WHY PEOPLE LIVE WHERE THEY DO: HUMAN WELL-BEING AND THE LIMITS OF INFLUENCE OF URBAN-RURAL DECISION-MAKING

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Executive Summary

Efforts to influence where people live are key to land-use planning and growth management policies in fast-growing areas like the Puget Sound region. Strategies typically focus on encouraging development in urban areas to lessen ecological impacts, conserve rural and resource lands, and boost infrastructure efficiency. Traditional policy methods often assume that residential choices respond predictably to rational trade-offs, such as housing costs, commute times, and access to services. However, an increasing amount of social science research shows that residential choices are far less flexible than these models assume. Where people choose to live is deeply connected to human well-being, shaped by emotional security, identity, perceived safety, and personal experiences that are not easily changed by informational campaigns, financial incentives, or behavioral nudges (Zanella et al. 2015).

This analysis contends that behavior-change frameworks are generally ineffective at influencing urban–rural residential choices because they fail to engage in the non-rational aspects of well-being that underpin place-based preferences. Residential choices are not just selections among interchangeable options; they serve as expressions of identity, coping mechanisms for stress, and attempts to achieve psychological stability. Consequently, policy tools aimed at changing residential behavior often face resistance, social inertia, or unintended effects (Gifford 2011; Brulle & Norgaard 2019).

This analysis shifts the focus of policy influence away from education-based interventions and toward enhancing urban livability. Policy and land-use planning interventions do not "move" people in the short term; instead, they shape the structural, social, and emotional conditions in which residential choices are made. Over time, policy affects the availability of options, neighborhood livability, and the degree to which different places support psychological security, social belonging, and daily well-being. Long-term investments in neighborhood safety, social cohesion, access to services, and opportunities for psychological renewal gradually expand the range of places residents see as viable and attractive, operating through lived experience rather than instant behavioral changes.

The central question guiding this analysis is: *"What human well-being factors influence residents' choices between urban and rural living?"* This question arises from the Land Development and Cover Implementation Strategy (LDC IS) (Habitat Strategic Initiative 2021), which aims to reduce pressure on ecologically important lands by encouraging more compact urban living. While the LDC IS reflects established land-use planning goals, this analysis also shows the limitations of education- and incentive-based methods when they are not aligned with the lived human dimensions shaping residential choices. The strategy is currently being revised, and this analysis offers a critique to improve its effectiveness.

Building on interdisciplinary research in psychology, human well-being, and migration studies, this paper reframes residential choice as an identity- and well-being-driven process rather than a behavior easily influenced by policy levers. Human well-being combines objective conditions, such as access to housing, employment, and services, with subjective perceptions of whether those conditions meet individual needs (Costanza et al. 2017). Policies that overlook this integration risk underestimating the strength of non-rational drivers and overestimating the effectiveness of incentives or informational tools.

This analysis indicates that the LDC IS update should focus on ongoing investment in neighborhood conditions that residents directly experience. When urban environments do not meet these basic well-being needs, residents might look for alternatives even if it conflicts with broader environmental and planning goals. Therefore, it is crucial to align sustainability objectives with people's real-life experiences, rather than assuming that density alone will achieve desired outcomes.

The LDC IS supports the goals of the Growth Management Act by shifting focus from limiting rural growth alone to enhancing the appeal and livability of urban centers. By encouraging market demand in city centers and increasing access to amenities and services, the strategy aims to make urban areas truly desirable places to live, thus redirecting development pressure away from rural and ecologically sensitive lands and conserving regional land cover essential for long-term ecosystem health.

Finally, effective interventions must engage with the lived experience of place, recognizing that well-being results from the interaction between objective conditions and subjective perception. Urban nature, for example, has been shown to strengthen social ties and neighborhood cohesion by encouraging shared use of space and informal social controls, thereby contributing to safety and the collective ability to tackle common challenges (House et al. 2016). Without integrating these human dimensions, land-use planning strategies risk misinterpreting residential behavior and overestimating the effectiveness of traditional policy tools to influence settlement patterns.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Efforts to influence where people live are a central concern of land-use planning, climate adaptation, and growth management policy. In regions experiencing rapid population growth, such as Puget Sound, policy strategies frequently aim to concentrate development in urban areas to reduce ecological impacts, protect rural and resource lands, and improve the efficiency of public infrastructure. Conventional approaches tend to treat residential location decisions as responsive to rational trade-offs such as housing costs, commute times, access to services, or regulatory constraints. However, a growing body of social science research suggests that where people choose to live is far less malleable than these models assume. Residential choice is deeply embedded in human well-being, shaped by emotional security, identity, perceived safety, and lived experience. These factors are not easily influenced by informational campaigns, financial incentives, or behavioral nudges (Zanella et al. 2015).

This paper argues that behavior-change frameworks are generally ineffective at influencing urban–rural residential decisions because they fail to engage with the non-rational dimensions of human well-being that anchor place-based preferences. Emerging work suggests that micro-traumas of urban life, the idyllic imaginary of rural living, and concerns about bringing city politics into rural communities all shape perceptions of well-being in relation to residential choice (Requena, F. 2016). Urban living often entails perceived psychological tolls such as noise, pollution, congestion, and high costs, while rural areas are frequently associated with peace and quiet, safety, and a sense of community (Requena, F. 2016; Jansen, S.J.T. 2020). This creates tension, as feelings of being safe and secure, or experiencing psychological stressors (or the lack thereof), are vital predictors of mental health and quality of life, heavily influencing residential preference (Guite et al. 2006). Decisions about where to live are not simply choices among interchangeable options; they are expressions of identity, coping strategies for stress, and attempts to secure psychological stability. As a result, policy tools designed to redirect residential behavior often encounter strong resistance, social inertia, or unintended consequences (Gifford, R. 2011; Brulle, R.J. & Norgaard, K.M. 2019).

If conventional behavioral nudges and incentive-based strategies have limited influence on residential choice, this does not imply that planning and policy are ineffective. Rather, it clarifies the scale and nature of their influence. Policies do not “move” people as behavioral models often assume; instead, they shape the structural, social, and emotional conditions within which residential decisions are made. Over time, planning interventions influence the availability of options, the livability of neighborhoods, and the degree to which different places support psychological security, social belonging, and everyday well-being.

From this perspective, the role of policy is not to override identity-based preferences, but to reduce the misalignment between where people want to live and where living well is realistically possible. By improving neighborhood-level safety, social cohesion, access to services, and opportunities for psychological restoration, planning efforts can expand the set of places that residents perceive as viable and desirable. These changes operate gradually and indirectly, shaping residential patterns through lived experience rather than short-term behavioral response. Recognizing this distinction

helps explain why education- or incentive-focused strategies alone rarely shift settlement patterns, while long-term investments in place quality and social trust exert more durable influence.

The profound influence of residential location on human well-being and socio-ecological relationships is undeniable. The complexity of place-based decision-making stems from the fact that human well-being is fundamentally an integration of the fulfillment of objective human needs and the subjective perception of that fulfillment (Costanza et al. 2017), making well-being inherently contextual (Edwards et al. 2016). The central question guiding this analysis is:

"What human well-being factors influence residents' choices between urban and rural living?"

It is within this context that regional growth management policy attempts to influence residential patterns. Regional policy, as articulated in the Washington Growth Management Act (GMA)(Chapter 36.70A RCW) and implemented through the comprehensive plans of cities such as Seattle and Redmond, seeks to manage rapid growth by concentrating development in urban centers to protect the surrounding natural environment and rural resource lands (RCW 36.70A.110). These plans, developed pursuant to RCW 36.70A.070 et seq., act as a "blueprint" for the next twenty years, guiding physical development, community character, and economic opportunity. In the Puget Sound region, Washington State's GMA mandates the designation of Urban Growth Areas (UGAs) to promote compact urban development, restrict urban-scale development outside of them, and prevent the extension of urban services, such as sewers, into rural lands (RCW 36.70A.020(1)). Under GMA, rural areas are defined as those with housing densities of no more than one dwelling unit per five acres and without urban governmental services such as sewers (RCW 36.70A.030).

Regional policy is driven by the GMA, which requires cities to accommodate twenty years of forecasted growth in a manner that identifies and encourages the preservation of natural resource lands and critical areas (RCW 36.70A.060). This legal framework directly shapes land supply, housing costs, access to infrastructure, and commuting patterns, reflecting a planning emphasis on density and service efficiency rather than on subjective well-being.

The guiding question for this analysis originates from the Land Development and Cover Implementation Strategy (LDC IS) (Habitat Strategic Initiative 2021), which seeks to reduce pressure on ecologically important lands by encouraging more compact urban living. While the LDC IS reflects well-established planning objectives, it also illustrates the challenges that arise when policy goals, such as incentive- or education-based approaches, are misaligned with the lived human dimensions that drive residential choice. Currently, the LDC IS is undergoing a revision process, and this analysis criticizes this approach specifically to improve the strategy.

Rather than evaluating whether urban or rural living produces better outcomes, this paper examines why individuals are drawn to different residential contexts and why these preferences prove resistant to external influence. Drawing on interdisciplinary literature across psychology, human well-being, and migration studies, the analysis reframes residential choice as an identity- and well-being-driven process rather than a behavior readily shaped by policy levers. By doing so, it highlights the structural limits of incentive-based and educational approaches and underscores the need for planning frameworks that better account for emotional, psychological, and social dimensions of place.

2. CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF FACTORS INFLUENCING RESIDENTIAL CHOICE

Residential choice is often treated in planning and policy frameworks as the outcome of rational decision-making shaped by economic incentives, infrastructure provision, and regulatory controls. However, evidence across the social sciences suggests that where people choose to live is not primarily a function of optimization. Instead, residential choice reflects an interaction between deeply embedded psychological needs and externally imposed structural constraints, making it highly resistant to direct policy manipulation (Manfredo et al. 2017; Whitfield et al. 2005).

At its core, residential choice is anchored in human well-being, which integrates both objective conditions, such as access to housing, employment, and services, and subjective perceptions of whether those conditions meet individual needs (Costanza et al. 2017). When policies attempt to influence residential patterns without accounting for this integration, they underestimate the strength of non-rational drivers and overestimate the effectiveness of incentives, information, or nudges. This section examines how emotional, structural, and social dimensions of human well-being interact to stabilize residential preferences and limit the influence of conventional policy approaches.

2.1 EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

Emotional and psychological factors play a central role in shaping residential preferences. Subjective well-being is commonly associated with feelings of safety, stress reduction, purpose, and emotional stability, all of which are strongly tied to place-based experience rather than abstract evaluations of opportunity (Edwards et al. 2016; Abbas et al. 2024).

Place attachment is particularly influential. Individuals form emotional bonds with places through memory, identity, and repeated social validation, making residential environments constitutive of cultural and personal identity (Dinnie et al. 2013; Fleming et al. 2022). When a place supports emotional security and reinforces identity, individuals are motivated to remain; when it generates stress or threatens psychological well-being, avoidance becomes more likely (Davidson, D.J. & Kecinski, M. 2022). These affective bonds are durable and cannot be easily disrupted through policy incentives aimed at altering residential behavior (Whitfield et al. 2005).

Perceived safety plays a distinct and influential role in shaping mental health and residential preference, operating alongside, but not reducible to, other stressors such as cost, noise, or crowding (Guite et al. 2006). Feelings of vulnerability, fear of crime, or exposure to social disorder can undermine the restorative potential of residential environments, though these perceptions are highly contextual and socially mediated (Foo et al. 2015). Particularly, individuals from marginalized racial, cultural, or political groups may experience rural settings as isolating or threatening. In these cases, residential preference may center not on rural living itself, but on access to urban environments that offer neighborhood-level safety, social acceptance, and institutional support. As with other psychological drivers, it is the *perception* of safety, rather than objective conditions alone, that shapes residential behavior (Guite et al. 2006).

These emotional dynamics are further reinforced by enduring cultural narratives that frame rural environments as spaces of safety, tranquility, and psychological restoration. Rural settings are often *perceived* as secure and ideal places to raise children; a view commonly grounded in assumptions about lower levels of violence and social disorder relative to urban life (Glendinning et al. 2003). The desire for peace and quiet emerges repeatedly as a primary motivation for rural residential preference, with tranquility valued as a means of escaping the sensory and psychological intensity of city living (Jansen, S.J.T. 2020; Glendinning et al. 2003).

Rural environments are also closely associated with direct access to nature, which plays a critical role in psychological well-being. Even brief or routine exposure to nearby natural spaces has been shown to reduce stress, alleviate mental fatigue, and support psychological restoration, reinforcing the appeal of lower-density living contexts (Hartig, T. & Kahn Jr., P.H. 2016; Taylor et al. 2018). In wealthier countries, where basic services and public goods are more evenly distributed, this narrative holds more strongly, as rural residences can offer both material sufficiency and perceived emotional relief, contributing to higher levels of subjective well-being than urban living in some contexts (Requena, F. 2016). Importantly, these associations function as perceptual anchors rather than objective assessments.

These emotional dynamics help explain why residents may prioritize peace, security, and familiarity over accessibility, efficiency, or environmental outcomes promoted through policy. Taken together, emotional and psychological drivers stabilize residential preferences by anchoring them to lived experience and identity. Because these drivers operate below the level of conscious cost–benefit analysis, they limit the effectiveness of behavior-change frameworks that assume individuals will respond predictably to incentives or information.

Importantly, these affective and perceptual preferences are not merely individual or informal; they are often explicitly reflected in planning documents themselves. These characteristics are explicitly codified as a core value in the plans for West Richland and Black Diamond, where residents prioritize a sense of community, safety, and breathtaking panoramic views (City of West Richland 2017; City of Black Diamond 2024). These values are echoed in Evrard's (2025) study of wastewater conversions in Puget Sound communities, which found that residents supported sewer restrictions because they believed such measures would help preserve the rural character of their communities. This "idyllic imaginary" is further reinforced by policies in Black Diamond that seek to preserve forested areas and open space as a frame for the built environment, allowing residents to maintain a connection to a "rich historic heritage" (City of Black Diamond 2024).

The inclusion of these values within comprehensive plans underscores the extent to which emotional well-being, perceived safety, and identity-based attachments are embedded within both residential preference and governance frameworks. While growth management and land-use policy frequently emphasize efficiency, density, and environmental protection, these documents reveal a parallel effort to preserve the experiential qualities of places that residents associate with well-being. This alignment illustrates both the power and the limitations of policy intervention: when planning objectives resonate with lived experience, they are more readily supported, but when they conflict with deeply held emotional attachments, they are likely to encounter resistance that cannot be resolved through incentives or information alone.

2.2 STRUCTURAL AND ECONOMIC FACTORS

While emotional and psychological factors shape residential preference, structural and economic conditions determine which options are realistically available. These constraints do not replace subjective drivers but instead interact with them, often producing mismatches between desired and actual living environments.

Residential decisions are influenced by financial investments, access to employment, commuting requirements, tax structures, and housing affordability (Feridhanusetyawan, T. & Kilkenny, M. 1996). Urban areas tend to attract residents through higher productivity, employment opportunities, and access to services and cultural amenities (Sugar, L. & Kennedy, C. 2021; Viganó et al. 2019). Cities often function as "robust attractors" by intentionally concentrating employment; for example, Redmond leverages its status as a global technology hub, anchored by a Microsoft campus employing over 47,000 workers (City of Redmond 2025). Competing models suggest that households either seek to maximize expected earnings net of commuting costs or prioritize minimizing living expenses and travel time (Feridhanusetyawan, T. & Kilkenny, M. 1996). In practice, both dynamics coexist, but neither fully captures the emotional dimensions of residential choice.

To counter the economic and psychological costs associated with commuting, Redmond 2050 focuses on creating "complete neighborhoods" where residents can meet all basic daily needs within a short walk or roll from home (City of Redmond 2025). This approach reflects an effort to reduce travel burdens while fostering social connections and everyday livability. However, the strength of employment concentration in urban centers means that not all residents can fully align their residential preferences with their place of work.

In contrast, West Richland and Black Diamond function primarily as "bedroom communities," where 98% and 78% of residents commute elsewhere for work (City of West Richland 2017; City of Black Diamond 2024). These patterns suggest that minimizing commute time is not always the dominant driver of residential choice. Instead, the availability of local amenities, perceptions of community, and broader quality-of-life considerations may exert a stronger influence on where households choose to live, even when doing so requires long-distance commuting.

Significant financial investments, such as purchasing a home or car, create behavioral momentum and sunk costs that further entrench residential patterns (Gifford, R. 2011). Once these investments are made, individuals are often reluctant to relocate or alter their associated lifestyles, even when incentives or environmental considerations would suggest otherwise. This inertia reinforces the stability of residential choices over time.

The broader economic context further shapes these dynamics. In wealthier countries, rural living can produce higher subjective well-being when living standards and public goods are sufficiently available, whereas in less prosperous contexts, cities often provide higher well-being due to superior access to services and infrastructure (Requena, F. 2016). These patterns demonstrate that residential satisfaction is contingent on context rather than universally tied to density or location.

Within this economic and psychological landscape, regional legal frameworks structure the spatial boundaries of residential choice. RCW 36.70A.110 mandates that counties designate UGAs where urban densities are encouraged and outside of which development must be non-urban in nature. Plans for Seattle and Black Diamond demonstrate how these structural boundaries dictate land supply and infrastructure access, effectively using "urban growth boundaries" to prevent the extension of sewers and other urban services into rural lands (City of Black Diamond 2024; City of Seattle 2022). Under the GMA, many areas commonly perceived as "suburbs" are in fact classified as urban due to their population density and provision of urban services, highlighting a spectrum of urban forms rather than a simple urban–rural divide. This nuance is important, as perceptions of safety and quality of life may differ between suburban and inner-city contexts even when both fall within designated UGAs. While UGAs aim to promote compact growth, they do not address the emotional and psychological factors that drive residential preferences, thereby limiting their effectiveness in shaping where people choose to live.

2.3 SOCIAL AND CULTURAL FACTORS

Residential choice is also shaped by social relationships, cultural expectations, and governance of governance that influence collective well-being. Social cohesion, community belonging, and relational networks contribute meaningfully to residential satisfaction and help explain why individuals remain in or leave places (Jansen, S.J.T. 2020; Glendinning et al. 2003; Viganó et al. 2019).

Rural communities are often characterized by strong social ties and a heightened sense of community, which can enhance collective well-being and social support. However, these same dynamics may also generate feelings of surveillance, lack of privacy, and social constraint, particularly for younger residents and women, leading to diminished self-esteem and increased desire to leave (Glendinning et al. 2003). Urban environments, by contrast, may offer anonymity and diversity but are also associated with social disorder, anxiety, and weakened community cohesion (House et al. 2016). These variances are based on an individual's *perception* of the lived experience.

Social and cultural dynamics not only shape residential preferences but also reinforce them over time through processes of selective migration and narrative reproduction. Idealized views of rural life as peaceful, cohesive, and emotionally fulfilling are partly maintained by self-sorting mechanisms, where individuals who already report higher levels of subjective well-being are more likely to move to or stay in rural areas (Hoogerbrugge, M. & Burger, M. 2022). This selective migration strengthens public perceptions that rural living inherently promotes happiness, even when these outcomes reflect pre-existing differences rather than causal effects of place (Hoogerbrugge, M. & Burger, M. 2022).

Residential choice is further shaped by emotional connections to particular ways of life, with individuals seeking locations that reinforce their psychological needs and personal identities (Whitfield et al. 2005; Hoogerbrugge, M. & Burger, M. 2022). These preferences are not easily altered, as they are influenced by shared family environments and genetic variation that contribute to stable, long-term orientation toward certain residential contexts (Whitfield et al 2005). Once established, individuals often rely on cognitive reappraisal strategies, reframing perceived costs or

losses to maintain overall satisfaction, thereby reinforcing attachment to place and stabilizing residential patterns over time (Costanza et al. 2017).

Beliefs about governance, particularly trust, fairness, and representation, also shape perceptions of local quality of life and influence engagement with planning processes (Fleming et al. 2022). Feelings of political alienation or lack of agency can intensify resistance to externally imposed development strategies, especially in rural or marginalized communities (Foo et al. 2015). These social and cultural dynamics further constrain the effectiveness of policy tools that assume residential behavior can be shifted solely through incentives or messaging.

Together, these social and psychological processes limit the capacity of external policy interventions to reshape residential behavior. By continually reproducing cultural narratives and reinforcing identity-based preferences, selective migration and place attachment constrain the effectiveness of incentives or informational strategies aimed at redistributing population growth across urban and rural areas.

3. CONCEPTUALIZING HUMAN WELL-BEING

Understanding why residential choices resist policy intervention requires a clear conceptualization of human well-being. While planning frameworks often rely on objective indicators, such as housing supply, density, or infrastructure capacity, social science research consistently demonstrates that well-being emerges from the interaction between material conditions and subjective experience (Costanza et al. 2017).

3.1 DEFINING HUMAN WELL-BEING

Human well-being is most examined in the literature through the closely related concept of quality of life, which seeks to capture the overall human experience across material, emotional, and social domains (Costanza et al. 2017). Across disciplines, human well-being is understood as a multidimensional construct integrating both objective and subjective components.

A widely used integrative definition describes human well-being as the extent to which objective human needs are fulfilled relative to individual or collective perceptions of satisfaction and quality of life (Costanza et al. 2017). Under this framework, material conditions, such as housing quality, access to clean water, sanitation, and basic comfort, are necessary but not sufficient. Subjective evaluations of safety, stress, autonomy, and belonging determine whether these conditions translate into lived well-being.

In planning contexts, human well-being is often operationalized through the concept of *livability*, defined as the suitability of a place for human living (Zanella et al. 2015). A livable environment supports health, safety, harmony, and affordability while enabling access to amenities, services, and environmental quality. Importantly, livability is not a fixed attribute of place, but a relational condition shaped by how individuals experience and navigate their environments.

For the Puget Sound Partnership and the Habitat Strategic Initiative, human well-being is a core part of each program. Both aim to enhance human well-being through implementation strategies

like LDC IS and various vital sign indicators. Puget Sound Partnership defines human well-being as encompassing both direct interactions with the natural environment, such as clean air and access to local foods, and the psychological and cultural dimensions of health. This includes measures such as a sense of place and the ability to participate in environmental and culturally significant practices tied to Puget Sound.

The achievement of human well-being relies on an interplay between objective conditions (fulfillment of needs) and subjective perception of that fulfillment across multiple areas:

Table 1.

Human Well-Being Domain	Key Factors
Emotional (Stress, Safety, Psychological)	*Stress and Mental Health* *Micro-traumas (Chronic Stressors)* *Sense of Safety*
Social (Community, Identity, Cohesion)	*Social Cohesion and Relations* *Community Belonging*
Environmental (Physical Status, Hazards)	*Access to Green Spaces* *Physical Health/Hazards*
Economic (Income, Opportunity)	*Living Standards and Income* *Job Access/Work*
Physical Health	*Activity and Exercise* *Exposure to Hazards*
Place Attachment and Sense of Place	*Cultural Identity/Belonging* *Place Dependence (functional)* *Place Identity (symbolic)*

3.2 SUBJECTIVE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF WELL-BEING

Subjective well-being reflects individuals' self-reported evaluations of their lives, encompassing happiness, satisfaction, emotional balance, and perceived welfare (Costanza et al. 2017 Abbas et al. 2024). It includes cognitive assessments of life satisfaction, positive affect, the absence of frequent negative affect, and a general sense of contentment (Abbas et al. 2024).

Psychological well-being emphasizes positive functioning rather than momentary happiness. It is characterized by self-acceptance, autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, purpose, and the ability to manage stress and adversity (Ng, M.K. 2016; Abbas et al. 2024; Edwards et al. 2016). These dimensions are particularly relevant to residential choice, as living environments either support or undermine individuals' capacity to cope with daily demands and maintain psychological stability.

The distinction between hedonic and eudaimonic approaches further clarifies how people evaluate well-being. Hedonic well-being focuses on pleasure, comfort, and the avoidance of stress, while eudaimonic well-being emphasizes meaning, purpose, and long-term flourishing (Abbas et al. 2024; Edwards et al. 2016). Residential preferences often reflect a balance between these orientations, with individuals seeking places that minimize psychological strain while supporting valued identities and life goals.

3.3 DOMAINS AND SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HUMAN WELL-BEING

Human well-being is shaped across multiple domains that interact dynamically rather than independently. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment identifies five core dimensions essential to human well-being: basic material needs for a good life, health, security, good social relations, and freedom of choice and action (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2003). Biendeweg (2017) used these domains to provide a useful structure for evaluating how living environments support or constrain quality of life.

Additional frameworks emphasize domains such as housing quality, accessibility and transportation, economic opportunity, education, culture, and leisure (Zanella et al. 2005). Together, these dimensions highlight that well-being is inherently contextual and place-dependent (Edwards et al. 2016). The same physical environment may support flourishing for one group while generating stress or exclusion for another. A holistic view recognizes that the environment can either shape or constrain human actions and enable flourishing through the provision of natural, social, or intellectual stimuli (Ng, M.K. 2016).

Rather than viewing human well-being as the sum of discrete indicators, a holistic perspective recognizes the environment as an active force shaping behavior, perception, and opportunity. Living environments enable or constrain flourishing by providing access to natural, social, and intellectual stimuli, shaping how individuals experience safety, autonomy, and belonging (Ng, M.K. 2016).

Taken together, these dimensions help explain why residential choice is resistant to direct behavioral intervention. Human well-being is not solely determined by material conditions that policy can readily adjust, but by subjective evaluations of safety, stress, identity, and belonging that develop over time. Residential environments become embedded in personal narratives and coping strategies, reinforcing stability through emotional attachment and cognitive reappraisal (Costanza et al. 2017).

3.4 PLACE ATTACHMENT AND VARIABILITY

Human well-being varies across individuals and contexts due to differences in socioeconomic status, development level, life stage, and early-life experience. A critical component of human well-being in residential decision-making is *place attachment*, defined as the emotional bond individuals form with environments that reliably meet their needs and reinforce identity (Fleming et al. 2022). Place attachment contributes to cultural identity and personal meaning, strengthening residential stability even when material conditions are imperfect (Dinnie et al. 2013).

Residential preferences are also shaped by selective migration and adaptation. Individuals who relocate often return to baseline levels of life satisfaction within several years, suggesting that place alone does not determine long-term well-being (Hoogerbrugge, M. & Burger, M. 2022). Preferences are also influenced by shared family environments and genetic variation, contributing to stable orientation toward certain living contexts across the life course (Whitfield et al. 2005).

4. URBAN LIVING AND HUMAN WELL-BEING IMPACTS

Urban environments play a central role in contemporary planning and growth-management strategies, particularly in regions experiencing rapid population growth. Cities are frequently positioned as efficient, sustainable solutions to development pressure due to their capacity to concentrate on housing, infrastructure, services, and economic activity. However, the human well-being implications of urban living are complex and uneven. Urban environments can both support and undermine well-being, depending on how they shape everyday experience, psychological security, and social connection.

This section examines urban living not as a uniformly positive or negative condition, but as a set of interacting structural, social, and emotional dynamics that influence residential satisfaction and stability. Understanding these dynamics is critical for explaining why policies designed to encourage urban living often encounter resistance, despite clear environmental and economic rationales.

4.1 DEFINING URBAN LIVING

Urban living is commonly defined by high population density and concentrated patterns of human association, with economic activity centered on industry, services, and technology rather than agriculture (Taylor et al. 2018). Globally, more than half of the world's population now resides in towns, suburbs, and cities, reflecting the spectrum and centrality of urban environments to modern life (Taylor et al. 2018). However, urban living is not defined by density alone. It also encompasses heterogeneity, social intensity, and the degree to which individuals interact with complex infrastructures and diverse populations (Requena, F. 2016).

Cities are uniquely human environments that provide access to food, shelter, employment, education, cultural resources, and social networks, all of which can enhance well-being when effectively integrated (Sugar, L. & Kennedy, C. 2021). They depend on extensive infrastructure systems, such as water, energy, transportation, communication, waste management, and public space, which shape daily life and mediate access to opportunity (Hartig, T. & Kahn Jr., P.H. 2016). From a human well-being perspective, the quality of urban living is best assessed by livability: the suitability of a place to support health, safety, harmony, accessibility, and affordability (Zanella et al. 2005).

Crucially, livability is not an inherent feature of urban form. It emerges from how urban environments are designed, governed, and experienced, and how well they align with residents' psychological and social needs.

4.2 POTENTIAL WELL-BEING BENEFITS OF URBAN LIVING

Urban environments can support multiple dimensions of human well-being when conditions are favorable. Dense settlement patterns enable access to services, employment, education, and healthcare that are often unavailable or less accessible in rural contexts (Taylor et al. 2018). For many residents, particularly those with higher levels of education, cities offer economic opportunity, cultural engagement, and social diversity that contribute positively to subjective well-being (Hoogerbrugge, M. & Burger, M. 2022).

Urban design features play a significant role in mediating these benefits. The LDC IS update promotes urban living through sustained investment in neighborhood-level conditions that most directly shape residents' well-being, including safety, restorative green space, affordability, and social trust. Walkable neighborhoods supported by interconnected pedestrian and cycling infrastructure promote physical activity and reduce reliance on automobiles (Riggs, W. 2012; Zhou, J. & Hatton, E. 2024). Green streetscapes enhance the attractiveness of walking routes, increase perceptions of greenness, and are associated with higher frequency of walking trips, contributing to both physical and psychological well-being (House et al. 2016). Walkability and shared public spaces can also foster social interaction, strengthen social networks, and support informal social cohesion (Zhou, J. & Hatton, E. 2024; Ng, M.K. 2016).

Cities facilitate face-to-face contact and social exchange, enabling the accumulation of social capital through shared spaces, mixed-use development, and community gathering areas (Hartig, T. & Kahn Jr., P.H. 2016; Ng, M.K. 2016). Urban environments also offer greater access to health and social services, education, and specialized resources, which can improve overall quality of life and resilience (Taylor et al. 2018). For many residents, proximity to well-designed green spaces is a key feature of desirable urban living, providing opportunities for restoration and stress reduction within dense environments (House et al. 2016).

4.3 WELL-BEING CHALLENGES IN URBAN ENVIRONMENTS

Despite these benefits, urban living is also associated with distinct stressors that can undermine human well-being and drive residential dissatisfaction. High-density environments often involve increased exposure to noise, pollution, congestion, and crowding, which can strain coping mechanisms and negatively affect mental health (House et al. 2016). Chronic exposure to these stressors contributes to psychological overload, fatigue, and reduced emotional resilience (Hartig, T. & Kahn Jr., P.H. 2016).

Empirical studies identify neighbor noise, household overcrowding, and dissatisfaction with escape options as significant predictors of poor mental health (Guite et al. 2006). Fear of crime and perceptions of unsafety, regardless of objective risk, are independently associated with lower mental health outcomes and reduced quality of life (Guite et al. 2006). These perceptions can diminish the restorative potential of urban environments and intensify stress, particularly for vulnerable populations.

Urbanization is also linked to higher exposure to environmental hazards, including air pollution and heat stress, which have direct implications for physical health (Zanella et al. 2005; Hartig, T. & Kahn

Jr., P.H. 2016). Economic pressures further compound these challenges. Rising housing costs, longer commute times, and unequal access to amenities disproportionately affect lower-income and less-educated residents, who may experience urban living as financially burdensome and psychologically taxing (Viganó et al. 2019; Hoogerbrugge, M. & Burger, M. 2022).

Importantly, improvements intended to enhance urban livability, such as investments in green infrastructure, can produce unintended consequences. While green spaces contribute to well-being, they may also increase property values and trigger gentrification, leading to displacement and heightened insecurity for marginalized communities, often reinforcing long-standing patterns of exclusion created by earlier growth-oriented planning decisions, such as redlining and major infrastructure projects, including the construction of I-5 and the transformation of neighborhoods like Seattle's Central District (House et al. 2016). These trade-offs complicate efforts to promote urban living as universally beneficial. To avoid unintended consequences, proactive measures such as rent caps and right-to-return policies for existing residents should be established in advance.

4.4 EXAMPLES FROM PUGET SOUND

The Puget Sound region illustrates the complex relationship between urbanization, human well-being, and planning objectives. As one of the most rapidly urbanizing regions in the United States, Puget Sound faces intense growth pressure alongside ambitious environmental protection goals (Biedenweg, K. 2017; House et al. 2016). Urban centers such as Seattle and Tacoma are characterized by high population density, economic growth, and proximity to valued natural environments, creating both opportunities and challenges for resident well-being.

Studies of human well-being indicators in Puget Sound reveal strong public valuation of the natural environment. A regional survey found that 84% of residents report frequently experiencing inspiration, awe, or stress reduction from engagement with Puget Sound's natural landscapes (House et al. 2016). Access to green space and opportunities for outdoor activity have therefore been adopted as key well-being indicators by the Puget Sound Partnership, reflecting their importance to urban residents (Biedenweg, K. 2017).

At the same time, urban areas within the region exhibit uneven social outcomes. In the Puyallup watershed, which includes urban Tacoma, stakeholder processes prioritized physical health and economic indicators but struggled to identify social and governance indicators, suggesting challenges related to social cohesion and collective decision-making (Biedenweg, K. 2017). This contrasts with more rural regions, where governance and stewardship indicators received greater emphasis. These findings underscore the tension between growth, livability, and equity in urban Puget Sound.

Urban attractors, such as access to services, employment, education, and healthcare due to dense populations, may also generate forms of "micro-trauma" associated with displacement, as rising property values in thriving villages can displace marginalized populations and small businesses (City of Seattle 2022; City of Redmond 2025). To mitigate these stressors, Seattle and Redmond have increasingly shifted toward equity-based planning approaches to ensure that the

benefits of density do not compromise psychological security (City of Seattle 2022; City of Redmond 2025).

Together, these dynamics highlight the limits of density-focused planning when human well-being is not explicitly centered. While urban environments can deliver substantial environmental and quality-of-life benefits, failure to address displacement, social cohesion, and emotional security risks exacerbates dissatisfaction and reinforces resistance to compact development.

4.5 URBAN FOCUSED PLANNING STRATEGIES

From a human well-being perspective, the effectiveness of urban-focused planning strategies depends not only on density targets but also on the extent to which urban environments support psychological security, social belonging, and everyday livability. Simply increasing housing supply or amenities is unlikely to shift residential preferences if urban living remains associated with stress, safety concerns, or exclusion.

This analysis suggests that the LDC IS update focuses on encouraging urban living by sustaining investment in the neighborhood-level conditions residents experience most directly, such as safety, access to restorative green space, affordability, and social trust. When urban environments fail to meet these foundational well-being needs, residents may seek alternatives, even when those choices conflict with broader environmental and planning objectives. Recognizing these well-being dynamics is therefore essential for designing urban policies that align sustainability goals with lived human experience rather than assuming density alone will produce desirable outcomes.

The Land Development and Cover Implementation Strategy (LDC IS) reinforces the goals of the Growth Management Act by shifting attention from restricting rural growth alone to strengthening the attractiveness and livability of urban centers. By incentivizing market demand within city centers and expanding access to amenities and services, the strategy seeks to make urban areas genuinely suitable places to live. In doing so, it redirects development pressure away from rural landscapes and ecologically important lands, helping preserve the regional land cover necessary for long-term ecosystem resilience.

Within this context, urban planning strategies increasingly seek to enhance the experiential quality of urban neighborhoods. To improve urban suitability, Seattle employs an “Urban Village Strategy” designed to make neighborhoods more vibrant by placing people near transit, jobs, and services they can walk to (City of Seattle 2022). Similarly, Redmond 2050 focuses on creating “complete neighborhoods” where basic daily needs are met within a short walk or roll from home, a policy aimed at fostering social connection and reducing the psychological tolls of driving (City of Redmond 2025). However, these strategies must contend with the risk of displacement; Seattle’s plan acknowledges that rising property values in urban villages can force lower-income households and marginalized populations out of their neighborhoods (City of Seattle 2022).

5. RURAL LIVING AND HUMAN WELL-BEING IMPACTS

Rural living occupies a powerful place in residential imaginaries, often positioned as an alternative to the perceived stress, congestion, and social intensity of urban environments. In planning

discourse, rural areas are frequently framed as spaces to be protected from development rather than as active sites of human well-being. Yet rural living, like urban living, presents a complex and uneven set of well-being benefits and challenges that shape residential preference and stability.

This section examines rural living through a lens of human well-being, emphasizing how emotional appeal, social dynamics, and structural constraints interact to shape residential satisfaction. Rather than treating rural environments as inherently restorative or problematic, the analysis highlights the conditions under which rural living supports well-being and the limits that complicate its viability as a broadly accessible or sustainable residential option.

5.1 DEFINING RURAL LIVING

Rural settlements are often characterized by villages, towns, or dispersed communities with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants and greater proximity to natural landscapes (Hoogerbrugge, M. & Burger, M. 2022; Viganó et al. 2019). Rural living is commonly defined by lower population density and reduced intensity of human association relative to urban centers, placing rural areas along a continuum rather than in strict opposition to cities (Requena, F. 2016).

Under GMA, rural areas are defined as those with housing densities of no more than one dwelling unit per five acres and without urban governmental services such as sewers (RCW 36.70A.030). In the Puget Sound context, rural regions such as the Hood Canal watershed exemplify these characteristics, with comparatively low population density, strong connections to natural-resource-based livelihoods, and limited access to centralized services (Biedenweg, K. 2017). These features shape both the appeal and the constraints of rural living, influencing how residents experience quality of life and well-being.

From a human well-being perspective, rural living is best understood not as a fixed condition but as a relational experience shaped by access to nature, social networks, infrastructure, and governance capacity.

5.2 POTENTIAL WELL-BEING BENEFITS OF RURAL LIVING

Rural environments are frequently associated with emotional and psychological benefits that contribute to residential appeal. One of the most cited motivations for choosing rural living is the desire for peace and quiet, with lower sensory stimulation valued as a counterbalance to the chronic stressors of urban life (Jansen, S.J.T. 2020). Rural settings are often perceived as tranquil and restorative, offering psychological relief from congestion, noise, and social intensity (Requena, F. 2016).

Access to natural environments plays a central role in these perceived benefits. Living near natural spaces and engaging with them regularly supports physical and psychological well-being by reducing stress, alleviating mental fatigue, and enhancing emotional resilience (Viganó et al. 2019;

Hartig, T. & Kahn Jr., P.H. 2016). This proximity to nature is a defining feature of rural residential preference and reinforces the association between rural living and restoration (Jansen, S.J.T. 2020).

Rural communities are also often characterized by strong relational networks and social cohesion, which can enhance collective well-being and provide emotional and practical support (Viganó et al. 2019; Hoogerbrugge, M. & Burger, M. 2022). Smaller population sizes and shared social contexts may facilitate collaboration, mutual aid, and a sense of belonging that residents value highly.

In wealthier countries, where basic services and infrastructure are more widely available, these emotional and relational benefits may translate into higher levels of subjective well-being for rural residents compared to urban counterparts (Requena, F. 2016). Importantly, these outcomes are context-dependent and reflect both material sufficiency and perceived quality of life rather than universal advantages of rural living.

5.3 WELL-BEING CHALLENGES IN RURAL ENVIRONMENTS

Despite their appeal, rural environments present significant structural and social challenges that can undermine human well-being and limit residential viability. The ideal of rural life as peaceful, cohesive, and community-oriented often clashes with the lived realities experienced by many residents. Rural environments are frequently marked by structural and economic limitations, including reduced access to healthcare and education, fewer leisure opportunities, and limited employment prospects, particularly for young people (Glendinning et al. 2003). While rural living is often viewed positively in childhood, this perception often declines during adolescence as social, educational, and recreational options narrow, leading many rural youth to report that there is “nothing for young people to do” (Glendinning et al. 2003). Social dynamics in rural communities can be double-edged. While close-knit networks may foster support and belonging, they can simultaneously generate heightened social visibility, loss of privacy, and feelings of constraint. Residents, particularly young women, have described rural life as intrusive or controlling, with frequent gossip and social surveillance linked to lower self-esteem and increased psychological stress (Glendinning et al. 2003).

These challenges are compounded by transportation constraints. Public transport in rural communities is often inadequate, infrequent, or costly, increasing reliance on private vehicles and making access to employment, education, and social opportunities more difficult, especially for those without independent mobility (Glendinning et al. 2003). Beyond structural barriers, rural well-being can be undermined by social and psychological pressures, including heightened social visibility, loss of privacy, gender-based constraints, and identity-related stress. These dynamics may transform close-knit community life from a source of support into a source of surveillance or exclusion, particularly for young women and individuals whose identities or aspirations diverge from dominant local norms (Glendinning et al. 2003).

Beyond these life-course and mobility constraints, economic and service access limitations further shape how rural residents experience well-being and influence decisions to remain in or leave rural communities. Rural regions tend to have lower incomes, higher poverty rates, and fewer employment opportunities, particularly for young people (Hoogerbrugge, M. & Burger, M. 2022).

Limited job prospects, combined with transportation barriers, contribute to out-migration and reinforce demographic imbalances.

Importantly, perceptions of safety and belonging in rural environments are unevenly distributed. While some residents associate rural living with security and stability, others, particularly individuals from marginalized racial, cultural, or political groups, may experience rural contexts as isolating or threatening. These differential experiences complicate narratives that frame rural living as universally safe or desirable.

5.4 EXAMPLES FROM WASHINGTON STATE

In the Puget Sound region, rural areas are widely valued for their contributions to quality of life, including access to local food systems, outdoor recreation, and cultural practices tied to natural resource use (Biedenweg, K. 2017). Rural communities also tend to emphasize stewardship, governance, and environmental responsibility as core components of well-being, reflecting strong connections to place, livelihood, and long-term care for local landscapes (Biedenweg, K. 2017).

At the same time, rural Puget Sound regions support diverse and sometimes competing interests, including natural-resource-dependent communities, long-term residents, and affluent second-home owners (Biedenweg, K. 2017). These dynamics shape access to housing, land, and services, influencing who can live well in rural areas and under what conditions.

Comparative well-being assessments further highlight contrasts between rural and urban regions within Puget Sound. While urban areas may prioritize physical health and economic indicators, rural regions often place greater emphasis on governance, stewardship, and sense of place (Biedenweg, K. 2017). These differences underscore the importance of context-specific approaches to well-being that reflect local values and lived experience rather than uniform policy assumptions.

Beyond more remote rural areas, Puget Sound also includes several hybrid contexts that complicate conventional urban–rural distinctions while illuminating important trade-offs in human well-being. Regions such as Black Diamond and Enumclaw in the south retain many rural characteristics—lower-density development, proximity to agricultural and forested lands, and strong place-based identity—while directly abutting expanding urban systems (City of Black Diamond 2024). These areas often attract residents seeking the psychological and cultural benefits associated with rural living without fully relinquishing access to urban employment, services, and infrastructure.

At the same time, proximity to metropolitan growth introduces distinct pressures that complicate rural well-being. Edge rural communities frequently experience development spillover, rising housing costs, increased commuter traffic, and land-use conflict as urban expansion intersects with historically rural landscapes and governance structures (City of Black Diamond 2024). Residents may face the gradual erosion of valued rural qualities without receiving the full benefits of urban service provision.

These tensions are evident in local planning contexts. Black Diamond faces a pronounced well-being mismatch as it transitions from a historic mining town to a high-growth area, with a projected

117% increase in population by 2044 (City of Black Diamond 2024). While its comprehensive plan seeks to maintain the city's identity as a "dynamic basecamp" for outdoor recreation, it simultaneously grapples with the absence of a diversified economy and significant "retail leakage," requiring residents to travel to nearby cities for basic goods and services (City of Black Diamond 2024). Similarly, West Richland's strategy for maintaining quality of life hinges on achieving sufficient economic growth to support public services while retaining the "neighborly character" that attracts young families to the area (City of West Richland 2017).

Together, these cases illustrate how residential preference in Washington is shaped not by a binary choice between urban and rural living, but by ongoing efforts to reconcile emotional well-being, identity, and access to services within rapidly changing regional systems.

5.5 IMPLICATIONS FOR RURAL FOCUSED POLICY

From a human well-being perspective, rural living cannot be treated as a scalable solution to urban growth pressures. While rural environments may support psychological restoration and social cohesion for some residents, structural constraints related to services, employment, transportation, and equity limit their capacity to accommodate widespread residential expansion without undermining well-being.

Policies such as the GMA prevent more centralized wastewater solutions, like LOSS, in rural areas not zoned as LAMRID. This creates an added burden on residents in rural communities. Efforts to protect rural lands and communities must therefore balance ecological objectives with the lived realities of rural residents, recognizing that well-being outcomes depend on both material conditions and subjective experience.

Ultimately, rural residential preference reflects a complex interaction of emotional appeal, identity, and constraint rather than a simple response to policy incentives. Recognizing these dynamics is essential for designing land-use and growth management strategies that respect both human well-being and environmental sustainability.

6. WHY BEHAVIOR-CHANGE FRAMEWORKS FAIL FOR RESIDENTIAL CHOICE

Behavior-change frameworks are a recommended approach to directing growth in urban areas in the LDC IS, assuming that residential decisions can be influenced by incentives, information, or nudges. However, evidence across psychology, sociology, and human geography suggests that residential choice operates through mechanisms that fundamentally limit the effectiveness of these approaches. Where people live is not simply a response to cost–benefit calculations, but an expression of identity, emotional security, and deeply held values that stabilize behavior over time.

6.1 RESIDENTIAL CHOICE IS IDENTITY-BASED

Residential choices are fundamentally shaped by deeply ingrained preferences, emotional security, and personal values, rendering generalized behavioral nudges or rational economic incentives largely ineffective (Jansen, S.J.T. 2020). Research indicates that location preferences are influenced by shared family environments early in life, genetic variation among individuals, and emotional attachment, suggesting that where people choose to live reflects enduring aspects of identity rather than flexible behavioral responses (Whitfield et al. 2005). Individuals tend to migrate toward places that satisfy and reinforce their psychological needs, reinforcing stability in residential patterns (Hoogerbrugge, M. & Burger, M. 2022).

These dynamics challenge rational economic models of decision-making. Once individuals have invested significant resources such as housing, social networks, or lifestyle infrastructure, they are reluctant to relinquish those investments, even when doing so might appear economically rational (Gifford, R. 2011). This resistance is reinforced by behavioral momentum and habit, which make established residential patterns particularly resistant to long-term change (Gifford, R. 2011). Non-economic motivations frequently dominate these decisions, with residents often citing peace, autonomy, and a sense of freedom as primary reasons for choosing where to live (Jansen, S.J.T. 2020). Central to these preferences is ontological security, a foundational sense of predictability, continuity, and safety, which plays a critical role in individual quality of life and anchors residential attachment (Brulle, R.J. & Norgaard, K.M. 2019).

Cultural narratives further reinforce identity-based residential preferences. Historically, media and social narratives have shaped distinctions between the perceived safety and simplicity of rural life and the social risks associated with urban environments (Glendinning et al. 2003). These narratives persist even as objective conditions change, continuing to influence perception and residential choice through shared cultural meaning rather than empirical assessment (Glendinning et al. 2003).

6.2 BEHAVIOR CHANGE THEORIES DO NOT ACCOUNT FOR EMOTIONS

Standard behavior-change frameworks often falter because they rely on rational actor assumptions that significantly underestimate the influence of emotional and non-rational drivers (Gifford, R. 2011). Emotional responses are frequently the primary catalyst for both individual and collective change, shaping how information is interpreted and acted upon (Davidson, D.J. & Kecinski, M. 2022). Affective systems operate automatically and intuitively, transforming environmental cues, such as perceived risk, into emotional reactions, including fear, anxiety, or dread, thereby framing risk as a feeling rather than a calculation (Weber, E.U. 2006).

This affective, association-based system tends to dominate during disagreement and uncertainty, outperforming slower, deliberative analytic reasoning (Weber, E.U. 2006). As a result, many decisions are guided less by abstract information than by emotional salience and lived experience (Davidson, D.J. & Kecinski, M. 2022). This dynamic helps explain why individuals struggle to act on distant or abstract threats, such as long-term environmental risks, which lack the concrete associations needed to elicit strong emotional responses (Weber, E.U. 2006). In the context of residential choice, subjective utility frequently outweighs measurable economic benefits.

Emotional knowledge also interacts with perceptions of political and cultural threats, reinforcing social inertia. Climate change, for example, functions as a symbolic challenge to existing social orders and collective identity narratives, triggering defensive responses that resist perceived disruption (Brulle, R.J. & Norgaard, K.M. 2019). In this context, newcomers or individuals with non-conforming political or cultural identities may experience social exclusion, further shaping residential dynamics (Davidson, D.J. & Kecinski, M. 2022). Conflicts arise when one group's actions are perceived to threaten another's safety, identity, or well-being. For instance, when green space benefits some residents, it diminishes others' sense of security or belonging (Dinnie et al. 2013), or when shared public spaces become contested sites of differing values and uses (Dinnie et al. 2013). In practice, green space initiatives can enhance well-being while simultaneously producing unintended distributional effects. Without attention to access, safety, and housing stability, investments in parks and green amenities may improve quality of life for some residents while increasing stress or insecurity for others through displacement, exclusion, or altered social dynamics.

In close-knit rural communities, these dynamics can be intensified. These emotional and social pressures further constrain the capacity of behavior-change frameworks to meaningfully influence residential choice.

7. DISCUSSION: THE NEED FOR BETTER LINKAGES BETWEEN HUMAN WELL-BEING AND PLACE-BASED PLANNING

7.1 URBAN AND RURAL PLANNING EFFORTS

Despite growing recognition of human well-being as a policy concern, decision-makers in many cities continue to prioritize place-marketing over place-making and fiscal well-being over people's well-being, often neglecting the psychological and social dimensions that underpin residential satisfaction (Ng, M.K. 2016). Place-marketing reflects a governing logic in which cities are positioned as competitors in a global marketplace, with success measured by their ability to attract investment, businesses, and a highly skilled workforce (Zanella et al. 2005; House et al. 2016; Ng, M.K. 2016). Within this framing, urban environments are presented less as lived places and more as marketable products. Place-making shifts the focus from promotion to experience, treating the built environment not as a product but as a living context that shapes social connection, emotional security, and psychological well-being (Ng, M.K. 2016; Zhou, J. & Hatton, E. 2024). At its core is the idea that access to healthy, supportive places is not a luxury, but a fundamental condition for human flourishing. As a result, planning and management systems that rely predominantly on objective, quantifiable indicators such as economic performance or infrastructure efficiency frequently fail to capture essential aspects of quality of life, including identity, emotional security, and a sense of belonging (Costanza et al. 2017; Biedenweg et al. 2017).

Empirical research reinforces the importance of place-based attributes in residential decision-making. Models estimating residential choice suggest that local features and amenities alone can predict residential location with notable accuracy, correctly identifying outcomes approximately 77% of the time (Feridhanusetyawan, T. & Kilkenny, M. 1996). This finding underscores the central

role of amenities and supports the “jobs follow people” hypothesis, in which residential preferences shape economic development rather than simply responding to it (Feridhanusetyawan, T. & Kilkenny, M. 1996).

Amenities are best understood not as isolated features, but as the physical and social conditions that make a place suitable for everyday living (Zanella et al. 2005). They shape how easily people meet daily needs, pursue aspirations, and experience comfort, safety, and belonging. Amenities include both the tangible elements of a neighborhood and the relational qualities that emerge through how those elements are used and experienced (Zanella et al. 2005; Jansen, S.J.T. 2020). A crucial distinction runs through this work: the difference between the presence of amenities and the experience of them. The availability and quality of amenities are often used to assess livability, yet it is residents’ interaction with those same features that determines quality of life. Two neighborhoods may offer similar services on paper but produce vastly different experiences of stress, accessibility, or satisfaction in practice (Zanella et al. 2005).

Amenities operate across several interrelated domains of human well-being. Social and institutional amenities, such as schools, healthcare facilities, libraries, local businesses, and employment opportunities, structure daily routines and social connections (Ng, M.K. 2016, Guite et al. 2006; Jansen, S.J.T. 2020). In so-called “complete neighborhoods,” these resources are embedded within walking or cycling distance, reducing friction in everyday life (Ng, M.K. 2016). Infrastructure and mobility amenities, including public transit, rail stations, complete streets, and high-speed internet, shape how residents move through space and whether a location is functionally viable at all (Ng, M.K. 2016; Jansen, S.J.T. 2020; Rao, N.D. & Min, J. 2018).

Equally influential are environmental and nearby-nature amenities, parks, urban forests, community gardens, trails, and water features, which provide opportunities for restoration and psychological relief (Ng, M.K. 2016; House et al. 2016). Consumption and lifestyle amenities, often concentrated in urban centers, further contribute to place appeal through restaurants, cultural venues, and high-quality tree canopy, with evidence showing that people are willing to spend more time and money in environments that integrate natural and aesthetic qualities (House et al. 2016; Jansen, S.J.T. 2020; Hoogerbrugge, M & Burger, M. 2022).

Beyond their role in daily life, amenities also function as powerful drivers of economic growth and social sorting. High-quality amenities, particularly those tied to scenic landscapes, trails, and outdoor recreation, are frequently cited as decisive factors in highly skilled workers' choice of where to live and in firms' decision on where to locate (House et al. 2016).

When planning frameworks prioritize ecological or growth objectives without integrating lived, experiential dimensions of human well-being, they risk disproportionately harming communities with deep cultural, social, economic, and psychological ties to the places being managed (Biedenweg et al. 2017). In rapidly urbanizing regions such as Puget Sound, this disconnect can intensify social conflict and undermine the legitimacy of planning interventions.

For planners and policymakers, this means that influencing where people live requires more than altering incentives or providing information. Effective interventions must engage with the lived experience of place, acknowledging that well-being emerges from the interaction between objective conditions and subjective perception. Without this integration, planning strategies risk

misinterpreting residential behavior and overestimating the power of conventional policy tools to redirect settlement patterns.

7.2 ADVOCATING FOR PLACE-BASED WELL-BEING ASSESSMENTS

The importance of recognizing human well-being in planning is widely acknowledged. A livable city must be healthy, safe, harmonious, attractive, and affordable, supported by high-quality amenities, accessibility, and environmental sustainability (Zanella et al. 2005). Moving beyond historical reliance on easily measurable indicators, contemporary approaches increasingly emphasize place-based well-being assessments that integrate objective conditions with subjective perceptions of satisfaction, happiness, utility, and welfare (Costanza et al. 2017).

Implementing such assessments requires methodological shifts in planning practice. First, human well-being must be defined and measured using pluralistic, multidimensional frameworks that encompass emotional, psychological, cultural, social, physical, economic, and governance domains (Biedenweg et al. 2017). Rather than imposing a single definition, assessment tools must remain adaptable, recognizing that well-being priorities are context-specific and culturally dependent, with significant variation across regions and communities (Biedenweg, K. 2017).

Second, integrating systems thinking into planning models is essential. Comprehensive frameworks that explicitly incorporate human well-being alongside environmental impact indicators, including air pollution and solid waste, offer a more holistic understanding of livability (Zanella et al. 2005). These integrated models provide critical guidance for aligning planning interventions with diverse livability objectives (Zanella et al. 2005).

Finally, an effective well-being assessment depends on the co-creation of knowledge. To ensure that planning decisions are both scientifically credible and politically legitimate, indicator development must involve interdisciplinary collaboration among social scientists, decision-makers, and diverse stakeholders (Biedenweg et al. 2017). This participatory process helps counteract the traditional reliance on existing datasets and expert judgment alone, while advancing social justice principles consistent with the capabilities approach to environmental justice, which emphasizes recognition and participation in policy processes (Biedenweg et al. 2017).

7.3 IMPLICATIONS FOR PUGET SOUND HOUSING, RESILIENCE, AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

An expanding body of social science research confirms that emotions shape and define human experience. Yet historically, both urban and rural planning efforts have struggled to integrate these insights into decision-making, resulting in a persistent gap between policy objectives and the complex human factors that influence where people live and how they experience well-being. This disconnect is particularly consequential in contexts where growth pressures, environmental change, and social inequities intersect.

Across the preceding analysis, residential choice emerges as a process deeply rooted in emotional pathways, psychological security, and cultural identity, factors that are highly resistant to simple

behavior-change approaches or singular economic incentives. When planning systems overlook these dynamics, they risk misinterpreting residential behavior and underestimating the importance of lived experience in shaping settlement patterns.

The Puget Sound region illustrates how stronger linkages between human well-being and planning can support more equitable and sustainable development outcomes. Rapid population growth and intensifying environmental pressures make it increasingly difficult to provide adequate human well-being across the region (Abbas et al. 2024). Investments in natural infrastructure have demonstrably improved quality of life and increased residential property values, with features such as trees and proximity to parks boosting housing prices, sometimes by as much as 20% (House et al. 2016).

Natural infrastructure also provides critical resilience benefits, particularly as Puget Sound communities face increased flood risk and other climate-related hazards (House et al. 2016). Nature-based solutions such as rain gardens and urban forests help mitigate pollution, reduce urban heat island effects, and deliver psychological benefits that are central to human well-being (House et al. 2016). Consistent with these findings, Puget Sound residents place high value on physical health indicators, including air and drinking water quality, reinforcing the importance of environmental management as a foundation for well-being (Biedenweg, K. 2017).

Equally important are the social and relational dimensions of well-being. The Puget Sound indicator project by Dr. Biedenweg demonstrated the value of incorporating subjective factors identified by local stakeholders as essential to quality of life, even when formal metrics were initially lacking (Biedenweg et al. 2017). This process led to the formal adoption of indicators reflecting deeply held community values, such as sense of place, place identity, and cultural practices (Biedenweg, K. 2017). Urban nature, in particular, has been shown to strengthen social ties and cohesion by encouraging the use of shared spaces and informal social controls, contributing to neighborhood safety and the collective capacity to address shared challenges (House et al. 2016).

For Puget Sound communities to be resilient in the face of continued growth and environmental change, planning must move beyond narrow performance metrics and actively support the relational, cultural, and psychological dimensions of human well-being. Doing so offers a pathway toward planning systems that align sustainability objectives with the lived realities of the people they are intended to serve.

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