicles.

(5) Public or private parks that are not included in an adopted city or county Comprehensive Plan or Park Plan.

.206 Public and community type uses.

(1) Churches, educational and religious training institutions, summer camps and cemeteries.

(2) State and local correction facilities.

(3) Type I solid waste handling facilities.

(4) Mental health facilities that provide residential treatment and are larger than other residential structures permitted in the zoning district.

(5) Substance abuse facilities that provide residential treatment and are larger than other residential structures permitted in the zoning district.

(6) Mental health facilities that provide crisis care.

- (7) Substance abuse facilities that provide crisis care.
- (8) Outpatient mental health facilities.
- (9) Outpatient substance abuse treatment facilities, including opiate substitution treatment clinics.
- (10) State education facilities.
- (11) Secure community transition facilities for sex offenders.

(a) A secure community transition facility shall not be located adjacent to, immediately across the street or parking lot from, or within the line of sight of existing risk potential facilities, which are:

- (i) Public schools;
- (ii) Private schools;
- (iii) School bus stops;
- (iv) Licensed day care;
- (v) Licensed preschool facilities;
- (vi) Public parks;
- (vii) Publicly dedicated trails;
- (viii) Sports fields;
- (ix) Playgrounds;
- (x) Recreational and community centers;
- (xi) Churches, synagogues, temples or mosques;
- (xii) Public libraries;
- (xiii) Public and private youth camps; and
- (xiv) Other uses identified by the State Department of Social and Health Services pursuant to RCW [71.09.020](#).

“Within the line of sight” shall mean that it is possible to reasonably visually distinguish and recognize individuals. An unobstructed visual distance of 600 feet shall be considered to be within the line of sight. Line of sight may be considered to be less than 600 feet if the applicant can demonstrate that visual barriers exist or would be created that would visually screen the risk potential facility from the secure community transition facility.

(b) No more than one secure community transition facility, with a maximum of three people (other than staff), shall be located within Whatcom County.

.207 Other uses.

(1) Mitigation banks as a form of compensatory mitigation for wetland and habitat conservation area impacts when permitted in accordance with the provisions of Chapter [16.16](#) WCC; provided, applications for mitigation banks shall be processed as a major development project pursuant to Chapter [20.88](#) WCC. (Ord. 2023-018 § 1 (Exh. A), 2023; Ord. 2012-032 § 2 Exh. B, 2012; Ord. 2011-013 § 2 Exh. B, 2011; Ord. 2005-068 § 2, 2005; Ord. 2004-026 § 1, 2004; Ord. 2004-014 § 2, 2004; Ord. 99-012 § 1(2), 1999).

20.61.250 Prohibited uses.

All uses not listed as permitted, accessory, administrative approval, or conditional uses are prohibited, including but not limited to the following, which are listed here for purposes of clarity:

.251 Reserved.

.252 Adult businesses.

.253 Aerial application of chemicals, including but not limited to pesticides and insecticides, previously regulated by the DNR as Class I, II, III or IV-Special forest practices, when located within an urban growth area.

.254 Slash burning, when located within an urban growth area. (Ord. 2022-035 Exh. A, 2022; Ord. 2016-011 § 1 (Exh. L), 2016; Ord. 2012-032 § 2 Exh. B, 2012; Ord. 99-070 § 2, 1999; Ord. 99-012 § 1(2), 1999).

20.61.255 Minimum lot frontage.

For the purpose of dividing property, minimum lot frontage shall be sufficient to provide adequate access and utility development, and meet applicable building setback, buffer, and development standards of the district. In no case shall the frontage be less than 30 feet. (Ord. 2012-032 § 2 Exh. B, 2012; Ord. 99-045 § 1, 1999).

20.61.300 Minimum lot size.

The minimum lot size shall be consistent with the area required to meet the building setback, lot coverage and development standards of the district. (Ord. 2012-032 § 2 Exh. B, 2012; Ord. 99-012 § 1(2), 1999).

20.61.320 Maximum building size.

.321 In a rural community designation, maximum allowable floor area for a building shall not exceed the floor area of the largest building of a use of the same type that existed in that same rural community designation on July 1, 1990, per WCC [20.80.100](#)(1) except as provided in WCC [20.80.100](#)(2).

.322 In a rural business designation, the maximum allowable floor area is 7,000 square feet except as provided in WCC [20.80.100](#)(3) and (4). (Ord. 2012-032 § 2 Exh. B, 2012; Ord. 2011-013 § 2 Exh. B, 2011).

20.61.350 Maximum density.

.351 Hotels and motels shall not exceed a floor area ratio (FAR) of 0.60.

.352 Duplexes may not exceed a maximum gross density of six dwelling units/acre. (Ord. 2012-032 § 2 Exh. B, 2012; Ord. 2011-013 § 2 Exh. B, 2011; Ord. 99-012 § 1(2), 1999).

20.61.400 Building setbacks.

Building setbacks shall be administered pursuant to WCC [20.61.600](#) and [20.80.200](#) except as provided below.

(1) Commercial uses shall be allowed to reduce front yard setback to 10 feet and the side yard setback to zero feet where the site and landscape plans promote pedestrian access to the building. (Ord. 2012-032 § 2 Exh. B, 2012; Ord. 2011-013 § 2 Exh. B, 2011; Ord. 99-012 § 1(2), 1999).

20.61.450 Height limitations.

The maximum building height shall not exceed 45 feet except for spires and decorative towers on public/community buildings, schools, and churches, which shall not exceed 70 feet in height. Height of structures shall also conform, where applicable, to the general requirements of WCC [20.80.675](#). (Ord. 2012-032 § 2 Exh. B, 2012; Ord. 99-012 § 1(2), 1999).

20.61.500 Lot coverage.

.501 On a lot in a rural community designation, combined floor area of all buildings shall not exceed that of a use of the same type that existed on a lot in that same rural community designation on July 1, 1990, per WCC [20.80.100](#)(1) except as provided in WCC [20.80.100](#)(2).

.502 In a rural business designation, building or structural coverage of a lot shall not exceed 70 percent of the total area. (Ord. 2012-032 § 2 Exh. B, 2012; Ord. 99-012 § 1(2), 1999).

20.61.550 Open space.

At least 10 percent of a noncommercial site shall be kept free of buildings, structures, hard surfacing, parking areas and other impervious surfaces. (Ord. 2012-032 § 2 Exh. B, 2012; Ord. 99-012 § 1(2), 1999).

20.61.600 Buffer area. (Adopted by reference in WCCP Chapter 2.)

.601 Where parcels situated within this district adjoin an Agriculture, Urban Residential, Urban Residential Medium Density, Residential Rural or Rural District, side and rear yard setbacks shall be increased to 25 feet along the property line(s) adjacent to the named districts. Unless adjoining an Agriculture Zoning District, said area shall be landscaped consistent with the requirements of WCC [20.80.345](#). (Ord. 2013-057 § 1 (Exh. A), 2013; Ord. 2012-032 § 2 Exh. B, 2012; Ord. 2011-013 § 2 Exh. B, 2011; Ord. 99-012 § 1(2), 1999).

20.61.650 Sign regulations.

Sign regulations shall be administered pursuant to WCC [20.80.410](#) and [20.80.440](#), or as otherwise determined in this chapter. (Ord. 2012-032 § 2 Exh. B, 2012; Ord. 99-012 § 1(2), 1999).

20.61.700 Development criteria.

(Ord. 2012-032 § 2 Exh. B, 2012).

20.61.701 Facility design.

Individual developments within a Small Town Commercial Zone District should be encouraged to accommodate additional commercial development on adjacent property in an integrated manner. Consistent architectural treatment is encouraged. Each development shall screen roof-mounted

mechanical equipment so as not to be visible by surrounding uses or roads.

Design of the proposed use in the Small Town Commercial Zone District shall be consistent with the scale and intensity of the existing uses in the area and consistent with the Comprehensive Plan rural land use chapter. (Ord. 2012-032 § 2 Exh. B, 2012; Ord. 2011-013 § 2 Exh. B, 2011; Ord. 99-012 § 1(2), 1999).

20.61.702 Landscaping.

Refer to WCC [20.80.300](#) for landscaping requirements. (Ord. 2012-032 § 2 Exh. B, 2012; Ord. 99-012 § 1(2), 1999).

20.61.703 Off-street parking and loading.

Off-street parking and loading shall be administered pursuant to WCC [20.80.500](#). (Ord. 2012-032 § 2 Exh. B, 2012; Ord. 99-012 § 1(2), 1999).

20.61.704 Drainage.

All development activities are subject to the stormwater management provisions of WCC [20.80.630](#) through [20.80.635](#). No project permit shall be issued prior to meeting those requirements. (Ord. 2019-013 § 1 (Exh. A), 2019; Ord. 2017-045 § 1 (Exh. A), 2017; Ord. 2013-057 § 1 (Exh. A), 2013; Ord. 2012-032 § 2 Exh. B, 2012; Ord. 99-012 § 1(2), 1999).

20.61.705 Driveways.

Consistent with WCC [20.80.640](#), driveway plans shall be reviewed by the county engineer or State Department of Transportation, as applicable. (Ord. 2013-057 § 1 (Exh. A), 2013; Ord. 2012-032 § 2 Exh. B, 2012; Ord. 99-012 § 1(2), 1999).

20.61.706 Access.

Access shall conform to the provisions of WCC [20.80.565](#). (Ord. 2012-032 § 2 Exh. B, 2012; Ord. 99-012 § 1(2), 1999).

20.61.707 Lighting.

Lighting shall be designed to avoid excessive glare onto neighboring properties, and to not create safety hazards or unreasonable interference with adjacent uses. (Ord. 2012-032 § 2 Exh. B, 2012; Ord. 99-012 § 1(2), 1999).

20.61.708 Binding site plan.

Should the commercial use be developed as part of a binding site plan, it shall be administered pursuant to WCC Title [21](#) (Land Division Regulations) and additional requirements as applicable. (Ord. 2012-032 § 2 Exh. B, 2012; Ord. 99-012 § 1(2), 1999).

20.61.709 Plat language for proposed subdivisions.

When a proposed subdivision, binding site plan, short subdivision or exempt land division will be located adjacent to or across a right-of-way from an existing Forestry District, the developer and any subsequent purchasers or successors in interest shall agree to refrain from any legal action to restrain or collect damages from the owners of such adjacent properties, or from Whatcom County, arising out of any reasonable and lawful activity on said forestry lands which occurs in the normal course of their established use. The agreement shall appear as a covenant or deed restriction upon the plat, tract or instrument of conveyance and shall run with the land. (Ord. 2012-032 § 2 Exh. B,

2012; Ord. 99-058, 1999).

20.61.750 Performance standards.

The following provisions shall apply to all uses within this district:

.751 There shall be no commercial storage or handling of hazardous, explosive, highly flammable materials in quantities which would cause fire, explosion or safety hazards, except the storage and dispensing of gasoline in service stations.

.752 There shall be no production of noise at any property line of any use in this district in excess of the average intensity of street and traffic noise found in the district.

.753 There shall be no emission of significant quantities of dust, dirt, odors, smoke, or toxic gases and fumes.

.754 There shall be no production of heat, glare or vibration perceptible from any property line of the premises upon which such heat, glare or vibration is being generated.

.755 There shall be no off-site release to soil or surface drainage ways of water borne or liquid pollutants.

.756 There shall be no polluting or hazardous discharge to a public sewer or septic system. (Ord. 2012-032 § 2 Exh. B, 2012; Ord. 2011-013 § 2 Exh. B, 2011; Ord. 99-012 § 1(2), 1999).



The Whatcom County Code is current through Ordinance 2025-047, passed September 23, 2025, and Resolution 2025-030, passed September 23, 2025.

Disclaimer: The Clerk of the Council's Office has the official version of the Whatcom County Code. Users should contact the Clerk of the Council's Office for ordinances passed subsequent to the ordinance cited above.

County Website: <https://www.whatcomcounty.us/>

County Telephone: (360) 676-6700

Codification services provided by [General Code](#)