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Future of Portland

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Return to EB

Prediction is an exercise in which you rarely succeed.

"It is foolish to say that it is necessary to zone Guilds Lake for fear someone might desire to erect a residence in the mire."

Commissioner Mann

Portland City Council

(During debate on the proposed zoning ordinance February 28, 1920.)

Commissioner Mann's vehement assurance that nothing would ever be built "in the mire" of Guilds Lake makes him appear foolish to those in Portland who witnessed residential construction in the Guilds Lake area barely 25 years after his assertion and who may now see the 2nd generation of industrial buildings there. But if missing a prediction makes you foolish, who can avoid the label of fool?

There are other examples.

"Ultimately it may be learned that Front Street, or even First Street, must be widened, and a thoroughfare from the north to the south boundary [of the City] along the river be constructed."

Morning Oregonian Editorial

December 10, 1919

Not only was Front Street widened, Harbor Drive was added, then taken away. Now some argue that Front Street should be closed. All that happened in 50 years. Who could have predicted such a turn of events?

So, I will make no predictions -- or at least only a few.

What follows is my own personal judgment of the important issues that will face Portland in the next decade -- not a long time in the history of this City, but a time which could include more than the usual number of major decisions.

If you asked everyone you met a single question, "What do you think Portland should become?" you would obviously get a lot of different answers. But one theme would undoubtedly run through many of the responses: "Portland is a great place now, or at least it's not a bad place. I'd like to keep it this way." Each and every one of those who held this general view might offer you many specific ways in which improvements could be made. But, by and large, people like Portland. A recent public works survey of almost 500 residents of Portland confirms this assessment. Almost 94% of all respondents said Portland was an "excellent" or "pretty good" place to live. Only 1 out of the 500 said Portland was a "poor" place to live.

So it's not a question of changing Portland drastically as it is in many of our mature metropolitan central cities. It's a question of how do you maintain what is already basically good?

If you then ask everyone you know how to maintain what is already basically good about Portland, you will again get a common theme running through the responses: "just keep it like it is; don't change anything too much."

In fact, it is not possible to keep everything like it is. Things over which the City and its residents have no control are changing every day. We will not necessarily maintain a quality of life which we value in Portland by doing what we have always done. In some cases, it is clear that we must change our ways and there are signs that these changes are underway. In other cases, we literally cannot afford to do things the way we used to.

There will be many major issues before the City and its residents in the next decade. The quality of life and residence in Portland will be affected by our decisions on these issues. Exactly what that quality to be maintained is, how it can be maintained, and at what cost are important questions before this community. In many of these important decisions, part of the cost will be changes in the way we do things.

Transportation

The City of Portland -- as a major interest in the region -- will make some major decisions in transportation over the next decade.

The problem is a familiar one.

Individuals in this region will continue to buy and drive cars. The number of trips by auto will increase. The major impact of these auto trips will be during two hours of the day as residents go back and forth to work.

In order to provide a standard of mobility equal to that which the residents of the region now enjoy, many prescribe substantial improvements and additions to our highway system. Unfortunately, these investments amount to more than we can afford and, if we could afford them, would only induce additional auto travel and additional investment -- again, which we can't afford.

The plain truth in transportation is becoming plainer every day. We can no longer afford the level of auto mobility we have grown to expect.

This region will invest about \$900 million in transportation facilities in the next ten years -- \$300 million on transit facilities, \$600 million on auto facilities.

This investment package will add pitifully little to our existing transportation system. In fact, the State Department of Transportation estimates that this multi-million dollar investment package will not add enough facilities to serve -- at present standards -- all the trips that are expected to be made in 1990.

The result is obvious and simple: we are going to spend a lot of money in the next decade -- most of it on highways -- but that will not be enough to avoid increased congestion on those same highways. And if our experience tells us anything, it's clear that no amount of money spent on automobile facilities would be enough to avoid increased congestion.

For those who would admonish local officials to do something, I would answer that building I-205 and I-505, the Banfield and Sunset busways, and the Oregon City light rail line in 10 years will be a considerable accomplishment -- more than has been done in any other 10-year period in this region's history.

Equipping and operating a transit system to increase ridership 4 times in 10 years will be an equally significant accomplishment. It isn't that nothing will be done -- it's that what has to be done to avoid congestion on our streets is much more than we can or will do.

We will spend \$900 million over the next decade trying to make drivers' lives a little easier two hours a day. More congestion

will come upon us slowly and without pain. We will leave our children with only a little less mobility than we have now.

Of course, mobility is not the only measure of quality of life that is affected by a transportation system and its operation. Sixty years ago the major arteries of this City were electric trolley lines, which operated with a minimum of noise, and virtually no air pollution. The Burnside Bridge carried as many pedestrians in and out of the downtown as it did private autos. And, most important, only a fraction of the daily trips of today were made at all.

If individuals continue to seek greater and greater mobility as a personal goal, we will never effectively serve the public goal of maintaining low levels of air and noise pollution, and high levels of pedestrian safety and comfort. In that sense, those who complain of traffic in their neighborhood and yet drive a car in their neighborhood are at odds with themselves. But is that necessarily the way it has to be?

Clearly not. If the institutions and individuals of this region could agree to staggered work hours, that would do more than any other single thing to preserve our auto mobility. Local governments of this region could agree to regional land use patterns which reduced the number and length of trips needed to

serve our needs. And if individuals made fewer auto trips, in vehicles not as loud nor as dirty (and, probably, not as powerful) as those we drive today, and if the streets were designed so that pedestrian safety were an objective equal in importance to driver safety; and, finally, if the noise and speed of individual vehicles were cut to a fraction of what they are today, much of the auto's adverse affects on the neighborhoods of the City would disappear.

These changes are not easy for anyone. But to maintain the quality of our air, to avoid increases in noise and to reduce the danger of auto and pedestrian conflicts, this city and region will have to overcome the addition of an estimated 800,000 trips each day by the year 2000. That's a tall order.

Without changes in private and public attitudes and laws as well as in vehicles and driver habits, there will be both a deterioration in mobility and a deterioration in the environment surrounding the transportation system -- and multi-million dollar investment programs will not permit us to avoid that outcome.

Housing

In 1970, an average new apartment in the Portland area rented for \$160 per month, and households earning \$8,320 or more annually could -- without undue burden on their budgets -- occupy this housing. In 1975, the same new apartment rented for \$235 per month and only households making \$12,220 or more could afford to occupy this new rental housing.

In 1970, an average-priced new home sold for \$23,000 and -- under usual rules of thumb -- could be purchased without undue burden on the budget by households making \$11 - \$13,000 annually. In 1975, the same new house cost \$33,000 and households must now earn \$19 - \$22,000 annually to be able to afford that new house.

Less than 15% of all households in the City of Portland could afford to buy a new home in 1975. Less than half (40%) of all households in the City of Portland could afford to live in a new apartment.

Costs of developed land, construction and financing have increased so much faster than income in the last 5 years that a great majority of the Portland population can no longer afford to buy or rent new housing. As a result, more are renting or purchasing existing units or staying in the ones they have.

Fewer units are built. A large proportion of the population must rent. Prices and rents for existing units increase, relatively rapidly, as competition for the existing units increases. The price of existing homes in the Portland area climbed from \$23,710 in 1972 to \$31,000 in 1974, and this figure is not likely to drop in 1975.

Thus, both new and existing homes are being priced out of the reach of all but a few households of the City. For a great majority of Portland households, if they are looking for housing they are looking for an existing rental unit - the only choice they have under their financial circumstances and that of the local housing market.

On the positive side, the condition of housing in Portland is relatively good. City estimates show fewer than 20% of all units in some way substandard. Further, almost all of these units could be rehabilitated. This is not a usual circumstance in a major American central city. The housing stock in Portland is pretty good, and keeping it pretty good would not seem to be an impossible task. Yet, the numbers are startling.

About 28,000 units in the City are substandard by the City's estimate. Even if all of these units could be rehabilitated, the City would still need about 8,000 new units to increase the vacancy rate, provide for new households in the City and take care of households displaced by public action.

So that's our immediate need -- to rehabilitate about 28,000 substandard housing units and building about 8,000 new units.

To meet that need we have pitifully inadequate public resources -- enough to assist in the construction of about 1,200 new units and the rehabilitation of about 3,500 existing units in the next 3 years. At this rate -- and if no new needs emerge -- it will take over 20 years to meet our immediate needs!

Obviously, our immediate needs are not going to be met immediately, if ever, and the outcome of the various forces in our housing market locally should give us all pause. Rents and prices for good housing will continue to go up -- at rates greater than increases in income.

Households will be required to spend more and more of their budget on housing. In fact, they have been increasing the share of their budget going to housing since at least 1940. But there's a new twist now. Households will have to spend more to get less. In earlier decades households have committed more and more of their budget to housing and they were getting, as a result, more and more housing -- more space, more "frills", etc. But new housing is getting smaller in area and fewer "frills" are included as builders and developers attempt to keep costs low enough so that middle-income households can still afford to buy.

Some households simply cannot afford to pay more. These households will undoubtedly be looking for units with less space and lower cost as well as units at less than standard condition -- if the units are lower in price or rent as a result.

Those who pay an inordinate amount of their income on housing are a special problem.

There are about 145,000 households in the City of Portland today. About 30,000 of those households are paying more than 25% of their gross income for rent (almost 20,000 households are paying over 35% of their income for rent). To get some idea of their predicament, take 25% of your gross income and compare that with your present expenditures on housing. Then ask yourself what you would be prepared to give up in order to pay that much rent. If costs continue to rise at rates greater than income, these households will surely increase.

This body of Portland residents pose a major challenge. Only generous public subsidy will assure standard housing at rents they can afford. In the next decade, the City (and the State) will be asking more and more the same questions: How much can we afford to subsidize housing? In what ways can housing be subsidized? Should low-income housing problems be alleviated by subsidy to housing or subsidy to low-income households? I don't know the answers.

How much land for growth?

There are presently about 200 square miles of the region devoted to the urban needs of about 1.1 million people. At that rate, should we expect that growth to 1.8 million people by 2000 would necessitate another 150 square miles of land to urban needs? Probably that is the most urban land this region will need in the next 25 years. Thus, in 2000 we would be a region of almost 2 million people using about 350 square miles of land.

An analysis of this region's local plans and zoning ordinances, however, produces some interesting figures. About 500 square miles of land in this region is now classified as urban and developable by local plans and codes. Over 5 million people (some estimates are as high as 10 million people) could be accommodated by the extent and density of residential development permitted by those local plans and codes. As an example, the City of Portland's zoning code permits over 1 million people if the City is developed at that density which is allowed. That's 2 1/2 times our present population.

I have never heard anybody say we should house 5 million people in this region. That is 5 times the population! Yet, our plans and codes permit such growth.

The Columbia Region Association of Governments is now developing -- with the assistance of local governmental agencies -- a proposed

urban growth area which will add about 150 square miles of urban land for the expected 700,000 new people in this region by the year 2000. The establishment of an urban growth boundary will then call for local plans and codes which are reasonable in their expectations for growth and, therefore, less wasteful of the land in this region.

The establishment of this urban growth boundary is not just to assure efficient use of land, but is also meant to preserve for the residents of the region one of the truly remarkable qualities of this metropolis -- ready access to the rural and the natural. It would be easy to lose this characteristic of the Portland region. Remember, in the next 25 years almost as much land is slated for additional urban needs as has been urbanized over the last 100 years. This is an obvious change occurring well within the lifetime of all residents. Exactly what land is urbanized, and where, could make a crucial and highly-visible difference to all the residents of the region.

But the establishment of an urban growth boundary cannot be sustained unless the cities and counties of this region agree. It is not usually the practice of either to limit the area of their growth on behalf of limits on the growth area of the region. A change in this practice is required and this is a profound change. But can we afford not to change?

Maintaining the City's neighborhoods

It may sound corny but it's nevertheless true, and often forgotten: the city is the people. The neighborhoods and districts of this city -- where people live and work -- deserve special attention. In the next decade, some of these neighborhoods will be openly challenged by a host of problems -- many real, some perceived.

The major question is not whether the City will help or even how much it can help. The major question is the extent to which neighborhoods can help themselves.

An important part of that question is the extent to which neighborhoods can do more than oppose. Everyone is familiar with the typical chronology of a neighborhood organization. Some event in the area threatens to disrupt the neighborhood -- a zone change, a freeway, a hospital expansion, etc. A group forms to fight the intrusion, the battle rages until decision by City Council or other body. After several months the organization withers and usually dies -- unless another issue comes along.

Will these same neighborhood organizations be able to go on to positive and constructive efforts in their areas? The answer is far from clear, but there are some hopeful signs.

The Northwest District Association (NWDA) now has a plan which was adopted by City Council. The Model Cities Planning Board (MCPD), the Corbett-Terwilliger-Lair Hill (C-H-LH) Planning Committee, the Homestead Neighborhood Association and the SW Hills Residential League all have neighborhood plans before the Planning Commission or City Council. The St. Johns Community Committee and the Buckman Community Association are carrying out City-financed improvement programs in their neighborhoods, as are NWDA, MCPD and C-T-LH. A coalition of seven inner-southeast neighborhoods are in the beginning stages of planning.

All of these efforts are positive attempts to develop a program for improvement of the neighborhood. All have required substantial commitments of time and resources by both the City and the residents of the neighborhood. And in all cases the responsibility of the City for the improvement or maintenance of the neighborhood have been specified. But in no case did they clearly answer a crucial question: what will be the responsibilities of the residents of that neighborhood? The answer to that question will, in my opinion, largely determine the extent to which our urban neighborhoods become the great neighborhoods they could be.

An example should make this clear.

Take a residential neighborhood of some 3,000 housing units -- a neighborhood about the size of Buckman. If each household

invests \$25 per month in his house or yard, the total investment in that neighborhood reaches almost \$1 million annually. No public body can spend that much in Buckman each year, year after year after year. So the residents of that neighborhood must believe strongly enough in the area to invest their time and money. The City can help with incentives to private investment and some small amounts of public money, but, ultimately, if there is no resident investment going on, there is nothing going on.

So it is crucial to the residents of each neighborhood that they devise ways and means to help themselves.

The idea of neighborhood associations, I think, is a good one. Whether these associations can lead neighborhood residents to positive accomplishments in their areas over the next decade will be the correct test of their usefulness.

Local Government Services

Maintaining the quality of City services in Portland is an important part of maintaining our quality of life. And this is not just a problem for Portland. It is becoming true for every local government in the region.

A recent report of the Joint Economic Committee of Congress makes the statement, "the picnic is over for state and local governments... For the next couple of years, tax increases and service cutbacks will be the rule, not the exception."

It's not hard to understand why this is occurring. Local government expenditures are heavily payroll -- much of which is tied by union or other agreement to price rises. Other expenditures are rising equally as fast. It now costs cities four times as much to borrow money as it did 25 years ago. Local revenues, on the other hand, are typically unresponsive to inflation -- rising much slower than costs.

In the City of Portland, costs are rising at 8% per year, revenues are rising 4%. That disparity cannot go on. In 5 years, at that rate, we would be \$19 million in the red. A variety of actions will need to be taken in order to keep local budgets balanced: some services will have to be removed or reduced, services necessary to maintain will have to be provided at less cost than before, and some increases in revenues will have to be found.

Mayor Goldschmidt's 1975-76 budget proposal to the City Council is an example that more and more local governments in this region will be following. In that budget, savings through efficiency and minor service level reductions permitted a net reduction of 78 positions and avoided costs of over \$1 million. At the same time, several minor adjustments in rates and fees produced an additional \$1 million in revenue.

This kind of balancing will continue throughout the next decade. The major issue will be whether the residents of this City will agree to a revenue source which responds to inflationary rises in costs of legitimate service needs. The Mayor's Revenue Advisory Committee headed by the late Terry Schruck, recommended that the City ask for voter approval of a 1% tax on individual and corporate income.

The Committee, in their report, recognized that "...proposed income tax increases in the past have met with voter resistance..." Obviously, such a proposal will meet with voter resistance again. But the choices are fairly clear. Without revenues which keep pace with inflation, services must be reduced. The City -- without additional resources of this kind -- will employ about 200 fewer people in 1980 than they did in 1970. This would require an obvious reduction in services.

So maintaining the level of police, fire, park and public works services of the City will not be easily accomplished -- and

certainly not at the prices we now pay. In the next decade, the voters will decide.

In addition to the taxes the City of Portland assesses to pay for general services, it sets and adjusts rates on goods and services provided. An important good sold by the City of Portland is water. Major decisions will be made about the quantity and price of this commodity in the next decade.

The Water Bureau of the City of Portland supplies almost 650,000 people in this region with about 90 million gallons of water every day. The quality of this relatively pure and soft water is possibly higher than that delivered to any other major city in this country.

The system which supplies this water began in 1895 as a single conduit with a capacity of 25,000,000 gallons per day feeding four reservoirs in the City with a combined storage capacity of 65,000 gallons. It has since grown to 3 major conduits -- with a combined capacity of 225 million gallons per day -- feeding 6 reservoirs and 56 tanks of standpipes -- with a combined capacity of 250 million gallons.

A few days during the summer of each year, this system operates at capacity attempting to fill peak demands. In addition, some parts of the present service area are growing, and per capita water use is increasing. The demand for water has been

increasing as a result. In the 25 years since 1950, total demand has just about doubled -- with most of the increase in demand coming about as a result of growth in the suburban parts of the water service area (east Multnomah and eastern Washington Counties).

Will continued growth in population and economic activity within the Bull Run service area eventually lead to the need for expansion of the present system? If so, how much would this cost, and who would pay for it?

This is a major decision for the City of Portland. Some of the improvement programs proposed by a consultant cost more than the value of the entire existing plant -- some 90 million dollars.

If expansion is necessary for new users, the cost of adding to -- and then maintaining -- the water system will increase. At the same time, new users are assumed to help pay the cost. If enough new users are assumed, water rates could be lowered for all.

On the other hand, suppose new users do not materialize as expected, or suppose per capita water use goes down as water rates go up -- as they must in any event. The result could be higher than expected rates to all -- including City water users.

To complicate the matter, some consideration should be given an alternative to the expansion plan -- a program to improve, repair and maintain the existing system that will assure the long life of what is now an excellent municipal water supply system. And this choice between expansion and improvement of an existing system occurs throughout City services.

Most of our basic physical plant in the City is well past middle age. It takes more than the usual effort to repair it and it needs repair more often than it did in its younger years. The investment this City has already made in water lines, pumps and reservoirs; sewer pipes and treatment facilities; and local streets and sidewalks should not be lost by allowing these facilities to deteriorate beyond recall.

Deferred maintenance must be stopped. The City's existing facilities have got to be maintained. We can't afford to replace these facilities. Our grandchildren will be even less able to afford replacements. In the next decade, the need for increased expenditures on maintenance and repair will get clearer and clearer. We can pay now when its easy or....

Summary

In summary, it may appear that the quality of life in Portland is sure to deteriorate. In fact, the quality of our existence in the City of Portland is deteriorating. But it doesn't have to. There are things that can be done. In the next decade, the leaders and residents of Portland will make some important choices. How they choose will determine whether Portland will continue to be "...a good place to live...."