

## The Portland Region: Where City and Suburbs Talk to Each Other—and Often Agree

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### *Abstract*

Portland, OR, is often cited as an example of successful regional governance and planning. The metropolitan area appears to match many of the precepts of the popular “compact city” model of urban growth and to demonstrate the capacity of local and state government to shape growing metropolitan regions. Given this reputation, it is important to evaluate the relevance of the Portland experience for other communities, distinguishing unique local circumstances from generalizable characteristics.

This analysis explores the spatial character of metropolitan Portland in the 1990s, summarizes the politics of regional planning, examines weaknesses in the Portland approach, and offers suggestions for other metropolitan areas. The study finds that many of Portland’s accomplishments center on urban design, but that the region’s most distinguishing characteristic is its attention to political process. The discussion concludes with suggestions about the value of extensive civic discourse, incremental policy making, and institution building.

**Keywords:** Housing; Land use/zoning; Urban planning; Growth management

### **Introduction**

Portlanders are proud of themselves. Like residents of many other U.S. cities, residents of Portland, OR, can be formidable promoters of their home community. Ask around town and you will learn that Portland is special for its climate (“mild,” not rainy), its views of snow-capped Mount Hood, its small-town ambience and “just folks” style, and its success at fending off many of the problems of urban sprawl and congestion. In this self-satisfied picture of achievement by avoidance, Los Angeles has long been damned, Seattle has sold its soul, and only Portland still treads the straight path to good planning.

Outsiders might freely dismiss these claims as the standard wares of local boosters were they not shared by many well-informed observers around the nation. Portland enjoys a strong reputation in the circles of urban planning and policy as a well-planned and livable metropolitan community. The city and

region gained initial attention in the late 1970s and 1980s and have enjoyed a surge of positive commentary in the 1990s. Inspection junkets have become a steady contributor to the Portland tourist economy as journalists try to discover “how Portland does it” (Langdon 1992; see Goldberg 1994 for an example) and civic delegations make the rounds of Portland’s leaders in search of lessons for their own cities.

## **Portland as a planning model**

The admiration starts at the center. According to its press clippings, Portland is an urban mecca (Ortega 1995) and one of the few large cities in the United States “where it works” (“Town Planning” 1990). Over the past 20 years, it has frequently appeared near the top of urban livability rankings. An informal poll of planning and design experts in 1988 rated Portland’s efforts to deal with urban design issues among the best in the United States (Laatz 1988), and the city makes regular appearances on lists of the nation’s best-managed cities (McEney 1994).

At the regional scale, the Portland area is a prime exhibit for innovative institutions in managing metropolitan growth and services. In a burst of institutional creativity in the 1970s, the Oregon legislature crafted a statewide system for mandated land use planning (Abbott and Howe 1993; Knaap and Nelson 1992; Leonard 1983), and the voters of the three core metropolitan counties created an elected regional government now known as Metro (Abbott and Abbott 1991; Nelson 1996). The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) recently credited regionwide cooperation for supporting a successful transition from traditional manufacturing to a knowledge-based economy (Tripp 1996).

Given this level of attention, it is worth taking a serious look at exactly what other communities might learn from Portland. This article addresses four questions that other cities might ask in considering Portland’s reputation and record:

1. What are Portland’s major accomplishments?
2. What led to these accomplishments?
3. What are the potential costs associated with compact urban growth in the Portland area?

4. What lessons might other cities draw from the Portland experience?

Analysis of these issues leads to two broad conclusions about the politics of good planning. *What* Portland has accomplished centers on decisions about *urban design and the physical shape* of the central city and its related communities. *How* Portlanders have shaped their cityscape and metroscape has to do most essentially with *politics*—with public values, leadership, the capacity of planning agencies and local governments, and the quality of civic discourse.

To summarize the “what” question, Portland is one of a limited number of U.S. metropolitan areas that measure favorably against the model of good urban form that increasingly dominates the contemporary literature of urban planning and design. As summarized in recent publications (Bank of America 1995; Congress of the New Urbanism 1996; Downs 1994; Rusk 1993), this model embraces several normative prescriptions about the characteristics of a balanced metropolis. First, it assigns high value to the maintenance of strong downtowns in order to nurture cultural vibrancy, promote social cohesion, and support nationally competitive advanced service industries. Closely related is the neotraditional turn in neighborhood planning, which also stresses small-scale planning and mixed land use (Calthorpe 1993; Katz 1994; Kunstler 1993; Langdon 1994). The third goal is tightly knit metropolitan regions. Since the famous report *The Costs of Sprawl* (Real Estate Research Corporation 1974), opponents of urban sprawl have had practical justifications for their argument that the centered metropolis should also be compact. The concentration of urbanization at relatively high density within a contiguous territory and circumscribed satellite centers presumably preserves green spaces and farmland, reduces energy consumption, and keeps infrastructure affordable (Frank 1989; Persky and Wiewel 1996; U.S. Congress 1995).

In exploring the second, or “how,” question, an analysis of the ways metropolitan Portland has pursued the goals of centeredness and compactness confirms the truism that planning is a political process. Good design and planning do not happen simply because they are good ideas. They happen because a community talks itself into putting ideas into action, and because that same community creates an infrastructure of governmental systems and civic institutions to support and implement those decisions. In short, it makes a difference where and how a community talks about its future.

## Portland as a compact metropolis

What distinguishes Portland-area growth patterns from those elsewhere is the compactness of the city's urban development. Unlike many fast-growing metropolitan areas in the American West—such as Phoenix, Houston, and Las Vegas—Portland is still best understood from the inside out (see table 1). The metropolitan area remains strong at its center, whether the standard is regional economic leadership, cultural creativity, or political clout.

*Table 1. Portland Metropolitan Population, 1950 to 1995*

| Year | City of Portland | Metropolitan Area* |
|------|------------------|--------------------|
| 1950 | 374,000          | 705,000            |
| 1960 | 373,000          | 822,000            |
| 1970 | 382,000          | 1,007,000          |
| 1980 | 365,000          | 1,245,000          |
| 1990 | 437,000          | 1,478,000          |
| 1995 | 498,000          | 2,024,000          |

*Source:* For 1950 to 1990: U.S. Census of Population; for 1995: Center for Population Research and Census, Portland State University.

\*Four counties in 1950–80, five-county consolidated metropolitan statistical area in 1990, eight-county consolidated metropolitan statistical area in 1995.

### *Economic context*

Portland has developed as a regional metropolis for the Pacific Northwest. Historically it grew as a transportation, finance, and wholesaling center with a moderate-sized manufacturing sector turning regional raw materials into foodstuffs, clothing, paper, and wood products. The metropolitan economy added a home-grown electronics industry in the 1960s and boomed in the 1970s. The 1980s, in contrast, began with a severe downturn as a national recession hit the regional timber industry especially hard. Between 1981 and 1985, the metropolitan area lost more residents than it gained through migration.

The economic picture a decade later offered a sharp contrast. The mid-1980s brought a recovery in regional service businesses and a new surge of growth in electronics. The combination of affordable land, available skilled workers, and convenience to California and the Pacific nations made the region very attractive to outside firms. Led by Intel, seven major electronics manufacturers announced plans to locate in or expand to Portland in

1994–95 (Barnett 1995). Between 1983 and 1993, export-oriented manufacturing (primarily electronics) grew by 23,000 jobs in the metropolitan area, and overseas exports soared (Ertel 1996). Whether measured by job growth or unemployment rates, the region outperformed the U.S. economy as a whole every year from 1985 to 1996.

The downside of the boom has been uneven distribution of benefits and downward pressure on wages. In effect, migration of potential workers—attracted by the economy and regional amenities—has outpaced the needs of high-wage manufacturing. As a result, traditionally low-paying personal service jobs grew by 59 percent during the 1983–93 period, twice the rate of export manufacturing jobs. The result has been that real annual income per worker has not recovered from its mid-1980s trough while the demand for housing has increased (Ertel 1996).

### *Downtown*

Metropolitan Portland is anchored by a strong and viable central core, as might be expected in a regional finance and business center. The downtown is walkable and attractive. Visitors to the city nearly always start at the center. *Time* (Henry 1988), the *Atlantic Monthly* (Langdon 1992), *Architecture* (Canty 1986), and the *Los Angeles Times* (Kaplan 1989) have all reported on the strength of the downtown design, the careful conservation of a sense of place, and the enhancement of the downtown with public art. The *New Yorker* pointed to “closely controlled new building, the carefully monitored rehabilitation of worthy old buildings, [and] the vigorous creation of open space” as key factors in creating a city of “individuality and distinction” (Roueche 1985, 42). Downtown design earned a City Livability Award from the U.S. Conference of Mayors in 1988 and an Award for Urban Excellence from the Bruner Foundation in 1989 (Peirce and Guskind 1993).<sup>1</sup>

Beyond its attractions of place, central Portland has retained economic and institutional dominance in the metropolitan area. The central office core has increased its job total and upgraded average job quality over the past 20 years; the number of jobs in five core census tracts increased from 89,000 in 1980 to 104,000 in 1994. Downtown and adjacent districts claim nearly all the

<sup>1</sup> A not surprising reaction to all this good ink is a skeptical recharacterization of downtown Portland as a Disney-like theme park rather than a “real” place (Robert Shibley, quoted in Peirce and Guskind 1993, 80; Brueggemann 1992).

major metropolitan institutions and gathering places: museums (art, history, and science), a performing arts center, several major hospitals, a public university, a medical school, a stadium, a convention center, a new privately funded arena for the Trail Blazers of the National Basketball Association, Pioneer Courthouse Square for political rallies, and Waterfront Park for community festivals.

Business statistics also depict a prosperous downtown. Downtown Portland has an unusually high share of office space within its region. In 1989, it had 66 percent of the class A space in its metropolitan area, second only to downtown Pittsburgh and far above the 40 percent for all large office markets taken together (Hughes, Miller, and Lang 1992). Retailing data are harder to obtain because of a lack of sales tax data. Downtown's share of total area sales is declining, but core retailing remains strong overall. The 1995 vacancy rate for downtown retail space was 4 percent, and the store mix has become increasingly upscale in the 1990s, with Saks Fifth Avenue and Banana Republic arriving and JCPenney and Newberry's leaving.

### *Inner ring*

Portland lacks the "dead zone" of derelict industrial districts and abandoned neighborhoods that surrounds the high-rise core of many cities. Nearly 40 years ago, Hoover and Vernon (1959) identified the problem of "gray areas" in older cities—the old transitional zones that seemed to be falling out of the real estate market. Since then, most inner-ring districts throughout the United States have followed an up-or-out pattern, in which the only options are gentrification and abandonment.

Portland, however, has seen essentially no abandonment and only scattered gentrification. Many areas have retained old functions and attracted gradual reinvestment. Downtown Portland is bordered by viable residential neighborhoods at several economic scales, by neighborhoods in the making on waterfront industrial and rail-yard sites, and by strong industrial-wholesaling districts.

Several of the industrial-wholesaling districts were incorporated into the Central City Plan of 1988 rather than being excluded as irrelevant to a growing downtown. The Central City Plan identified which areas adjacent to the downtown to appropriate for intensified development for information industries and information workers (Lloyd District and portions of the west bank of the

Willamette) and which to stabilize for blue-collar jobs. In effect, the plan recognized that a seaport and regional trade center needs to push both paper and payloads. An innovative industrial sanctuary policy uses a zoning overlay to protect inner manufacturing and warehousing districts from incompatible uses such as big-box retailing. This industrial sanctuary policy is a powerful tool for avoiding the mismatch between the locations of jobs and housing that afflicts many metropolitan areas. In 1994, major employment centers within two miles of downtown added roughly 100,000 jobs to those in the central business district.

### *Middle ring*

Beyond the inner ring of apartment neighborhoods and industry lie Portland's streetcar suburbs, the residential districts that first developed between 1890 and 1940. In most cases, a third generation of families filled these neighborhoods in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. These neighborhoods support an unusually prosperous set of neighborhood business districts and strong public schools. The public school system that serves the city of Portland enrolls 92 percent of school-age children in its district, and suburban systems enroll even higher percentages. Median Scholastic Aptitude Test scores for the Portland schools compare favorably with statewide figures and exceed national medians.<sup>2</sup> In the face of substantial revenue reductions caused by statewide voter-mandated property tax cuts, there is yet no evidence of middle-class exodus to private schools.

The conservation of older neighborhoods is most striking in the West Hills, a large crescent of upscale houses draped across the steep hills to the west of downtown. Initially opened to residential development by cable cars, the West Hills became Portland's elite district with the advent of family automobiles in the 1910s and 1920s. For three generations, the affluent highlanders of King's Heights, Arlington Heights, Willamette Heights, Portland Heights, and Council Crest have enjoyed views of Mount Hood and 10-minute commutes to downtown offices. A good indicator of social status is education level; in 1990, more than two-thirds of the adult residents (age 25 or older) in the half-dozen neighborhoods that overlook downtown from the west and southwest had college degrees. Protected by elevation from the lower-income residents and mixed uses of the downtown fringe, successful businessmen, ambitious professionals, and heirs of

<sup>2</sup> Portland median scores (math/verbal) in 1996 were 522/514. Oregon medians were 521/523. U.S. medians were 508/505.

moneyed families have been able to maintain social status and leafy living without needing to flee to suburbia.

### *Outer ring*

Portland's suburbs have plenty of people (65 percent of those in the primary metropolitan statistical area [PMSA]), plenty of jobs (45 percent of those in the PMSA), and large stretches of standard postwar cityscapes. Workers leave standard model subdivisions and apartment tracts to battle clogged suburban highways in order to reach jobs in commercial strips and office parks. Power retail stores compete with precast concrete manufacturing boxes and landscaped corporate headquarters for prime acreage. Mile by mile, much of Washington and Clackamas Counties looks like the suburbs of Seattle or Denver.

In contrast to many other metropolitan areas, however, Portland's outer ring lacks metrowide public facilities and concentrated employment centers that rival those of the historic downtown. There is no equivalent to Houston's Galleria–Post Oak district or the Tysons Corner complex in the Virginia suburbs of Washington, DC. Specialists on the multinodal city can identify only one “edge city” (Garreau 1991) or “suburban activity center” (Cervero 1989), and those are flimsy examples at best.<sup>3</sup> Instead, the outer ring of the metropolitan area remains closely tied to the core through a radial highway system and a developing radial rail system.

Indeed, the key structural reason that the Portland suburbs remain supplementary employment and consumption arenas is the lack of a suburban beltway. In the 1950s, highway engineers decided to bring the city's first limited-access freeways into the center of the city and connect them with a tight freeway loop that hugged the edges of the central business district. The route took advantage of available or easily acquired rights of way and avoided the steepest parts of the West Hills. The economic consequence was to maintain downtown Portland and its nearby neighborhoods as the most accessible parts of the metropolitan area after the demise of streetcars and interurban railways (Dotterrer 1974). The eastern half of a suburban freeway bypass through the less fashionable side of the metropolitan area did not open until the 1980s. Plans for a southwestern quadrant

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<sup>3</sup> Garreau identifies the Beaverton-Tigard-Tualatin triangle and Cervero the I-5 corridor from Tigard to Wilsonville. These are overlapping areas in the western suburbs.

recently stalled in political traffic, and a northwestern quadrant that would violate parks and open spaces and require multiple bridges across the Columbia River is even less likely.

### *Minority neighborhoods*

Distant from both the rural South and Latin America, Portland in the 20th century has had small minority populations. Federally identified minorities (Asian, Native American, black, and Hispanic) constituted only 7.8 percent of the population in the three core counties of Multnomah, Washington, and Clackamas in 1980. By 1990, the figure had grown to 11.4 percent, largely as a result of large Asian and Hispanic migration. Portland is thus one of the “whitest” metropolitan areas in the nation.

As late as 1940, Portland’s African-American population totaled only 2,000. The black community grew to 20,000 during the shipbuilding boom of World War II and inched upward to 38,000 in 1990—8 percent of the central-city population and only 3 percent of the metropolitan-area population. Most of these new Portlanders replaced European immigrants in working-class neighborhoods on the east side of the Willamette River, where they were physically isolated from downtown Portland (Portland Bureau of Planning 1993). Since 1980, however, the black suburban population has increased more rapidly than the black concentration in north-northeast Portland, which accounted for roughly 75 percent of the total in 1990.

Partly because of their small numbers, racial groups are relatively well integrated on the neighborhood scale. Portland in 1990 had only six census tracts that were more than 50 percent African American (Abbott 1991a). Hispanics are scattered through lower-income city neighborhoods and live in large numbers on the rural fringe of the metropolitan area. Vietnamese are concentrated on the east side of Portland, while a substantial Korean population has settled in Washington County. The index of dissimilarity was 0.63 for black/nonblack, 0.21 for Asian/non-Asian, and 0.18 for Hispanic/non-Hispanic.

### **Politics of Portland area planning**

In Portland as in every other city, planning is a tool of politics. As both technicians and visionaries, planners depend on political support for plan implementation. Good ideas about urban form do not realize themselves; they take shape through public

decisions in which the community considers alternatives and makes choices. In Portland, those decisions have involved the construction of several interlocking and remarkably stable alliances around issues of urban form, and the following section describes the key steps and measures through which Portlanders have shaped their metropolitan area. Their political alliances have supported the creation of textbook examples of planning and growth management institutions. In turn, such institutions have provided both a focus and a forum for perpetuating and extending the political coalitions (Lewis 1996).

### *Context of coalition building*

These coalitions are products of the past 30 years. In the decade following World War II, Portland politics revolved around traditional battles between the old guard and reformers over police corruption, proposals for city manager government, and the acceptability of public housing (with the old guard emerging the winner). In the next decade, the drive wheel of politics was a long-standing tension between business interests on the east and west sides of the Willamette River, expressed in bitter electoral battles over the location of public facilities such as a coliseum and a domed stadium.

One reason for infighting over issues left over from the 1930s and 1940s was Portland's failure to catch the postwar economic boom. From 1945 to 1965, Portland was stodgy in social tone, cautious in leadership, and stingy with public investments. The neoprogressive political reform movements that spoke for new economic interests and transformed cities such as Denver and Phoenix bypassed Portland. Within the Pacific Northwest, Seattle consolidated its economic lead with strategic investments in the University of Washington, in the Century 21 exposition, in facilities to handle containerized cargo, and in community infrastructure. Saving rather than risking public funds, Portland grew much more slowly as a regional wholesale and service center (Abbott 1992).

The late 1960s, however, brought important changes. The rise of a locally based electronics and instrumentation industry and the expansion of business and professional services brought in highly educated outsiders, many attracted by environmental amenities and the outdoors as well as specific jobs. In combination with the newcomers, a new generation of voters with limited interest in old battles paved the way for a new set of political leaders with fundamentally new municipal and regional agendas

(Abbott 1983). Between 1960 and 1970, the proportion of Portlanders aged 15 to 34 increased from 22 to 30 percent. In partial response, the average age of Portland City Council members dropped by 15 years between 1969 and 1973. Voters made similar changes in other local governing bodies and in the city's delegation to the state legislature.

This generational turnover transformed many basic assumptions of civic debate. The core values of the older leadership had been formed by the tumultuous years that stretched from the mid-1920s to the mid-1940s. Their goal for the postwar city was social and economic stability. The newer leaders, in contrast, came of age during the optimistic years of the Great Boom of 1945 to 1974; they were more willing to risk new ideas and new public investments.

This local revolution in public leadership coincided with changes in the national dialogue about city planning and politics. Portland's new politics were informed by the urban renewal and freeway critics of the 1960s, who emphasized the value of small-scale and vernacular urban environments and the excitement of large cities. City planners rediscovered that downtowns were complex collages of subdistricts rather than unitary wholes. Both quality-of-life liberals working in the growing information industries and members of minority communities reemphasized the values of place and sought to make neighborhoods effective instruments of resistance to large-scale changes in the urban fabric. Within this changing national discourse, Portland stood out not for the content of its vision but for the effectiveness of its leaders in transforming the common vision into a comprehensive set of public policies and for constructing powerful political coalitions around several planning goals.

### *Downtown and older neighborhoods*

The 1970s in Portland were marked by the construction of a powerful alliance between downtown business interests and residents of older neighborhoods. The same sorts of forces that were affecting other U.S. cities in the era of the "urban crisis" drove the political marriage. Downtown parking was inadequate, the private bus system was bankrupt, and a new superregional mall in the affluent western suburbs threatened to end downtown retailing. At the same time, older neighborhoods were threatened by institutional expansion, schemes for large-scale land clearance and redevelopment, concentrating poverty, and racial inequities.

The chief architect and beneficiary of the political transition was Neil Goldschmidt, elected to the city council in 1970 and elected mayor in 1972 at age 32.<sup>4</sup> By the start of his first mayoral term, Goldschmidt and his staff had drawn on a ferment of political and planning ideas and sketched out an integrated strategy involving the coordination of land use and transportation policies. They were strongly influenced by the 1970 census, which showed how the declining proportion of middle-class families affected neighborhood diversity and city tax base. During 1973, 1974, and 1975, Goldschmidt's team brought together a variety of ideas that were waiting for precise definition and articulated them as parts of a single political package that offered benefits for a wide range of citizens and groups.

This so-called population strategy emphasized public transportation, neighborhood revitalization, and downtown planning. Improved public transit would improve air quality, enhance the attractiveness of older neighborhoods, and bring workers and shoppers downtown. In turn, a vital business center would protect property values in surrounding districts and increase their attractiveness for residential reinvestment. Middle-class families who remained or moved into inner neighborhoods would patronize downtown businesses, and prosperity would support high levels of public services. Neighborhood planning would focus on housing rehabilitation and on visible amenities to keep older residential areas competitive with the suburbs.

Preservation of a user-friendly downtown was the strategy's cornerstone (Peirce and Guskind 1993). Business worries about suburban competition and parking problems coincided at the end of the 1960s with public disgust with a blighted riverfront. In 1970 to 1972, an unusual alliance between city and state officials opened the opportunity to rethink downtown planning. Goldschmidt, as a city council member, and other city leaders worked with Governor Tom McCall and Glenn Jackson, an electric utility executive who chaired the state Highway Commission, to remove a multilane expressway from the downtown waterfront. The action fired imaginations about radical responses to other downtown problems. The younger generation of technically sophisticated citizen activists worked with city officials, downtown retailers, property owners, neighborhood groups, and civic organizations to treat previously isolated issues (parking, bus service, housing, retailing) as part of a single comprehensive package.

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<sup>4</sup> Goldschmidt served as mayor until 1979, when he became secretary of transportation in the Carter administration. He served as governor of Oregon from 1987 to 1990.

The resulting Downtown Plan of 1972, finished as Goldschmidt moved from the city council to the mayor's office, offered integrated solutions to a long list of problems that Portlanders had approached piecemeal for two generations. The plan was technically sound because its proposals were based on improvements in access and transportation; it was politically viable because it prescribed tradeoffs among different interests as part of a coherent strategy. Specifics ranged from a waterfront park and pedestrian-oriented design to high-density retail and office corridors crossing in the center of downtown. The ideas found strong advocacy in the mayor's office and an institutional home in the form of a downtown design review process (Abbott 1991b). Sixteen years later, the new Central City Plan updated the design elements and called for the careful extension of a thriving business core into downtown fringe areas (Krumholz and Keating 1994).

A second piece of the strategy was to recycle older neighborhoods built from the 1880s through the 1930s. The city used housing and community development funds and leveraged private capital with tax-free borrowing for an extensive housing rehabilitation program. Inflation of suburban housing costs in the 1970s also helped to retain families in older, affordable neighborhoods. Several neighborhoods between the downtown and the base of the West Hills experienced gradual gentrification by new residents looking for Portland's closest imitation of a sophisticated urban environment. The bungalow belt on the east side of the Willamette attracted a new generation of Portlanders looking for traditional city neighborhoods of 50- by 100-foot lots, trees, sidewalks, and stores within walking distance.

A political bargain with neighborhood activists accompanied direct investment policy. After a series of confrontations between neighborhoods and city hall in the late 1960s, the Goldschmidt administration decided to legitimize and partially co-opt neighborhood activists by incorporating independent neighborhood associations as secondary participants in public decision making (Berry, Portney, and Thomson 1993; Clary 1986; Cunningham and Kotler 1983; Hallman 1977). The acceptance and financial support of voluntary neighborhood groups have offered a partial alternative both to confrontational tactics from the grassroots and to top-down management of citizen participation from city hall.

The third element of the strategy was to shift investment from highways to public transit. A new Tri-County Metropolitan Transit District (Tri-Met) had absorbed the bankrupt bus system

in 1969. One of the key features of the Downtown Plan was a transit mall that drew on the experience of Minneapolis. Completed in 1978, the mall increased the speed of bus service and facilitated transfers. The second major transit decision was the 1975 cancellation of the so-called Mount Hood Freeway, a five-mile connector that would have devastated half a dozen lower-middle-class neighborhoods in southeast Portland. Most of the federal money was transferred to build a successful 15-mile light-rail line from downtown to the eastern suburb of Gresham.<sup>5</sup> At the start of the 1990s, Tri-Met's radial bus and rail system carried 43 percent of the workers who commuted into downtown Portland (compared with 20 percent in Phoenix, 17 percent in Salt Lake City, and 11 percent in Sacramento).

The "Goldschmidt coalition" and a consensual style remain basic facts of Portland municipal politics after 25 years. Both their formation and their persistence have been assisted by Portland's social homogeneity. Portland is a middle-class city of small business proprietors, skilled union members, managers, and professionals. Compared with neighboring Seattle, Portland has fewer instances of labor-management conflict. At the neighborhood and census tract level, Portland's social classes intermix at a relatively fine grain, with stable pockets of high-income housing adjacent to a variety of middle- and working-class districts. Recent comparative data on the segregation of the poor identify Portland as one of the most class-integrated metropolitan areas in the country (Abramson, Tobin, and VanderGoot 1995).<sup>6</sup>

The economic strength of the central city and the slow development of the suburbs also dampened the class dimension of city-county politics. The income gap between the central city and the suburbs is relatively small. Median family and household income patterns in the Portland PMSA can be compared with those in 24 other metropolitan statistical areas or PMSAs with 1990

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<sup>5</sup> Again, the Mount Hood Freeway was stopped by a downtown-neighborhood alliance. The self-interest of neighborhoods in the path of the freeway was obvious. At the same time, a significant segment of the downtown business community was convinced that centrally focused public transit improvements would be more beneficial than a second east-side freeway.

<sup>6</sup> Working with census tract data, Abramson, Tobin, and VanderGoot (1995) calculated a dissimilarity index and an isolation index for persons below the poverty level for each of the 100 largest metropolitan areas in 1990. In 1970, 1980, and 1990, metropolitan Portland had indices substantially below the mean for all large metro areas; its dissimilarity index in 1990 was sixth lowest among the 100 metro areas.

populations between 1 million and 2.5 million. Portland's ratio of metrowide family income to central-city family income was 1.14, below the middle value for the whole set of metropolitan areas (1.20). Using households rather than families, the Portland ratio of 1.21 falls below the midpoint for the set (1.28).

Within this homogeneous social landscape, even the highly volatile issue of low-income housing has been handled through consensus policies. Advocates for homeless persons and lower-income households have certainly had to battle for attention in city hall and downtown boardrooms. However, the Portland style is then to bring "well-behaved" advocacy groups into the conversation. Once on the team, such groups can trade acquiescence with long-term land redevelopment goals for substantial public commitments to low-income housing. In the 1980s, for example, agencies serving the homeless population of Portland's skid row (or "skid road," the preferred term in the Pacific Northwest) agreed to a cap on shelter beds in the district in return for a go-slow approach to redevelopment and an active program for relocating shelters and social services. In the mid-1990s, the Portland Organizing Project (an organization based in east-side churches that followed the strategies of community activism associated with Saul Alinsky) forced consideration of low-income housing as a component of a massive redevelopment of underutilized rail yards north of downtown. Once the development leadership recognized the power of this populist appeal, however, it moved rapidly to enfold low-income housing and its advocates into the "River District" planning process. In the Portland context, these processes are seen as team building rather than co-optation.

### *Central city and older suburbs*

A logical expansion of the Goldschmidt coalition has been the definition of common agendas by the city of Portland and key suburban cities. The coalition developed in the 1980s around planning for a four-spoke light-rail system. With the exception of weakly organized suburban manufacturers who prefer cross-suburb road improvements, the Portland area's civic leadership now considers strong public transit to be one of the axioms of regional development. The cities of Gresham, Milwaukie, Hillsboro, and Beaverton, along with Washington and Clackamas Counties, all recognize that light-rail links to downtown Portland offer strong development potential for secondary activity centers. In effect, leaders in these communities have chosen to

pursue a role as outlying anchors on radial transportation lines rather than as beads on a beltway.

The region's light-rail system began with an east-side line in 1986. Voters in the three-county core have since approved spending for a west-side light-rail extension (under construction) and for a north-south line (in the planning stage). Despite the argument of the *Oregonian* that light rail is essential for "Oregon's environmentally wise anti-sprawl policy" ("Yes for Roads and Rail" 1996), however, voters statewide rejected a state contribution to the north-south line. It is unclear whether the vote represents the first fracture in the city-suburb coalition, fallout from political infighting in Clackamas County, general antispending sentiment, downstate response to environmentally oriented ballot measures that could be read as antirural—or all of the above.<sup>7</sup>

Again, aspects of metropolitan social geography have facilitated a city-suburb alliance. The small size of Portland's racial minority populations and their dispersal through the metropolitan area have meant that city-suburban politics have not revolved around race and racial avoidance. Plans for intensified development in suburban communities do not carry an automatic implication of racial change. White Portlanders have still chosen suburban housing for a wide variety of reasons, but racial flight has not been prominent among them.

Another important context for transportation planning has been the growing importance of Metro, a regional planning and service agency with jurisdiction over the urbanized portions of Multnomah, Washington, and Clackamas Counties. Created by referendum in 1978 and given a home rule charter in 1992, Metro is the only regional government in the United States that has both an executive director and a legislative council elected directly. The seven Metro council districts are designed to cut across city and county boundaries and reinforce Metro's direct relationship with the voters (see figure 1). Metro responsibilities include direct management and provision of several services (zoo, regional parks, garbage disposal) and regional transportation and land use planning, with the legal authority to require local implementation of regional land use plans.

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<sup>7</sup> Since the project already has substantial tricity and federal funding, possibilities may remain for a pared-down project. The southern extension is particularly important for the regional coalition because Clackamas County has been waiting patiently in line behind Multnomah and Washington Counties.



*Farmers, environmentalists, and metropolitans*

The legal framework for Portland area planning, including the urban growth boundary (UGB), is set by Oregon's state system of land use planning. In 1973, the legislature established a mandatory planning program administered by the Land Conservation and Development Commission (LCDC). The legislation, which has survived numerous legal challenges and three statewide referenda, requires every Oregon city and county to prepare a comprehensive plan that responds to a set of statewide goals. The plans provide the legal support for zoning and other specific regulations, and LCDC can require local governments to revise unsatisfactory plans. Oregon thus operates with a system of strong local planning carried on within enforceable state guidelines that express a vision of the public interest.

In both its origins and its continued political strength, the Oregon planning system represents another persistent coalition that spans the Willamette Valley (Abbott and Howe 1993; Knaap 1994; Walth 1994). The original goal of Oregon Trail emigrants, the valley contains the state's richest farmland and its three largest cities (Portland, Salem, and Eugene). The movement for state-mandated planning originated in efforts by Willamette Valley farmers to protect their livelihoods and communities from urban engulfment and scattershot subdivisions, with their disruptive effects on agricultural practices. As the effort moved through several legislative versions between 1970 and 1973, fear of California-style sprawl and the possibility of a mini-megalopolis in the Eugene-Seattle corridor attracted Willamette Valley urbanites to the legislative coalition. The final measure drew overwhelming support from all parts of the valley.<sup>8</sup>

From the start, the statewide goals linked older urban-planning concerns to a newer environmentalism. The LCDC program rapidly evolved from a purely reactive effort to fend off erosion of the state's farm economy to a positive attempt to shape a particular urban form. Several goals have been of special importance for directing metropolitan growth: goal 3 on the preservation of farmland, goal 5 on the preservation of open space, goal 10 on access to affordable housing, goal 11 on the

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<sup>8</sup> Willingness to consider European-style constraints on metropolitan expansion has stemmed in part from a sense of physical limits unusual in the expansive West. The agricultural zone of the Willamette Valley extends roughly 100 miles north-south and 40 miles east-west. Valuable Willamette Valley farmland is thus an obviously finite resource, whose limits are brought home visually by the towering wall of the Cascade Mountains to the east and the dark green slopes of the Coast Range to the west.

orderly development of public facilities and services, goal 13 on energy-efficient land use, and goal 14 on the definition of UGBs to separate urbanizable from rural lands. Although very different in origins from Portland's city planning initiatives, the state program ended up blending the interests and combining the votes of urbanists, agriculturalists, and environmental advocates in a way that has mirrored and supported the similar alliance at the metropolitan scale. The Oregon Farm Bureau, environmental activists, and Portland politicians have been equally strong supporters.

Metro adopted the UGB for the Portland area in 1979. Supposedly embracing a 20-year supply of developable land, the UGB is intended to prevent sprawl by providing for "an orderly and efficient transition from rural to urban use" (Oregon LCDC 1990). Within the UGB, the burden of proof rests on opponents of land development. Outside the boundary, the burden rests on developers to show that their land is easily supplied with necessary services and not worth retention as open space or farmland. Studies indicate that UGBs around Portland and the other Willamette Valley cities have created a dual land market that assigns different values to acreage inside and outside the boundaries (Nelson 1986).

The UGB is coupled with goal 10, which essentially mandates a "fair-share" housing policy by requiring that every jurisdiction within the UGB provide "appropriate types and amounts of land ... necessary and suitable for housing that meets the housing needs of households of all income levels" (Oregon LCDC 1990). In other words, suburbs are not allowed to use the techniques of exclusionary zoning to block apartment construction or to isolate themselves as islands of large-lot zoning. By limiting the speculative development of large, distant residential tracts, the LCDC system has tended to level the playing field for suburban development and discourage the emergence of suburban "super developers" with overwhelming political clout (Toulan 1994). In the Portland region, a housing rule adopted by LCDC now requires every jurisdiction to zone at least half its vacant residential land for apartments or for attached single-family housing. In effect, the rule enacts a version of a fair-share program that hopes to reduce socioeconomic disparities between city and suburbs by manipulating density and urban form.

LCDC has also adopted a transportation rule that requires local jurisdictions to plan land uses and facilities to achieve a 20 percent reduction in vehicle miles traveled per capita over the next 20 years (Adler 1994). The rule flies in the face of the

explosive nationwide growth of automobile use. It requires a drastic rethinking of land use patterns and transportation investment to encourage mixed uses, higher densities, public transit, and pedestrians, thus reinforcing the light-rail strategy. It makes local land use planners and the Oregon Department of Transportation into allies while the federal Intermodal Surface Transportation Enhancement Act is forcing highway builders to rethink their jobs.

With the LCDC system as a framework, Portlanders through the 1990s have engaged in a prolonged and intelligent debate about metropolitan growth and form. Metro has been the lead agency for responding to expected population growth. Staff in 1988 realized that there was no established process for amending the Portland-area UGB, even though the state requires periodic review and anticipates incremental UGB expansion. The agency therefore designed a classic planning process to develop a "Region 2040" plan for up to a million more residents in the four core counties. The process was remarkable for the breadth of participation and included home builders, commercial real estate interests, and growth management advocates. It was also remarkable for actually changing ideas, starting as an effort to determine how much to expand the UGB and ending with a debate over how best to freeze or limit it.

The Metro council adopted the Region 2040 Growth Concept in December 1994, outlining broad spatially defined goals for accommodating anticipated growth over the next half century. The document reflects the national professional belief in compact cities by proposing to focus new jobs and housing in downtown Portland, in urban and suburban centers, and along transportation corridors; by identifying rural reserves to remain permanently outside the UGB (including farm and forest land and prominent natural features); and by adapting transportation improvements to the land use goals. The Region 2040 Growth Concept anticipates sharply increased population density in central Portland, in six regional growth centers, and along transit corridors (see table 2). Residential neighborhoods can expect only mild increases through infill.

Metro followed in October 1996 by adopting an Urban Growth Management Functional Plan to allocate nearly half a million new residents and jobs anticipated by 2017 within the UGB.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The Urban Growth Management Functional Plan is itself a component of a comprehensive Regional Framework Plan, which Metro is required by its charter to adopt by the end of 1997.

*Table 2. Proposed Population Densities: Region 2040 Growth Concept*

| Area Type                       | Density (Persons per Acre) |      | Share of Projected Increase (%) |          |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------|------|---------------------------------|----------|
|                                 | 1990                       | 2040 | New Households                  | New Jobs |
| Downtown Portland               | 150                        | 250  | 5                               | 22       |
| Regional centers                | 24                         | 60   | 3                               | 9        |
| Town centers                    | 23                         | 45   | 3                               | 7        |
| Transit corridors               | 18                         | 24   | 33                              | 19       |
| Main streets                    | 36                         | 39   | 2                               | 3        |
| Inner neighborhoods             | 11                         | 15   | 21                              | 8        |
| Outer neighborhoods             | 10                         | 13   | 17                              | 7        |
| Industrial and commercial areas | —                          | —    | 6                               | 25       |

*Source:* City Club of Portland (1996).

*Note:* Regional centers include large suburban downtowns and areas around superregional malls; town centers include smaller suburban downtowns; transit corridors include light-rail routes and major arterial highways; main streets include streetcar-era shopping streets and secondary automobile strips.

Under Metro’s 1992 charter, local jurisdictions must modify their own zoning and land use regulations to implement “functional plans.” In fact, a Metro Policy Advisory Committee (MPAC) of elected officials representing city, suburbs, and counties took the lead in sharing out the expected development. Created in the 1992 charter as a possible check on the Metro council, MPAC instead became a forum in which political leaders agreed to match each other’s efforts to absorb growth. The result was an agreement on the number of new housing units and new jobs that each jurisdiction would try to accommodate. Among them, Gresham, Milwaukie, Hillsboro, and Beaverton anticipate 50,000 new housing units, and Portland anticipates 70,000. Indeed, several mayors and county commissioners on MPAC publicly urged the Metro council to hang tough on growth management—a vivid demonstration of the strength of the city-suburb coalition around compact growth (Nokes 1996b).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The provisions of the plan include (1) housing and job targets for each of the area’s 24 cities and incorporated portions of 3 counties that will require higher overall densities, (2) requirements for minimum development densities for new housing averaging 80 percent of the zoned maximum, (3) exclusion of big-box

A compact urban form benefits the undeveloped landscape and natural systems as well as the farms. Environmental advocates are interested in growth management in Portland for the same reasons that spurred the formation of the LCDC. Relatively little urbanizable land remains between the suburban frontier and the edges of the Northwest forest. Environmental groups have therefore been strong supporters of a compact metropolis with its bias toward urban social and cultural values.

A representative issue was the West Side Bypass, a highway proposed to meet lateral transportation needs in fast-growing Washington County. The county's electronics industry strongly favored the bypass, as did state transportation officials. Expected opposition came from environmentalists unhappy with any highway system expansion as promoting wasteful auto-centered living. Other opponents worried that the proposed route, which looped through rural land outside the UGB, would inevitably encourage sprawl.

A group called 1000 Friends of Oregon, a well-established advocate for strong land use planning, took the lead in blending the environmental and planning criticisms. It used the bypass as the case study for the nationally funded study *Making the Land Use, Transportation, Air Quality Connection*, also known as LUTRAQ (1000 Friends of Oregon 1996). LUTRAQ extended costs-of-sprawl analysis of alternative urban forms to impacts on air quality and automobile use—with results favoring compact transit-oriented development. Over a period of several years, the combination of grassroots and expert opposition shifted the terms of the transportation planning debate and raised the political costs of the bypass to make it unpalatable to both county and state elected officials.

An ideological consensus about regional growth policy has therefore developed in parallel with the regional political coalition. The majority of involved citizens in both Portland and the suburbs share a basic vision of a metropolis that above all else is “not Los Angeles” and “not Seattle.” They agree that the best way to avoid the gridlock and endless subdivisions that characterize their West Coast neighbors is to support relatively

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retailing from industrial zones, (4) minimum and maximum parking ratios for new development, (5) a requirement that Metro develop specific affordable housing goals, and (6) a provision for UGB expansion if enough communities demonstrate that the targets will not work (Nokes 1996c). Critics argue that the plan actually involves substantial and unworkable increases from the density increases approved in the Region 2040 Growth Concept.

compact land development within the constraints of the UGB.<sup>11</sup> The agreement has been broad enough to attract the support of state-level politicians. In 1994, Governor Barbara Roberts issued an executive order giving priority to established downtowns and transit-accessible sites for new state offices. In 1996, Governor John Kitzhaber publicly supported government-business efforts to promote “compact, mixed-use development that provides transportation choices as a way to ensure our communities retain their livability” (Kitzhaber 1996).

In effect, the recent neotraditional vision of compact development has been layered on an environmental regionalism of the sort historically associated with Lewis Mumford (1939). The former draws from the planning and design communities that are the strongest advocates of “new urbanism”; the latter draws on scientific environmentalism, with its concern for sustainable natural systems. The result is a potent alliance between boulevardiers and environmentalists—friends of city life and friends of trees.

## **Costs of compactness**

The compact city is not a perfect city. Portlanders in the 1990s have identified several real or potential costs of current growth strategies that need to be explicitly addressed. As with most challenging public issues, these problems blend arguments over empirical data with conflicts over social and cultural values.

### *Loss of open space*

The mid-1990s have brought a rising awareness within the city of Portland that increased density will consume existing local open space and vacant land. With thousands of new housing units inside the city limits, many residents fear that there will be no breathing space, no rest for the eye. In specific instances, this fear pits the grassroots organizing goal of neighborhood stability against the metropolitan environmental agenda of limiting sprawl.

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<sup>11</sup> In 1994, Metro received 17,000 responses to a mail-in questionnaire about regional planning issues. Half the responses included additional write-in comments. The feedback strongly favored higher densities, smaller lots, and transit-oriented development.

In fact, the Portland region is making choices about types and locations of open space. Certainly the Urban Growth Management Functional Plan implies infill of vacant lots and empty parcels, some of them derelict industrial or residential sites in inner neighborhoods. Many of these informal additions to neighborhood open space will vanish. However, the Portland area has numerous large parks and extensive stream corridors close to its center (the problem of urban coyotes and suburban cougars that use these spaces became a public concern in mid-1996). In addition, voters in 1995 gave Metro a \$136 million bond issue to acquire potential parklands on both sides of the UGB. In broadest terms, the compact city model trades off neighborhood open space for quicker access to rural lands outside the metropolitan area.

The buried issue is not so much the amount of open space as its accessibility by socioeconomic class. As their property taxes pay off Metro's bonds, Portlanders will be buying suburban parks and preserves. As they cope with infill housing, they will be protecting farms and forested hillsides 15 miles away. Such spaces are great for hikers, mountain bikers, and weekend excursions. They are less useful for inner-neighborhood kids and summer youth programs.

### *Housing affordability*

Portland has a serious shortage of affordable housing for new households and working-class families. In the aggregate, housing prices rose rapidly in the 1970s, dropped during Oregon's prolonged recession in the early and middle 1980s, recovered in the late 1980s, and escalated rapidly in the 1990s. In constant dollars, the median sale price of a single-family house in the Portland area increased by 50 percent from 1988 to 1995, finally passing the previous high of 1979 (Joint Center for Housing Studies 1996b). The price of buildable land also rose rapidly. The median price of housing is still below that in most other West Coast metropolitan areas, but price increases have been especially troublesome because per capita income has been stagnant (Ahluwalia 1995; Nokes 1996a). As a result, Portland is one of the few large metropolitan areas where the median after-tax mortgage payment increased as a percentage of median income between 1990 and 1995 (Joint Center for Housing Studies 1996a).

A tight housing market has also led to explosive price increases in previously undervalued neighborhoods. In the early 1990s,

middle-class neighborhoods on the less fashionable east side of Portland closed much of the price gap with west-side neighborhoods. By the mid-1990s, families and speculators were hunting for rapidly disappearing bargains in neglected working-class and racially mixed areas. Commented one retired grocery checker from northeast Portland, “That’s the talk of the town, people coming over and buying up these houses. You look at all the people. They’re not black. I thought you people were too scared to come over in this neighborhood” (Mayer 1996, C1; see also Lane 1995).

Advocates of growth management and proponents of untrammelled markets can agree on many facts of housing price inflation but not the reasons for the increases. The region is still in the midst of the housing inflation, meaning that no one knows when and why the boom will end and what housing measures will look like at that point. Partly for this reason, there is not yet a thorough and conclusive empirical analysis. Instead, arguments are grounded in rival models and competing thought experiments based on different comparison situations and analogies.

The Metropolitan Home Builders Association and market advocates argue that the heart of the affordability problem is scarcity of housing as a product. A tight UGB is said to artificially constrict land supply and drive up the price of undeveloped land, with serious consequences for home prices (Mildner, Dueker, and Rufolo 1996). Support for their concern comes from comparative data for large metropolitan areas that show Portland with an extremely high rate of increase in median house price in the 1990s—higher even than Sunbelt cities such as Phoenix, Atlanta, and Miami, which have also grown substantially in the same period.

Growth management advocates, and Metro in particular, think that the essential problem has been booming demand rather than limited supply. They point out that Portland has enjoyed flush times and what may be a one-time influx of capital from a wave of California in-migrants in the early 1990s. Urban Land Institute data indicate that lot price increases in metropolitan Portland for 1990 to 1995 were in line with increases in numerous comparable cities from Albuquerque to Indianapolis to Charlotte. Advocates also note that Portland’s 46 percent increase in housing prices from 1990 through 1994 is not substantially different from Denver’s 41 percent increase or Salt Lake City’s 42 percent increase, neither of which can be attributed to government limitation of supply. They also note that Portland housing prices increased more slowly in the 1990s than in the

region's previous boom of 1973 to 1979, before the UGB took effect (Briggs 1997). Believers in a compact Portland also assert that expanding the UGB would be a temporary fix at best, with most land freed by such an expansion being used for large-lot developments. Instead, they argue on the basis of national studies and modeling that a compact city promotes affordability by reducing infrastructure costs and encouraging small-lot development, infill, and accessory units (Burton 1996; see also Downs 1992).

Behind the competing assumptions and assertions are alternative visions of the good city. Remembering that households rent or buy a neighborhood as well as a dwelling unit with each housing choice, UGB advocates can argue that compactness increases the value of the housing-neighborhood package by promoting more "real neighborhoods" along the neotraditional model. Those who argue for expansion might counter that a tight UGB reduces the value of the same package by making it more difficult to opt for "Green Acres," with its own bundle of social and environmental advantages.

There is also little doubt that maintaining a tight UGB interrupts the classic trickle-down approach to affordable housing. Traditionally we have assumed that upper-income families in search of newer and bigger houses will walk away from perfectly good neighborhoods and hand them down the economic ladder. This process has made some affordable housing available, but it has also tended to devalue working-class neighborhoods except when aggregate demand is very high. Indeed, the trickle-down model has seriously undercut homeownership as a capital accumulation strategy for the working class (Edel, Selar, and Luria 1984). With a tight UGB, the Portland area will be less likely to hand down cheap housing for new households, but also less likely to undermine the investments of many working-class and middle-class families.

### *Thank God for Clark County*

Does Portland do it with sleight of hand? In recent years, the fastest-growing segment of the metropolitan area has been Clark County, WA. Untrammled by Oregon's strict land use system, Clark County has been a safety valve that offers an easy location for residents and builders who like the low-density suburban model.

However, Clark County development patterns will be increasingly constrained by Washington's Growth Management Act

(Gale 1992). Passed in 1990 and amended in 1991, the act is mandatory for the state's large and fast-growing counties, including Clark. As in the Oregon system, the county is required to prepare a plan that responds to statewide goals, including creation of a UGB, although the state has limited power to alter the content of local plans. As the Washington State system is fully implemented in the late 1990s, the effects will be unpredictable. Substantial political conflicts over development and infrastructure within Clark County divide the older city of Vancouver, rapidly suburbanizing areas, and rural districts. Regulations that favor compact development patterns have the possibility of diverting growth pressure to Oregon and complicating the careful tradeoffs of 2040.

### *Unheeded voices*

Consensual politics leave little room for principled dissent, for they assume basic agreement on community goals. With all its virtues, the Portland style tends to muffle radically dissenting voices. Although advocates of the Portland consensus would disagree, it is possible that a pattern of co-optation stifles a serious hearing for good ideas by whittling away at genuine alternatives until they fit the mold.

One example is Portland's tradition of middle-class populism. Since the late 19th century, an economy of skilled workers and small businesses has nourished dissenting political tradition that distrusts professional expertise and corporate leadership (Johnston 1993). Nearly every mayoral and city council election shows a divide between the outer east-side neighborhoods and the central and close-in neighborhoods most benefited by the Goldschmidt package. In socioeconomic terms, the divide pits antitax populists against quality-of-life liberals. However, at-large elections and good-government ideology had combined to keep such dissent to a minimum. In the 1990s dissent has emerged instead in statewide antitax movements.

At the metropolitan scale, the Portland system has little room for new suburban economic interests. In many postwar metropolitan areas, such as San Jose and Orange County, CA, new suburban industries have been able to dominate suburban governments in the same way that downtown growth coalitions dominated central-city administrations and politics (Olin 1991; Trounstein and Christensen 1982). One result has been metropolitan fragmentation, but another has been an opportunity for new voices and forces to enter the political arena. In a sense,

loosely knit metropolitan areas have contributed to political pluralism, perhaps functioning as political safety valves.

In Portland, a physically compact and institutionally integrated metropolis has left little elbow room for new interests. As described, older suburbs are partners in the compact city growth alliance. The most important new economic interest to emerge in the past two decades has been the substantial electronics industry in Washington County. However, the industry has been particularly frustrated by its inability to promote lateral highways to help get suburban workers to their jobs (see the West Side Bypass story) or to secure local and state funding for a major engineering school in the western suburbs.<sup>12</sup>

Unheeded interests are the seeds for new political revolutions. If the Portland consensus erodes and collapses, the probable cause will be challenges from “outsider” groups that see no benefits from public investments and take no pleasure in higher density. The most likely countercoalition would combine antitax populists with local activists mobilized to defend moderate-income neighborhoods against higher densities and social changes (O’Toole 1996). Such a countercoalition would raise the banner of status quo against the changes in the urban fabric and infrastructure costs required by the vision of a compact city.<sup>13</sup> An example is a large section of eastern Multnomah County, where gradual infill and intensification of development now require sewer hookups. For established residents, who have used septic systems since the 1950s, growth means higher tax bills as well as congestion and social change.

Grassroots discontent is exacerbated by an unusual Oregon tax system. The state relies heavily on income taxes and local governments on property taxes, but neither level of government collects a sales tax. Growth drives income tax collections, but the public sector gets no benefit from the parallel increase in retail sales. At the same time, growth drives up real estate values and

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<sup>12</sup> Washington County contains the small, private Oregon Graduate Institute, with programs in the sciences and engineering. The large undergraduate engineering program of Portland State University operates in downtown Portland. Oregon State University’s graduate engineering programs are 80 miles south of the electronics heartland.

<sup>13</sup> An alternative countercoalition between east-side antitax populists and west-side high-tech entrepreneurs is less likely to be lasting. The two groups in the mid-1990s could agree on opposition to light-rail expansion, but their reasons were different. Antitaxers don’t want to spend the money; the electronics lobby would prefer to spend it on something different.

property tax assessments. One result was voter approval of 1990 and 1996 ballot initiatives that curbed property tax increases.

## Lessons from Portland

A final issue is the generalizability of the Portland experience. What is there in the Portland story that other communities might want to imitate, and what problems or complications might they seek to avoid? Which aspects of Portland's planning and growth management efforts realistically hold the potential for imitation?

The preceding discussion has repeatedly singled out civic consensus and political will as the forces that have pulled policy fragments into a coherent and effective strategy for Portland metropolitan development. It is clear that most American cities have access to the technical and policy tools they need to maintain centered metropolitan areas. The achievement of a compact and efficient urban form is a solvable issue of the sort that James Q. Wilson wrote about 25 years ago:

These problems ... fiscal imbalance, traffic congestion, air pollution, the movement of jobs away from minority groups ... are susceptible to rather precise formulation and study; alternative ways of coping with them can be conceived and evaluated with a certain rigor; the obstacles to remedial action are primarily political (and to a certain degree economic) ... what is most important, something *can* be done. (Wilson 1970, 398)

With Wilson's challenge in mind, what advice might other cities draw from Portland's admittedly peculiar history of municipal and regional policy making? Are there useful lessons for Louisville civic leaders, pointers for Pittsburgh politicians?

In looking for generalizable lessons in Portland's history of planning and policy making, it is useful to bear in mind that Portland in the aggregate is not a unique metropolitan area. Many aspects of its economic base, social geography, and demography certainly set it apart from the typical city of the South or Northeast. However, it is not *sui generis*, despite its "whiteness" and its muted class divisions. In particular, Portland bears many similarities to a number of "middle American" cities, including Indianapolis, Des Moines, Minneapolis–St. Paul, Omaha, Denver, Salt Lake City, Sacramento, and Seattle.

*Variability of housing tastes*

Economic models of housing and land markets tend to project past consumer preferences into the future. We know from other consumption arenas, however, that tastes and behaviors change—that millions of Americans can decide to grind out their cigarettes, or that four-cylinder Hondas can push Roadmasters and Rocket-88s out of American driveways.

Portland in the 1990s shows that tastes for housing are similarly flexible and that suburban large-lot housing fails to satisfy a large segment of the market. Although standard suburban housing has remained plentiful, old neighborhoods with tightly packed houses have also become hot spots. New row houses, small-lot subdivisions, and upscale downtown condominiums jump off the market. A series of demonstration projects and market subdivisions in 1995 and 1996 have successfully offered a variety of configurations of individually owned small-lot housing. One example is a suburban development of freestanding houses on 2,500-square-foot lots that have sold out before completion. Another is a demonstration project on a vacant half-block in a middle-income Portland neighborhood. Its 18 row house, courtyard, and duplex units with average floor area of 1,200 square feet sold within months.

Anecdotal evidence from other cities also shows the breadth of the housing market. Many households still prefer freestanding houses on relatively large lots. However, the range of preferences for alternative styles and configurations is more varied than appraisers and bankers are willing to allow, especially as the structure of households becomes more varied. A yet undetermined proportion of home buyers are willing to trade extensive private space for high-quality public space.

*UGBs as planning tools*

UGBs in various forms have become popular solutions to metropolitan planning problems, frequently proposed in tandem with the principles of neotraditional design and the new urbanism. UGBs or their equivalents are found in several state planning systems, such as those in Washington and New Jersey, and have been adopted or advocated for cities as diverse as Boulder, CO, and San Jose, CA. In fast-growing metropolitan areas, they can prevent explosive deconcentration of urban activities. In stagnant regions, they can maintain market focus on areas that are already urbanized and perhaps slow class segregation.

The Portland experience offers several additional suggestions about the use of UGBs. First is the reminder that growth boundaries are long-term commitments, not quick fixes. They work best when they are part of a planning implementation package that includes public transit investment, infill development, and affordable housing strategies. In Oregon, such coordination is formally mandated through a planning program in which growth containment operates in conjunction with efforts to achieve 13 other statewide planning goals.

Like all planning tools, UGBs need to be flexible enough to respond to changing circumstances. In Portland in the mid-1990s, the UGB has become a symbol as well as a tool. Many residents now regard it as a metaphor for the region's ability to control its own future in the face of global market forces. If the idea of a "frozen" UGB becomes a politically untouchable absolute, however, the region will lose adaptability and may invite future problems of congestion or housing affordability.

### *Value of incrementalism*

Portland has built its particular urban form and its supportive institutions of planning and growth management through a series of small decisions. The decisions and institution building that have shaped the Portland of 1996 had their beginnings in the late 1960s. During these three decades, residents of the Portland area have moved one step at a time, addressing problems in sequence rather than trying for a comprehensive one-time solution to a complex set of concerns. They have also built public institutions incrementally. An example is the evolution of Metro from the Columbia Region Association of Governments (CRAG) in 1966, addition of the Metropolitan Service District (MSD) in 1970, modification of CRAG in 1974, merger of CRAG and MSD into Metro in 1978, and further expansion of Metro's authority and independence in 1992.

Other cities might also think about the value of incremental approaches to growth management. It is common wisdom among community organizers that it is vital to start with small but winnable issues to build community confidence and political momentum before tackling the hard problems. The Portland experience suggests that an analogous approach may be relevant for citywide and regional planning and growth management.

*A habit of planning*

Incremental policy making has allowed Portlanders to develop a habit of planning. Portland's civic community is comfortable and familiar with planning processes, issues, and terminologies. Planning issues are part of the civic discourse and a staple of local news reporting to an extent unusual in other cities. As Department of Land Construction and Development staffer Mitch Rohse puts it, "the ethos or culture of land-use planning has absolutely permeated the population" (Hylton 1995; see also Abbott 1994).

Metropolitan areas frequently take a single well-publicized swing at defining a regional agenda. Examples in recent years have been the Civic Index Project of the National Civic League and newspaper-sponsored reports on metropolitan issues by Neal Peirce. The Portland experience suggests the importance of following such highly visible activities with continued discussion through ongoing newspaper coverage and through conferences, meetings, and specialized publications sponsored by local institutions. These institutions might be urban universities, government agencies, or nonprofit advocacy organizations (such as 1000 Friends of Oregon or the Regional Planning Association of New York).

This conclusion draws support from the experiences of other cities where repeated discussion and promotion of a set of policy alternatives and the underlying public values have shifted the center of political discourse over time. An example is the gradual acceptance of neighborhood-based growth management in San Francisco after 1975 (DeLeon 1992; McGovern 1993). The appropriate forums and sponsors and the most pressing issues will vary from one metropolitan area to the next, but the principle of gradual and persistent education is constant.

*Institutionalizing good ideas*

The impacts of civic discussion and education can be reinforced by the creation of institutional or organizational homes for good planning ideas, making the procedures of planning and growth management into everyday routines. In 1973, for example, the Oregon legislature followed the Progressive Era tactic of depoliticizing governmental decisions in the interest of "good government" when it placed the state planning system under an independent commission. The Portland area offers other examples of the bureaucratization of good planning, including the

regular participation of neighborhood associations in Portland planning decisions (Adler and Blake 1990), the application of design review to downtown development (Abbott 1991b), and the depoliticizing of metropolitan transportation decisions (Edner and Adler 1991).

In the Portland area, planning bureaucracies have brought strong community movements into regular relationships with other interests. They have helped to channel high levels of public concern into accepted procedures designed to implement a community consensus. At best, such procedures equalize access to public decision making and tend to reduce the privileges of wealth. In their turn, the presence of strong municipal and regional institutions for planning and policy formulation facilitates the good-government habit (Lewis 1996).

### *Coalition building*

The central point of the preceding analysis is the importance of building stable political coalitions for moving a metropolitan regional agenda. Portlanders share a political culture that considers policy alliances and team building to be the normal way of doing public business. Nurtured in nonpartisan political institutions for local government, the Portland style prefers protracted discussion and negotiation to ideological battles and electoral confrontation. At its worst, coalition politics ignores and isolates pockets of dissent in favor of a soft middle ground. At its best, it involves a search for a common public good that transcends the summation of individual and group interests.

As described for metropolitan Portland, city-level coalitions nest within regional coalitions. An important result of Portland's city-level planning initiatives, for example, has been an ability to avoid viewing downtown and neighborhoods as rivals in a zero-sum game. Urban politics nationwide has frequently pitted advocates of neighborhood needs against proponents of downtown development, with both sides fighting for the attention and resources of city hall. Examples of this polarization can be drawn from every part of the country—from Chicago (Suttles 1990) to San Antonio (Abbott 1987), Seattle (Bello 1993), and Los Angeles (Davis 1992). Since the 1960s, in contrast, Portlanders have recognized that the Goldschmidt strategy makes every district within five miles of the central business district into a winner. The city-suburban coalition has a similar basis—a belief that there is enough growth for both city and suburbs to negotiate

equitable cuts and to make such potentially explosive issues as fair-share housing politically palatable.

Portland's bias toward centrist coalitions can be framed in the perspectives of urban political theory. In Peterson's terminology (1981), neighborhood and downtown interests unite around a carefully balanced developmental agenda rather than fighting over redistribution of resources. In the terms of Logan and Molotch (1987), downtown and neighborhood interests come together as parts of a mild-mannered growth machine. The same analyses apply to the city-suburban growth management coalition.

It is unlikely that the basis for coalition building will be the same in other metropolitan areas, where different issues may be foremost in the public mind. Another commonly suggested catalyst for assembling a metropolitan coalition, for example, is equitable sharing of city and suburban tax resources (as in the Minneapolis–St. Paul region). In a different community, it might be the creation of political bridges across racial divides. Whatever the issue, the need for long-term commitments to a broad public interest argues strongly for networks of community support that outlast the short-term election cycle. Self-conscious coalitions built on shared visions of a community's future potentially have the necessary staying power.

## Conclusion

An appropriate headline to capture the Portland experience would be "City and Suburbs Talk to Each Other—and Often Agree!" The growth management process in Portland in the late 1990s reflects a political culture that values coalition building over electoral confrontation and balances the brokering of economic and political interests with a serious regard for rational argument. Portland's ethos also assumes that it is possible to find common goals and goods (if not necessarily a unitary public interest). Mayor Gussie McRobert of Gresham (the second-largest city in the Portland area) comments, "In Oregon we have a tradition of being able to set aside our individual interest for the broader good of the community" (Hylton 1995, 117). A few years earlier, a prominent economic and civic leader challenged an audience of citizens to hold fast to a "moral obligation to the idea of Oregon" (Abbott 1994, 205). The point is not that Portlanders are saints, but that the political culture allows such statements to be part of the dialogue.

The organization and character of the public realm are thus the key variables that make Portland different. This analysis is not intended to be self-congratulatory. This discussion has made clear that the Portland consensus has significant limits and blind spots. Nevertheless, the experience suggests that the specifics of policy and planning decisions need to be embedded in a “thick” environment of discourse and debate and to be thought through as civic choices by citizens and officials. In concert with recent ideas about social and civic capital (Putnam 1993), these discussions should engage multiple groups and utilize multiple forums—the formal citizen participation process for public agencies, neighborhood associations, civic organizations, and a wide range of issue-advocacy groups.

One of Portland’s key lessons is thus less about growth management than about democracy. Its planning debates are about specific goals, but an underlying function has been to build a sense of community and to provide opportunities for exploring common interests. Other metropolitan areas might emulate what is best about Portland by engaging in rich and vigorous democratic discussion about *their* most salient issues—about ethnicity and equity, or economic transition, or fair sharing of public resources.

These suggestions resemble the theoretical work of Habermas (1984) and its adaptation to planning by Forester (1989) and Innes (1995, 1996). Habermas’s theory of communicative rationality places reiterative discussion at the center of civic life. Experts learn from citizens and citizens from experts in a continual refining of ideas; the public realm takes on a life and value of its own. The achievement of consensus becomes a valuable and positive product in itself—not a compromise among conflicting interests, but an understanding of common needs and goals. In this light, the Portland experience is ultimately an argument for the value of talk and the power of democracy.

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