# CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

## Purpose

The purpose of the Adams County Comprehensive Plan is to provide a guide for the growth and development of the county for the next 20 years. The various Elements of this Plan provide goals, policies, and recommendations that will be used as official policy guidance, enabling county officials to make decisions that are in the best interest of the community as a whole. The plan provides a general sense of direction and a broad overview of where the county is now, and where it is going in the future.

It envisions development of the county that will make it a convenient, attractive, affordable, and orderly place to live, shop, work and play. Furthermore, it includes and considers feedback from the residents attained through surveys, open houses, and other public engagement opportunities. The plan must be periodically reviewed and updated to ensure that goals, policies, and recommendations reflect technological, social, economic and regulatory changes.

## Authority

The comprehensive plan has been prepared pursuant to Chapter 36.70 of the Revised Code of Washington as well as Chapter 36.70A. Known as the Planning Enabling Act and the Growth Management Act (GMA), respectively.

Washington State adopted the Planning Enabling Act in 1959 which authorizes counties to plan, and describes how they are to engage in planning activities. There are procedural and substantive requirements for counties to meet when developing a comprehensive plan and developing or updating development regulations. Specifically, RCW 36.70 requires adoption of a comprehensive plan prior to implementing zoning ordinances. Adams County's first comprehensive plan was adopted in 1965 following guidance of the Act.

In 1990, amidst a statewide surge in population and uncoordinated development, the legislature adopted the Growth Management Act (GMA), found in RCW 36.70A. The GMA established 13 statewide goals (now 15) intended to guide orderly development at a county and local level. The GMA does not require all counties to fully plan under the provisions of the Act, rather those counties that had a population of fewer than 50,000 people in 1990, or did not have 10% or more growth in the prior decade could opt out of most requirements.

Adams County opted out, and is instead designated as a "partially planning" county. The GMA contains certain mandates that are required of all jurisdictions in the state, including:

- All are required to identify and protect resource lands and critical areas;
- All are required to have development regulations, such as zoning and subdivision codes, that are consistent with the adopted comprehensive plan.

Amidst a new wave of statewide planning efforts, Adams County repealed the 1965 comprehensive plan and adopted a new plan in 2005 (Ordinance 02-05), which was in alignment with new requirements as well as updated social, ecological, technological, and economic circumstances. Therefore, there is authority and direction to prepare this comprehensive plan that is also garnered from Chapter 36.70A of the Revised Code of Washington.

Since 2021 many new requirements for partially planning counties have been adopted by the legislature, including adopting development regulations for STEP housing (emergency shelters, transitional housing, emergency housing, and permanent supportive housing), the siting of organic materials management facilities, and the incorporation of a Shoreline Master Program (SMP), as applicable, which was added as the 14th GMA goal in 2023.

## Vision Statement and Community Goals

In updating this comprehensive plan, the County revisited the community values of the previous planning process in 2005 to ensure that they continue to represent the Adams County community and to craft a vision statement. Following workshopping with the county staff and the planning commission, the following vision statement was crafted to guide the development of the comprehensive plan in a manner that represents community sentiment.

**Vision Statement**

*Adams County is proud to offer opportunities. As a strategically located area with a stable climate, Adams County balances the need to preserve and protect agriculture with the opportunities to grow industrial and housing.*

*ALTERNATIVE OPTION 2: Adams County is a place where opportunity grows. Rooted in strong agricultural traditions and supported by strategic regional connections, the county welcomes [fosters?] new industries, quality housing, and a thriving rural way of life.*

*ALTERNATIVE OPTION 3: Adams County leverages its strategic location and dependable climate to support a dynamic economy. By safeguarding agriculture and encouraging responsible industrial and housing development, the county builds a balanced and prosperous future.*

## Plan Development and Public Participation

### 2005 Comprehensive Plan

The concepts and focus areas presented in the 2005 comprehensive plan were driven largely by the Board of County Commissioners' goal to attract new commercial and manufacturing industries to Adams County and expand future economic development opportunities. Although the county's economic base has long been rooted in agriculture and will continue to be, the Board also recognized the importance of diversifying the local economy. Agricultural communities often face significant financial challenges, and relying solely on that sector can threaten the overall economic stability of the county.

Plan development occurred in two different phases: one conducted during 2000 and 2001 that focused on the issues important to the eastern two-thirds of the county, and another conducted during 2002 and 2003 that initially focused on the issues facing the "Panhandle," or western portion of the county. The second phase of the effort quickly expanded into integrating the two

parts of the county into an overall comprehensive planning effort as it became apparent that the fundamental issues important to citizens of the different geographic regions of the county were actually very consistent. The result of these two phases was the final 2005 Comprehensive Plan.

Adams County elected officials and Planning Commission members promoted numerous efforts to seek citizen participation throughout the planning process. In total, the four-year process that went into the development of the 2005 comprehensive plan involved countless hours of invaluable insight, direction and expressions of commitment to a positive future for Adams County.

### 2015 Comprehensive Plan

In 2015 the County adopted (as required) an update to the Shoreline Master Program (SMP), as required in the Shoreline Management Act (SMA, governed by RCW 90.58). In the process of that SMP update, the County conducted public participation efforts countywide, and engaged multiple stakeholders. The SMP was approved by the County Commissioners and determined to be in alignment with the County's comprehensive plan. The comprehensive plan was amended to include the SMP as the 7th chapter in the 2015 update.

### 2027 Comprehensive Plan

[PENDING – SUMMARY OF COMP PLAN UPDATE EFFORTS INCLUDING PUBLIC OUTREACH EFFORTS SUCH AS SURVEY RESULTS AND PUBLIC MEETINGS/ HEARINGS]

## Plan Organization and How To Use It

A comprehensive plan is a policy document. It is used by decision-makers to establish community goals and evaluate a jurisdiction's progress in achieving its preferred future. The plan should provide guidance on a range of topics, organized as "elements" in the comprehensive plan. Each element is developed to instruct how a range of development decisions, both public and private, can be decided. This plan contains the following:

1. Introduction and Background
2. Land Use Element
3. Transportation Element
4. Facilities and Utilities Element
5. Economic Development Element
6. Shoreline Element
7. Housing Element
8. Natural Resource Lands and Critical Areas Element

In order to maximize the usability of the plan, it must be considered a "living" document. The comprehensive plan must be consulted regularly, and familiarity with its contents will help to determine needed updates, particularly as conditions change.

While each of the topics, or elements, are considered individually, they are all also intricately linked to each other. For instance, changes in future land use will change how transportation works. Growth that occurs in an area will trigger the need to improve certain roads. Growth will also drive the need to upgrade utilities. Growth may result from choices made about economic

development. As such, each of the elements must be considered within the context of the others and be internally consistent.

## Implementation

The goals and policies of the comprehensive plan are general guidelines, not regulations. The GMA states at Section 36.70A.040(3)(c) "...the county and each city located within the county shall adopt a comprehensive plan under this chapter and development regulations that are consistent with and implement the comprehensive plan...". Development regulations are the primary means to implement the goals and policies of this Comprehensive Plan. Development regulations are legally binding rules that govern how land is used, subdivided, and protected. Development regulations include the following county codes: zoning, subdivisions, critical areas, and SEPA environmental protection.

### Zoning

Zoning is the most commonly used legal tool used to implement the plan. Property within the jurisdiction is assigned a zone or zoning district, with types of uses, permit requirements and other land use regulations defined for each zone, as well as procedural requirements for development in compliance with State law. The most basic regulations determine where a use can be sited, how large it can be, how it connects to other buildings or the transportation network, and how dense development can be, amongst other things. Development regulations are required to be aligned, and in fact derived *from* the comprehensive plan. This ensures that the public input gathered from the comprehensive planning process is considered in the technical regulations for development countywide.

Zoning also considers Planned Residential Developments (PRDs) and binding site plans. PRDs are a mechanism which allow for flexible residential development on a large-scale.

### Subdivision Regulations

Subdivision regulations are intended to regulate the manner in which land may be divided into parcels or lots, and developed. The regulations apply whenever land is divided for purposes of convenience, sale, lease or transfer. There are two basic forms of subdivision including long plats, which contain five or more lots, and short plats, which contain four or fewer lots (or as otherwise specified in the adopted code). Regulations pertaining to both types of subdivisions are adopted and enforced at the county level in accordance with provisions and statutory authority contained in state law. The regulations specify methods of subdivision procedures for the developer and the county; minimum requirements of improvements (construction of streets, installation of utilities, etc.), together with design standards for streets, lots, and blocks. Subdivision regulations encourage the orderly development and redevelopment of lands within the community. Subdivision regulations also set out processes and procedures for boundary line adjustments, lot splitting, and lot consolidations.

### State Environmental Policy Act

The State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) is an environmental review process requiring both public agencies and developers to consider the environmental consequences of their actions. The SEPA process starts when someone submits a permit application to the county for substantial development, or when the county proposes to take some official action. An “environmental

checklist" completed by the project proponent is reviewed to determine whether the project or action is significant enough to require an environmental impact statement (EIS). The SEPA process provides a way to solicit public and agency comments and can impose "mitigation" measures if it is determined that they are necessary to off-set the negative impacts of the proposed action.

### Environmentally Critical Areas

The GMA requires that all cities and counties in the State classify, designate, and protect environmentally critical areas. Environmentally critical areas include wetlands, critical aquifer recharge areas, frequently flooded areas, geologically hazardous areas, and fish and wildlife habitat conservation areas (RCW 36.70A.170). One avenue for protection is the adoption of a critical areas ordinance which must be consistent with the comprehensive plan, and must be based on the best available science (BAS) available at the time of its adoption. This ordinance may prohibit development that is incompatible with the critical areas, but usually it will provide some mitigation measures or conditions to alleviate the negative impacts of a specific development on a specific critical area or areas, to ensure no net loss in critical area functions and to protect public safety.

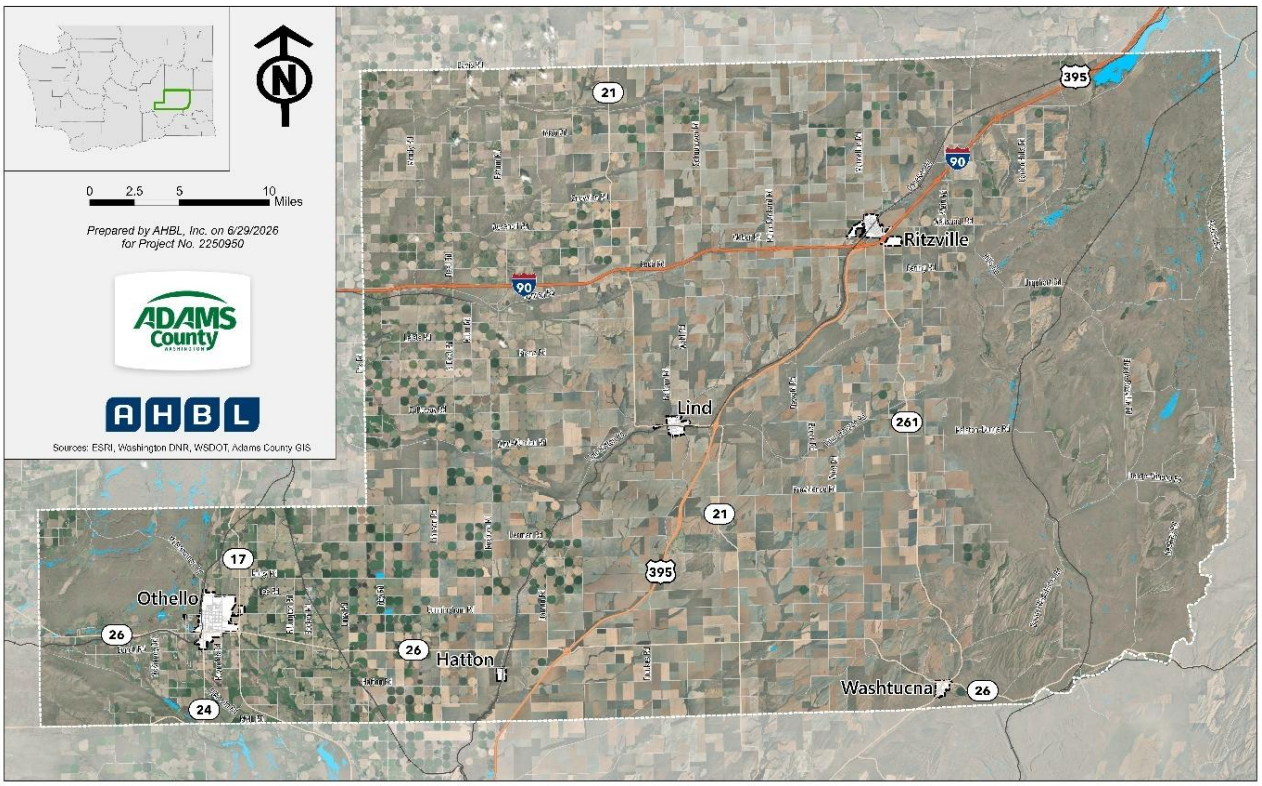
## Background Information

### Description of the County

Adams County, named after the late president John Adams, is located in the southeastern portion of Washington State. Its shape is an upside down pan with the southwest portion of the county referred to as the panhandle. Interstate 90 runs through the northern part of the county with US-395 meeting I-90, and running south through the middle of the county. Adams County is approximately 35 miles long and 65 miles wide at its largest point, encompassing 1,894 square miles. It is ranked 31st of the 39 Washington counties in population, and is the 14th largest county by geographic area. The southern half of the county was ceded from Yakama tribal lands through the Treaty of Camp Stevens in 1855. This treaty is still in effect and includes native fishing and hunting rights.

Adams County's topography consistently rises from the west side to the east ranging from approximately 1,000 to 1,900 feet in elevation above mean sea level. The southeast corner of the county is bordered by the Palouse River, with the Columbia National Wildlife Refuge in the northern portion of the Panhandle. The Columbia Plateau State Park is located in the Cow Creek watershed in east Adams County.

## Figure 1 Adams County Map




The climate of Adams County is shaped by the Cascades which obstruct the easterly movement of moist air from the Pacific Ocean, creating a rain shadow. The temperature generally averages between 25 degrees F in January and 80 degrees or more in the summer months. Average annual precipitation ranges from eight inches on the west side of the county to 12 inches on the east side, with the heaviest precipitation occurring during the winter months. Average annual snowfall ranges from zero to two inches.

The County is dominated by agricultural activity. Most of eastern Adams County has been designated as Agricultural Lands in conformance with GMA requirements. Extractive mining operations, or mineral lands, are also located in the area, often using the deep layers of basalt for local roadwork. There are no forests in Adams County.

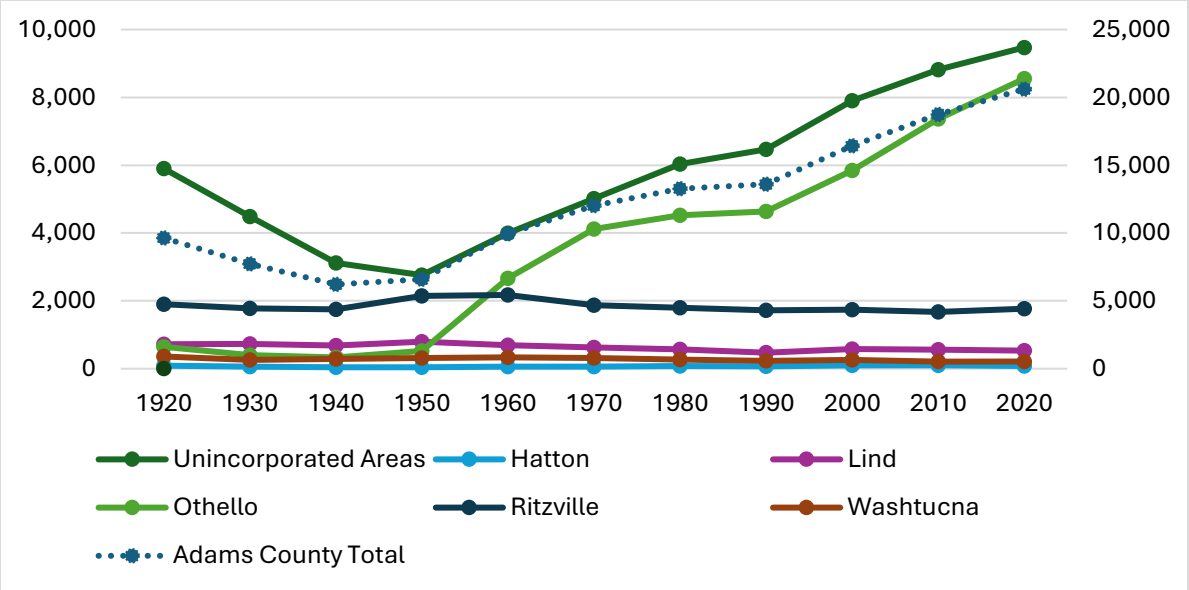
Sprague Lake, the Palouse River, Rock Creek, and Cow Creek from the mouth of Lugenbeal Creek to the confluence with the Palouse river are considered shorelines of statewide significance as determined by the Shoreline Management Act (SMA), and are subject to further protections when development proposals are considered. Critical areas, further described below, have been identified and designated for habitat and wetlands that exist because of Sprague Lake.

Floodplains can be found in each of the towns in east Adams County, as well as in most of the coulees. Wetlands are relatively scarce given the very dry climate. The county is underlain by three distinct and relatively deep aquifers: Grand Ronde, Wanapum and Odessa Subarea.

## Growth Past and Present

In 1883, the Washington Territorial Legislature created Adams County from a portion of Whitman County. It had a known population of 150 people. By the time the US census was conducted in 1900, the county had a population of 4,840 people. By 1910 the population had increased 126 percent, according to local papers it was spurred on in part by large numbers of wheat farmers, good wheat prices and the new railroad system. However, from the 1910 to the 1950 census the population continually decreased. The population declined from 10,920 down to 6,584, a negative 40 percent from 1910 to 1950. It was reported that major fires throughout the small communities and low wheat prices influenced the decease, along with World War I and the Great Depression. Since then, the county has had steady growth with an average increase of three percent per year. As of 2026, the population has grown to an estimated 22,000[1]. Figure 2 shows the population for the county and cities over the last 100-year period, by decade. Table 1 shows the population from 2015-2025 annually.

### Figure 2 Adams County Population, 1920-2020




[1] According to the Office of Financial Management (OFM) April 1, 2026 population estimates.

### Table 1 - Adams County Population by Jurisdiction, 2015-2025

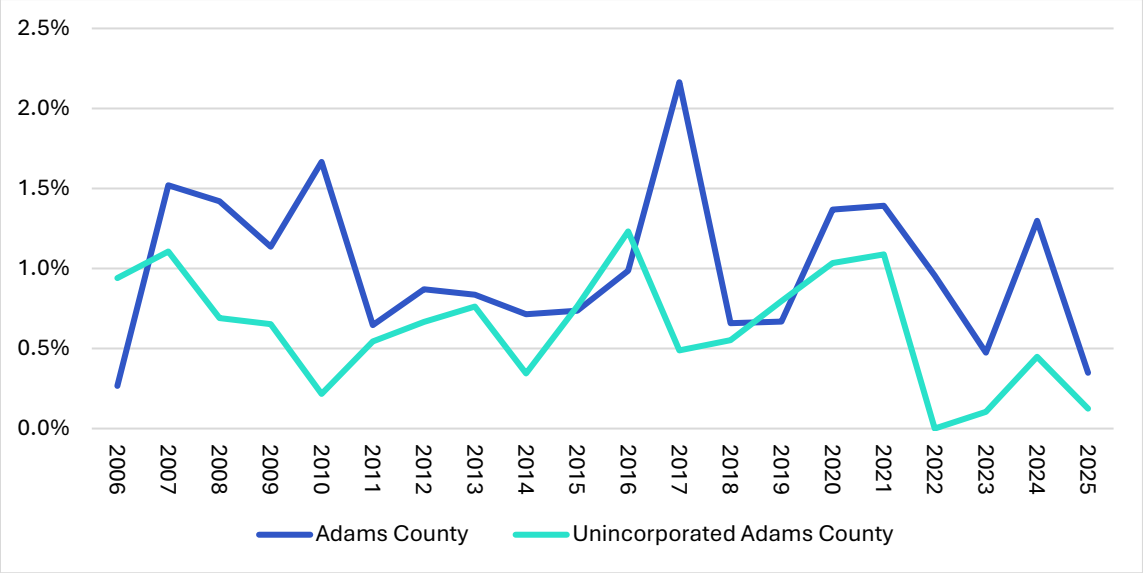
| | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 | 2025 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Adams County Total | 19,451 | 19,643 | 20,068 | 20,200 | 20,335 | 20,613 | 20,900 | 21,100 | 21,200 | 21,475 | 21,550 |
| Unincorporated Area | 9,093 | 9,205 | 9,250 | 9,301 | 9,375 | 9,472 | 9,575 | 9,575 | 9,585 | 9,628 | 9,640 |
| Hatton | 90 | 87 | 85 | 82 | 82 | 79 | 80 | 80 | 80 | 167 | 165 |
| Lind | 565 | 556 | 556 | 534 | 535 | 535 | 535 | 535 | 535 | 535 | 535 |
| Othello | 7,774 | 7,861 | 8,229 | 8,328 | 8,375 | 8,549 | 8,725 | 8,920 | 9,005 | 9,145 | 9,210 |
| Ritzville | 1,723 | 1,723 | 1,738 | 1,743 | 1,756 | 1,767 | 1,775 | 1,780 | 1,785 | 1,790 | 1,790 |
| Washtucna | 206 | 211 | 210 | 212 | 212 | 211 | 210 | 210 | 210 | 210 | 210 |

*Source: Washington State Office of Financial Management*

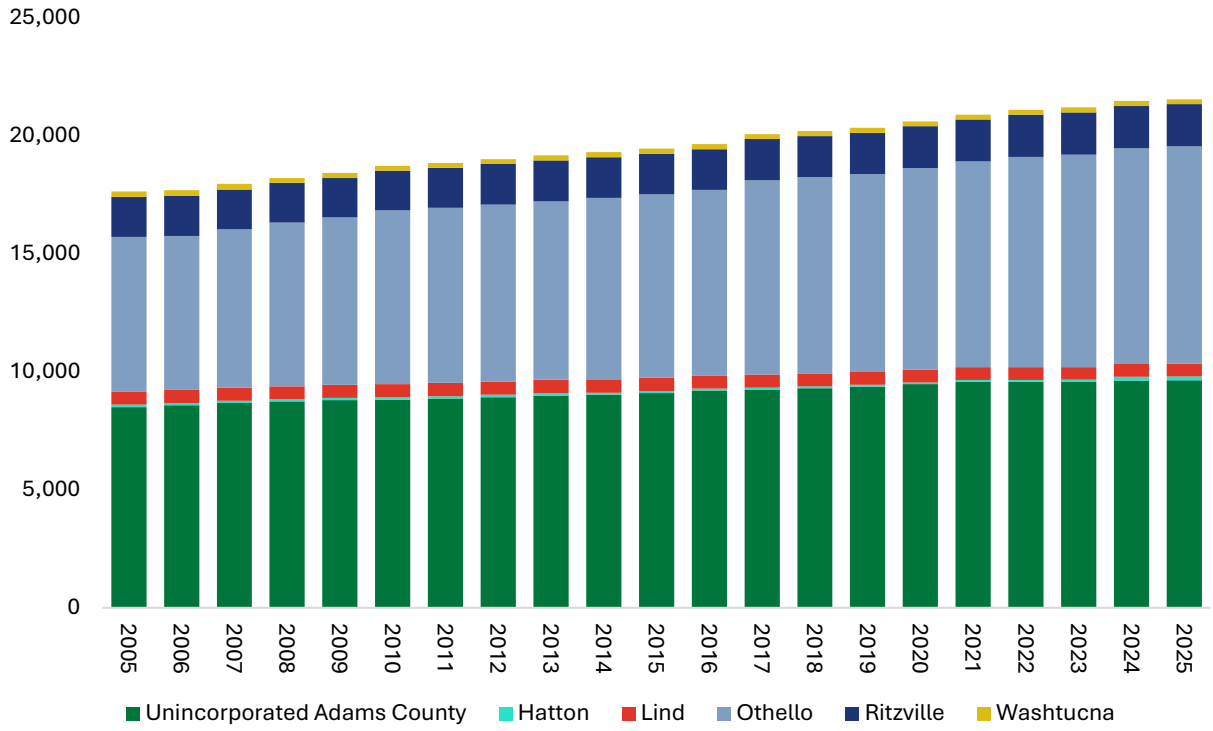
The following charts show this fluctuation through the percent of change and actual population.

Figure 3 shows the population growth rates of the county as a whole, and unincorporated areas in the years from 2006 to 2025. Figure 4 expands on that to show each jurisdiction's population, as well as the county's overall population. It is interesting to note that growth for the unincorporated areas is generally growing at a slower rate than the incorporated areas, particularly Othello. shows each jurisdiction as a percentage of the countywide population.

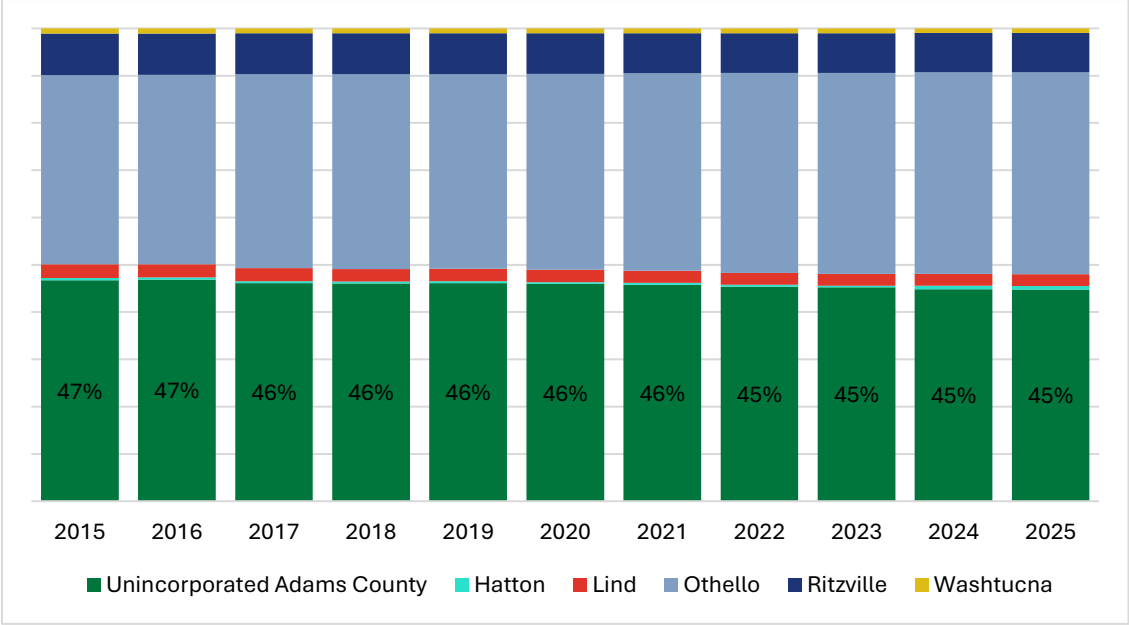
### Figure 3 Percent of Population Change, 2006-2025



## Figure 4 County population by jurisdiction, 2005-2025




## Figure 5 Percentage of County population, 2015 - 2025



# Demographics

## Age

Compared to statewide averages, Adams County has a higher percentage of children and a lower percentage of residents over 35 per the 2020 census. This results in a correspondingly lower median age, which was 29.7 years of age for Adams County versus 38.1 years of age in the State overall.

It is useful to track changes in the population's composition by age groups over time to see if there are notable trends developing with people moving out of the county at different rates. This also informs how the County can prepare for the anticipated needs, such as school enrollments or medical care.

The graph below, Figure 6 shows population growth by different age brackets (and the distribution is not equal), while Figure 7 shows those age groups as a proportion of the total population. Proportionally more people in the 20 to 24 age group category are staying in the county in 2010 and 2020 than earlier decades. This age group includes many people who are of college age, and there are no colleges in Adams County. The nearest universities and/or junior colleges may be too far to commute, although there are increasing options for online education. Over the years, the number of school age children and the category of persons aged 25 to 44 are consistently higher than the other categories. The age categories all appear to generally increase proportionally with the exception of the age categories of people aged 75 and over, which has declined in the past decade. This could be due to a lack of available health care. In more recent years the county's population appears to be aging, as the 60-74 age category has proportionally increased, while the percentage of under 5 years has decreased slightly.

**Figure 6 Age Comparison for Adams County (1980 – 2020)**

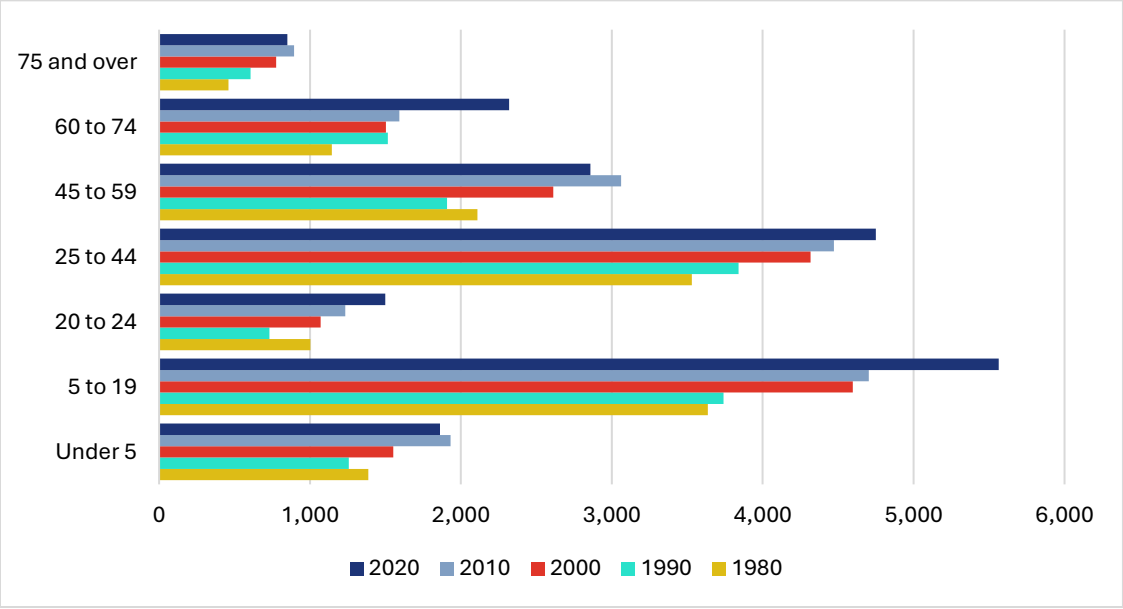
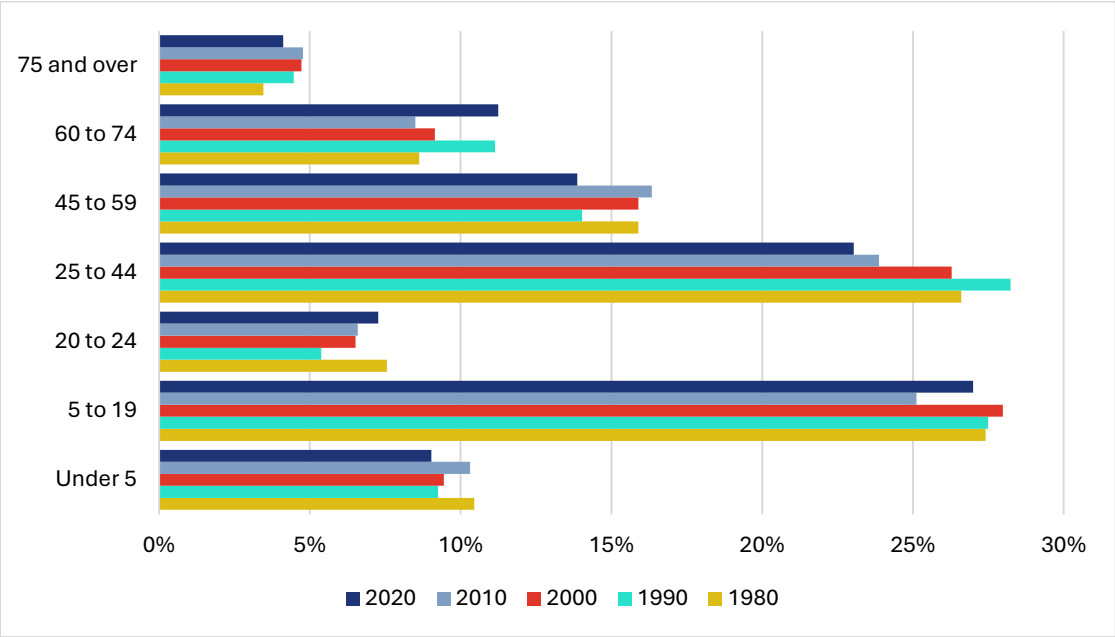


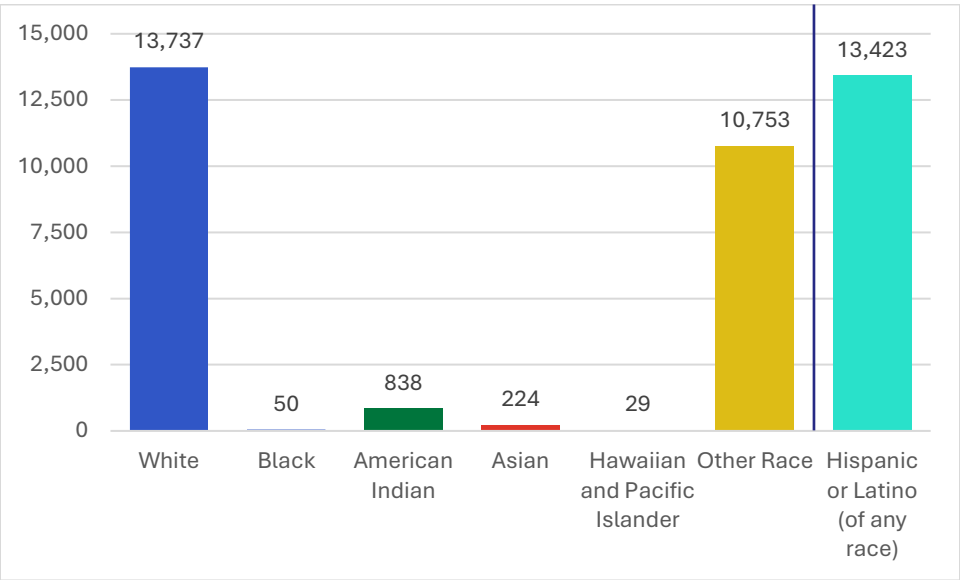
**Figure 7 Age comparison by percentage of population (1980 – 2020)**




## Race and Ethnicity

The County's population has trended with agricultural events. With an increase in irrigated agriculture after the 1960s, there was a significant increase in immigration due to the agriculture industry, largely from Mexico. Up until 1970, the Census Bureau did not ask about ethnicity or Hispanic/ Latino origin, so respondents often selected the "other race" category. The Census Bureau has been refining the series of race and ethnic questions in the intervening years, and for the purposes of Census data collection, race and ethnicity are considered as separate identifiers, meaning a person can be considered Hispanic and also white, or "some other race." Regardless of the change in available racial and ethnic identifiers, it is clear in the data that there has been a large increase in the percentage population identifying as Hispanic/Latino. As of 2024, approximately 64 percent of the population is of Hispanic or Latino origin, while approximately 66 percent also identify as White, as shown in Figure 8.

**Figure 8: Race and Ethnicity in Adams County, 2024**




*Source: U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 5-Year Estimates, 2024. Table DP05*