

**PIERCE COUNTY  
PROFILE**

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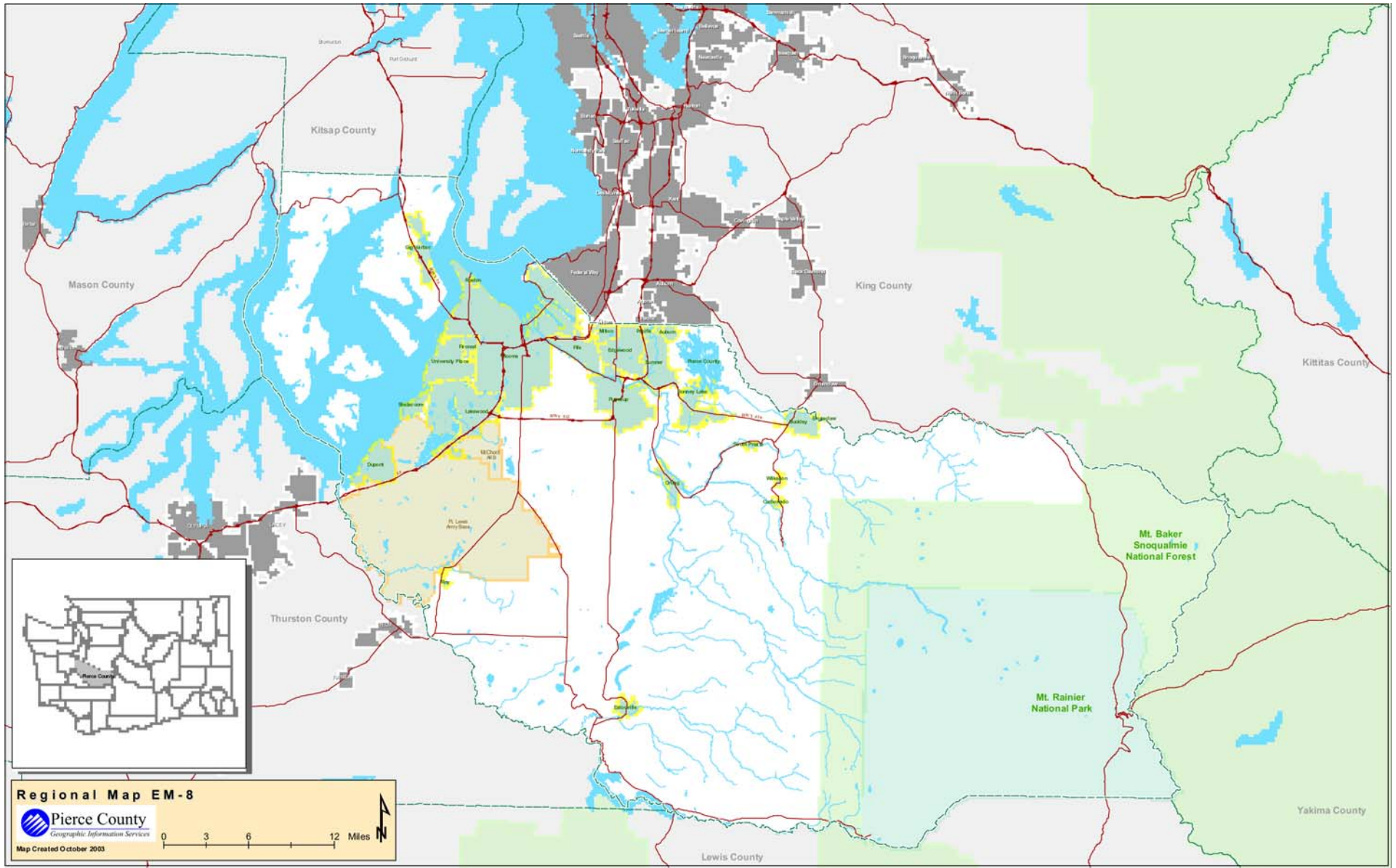
Pierce County was established in 1852 and became a Home Rule County by a vote of the people in 1981. The County is governed by an elected County Executive and seven elected Council Members. The Prosecutor, Assessor-Treasurer, Auditor, Superior Court Judges, and District Court Judges are also elected by the people.<sup>1</sup>

## Geography

Pierce County's extremely varied topography ranges from sea level to 14,410 feet at the summit of Mt. Rainier. The County is located in the west-central part of the state and has a land area of 1,148,006 acres or 1,794 square miles. There are 118 square miles of water in the County excluding Puget Sound. Puget Sound divides the County into western and eastern portions. The smaller portion, to the west of the Sound, is located on the southern portion of the Kitsap Peninsula. In addition, a number of islands, six of them inhabited, in the southern Sound are incorporated in the County.

The Puyallup and White River valleys are fertile regions comprising one of the most intensively cultivated areas in the State. This is, however, gradually giving away to commercial expansion. The water from all major rivers with headwaters on Mt. Rainier, with the exception of the Cowlitz and its tributaries draining the southeast corner of the mountain, flows into Puget Sound. They are the Puyallup, White, Nisqually, Mowich and Carbon Rivers. Of these, only the Nisqually and Puyallup actually enter Puget Sound. The White, Carbon and Mowich Rivers are all tributaries of the Puyallup and join it before it enters the Sound. The White River borders Pierce County to the north and drains the east side of the mountain. The Nisqually forms the southern border of the County and drains the south side of the mountain. With its tributaries, the Mowich and the Carbon, the Puyallup River contains the runoff from both the north and west sides of Mt. Rainier. It discharges their combined waters into Commencement Bay. There are numerous other rivers and creeks throughout the County.

**Map 2- 1 South Puget Sound Regional Map**



# Topography

Commencement Bay, Pierce County's principal port, is an arm of Puget Sound that allows easy access to the sea. The developed portions of the County are located near Puget Sound on gently rolling terrain formed from glacial outwash and till. The eastern portion of the County consists of foothills rising up to the crest of the Cascade Range. Just to the west of the crest is Mt Rainier, the high point of the County and of Washington State. Mt. Rainier National Park encompasses the southeast portion of the County and is a primary recreation and tourist attraction.

State and Federal government control includes five large parcels of land within the County for a total of 436,776 acres or 38% of the total land area (Table 2-1). In addition to these five, they also have a number of smaller parcels, such as the Washington State Soldiers' Home and Colony in Orting, the Veterans Hospital at American Lake, and Mud Mountain Dam under control of the Army Corps of Engineers.

**Table 2-1 Major State and Federal Land Holdings in Pierce County**

Fort Lewis	87,000 Acres
McChord Air Force Base	4,616 Acres
Snoqualmie National Forest (Portion located in Pierce County)	144,749 Acres
Mt. Rainier National Park (Portion located in Pierce County)	196,168 Acres
McNeil Island	4,243 Acres

Included within the boundaries of Pierce County are 361 lakes greater than one acre in size. One hundred and sixty-two of these are above 2,500 feet in elevation. National forests, 225 miles of saltwater shoreline, the abundance of lakes and other recreational opportunities contribute to an excellent quality of life in Pierce County.

Anderson Island, McNeil Island and Fox Island are the three major islands within the county and lie west of Tacoma and Steilacoom. Anderson and McNeil Islands can be reached only by ferry or boat. There is a connecting bridge to Fox Island. Anderson Island has a resident population of only a few hundred people, but during the summer months, this population can swell to several thousand people. There are no medical facilities on either Anderson or Fox Islands. However, emergency medical technicians and paramedics are available through the resident fire service. McNeil Island is a state correctional facility.

Three smaller islands, Ketron, Raft and Herron, also have a small number of permanent residents. Ketron and Herron Islands are accessed by ferry. Raft Island is connected to the mainland by a bridge.

## Geology

In the western and central area of the county, the upper crustal materials are predominantly glacial deposits (called drift) consisting of sediments laid down during the several cycles of glacial advance and retreat. The last major glacial period was the Fraser glaciation and lasted about 10,000 years.

The advance of Cordilleran ice sheet from British Columbia into the Puget Sound area reached its maximum extent around 15,000 B.P. The ice sheet split into the Juan de Fuca and Puget ice lobes as it encountered the Olympic Mountains. The Puget ice lobe moved south covering Pierce County and extending south into Thurston County. The Vashon advance was short-lived; by 13,600 B.P., the two lobes had receded into a single lobe located in the northern Puget lowlands. The Fraser glaciation ended about 10,000 B.P. when major climatic changes occurred.

The Vashon Drift consists of water laid, stratified, granular material deposited in front of the advancing glacier (advance outwash) overlain by unsorted clay, silt, sand and gravel (till); in turn overlap by another blanket of granular stream deposits (recessional outwash).

During the retreat of the glacier, glacial damming formed large temporary lakes. One of these ice-dammed lakes—occupying the Puyallup and White River valleys during the retreat of the Vashon ice—discharged water and material across the plain between Tacoma and Eatonville. Deep channels as much as a mile wide were carved by the torrential discharge streams and a layer of coarse-grained, poorly sorted material was laid down in a fan-shaped area from Chambers and Clover Creeks on the north to the Nisqually River and Muck Creek on the south.

Following the glacial retreat, a number of smaller lakes were formed in surface depressions. Since the retreat of the Vashon Glacier, geologic processes have included both weathering of the glacial drift, and reworking of and re-deposition of it by streams and marine erosion.

The walls and floors of the major valleys reveal other material. This includes mudflow deposits from Mt. Rainier in the Puyallup, Nisqually and White River valleys. Deposits show up in isolated spots and peat bogs have formed where lakes or ponds used to lie.

Bedrock predominates in the eastern portion of the County with the exception of Mt. Rainier. This is situated on top of intrusive Tertiary rocks of the Tatoosh pluton. Other bedrock includes sandstone and coal much of which supported quarrying and mining operations early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In the vicinity of the Port of Tacoma, a considerable manmade fill has been placed on top of the mud flats at the mouth of the Puyallup River. Other manmade modifications to the landscape are continuing today.

## **Climate**

The climate of Pierce County is generally mild. The Cascade Mountains to the east block cold winter air and the Willapa Hills and the Olympic Mountains to the west remove much of the moisture from most Pacific storms before they reach the lowland areas of the County.

Definite seasons are evident, with the rainy season generally from October through April. Precipitation on the western and central portions of the county is usually in the form of rain, with occasional snow during the winter, while the eastern portion of the county is subject to a very heavy winter snowpack. This snowpack melts each spring with the exception of the

upper slopes of Mt. Rainier, where snow remains year round locked up in an extensive glacier system.

Tacoma's average rainfall is approximately 40 inches per year, while average temperatures range between seven degrees and 98 degrees. Precipitation in the mountainous areas of the eastern part of the county is well over 100 inches per year.

## Demographics

As of July 1, 2004, the Pierce County population is 725,000 with 395,792 (54.6%) persons residing in the 24 incorporated cities and 329,208 (45.4%) residing in the unincorporated communities and areas. The 2000 census data shows the age distribution of people in the County (Table 2-2).<sup>2</sup> This distribution shows a slightly younger population than is average for the State. Ethnic backgrounds reported show Pierce County to be slightly more diverse than Washington State overall.

While the percentage of people who graduate from high school is comparable with the rest of the State, those who have achieved bachelors or higher degrees is much lower than the State average being 20.6% compared with 27.7% for the State overall.

Home ownership is similar to the State average, however the value of those homes is only 89% of the average across the State. Household income is slightly less, however when converted to per capita income it is only 91% of the average across the State. When compared to King County however Pierce County's per capita income shrinks to 71%.

Pierce County is the second most populous county in Washington, with twelve percent of the state population. During the 1980's, its population increased by 20.7 percent, ranking eighth in the

state in rate of growth over this period. Between 1990 and 2001, there was approximately a 21.7% increase in Pierce County's total population (see Table 2-3).

Table 2-2 2000 Pierce County Census Data	
Population	700,820
Population, % change 1990-2000	19.6%
Persons under 5 years old %	7.1%
Persons under 18 years old %	27.2%
Persons from 19 to 64 years old %	62.6%
Persons 65 years old and over %	10.2%
Female persons %	50.3%
White persons % (a)	78.4%
Black or African American persons % (a)	7.0%
American Indian and Alaska Native persons % (a)	1.4%
Asian persons % (a)	5.1%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander % (a)	0.8%
Persons reporting some other race % (a)	2.2%
Persons reporting two or more races %	5.1%
Persons of Hispanic or Latino origin % (b)	5.5%
White persons, not of Hispanic/Latino origin %	76.0%
Living in same house in 1995 and 2000, % age 5+	46.9%
Foreign born persons %	8.1%
Language other than English spoken at home, % age 5+,	11.8%
High school graduates, % of persons age 25+,	86.9%
Bachelor's degree or higher, % of persons age 25+,	20.6%
Persons with a disability, age 5+,	123,624
Housing units	277,060
Homeownership rate %	63.5%
Housing units in multi-unit structures %	24.6%
Median value of owner-occupied housing units	\$149,600
Households	260,800
Persons per household	2.60
Median household money income, 1999	\$45,204
Per capita money income, 1999	\$20,948
Persons below poverty, %, 1999	10.5%
(a) Includes persons reporting only one race.	
(b) Hispanics may be of any race, so also are included in applicable race categories.	

**Table 2-3 Pierce County Population by Jurisdiction**

CITY/TOWN	1980	1990	7/1/ 2002
Auburn <sup>1</sup>	King County only	Parts Annexed 1999-2000	1,040
Bonney Lake	5,328	7,494	12,360
Buckley	3,143	3,516	4,410
Carbonado	456	495	647
DuPont	559	592	3,295
Eatonville	998	1,374	2,070
Edgewood	Unincorporated in 1980	Incorporated in 1996	9,320
Enumclaw <sup>1</sup>	King County only	King County only	0 <sup>2</sup>
Fife	1,823	3,864	4,815
Fircrest	5,477	5,258	5,925
Gig Harbor	2,429	3,236	6,540
Lakewood	Unincorporated in 1980	Incorporated in 1996	58,580
Milton <sup>1</sup>	2,944	4,298	5,180
Orting	1,787	2,106	4,060
Pacific <sup>1</sup>	King County only	Parts Annexed 1996	145
Puyallup	18,251	23,878	34,920
Roy	417	258	865
Ruston	623	693	740
South Prairie	202	180	440
Steilacoom	4,886	5,728	6,095
Sumner	4,936	6,459	8,670
Tacoma	158,501	176,664	194,900
University Place	Unincorporated in 1980	Incorporated in 1995	30,350
Wilkeson	316	366	425
Incorporated City Subtotal	213,076	246,459	395,792
Unincorporated Pierce County	272,591	339,744	329,208
Total	485,667	586,203	713,400

<sup>1</sup> Portions of Pacific, Milton, Auburn and Enumclaw are located in Pierce County, while other sections are in King County. This brings the total number of incorporated cities with at least some property in Pierce County to 24. Populations listed for the individual cities and towns are for Pierce County only and do not include King County populations.

<sup>2</sup> Although there are currently no residents of the Town of Enumclaw residing in Pierce County the City does have some park property within the boundaries of Pierce County.

There are 16 public school districts within Pierce County with an enrollment total of 129,907 students for the 2001-2002 school year. In addition, there are 10,413 students registered in private schools.

## Economy<sup>3</sup>

### Economic Conditions

Pierce County continues to feel the impact of the economic slowdown with most key indicators moving downward. However, the County is in a good position to recover and experience future economic growth. Recent forecasts describe some of the advantages the County enjoys: (1) a major port with the potential for future expansion, (2) relatively low property costs in rural areas, (3) available and competitively priced office and commercial

space, and (4) its situation as the geographic anchor for the central Puget Sound. Some specific sectors are highlighted in the following paragraphs.

### *Manufacturing*

Pierce County's manufactured products include chemicals, machinery, hardware, food products, and electronics. Among the major manufacturers are Intel (1,500 jobs), Boeing (1,000), Milgard Glass (740), and Simpson Tacoma Kraft wood products (508). Intel has already invested over \$160 million in Pierce County and has plans for future expansion. Boeing has completed two phases of construction on a Pierce County facility which builds components for the 777 aircraft.

### *Port Facilities*

In describing the Port of Tacoma, the Economic Development Board of Pierce County says "the Port of Tacoma has become one of the fastest growing ports in the United States. It is strategically located...and offers efficient connections to sea, rail, highway, and air transportation networks. It enjoys strong international ties with nations on the Pacific Rim and around the world." As the sixth busiest container port in North America, and one of the 25 busiest in the world, the Port of Tacoma plays an important part in the local economy. This deep-water port covers 2,400 acres and offers a combination of facilities and services including 34 deepwater berths, two million square feet of warehouse and office space, and 131 acres of industrial yard. One economic impact study showed that more the 22,000 jobs in Pierce County are related to the Port activities.

### *Service/Government*

One of the largest components of the service sector is health care. The largest employers include Multicare Medical Center (4,519), the Franciscan Health System (2,892), and Good Samaritan Hospital (1,600). Fort Lewis Army Base and Madigan Army Medical Center occupy 86,000 acres in southwest Pierce County while the adjacent McChord Air Force Base sits on 5,000 acres. Together these facilities employ over 35,000 military and civilian personnel. Unlike many military installations across the country, Fort Lewis and McChord have expanded as people are transferred from closed facilities to the northwest. In addition, President Bush's 2003 budget included a 4.1% pay raise for all military members and more than \$106 million for construction projects at Fort Lewis. Other government employment includes the local public school districts (12,778), the City of Tacoma including Tacoma Public Utilities (3,136), Pierce County (3,034), and, the Puyallup Tribe (1,795).

## **Economic Indicators**

The following indicators are key elements in the evaluation of current economic conditions and are useful when developing projections or economic forecasts:

### *Inflation*

Inflation as measured by the Seattle-Tacoma-Everett Consumer Price Index for all urban consumers decreased from 2.5% in 2001 to 2.1% in 2002. During the same period, the U. S. average (CPI-U) went from 1.6% in 2001 to 2.6% in 2002.



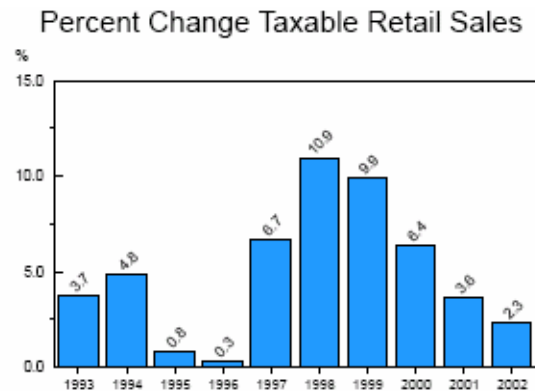
## Employment

Total employment increased to 316,000, while the rate of unemployment increased to 6.7%. Pierce County unemployment is slightly lower than the statewide average of 6.8% but higher than the U.S. average of 5.8%.



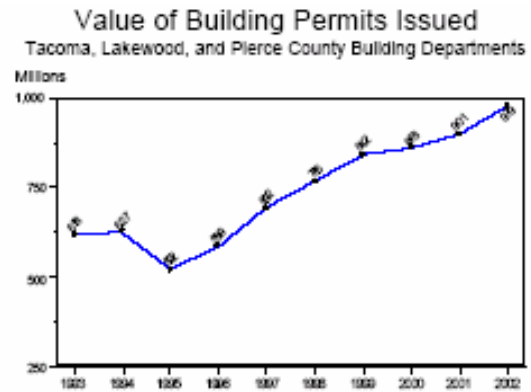
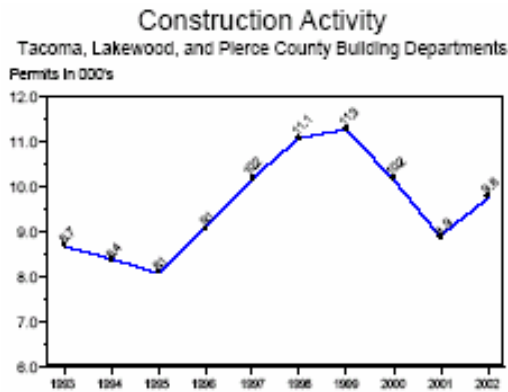
## Taxable Retail Sales

Taxable retail sales continued the pattern of slow growth that began in 2001. Still, 2002 taxable retail sales managed to increase 2.3% over 2001. Based on current economic forecasts, we anticipate that total taxable retail sales will be slightly higher in 2003.



## Construction

New construction activity is an important economic indicator since it greatly impacts County operations and workload in areas such as planning, permits, land services, public works, and public construction. Property tax revenues are also affected by fluctuations in new construction activity and the number and value of permits issued is one way to determine future growth in the County's property tax base. The figures below show that the number of permits issued increased in 2002 as did the total value.



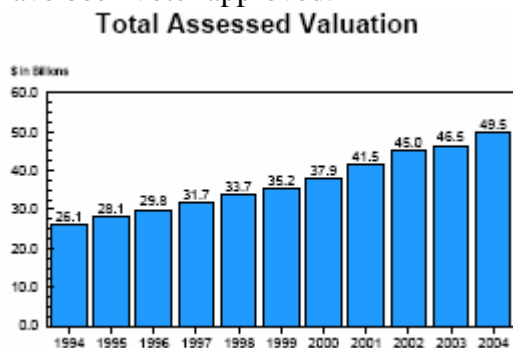
## Transportation

Pierce County is served by Sea-Tac Airport 16 miles to the north and the Tacoma Narrows Airport between Gig Harbor and the City of Tacoma. There are also three general aviation airports. Interstates 5 and 705 run through the County as do numerous state highways. Pierce Transit provides excellent bus service extending from the state capital, Olympia, to the City of Seattle. Sound Transit, the regional transit authority, recently completed a light rail line that connects downtown Tacoma to a major transit hub near the Tacoma Dome. Two transcontinental railroad systems connect the County with the rest of the nation as do 30 interstate trucking companies.<sup>4</sup> Ferry service is necessary both for commuting and for the transportation of goods. WASHDOT and Pierce County operate ferries to Vashon Island, Anderson Island, and Ketron Island. The Washington State Department of Corrections operates both the McNeil Island Ferry and the McNeil Island Barge and Tug.

## Development Trends<sup>5</sup>

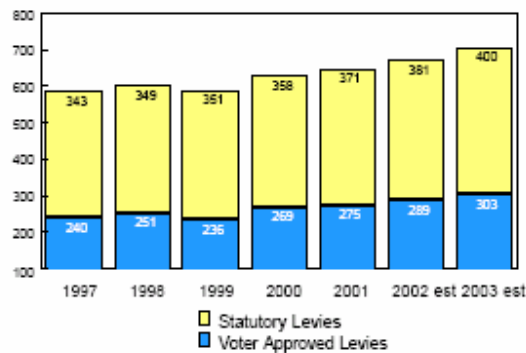
### Property Taxes and Assessed Valuation

Property tax is the largest source of revenue in the General Fund and a major source of Road Fund revenue. The Assessor -Treasurer values and provides information on approximately 1,080,000 acres of land in Pierce County. Of this total, 51% is taxable acreage, the remaining being exempt under State law. In addition to the statutory levies implemented through State legislation, local levies are imposed through a vote of the people. These are most typically for school and fire districts. On average 43% of the total taxes levied over the last 7 years have been voter approved.



The growth in Property Tax revenue is dependent upon both the actual growth in assessed valuation and the tax rate. The growth in assessed valuation from 2003 to 2004 is approximately \$2.9 billion (6.3%). Approximately 63% of the growth is due to new construction, and 37% is due existing property revaluation.

**Voter Approved and Statutory Property Taxes**



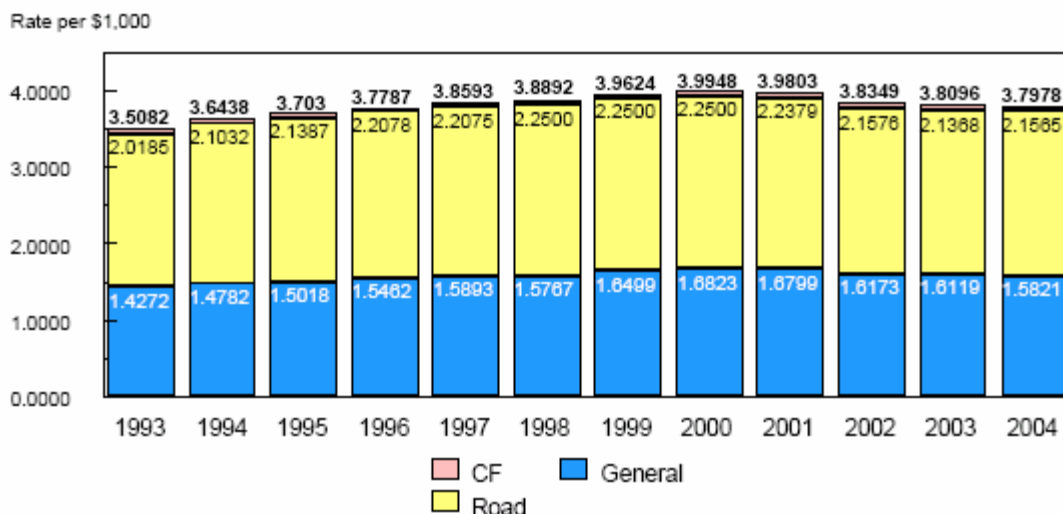
**Pierce County Acreage Exemption Status**



## Property Tax Levy Rates

Levy rates determine the amount of tax that a property owner pays per thousand dollars of assessed value. The November 2001 passage of Initiative 747 limits the maximum growth in property tax revenues from existing property to the lesser of 1% or the percentage increase in the Implicit Price Deflator (IPD), which is 1.84% in 2004. This limitation on the growth in property tax revenues coupled with an inflationary increase in existing property revaluations has resulted in a 2% reduction in the 2004 County Levy tax rate from 2003. The 2004 Road Levy tax rate and Conservation Futures tax rate have increased almost 1% from 2003, although the Conservation Futures tax rate is limited by almost 7% due to this 1% increase. The chart on the following page presents historical and comparative detailed rate information.

**Combined Property Tax Millages**



Please keep in mind that the County's General Fund share of the total property tax is only 11% of the total. Most of the property tax paid by our citizens is allocated to the State of Washington, cities, and local schools.

# Resource Directory

## Regional

- **Pierce County Government**  
[www.piercecountywa.org/PC/](http://www.piercecountywa.org/PC/)
- **Pierce County Executive**  
<http://www.piercecountywa.org/pc/abtus/ourorg/exec/exec.htm>
- **Pierce County Council**  
<http://www.piercecountywa.org/pc/abtus/ourorg/council/default.htm>
- **Pierce County DEM**  
<http://www.piercecountywa.org/pc/abtus/ourorg/dem/abtusdem.htm>

## National

- **US Census**  
[www.census.gov/](http://www.census.gov/)

# Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Pierce County 2004 Budget, Pierce County Executive's Office. December, 2003. Budget Overview, p. 18.  
[http://www.co.pierce.wa.us/pc/abtus/ourorg/bnf/bud\\_div.htm](http://www.co.pierce.wa.us/pc/abtus/ourorg/bnf/bud_div.htm).

<sup>2</sup> [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov) [accessed January, 2002].

<sup>3</sup> Pierce County 2004 Budget, Pierce County Executive's Office. December, 2003. Budget Overview, p. 18-20.  
[http://www.co.pierce.wa.us/pc/abtus/ourorg/bnf/bud\\_div.htm](http://www.co.pierce.wa.us/pc/abtus/ourorg/bnf/bud_div.htm).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p. 21-22.