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The Road to Damascus

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The Road to Damascus

by Liona Tannesen Burnham

This spring, clusters of lawn signs and dueling websites were the online and offline symptoms of a divisive debate about the future of Oregon's second-newest city, Damascus. Signs next to red barns, farm fields, businesses, and homes urged voters to oppose or support the city's comprehensive plan. Blue-and-yellow signs proclaimed "Our Values, Our Plans. Vote for 3-375." Hand-screened

and printed signs with American flags on top urged no votes: "Metro's Values. Metro's Plan."

This plan is more than just a piece of paper in a bureaucratic process. Called "Envision Damascus," it creates the outline of a city of nearly 35,000 residents by 2028, more than three times the current size. And on May 17, fifty-two percent of the 6,548 registered voters in Damas-

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cus rejected that plan by 65 percent to 34 percent. More voters turned out for this special election than for any other special election, except incorporation, City Manager Dan O'Dell said.

But what does that rejection mean? Were residents voting for deer in their back yards or against stream set-backs? Were they voting for property rights and low taxes? Were they voting for planned growth, if it's inevitable? Were they voting for local control? Is growth coming, like it or not?

The short answer is, "Yes, probably."

Because Damascus is now within Metro's Urban Growth Boundary for the Portland region, the city must help absorb new residents. The Portland region created an urban growth boundary in the late 1970s, and the goal is to create dense growth within the boundary to protect farmlands and forests from suburban sprawl. However, Damascus also is exploring whether the boundary could be moved to keep it rural.

Farms, buttes, and sweeping views of the mountains characterize Damascus, which occupies 10,833 acres between Gresham and Portland. Damascus did not become a city because the residents have a burning desire to pave over the nurseries and strawberries fields to become walkable, sustainable, and dense little city. Instead, they incorporated in 2004 as a defensive move after Metro extended the Urban Growth Boundary in 2002 to include the area that became Damascus. They hoped to maintain more local control over the way they grew, but residents do not share a single view of how to grow.

The area must "grow up" to become an adult city even though most residents moved there for the rural character and community, Damascus City Council Pres-

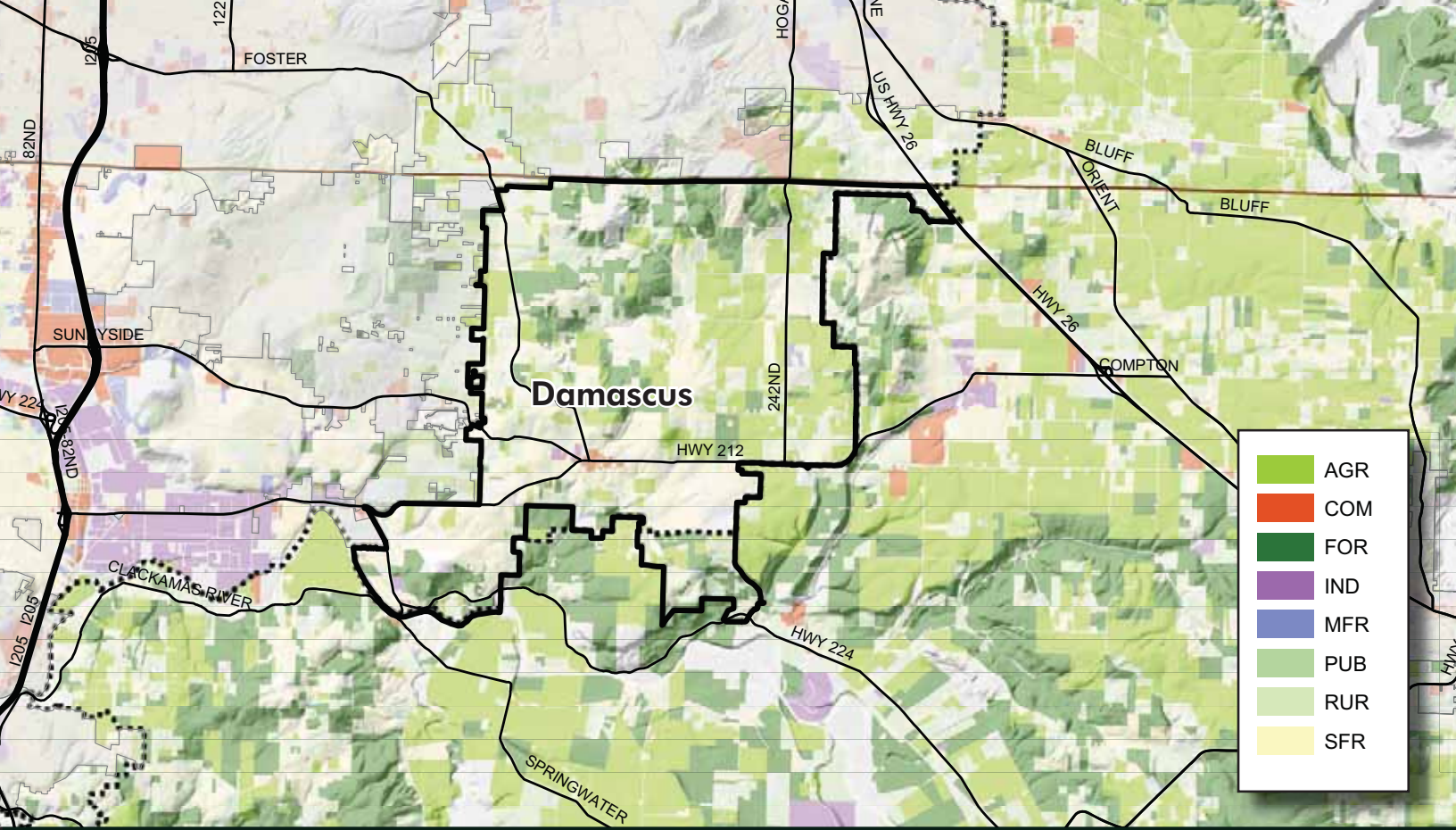
ident Diana Helm said. "Oh my gosh, folks. It's a big pill to swallow."

"The city is divided, and now the City Council must determine exactly what the voters were saying," Helm said. Mayor Steve Spinnett said the bottom line is that the community drew a "line in the sand" that placed him on one side and all of the other city councilors on the other side. "The community agreed with me," Spinnett said. The City Council approved the comprehensive plan in December when Spinnett was the mayor-elect.

Ask Damascus – an organization described as "free market and local control organization" by founder Dan Phegley – wrote the petition, which asked voters whether to approve the Damascus Comprehensive Plan and Maps. Ask Damascus is an affiliate of the conservative national group Americans for Prosperity, according to the state chapter's blog. The group – which includes Spinnett – urged voters to say "no" to the comprehensive plan. The Taxpayer Foundation of Oregon, a state group that advocates for small government and low taxes, also urged voters to say "no."

On the other side, Save Damascus, a group that says it supports measures that fit with the city's eight core values, urged voters to approve the comprehensive plan. The group's website includes a list of sixty-plus neighbors who support the measure, as well as responses to "misinformation."

Ask Damascus and Save Damascus do seem to have a shared vision of the future they do not want. The Save Damascus Facebook page includes an image of a development-encrusted hillside next to a barren field and the words "Damascus 2030 and no comprehensive planning?" The Ask Damascus Facebook page reposted the photo with the comment "all



I see is high density housing with alot of green space hmmm why does that sound familiar lol.”

The question is which path leads to their nightmare scenario.

Damascus Now

Twenty-two years ago, Damascus began the process of becoming the first city in Oregon to incorporate in recent history. The area’s pastoral reverie was broken by the news in 2002 that Metro intended to extend the Urban Growth Boundary to include 12,500 acres in the Damascus and Boring areas. Since Damascus’ farmland is not among the best in the region, the area was a prime candidate.

After a series of meetings and plans, Damascus residents decided the best way to control their destiny would be to incorporate and so they voted to do so in 2004. Since the city was born to stymie the new density requirements, “The yes vote was

rooted more in fear than in hope,” Damascus Community Development Director Anita Yap and Dean Apostol, a resident and Save Damascus member, wrote in an article for the “Oregon Planners’ Journal” in 2009.

Damascus’ 10,539 residents are somewhat older and richer than the Portland region or Clackamas County as a whole. According to the city’s data, in 1999, Damascus residents had a median income of \$67,070 to \$72,016. The median age is 43, according to the 2010 U.S. Census. Ninety-one percent own their homes. In 2011, the median home sale price so far is \$245,700, according to Zillow, a real estate website. As Damascus creates itself, the city faces unique opportunities and challenges.

“It’s kind of a blank slate, but 10,000 people live out there,” Yap said.

Damascus does not have a traditional



Damascus will never be a Jimmy-Stewart-esque downtown with tidy blocks of houses hugging it.

downtown. The city has five school districts, two fire districts, and two water districts. The City Hall is in a strip mall with a Bi-Mart. The city also is divided by geography. Buttes, valleys, and creeks mean that Damascus will never be a Jimmy-Stewart-esque downtown with tidy blocks of houses hugging it.

Landscape nurseries with ornamental cherries, maples, and firs spread out across the valleys and at the top of the buttes. Roads wind swiftly down under tall maples covered in moss. On clear days, snow-covered mountains may be visible beyond the farm fields.

Along state Highway 212, you can buy groceries at the Bi-Mart or the Safeway, a pair of carved wooden dolphins for your yard from a roadside stand, home decorating supplies at Helm's store, Terra Casa, and a few other items. But residents

head out of town if they want to go out to dinner.

That and much else may change in the future with a new comprehensive plan. The state requires every city to have a comprehensive plan. Damascus residents have spent six years critiquing plans for their city and creating the most recent comprehensive plan. The process has not been a smooth one.

All of the city's officials and the planning commission were brand-new. Learning how to make decisions about the future of the community when they had not seen the process before was challenging, Yap said. She was the fourth planning director in two years, and O'Dell is the sixth city manager. The city started without even a stapler in the Sunset Water Authority building, said Helm, who joined the City Council in 2007. The city needed

about two years to get up and running, Helm said.

The Future of Damascus?

Damascus started with a large challenge – not only did it need to start acting like a city, but it needed to create a plan for its future within Metro’s rules and the framework of the Oregon Land Use Planning program. Metro requires a certain amount of density, Metro spokeswoman Patty Unfred said.

“They have a lot of authority within their city in terms of how and where they put it,” Unfred said. Metro’s role is to provide enough density to accommodate the region’s expected growth.

The comprehensive plan that the voters rejected in May would consolidate the growth to preserve natural resources.

“It’s really kind of a nice concept,” Yap said. “The idea is that people could still live in a little village community and still have natural resources around there.”

Metro recommends 10 units per acre for medium-density growth, but the Damascus plan calls for eight units per acre for medium density. The plan calls for village centers rather than one central downtown and one home per acre on the buttes. It also preserves some of the area’s natural features.

One of the disputed parts of the plan is 100- to 200-foot stream buffers that limit development. The stream buffers are a part of a plan for ecosystem services. Since the city does not have water and sewer lines already, it could decide to provide the services differently.

Ecosystem services are “provided by the natural environment and are of value to humans,” according to the city. The benefits include storm water management, trails, easements for sewer or water lines, and wildlife corridors, Yap said. Part of the idea is to avoid costly retrofitting

because of issues with salmon-bearing streams – Portland has spent millions, she added. The vision of the city in the 205-page comprehensive plan and the map is the result of six years of work. The city, county, residents, and consultants created several previous plans, but this one is not an amalgamation of those, Yap said. The community “developed and designed” this version, Yap said. The other versions did not involve enough community input, she added.

It is based on eight core values. The city selected these values by holding small “coffee klatch” groups to discuss their values and vision for the community.

But not all members of the community believe that this comprehensive plan reflects their views. In fact, the opponents have a vocal and visible opponent.

Key Sticking Points

Mayor Spinnett has several key concerns about the comprehensive plan, although other members of Ask Damascus have different concerns. His overarching concern is that the City Council focused on particular ideologies rather than on serving the public – they would listen but then proceed with their own ideas. This issue leads to three specific concerns:

◆Stream Setbacks

The 100- to 200-foot stream setbacks are too large. Spinnett does not want stream setbacks for trails or public infrastructure without cash compensation to property owners. Spinnett wants more flexibility for property owners with unique situations. Rather than balancing the economic, energy, and environmental needs, Spinnett said this plan focuses too much on the environment.

◆Cost

Spinnett also would like an approximate price tag for becoming a full-fledged city and to know who will foot the bill. It’s not

... there is not enough funding for infrastructure needed in existing communities, let alone build a new one.

wrong to need to pay for sewer hook-up, for example, he said, but “lay it out early and with transparency.” Ask Damascus founder Dan Phegley also is concerned about the high price tag and who will pay it.

Creating the infrastructure for the city probably will cost \$3.5 to 4 billion, Yap said. Those numbers are “high-level” estimates based on Clackamas County’s research, Yap said. However, the city needs a comprehensive plan and then master plans for water, sewer, etc., in order to determine the cost.

Developers would pay for part of the cost for new infrastructure. The estimated cost to new developers would be \$40,000 per unit, the highest in the state, Yap and Apostol wrote in their 2009 article for the “Oregon Planners’ Journal.”

Phegley said he doubts that new businesses such as a 7-Eleven would choose to open in Damascus if they needed to pay high developer’s fees to put in sidewalks, sewers, and other infrastructure.

That concern is shared by Yap and Apostol. In their article, Yap and Apostol wrote, “the projected cost of new infrastructure may be prohibitive ... there is not enough funding for infrastructure needed in existing communities, let alone to build a new one.”

◆Citizen Input

Although there have been surveys, coffee klatches, and many public meetings, Spinnett said there was not real “heart” to hear from the public.

“I think the most important thing is the heart,” Spinnett said. “If government legitimately wants to know and to be on the side of the people, people will respond positively.” Carefully structured meetings informed the public about the plan but did not offer enough opportunities to listen to the public, Spinnett said.

Council President Diana Helm said the city won awards for citizen involvement and that the “No” vote was “heartbreaking.” The plan represents thousands of hours of work, she said. “A small, vocal minority is trying to stop any of it,” Helm said.

Spinnett does not want the comprehensive plan scrapped, but he does want it improved through more public involvement.

Phegley agrees that people should have a voice in the plan – and that they should know what they are buying and the cost before having the opportunity to vote on it. However, Phegley would like to see a larger overhaul of the entire process.

◆Metro

“We have to get Metro out of it,” Phegley said. “We don’t want them dictating to us.”

Metro’s expectations for density are unrealistic and destroy the characteristics that made Damascus appealing to Phegley and his neighbors, he said. Phegley moved to Damascus after Portland annexed the mid-county area he lived in.

“Many of the citizens are refugees of Portland,” Phegley said. They like the area’s low density and do not want low-income apartments, Phegley said.

Ask Damascus discussed trying to elect a new Metro councilor to the regional government but decided that the Portland bloc would outvote anyone else, he said.

Part of a tax revolt?

The comprehensive plan vote is only one of many Damascus petitions written and sponsored by Ask Damascus. Ask Damascus is affiliated with the conservative national organization, Americans For Prosperity. From 2007-2010, Americans for Prosperity donated nearly \$12,000 in cash and about \$1,400 of in-kind contri-



butions, according to Orestar, the Oregon Secretary of State's campaign finance database. The organization did not contribute to the comprehensive plan campaign.

However, the Americans for Prosperity's Oregon website included the rejection of Damascus' comprehensive plan in its list of "tremendous victories for AFP's local Chapters across the state." The Damascus comprehensive plan was one of a half-dozen measures Clackamas County voters rejected.

Ask Damascus also has received support from the Taxpayers Association of Oregon, which is a group that advocates for limited government and taxes.

Save Damascus' largest contributor was DEH LLC, which contributed \$4,000, and PGE and New Seasons, which each contributed \$500. They also did not have any large contributions this year.

One of Ask Damascus' key petitions that passed requires Damascus citizens to vote on every new tax or fee. Other cities in the area do not have a similar requirement. That requirement is a struggle, City Manager Dan O'Dell said. The law was retroactive, so the city submitted its fees to the voters in November 2008. The voters said "No."

The city is exploring ways it could make the process less time-consuming, O'Dell said. For example, it could include a cost-of-living increase in building fees, but voters would need to approve the initial building fee.

What is next?

The city's future is not clear. What is clear is that Damascus will not become a booming metropolis any time soon.

◆ More Citizen Input

The first step seems to be agreed upon.

Apostol, who owns five acres of farmland, said he hoped for a “scientifically valid” poll to determine why the comprehensive plan was not supported. Helm agreed.

“We need to find out what the no vote meant,” Helm said. “Is it no to this plan or no to any plan?”

The city hired a Tom Eiland of CFM Strategic Communications Inc. to help create a survey. O’Dell said the city hopes to find out why citizens voted yes, why citizens voted no, and what they think about the cost issue. Eiland provided the city with a draft of the questions in mid-July and the city plans to administer the survey the first week in August.

The city also is moving ahead with a process, which already was planned and required, to allow individual property owners to request changes to the map and comprehensive plan. These changes must impact the property owner’s own land. The process likely will involve the Planning Commission and a recommendation to the City Council, O’Dell said.

“Each citizen has an opportunity to contest what is on the map,” O’Dell said.

◆ **Making Decisions**

The city also has created a spreadsheet of the issues to help the City Council to make decisions. For example, Spinnett’s concern about the riparian setbacks is one of the issues on the spreadsheet. The Council will consider the issue; what the current plan says; pros and cons; the legal considerations, process, decision, and policy; and survey results.

“We are developing a decision-making process so that we can move forward,” O’Dell said.

The Council also is moving ahead with another part of this process – city staff has drafted a report called the “Environmental, Cultural, Economics, and Energy

Report.” The report will flesh out many of the issues surrounding the comprehensive plan, O’Dell said. The report examines how you “balance economic fairness and protecting natural features,” he said. The City Council is reviewing each chapter now.

◆ **New Council?**

Phegley has little faith in the City Council’s ability to make the best decisions for the citizens. “My hope is – although it is fading fast – that the City Council would listen,” Phegley said. “It appears that they just have an agenda and seem to want to do planning by force.”

Phegley said that the next step should be to replace the Council so that citizens will be heard. The comprehensive plan vote was a “no-confidence” vote for the council, and it indicates that citizens do not trust the City Council, Phegley said.

◆ **The Process**

Meanwhile, the city still is required to have a comprehensive plan. The four-year deadline for a new city to create a comprehensive plan has passed. The City Council could just decide to ignore the vote, which is advisory, and re-approve the comprehensive plan, but Ask Damascus also could re-submit the plan for voter approval.

“It’s felt like the wheels have stopped on this planning process,” said O’Dell, the city manager.

Expecting a brand-new city to create a comprehensive plan within four years is unrealistic, O’Dell said. Even in the 70s when all of the existing cities were required to do it, only two or three completed the plans within four years, he said. The city is expected to bring a new version of the comprehensive plan back to the state’s Land Conservation and Development Commission sometime in 2012, Yap said.



The citizens chose to incorporate in order to gain some measure of control ...

◆ Disincorporation

Another member of Ask Damascus – Josh Lattin – mentioned on OPB’s Think Out Loud program that many residents support disincorporation.

Spinnett and Phegley do not favor disincorporation because it would remove the local voice. The density requirements would not vanish if the residents disincorporated. Helm said that a Damascus plan would allow the residents to shape the growth in the area.

“The citizens chose to incorporate in order to gain some measure of control,” Apostol said. “It turned into just saying ‘no.’”

Apostol said that personally he had mixed feelings about Damascus’ incorporation within Metro’s Urban Growth Boundary. Basically, he is happy with the area the way it is now, but if the area

needs to become a city, he does not want “just a haphazard suburban mess” but the “best possible city.”

◆ Moving outside the UGB

The city is exploring the process and ramifications of removing Damascus from the urban growth boundary. A City Council member asked if that is a possibility, and city staff is researching the possibility. If Damascus did that, then rural zoning rather than urban zoning would apply. The residents would not be able to subdivide and sell their lots as easily, but the rural character would stay in-tact.

Spinnett fell in love with Damascus at a wedding in the area. The outside wedding looked across the valley. Spinnett said he thought, “I would like to live out here.”

Several years later, his family moved into a house they built on 11 acres. They had the beauty of the area, and it was close enough to Spinnett’s business in Southeast Portland. That was 18 years ago.

“It’s kind of the best of both worlds,” Spinnett said. “I live on the end of a gravel road.” **M**

Liona Barnham is a Portland-based freelance reporter and teaches writing at two community colleges. She has also reported and copy edited for several newspapers in Washington state.