Kittitas County

FROM THE CASCADES ... TO THE COLUMBIA

KITTITAS COUNTY

Code of the West
Welcome to Kittitas County

We’re happy that you have chosen to live in one of the most beautiful areas in the state of Washington.

It is important for you to know that life in the country is different from life in the city. County governments are not able to provide the same level of service that city governments provide. To that end, we are providing you with the following information to help you make an educated and informed decision when choosing to purchase rural land outside the boundaries of incorporated cities.

Access

The fact that you can drive to your property today does not necessarily guarantee that you, your guests and emergency service vehicles can achieve that same level of access at all times. Please consider:

Emergency response times (sheriff, fire suppression, medical care, etc.) cannot be guaranteed. Under some extreme conditions, you may find that emergency response is extremely slow and/or expensive.

There can be problems with the legal aspects of access, especially if you gain access across property belonging to others. It is wise to obtain legal advice and understand the easements that may be necessary when these types of questions arise.

You can experience problems with the maintenance and cost of maintenance of your road. Kittitas County maintains many miles of roads, but many rural properties are served by private and public roads that are maintained by individuals or by private road associations. Additionally, there are many miles of county roads that are not maintained by the county – no grading or snow plowing. There are even some public roads that are not maintained by anyone. Make sure you know what type of maintenance to expect and who will provide that maintenance.

Extreme weather conditions can destroy roads. Many roads were not built to current standards, and the combination of the weather and increased loading will result in high maintenance costs.

Many large construction vehicles cannot navigate small, steep, narrow roads. If you plan to build, it is prudent to check out construction access. If you buy land in a subdivision with a private road, it is likely that you or your homeowners association will have to improve that road by the time the last entrant to the subdivision finishes their residence.

School buses travel only on maintained county roads that have been designated as school bus routes by the school district. You may need to drive your children to the nearest county road so they can get to school.
In extreme weather, even county maintained roads can become impassable. You may need a four wheel drive vehicle with chains for all four wheels to travel during those episodes, which could last for several days. The county does not plow lower volume roads if the snow is less than four (4) inches deep. Under normal snow conditions your road may not be plowed until late in the day or sometime the next day based upon the County Snow Removal Priority System.

Natural disasters, especially floods, can destroy roads. A dry creek bed can become a raging torrent and wash out roads, bridges, and culverts. The repair of these private roads are the responsibility of the landowners who use those roads. Kittitas County by law can only repair and maintain roads in the County Road system.

County Roads are often more narrow and have tighter curves than city roads or state highways. The shoulders are often very steep to allow for the conveyance of irrigation water. You should not expect the road to be widened unless there is a significant increase in road use. Unpaved roads generate dust when traffic reaches specific levels. As a rule Kittitas County does not treat county roads to suppress the dust. Dust is a fact of life for most rural residents. If you reside near an unpaved County road, you may be able to obtain a permit from the Public Works Department to treat the road for dust suppression using a county approved contractor at your expense.

If your road is unpaved, it is highly unlikely that Kittitas County will pave it in the foreseeable future. Check carefully with the Kittitas County Public Works Department when any statement is made by the seller or realtor of any property that indicates any unpaved roads will be paved.

Unpaved roads are not always smooth and are often slippery when they are wet. You will experience an increase in vehicle maintenance costs when you regularly travel on rural county roads.

Mail delivery is not available to all areas of the county. Ask the postmaster to describe the system for your area.

Newspaper delivery is similarly not always available to rural areas. Check with the newspaper of your choice before assuming you can get delivery.

Standard parcel and overnight package delivery can be a problem for those who live in the country. Even the major companies, (Fed Ex, UPS etc.) may have a one day delay on overnight deliveries to rural residents. Confirm with the mail or parcel delivery providers as to your status.
Utilities

Water, sewer, electric, telephone and data services and other services may be unavailable or may not operate at urban standards. Repairs can often take much longer than in towns and cities. Please review your options from the non-exhaustive list below:

Data and communications

Telephone and cellular communications can be a problem, especially in the mountainous areas of Kittitas County. If you have a private line, it may be difficult to obtain another line for fax or computer modem uses. Cellular phones will not work in all areas.

Sewer and Septic

If public sewer is available to your property, it may be expensive to hook into the system. It also may be expensive to maintain the system you use.

If public sewer is not available, you will need to have a site evaluation performed on your property to determine site suitability. If your property meets the requirements for an onsite sewage system, a design must be submitted, approved and permit issued to install an on-site sewage system. The type of soils, depth to restrictive layers, and water table, will determine the location, type, cost, and maintenance of your system. All on site sewage permits are issued through Kittitas County Environmental Health, and must adhere to their design determinations.

Water

If you have access to a public water supply, the tap fees can be expensive. You may also find that your monthly service can be costly when compared to large municipal systems.

If you do not have access to public water, you will have to develop an alternative supply. The most common sources of water in rural areas are private (or exempt) wells and group” B” small public water supplies. In Kittitas County, three or more connections to a single well requires you to complete a Class “B” system workbook. Class “B” systems are regulated by the Washington State Department of Health through our local Environmental Health office.

The cost for drilling and pumping can be considerable. The quality and quantity of well water can vary considerably from location to location and from season to season. It is strongly advised that you research this issue very carefully. Contacts should be made with both Kittitas County Environmental Health, and the Washington Department of Ecology. Not all wells can be used for watering of landscaping and/or livestock. If you have other needs, make certain that you have the proper approvals before you invest. It may also be
difficult to find enough water to provide for your needs even if you can secure the proper permit.

Surface water, seasonal or year round, is generally not available for domestic use. Surface water use is regulated and determined by the Washington State Department of Ecology through the issuance of withdrawal rights (water rights). You must have a right to withdraw water. If the water is "given" to you through a water rights certificate, it belongs to someone else.

By state statute a building permit may not be issued unless proof of potable water availability is presented at the time of application for that permit.

**Electricity**

Electric service is not available to every area of Kittitas County. It is important to determine the proximity of electrical power. It can be very expensive to extend power lines to remote areas.

It may be necessary to cross property owned by others in order to extend electric service to your property in the most cost efficient manner. It is important to make sure that the proper easements are in place to allow lines to be built to your property.

Electric power may not be available in two phase and three phase service configurations. If you have special power requirements, it is important to know what level of service can be provided to your property.

If you are purchasing land with the plan to build at a future date, there is a possibility that electric lines (and other utilities) may not be large enough to accommodate you if others connect during the time you wait to build.

The cost of electric service is usually divided into a fee to hook into the system and then a monthly charge for energy consumed. It is important to know both costs before making a decision to purchase a specific piece of property.

Power outages can occur in outlying areas with more frequency than in more developed areas. A loss of electric power can also interrupt your supply of water from a well. You may also lose food in freezers or refrigerators and power outages can cause problems with computers as well. It is important to be able to survive for up to a week in severe cold with no utilities if you live in the country.

**Garbage Service**

Garbage Service is not available in all areas in Kittitas County. Solid Waste removal can be much more cumbersome and expensive in a rural area than in a city. It is illegal to dispose of solid waste on your property. It is good to know the cost for garbage disposal
as you make the decision to move into the country. In some cases, your only option may be to haul your garbage to a solid waste transfer station facility yourself.

Recycling is more difficult because pickup is not available in most rural areas. Recycling is available at both Upper and Lower County Transfer Stations. House hold hazardous waste disposal is also available but only by appointment. Contact Kittitas County Solid Waste Department for information.

The State of Washington has laws which prohibit and/or restrict the open burning of trash and yard debris. You will need to contact the Kittitas County Fire Marshal or the Washington State Department of Ecology to determine your ability to burn these types of materials on your property.

Your Property

There are many issues that can affect your property. It is important to research these items before purchasing land.

Construction of most buildings in Kittitas County requires county issued building permits and inspections prior to occupancy. Depending on the building location and use, other permits and approvals may also be required, such as Conditional Use Permits (CUP’s), Zone changes, or shoreline substantial development permits. You should verify all permits required by contacting Kittitas County Community Development Services or your homeowners association.

Not all lots or lot portions are buildable. The Kittitas County Assessor has many parcels that are separate for the purpose of taxation that are not legal lots in the sense that a building permit would be issued for that lot. It is wise to check with Kittitas County Community Development Services and Kittitas County Environmental Health to know whether a piece of land can be built on.

Easements may require you to allow construction of roads, power lines, water lines, sewer lines, etc. across your land. There may be easements that are not of record. Check these issues carefully.

You may be provided with a plat of your property, but unless the land has been surveyed and pins placed by a licensed surveyor, you cannot assume that the plat is accurate.

Fences that separate properties are often misaligned with the property lines. A survey of the land is the only way to confirm the location of your property lines. In the event of a conflict between fences and surveyed lines, the fence line is usually considered to be the property line.

Many subdivisions and planned unit developments have covenants that limit the use of the property. It is important to obtain a copy of the covenants (or confirm that there are none) and make sure that you can live with whose rules. Make sure that they have been
recorded with the Kittitas County Auditor. Also, a lack of covenants can cause problems with neighbors. Kittitas County does not become involved in the enforcement of covenants.

Homeowners’ Associations are required to take care of common elements, roads, open space, etc. A dysfunctional homeowners association or poor covenants can cause problems for you and even involve you in expensive litigation.

Dues are almost always a requirement for those areas with a Homeowners’ association. The by-laws of the HOA will tell you how the organization operates and how the dues are set.

The surrounding properties will probably not remain as they are indefinitely. You can check with Kittitas County Community Development Services to find out how the surrounding properties are zoned, find out what kind of buildings and uses are allowed, and to see what future developments may be in the planning stages. The view from your property may change.

If you have a ditch running across your property there is a good possibility that the owners of the ditch have the right to come onto your property with heavy equipment to maintain the ditch.

Water is a contentious issue in Kittitas County. Water rights that are sold with the property may not give you the right to use the water from any ditches crossing your land without coordinating with a neighbor who also uses the water. Other users may have senior rights to the water that can limit your use or require you to pay for the oversizing or other improving of the ditch.

It is important to make sure that any water rights you purchase with the land will provide enough water to maintain fruit trees, pastures, gardens or livestock.

The water flowing in irrigation ditches belongs to someone. You cannot assume that because the water flows across your property, you can use it.

Flowing water can be a hazard, especially to your children. Before you decide to locate your home near an active ditch or stream, consider the possible danger to your family.

The development of lots or portions of lots may be affected by geological hazards, frequent flooding, wetlands, streams, rivers, and lakes. Additionally, priority fish and/or wildlife habitats and species may limit the type and location of development you may perform on your property. Development constraints, extra costs, special studies and/or permits may be required for development of lots or portions of lots affected by the above physical characteristics and attributes.
Mother Nature

Residents of the county usually experience more problems when the elements and earth turn unfriendly. Here are some thoughts for you to consider.

The physical characteristics of your property can be positive and negative. Trees are a wonderful environmental amenity, but can also involve your home in a forest fire. Building at the top of a forested draw should be considered as dangerous as building in a flash flood area. “Defensible perimeters” are very helpful in protecting buildings from forest fire and inversely can protect the forest from igniting if your house catches on fire. If you start a forest fire, you are responsible for paying for the cost of extinguishing that fire. For further information, you can contact the Kittitas County Emergency Services Department, the Kittitas County Fire Marshal or the local Fire District.

Steep slopes can slide in unusually wet weather. Large rocks can also roll down steep slopes and present a great danger to people and property.

Expansive soils can buckle concrete foundations and twist steel I-beams. You can determine the soil conditions on your property if you have a soil test performed, or consult a geologist or geotechnical engineer.

North facing slopes or canyons rarely see direct sunlight in the winter. There is a possibility that snow will accumulate and not melt throughout the winter.

The topography of the land can tell you where the water will go in the case of heavy precipitation. When property owners fill in ravines, they have found that the water that drained through that ravine now drains through their house. Low areas will collect water when snow melts or large rain events occur. Take you’re property’s topology into account when siting structures and other development.

A flash flood can occur, especially during the summer months, and turn a dry gully into a river. It is wise to take this possibility into consideration when developing your property or building.

Spring run-off can cause a very small creek to become a major river. Many residents use sand bags to protect their homes. The county does not provide sand bags, equipment or people to protect private property from flooding.

Nature can provide you with some wonderful neighbors. Most, such as deer and eagles are positive additions to the environment. However, even “harmless” animals like deer can cross the road unexpectedly and cause traffic accidents. Rural development encroaches on the traditional habitat of coyotes, bobcats, mountain lions, rattlesnakes, bears, mosquitoes and other animals that can be dangerous and you need to know how to deal with them. In general, it is best to enjoy wildlife from a distance and know that if you do not handle your pets and trash properly, it could cause problems for you and the wildlife. The Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife and the Kittitas County
Health Department are two good resources for information. They have many free publications to help educate you about rural living.

Many areas in the County are open for hunting. Hunting, while providing recreational opportunities, is a tool for managing wildlife populations. It also involves individuals who may trespass, litter, and fire guns. Don’t automatically assume that your property is in a shooting or no shooting zone. No shooting zones are designated by the Sheriff’s Department.

### Agriculture

The people who tamed this wild land brought water to the barren, arid east slope of the Cascades through an ingenious system of water diversion. This water has allowed agriculture to become an important part of our environment. Owning rural land means knowing how to care for it. There are few things you need to know:

Farmers often work long hours, especially during growing and harvest time. It is possible that adjoining agriculture uses can disturb your peace and quiet.

Land preparation (plowing, harrowing, planting) and other operations can cause dust, especially during windy and dry weather.

Farms occasionally burn their ditches to keep them clean of debris, weeds and other obstructions. This burning creates smoke that you may find objectionable.

Animals and their manure can cause objectionable odors. What else can we say?

Agriculture is an important business in Kittitas County. If you choose to live among the orchards, farms and ranches of our rural countryside, do not expect county government to intervene in the normal day-to-day operations of your agribusiness neighbors. In fact, Washington has “Right to Farm” legislation that protects farmers and ranchers from nuisance and liability lawsuits. It enables them to continue producing food and fiber.

The State of Washington has an open range law. This means that if your property is located in an open range and you do not want cattle, sheep or other livestock on your property, it is your responsibility to fence them out. It is not the responsibility of the rancher to keep his/her livestock off your property.

Before buying land you should know if it has noxious weeds that may be expensive to control and you may be required to control. Some plants are poisonous to horses and other livestock.

Animals can be dangerous. Bulls, stallions, rams, boars, etc. can attack human beings. Children need to know that it is not safe to enter pens where animals are kept.
Much of Kittitas County receives less than 15 inches (38cm) of precipitation per year. As a result, we have a problem with overgrazing, and fugitive dust. Without irrigation, grass does not grow very well. There is a limit to the amount of grazing the land can handle. The Kittitas County Cooperative Extension office can help you with these issues.

**In conclusion**

Even though you pay property taxes to the county, the amount of tax collected does not cover the cost of the services provided to rural residents. In general, tax revenues derived from commercial, industrial, agricultural and forest uses and activities in the County subsidize the lifestyle of those who live in the country by making up the shortfall between the cost of services and the revenues received from rural dwellers. This information is by no means exhaustive. There are other issues that you may encounter that we have overlooked and we encourage you to be vigilant in your duties to explore and examine those things that could cause your move to be less than you expect.