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**WORKS**

# Health Impact Assessment: Potential Municipal Incorporation of **South Hill**

EDITORS

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**W** LIVABLE  
CITY YEAR

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HEALTH SCIENCES

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# Front Matter

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The University of Washington acknowledges the Coast Salish peoples of this land, the land which touches the shared waters of all tribes and bands within the Duwamish, Muckleshoot, Puyallup, Suquamish, and Tulalip nations.

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## **Equity Statement**

This report includes equity considerations related to transportation, governance and essential services, and community infrastructure and public space within the context of South Hill. We recognize that unincorporated communities often lack the political representation, dedicated funding, staffing capacity, and local decision-making authority needed to effectively address community concerns and invest in local priorities. These limitations can affect residents' access to transportation options, public services, community amenities, and opportunities for civic participation. As South Hill continues to grow, ensuring equitable access to infrastructure, services, and community resources will become increasingly important. Certain populations, including children, older adults, individuals with disabilities, lower-income households, military families, and residents without reliable access to a personal vehicle, may be disproportionately affected by gaps in service provision, transportation connectivity, and access to public spaces and community facilities. Future planning and decision-making processes should consider meaningful community engagement and consider how policies, investments, and governance structures may affect different populations. Whether South Hill remains unincorporated or pursues municipal incorporation, decision-makers should seek to ensure that investments in transportation, public services, and community infrastructure equitably benefit current and future residents and help reduce barriers to opportunity, mobility, and community participation.

## **Positionality Statement**

This report was completed by sixteen graduate students at the University of Washington representing the fields of public health, landscape architecture, engineering, and urban design and planning. This report was completed in partial fulfillment of the graduate course requirements for ENV H/URBAN 536: Health Impact Assessment. We acknowledge that our pursuit of higher education is a privilege that is disproportionately shared in our society. Our role as students allows us the opportunity to devote time and resources toward better understanding and addressing the potential health, environmental, and structural equity impacts of proposed plans and policies. Not all report contributors of the report are familiar with South Hill and the surrounding area. The findings and recommendations of this report are informed by educational and personal experiences, online research, informational meetings with representatives from Pierce County Planning & Public Works, and, for some, limited firsthand accounts of visiting the site. Collaboration with local community groups and engagement with local residents to understand their needs is also essential; however, due to time constraints, the student team was unable to incorporate direct community engagement.

## List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

BRT	Bus Rapid Transit
CDC	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
CPFR	Central Pierce Fire and Rescue
CTR	Commuter Trip Reduction
County	Pierce County
DHHS	U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
EMS	Emergency medical services
EPA	U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
FTA	Federal Transit Administration
GIS	Geographic Information System
GSH	Good Samaritan Hospital
ILA	Interlocal agreement
Longston	Longston Towne Center
Meridian	Meridian Avenue East
MRSC	Municipal Research and Services Center
NMT	Nonmotorized transport
NRPA	National Recreation and Park Association
OFM	Washington State Office of Financial Management
PCC	Pierce County Code
PCRC	Pierce County Regional Council
PCSD	Pierce County Sheriff's Department
PPW	Pierce County Planning and Public Works
PSRC	Puget Sound Regional Council
RCW	Revised Code of Washington
SB	Senate Bill
SDOH	Social determinants of health
SR-161	State Route 161
Sunrise Village	Sunrise Village Towne Center
TBD	Transportation Benefit District
Thun Field	Pierce County Airport – Thun Field
TMP	Transportation Management Plan
TPCHD	Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department
UGA	Urban Growth Area
USP	Unified Sewer Plan
UW	University of Washington

WSDOH	Washington State Department of Health
WSDOT	Washington State Department of Transportation
WSIPP	Washington State Institute for Public Policy



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Health Impact Assessment: South Hill

# Executive Summary

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# Executive Summary

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## Introduction

As the Washington State community of South Hill continues to grow, residents and Pierce County (County) officials are increasingly interested in understanding the potential impacts of municipal incorporation, whereby a new city administration would inherit primary governance of the community from Pierce County. In pursuit of that goal, this Health Impact Assessment (HIA) evaluates the health implications of the potential incorporation of South Hill and issues priority recommendations. By focusing specifically on health, this report fills a gap in the information provided by the 2023 Governance Study and the Plan Review & Incorporation Planning Objectives (Community Attributes, Inc. & Maul Foster & Alongi, Inc., 2023; Berk Consulting, 2025). Topics explored with regard to their connection to health and incorporation in South Hill include transportation; governance and essential services; and community infrastructure and public space.

## Background

### South Hill Incorporation

South Hill sits at an inflection point. Located in central Pierce County directly south of (and up the hill from) Puyallup, South Hill occupies approximately 19 square miles of Puget Sound lowlands, bisected north to south by Meridian Avenue East (State Route 161), bounded to the east by the Orting Valley, to the west by the communities of Frederickson and Summit, and to the south by Graham. What once was a small farming community at mid-century has transformed into Washington’s largest unincorporated community, home to an estimated 71,800 people as of 2026, more than the nearby city of Lakewood or other cities like Redmond or Kirkland (Washington State Office of Financial Management, 2024). Despite the size and scale of South Hill, there is no mayor, no city council, and no municipal budget of its own. Its roads, parks, and planning decisions are governed by Pierce County in Tacoma, whose seven council members divide South Hill across three overlapping districts, leaving the community without a consistent advocate to the County.

That condition is increasingly under scrutiny. In January 2026, Washington State Senator Steve Conway introduced Senate Bill (SB) 6181, legislation that would allow Pierce County—west of the cascades with a population between 900,000 and two million people—to file an incorporation petition on behalf of South Hill—a community with more than 25,000 residents within the urban growth boundary—bypassing the current requirements to collect signatures from at least 10% of registered voters (SB 6181, 2026). Pierce County Executive Ryan Mello identified South Hill as the most immediate candidate for cityhood under the legislation, framing the case in terms of self-determination: “This allows them to really control their own destiny, about how they want to be governed and what level of government services they want” (KOMO News, 2026). Regardless of

whether SB 6181 advances, the 2023 Governance Study, University of Washington (UW) Livable City Year partnerships, and the formation of the South Hill Advisory Commission have together made incorporation a live, consequential question for the community and for Pierce County.

## Project Team

This HIA was produced by sixteen graduate students at the University of Washington, Seattle, representing public health, urban design and planning, landscape architecture, and engineering. The project was completed as part of the cross-listed graduate course ENVH/URBAN 536: Health Impact Assessment, co-instructed by Edmund Seto, PhD, MS, Professor in the Department of Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences, and Andrew L. Dannenberg, MD, MPH, Affiliate Professor in both the School of Public Health and the College of Built Environments. Both instructors are recognized in theory and the practice of HIA in the United States.

The project partnership was conducted under the umbrella of the UW Livable City Year Program, which partnered with Pierce County Planning and Public Works (PPW) in 2025-2026 to deliver a suite of student-led research projects focused on South Hill. Pierce County Senior Planners Alon Bassok and Justin Patterson served as primary external advisors to the HIA team, providing access to planning documents, the South Hill Existing Conditions Report, the 2023 Governance Study the 2025 Plan Review & Incorporation Planning Objectives Report, and attending an interim briefing on June 4, 2026, to offer direct feedback on the team's findings. The UW Livable City Year Program, represented by Branden Born, Jennifer Otten, and Teri Thompson Randall, provided coordination support throughout the quarter.

## HIA Process

An HIA is "a combination of procedures, methods and tools that systematically judges the potential, and sometimes unintended, effects of a policy, plan, program or project on the health of a population and the distribution of those effects within the population. HIA identifies appropriate actions to manage those effects" (Winkler et al., 2021). HIAs facilitate decision-making by identifying potential harms and benefits of a program before implementation, considering vulnerable populations, and supporting transparency and community engagement. A complete HIA follows six steps: Screening, scoping, assessment, recommendations, reporting, and monitoring and evaluation. Each step of this HIA is described briefly below.

### Screening

Screening is the process of determining whether a proposed policy, plan, or project warrants an HIA, specifically, whether one would add new, useful information to an otherwise incomplete decision-making process (Winkler et al., 2021; Bhatia et al., 2011). Screening criteria applied by the course instructors to select this project are described below, with specific application to South Hill's incorporation question.

A decision is pending, and time remains to inform it. As of June 2026, South Hill's governance future is under active legislative, executive, and community deliberation. SB 6181 represents a live

pathway to an incorporation vote, and Pierce County has invested substantially in community outreach infrastructure in anticipation of that deliberation. The 2023 Governance Study has been completed, a final decision has not been made, and a window exists within the academic calendar to conduct a rapid HIA and present findings to county staff before the quarter's end.

The proposal has meaningful potential to affect social and environmental determinants of health. Municipal incorporation would reorganize the governance structure that determine how South Hill's roads are designed, how transit service is planned, how parks are funded, and how development is reviewed—all well-established determinants of population health (Frumkin et al., 2004, Ewing & Cervero, 2010). Emerging research has found that larger proportions of unincorporated land within a county are associated with lower average county life expectancy, and that residents of unincorporated communities face political exclusion and diminished access to the resources that protect health (Gomez-Vidal & Gomez, 2021). Whether or not these patterns hold in a prosperous suburban community like South Hill, the governance mechanisms at stake are real.

The HIA adds new information not captured in existing analyses. The 2023 South Hill Governance Study examined financial feasibility, service transition logistics, and governance structure options in significant depth. However, as the study's own framing makes clear, it was explicitly an informational fiscal analysis, health impacts were not a part of its scope (Community Attributes, Inc. & Maul Foster & Alongi, Inc., 2023). The 2025 Plan Review & Incorporation Planning Objectives Report prepared for Pierce County by Berk Consulting provides additional governance recommendations based on prior planning documents (Berk Consulting, 2025). At the national level, HIAs examining municipal incorporation are rare; the literature on governance and health is still developing, and no prior HIA has focused specifically on incorporation as a proposed action. This project fills that novel gap.

Vulnerable populations are meaningfully affected. South Hill's population includes significant numbers who would be disproportionately affected by the transportation, parks, and service provision outcomes that are most sensitive to governance structure: children and youth, older adults, veterans (the county is home to over 75,000 veterans), lower-income households, and residents without access to a private vehicle. These populations are both more dependent on public infrastructure and less likely to have individual resources to compensate for its absence.

Sufficient resources and evidence are available to conduct this scale of assessment. The South Hill Existing Conditions Report (2026), the Community Plan (updated 2023), the Governance Study, the Puget Sound Regional Council data portal, American Community Survey estimates, Pierce County geographic information system data, and all other cited and referenced data sources in this report provided a well-developed evidence base for a rapid HIA of this type.

## Scoping

Pierce County and Public Planning provided the UW HIA Team with a project overview describing current conditions and challenges in South Hill, as well as the implications for remaining unincorporated status versus pursuing municipal incorporation. Professors Dannenberg and Seto

then facilitated a collaborative scoping exercise with the team to identify the key health and equity impacts associated with incorporation. Based on this process, the team organized potential human health outcomes into the following three focus areas or chapters:

- Transportation;
- Governance and Essential Services; and
- Community Infrastructure and Public Space.

Each chapter examines a set of related subtopics, assessing their connections to health, current conditions in South Hill, key findings, projected outcomes under both the status quo (i.e., unincorporated status) and municipal incorporation, and targeted recommendations. Table ES.1 (below) provides some existing health conditions for South Hill compared to Pierce County as a whole; while the health conditions mirror those of the county, there are high rates of high blood pressure, high cholesterol, obesity, and cardiovascular disease.

**Table ES.1**

*Prevalence of Age-adjusted Chronic Health Conditions, Pierce County and South Hill (2023)*

Measure	Pierce Co. Age-adjusted Rate	CI	South Hill Age-adjusted Rate	CI
High blood pressure among adults ( % )	30.8	( 28.6 - 32.9 )	29.9	( 28 - 31.8 )
Current asthma among adults ( % )	10.8	( 9.8 - 12 )	11.0	( 10 - 11.9 )
Coronary heart disease among adults ( % )	4.9	( 4.3 - 5.5 )	4.7	( 4.3 - 5.1 )
Diagnosed diabetes among adults ( % )	9.9	( 8.8 - 11 )	9.4	( 8.4 - 10.3 )
High cholesterol among adults who have ever been screened ( % )	32.3	( 30.1 - 34.5 )	32.0	( 29.9 - 34.1 )
Obesity among adults ( % )	36.8	( 33.6 - 40 )	36.1	( 33 - 39 )

Note. Created by the authors using data from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2025a, 2025b).

## Assessment

### Chapter 1: Transportation

When designed with, by, and for the community it serves, transportation is one of the most powerful health interventions a community can make. Regular walking and cycling reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, obesity, and depression; commuting by transit rather than driving alone is consistently associated with lower stress and improved psychological well-being; and communities with accessible, connected mobility networks see measurably better health equity outcomes for residents who are elderly, disabled, young, or low-income (Ewing & Cervero, 2010; Chatterjee et al., 2020; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). South Hill, with its approximately 71,800 residents, its growing commercial core along Meridian Avenue East (Meridian, or State Route 161 [SR-161]), and its location within Pierce Transit's service area, has the population density, land use foundations, and latent demand to become a community where non-drive-alone travel is a genuine, attractive option for daily life—not an afterthought. Route 402's ridership already outperforms Pierce Transit's own benchmarks despite operating at hourly headways, a clear signal that residents will use expanded service when it is offered (Livable City Year Program, 2026). The chapter's assessment finds that the primary barrier to realizing South Hill's transportation health potential is not physical geography or community preference, it is the absence of a local governing authority with the tools, accountability, and dedicated capacity to act.

Incorporation changes that fundamentally. South Hill has the potential to pursue a seat on the Pierce Transit Board of commissioners immediately upon incorporation, using that representation to advocate for 15-minute headways on Route 402 and expanded Pierce Transit Runner microtransit coverage into South Hill's residential core—transit improvements with direct, well-documented benefits for physical activity, air quality, traffic safety, and access equity (Morency et al., 2018; Morabia et al., 2010). Alongside that, an incorporated South Hill should consider establishing a Transportation Benefit District (TBD) as one of its first council actions, generating dedicated local revenue for the sidewalk, bicycle, and transit-oriented infrastructure that county capital programming has been unable to prioritize against a \$344.1 million projected deficit through 2044 (Pierce County, 2024). Adopting a citywide Complete Streets ordinance, a high-priority comprehensive plan element, both sets an enforceable design standard for transforming major arterials (such as Meridian) into the walkable, human-scaled corridors the Community Plan has envisioned for over two decades, and unlocks competitive Washington State grant funding under Revised Code of Washington 47.04.320 that is currently unavailable to unincorporated South Hill. The Commute Trip Reduction (CTR) Act becomes mandatory upon incorporation, requiring qualifying employers (with the possible rapid expansion from House Bill 2307) to actively reduce drive-alone rates and vehicle miles traveled through transit incentives, flexible scheduling, worksite amenities, and transportation demand management programs. Programs such as Commute Seattle have been key to shifting two-thirds of CTR-affected commuters away from drive-alone commutes (City of Seattle, n.d.). Connecting all of these tools is the chapter's foundational institutional recommendation: the creation of a dedicated municipal South Hill Transportation Department in the first year of incorporation. A locally staffed,

accountable transportation planning function is what transforms legal authority into real outcomes, and the institution which South Hill can, for the first time, plan its streets, transit connections, and mobility network as a coherent system designed expressly around the health and daily movement of its residents.

## Chapter 2: Governance and Essential Services

Through incorporation, South Hill has an opportunity to proactively address future health risks tied to essential service provision. In the context of regional growth and resource constraints at the county level, current utility infrastructure, first responder services, healthcare facilities, and available housing may become insufficient. Consistent population growth combined with rising housing costs raises the alarm for displacement risk. An overburdened sewer system can lead to soil and groundwater contamination, elevating the risk of pathogen contamination and disease, yet the County has limited resources to ensure that system modernization aligns with population growth. While the healthcare options available to South Hill residents today meet the needs of most residents, growth in central Pierce County may lead to longer wait times, which would contribute to a range of adverse health outcomes. Current response times from police, fire, and emergency medical services raise concerns about public safety, especially for medically vulnerable residents. An incorporated South Hill could choose to reallocate funds, pursue grants, or create new funding mechanisms to address upgrades to the services that matter most to them. In this chapter, we make recommendations that look toward the future of South Hill and aim to promote the health of residents through the services they depend on each day.

## Chapter 3: Community Infrastructure and Public Space

South Hill's continued population growth has intensified the need for investments in community infrastructure, public gathering spaces, and multimodal connectivity. Well-designed community infrastructure and public spaces support physical, mental, social, economic, and environmental health by promoting walkability, active transportation, social interaction, access to community amenities and services, local economic activity, and reduced dependence on motor vehicles (Credit & Mack, 2019; Frank et al., 2006; Sallis et al., 2012; Wojnarowska, 2016). These benefits are particularly important for children, older adults, and lower-income households, who often rely more heavily on nearby community resources and accessible public spaces. As one of the largest urban unincorporated communities in Pierce County, South Hill relies on County and regional entities for infrastructure planning and service provision, shaping residents' access to public amenities and opportunities for community engagement. Resident feedback consistently identifies the quality and availability of infrastructure, public facilities, and expanded public services as important determinants of quality of life, underscoring demand for investment in these areas (Pierce County, n.d.).

South Hill possesses many of the population, economic, and geographic characteristics needed to support vibrant civic spaces and walkable activity centers, but lacks the local authority, funding, and coordinated planning capacity needed to fully realize these opportunities. While planned investments in Meridian Habitat Park and Community Center represents an important step forward,

long-term improvements to accessibility, placemaking, and community identity will require sustained local leadership capable of aligning land use, infrastructure, and public service priorities around community needs. Incorporation affords South Hill residents the opportunity to take a more active role in shaping the built environment and future development patterns. By providing greater local control over planning, infrastructure investment, and service delivery priorities, incorporation would allow decision-makers to pursue projects that strengthen social cohesion, improve access to amenities and services, and create healthier, more connected neighborhoods. An incorporated City of South Hill should consider phased redevelopment of Pierce County Airport – Thun Field (Thun Field) into a mixed-use green space that integrates with housing, community facilities, local services, and multimodal transportation connections at adjacent Sunrise Village Towne Center. Over time, this redevelopment would create a new focal point for community life while expanding opportunities for physical activity, social interaction, economic development, and equitable access to essential resources, generating lasting health benefits for current and future South Hill residents (Wood et al., 2017).

## Priority Recommendations

Table ES.2 displays our priority recommendations, ranked based on potential to improve health, feasibility, and perceived alignment with community interests. We broadly recommend that South Hill pursue incorporation as its own municipality first, as it drastically improves the feasibility of all other actions and provides the most significant long-term benefits for community health. The responsible parties listed, thus, reflect the new city and its new city departments. Further details and additional recommendations can be found in subsequent chapters.

**Table ES.2**

*Priority Recommendations Summary*

<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Chapter</b>	<b>Responsible Party</b>
R1.1: Establish a South Hill Department of Transportation	Transportation	City
R1.4: Expand transit service via Pierce Transit Board of Comms	Transportation	City Department of Transportation
R2.3: Identify and pursue state and federal grants to support high-density affordable housing in towne centers	Governance and Essential Services	City
R2.2: Leverage Puget Sound Regional Council representation to influence regional growth management	Governance and Essential Services	City Planning & Public Works Department
R3.1: Reimagine Pierce County Airport – Thun Field as a phased, mixed-use, civic redevelopment site	Community Infrastructure and Public Space	City Planning & Public Works Department
R2.8: Utilize growth projections to inform desired level of service when updating interlocal agreements with Pierce County Sheriff and Central Pierce Fire & Rescue	Governance and Essential Services	City
R3.5: Create safer, more connected, and more comfortable pedestrian infrastructure along Meridian Avenue East	Community Infrastructure and Public Space	Collaboration: City Planning & Public Works or DoT and WSDOT

Note. City = City of South Hill; DoT = Department of Transportation; WSDOT = Washington State Department of Transportation

### Reporting

Interim findings were presented to PPW on June 4, 2026. The draft report was revised based on feedback from PPW and course instructors. A copy of this final report was submitted to PPW for review. This report will be made publicly accessible via a County webpage.

### Monitoring and Evaluation

Due to time constraints, the HIA team was unable to engage in monitoring and evaluation. If incorporation occurs, Pierce County and South Hill are encouraged to monitor whether

recommendations of the HIA were considered, the decisions that were made, and ultimately, the health impacts of interest for each implemented recommendation.

## Limitations

This HIA was completed within a 10-week academic quarter by a team of sixteen UW graduate students, a scope consistent with rapid assessment but one that imposes meaningful constraints. Direct community engagement with South Hill residents was not possible within the available timeframe, and the assessment relies on existing planning documents, county level health data, and informational meetings with Pierce County staff rather than original data collection or community-led input. Health data disaggregated specifically to South Hill is largely unavailable for some key measures for the assessments. This HIA is also, to the team's knowledge, among the first to evaluate municipal incorporation as a proposed action, meaning limited precedent exists in the literature for calibrating its findings. These constraints do not invalidate the analysis, but they underscore the importance of community engagement, South Hill-specific health data collection, and ongoing monitoring should incorporation move forward.

## Conclusion

This HIA assesses the potential health impacts of municipal incorporation for South Hill, with a focus on transportation, governance and essential services, and community infrastructure and public space. Overall, incorporation is expected to have largely positive impacts on health and equity by increasing local decision-making capacity, improving access to transportation and essential services, and enabling more coordinated investment in community infrastructure and public spaces. Across all three chapters, the assessment finds that South Hill has strong underlying population growth, geographic positioning, and community demand to support improved health outcomes; however, current reliance on County governance limits the ability to fully address gaps in transportation connectivity, service provision, and access to high-quality, equitable public spaces. Incorporation would provide South Hill with tools that more directly align planning, funding, and implementation with local needs. To maximize positive health outcomes and reduce inequities, respective agencies should consider expanded multimodal transportation access, strengthened and adequately funded essential services, and investment in inclusive, accessible community infrastructure that supports physical activity, social connection, and civic life for all South Hill residents.

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Health Impact Assessment: South Hill

# Introduction

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CITY YEAR



URBAN DESIGN  
& PLANNING



ENVIRONMENTAL  
& OCCUPATIONAL  
HEALTH SCIENCES

# Introduction

## HIA Steps

An HIA is a tool employed by public health practitioners, urban planners, and other entities interested in understanding the potential health impacts of a plan, project, policy, or program. HIAs are conducted prior to implementation and offer specific, actionable, health-promoting recommendations to guide the decision-making process. Crucially, HIAs should be informed by community priorities and thus should involve engagement with stakeholders such as community leaders or elected officials (Bhatia et al., 2011).

Inherent to the HIA process is consideration of the social determinants of health (SDOH), or the non-medical contributors to the frequency and distribution of health outcomes across a population. SDOH include factors such as education and healthcare access; neighborhood and built environment conditions such as housing, transportation, public safety, green space, and walkability; social connectedness and support; and economic stability (Figure 0.1). The SDOH framework illustrates the multifactorial nature of human health and thus the benefit of HIA for promoting healthier communities (World Health Organization, 2026).

**Figure 0.1**

*Social Determinants of Health*



Note. From (CDC , 2026).

Though HIA scope may differ drastically by sector and project, all complete HIAs follow the six stages described below:

1. **Screening:** Identify a proposed policy or project with the potential to impact health for which an HIA would add new, useful information to the decision-making process.
2. **Scoping:** Outline the scope of work, including key health impacts or topic areas for evaluation.
3. **Assessment:** Summarize baseline conditions and synthesize available evidence to characterize health impacts for each alternative.
4. **Recommendations:** Based on the evidence synthesized during the assessment phase, the HIA team should generate a series of specific, feasible, and health-promoting recommendations. Recommendations should identify the entity responsible for implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.
5. **Reporting:** A final report (like this one) detailing each step of the HIA shall be generated and made publicly available. Interim findings may be presented to stakeholders for feedback before releasing HIA findings to the general public.
6. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Process evaluation pertains to the effectiveness of how the HIA was conducted. Impact evaluation interrogates the extent to which the HIA impacts decision-making processes. Monitoring, or outcome evaluation, utilizes specific health metrics to track the impact of recommendations on health over time. Monitoring is conducted by the agency responsible for implementation.

## Municipal Incorporation and Health

### Incorporation Overview

Municipal incorporation is the formal legal process by which unincorporated territories are converted into municipalities in the United States (Smith, 2018). During municipal incorporation, unincorporated communities undergo governance transfer whereby the most proximal governing body changes from the county to a new town or city government. Drivers of modern municipal incorporation include a desire for political representation and local control, better services, and community homogeneity amidst population growth and regional heterogeneity (Leon-Moreta, 2015). Given the potential for transformative governance impacts, county governments and unincorporated communities must carefully consider the implications for incorporation.

In Washington State, unincorporated communities with a minimum of 15,000 residents (or communities of 3,000 residents or more within five air miles of a city or town with at least 15,000 residents) may choose to incorporate. Feasibility studies are often completed to evaluate population growth projections, determine potential geographic boundaries, discuss level of service (LOS) alternatives, and predict financial impacts. Despite multi-dimensional linkages between health and local governance, health impacts are not explicitly considered in incorporation feasibility studies (Municipal Research and Services Center [MRSC], 2026).

## Unincorporated Status as a Determinant of Health

Public amenities that residents depend on every day, such as roads, utilities, and first responder services, are funded through a combination of state and federal grants, local taxes, and direct service charges. In unincorporated communities, these financial resources and the services they fund are allocated and managed by county agencies. Evidence suggests that in the governance of unincorporated areas, county governments are limited in their ability to adequately provide housing choice and mobility; clean air, water, and soil; and political representation for residents (Anderson, 2010). Substandard resource provision in some unincorporated communities has led to worse health outcomes compared to incorporated towns and cities (Gomez-Vidal & Gomez, 2021). Many linkages between lack of incorporation and health are often not firmly established due to a lack of research focusing specifically on unincorporated communities and health. However, civic participation, environmental pollutants, and housing are all well-evidenced determinants of health, suggesting that unincorporated status can be associated with worse health outcomes compared to incorporated municipalities (Gomez-Vidal & Gomez, 2021). Indeed, research has found that those living in unincorporated areas had fewer avenues to address community needs and health risks compared to those in towns and cities (Purifoy, 2021).

**Figure 0.2**  
*Unincorporated Status as a Determinant of Health*

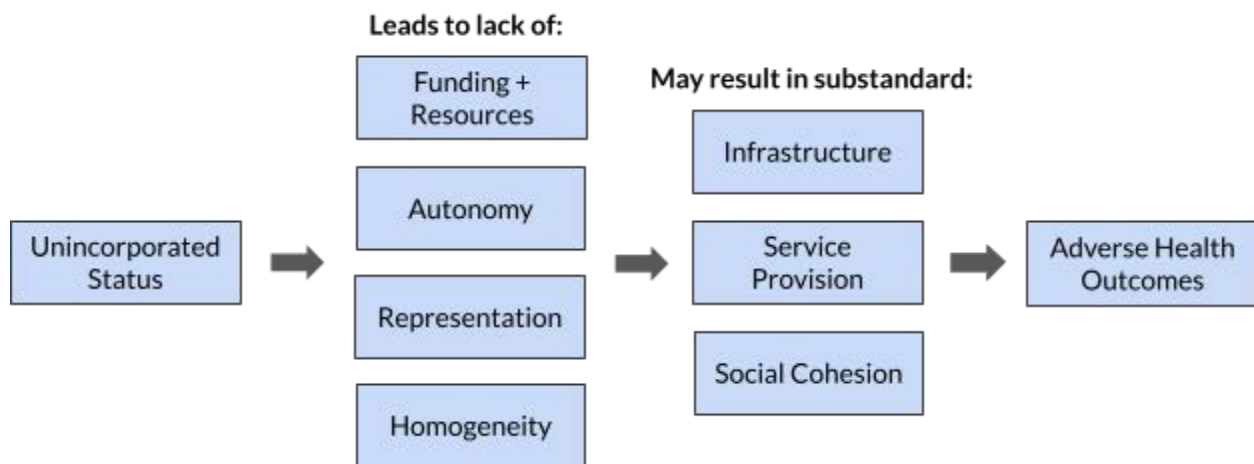


Figure 0.2 provides a visual representation of the connection between unincorporated status and health. Lack of incorporation leads to a lack of funding and resource allocation, little to no autonomy in governance, inadequate political representation, and a lack of a cohesive local identity. In turn, these weaknesses may result in substandard infrastructure, service provision, and social cohesion, all of which are linked to adverse health outcomes.

## Resource Allocation and Representation in South Hill

South Hill is currently governed by Pierce County (County), and is subject to the decisions made by county officials on how to allocate limited resources. With over 460,000 of the County's nearly 950,000 residents living in unincorporated areas served directly by the county and its contractors, county funds, which are derived from sources including, but not limited to, property and sales tax revenue and state and federal grants, are spread thin (U.S. Census Bureau, 2026; Livable City Year Program, 2026). The county uses these funds to maintain existing services and implement projects with the potential to provide benefits across the county as a whole.

If incorporated, South Hill's 71,800 residents would make up the second largest city in the county behind Tacoma. However, without city status, South Hill is ineligible for the federal and state funding available to cities and towns. All Washington State retail sales are subject to 6.5% state sales tax and at least 1% local sales tax. Municipalities and counties have the option to levy additional sales taxes to support services such as law enforcement and transportation. For sales within cities or towns, the initial 1% is shared between the county and the municipality. Local sales tax revenue in unincorporated communities goes entirely to the county, and is then dispersed across municipalities and unincorporated communities at the county's discretion (MRSC, 2026). According to 2020 U.S. Census data, despite making up less than 10% of the county's total population, South Hill accounted for approximately one quarter of Pierce County's total retail sales, due to active commerce along Meridian (U.S. Census Bureau, 2026). As an unincorporated community, all revenue from local sales taxes collected within South Hill is funneled directly to Pierce County and then distributed according to county interests.

There is currently no avenue through which the South Hill community can meaningfully advocate for changes to county funding allocation as a unified body. The Pierce County Council is a governing body made up of seven council members, one from each council district. South Hill is split across districts 1, 2, and 3, leaving the community without a dedicated advocate at the county level as council members must consider the interests of all communities within their district. Council districts afford each resident of the county equal voting privileges regardless of incorporation status, but as pointed out by Gomez-Vidal & Gomez (2021), only unincorporated areas fall fully under county jurisdiction. Thus, unincorporated community residents have less autonomy over funding and policy potentially affecting their health since city residents elect to make changes to services at the municipal level.

In addition to hindering effective advocacy for community-specific funding, South Hill's unincorporated status limits its representation on regional planning bodies. The Puget Sound Regional Council (PSRC) is a quasi-governmental body that oversees coordinated long-range planning for King, Kitsap, Pierce, and Snohomish counties. The Pierce County Regional Council (PCRC), a sub-council of PSRC, is composed of members from incorporated cities within Pierce County. Members of PCRC serve on boards and commissions within PSRC, including the Growth Management Policy Board, the Transportation Policy Board, the Economic Development Policy Board, and the Executive Board. The Growth Management Coordinating Committee, which is made up of planning officials from each of the cities and towns in Pierce County (but does not include

representatives from unincorporated communities), helps to determine locations, housing types, and infrastructure needs for new developments within the county.

As a city, South Hill would also be able to have a seat at the table when it comes to decisions on county-wide planning policies, including affordable housing, agricultural lands, economic development and employment, education, fiscal impacts, historic, archeological, and cultural preservation, natural resources, open space and environmental protection, siting of public capital facilities, transportation facilities and strategies, and Urban Growth Areas (UGAs), all of which can impact health. Through PSRC, a future City of South Hill would have a say in allocation of federal transportation funding for the region. This would impact updates to Meridian, which is managed by the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT). It would also impact local transit authorities such as Pierce Transit. Additionally, representation on PCRC would allow for South Hill to be represented on the Growth Management Policy Board, directly influencing population growth policy within the county.

A future City of South Hill would also have access to state and federal grants to help offset costs of priority projects. The remainder of this report will expand upon the health implications of added political autonomy versus potential burden of service provision under an incorporation case.

#### How will incorporation impact health in South Hill?

The core analytical question of this HIA, and the one that the Governance Study left unanswered, is how the governance transition from county to city would affect the health of the approximately 71,800 people who live there.

First, South Hill's reliance on county service provision creates structural constraints on health-promoting investment. Pierce County, facing fiscal pressures that have required the county to draw from its reserves and impose a new public safety rules tax in early 2026 to maintain current operations, manages a service territory of over 460,000 unincorporated residents alongside its responsibilities to incorporated cities (Pierce County, 2024). South Hill's transportation network reflects some of these consequences: the County faces a \$344.1 million projected transportation funding deficit through 2044, South Hill's road network only includes 77 miles of sidewalks across 136 miles of county roads, and it completely lacks any protected bicycle infrastructure (Pierce County, 2024; Livable City Year Program, 2026). These are not just minor amenity gaps. The absence of walkable, safe infrastructure is directly linked to physical inactivity, traffic injury risk, poor air quality exposure, and health inequities for vulnerable groups such as children and older adults (Frumkin et al., 2004).

Second, incorporation offers something that county governance structurally cannot: local control and direct accountability over the built environment decisions that shape health. As an unincorporated community, South Hill is ineligible for an array of funding sources, such as Washington State Complete Streets grants. These tools are legally restricted to incorporated jurisdictions, and many are among the most evidence-supported mechanisms available for improving population health through the built environment. South Hill residents and community

members have consistently and clearly identified these gaps. When Pierce County conducted community outreach for the South Hill Community Plan update, respondents gave top priority to building sidewalks, improving roads, and developing parks (Pierce County, 2024). The Community Plan’s own vision statement, written by and for South Hill residents, calls explicitly for neighborhoods connected to businesses, schools, and services through “a functional transportation network that includes roads, sidewalks, bike lanes, and where needed, transit services” (Pierce County, 2024). That vision has been in the books in some form since 2003, when the editor of this section (and former resident of South Hill) was born. The constraints of county governance are a primary reason it has not been realized.

Third, incorporation would expand access to locally retained revenues and grant programs that could be directed toward the priorities South Hill residents have identified. South Hill accounts for approximately one-quarter of Pierce County’s total retail sales despite comprising less than 10% of its population, owing to the commercial concentration along Meridian (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). The catchment area for South Hill businesses and services stretches as far as over 20 miles away to the communities of Roy, Eatonville, South Prairie, Orting, Sumner, Bonney Lake, Buckley, Frederickson, Summit, Waller, Spanaway, Parkland, Elk Plain, and Lake Tapps. Under the current structure, all local sales tax revenue flows back to Pierce County and is redistributed at the County’s discretion. As an incorporated city—the second-largest in the County behind only Tacoma—South Hill would share in the 1% local sales tax and gain access to federal and state funding programs unavailable to unincorporated areas, including Federal Transit Administration (FTA) formula funding, PSRC Transportation Improvement Program allocations, and many others. Those resources, directed by an accountable, democratic, local government toward the transportation, parks, and infrastructure priorities South Hill residents have articulated for over two decades, represent the most concrete pathway available for translating the community’s health vision into the physical form of the community itself.

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# Health Impact Assessment: South Hill **Transportation**

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# Chapter 1: Transportation

## Introduction, Key Findings, and Recommendations

South Hill is a rapidly growing unincorporated community in Pierce County, Washington, where the built environment has developed primarily around the private automobile. For most residents, driving is the most accessible and, in many cases, the only realistic way to reach daily destinations. This dependence on single-occupancy vehicles has direct consequences for community health, including physical inactivity, increased air and noise pollution, elevated traffic injury risk, and reduced access for residents who cannot drive (Frumkin et al., 2004; Health Effects Institute, 2010).

This chapter examines transportation and health across three interconnected domains: **Urban Design, Transit** and **Mobility**. While each topic is addressed in its own section, they share a common thread: the extent to which South Hill's street network, transit service, and non-motorized infrastructure either enable or constrain healthy, equitable movement through the community. Importantly, these three subjects operate at different levels and through different policy mechanisms:

- **Urban design** concerns the physical form of streets, buildings, public spaces, and land uses. This is the environment within which all travel occurs.
- **Transit** is an organized service provided by a transit agency, operating on schedules and routes that can be adjusted independently of the physical street network.
- **Mobility** is the broadest domain: the overall capacity of people to move through the community by any means, including walking, cycling, driving, using transit, and combining modes. The planning, advocacy, and governance structures that shape how all of these systems connect is also part of mobility.

These domains are deeply interdependent. The best bus service in the world is undermined when pedestrians cannot safely reach a bus stop. Sidewalk infrastructure is less useful when buses come only once per hour. And neither transit nor sidewalks can fully compensate for land use patterns that place essential destinations so far apart that no combination of non-automotive modes can connect them efficiently. Addressing all three domains in coordination is both the challenge and the opportunity that South Hill faces as it considers incorporation.

As South Hill's population is estimated at approximately 71,800 people in 2026, growing at roughly 1.7% annually, the transportation decisions made now will shape health outcomes for current and future residents for decades to come (Washington State Office of Financial Management [OFM], 2024). As of June 2026, Washington State Senate Bill 6181 proposed to allow Pierce County to trigger a South Hill incorporation vote within the urban growth boundary, with Pierce County Executive Ryan Mello publicly identifying South Hill as the most immediate opportunity for cityhood under the bill (*The Olympian*, 2026). Incorporation would give South Hill a set of transportation

governance tools that are not available under unincorporated status, including funding authorities, design review powers, and transit agency representation. This chapter's recommendations are structured around that possibility.

## Key Findings

- South Hill's automobile-oriented built environment creates measurable barriers to physical activity, clean air, and equitable access, particularly for residents who do not or cannot drive.
- Pierce County faces a \$344.1 million transportation funding deficit projected through 2044; South Hill's unincorporated status makes it ineligible for Washington State Complete Streets grant funding under RCW 47.04.320, restricting a key mechanism for corridor improvements (Pierce County, 2024; MRSC, 2022).
- Public transit is deeply underutilized: only 1.5% of South Hill commuters use it. Contributing factors include first- and last-mile barriers, limited service frequency, and the absence of locally accountable representation on the Pierce Transit Board of Commissioners (Livable City Year Program, 2026).
- Incorporation would unlock a suite of tools that together provide the legal and fiscal prerequisites for systematic transportation health improvement.

## Recommendations Summary

The seven recommendations developed in this chapter have been prioritized based on two criteria: the strength of evidence for health benefit and the feasibility of implementation given South Hill's incorporation context (Table 1.1). Urban design recommendations address the physical environment that shapes all travel behavior and are therefore foundational. Transit recommendations focus on governance access and the on-demand service infrastructure already present in the region. Mobility recommendations anchor everything to dedicated funding authority and employer-level demand management, which together represent the highest-impact, lowest-cost tools available to a newly incorporated city.

**Table 1.1**  
*Recommendations for Transportation*

<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Section</b>	<b>Responsible Party (under incorporation)</b>	<b>Timing (post inc.)</b>	<b>Health Impact</b>	<b>Feasibility</b>
R1.1: Establish a City Transportation Division within the Planning and Public Works Department	Not Applicable	City Council	Year 1	High	Very High
R1.2: Adopt Complete Streets and Urban Design Standards Plan	Urban Design	City Department of Transportation	Year 1-2	High	Moderate
R1.3: Activate design review for Meridian commercial development	Urban Design	Pierce County Planning & Public Works, City Planning Department, or City Department of Transportation	Immediate	Moderate-High	High
R1.4: Pursue Pierce Transit Board seat and expand Runner zone	Transit	City Council & City Department of Transportation	Year 1-4	High	Moderate
R1.5: Establish transit fare affordability program	Transit	Pierce Transit & City Department of Transportation	Year 1-2	Moderate	High
R1.6: Establish Transportation Benefit District	Mobility	City Department of Transportation & City Council	Immediate	High	Very High
R1.7: Adopt a Commute Trip Reduction ordinance for qualifying employers	Mobility	City Department of Transportation	Year 1	High	Very High
R1.7.1: Evaluate shared micromobility program	Mobility	City Department of Transportation	Year 2-3	Moderate	Moderate

**R1.1: A South Hill city council should consider establishing a Transportation Division within the new city's Public Works Department to administer the TBD, Complete Streets plan, CTR program, and regional transit relationships.**

A city's transportation recommendations are only as durable as the institutional capacity to implement them. South Hill's seven prior recommendations – spanning complete streets planning, Pierce Transit board advocacy, TBD establishment, fare affordability, CTR compliance, and micromobility programming – each require sustained staff capacity, interagency coordination, and grant management expertise. Without a dedicated transportation function, these responsibilities will default to a general Public Works department already stretched by street maintenance and capital project delivery. Peer cities in the Puget Sound region provide directly relevant models. The City of Kenmore (incorporated 1997, population ~23,000), which is of comparable age and suburban character, structures transportation functions within a Public Works department that handles capital project management, traffic operations, TIP administration, development review, and surface water – a scope nearly identical to what South Hill will need. The City of Burien (incorporated 1993) similarly houses transportation engineering, capital programming, and maintenance operations in a unified Public Works department. The City of Covington (incorporated 1997) organizes its Public Works Engineering Division to oversee the capital improvement program, storm water management, and traffic operations as a single integrated unit. For South Hill, the immediate priority upon incorporation would be hiring a Public Works Director and at minimum one Transportation Engineer with experience in PSRC TIP programming, Washington State grant administration (TIB Complete Streets grants), and CTR compliance. This staffing investment is the institutional prerequisite for accessing the state and federal transportation funds identified throughout this chapter.

*Primary institutions:* City of South Hill (upon incorporation); MRSC – model ordinances and staffing guidance; Washington State Transportation Improvement Board (TIB); PSRC – TIP participation; Pierce County Human Resources (interim staffing support); Association of Washington Cities – guidance on new city startup.

## Urban Design

### Introduction

The physical design of the built environment, specifically how streets, buildings, public spaces, and neighborhoods are arranged and constructed, shapes the daily lives and health of the people who live within it. Urban design determines whether a community is walkable or car-dependent, whether public spaces feel safe and inviting, and whether residents of all ages and abilities can move through their environment comfortably. These design choices are not merely aesthetic; they have measurable consequences for physical activity, air quality, mental health, and health equity (Ewing & Handy, 2009). Communities designed around motor vehicles, with wide arterials, minimal sidewalks, and dispersed land uses, tend to produce worse health outcomes than those designed

around people with connected streets, accessible destinations, and infrastructure that supports alternative modes of transportation (Frumkin et al., 2004).

At the center of urban design's relationship to transportation health is the concept of **complete streets**. "Complete streets" refers to roads designed and operated to enable safe, comfortable, and convenient travel for all users regardless of age, ability, or mode of transportation (Smart Growth America, 2019). Complete streets integrate sidewalks, protected bike lanes or paths, accessible crossings, and traffic-calming features as standard elements of street design and reconstruction, rather than treating them as optional additions. In South Hill, where the road network was built primarily around automobile movement, the absence of complete streets infrastructure is one of the most direct ways that urban design produces health harm.

## Connection to Health

### Physical Activity

Walking and cycling are forms of moderate-intensity aerobic activity, and people who live in communities with connected, safe pedestrian infrastructure engage in substantially more physical activity than those in car-dependent environments (Ewing & Cervero, 2010). Regular physical activity reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, some cancers, obesity, and mental health conditions including depression and anxiety (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2018). In communities where driving is the only realistic option for most travel, residents who cannot drive, including children, people with disabilities, older adults, and those without access to a vehicle, face significant barriers to meeting daily physical activity recommendations.

### Air Quality

Vehicle emissions are a primary source of particulate matter, nitrogen dioxide, carbon monoxide, and ground-level ozone, all of which contribute to respiratory illness, cardiovascular disease, and premature death (Health Effects Institute, 2010). Streets designed to support walking, cycling, and transit use reduce vehicle miles traveled and associated emissions at the community scale. This is particularly relevant in South Hill, where the South Hill Community Plan identifies Meridian as the location of greatest air quality concern in the plan area, citing concentrated carbon monoxide discharge from automobile traffic (Pierce County, 2024). Residents living in close proximity to the Meridian corridor face disproportionate exposure to these pollutants, making design interventions that reduce vehicle volumes along the corridor a direct health equity intervention.

### Health Equity

Residents who are least likely to own or have access to a vehicle, including low-income households, older adults, children, and people with disabilities, are most dependent on safe, accessible non-motorized infrastructure. In communities where this infrastructure is absent or incomplete, these populations face the greatest barriers to accessing jobs, schools, groceries, healthcare, and social connections. These resources are all key SDOH (Pucher & Buehler, 2010). Urban design that

prioritizes complete streets explicitly addresses this inequity by ensuring that streets serve all users, not just those who drive.

### Relevant Policies, Standards, and Guidelines

- **Pierce County Complete Streets Ordinance (2014):** Pierce County adopted Ordinance No. 2014-44s, directing the County to provide and require the implementation of facilities for all users on newly constructed and reconstructed roads (Pierce County, 2024). This is the current legal framework governing street design in unincorporated South Hill.
- **Washington State Complete Streets Legislation (2022):** Revised Code of Washington (RCW) 47.04.035 requires WSDOT projects over \$500,000 to incorporate complete streets principles on state highways routed over city streets. RCW 47.04.320 establishes a competitive grant program to fund complete streets projects, but eligibility requires a jurisdiction-wide complete streets ordinance adopted by an incorporated city, town, or county (MRSC, 2022).
- **South Hill Community Plan Transportation Element:** Goal SH T-6 directs Pierce County to "plan, program and construct active transportation facilities throughout the South Hill community," with priority given to safe, well-lit pathways within one mile of schools. Goal SH T-7 calls for making Meridian more pedestrian accessible while maintaining its regional transportation function (Pierce County, 2024).
- **National Complete Streets Coalition:** Smart Growth America recommends that jurisdictions embed complete streets principles across all transportation planning, programming, and project delivery as a default design standard for every street, rather than restricting complete streets principles to standalone projects, (Smart Growth America, 2019).
- **Washington State Active Transportation Plan:** WSDOT's Active Transportation Plan sets statewide goals for walking and cycling infrastructure, safety, and access, providing a policy framework within which local complete streets efforts are situated (WSDOT, 2021).

### Background and Current Conditions

South Hill is an unincorporated community in Pierce County, Washington, encompassing approximately 19 square miles and bisected by Meridian (SR-161). South Hill recorded a 2020 U.S. Census population of 64,708 people, up from 52,431 people in 2010 and 37,049 people in 2000. South Hill has experienced rapid and sustained suburban growth for decades, making it the 19th most populous place in Washington State (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, 2010, 2020; OFM, 2022). As of 2026, the population is estimated at approximately 71,800 people, growing at roughly 1.7% annually (OFM, 2024). This growth trajectory, combined with South Hill's unincorporated status, has produced a built environment shaped predominantly by automobile-dependent, low-density suburban development patterns. This context carries significant implications for health, equity, and long-term livability.

South Hill's land use pattern is primarily moderate-density, single-family residential, with commercial activity concentrated along the Meridian corridor. The South Hill Community Plan

characterizes the predominant built form as a community where "moderate density single-family housing" defines the residential core, while "high-density multifamily housing acts as a buffer along major traffic corridors" and commercial uses adjoin Meridian (Pierce County, 2024). Outside this corridor, the community transitions rapidly to low-density subdivisions interspersed with environmentally sensitive areas, including wetlands, steep slopes, and groundwater recharge zones.

A longstanding and explicitly acknowledged challenge in the South Hill Community Plan is the continuous strip commercial pattern along Meridian. The 2003 Community Plan set a goal to "reshape commercial activities along Meridian to stop the continuous strip pattern" by designating separated commercial nodes distinguishable through architecture, site design, and activity type (Pierce County, 2024). Despite this stated goal, Meridian continues to function as a conventional suburban arterial commercial strip characterized by wide travel lanes, large surface parking lots set between the street and buildings, auto-dependent retail and service uses, and minimal pedestrian-scale amenities.

South Hill's street network reflects its origins as an automobile-centered suburban community. Sidewalks exist along portions of Meridian, but pedestrians report that the environment feels unsafe due to high vehicle speeds, wide lane configurations, and the distance between signalized crossings. Street trees, pedestrian-scale lighting, and street furniture are largely absent along the commercial corridor. Off of Meridian, most neighborhood streets lack sidewalks entirely. Pierce County Design Guidelines only require sidewalks in UGAs where roads are being actively constructed or repaired, leaving roads without existing pedestrian infrastructure with no near-term improvement pathway (Pierce County Code [PCC], 2024). There is one officially designated bike trail and a few bikeable paved routes within park areas; no protected bike lanes exist along Meridian. Combined, these conditions create a public realm that is functionally inaccessible without a private automobile for a significant share of South Hill residents.

In 2019 and subsequent updates, Pierce County amended the South Hill Community Plan's zoning to introduce Centers and Corridors designations, enabling higher-density mixed-use development, up to 65 feet in town centers or 85 feet with affordable housing provisions, at key nodes along Meridian Avenue (*The News Tribune*, 2019). Two town centers were designated along Meridian in South Hill, intended to function as community gathering places with "jobs and services, high-density housing and commercial and civic uses and walkable and transit-oriented developments" (Pierce County, 2024). Physical redevelopment has been slow, however, and the built environment remains largely auto-oriented. Pierce County is expected to need 31% more housing countywide by 2044 to accommodate projected population growth, meaning that the form and connectivity of future development will have lasting health consequences (Pierce County, 2024).

## Assessment of Project Alternatives

### Alternative 1: Status Quo, Remain Unincorporated

Under the status quo, South Hill's urban design would continue to be governed by Pierce County's zoning code, design standards, and capital programming. Pierce County has adopted meaningful standards, including site design guidelines under PCC 18J.80 and the Complete Streets Ordinance No. 2014-44s, and the South Hill Community Plan's Design and Character Policies articulate a compelling vision for pedestrian-scaled, contextually responsive commercial development (Pierce County, 2024). However, current conditions reflect a substantial gap between this stated vision and the physical character of Meridian.

Several structural features of County governance limit the pace of improvement. First, Pierce County faces a \$344.1 million transportation funding deficit projected through 2044, constraining capital investment in the pedestrian and bicycle improvements that would most directly improve corridor walkability (Pierce County, 2024). Second, South Hill's unincorporated status makes it ineligible for Washington State Complete Streets grant funding under RCW 47.04.320, which requires a jurisdiction-wide complete streets ordinance adopted by an incorporated city, town, or county. This eligibility requirement limits one significant funding stream for Meridian Avenue improvements (MRSC, 2022). Third, design review in unincorporated Pierce County is administered countywide rather than through a locally staffed planning body with a specific mandate to implement South Hill's community design vision.

The recent Centers and Corridors zoning changes represent a meaningful improvement and create real potential for transit-oriented, walkable redevelopment nodes (*The News Tribune*, 2019). However, zoning alone does not guarantee high-quality urban design outcomes; without an active design review process, a local capital improvement program, and enforceable streetscape standards, upzoning can produce larger auto-oriented buildings rather than the pedestrian-scaled mixed-use environments the plan envisions (MRSC, 2025). Given these structural constraints, urban design outcomes under the status quo are likely to improve incrementally but fall short of the community's design vision over the planning horizon.

### Alternative 2: Incorporation

Incorporation would give South Hill the institutional authority and fiscal tools to directly govern its built environment in ways not available under the status quo. As an incorporated city, South Hill could adopt its own complete streets ordinance, making it eligible for state Complete Streets grant funding under RCW 47.04.320, and establish a locally staffed planning and design review process accountable to South Hill residents (MRSC, 2022). Cities can embed design standards into the development review process, conditioning project approvals on compliance with specific requirements for building placement, façade articulation, pedestrian connections, and landscaping (MRSC, 2025). This form of active, discretionary design review has been shown to improve urban design quality, particularly for commercial corridor redevelopment, where parcel-by-parcel private investment would otherwise produce fragmented results (Ewing & Handy, 2009).

Incorporation would also allow South Hill to establish a **Transportation Benefit District (TBD)** under Chapter 36.73 RCW. A TBD is a quasi-municipal corporation enabling a city council to impose a vehicle registration fee and up to a 0.1% sales tax for transportation improvements without a public vote (higher amounts require voter approval). The City of Bellevue established its TBD in 2023 and is evaluating full activation in 2026 to fund sidewalks, bike infrastructure, and multimodal improvements, a model directly analogous to what South Hill would face (City of Bellevue, 2026). Additionally, Washington's Tax Increment Financing law (Engrossed Substitute House Bill 1189, 2021) allows cities to designate increment areas on corridors like Meridian and use future property tax growth to repay bonds issued for streetscape, sidewalk, and bicycle infrastructure improvements without raising taxes on existing property owners (Davis Wright Tremaine LLP, 2021; MRSC, 2021).

Evidence from communities that have adopted Complete Streets policies and associated design standards indicates measurable improvements in physical activity, pedestrian safety, and mode shift. County Health Rankings rates complete streets and streetscape design initiatives as "Scientifically Supported," one of its highest evidence ratings, for increasing physical activity and improving pedestrian and cyclist safety (County Health Rankings, 2023). A study published in the *American Journal of Public Health* found that Florida's complete streets policy was associated with preventing approximately 3,500 pedestrian fatalities over 29 years (Dumbaugh & Li, 2011). Studies of complete streets designs find consistent positive effects on walking, cycling, and physical health outcomes, with particular benefits for residents who cannot drive (Ewing & Cervero, 2010; Frumkin et al., 2004).

A key uncertainty under incorporation is fiscal capacity. The South Hill Governance Study (2023) notes that initial years of incorporation may involve budget constraints as a new city builds its tax base and administrative infrastructure (Pierce County / Berk Consulting, 2023). Nonetheless, incorporation creates the legal authority and local accountability structure that are prerequisites for systematic, community-driven urban design improvement.

## Recommendations

**R1.2: If incorporated, a City Transportation Department should consider adopting a Meridian Avenue East Complete Streets and Urban Design Standards Plan as a first-cycle comprehensive plan priority, funded through a city Transportation Benefit District and Washington State Complete Streets grants.**

This is the highest-priority urban design action for a newly incorporated City of South Hill. A corridor-level Complete Streets and Urban Design Standards Plan would establish enforceable requirements for building placement, pedestrian realm improvements, street tree planting, bicycle infrastructure, and parking management along Meridian. This addresses the most persistent and consequential urban design failure in South Hill: the sustained gap between the Community Plan's design vision and the auto-oriented physical reality of the corridor (Pierce County, 2024).

The public health evidence for thRis intervention is among the strongest available in the built environment literature. County Health Rankings rates complete streets and streetscape design initiatives as "Scientifically Supported," its highest evidence category, for increasing physical activity and improving pedestrian and cyclist safety (County Health Rankings, 2023). A landmark Florida study found that complete streets policies were associated with preventing approximately 3,500 pedestrian fatalities over 29 years, a 75% reduction relative to the pre-policy period (Dumbaugh & Li, 2011). The American Public Health Association documents that marked on-road bike lanes reduce bicyclist collisions with automobiles by up to 50%, and that raised medians and sidewalks reduce pedestrian exposure to traffic by 28% (American Public Health Association, n.d.). Ewing and Cervero's (2010) meta-analysis found consistent positive relationships between walkable street environments and rates of active travel, with the strongest effects along mixed-use commercial corridors precisely like Meridian.

What makes this recommendation feasible upon incorporation is the convergence of two currently unavailable funding tools. First, adoption of a city-wide complete streets ordinance unlocks competitive grant funding under RCW 47.04.320, a program administered by the Washington State Transportation Improvement Board that is not accessible to unincorporated South Hill (MRSC, 2022). Second, a city TBD can generate dedicated sales tax revenue by council action alone, without a ballot measure, beginning in the first year of incorporation (Chapter 36.73 RCW). The George Road Complete Streets HIA in Hillsborough County, Florida, offers a directly applicable precedent: the HIA's recommendation that the county adopt a binding complete streets policy and fund corridor improvements through the Transportation Improvement Plan was adopted, funded, and entered construction in 2025 (HIA Community Commons, 2019; Hillsborough County, 2023). Nashville, Tennessee, went further, using complete streets adoption as the trigger for embedding HIAs into all future transportation projects, a practice that South Hill should consider replicating (American Public Health Association, n.d.).

*Primary institutions:* Washington State Transportation Improvement Board (Complete Streets grants); City of Bellevue Mobility Implementation Plan (regional design standard model); Smart Growth America National Complete Streets Coalition (policy framework and evidence base).

**R1.3: Regardless of governance outcome, Pierce County Planning and Public Works or the City should consider activating discretionary design review for new commercial development along Meridian Avenue East under Pierce County Code 18J.80, requiring pedestrian-scale site design as a condition of approval.**

This recommendation is actionable immediately and does not require incorporation. It is the "no-regrets" urban design action: whether or not South Hill becomes a city, the wave of new commercial and mixed-use development enabled by the 2019 Centers and Corridors upzoning is already underway, and the built form decisions made in the next five years will shape Meridian's pedestrian environment for decades. Pierce County already has the authority to activate discretionary design review under PCC 18J.80 for development in the Meridian Towne Center designations; the gap is in consistent enforcement, not legal authorization (PCC, 2024).

At minimum, project-level review should consider enforcement of pedestrian connectivity requirements, building setback-to-street standards, parking lot placement behind buildings, ground-floor activation criteria, and landscape screening. Research consistently finds that communities with compact, mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented commercial environments produce residents who walk more, drive less, and experience lower rates of obesity and cardiovascular disease than residents in auto-oriented suburbs (Ewing & Handy, 2009; Frumkin et al., 2004). For South Hill, where 77.6% of residents commute by single-occupancy vehicle and the mean commute is 32.8 minutes, nearly five minutes above the state average, the compounding effect of incremental walkability improvements made project by project along Meridian represents a meaningful and cost-effective long-term health investment (Livable City Year Program, 2026).

Under incorporation, this recommendation strengthens considerably: a locally staffed design review board with community-specific standards, potentially structured around a form-based code for the Meridian corridor, would replace countywide review with accountable local oversight. MRSC documents multiple Washington cities along SR-99 and other suburban arterials, including Burien, Shoreline, and Federal Way, that have used provisions analogous to PCC 18J.80 to improve commercial corridor walkability incrementally over 10-15 year periods without large capital outlays (MRSC, 2025).

*Primary institutions:* PPW (immediate); MRSC (technical assistance for form-based code development); Smart Growth America (form-based code evidence and templates).

Transportation Management Plans (TMPs) for New Development: As South Hill activates design review for Meridian corridor development under R3, the city should consider adopting a TMP requirement for large-scale commercial and mixed-use projects. TMPs are conditions by the State Environmental Policy Act that require new development to mitigate traffic impacts by setting solo-drive mode-share reduction goals and implementing demand management programs (e.g., transit pass subsidies, bike parking, carpool matching). Seattle requires TMPs for developments over 100,000 gross square footage (gsf); Bellevue requires them for office buildings over 50,000 gsf with performance goals binding for the life of the building (Bellevue City Code 14.60.070). For South Hill, a TMP requirement tied to Meridian corridor design review would directly reduce vehicle trips generated by new development, protect the street capacity improvements called for in R2, and create an early pipeline into the CTR programs in R7. This condition could be incorporated into the Urban Design Standards Plan as a standard development agreement term, requiring no separate ordinance.

## Transit

### Introduction

South Hill's transportation network is organized around the private automobile. Meridian carries the majority of vehicular traffic through the community, functioning as the primary arterial connecting residential areas to commercial destinations and regional employment centers. Bus service is available through Pierce Transit, including Route 4 connecting to Lakewood via the South Hill Mall

Transit Center, Route 402 serving Meridian north to Federal Way, and Route 400 connecting to downtown Tacoma via Puyallup. However, public transit accounts for only 1.5% of commute trips among South Hill residents, reflecting the structural barriers described in this section (Livable City Year Program, 2026).

As South Hill considers incorporation, transit governance is a central policy question. Incorporation would give South Hill a seat on the Pierce Transit Board of Commissioners, stronger influence over service planning and budgeting, and the ability to leverage city revenues to fund transit access improvements. Over time, these changes could enable a meaningful shift in transit use, with direct health benefits for the broader community.

## Connection to Health

Increasing transit use and reducing single-occupancy vehicle travel can improve health through multiple pathways: reductions in air pollution, decreases in traffic noise exposure, increased physical activity associated with walking to and from transit stops, reduced traffic injury risk, and lower stress associated with active and transit-based commutes (Health Effects Institute, 2010; Park et al., 2021).

### Air Pollution

Traffic is the dominant source of air pollution in South Hill and in urbanizing communities generally. Vehicle emissions contain nitrogen dioxide, nitrous oxide, carbon monoxide, particulate matter, sulfur dioxide, and ground-level ozone. These are criteria pollutants monitored by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) under the National Ambient Air Quality Standards (U.S. EPA, 2024). These pollutants are associated with respiratory disease, elevated blood pressure, hypertension, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, strokes, pediatric allergies, cancer, and delayed cognitive development in children (Debelu, 2024). Transportation is the largest single contributor to U.S. greenhouse gas emissions, accounting for approximately 28% of total national output (U.S. EPA, 2024). The American Public Transportation Association estimates that transitioning from single-occupancy vehicle travel to transit can reduce a commuter's individual carbon footprint by more than 45% per mile traveled (American Public Transportation Association, 2023).

### Noise Pollution

Long-term exposure to traffic noise is associated with cardiovascular disease, sleep disturbance, increased stress, impaired concentration, and reduced productivity (U.S. EPA, 2024). Noise levels along high-volume corridors like Meridian are influenced by traffic volume, vehicle speed, and the proportion of heavy vehicles. Increasing transit ridership and reducing vehicle volumes on Meridian would reduce noise exposure for residents and businesses adjacent to the corridor, though local noise monitoring data specific to South Hill has not been identified in this review. The World Health Organization recommends a maximum of 53 A-weighted decibels for outdoor daytime traffic noise to prevent adverse health effects; levels on high-volume arterials like Meridian routinely exceed this threshold (2018).

## Physical Activity and Mental Health

Using transit increases physical activity because riders must walk to and from stops. A study conducted in Queens, New York, found that energy expenditure from transit commuting, primarily walking to and from stops, could produce meaningful weight loss if sustained over at least six weeks (Morabia et al., 2010). Regular physical activity is associated with decreased risk of type 2 diabetes, some cancers, cardiovascular disease, and premature mortality (DHHS, 2018). As of 2021, Pierce County's adult obesity rate was approximately 33%, above state and national averages, underscoring the importance of built environment and transportation interventions that support active travel (Tacoma-Pierce County Public Health, 2021). Commuting by transit rather than driving alone is also associated with reduced stress and improved psychological well-being, as it reduces financial burden and the anxiety of navigating unpredictable traffic (Chatterjee et al., 2020).

## Traffic Safety

Transit is a demonstrably safer mode of travel than single-occupancy vehicles. A study conducted in Montreal found that the risk of injury was 4.1 times higher for pedestrians and 5.3 times higher for cyclists compared to bus passengers per 100 million passenger-kilometers traveled (Morency et al., 2018). Between 2018 and 2022, county-owned roads in Pierce County recorded 108 fatal crashes and 296 serious injuries. Of those, motor vehicle accidents accounted for 262 fatalities or serious injuries, compared to one fatality and one serious injury attributed to buses (Pierce County Vision Zero, 2025). Shifting trips from private vehicles to transit reduces overall system injury risk for all road users.

## Background and Current Conditions

Planning for transit in smaller communities like South Hill requires a perspective that accounts for the unique characteristics and local barriers residents face. These barriers differ substantially from those in large urban transit markets (Goodspeed et al., 2023). In this context, limited financial investment and first/last-mile connectivity challenges have shaped how residents engage with transit (Livable City Year Program, 2026).

### Pierce Transit: Agency Structure and Funding

Pierce Transit is a **Public Transportation Benefit Area (PTBA)** established in 1979 under Chapter 36.57A of the RCW. It is one of 21 PTBAs in Washington State, covering 292 square miles of Pierce County and serving roughly 70% of the county's population (MRSC, 2025). Pierce Transit provides four types of service: fixed-route bus, SHUTTLE paratransit, on-demand Runner microtransit, and Rideshare (vanpool/carpool matching).

Pierce Transit's primary funding source is a **local sales tax** levied within the PTBA boundary, currently set at 0.6% of retail sales (Pierce Transit, 2025). The agency's 2024 National Transit Database profile reflects total operating funds expended of approximately \$175.6 million. This figure draws primarily from the PTBA sales tax, with supplemental federal and state formula funding (FTA, 2024). Pierce Transit's Destination 2045 Long Range Plan, adopted August 11, 2025, identifies two growth scenarios that would require voter-approved sales tax increases: a 0.9%

scenario enabling up to 600,000 annual service hours, and a 1.1% scenario enabling up to 750,000 hours, compared to the current baseline of approximately 482,000 hours at the existing 0.6% rate (Pierce Transit, 2025). As of May 2026, Pierce Transit is actively developing a draft service expansion package for public comment, including new routes and increased frequency. This represents a live opportunity for South Hill to provide input (Pierce Transit, 2026).

Unincorporated areas in Pierce County receive Pierce Transit service if they fall within the PTBA boundary. The northern part of South Hill is within the PTBA, funded through the same 0.6% sales tax levy as all other areas. Unincorporated areas, unlike incorporated cities, do not have the option to opt out of PTBA membership (WSDOT, 2023).

### **Pierce Transit: Board Governance and South Hill's Representation Gap**

Pierce Transit is governed by a **ten-member Board of Commissioners** consisting of nine voting elected officials and one non-voting labor representative (Pierce Transit, 2025). The nine voting members include three Tacoma City Council members, the mayors of Lakewood and Puyallup, two Pierce County Council representatives, and two seats representing clusters of smaller Pierce County cities. South Hill has **no board seat**. Because South Hill is unincorporated, it does not qualify as a "component city" under RCW 36.57A.010, which defines "city" as an incorporated city or town. The Pierce County Council seat nominally covers South Hill, but it is shared with all other unincorporated Pierce County residents (Livable City Year Program, 2026).

Under RCW 36.57A.055, the board's composition is reviewed every four years by the component counties and cities. An incorporated South Hill, with approximately 71,800 residents, would qualify as one of the larger component cities in the PTBA and would have a strong population-based argument for a dedicated board seat at the next composition review following incorporation (RCW 36.57A.055). If South Hill's population exceeds 15% of the PTBA population, the statute may require an expedited composition review (RCW 36.57A.055). Without a board seat, South Hill currently has no mechanism to advocate directly for Route 402 service expansion, first/last-mile investments, fare structure adjustments, or targeted community outreach.

### **Current Transit Service in South Hill**

South Hill's transit network consists of three Pierce Transit routes: Routes 4, 400, and 402. The **South Hill Mall Transit Center** in Puyallup serves as the primary transfer hub for all three routes, along with on-demand Runner and ADA SHUTTLE services (Livable City Year Program, 2026). Routes 400 and 4 provide regional connections: Route 4 runs between Lakewood and the South Hill Mall, and Route 400 connects Puyallup to downtown Tacoma. Neither route passes through South Hill's residential core (Pierce Transit, 2026a, 2026b).

**Route 402** is the primary route serving South Hill directly. It originates at Meridian and 171st Street Court East in South Hill, travels north through Puyallup and Milton, and ends at the Federal Way Downtown Station (Pierce Transit, 2026c). The route operates with 30-minute headways on early weekday mornings (5:30 a.m. to 7:00 a.m.) and hourly headways at other times, with service from 5:30 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. on weekdays, 7:27 a.m. to 6:27 p.m. on Saturdays, and 9:26 a.m. to 5:31 p.m.

on Sundays (Pierce Transit, 2026c). Despite this limited frequency, Route 402 **outperforms** Pierce Transit's targets for boardings per revenue mile and boardings per service hour, reflecting significant unmet demand relative to the service currently offered (Livable City Year Program, 2026). Pierce Transit's Destination 2045 Long Range Plan had originally proposed Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) along the Meridian corridor (the Route 4 alignment), which motivated the 2019 upzoning along Meridian. The BRT project was subsequently excluded from the funded plan due to agency budget constraints (Pierce Transit, 2025).

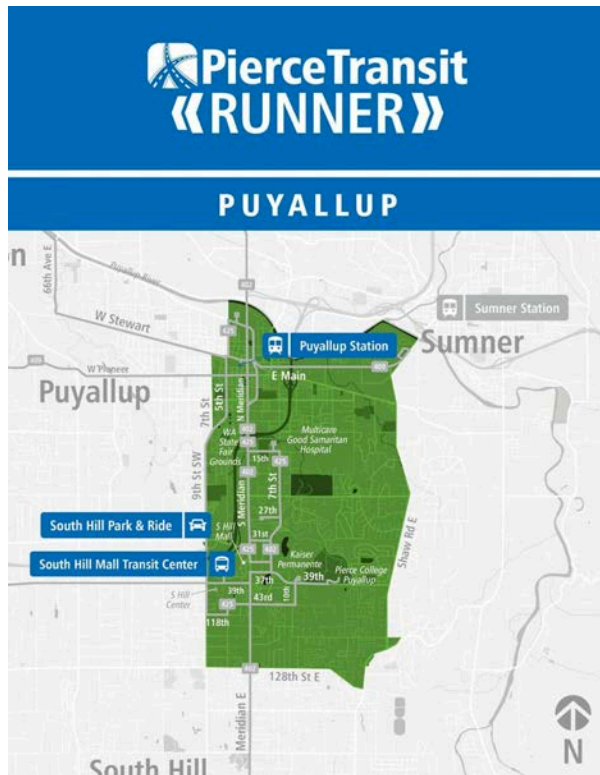
Public outreach conducted by Pierce Transit in 2023 revealed community interest in extending Route 402's level of service and deviating the route to Walker High School north of South Hill. This indicates latent transit demand that current service does not capture (Livable City Year Program, 2026).

### **The Pierce Transit Runner: On-Demand Service in South Hill**

**Pierce Transit Runner** is an on-demand microtransit service launched in November 2023, currently operating in three zones across Pierce County (Pierce Transit, 2024; Figure 1.1). The Puyallup Runner zone, funded by a \$776,000 Washington State grant of which approximately \$484,000 per year covers service costs with Pierce Transit covering the remainder, explicitly includes downtown Puyallup and **parts of South Hill**, including the South Hill Park and Ride and the South Hill Mall Transit Center (*The News Tribune*, 2023). A separate zone covers Spanaway, Parkland, and Midland (Pierce County, 2025).

Runner operates as an app-based shared-ride service through a partnership with Via Transportation. riders request trips within the zone using the Pierce Transit Runner app or the Transit app (integrated as of June 2024), and the system dispatches shared vehicles with typical arrival times within 15 minutes (Pierce Transit, 2024). Vehicles are ADA-accessible, accommodate wheelchairs, mobility devices, strollers, and bikes, and operate seven days per week from 7:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. (Pierce Transit, 2025).

The fare is identical to a standard Pierce Transit bus fare (\$2 adult; \$1 reduced fare; free for riders 18 years of age and under), and payment is accepted via ORCA card, the Transit app, or paper pass; cash is not accepted (*The News Tribune*, 2023).



**Figure 1.1**

*Map of Pierce Transit Runner Service in South Hill*

*Note. From The News Tribune (2023).*

Runner is designed as a **first/last-mile and low-density area connector**, providing access to fixed-route stops, regional Sounder rail at the Puyallup Station, and the South Hill Mall Transit Center in areas where conventional bus service is unavailable (Pierce Transit, 2025). The ADA SHUTTLE, by contrast, is a separate paratransit service limited to individuals who, because of a disability, are unable to use fixed-route bus service. The SHUTTLE requires advance booking and operates within a ¾-mile buffer of fixed routes within PTBA boundaries (Ride Together Pierce, 2025).

### First and Last Mile

The first-mile and last-mile problem refers to the gap between transit stops and the traveler's origin or destination. It is a documented barrier to transit use in communities like South Hill (Park et al., 2021). Park and colleagues found that out-of-vehicle environments, including safety and transfer experience, influence customer satisfaction and transit loyalty more strongly than in-vehicle or system-level factors. In South Hill, the lack of safe pedestrian environments, bicycle infrastructure, and long walking distances to Route 402 stops reduce transit attractiveness even for residents who could otherwise use it (Livable City Year Program, 2026).

## Assessment of Project Alternatives

### Alternative 1: Status Quo, Remain Unincorporated

Pierce County's projected transportation funding deficit means that current transit services in South Hill are likely to remain static or decline relative to population growth (Livable City Year Program, 2026). The planning approach adopted to date has connected South Hill to larger metropolitan areas through regional routes, but will prove insufficient as population grows and Pierce Transit's budget constraints limit capacity expansion. Without specific agency representation on the Pierce Transit Board, South Hill has no formal mechanism to advocate for service improvements tailored to its residents' needs. The continued gap in multimodal options may result in longer travel distances and commute times, with associated health consequences (Goodspeed et al., 2023).

### Alternative 2: Incorporation

If South Hill were to incorporate, Pierce Transit would remain the primary service provider, but South Hill would gain the right to seek a seat on the Pierce Transit Board of Commissioners during the next mandatory four-year composition review under RCW 36.57A.055. With board representation, South Hill could advocate for service design aligned with local needs, including Route 402 frequency improvements, route extensions, and fare equity programs. Incorporated cities may also raise additional revenue through levies and a city TBD to fund local transportation supplements, including infrastructure improvements that support transit access, and may enter into interlocal agreements (ILAs) with Pierce Transit for service enhancements under RCW 36.57A.080 (Livable City Year Program, 2026).

## Recommendations

**R1.4: The City should consider pursuing a Pierce Transit Board seat upon incorporation and use that representation to advocate for Route 402 service expansion and deeper Pierce Transit Runner zone coverage in South Hill's residential areas.**

This recommendation consolidates the two most impactful transit governance actions into a single strategic priority, because both depend on the same foundational step: gaining representation on the Pierce Transit Board of Commissioners.

The current Pierce Transit Board includes nine voting members representing Tacoma (three seats), Pierce County (two seats, covering all unincorporated areas including South Hill), Lakewood (one seat), Puyallup/Edgewood (one shared seat), and Fircrest/Gig Harbor/University Place (one shared seat) (Pierce Transit, 2026). An incorporated South Hill, with an estimated population of 71,800 people, would be the second-largest single jurisdiction in the PTBA after Tacoma and larger than Lakewood and Puyallup individually. Under Washington's 2018 legislation requiring roughly proportional board representation by population, South Hill's incorporation would create a strong legal and demographic basis for a dedicated board seat at the next four-year composition review required by RCW 36.57A.055 (*The News Tribune*, 2020). Pierce Transit held its most recent

composition review on June 26, 2024; the next review is required by 2028, meaning an incorporated South Hill could petition for inclusion in that process (Pierce Transit, 2024).

With a board seat, South Hill's representative would have direct influence over two specific service priorities. First, Route 402 already outperforms Pierce Transit's boardings benchmarks, indicating significant unmet demand, yet still operates at hourly headways during most of the day. Pierce Transit's Destination 2045 Long Range Plan (adopted August 2025) identifies service frequency improvements as a priority under expanded funding scenarios, providing the internal policy foundation for South Hill advocacy toward a stepped frequency improvement: 30-minute headways on Route 402 as a near-term achievable target, progressing to 15-minute headways as the long-term goal (Pierce Transit, 2025). Second, the Puyallup Runner zone currently serves portions of South Hill near the Mall Transit Center and the South Hill Park and Ride. The Runner's proven cost structure, approximately \$484,000 per year in operating costs supported by state grants (*The News Tribune*, 2023), and its demonstrated ability to serve low-density areas where fixed-route service is not viable, make zone expansion into South Hill's residential core a highly feasible and relatively low-cost service improvement. Pierce Transit's own Limited Access Connections Mobility on Demand Demonstration (2018-2019) found that first/last-mile on-demand services increased transit use among participants and improved the agency's overall service perception in comparable low-density corridors (FTA, 2022).

The health case for this recommendation is direct. A study in Montreal found that bus travel carries 4.1 to 5.3 times lower injury risk per passenger-kilometer than private vehicle travel (Morency et al., 2018). Transit use increases walking for trips to and from stops, with research demonstrating that this incidental physical activity can produce measurable weight loss effects when sustained over six or more weeks (Morabia et al., 2010). And communities with higher transit ridership consistently show lower rates of traffic-related air pollution exposure, a key determinant of cardiovascular and respiratory health (Health Effects Institute, 2010).

*Primary institutions:* Pierce Transit Board of Commissioners (board seat via RCW 36.57A.055); Via Transportation/Pierce Transit (Runner zone expansion); FTA Section 5307 and MOD program grants (funding).

*Sound Transit Regional Context:* While Pierce Transit is the primary local service provider, South Hill's incorporation also creates an opportunity to engage the regional conversation around Sound Transit (ST3). Sound Transit is currently navigating a \$34.5 billion budget shortfall driven by construction cost escalation, and Pierce County leaders – including the Pierce County Council – have formally urged Sound Transit to protect the Tacoma Dome Link Extension, which would bring light rail within connecting distance of South Hill via the Sounder commuter rail at Puyallup Station (Pierce County Council, 2026; Sound Transit, 2026). As an incorporated city, South Hill would have standing to formally participate in the Sound Transit subarea equity process and add its voice to Pierce County's regional advocacy. Route 402 already serves as a feeder to Sounder at Puyallup; preserving and extending that connection is in South Hill's direct interest as the regional rail network develops.

**R1.5: Pierce Transit or the City Department of Transportation should consider establishing a transit fare affordability program for income-qualified South Hill residents through city levy funding, employer partnerships, or Pierce Transit's existing reduced-fare infrastructure.**

Fare affordability is a structural equity prerequisite: a transit system that improved in frequency and coverage would still fail its lowest-income riders if cost remained a barrier to use. This recommendation is rated highly feasible because it can be implemented through existing administrative frameworks rather than requiring new infrastructure. South Hill's pathways include: participating in Pierce Transit's existing reduced-fare programs; using city TBD revenue to fund transit pass subsidies for income-qualified residents; partnering with large local employers, particularly in the light industrial sector near Thun Field, on employer-sponsored transit pass programs; and, upon gaining a board seat, advocating for expansion of Pierce Transit's reduced-fare eligibility criteria.

King County Metro's ORCA LIFT program provides the clearest regional model. ORCA LIFT delivers reduced-fare access to riders at or below 200% of the federal poverty line through partnerships with social service agencies, reaching tens of thousands of low-income riders across the Puget Sound region with administrative simplicity and broad enrollment pathways (King County Metro, n.d.). A South Hill board representative would be positioned to advocate for a Pierce Transit equivalent, or to fund a local supplement through a city TBD levy. The Rural Health Information Hub (2014) identifies employer-sponsored transit pass programs as particularly effective in smaller urbanized communities because they leverage private employer investment in transportation access without requiring large city capital outlays.

*Primary institutions:* King County Metro ORCA LIFT (model); Pierce Transit (reduced-fare program expansion advocacy); City TBD (local subsidy funding vehicle).

## Mobility

### Introduction

When discussing mobility and transit in the community, there are some key differences between the two. Transit or transportation typically refers specifically to public transportation services like buses, rail, and the infrastructure that supports them. Mobility on the other hand focuses on a broader concept of movement within communities and describes how easy it is for people to get from one place to another, including walking, cycling, driving, transit use, and the connections between them. While a community can have access to transit service, the mobility can still be poor if there are missing links such as incomplete or lacking side walk systems, if destinations are spread out over long distances, or if only those with ability to drive and own cars can readily get around the community.

In South Hill, where the built environment has developed primarily around the automobile, mobility still has a foundational health issue. The following section examines the evidence linking mobility to physical activity, mental health, and health equity.

## Connection to Health

### Physical Activity

Physical activity is a major component of mobility and has been studied extensively in public health. As discussed in the Urban Design section, walkable and bicycle-friendly communities enable substantially more physical activity than car-dependent environments, helping to reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease, Type II diabetes, and obesity (Sallis et al., 2016; DHHS, 2018). What distinguishes mobility from street-level design is its network effect: physical activity through travel depends not just on the quality of individual streets, but on whether the broader system of connections between neighborhoods, transit stops, and destinations is complete and continuous (Ewing & Cervero, 2010). A fragmented street network – common in South Hill, where sidewalks cover only 77 of 136 miles of county roads – prevents residents from reliably incorporating walking and cycling into their daily travel regardless of the quality of any single corridor (Pierce County, 2024).

### Mental Health

Beyond physical health, mobility patterns have significant mental health consequences. Daily long-distance solo car commuting is associated with elevated stress, anxiety, and decreased life satisfaction compared with active or transit-based travel (Chatterjee et al., 2020). Unpredictable traffic congestion – a regular condition on Meridian during peak hours – amplifies these negative psychological states and contributes to chronic stress and cardiovascular disease (Stutzer & Frey 2008). By contrast, evidence shows that active and transit-based travel improves psychological mood, attributable to both the physical activity and the social interaction it affords (Avila-Palencia et al., 2017)

### Health Equity

Transportation inequity compounds existing health disparities. When owning and operating a private vehicle is the practical prerequisite for community participation, those who cannot drive – due to age, disability, income, or immigration status – face systematic barriers to employment, healthcare, and healthy food access (Grengs, 2010). Even residents who do drive bear health costs: those living near high-volume corridors like Meridian face disproportionate exposure to vehicle-generated air pollutants, as detailed in the Transit section above. Many of the households with children in South Hill also have older adults, people with disabilities, and low-income families. Consequently, in order to improve the health of the residents of South Hill and to achieve health equity in South Hill, it is necessary to address the mobility issues of the community as a system.

## Background and Current Conditions

Over the last couple decades, South Hill has grown rapidly as a suburban community. The growth of the community has occurred in an automobile-dependent and car-centered way. The typical commute to work for residents of Pierce County from 1990 to 2010 was to drive alone to work for 75% to 80% of commuters (Pierce County, 2024). In the data from 2014-2018 American Community

Survey, 58% of south hill residents were found to travel 30 mins or more each day to work. This number is higher than the county average of 47.7% and state average (39.9%). The plan area includes approximately 136 miles of county roads but only 77 miles of sidewalks, with no protected bike lanes.

## Assessment of Project Alternatives

### Alternative 1: Status Quo, Remain Unincorporated

South Hill residents have articulated in the Community Plan Vision Statement since 2003 a desire to connect neighborhoods, businesses, schools, and services through functional transportation networks, including sidewalks, bike lanes, and transit services (Pierce County, 2024). Without local ownership and control of transportation planning, South Hill has limited ability to address these priorities or implement improvements that reflect local needs. This challenge is compounded by the lack of direct representation on the Pierce Transit Board: unlike incorporated cities such as Tacoma and Puyallup, South Hill has no dedicated voice advocating for transportation investments (Livable City Year Program, 2026).

Currently, 77.6% of South Hill residents commute alone by car, contributing to congestion along the community's primary corridors (Livable City Year Program, 2026). Without a mechanism to generate dedicated local transportation revenue or to prioritize South Hill-specific investments in regional planning, this condition is likely to persist and worsen as population continues to grow.

### Alternative 2: Incorporation

Upon incorporation, South Hill would assume ownership and maintenance responsibility for its local street network, replacing Pierce County as the governing entity for transportation infrastructure within city limits. This authority would enable the development of comprehensive transportation plans, the establishment of funding priorities, and the implementation of multimodal strategies reflecting local needs. Incorporation also activates the city's authority under Chapter 36.73 RCW to establish a TBD, the most accessible dedicated transportation revenue tool for a newly formed city, and enables participation as an incorporated city in PSRC transportation planning and federal formula funding competition. Washington State's CTA Act (RCW 70A.15) would become **mandatory** for an incorporated South Hill upon reaching qualifying employment thresholds, requiring worksites with 100 or more affected employees to implement TDM programs to reduce drive-alone commuting. This is a no-cost regulatory tool with direct air quality and physical activity health benefits.

Fiscal Transition Note – County Road Levy: One critical fiscal implication of incorporation that this chapter must address is the loss of the Pierce County Road Levy. Currently, South Hill properties in unincorporated Pierce County contribute to the county road levy, which generated approximately \$87.5 million countywide in 2025 (tax rate: \$0.963 per \$1,000 AV). Upon incorporation, the new City of South Hill would no longer be subject to this levy, and Pierce County would cease to have road maintenance responsibility within city limits. The city would assume that responsibility – but without the levy revenue, unless a replacement is established. This makes early formation of a TBD

(R6) not merely beneficial but financially essential: the TBD is the primary mechanism by which an incorporated South Hill can replicate and eventually exceed the transportation revenue it receives indirectly as an unincorporated area. Authors should confirm the specific South Hill-attributable share of county road levy revenue and include this figure in the final draft as a baseline for TBD sizing discussions.

## Recommendations

### **R1.6: The City should consider establishing a Transportation Benefit District as South Hill's foundational transportation revenue tool upon incorporation, and participate directly in Puget Sound Regional Council Transportation Improvement Program funding competition.**

This is the most foundational mobility recommendation because it is the financial prerequisite for most other transportation investments in this chapter. Without a dedicated, locally controlled revenue source, a new City of South Hill would depend entirely on Pierce County's capital programming, which faces a \$344.1 million projected transportation deficit through 2044 (Pierce County, 2024). A TBD, established by a simple vote of the city council under Chapter 36.73 RCW, can begin generating revenue within months of incorporation. Up to a \$20 vehicle registration fee and a 0.1% sales tax increase are within council authority. Higher revenue amounts require voter approval. These funds can be used for streets, sidewalks, bike infrastructure, transit-oriented improvements, park-and-ride facilities, and transportation demand management programs, covering essentially all of the physical investments identified in this chapter.

The feasibility of TBD formation for a newly incorporated city is well established in Washington State. The City of University Place, which incorporated in 1995 and was of similar suburban character to South Hill, established its TBD as one of its early governance priorities and used the revenue to fund sidewalk and street improvements that Pierce County had not been able to prioritize (City of University Place, n.d.). More recently, the City of Sumner activated its TBD for road maintenance and sidewalk investment, demonstrating that even smaller Pierce County cities find this mechanism practical and accessible (City of Sumner, 2025). Pierce County itself operates a TBD for county road maintenance, showing that the model is understood and supported within the local institutional environment (Pierce County, n.d.).

Simultaneously, incorporation makes South Hill a member jurisdiction of the PSRCI, the federally designated metropolitan planning organization for the four-county Puget Sound region. PSRC administers the Transportation Improvement Program through which local governments compete for Surface Transportation Block Grant and Transportation Alternatives Program federal funds. South Hill's incorporation is a prerequisite for participating in this competitive cycle rather than depending on Pierce County to advocate for its projects.

*Primary institutions:* Washington State Legislature / Chapter 36.73 RCW (TBD authority); PSRC (TIP process); City of University Place and City of Sumner (Pierce County precedents).

**R1.7: The City Department of Transportation should consider adopting a Commute Trip Reduction ordinance as required under RCW 70A.15, and leverage the employer TDM framework to reduce drive-alone commuting among South Hill's qualifying worksites.**

This recommendation carries the highest ratio of health impact to implementation cost of any recommendation in this chapter. The Commute Trip Reduction Act (RCW 70A.15.4000-4090) is mandatory for incorporated jurisdictions in Washington's nine most populous counties, including Pierce, once qualifying worksites are identified. It requires worksites with 100 or more full-time employees beginning their workday between 6:00 a.m. and 9:00 a.m. to implement programs that reduce drive-alone commuting through transit incentives, telework policies, flexible scheduling, carpool matching, and other Transportation Demand Management measures (WSDOT, 2023). South Hill's Meridian corridor employers, light industrial sector near Thun Field, and larger commercial enterprises are likely to include qualifying worksites. For the city, adopting a Commute Trip Reduction (CTR) ordinance is largely administrative: WSDOT and the PSRCI provide technical assistance, employer outreach, and survey tools at no cost to the city (City of Auburn, 2024).

The public health benefits are direct and well-documented. Seattle's CTR program, the largest in the state, has seen over two-thirds of CTR-affected commuters shift to non-drive-alone modes including transit, walking, carpooling, and cycling (City of Seattle, n.d.). Statewide, more than 1,000 worksites participate in CTR programs, and the program is recognized nationally as one of the most effective Transportation Demand Management interventions in the country (City of Auburn, 2024; Move Redmond, 2025). Reductions in drive-alone commuting lower vehicle miles traveled, decrease particulate matter and nitrogen oxide concentrations along Meridian and regional corridors, increase active commuting, and reduce the chronic stress and cardiovascular risk associated with solo car commuting (Chatterjee et al., 2020; Avila-Palencia et al., 2017). The CTR framework also has potential to be extended: Washington's current CTR reform discussion (House Bill 2307) proposes expanding eligible employees beyond the 6:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m. window to reach lower-income shift workers, the population that would benefit most from employer-supported commute alternatives (Move Redmond, 2025).

*Primary institutions:* WSDOT CTR Program (technical assistance and oversight); PSRC (regional coordination); City of Auburn and City of Puyallup (Pierce County CTR program precedents).

**R1.7.1: Evaluate and potentially implement a shared micromobility program as a low-cost, equity-focused complement to fixed-route transit, prioritized for the period after core street and transit improvements are established.**

Ride Together Pierce and Accessible Mobility: South Hill's mobility landscape includes a critical but underutilized resource: Ride Together Pierce ([ridetogetherpierce.com](http://ridetogetherpierce.com)), a Pierce County-coordinated mobility hub that aggregates transportation options for residents with limited access to conventional transit – including older adults, people with disabilities, low-income residents, and veterans. The platform connects users to ADA SHUTTLE paratransit (Pierce Transit), demand-responsive vanpool, medical transportation programs, and volunteer driver networks. An incorporated South Hill would be in a stronger position to actively partner with and promote Ride Together Pierce, integrate it into the city's mobility communications, and potentially fund

expanded outreach to South Hill residents through TBD revenues. Given that 58% of South Hill residents commute 30 or more minutes to work and the community has no protected bike infrastructure, accessible mobility services like those coordinated through Ride Together Pierce represent the highest-equity mobility intervention available in the near term, particularly for residents who cannot drive. Any Transportation Demand Management program under R7 should be designed to include employer communications about Ride Together Pierce resources for employees with mobility barriers.

Shared micromobility, including docked or dockless e-bikes and electric scooters, can provide affordable, low-emission first/last-mile connectivity where conventional transit cannot serve efficiently. However, research consistently finds that micromobility performs best as a complement to fixed-route transit rather than as a standalone mobility solution, and that equity outcomes depend heavily on deliberate program design: program siting, fare structure, payment accessibility, and community co-design (TransitCenter, 2019; Pinski et al., 2026). For this reason, micromobility is identified as a Phase 2 recommendation, suitable for implementation after the more foundational investments in street infrastructure, Route 402 frequency, and Runner zone coverage are underway.

As of 2022, approximately 62% of U.S. shared micromobility programs included at least one equity component such as discounted rides for low-income users, cash payment options, or multilingual outreach (Brown et al., 2024). South Hill should consider requiring these provisions in any permitting agreement. The Institute for Transportation and Development Policy identifies transit-station co-location as the most effective siting strategy for maximizing shared micromobility's ridership and equity impact (ClimateWorks Foundation / ITDP, 2021). In South Hill's context, designating micromobility corrals at Route 402 stops and the South Hill Mall Transit Center would directly connect the micromobility network to the existing fixed-route system. The U.S. Department of Transportation's shared micromobility guidance identifies FTA formula grant eligibility for e-bike and scooter programs, making this a potentially grant-fundable Phase 2 initiative (U.S. DOT, 2025).

*Primary institutions:* FTA (grant funding); Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (equity siting guidance); Pierce Transit (coordination on station co-location).

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PLANNING & PUBLIC  
**WORKS**

Health Impact Assessment: South Hill

# Governance & Essential Services

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LIVABLE  
CITY YEAR



URBAN DESIGN  
& PLANNING



ENVIRONMENTAL  
& OCCUPATIONAL  
HEALTH SCIENCES

## Chapter 2: Governance and Essential Services

### Introduction, Key Findings, and Recommendations

South Hill is currently the largest urban unincorporated area in Pierce County, home to an estimated 71,800 residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2026). Decisions about how to accommodate growth, maintain and update utility infrastructure, and offer police and emergency services in South Hill are made by county and regional governing bodies. Pierce County also handles taxation and distribution of funds across towns, cities, and unincorporated areas (Livable City Year Program, 2026). Incorporating as a self-governing city would fundamentally alter South Hill's autonomy in governance, while opportunities for continued utility and emergency service provision from existing entities would ensure continuity and financial stability for a new city (Community Attributes, Inc., & Maul Foster & Alongi, Inc., 2023). The shift from county dependence to direct regional representation would act as a structural determinant of health, giving residents the opportunity to decide how to accommodate regional growth, manage infrastructural strains, and seek improvements in utility capacity, emergency services, and healthcare access to bolster the long-term health of the community (Gomez-Vidal & Gomez, 2021).

### Key Findings

- As the region grows, essential amenities in their current state, including affordable housing, utility infrastructure, the local healthcare system, and emergency services may face significant strain that county resources cannot adequately address, leaving residents more vulnerable to adverse health outcomes.
- Coordination across departments is essential during the development process in order to ensure that mixed use development is paired with access to public transportation, consideration of environmental hazards, and appropriate utility service levels. This will ensure that residents access the full health benefits of dense, walkable, affordable communities.
- A better understanding of healthcare demand and access could inform future expansion of or improvements to the services provided by existing area hospitals and clinics.
- An incorporated city would have the opportunity to negotiate more favorable iILAs with emergency service providers, such as Pierce County Sheriff and Central Pierce Fire and Rescue, to reduce response times.

### Recommendations

Based on these findings, eight recommendations have been developed. Table 2.1 summarizes recommendations that the authors of this report encourage decision-makers to consider. The remainder of this chapter will provide context and rationale for each recommendation.

**Table 2.1**  
*Recommendations for Governance and Essential Services*

<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Section</b>	<b>Responsible Party (under incorporation)</b>	<b>Timing (post inc.)</b>	<b>Health Impact</b>	<b>Feasibility</b>
R2.1: Comprehensive coordination across departments when upzoning	Growth: Land Use & Zoning	City	Year 1-2; continuous	High	Moderate
R2.2: Leverage PSRC representation to influence growth	Growth: Land Use & Zoning	South Hill's PSRC representative	Year 2-5	High	Moderate
R2.3: Pursue state and federal grants to support high-density affordable housing in town centers	Growth: Displacement	City Public Works Department	Year 2-5	Moderate	Moderate
R2.4: Monitor displacement risk factors	Growth: Displacement	City Public Works Department	Year 1-2; continuous	Moderate	High
R2.5: Prioritize sewer expansion in high-risk areas; negotiating ILAs	Sewer and Wastewater Systems	City Public Works Department	Year 5-10	Moderate	Moderate
R2.6: Improve septic system monitoring and maintenance requirements	Sewer and Wastewater Systems	City Public Works Department	Year 5-10	Moderate	Low-Moderate
R2.7: Develop a healthcare access mapping and information system	Healthcare Access	Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department	Year 5-10	High	High
R2.8: Utilize growth projections to inform desired level of emergency service when updating contracts	Emergency Services	City, Sheriff's and Fire Departments	Immediate	Moderate	High

## Growth

Many residents in South Hill have expressed concerns about rapid growth. Long-time residents yearn for the days when South Hill was still a small developing area with little traffic. For decades, ample empty land in South Hill allowed for unlimited population growth and housing development. However, developable land is running out, and South Hill's population continues to swell with families seeking affordable homes with proximity to Tacoma and Mt. Rainier. As the remaining land is developed into more houses, it will become more expensive, putting many current residents at risk of displacement in the future.

### A. Land Use and Zoning

Generally, land use and zoning are the designations that planners give portions of land in a city or county to limit the ways that the land can be used. For example, a city might determine that the land surrounding a busy arterial will be mixed-use, indicating that it can simultaneously be used for residential and commercial purposes. Another portion of land might be designated for only single-family houses, restricting all other possible uses of the land. Land use designations and zoning have the power to shape the built environment and, subsequently, how people live each day. More specifically, it influences whether people choose to walk to work or drive, how many friends they have, what food they eat, and whether they live near basic amenities. By influencing daily decisions, land use and the built environment are important determinants of health (Lens, 2022; Maantay, 2001).

#### Connection to Health

Zoning and land use designations directly influence how and where regional growth occurs and can have a significant impact on health, particularly in the context of housing. Land use designations determine proximity of housing to noxious uses like industry, large scale agriculture, high-density roadways, airports, waste management, or wastewater treatment (Dannenberg et al., 2011; Lens, 2022). When housing sits closer to such sources of harmful toxicants, residents may be exposed to environmental hazards such as air pollution, noise pollution, and water and soil contaminants, leading to increased risk of chronic diseases (Maantay, 2001). Zoning and land use also influence individual health behavior by dictating distance from housing to nearby amenities, which influences physical activity by encouraging or discouraging walking and other forms of active transportation (Barton, 2009). Sprawling suburban land use, which increases reliance on motor vehicles as the primary mode of transportation, decreases physical activity and increases the risk of unsafe streets and traffic injuries for those who still elect to walk or bike (Frumkin et al., 2013). In addition, sprawl decreases the availability of affordable housing due to a lack of density and diversity in housing type, forcing low-income residents to live farther away from amenities, have less money to spend on quality food, and be exposed to pollution from undesirable land uses such as manufacturing (Rossen & Pollack, 2012; Strully et al., 2026). Compact, densely-zoned areas with a mixture of housing types promote health by making it easier and safer to walk to other nearby

amenities such as a grocery store, pharmacy, transit stops, school, or library (Schilling & Linton, 2005).

## Background and Current Conditions

Under the Washington Growth Management Act, South Hill is designated as a UGA. As such, the most proximal governing body is required to periodically update a comprehensive plan that plans for population growth. The most recent update to the South Hill Community Plan was in 2023 as part of the Pierce County Comprehensive Plan, which included limited changes to land use designations in South Hill. After this update, the majority of land use designations remained moderate density single family at 46%, while multi-family housing made up 4.26% with more than half of that being middle housing. However, the plan also sought to incentivize high-density development along Meridian in two transit-oriented Towne Centers and a mixed-use corridor. Most additional growth is expected to occur in these small high-density zones. Specifically, the Towne Centers are compact, pedestrian-friendly areas that support a combination of residential and commercial uses. The high density allowance is with the expectation that BRT will be built along Meridian to serve the Towne Centers. These land use designation changes are reflected in the Pierce County zoning code (Pierce County, 2023). See Figure 2.1 for current zoning designations in South Hill.

## Assessment of Project Alternatives

### **Alternative 1: Status Quo, Remain Unincorporated**

Without incorporating, South Hill will still rely on Pierce County for land use and zoning decisions. Pierce County will continue to update the current South Hill Community Plan, but resident input will be limited to community forums, not formal decision-making power.

### **Alternative 2: Incorporation**

Based on the current land use designations and zoning policies in South Hill, the vast majority of residents live in single-family homes in sprawling neighborhoods. Most residents rely on a personal vehicle to navigate South Hill and access local amenities. Although there is a portion of South Hill that is zoned for high density residential, it is a very limited area within South Hill and is not served by BRT. South Hill is already a UGA, but Pierce County is in charge of land use planning and zoning with limited funding and staff. This has meant infrequent updates to the South Hill Community Plan, which makes planning and adjusting to the continuous growth difficult. Incorporation would allow South Hill to create its own planning department as well as elect local decision-makers who could allocate more time and funding to planning for growth in South Hill through additional zoning changes and incentives.



## Recommendations

### **R2.1: Consider comprehensive coordination across departments when upzoning.**

Increasing the amount of land zoned for high-density residential use in South Hill along Meridian and other accessible and compact portions of the area such as Military Road would help to increase density in areas already served by amenities such as public transportation. In order for density to be beneficial to health, it must be paired with improvements suggested by other sections of this report, including public transportation and pedestrian infrastructure. These coordinated improvements would ensure that residents reap the health benefits of denser living areas.

### **R2.2: Leverage Puget Sound Regional Council representation to influence regional growth management.**

As an incorporated city, South Hill residents would have a representative on the Puget Sound Regional Council, a regional planning body that coordinates growth, development, and transportation planning across King, Kitsap, Pierce, and Snohomish counties. Upon incorporation, South Hill should consider leveraging this representation to ensure that the priorities of residents surrounding growth are being met.

## B. Displacement and Housing Insecurity

Displacement is one of the greatest challenges with which urban planners must grapple when balancing improvements with affordability. Displacement occurs when households are forced to move to a new, more affordable neighborhood due to rising housing costs, including rent and property taxes. With additional investment such as safety improvements, green spaces, or other amenities, some neighborhoods experience an increase in property value and an influx of residents who are interested in the amenities and can afford higher housing prices. Cities can track risk factors to identify neighborhoods that are at risk of displacement. These factors include rising single-family home sale prices and market rental prices, low apartment vacancy rates, and construction permit activity that is replacing affordable housing (City of Seattle, 2025). People facing housing insecurity, or the lack of safe, stable, or secure housing, are especially vulnerable to displacement, along with other negative outcomes such as eviction or homelessness.

### Connection to Health

Displacement is a frustrating and traumatic experience for many people who are involuntarily forced to leave their long-time community. Loss of social ties, social resources, and increases in stress levels can result from displacement, leading to adverse mental health outcomes (Keene & Geronimus, 2011). Additionally, displacement increases the likelihood of a hospitalization due to a mental health crisis and the risk of chronic diseases and weight gain (Lim et al., 2017; DeLong, 2023; Powell-Wiley et al., 2015).

Similar to displacement, housing insecurity has a strong negative impact on health. Notably, it has been found to increase the odds of reporting poor health, delayed doctor's visits, and poor mental or physical health limiting activity for 14 days or more in the last 30 days (Stahre et al., 2015). Furthermore, being behind on rent, or in default on mortgage payments, increases childhood lifetime hospitalizations, poor child health, maternal depression, poor caretaker health, and worse mental and physical health generally (Cannuscio et al., 2012; Sandel et al., 2018). On the other hand, affordable housing has been shown to lower stress and improve mental health, increase self-esteem, reduce infectious disease, improve outcomes for chronic conditions, increase resources that can go towards healthy food, and increase access to important amenities (Lubell et al., 2007). Finally, affordable housing is associated with lower rates of food insecurity compared to those still on a waitlist (Kirkpatrick & Tarasuk, 2011).

### Background and Current Conditions

Until recently, displacement concerns in South Hill were minimal. Continuous housing development on available land since the 1990s consistently kept pace with the community's population growth. According to the South Hill Community Plan, from 2000 to 2019, the number of housing units grew 65%, while the population grew almost 70%. At the time of the recent South Hill Community Plan update, the vacancy rate was around 4% (Pierce County, 2024). More recently, the median household income in 2023 was \$109,235, which was higher than other nearby comparison areas. Additionally, the median home value increased by 42%, which was the second highest increase for comparison areas, with Tacoma having the highest increase. When looking at the cost burden for renters in South Hill, 46% were either cost burdened (30-50%) or severely cost burdened (>50%). When comparing cost burden by race, historically marginalized groups were disproportionately cost burdened in South Hill (Berk Consulting, 2025). Central Pierce County continues to boast more affordable home prices than places like Tacoma and much of Seattle and King County, but continually rising costs across the region may make displacement a reality for many families over the next several decades.

### Assessment of Project Alternatives

#### **Alternative 1: Status Quo, Remain Unincorporated**

Without incorporating, South Hill would continue to rely on Pierce County to plan for future population growth. Given that the most recent South Hill Community Plan was in 2023, the next would likely not come for some time. Pierce County is already stretched thin financially and has limited resources to plan extensively in South Hill. As a result, South Hill would likely struggle to keep up with the population growth trend paired with limited availability of empty land to build more housing and keep up with demand.

#### **Alternative 2: Incorporation**

South Hill is nearing the end of its unlimited population and housing growth without considerations of displacement as the remaining vacant land is developed. Based on the dwindling vacant land, along with displacement indicators such as rapidly increasing median home values, continuous

population growth, low vacancy rate, and high percentage of cost burdened renters, South Hill will likely soon grapple with the displacement of long-time lower-income residents. This will influence the health of residents who are impacted by displacement mentally, physically, and socially. Under Washington State's Growth Management Act, South Hill is designated as a UGA. UGAs are required to plan to accommodate additional growth under the Washington Growth Management Act. As a city, South Hill would have the authority to designate specific areas. However, currently that is limited to decision-making by planners for Pierce County. Incorporation would provide South Hill with local decision-making and planning power to mitigate displacement and its resulting health impacts.

## Recommendations

### **R2.3: Consider pursuing state and federal grants to support high-density affordable housing in town centers.**

While Pierce County provides some incentives for developers to build affordable housing in unincorporated urban areas, additional policies and bonuses could encourage more affordable housing developments in the near future. Additional housing development is necessary to keep up with population growth, and particularly affordable housing. This must be paired with zoning and land use policies that support dense multifamily housing near future transit and other amenities. Continuing to create more housing, particularly affordable housing, will help limit displacement and the negative impacts, as well as create more housing opportunities that support lifestyles that are less reliant on a personal vehicle. Incentivizing developers to build this type of housing, or pursuing federal grants from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, such as a Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), may make it easier for a city to initiate this type of development (MRSC, 2026).

### **R2.4: Consider monitoring displacement risk factors.**

As noted previously, a number of displacement indicators highlight an increasing risk of future displacement in South Hill. Therefore, it is critical that either Pierce County or incorporated South Hill consistently monitor these indicators, noting which neighborhoods are at a greater risk. Based on periodic results from monitoring, if there are significant indicators of displacement, the government could respond with a variety of strategies including incentivizing affordable housing development through the Multifamily Tax Exemption program, pursuing a CDBG, or instituting regulations on the number of affordable units that must be included in new developments (MRSC, 2026). As noted previously, displacement and housing insecurity have drastic health implications for individuals affected, while affordable housing has positive health outcomes, making these strategies crucial to protecting the health of South Hill Residents.

## Sewer and Wastewater Systems

### Connection to Health

Sewer and wastewater systems have major implications for public health as they directly influence water quality, pathogen exposure, and environmental safety. As on-site septic systems remain common in South Hill, concerns have been voiced regarding their ability to accommodate the current rate of population growth. Increased discharge with limited capacity is not only financially unfavorable but also raises health concerns in case of system failure or poor maintenance, which can lead to groundwater and surface water contamination. As a result, pathogens and excess nutrients could infiltrate local drinking water sources, which can lead to serious health implications (U.S. EPA, 2017). Untreated wastewater contains a wide range of bacteria, viruses and parasites capable of causing disease upon exposure. These include gastrointestinal infections caused by bacteria such as *E. coli*, leading to symptoms like diarrhea, vomiting, stomach pain, and, in severe cases, death (Bej et al., 2023; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2025). Exposure to contaminated water can also lead to contagious liver infection caused by the hepatitis A virus, which can manifest as fatigue, nausea, and abdominal pain, and may result in lasting liver damage (CDC, 2025; Girish et al., 2026). Wastewater contamination can also result in elevated levels of nitrate in drinking water. High nitrate exposure can impair the blood's ability to transport oxygen, causing methemoglobinemia, or more commonly known as blue baby syndrome, in infants, which can lead to coma or death (Knobeloch et al., 2000; Washington State DOH, 2025). Studies have also suggested that exposure during pregnancy may increase the risk of miscarriage and birth defects (Damania & Zaveri, 2023). Beyond drinking water contamination, system failures or leakage can also increase human exposure to pathogens through direct contact with polluted sources such as soils and recreational waters (U.S. EPA, 2017).

### Background and Current Conditions

South Hill currently operates under a mixed wastewater system that consists of both centralized sewage infrastructure and independent on-site septic systems. The area near major transportation corridors is primarily served by Pierce County's regional sewer system, which directs wastewater to the Chambers Creek Regional Wastewater Treatment Plant (PPW, 2024; *Sewer Utility Pierce County*, n.d.). As of 2015, the South Hill community was served by approximately 48 miles of intercepting and collecting pipes, with the majority of these being gravity pipes and the remainder being forced mains (*South Hill*, 2015). Currently, South Hill constitutes approximately 29% of Pierce County's sewer service area. The current system is facing increasing challenges due to regional growth. Pierce County's 2040 Unified Sewer Plan (USP) is a long-range comprehensive planning document that describes how the agency will protect environmental public health and support economic development in this context. The USP will consist of strategies designed to remedy aging infrastructure, manage system expansion, create smaller, subregional treatment facilities, capture and use biogas, and direct reclaimed water, all of which address growth happening across the

service area and seek to reduce repair costs that would ultimately be transferred to ratepayers. Pierce County expects to finalize the 2040 USP update in 2026.

On-site septic systems are more prevalent off of Meridian and outside of planned communities such as Sunrise (Figure 2.2). While there are multiple private providers for septic maintenance, all operations require approval from the Tacoma–Pierce County Health Department (TPCHD; TPCHD, n.d.). Many septic systems were originally designed for smaller households and lower-density development, making them inadequate to address current or future demand. Increasing population density and upzoning plans are placing additional pressure on the sewer and septic systems, which elevates the risk of system failures and can lead to broader and more severe environmental and public health impacts.

### Assessment of Project Alternatives

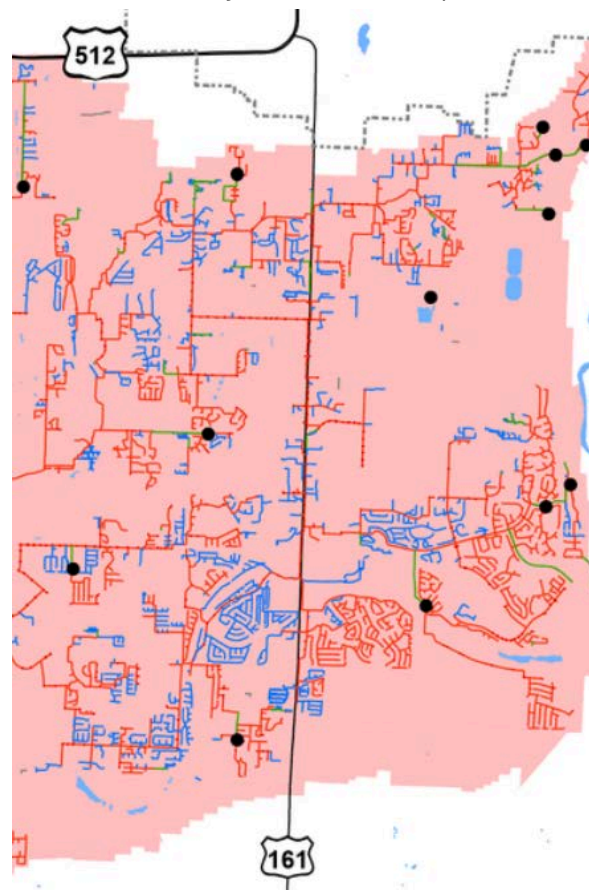
#### **Alternative 1: Status Quo, Remain Unincorporated**

Pierce County would continue to manage wastewater with gradual expansion guided by the county’s six-year Capital Facilities Plan, the USP, and the long-term Sewer Improvement Program outlined in the community and county plans (Pierce County, 2026; Pierce County, 2023; Livable City Year Program, 2026). However, limited financial and infrastructural resources may slow the pace of sewer system expansion, resulting in continued reliance on on-site septic systems. This approach may be particularly problematic for residents whose septic systems are already at or near capacity, increasing their risk of system failure and thus a higher risk of drinking water contamination and associated health implications. Without careful attention to sewer capacity as growth occurs along Meridian, excess strain on the existing system may lead to adverse public health outcomes.

#### **Alternative 2: Incorporation**

Under incorporation, South Hill would likely continue to contract sewer and wastewater services from the county as has been done in previous area incorporations, (Livable City Year Program, 2026). As of the 2015 Comprehensive Plan, the county already requires that

**Figure 2.2**  
*South Hill Sewer System Service Map*



Note. Red and blue lines indicate two types of sewer service. Unlined indicates septic. Pink represents the area served by the Unified Sewer Plan. From Pierce County (2026).

residences within 300 feet of existing sewer lines be connected to the centralized system (South Hill, 2015). This reflects a general trend toward transitioning from decentralized septic systems to centralized sewage infrastructure that can better accommodate population growth and reduce environmental risks, which would persist under incorporation. Realistically, the speed of upgrades and expansion to current sewer lines will remain similar regardless of incorporation status. However, as a city, South Hill would wield more control over on-site septic monitoring and maintenance requirements, and could adopt more health-protective maintenance standards with assistance from Tacoma-Pierce County Public Health.

## Recommendations

### **R2.5: Consider prioritizing sewer infrastructure expansion in high-risk areas.**

Regardless of incorporation status, the USP update should consider focusing on continued identification and prioritization of high-risk areas for upgrades and expansion. These areas can be identified by factors such as high septic system density, rapid population growth, and evidence of septic overuse. Using this data, Pierce County can update their existing sewer map to include a risk-based mapping system to identify neighborhoods most in need of infrastructure improvements. Prioritizing expansion in these high-risk areas can reduce the likelihood of septic system failures, improve water quality, and minimize exposure to environmental health hazards. If incorporated, a city government would likely continue to contract services from Pierce County, so responsibility for this recommendation falls on the county.

### **R2.6: Consider updating septic system monitoring and maintenance requirements and pairing enforcement with resource communication.**

Strengthening septic system monitoring programs can enable earlier detection of system failures and leakage, allowing for timely interventions and risk mitigation. As the region continues to rely on septic systems for extended periods, especially in areas experiencing a rapid population boost, this makes the residents more susceptible to system failure. Governance bodies, whether at the county level (unincorporated) or city level (incorporated), should consider enforcement of stricter maintenance and inspection requirements for onsite septic systems to reduce the risk of water contamination, protect drinking water quality, and minimize public exposure to potential pathogens. Under incorporation, cities have greater capacity to support these improvements through updated requirements for developers or negotiating updated ILAs (MRSC, 2026). Regardless of incorporation status, some residents may qualify for financial assistance for septic system maintenance through Pierce County, the Puget Sound Partnership Financial Assistance Program, or other programs (TPCHD, 2026). An incorporated city could choose to initiate a public education program to ensure that South Hill residents are aware of potential discounts and grants available to them, or could ask that the county do so.

## Access to Healthcare

### Connection to Health

Perhaps the most intuitive linkage lies between health and access to healthcare. Timely, proximal, and high-quality healthcare is fundamental to robust community health. Primary care, or provision of regular check-ups, risk factor-appropriate screening, vaccinations, and lifestyle guidance, is crucial to prevention, detection, and management of chronic conditions, such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, or heart disease (Macinko et al., 2007). Primary care physicians also act as an intermediate step between the patient and specialty care by issuing referrals to experts in specific disease or organ system areas. Emergency and inpatient care are utilized by patients with more serious or emergent conditions that require intensive or immediate treatment (Lazaris, 2025). Limited access to both preventative and emergent care can result in delayed and/or inadequate treatment, contributing to an increase in inpatient stays, adverse health outcomes, mortality, and reliance on emergency services (Ratnapradipa et al. 2023; Sartini et al., 2022).

### Background and Current Conditions

Penchansky and Thomas (1981) put forth a framework of five dimensions across which to measure healthcare access, including availability, accessibility, accommodation, affordability, and acceptability. Availability and accessibility, which refer to the physical presence and proximity of healthcare to a particular population, the ability of that population to access said care via personal vehicle or public transportation, and the capacity of local healthcare services to provide care to all individuals who require it, are two key dimensions with relevance to South Hill.

Current demographics and projected shifts point to an evolving demand for care in South Hill, which will shape care utilization rates and thus availability of care. South Hill's current population skews young; the median age is 38.3 years and one quarter of the population is under the age of 18, which is 20% higher than the average in Washington (U.S. Census Bureau, 2026). This suggests a current high demand for pediatric, maternal, and family medicine. As mentioned in the Executive Summary of this report, South Hill has a relatively high baseline prevalence of chronic conditions such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, obesity, and cardiovascular disease, further supporting a high demand for routine care (CDC, 2025). Like much of the U.S., however, the proportion of older adults is likely to increase over time, leading to an increasing demand for hospital-based services and management of chronic conditions in the future.

South Hill's closest hospital, Multicare's Good Samaritan Hospital (GSH), located in Puyallup just north of South Hill, is the only acute care facility in the region. South Hill residents, like much of central Pierce County, are dependent on GSH for all emergency and specialized care. When combined with traffic along Meridian and sub-optimal public transportation options, accessibility of emergency care could be improved. Driven by the growth of Central Pierce County, GSH was home to the fourth busiest emergency department per capita in the United States in 2024, and has since initiated an expansion project that will add 160 additional beds; it is likely that emergency

department utilization will remain high even with the expansion (Tacoma News Tribune Staff, 2025). Within South Hill, a 24/7 MultiCare Emergency facility provides laboratory and medical imaging services. Sunrise Medical Campus offers outpatient specialties including women’s health, digestive health, diagnostic imaging, eye and skin care, and more (LoopNet, 2026). Walk-in clinics also exist along Meridian, and additional family medicine options exist in Puyallup. As the region continues to grow, even an expanded GSH will see continued capacity strain, and existing primary care options are likely to struggle to meet the demands of a growing population.

Current access to care in South Hill is not cause for significant concern for the majority of the population, especially given wider regional options. However, when taking into account future regional demographic shifts and growth projections, it is clear that South Hill residents would benefit from expansion of options across Central Pierce County.

## Assessment of Project Alternatives

### **Alternative 1: Status Quo, Remain Unincorporated**

Given that most hospitals are not publicly operated and report metrics to TPCHD and Washington State Department of Health (WSDOH), it is unlikely that incorporation alone would lead to increased access to or quality of preventative and acute healthcare options for residents in South Hill. As discussed above, continued regional growth will strain existing systems if expansion does not occur.

### **Alternative 2: Incorporation**

Though incorporation itself does not immediately expand healthcare systems, it would create opportunities for South Hill residents and leaders to direct growth of healthcare access within South Hill if desired. A municipal government would have several options, including coordination of land use planning to address healthcare access needs (Bramhall & Schilling, 2020; Altman & Morgan, 1983). Incorporation would also allow South Hill to prepare a Certificate of Need, a healthcare planning document that a city may submit to WSDOH which establishes current or near future demand for expanded hospital services and supports new facility planning and expansion of existing facilities (WSDOH, n.d.). It is beyond the scope of this report to investigate the feasibility of construction of a new hospital in South Hill considering the cost and time involved, compliance with regulatory requirements, and coordination with other regional healthcare systems.

## **Recommendations**

### **R2.7: Consider developing a healthcare access mapping and information system.**

Due to the high cost and time investment involved in establishing new and expanding existing healthcare facilities, a more immediate and feasible strategy to improve healthcare access in South Hill is to develop a publicly accessible centralized healthcare information system, partnering with neighboring cities and regions. This need is especially pressing given the current lack of a comprehensive healthcare access report for Pierce County (WSDOH, n.d). This system would map out all the healthcare resources within and near the community, including hospitals, walk-in clinics,

urgent care services, and other health services, along with the respective services provided and the status of operation. The system could be integrated with TPCHD's existing mapping of health indicators on their data dashboard (TPCHD, 2026). When combined with data from the WA HEALTH Hospital Bed Capacity Surveillance System, which collects real-time capacity and resource data from hospitals across the state, this visualization of healthcare facility density could help inform targeted support or expansion of facilities where it is most needed (Office of Resiliency and Health, 2026). The system could also be integrated with existing mapping tools used by first responders, if available, leveraging preexisting infrastructure to enhance emergency response coordination and ensure more efficient routing to appropriate care facilities.

The application of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to healthcare access has been supported by health experts and technology providers, demonstrating how mapping technologies can improve healthcare accessibility (Geraghty, 2023). Similarly, there are also private-sector platforms that offer services for healthcare navigation and mapping solutions that the City or the County could partner with to actualize the project (*Pointr*, n.d.). Evidence from studies have also shown to support this approach, where a study conducted in rural Malaysia found that GIS-based mobile healthcare systems improved access to care in underserved communities (Rashid et al., 2019).

Under incorporation, this initiative would likely be led by the newly established city government, allowing for greater prioritization and local control. The City could also establish ILAs to facilitate regional collaboration and resource sharing for this project (MRSC, 2026). While implementation may still be possible under an unincorporated structure led by the county, it would likely receive lower priority and face greater challenges in execution.

## Emergency Services

### Connection to Health

First responders including police, firefighters, and emergency medical service (EMS) personnel play an essential role in community health and public safety. In general, the effectiveness of otherwise adequately trained and resourced first responders rests largely on response time, especially for fire and EMS. For instance, longer EMS response times are associated with higher motor vehicle crash mortality, both for vehicle-only and pedestrian-involved crashes (Bryne et al., 2019; Patwary & Khattak, 2024). Additionally, studies show a strong association between shorter ambulance response times and improved patient survival for severe acute health problems such as cardiac arrest and trauma (Soltani et al., 2026). According to the National Fire Protection Agency, structural fires can double in size every 30-60 seconds, pointing to a clear need for rapid response to protect health (2020). Faster police response time has been shown to reduce the risk of an incident resulting in an injury, especially among female victims (DeAngelo et al., 2023). Additionally, Higher prevalence of neighborhood-level safety concerns are correlated with higher levels of stress and reduced physical activity, which may contribute to poorer health outcomes (Robinette et al., 2021). Taken together, emergency response time is a significant driver of health outcome prevalence in communities.

## Background and Current Conditions

**Figure 2.3.**

*Central Pierce Fire and Rescue, Station #72*



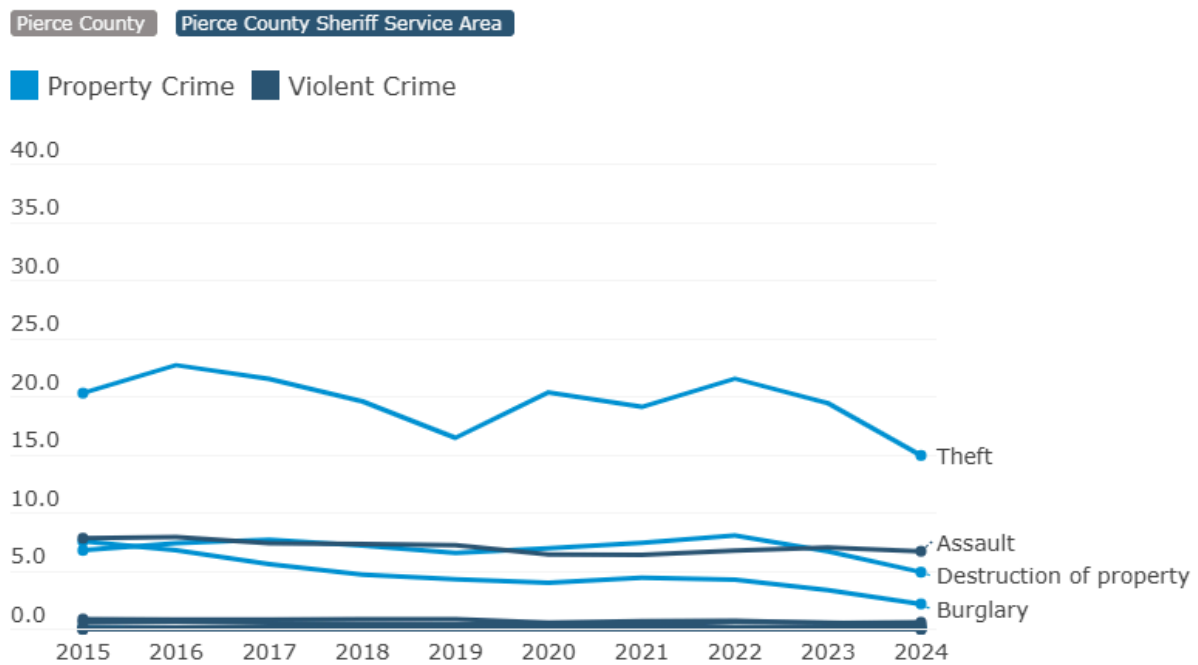
*Note.* From Central Pierce Fire and Rescue (2023).

South Hill receives fire and emergency medical services from Central Pierce Fire and Rescue (CPFR) (Figure 2.3), which also serves Puyallup, Parkland, Frederickson, Graham, and surrounding areas. According to the CPFR 2025 Annual Report, reopening of Station 66, which is located in Central South Hill, dropped the combined 90th percentile emergency response time in that area from 12:27 to 11:27 by the end of 2025, meaning over 90% of emergencies have first responders on site with 11 minutes and 27 seconds (CPFR, 2026). This demonstrates how improved coverage and resource allocation has tangible impacts on response times. The South Hill area is also served by Station 72, which had the highest volume of responses of any CPFR station, and Stations 68, 69, and 91 (CPFR, 2026).

South Hill is currently served by 300 commissioned officers from the Pierce County Sheriff's Department (PCSD). The South Hill Precinct provides patrols, 911 response, non-emergency response, and jail services. In South Hill and unincorporated Pierce County as a whole, residents are interested in upholding public safety (Park, 2025). Across the PCSD service area, which includes unincorporated Pierce County, Edgewood, and University Place, violent and property crime either decreased or stagnated between 2015 and 2024, as shown in Figure 2.4 (Pierce County, 2026). Still, many residents in unincorporated Pierce County believe that the Sheriff's Department requires further funding to support additional staffing. Indeed, PCSD had an estimated 0.57 officers per 1,000 residents in 2023, which is less than half of the national average (Park, 2025). Additionally, response times across unincorporated Pierce County for high priority calls range between 11.1 and 21.1 minutes on average, with responses for routine calls exceeding one hour (Community Attributes, Inc., & Maui Foster & Alongi, Inc., 2023; Crime Analysis Unit, 2022).

This points to a potential area of improvement for policing in South Hill. Publicly available disaggregated data on South Hill alone was not identified during the preparation of this report.

**Figure 2.4**  
*Crime Rate Per 1,000 Residents by Type in Unincorporated Pierce County (2015-2024)*



Note. Data is limited to Pierce County Sheriff Service Area. Disaggregated data is not available for South Hill alone. From Pierce County (2026).

## Assessment of Project Alternatives

### Alternative 1: Status Quo, Remain Unincorporated

If South Hill does not incorporate, level and costs of service for police, fire, and EMS will remain stagnant absent changes in funding or goals at the county level.

### Alternative 2: Incorporation

Under incorporation, South Hill would likely continue contracting services from PCSD, mirroring similar agreements in Lakewood and University Place. The City of University Place contracts its police services from Pierce County, paying an estimated \$128 per capita in 2022. Comparatively, in the City of Puyallup expenditure per capita for police is approximately \$579 (Community Attributes, Inc. & Maul Foster & Alongi, Inc., 2023). With additional opportunities for funding and retention of additional revenue, South Hill could choose to invest in a more robust contract with the Sheriff’s department whereby dedicated officers could contribute to a reduced response time in South Hill. Similarly, continuation of contracted services with CPFR is likely to be much more cost effective

than the establishment of a city department. This approach has the potential to positively impact health by improving response times and aligning services with community safety priorities.

### **Alternative 3: Incorporation with City Police Department**

Incorporating as an independent city would allow South Hill to establish its own police department to target shorter emergency response times, mirroring more localized models such as Puyallup. However, constructing facilities, hiring and training personnel, and providing continuous funding to achieve a much higher level of service is significantly more expensive than continuing to contract with the County, as highlighted by the 2023 Governance Study (Community Attributes, Inc. & Maul Foster & Alongi, Inc., 2023). While independent public safety operations could enhance local emergency response, high costs of implementation would divert funds away from other community priorities.

## **Recommendations**

### **R2.8: Consider utilizing growth projections to inform desired level of service when updating interlocal agreements with Pierce County Sheriff's Department and Central Pierce Fire & Rescue.**

Under incorporation, continued police services from PCSD is the most cost-effective path to uninterrupted public safety coverage for South Hill, especially during the first several years following incorporation (Community Attributes, Inc. & Maul Foster & Alongi, Inc., 2023). By leveraging the existing Pierce County Sheriff infrastructure, a new city would avoid massive upfront capital costs of establishing a city department. South Hill's city government would have the opportunity to negotiate a new ILA with PCSD that better reflects the priorities of South Hill residents. This ILA may lead to a higher level of service, which would likely include more dedicated officers and faster response time. To pay for a higher level of service, a city government could explore options such as reallocation of existing funds or new revenue streams such as additional taxation, traffic enforcement, or other methods.

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PLANNING & PUBLIC  
**WORKS**

Health Impact Assessment: South Hill

# Community Infrastructure & Public Space

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**W** LIVABLE  
CITY YEAR

**W** URBAN DESIGN  
& PLANNING

**W** ENVIRONMENTAL  
& OCCUPATIONAL  
HEALTH SCIENCES

# Chapter 3: Community Infrastructure and Public Space

## Introduction, Key Findings, and Recommendations

With an estimated population of approximately 71,800 people in 2026, South Hill has grown by nearly 12% since the 2020 census. This continued growth has intensified the need for investments in community infrastructure, public gathering spaces, and multimodal connectivity. Existing plans to build a new community center and revitalizing the area's two Towne Centers present opportunities to address longstanding challenges associated with car-dependent development and limited pedestrian connectivity. As the largest urban unincorporated area in Washington State, South Hill relies exclusively on County and regional entities for infrastructure planning and service provision, shaping residents' access to public amenities and services (Livable City Year Program, 2026). Enhancing public spaces and improving accessibility to community amenities and programming would help ameliorate structural barriers to mobility, social connection, and equitable access throughout this growing and increasingly diverse community. Specific subpopulations of interest for South Hill include youth, the elderly, and multiracial and military families. Investments in community infrastructure and public spaces can therefore function as important SDOH by increasing opportunities for physical activity, social interaction, civic participation, and access to essential resources and services. Collectively, these investments would strengthen community identity and contribute to the long-term resilience and livability of South Hill.

### Key Findings

- Well-designed, mixed-use town centers support physical, mental, social, economic, and environmental health by promoting walkability, active transportation, social interaction, access to community amenities and services, local economic activity, and reduced dependence on motor vehicles.
- Robust pedestrian and nonmotorized transport infrastructure minimizes traffic-related accidents, reduces air pollution, and increases physical activity and accessibility, contributing to a more interconnected and livable community.
- Involvement in community-centered programming is positively associated with improved social support, enhanced mental well-being, and healthier lifestyle behaviors at the individual and community levels.
- Structured youth activities and recreation programming lower risk of child overweight and obesity, increase physical activity, improve mental health and social connection, foster youth safety, and prevent juvenile crime.

### Recommendations

The nine recommendations developed for this chapter have been prioritized based on the strength of evidence for human health benefits and the feasibility of implementation given South Hill's

incorporation context (Table 3.1). Regardless of incorporation status, respective agencies should consider improvements to town centers, the community center, pedestrian and nonmotorized transport infrastructure, and youth programming and employment. The remainder of this chapter will provide additional context and rationale for each recommendation.

**Table 3.1**

*Recommendations for Community Infrastructure and Public Space*

<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Section</b>	<b>Responsible Party (under incorporation)</b>	<b>Timing</b>	<b>Health Impact</b>	<b>Feasibility</b>
R3.1: Reimagine Pierce County Airport – Thun Field as a phased, mixed-use, civic redevelopment site.	Towne Centers	City/County Public Works Department	Year 3-5; phased	High	Moderate (via impact fees)
R3.2: Leverage vacant lots Longston and Sunrise Village to develop multifunctional, civic town centers.	Towne Centers	City/County Public Works Department	Year 2-4; phased	High	Moderate (via impact fees)
R3.3: Incorporate physical activity and wellness spaces into the Meridian Habitat Park Community Center.	Community Centers	City/County Public Works Department	Year 2-3; continuous	Moderate	High
R3.4: Improve accessibility and inclusive design at the Meridian Habitat Park Community Center.	Community Centers	City/County Public Works Department	Year 2-3; continuous	Moderate	High
R3.5: Create safer, more connected, and more comfortable pedestrian infrastructure along Meridian Avenue East.	Pedestrian and Nonmotorized Transport	City/County Public Works/Transportation Department	Year 2-3; continuous	High	Moderate (cost barrier)
R3.6: Add placemaking features to pedestrian and nonmotorized transport infrastructure along Meridian Avenue East.	Pedestrian and Nonmotorized Transport	City/County Public Works/Transportation Department	Year 1-3; continuous	Low	High

R3.7: Develop indoor, year-round programming for youth at South Hill Community Park and Heritage Recreation Center.	Youth Programming and Employment	City/County Public Works Department	Year 1-2	Moderate	Moderate
R3.8: Create employment pipelines in local youth programming for local high school and college students.	Youth Programming and Employment	City/County Public Works Department	Year 1-2	Moderate	Moderate
R3.9: Ensure equitable access to youth programming through affordability, multilingual outreach, and direct transit.	Youth Programming and Employment	City/County Public Works Department	Year 1-2	High	Moderate

Note. Timing for recommendations correspond to time of implementation, regardless of municipal status for South Hill.

## Towne Centers

### Connection to Health

This section explores the relationship between mixed-use spaces and public health in suburban environments, with a specific focus on how towne centers can support physical, mental, and social well-being. The integration of key public spaces like towne centers into suburban environments plays a significant role in increasing neighborhood walkability and accessibility, physical activity, social cohesion, and a sense of community and cultural identity (Creatore et al., 2016; Frank et al., 2006; Wojnarowska, 2016).

Towne centers encourage active transportation, such as walking and cycling, by concentrating services, retail, housing, and public amenities. Increased walkability has been associated with higher levels of daily physical activity, lower rates of overweight and obesity, and reduced risk of cardiovascular disease and diabetes (Althoff et al., 2024; Creatore et al., 2016; Frank et al., 2006). In addition to physical health benefits, towne centers contribute to mental and social health by creating opportunities for social interaction, community engagement, and access to public gathering spaces (Wojnarowska, 2016). Integrating an array of services that cater to different demographics, like public plazas, parks, cafés, and pedestrian-oriented streets, into these key

public spaces can further reduce social isolation and strengthen social cohesion (Wojnarowska, 2016; Wood et al., 2017).

For families, town centers can provide access to parks, playgrounds, and safe pedestrian environments that encourage outdoor play for children, which is linked to increased physical activity and improved social and developmental health outcomes (Sallis et al., 2012). These spaces also reduce caregiver burden by creating multifunctional destinations for recreation and daily needs. Additional amenities like dog parks and shared green spaces similarly promote routine outdoor activity and informal social interaction among residents, strengthening community ties (Wood et al., 2017).

Town centers also support local economic growth and development by concentrating employment opportunities and small businesses within accessible, walkable areas, which can reduce commute burdens and improve access to jobs for residents (Chriqui et al., 2016). Mixed-use environments further contribute to economic resilience by supporting local businesses that benefit from consistent pedestrian activity and place-based interaction (Credit & Mack, 2019). Town centers may further improve environmental health by reducing dependence on motor vehicles, which can decrease traffic-related air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions in the area (Frank et al., 2006).

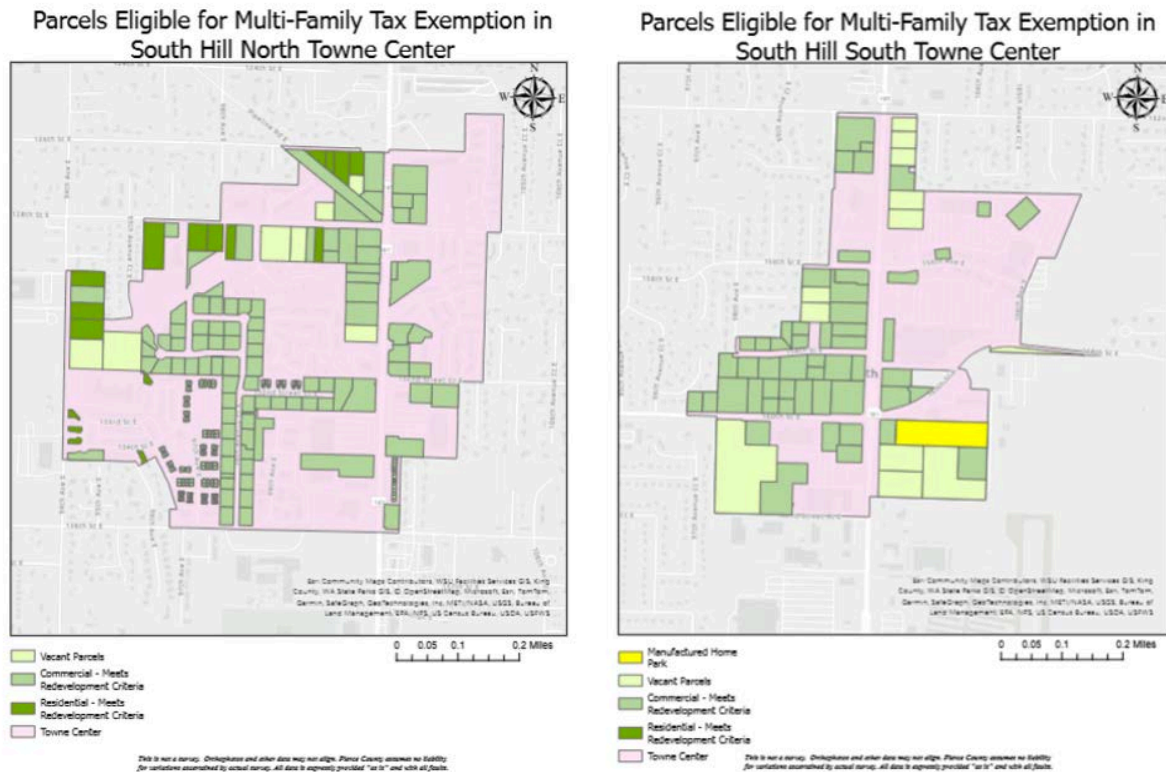
Compact, walkable development patterns support healthier suburban environments by promoting cleaner air, safer streets, and more accessible community resources (Frank et al., 2006; Sallis et al., 2012; Wojnarowska, 2016). Collectively, these characteristics demonstrate how well-designed, multi-purpose town centers function not only as economic and social hubs, but also as important contributors to human health and suburban resilience.

## Background and Current Conditions

The Towne Center (TCTR) zone classification in South Hill refers to “a pedestrian-oriented, compact community with access to businesses and amenities” and “attached single-family and multifamily residential uses at a density of 15 to 25 units per net acre” (Pierce County, 2024a). Based on Pierce County’s Multi-Family Tax Exemption Maps, there are two active town centers in South Hill (Figure 3.1; Pierce County, n.d.a.). The North Towne Center, also known as Longston Towne Center (Longston), is located between 128th Street East and 136th Street East and includes a cluster of retail stores, restaurants, grocery stores, a movie theater, a post office, and other service providers (e.g., home repair, personal care, automotive, and financial services) (Berk Consulting, 2025; Pierce County, 2024a). The South Towne Center, also known as Sunrise Village Towne Center (Sunrise Village), is located between 152nd Street East and 176th Street East/Sunrise Boulevard East. This commercial development includes the Sunrise Village shopping center, big box retail, restaurants, grocery stores, and other service providers (Figure 3.2; Berk Consulting, 2025).

**Figure 3.1**

*Parcel Maps of South Hill North (Left) and South (Right) Towne Centers*



Note. From Pierce County (n.d.a.).

Both towne centers are primary employment hubs within South Hill and contain several vacant parcels and residential and commercial parcels that meet redevelopment criteria (Figure 3.1; Pierce County, n.d.). Sunrise Village has a large area of undeveloped land (Pierce County, 2024); however, due to its proximity to Thun Field, it is subject to Area of Influence regulations that limit population intensity for safety reasons (Pierce County, 2024a). The County has designated towne centers as infrastructure investment priorities, and South Hill residents emphasize the quality and availability of infrastructure, public facilities, and expanded public services as key factors influencing their quality of life (Pierce County, 2024).

**Figure 3.2**

*View of Mount Rainier from Sunrise Village Towne Center Parking Lot*



Note. Photograph by Christopher Tritt, 2024. Used with permission.

## Assessment of Project Alternatives

### **Alternative 1: Status Quo, Remain Unincorporated**

Both towne centers would continue to be maintained and funded by the County under existing planning and redevelopment frameworks. Planned investments, including the revival of the community center and gradual improvements to public spaces, would likely continue through county-led capital improvement and community planning processes. However, limited funding and competing regional priorities may constrain the County’s capacity to pursue redevelopment projects that fully address resident needs related to accessibility, walkability, public gathering spaces, and multimodal connectivity (Pierce County, 2024c). As a result, improvements to towne center revitalization may occur incrementally, potentially prolonging existing barriers to mobility, social connection, and equitable access to community amenities and services.

### **Alternative 2: Incorporation**

Under incorporation, South Hill’s two towne centers would likely continue utilizing existing planning partnerships and infrastructure systems currently maintained by the County. However, incorporation would provide greater local control over land use planning, redevelopment priorities,

and infrastructure investment. This could allow decision-makers to pursue more targeted revitalization efforts that directly address resident concerns related to walkability, accessibility, public gathering spaces, and community identity. Increased local autonomy may support faster implementation of sidewalk expansions, pedestrian-oriented design, public amenities, and mixed-use development within the towne centers, potentially improving mobility, social cohesion, civic engagement, and equitable access to services and resources.

However, incorporation may also create financial challenges associated with funding redevelopment and infrastructure improvements locally. Increased responsibility for maintaining and improving public spaces, transportation infrastructure, and community facilities could place additional fiscal pressure on the new city and its residents. If funding capacity is limited, redevelopment efforts may occur unevenly or contribute to increased costs for residents and developers.

## Recommendations

### **R3.1: Consider reimagining Pierce County Airport – Thun Field as a phased, mixed-use, civic redevelopment site.**

Long-term conversion of the airport into a mixed-use central green space could support a public park with walking trails and playground area, sports courts, dog park, farmers markets and events, and additional parking, pending environmental remediation assessment. This redevelopment project would complement amenities offered at adjacent Sunrise Village.

### **R3.2: Consider leveraging vacant lots at Longston and Sunrise Village to develop multifunctional, civic towne centers.**

Create flexible public spaces in both towne centers to support farmers markets, events, recreation, and daily gathering. Support zoning and design changes that allow residential units above retail spaces and improved pedestrian infrastructure. This would transition the area into a complete, walkable “20-minute” neighborhood with housing, jobs, and services. These spaces should consider designs that prioritize walkability, shade, and adjacency to mixed-use development to encourage consistent community use and social interaction.

*Monitoring and Evaluation:* Depending on incorporation status, County or City Planning and Public Works should consider monitoring towne center use before and after development or expansion. Data on visitation frequency, duration of stay, trip purpose, and user demographics could help evaluate whether Longston and Sunrise Village are serving a diverse population and meeting community needs.

## Community Centers

### Connection to Health

According to the National Institute of Health, the prevalence of chronic health conditions, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity, and mental health disorders, continue to rise within the United States (2025). Increasing attention has therefore been directed toward community-based interventions that support both physical and psychosocial well-being (Garg, 2025). In 2013, Jones et al. conducted a study to examine the relationship between participation in community center activities, psychosocial well-being, and health-related behaviors in England. Their findings suggest that involvement in community-centered programming is positively associated with improved social support, enhanced mental well-being, and healthier lifestyle behaviors.

Relatedly, extensive research has demonstrated that public community centers play a critical role in fostering social interaction and strengthening community connectedness (Colistra et al., 2019; Jones et al, 2013). Emerging from the early twentieth-century social settlement movement, community centers have historically addressed both urban and rural social needs by promoting cooperation, civic engagement, and social cohesion among diverse populations. Community centers facilitate interpersonal relationships and enhance community well-being, underscoring their value as essential public health resources that contribute to both individual and community health outcomes.

### Background and Current Conditions

The Meridian Community Center, formerly known as the Puyallup Amphitheatre, is a multipurpose recreational and event facility that was converted from a church in 1983 (Figure 3.3). The center serves as an important gathering space for public events, recreational programs, weddings, concerts, meetings, and other community activities (Pierce County, n.d.c.). The facility includes a large indoor auditorium with vaulted ceilings and a performance stage, meeting and preparation rooms, kitchen facilities, and adjacent outdoor gathering areas integrated within Meridian Habitat Park (Pierce County, n.d.c.).

Surrounding the community center, Meridian Habitat Park encompasses approximately 40 acres of recreational and natural open space, including walking trails, wetlands, environmental education areas, open lawns, playgrounds, picnic facilities, restrooms, water fountains, soccer fields, and a dog park (Pierce County, n.d.d.). The park also connects to the Nathan Chapman Memorial Trail, providing access to nearby destinations such as the Heritage Recreation Center, Rogers High School, and Zeiger Elementary School (Pierce County, n.d.e.). Together, these amenities support recreation, physical activity, environmental education, and community interaction (County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, 2023; Garg, 2025) throughout South Hill.

Recognizing the facility's importance and aging infrastructure, the County is currently in the conceptual design phase of replacing the existing community center with a new facility that would provide more flexible enclosed rentable spaces and updated supporting infrastructure (Pierce County Parks, 2026; Pierce County, n.d.c., 2024b). This redevelopment project presents an

opportunity to build upon the site's existing role as a community hub while strengthening public engagement, community identity, and social connection among South Hill residents.

**Figure 3.3**

*The Current Meridian Habitat Park Community Center*



Note. Photograph by Andy Pham, 2026. Used with permission.

## Assessment of Project Alternatives

### **Alternative 1: Status Quo, Remain Unincorporated**

Under the status quo, South Hill would continue to rely on the County for the planning, funding, and redevelopment of community facilities such as the Meridian Community Center. The County's current conceptual design phase to replace the existing facility with a new community center would likely proceed; however, decision-making authority, funding priorities, and long-term operational planning would remain at the county level. While this approach supports continued investment in a key community asset, it also limits local control over design priorities, programming decisions, and responsiveness to rapidly changing community demographics and needs. As a result, the ability to tailor services and public space programming to South Hill's growing and increasingly diverse population may remain constrained by broader countywide priorities and resource allocation frameworks.

## **Alternative 2: Incorporation**

Under the incorporation alternative, South Hill would gain local governance authority over planning priorities, funding allocation, and long-term development strategies for community infrastructure, including public gathering spaces such as community centers and parks. This shift could enable more direct alignment between facility design, programming, and resident needs, including expanded opportunities to prioritize accessibility, cultural responsiveness, and multifunctional community use within spaces like the Meridian Community Center. Incorporation could also strengthen South Hill's ability to coordinate long-term investment strategies that integrate community facilities with transportation access, schools, and surrounding residential areas. However, the effectiveness of this alternative would depend on the establishment of sustained operational funding, administrative capacity, and equitable decision-making processes to ensure that community benefits are widely distributed across South Hill's diverse population.

## **Recommendations**

### **R3.3: Consider incorporating physical activity and wellness spaces into the Meridian Habitat Park Community Center.**

The redevelopment of the Meridian Habitat Park Community Center should prioritize accessible indoor and outdoor spaces that encourage physical activity and social engagement for individuals of all ages and abilities. Features such as walking paths, multipurpose recreation rooms, fitness programming areas, and accessible playground and gathering spaces can support both physical and mental health outcomes within the surrounding community.

### **R3.4: Consider improving accessibility and inclusive design at the Meridian Habitat Park Community Center.**

The new facility should incorporate universal design principles to ensure equitable access for individuals with disabilities, older adults, families with young children, and diverse community members. Recommendations include Americans with Disabilities Act-compliant entrances and pathways, multilingual signage, sensory-friendly spaces, accessible restrooms, and flexible gathering areas that accommodate a variety of users. These improvements would help reduce barriers to participation and improve health equity by ensuring all residents can access recreational and social services regardless of physical ability or socioeconomic status.

*Monitoring and Evaluation:* Depending on incorporation status, Pierce County or the City of South Hill should consider establishing a system to track community center usage and participation following its opening. Collecting demographic information from users could help evaluate who the facility is serving, identify potential gaps in access or participation, and inform future programming and outreach efforts.

## Pedestrian and Nonmotorized Transport

### Connection to Health

Safe, accessible, and well-connected pedestrian infrastructure is an important determinant of health because it influences opportunities for physical activity, access to community resources, and exposure to air pollutants (WSDOH, n.d.). Walking, bicycling, rolling, and other forms of active transportation are associated with improved cardiovascular health, reduced risk of chronic disease, and enhanced mental well-being. Communities with connected pedestrian networks also tend to experience greater access to parks, schools, employment centers, and other essential destinations, supporting social interaction and overall quality of life (Seattle Department of Transportation, 2017).

Pedestrian infrastructure also affects environmental health outcomes. South Hill experiences elevated exposure to traffic-related air pollution, including fine particulate matter, in some areas due to proximity to major transportation corridors like SR-161 and high levels of motor vehicle dependence. These exposures can contribute to adverse respiratory and cardiovascular health outcomes, particularly among children, older adults, and individuals with preexisting health conditions. Pedestrian and nonmotorized transport (NMT) infrastructure can reduce reliance on personal vehicles and help decrease transportation-related emissions over time (Frank et al., 2006).

Because transportation systems shape how residents move throughout their community, the quality and connectivity of pedestrian and NMT infrastructure can affect both individual and community health. Improvements such as safer crossings, expanded trail connections, and greater separation between pedestrians and vehicle traffic can increase opportunities for active transportation, improve access to parks and community destinations, and reduce exposure to traffic-related hazards (Seattle Department of Transportation, 2017). Together, these benefits can help create a healthier, more connected, and resilient community.

### Background and Current Conditions

Safe and comfortable pedestrian and NMT access will impact utilization of major public spaces in South Hill, such as Meridian Habitat Park, the proposed community center, and nearby town center. Meridian serves as the primary transportation corridor through South Hill, running north to south and containing much of the area's retail, food, and community destinations. Currently, much of Meridian prioritizes vehicle movement over pedestrian safety, with minimal separation between sidewalks and traffic lanes. In many areas, sidewalks are separated from multiple lanes of traffic by a narrow painted buffer, creating uncomfortable and potentially unsafe conditions for pedestrians, bicyclists, and rolling mobility users. Community feedback has expressed a desire for increased walking, bicycling, and other forms of NMT; however, current roadway conditions do not appear to adequately support or encourage these modes of transportation. As a result, community members have consistently identified traffic and roadway safety as major concerns.

These observations are underscored by the most recent Pierce County Parks, Recreation, and Open Space (PROS) plan, which asserts that residents are significantly more likely to use motor vehicles for park access when pedestrian routes are perceived to be unsafe (2026). Moreover, transit service is limited to major routes, further limiting access for residents without a personal vehicle (Pierce County Parks, 2026). The plan thus advocates for greater sidewalk access, NMT improvements (e.g., trails), and park and recreation opportunities in areas with accessibility barriers throughout South Hill (Pierce County Parks, 2026).

## Assessment of Project Alternatives

### **Alternative 1: Status Quo, Remain Unincorporated**

If South Hill remains unincorporated, transportation planning and infrastructure investments would continue to be managed by the County. While this alternative would avoid the financial and administrative costs associated with establishing a new municipal government, South Hill would continue to compete with other unincorporated communities for County resources and infrastructure funding. As a result, improvements to pedestrian facilities, bicycle infrastructure, and other NMT networks may occur more slowly and be less responsive to local priorities. Without substantial changes to current investment patterns, residents are likely to remain heavily dependent on personal vehicles for most daily trips, limiting opportunities for active transportation and contributing to ongoing concerns regarding connectivity, accessibility, and transportation safety in South Hill.

### **Alternative 2: Incorporation**

Incorporation would provide South Hill with greater local control over transportation planning, land use decisions, and infrastructure investment priorities. As a municipality, South Hill could pursue funding opportunities available only to incorporated jurisdictions and would have elected officials directly accountable to local residents. This increased autonomy could empower the city to prioritize pedestrian infrastructure, trail connections, bicycle facilities, and other NMT improvements identified by community members. Although incorporation would require significant start-up costs and create additional administrative responsibilities, greater local decision-making authority may allow transportation investments to better reflect community needs and support long-term goals related to mobility, safety, accessibility, and active transportation. Over time, these improvements could increase opportunities for residents to navigate South Hill without relying exclusively on personal vehicles.

## Recommendations

### **R3.5: Consider creating safer, more connected, and more comfortable pedestrian/NMT infrastructure along Meridian Avenue East.**

Install physical sidewalk barriers and expand pedestrian facilities where feasible to create a safer, more connected, and more comfortable NMT environment. Existing sidewalks along portions of the Meridian corridor provide limited separation from high-speed vehicle traffic and may not adequately accommodate multiple users, reducing comfort and perceived safety for nonmotorized travelers. Construct pedestrian underpasses at the Meridian intersections of Sunrise Boulevard East and 144th Street East to provide safe, accessible crossings and strengthen connections between residential neighborhoods, parks, schools, community facilities, and commercial destinations. As a major transportation corridor, Meridian can act as a barrier to pedestrian and NMT movement, limiting access to community resources and discouraging walking and other forms of active transportation. Grade-separated crossings would reduce conflicts between pedestrians and vehicle traffic while creating more direct and convenient connections throughout South Hill. By linking residential areas with key destinations such as Meridian Habitat Park, the proposed community center, the towne center, and nearby schools, these improvements could increase opportunities for physical activity, improve access to community resources, and enhance overall community connectivity. The proposed underpass near 144th Street East would also support safer travel routes for students and families accessing the nearby school, contributing to improved pedestrian and NMT safety.

### **R3.6: Consider the addition of placemaking features to pedestrian/NMT infrastructure along Meridian Avenue East.**

Incorporate public art, murals, and wayfinding signage along major pedestrian routes, underpasses, and community gathering spaces to create a more welcoming, recognizable, and user-friendly pedestrian environment. Wayfinding signs should direct residents and visitors to key destinations such as Meridian Habitat Park, the community center, schools, the towne center, and other community resources, while public art installations can reflect local culture and community identity. These placemaking features can encourage greater use of pedestrian infrastructure by improving navigation, creating a stronger sense of place, and making walking routes more engaging and inviting. In addition to supporting active transportation, public art and wayfinding can strengthen community pride, increase awareness of local amenities, and foster social connections among residents.

*Monitoring and Evaluation:* Depending on incorporation status, the appropriate planning, transportation, or public works agency for Pierce County or City of South Hill should consider establishing baseline data on traffic-related injuries and pedestrian/NMT use before improvements to infrastructure. These indicators could then be monitored following project completion to assess changes in transportation usage, accessibility, and safety outcomes.

## Youth Programming and Employment

### Connection to Health

Adolescents with easy access to recreation facilities are more physically active and less likely to be overweight or obese than those without such access (National Recreation and Park Association [NRPA], n.d.). The CDC recommends that children and adolescents engage in at least 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity daily, yet national data show that fewer than 25% of youth meet this benchmark. Community centers that offer organized sports leagues, fitness classes, open-gym time, and active-play spaces are a proven strategy for closing this gap (County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, 2023; Witt & Caldwell, 2010). Park renovations and new recreation facilities have also been shown to increase vigorous physical activity and reduce healthcare costs among children. For example, a study of Seattle's park and recreation system found that residents saved an estimated \$64 million in healthcare costs as a result of physical activity in parks (NRPA, n.d.). Collectively, youth participation in organized community activities is associated with positive identity development, stronger social relationships, improved conflict resolution skills, academic success, and civic engagement (Witt & Caldwell, 2010).

Research consistently shows that the majority of juvenile crime occurs during the week between 3:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m., the unsupervised hours between when school ends and when parents return home from work (NRPA, 2015). Youth who participate in organized extracurricular activities are more likely to have higher self-esteem, greater academic achievement, and lower incidences of delinquency (NRPA, 2015). Research from the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) found that effective delinquency-prevention programs can save taxpayers \$7 to \$10 dollars for every dollar invested, primarily through reductions in incarceration spending (2024; Youth.gov, n.d.). However, not all recreation programming is equally effective. Research cautions that recreation centers with poorly structured activities can attract youth with social and academic problems, and that frequent participation in such unstructured settings has been linked to higher rates of juvenile offending (Mahoney et. al, 2004). This underscores the importance of intentional program design in the new community center; that is, not just building the space, but staffing it with trained professionals and offering structured evidence-based programming that includes skill-building, mentorship, and adult supervision.

Beyond recreation, community centers direct employment pathways for local youth and young adults. Community centers typically employ part-time staff for roles such as lifeguards, program assistants, front desk attendants, camp counselors, and maintenance workers. These positions offer young people their first work experiences, skill-building in customer service and teamwork, and income, all of which are recognized health determinants. Research from collegiate recreation centers demonstrates that employment in recreation facilities directly contributes to workers' health, wellness, and satisfaction, with employees reporting greater feelings of belonging and professional development. Additionally, youth programming at local community centers may create opportunities for local businesses and entrepreneurs. For example, contracting instructors for

fitness, arts, or music classes, food vendors, or event coordinators would strengthen the local economy and provide varied employment options.

### Background and Current Conditions

South Hill's existing recreation infrastructure is primarily centered on outdoor facilities (Figure 3.4). South Hill Community Park provides a 40-acre site with soccer fields, playgrounds, picnic areas, and the one-mile Loop Trail. The Nathan Chapman Memorial Trail connects the park to Heritage Recreation Center through a 1.6-mile paved pathway that traverses forested wetlands. Heritage Recreation Center, managed in partnership with the Puyallup School District, offers tournament-level baseball, softball, soccer, and lacrosse fields and has experienced increased usage in recent years, with trail activity rising by nearly 50% compared to 2019 levels.

Despite these assets, South Hill has notable gaps in its recreation infrastructure. Existing amenities are overwhelmingly outdoor-based and therefore weather-dependent, which is a significant limitation in the Pacific Northwest, where the region averages more than 150 rainy days per year. The community also lacks sufficient indoor space for structured, year-round youth programming, including fitness classes, arts and music education, tutoring, career development, and drop-in activities. Although South Hill is the largest unincorporated population center in Washington State and larger than most cities in Pierce County, it does not currently have a dedicated indoor community center offering comprehensive programming for youth and families.

This gap is particularly important given the community's demographic profile. Over one quarter of South Hill residents are under 18 years of age, and approximately 40% of households include children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). The redevelopment of the South Hill Community Center therefore represents a significant opportunity to support a large and growing youth population through expanded recreation programming, structured activities, and potential employment pathways for young people.

The need for youth-focused programming is further underscored by regional mental health trends. According to the 2023 Healthy Youth Survey conducted by the TPCHD, 17.3% of tenth graders reported seriously considering suicide, and 9.0% reported attempting suicide (2026). Nearly 63% reported feeling anxious, nervous, or on edge, and 31.8% reported prolonged feelings of sadness or hopelessness. The report also notes that mental health indicators have not improved for youth to the same extent as other age groups, with increased demand for crisis services beginning in 2021. These trends highlight the need for accessible, supportive environments where young people can engage in physical activity, build social connections, and access informal support. Community centers are well-positioned to provide these benefits by functioning as "third spaces"—neither home nor school—where youth can develop relationships, belonging, and stability. As McMillan and Chavis (1986) describe, these environments contribute to a broader "sense of community," particularly in rapidly growing suburban areas where many residents are new to the community and may lack established social networks.

South Hill also faces an after-school access gap that compounds these challenges. Approximately 40% of households include children under 18 years of age (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020), and many parents commute to Tacoma, Joint Base Lewis-McChord, or the greater Seattle area. As a result, the after-school hours represent a period in which youth may have limited supervision, structured activities, or safe spaces to engage outside the home. Accessible, well-designed community center programming can help fill this gap by providing structured enrichment opportunities, social engagement, and positive developmental environments during critical hours of the day.

Transportation access further shapes who can benefit from these resources. South Hill is widely characterized as a car-dependent community, where most daily activities require a private vehicle. Youth under 16 years of age face particular barriers to independent travel, limiting their ability to reach recreation facilities without adult assistance. Pierce County's Beyond the Borders program provides limited transit options for eligible riders, including youth ages 12–17 years, but services are constrained and often require advance scheduling, with relatively sparse coverage compared to more urbanized areas of the county. As a result, the extent to which youth can access community center programming, and therefore realize associated health and social benefits, will depend heavily on transportation availability.

Finally, equity considerations are central to understanding the potential impact of year-round youth programming. South Hill is becoming increasingly diverse, with populations that are 61% White, 8% Black or African American, 8% Asian, and growing Hispanic/Latino and multiracial communities (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Approximately 4.6% of youth live below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020), and the area includes military-connected families associated with Joint Base Lewis-McChord. Ensuring that programming is affordable through sliding-scale fees, scholarships, or free offerings, as well as culturally responsive and inclusive, will be essential to prevent inequitable access. Transportation barriers also intersect with income, as lower-income households are less likely to have reliable access to a vehicle or flexible schedules for driving youth to activities. Without intentional planning, there is a risk that benefits will be disproportionately accessed by higher-income households, limiting its potential public health impact.

**Figure 3.4**

*Meridian Habitat Park*



Note. Photograph by Ingrid Fosberg, 2026. Used with permission.

Assessment of Project Alternatives

**Alternative 1: Status Quo, Remain Unincorporated**

Under the status quo, South Hill would continue to rely on Pierce County and regional partners to plan, fund, and operate recreation programming, youth activities, and related workforce opportunities. Planned investments, including the community center redevelopment and priorities outlined in the PROS Plan, would likely proceed; however, programming, staffing, and long-term operational capacity would remain dependent on countywide priorities and budget constraints.

Since quality youth programs return \$7 to 10 for every dollar invested (WSIPP, 2024), Pierce County should consider this evidence to sustain operational funding beyond the initial \$17 million capital build-out to address these gaps. Equity concerns are likely to persist, particularly for South Hill's increasingly diverse populations. Youth from households without reliable vehicle access may face disproportionate barriers to participation in recreation and job opportunities due to South Hill's car-dependent built environment, with limited fixed-route transit service and demand-response options. Without targeted investment in affordability, outreach, and transportation access, benefits from recreation programming may continue to disproportionately reach higher-income and more mobile households.

## **Alternative 2: Incorporation**

Under the incorporation alternative, South Hill would gain local governance authority over recreation planning, service prioritization, and coordination of youth programming and workforce opportunities, enabling more direct alignment with community needs. This could support more equitable recreation access through expanded programming, culturally responsive services, and targeted affordability strategies such as sliding-scale fees, scholarships, or free participation options. The City of South Hill should consider benefit-cost analyses of youth programming (WSIPP, 2024) for budget advocacy efforts. Incorporation may also improve coordination with schools and Pierce Transit to reduce transportation barriers, including the potential development of a shuttle or direct transit connection between the community center, nearby high schools (e.g., Rogers, Emerald Ridge, and Zeiger), and residential areas. However, equitable outcomes would still depend on sustained operational funding for staffing, programming, and maintenance beyond capital investments such as the community center redevelopment, as well as intentional implementation of equity-focused policies. Without these supports, access disparities could persist despite changes in governance structure.

## **Recommendations**

### **R3.7: Consider developing indoor, year-round programming for youth at South Hill Community Park and Heritage Recreation Center.**

This includes, but is not limited to, fitness, arts, STEM education, tutoring, mental health, and drop-in hours to complement the existing outdoor facilities. These structured, supervised, non-school programs should be run by trained staff to maximize positive youth development outcomes and avoid the pitfalls of unstructured drop-in settings. Programs should consider targeting the 3:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. after-school window when youth are most vulnerable to unsupervised risk behaviors.

### **R3.8: Consider creating employment pipelines in local youth programming for local high school and college students.**

Consider partnering with the Puyallup School District, Clover Park Technical College's South Hill campus, Pierce College, and UW-Tacoma to offer part-time positions, internships, and volunteer opportunities in youth programming and at public amenities like the community center.

### **R3.9: Consider equitable access in youth programming through affordability, multilingual outreach, and direct transit.**

Offer free, low-cost, and sliding-scale programming to reduce financial barriers for lower-income families. Expand multilingual outreach and program materials by partnering with existing community resources, such as South Hill's bilingual Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program, to better engage diverse populations. Additionally, coordinate with Pierce Transit to improve direct transit connections between the community center, local schools, and residential

neighborhoods, reducing transportation barriers for youth and families without reliable vehicle access.

*Monitoring and Evaluation:* Depending on incorporation status, Pierce County or the City of South Hill Planning and Public Works should consider establishing baseline data on youth physical activity, mental health indicators, and employment rates before a youth programming center opens. These metrics could then be monitored over time as part of an ongoing community health assessment to evaluate the center's impacts on youth well-being and community health.

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Health Impact Assessment: South Hill

# Conclusion

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**W** LIVABLE  
CITY YEAR

**W** URBAN DESIGN  
& PLANNING

**W** ENVIRONMENTAL  
& OCCUPATIONAL  
HEALTH SCIENCES

# Conclusion

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## Reporting

This HIA report was prepared to communicate findings to county officials, community leaders, residents, and other stakeholders interested in the health implications of the incorporation of South Hill. The authors hosted representatives from PPW for an initial briefing on interim findings to gather their direct feedback on feasibility and prioritization of recommendations. HIA authors utilized feedback to refine and finalize this report, which will be made publicly available on Pierce County's South Hill web page.

## Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation are the final steps of a complete HIA. The goal of monitoring and evaluation are to determine whether HIA recommendations were implemented by responsible parties and to what extent expected health effects were observed. Monitoring and evaluation help municipalities identify gaps in implementation, and may inform future policies, programs, or HIAs for similar projects.

Many of this report's recommendations surrounding municipal services, transportation, and community infrastructure are made far more feasible by the autonomy and funding options available exclusively to city governments. However, in the case of non-incorporation, Pierce County may still implement some recommendations based on need, feasibility, and community priorities.

Though individual elements of this project have been assessed in past HIAs, this report is the first to evaluate the potential health impacts of municipal incorporation. As such, findings from the monitoring and evaluation step of this project are particularly valuable as for informing future HIAs or incorporation efforts for communities with similar characteristics. Due to the constraints of the ten-week academic quarter, students were unable to engage in evaluation of impact and monitoring of outcomes for this HIA. The authors encourage the entities responsible for implementation of specific recommendations to define, measure, interpret, and share specific health impact metrics, regardless of whether implementation occurs within an incorporated city or under a non-incorporation case.

## Limitations

This HIA was conducted under several constraints that readers should consider when interpreting its findings and recommendations. The most fundamental is time: the assessment was completed within a ten-week academic quarter, a timeline consistent with a rapid HIA but one that precluded the depth of data collection and stakeholder engagement that a decision of this magnitude would ideally warrant. The team relied almost exclusively on existing secondary sources—the South Hill

Community Plan, the 2023 Governance Study, the 2026 Existing Conditions Report, American Community Survey estimates, and Pierce County GIS data—rather than original data collection, and was unable to conduct direct community engagement with South Hill residents. Community priorities were inferred from the planning record rather than through interviews, surveys, or public meetings. The team also acknowledges, as stated in the Positionality Statement, that not all contributors are personally familiar with South Hill, and that the findings of this report are shaped by the educational and professional backgrounds of a group of University of Washington, Seattle, graduate students rather than by lived experience in the community. These factors do not undermine the analysis, but they mean the voices of South Hill’s most directly affected residents are not fully represented in it.

A second set of limitations concerns data availability and the novelty of this HIA’s subject matter. Health outcome data for this assessment is reported primarily at the county level rather than disaggregated to South Hill specifically, a structural gap that is itself a consequence of unincorporated status: as Gomez-Vidal and Gomez (2021) observe, residents of unincorporated communities are routinely subsumed into county-level data that may not reflect their community’s particular conditions. This means recommendations are grounded in general evidence about how governance, built environment, and service changes affect health, evidence that is robust at the regional and national level, but cannot be precisely calibrated to South Hill’s specific health baseline. The novelty of an incorporation-focused HIA adds another challenge: with no established precedent in the literature, the team adapted analogous cases to draw on and had no prior monitoring framework to adapt. Finally, some of the legislative context cited in this report is not certain, notably House Bill 2307. CTR expansion eligibility is dead for this year’s legislative session, but it may be expanded before or during a formal incorporation process for South Hill.

## Conclusions

This HIA assesses the potential health impacts of municipal incorporation in South Hill, an urban unincorporated community in Pierce County, Washington. Overall, incorporation has the potential to positively influence health by providing South Hill with greater local control over transportation planning, essential services, and investments in community infrastructure and public space. Through enhanced governance capacity and dedicated local decision-making, an incorporated South Hill may be better positioned to address longstanding challenges related to transportation, service provision, walkability, and access to community amenities. We expect many of the potential health benefits of incorporation to occur through improvements to the built environment and public services that residents rely on every day.

Expanded transit access, safer pedestrian infrastructure, and more connected transportation networks can support physical activity, improve air quality, and increase access to jobs, education, and essential services. Strategic investments in utilities, emergency services, healthcare access, parks, community facilities, and public gathering spaces can strengthen community resilience, promote social cohesion, and improve quality of life for current and future residents. Incorporation also creates opportunities to better align planning decisions with local priorities and respond more

effectively to the needs of South Hill's growing and increasingly diverse population. Our recommendations aim to maximize these positive health outcomes while reducing potential inequities associated with future growth and development. To do so, we recommend that South Hill consider multimodal transportation, sustainable and equitable service provision, community-centered planning, and investments in accessible public spaces and civic infrastructure.

