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FIVE QUESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

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We suspect that every generation views its times and challenges as tougher and more challenging than any preceding time. Sometimes the issue is money, others it's that elusive sense of leadership, or even "the vision thing." Nonetheless, it's less about what times used to be like that matters, and more about what we'll do with the hand we've been dealt. Fundamentally, it's about the future.

As we reviewed the materials now in your hands, we identified a number of issues, five to be precise, that will distinguish or diminish the prospects for this region in the future. Certainly, other readers would likely focus on different issues. This is our cut, and we encourage you to seek your own story for the future out of the presentations in this edition of the Metropolitan Briefing Book. The challenge for our time, as for any time, is to present our take on the present and the future in plain view. The more stories, the better. The more stories, the more robust the conversation, and the better chance that we can move forward with purpose and conviction as a metropolitan community.

In that spirit, we present the following five key questions for the future of our region:

1. How will we link education, the economy, and our place?

In every edition of the Metropolitan Briefing Book, the changing nature of the economy has been a common thread. As a smaller share of people actually earn a living from our abundant landscape, it may appear that the linkage between economy and place has weakened. Similarly, as the best paying jobs require both knowledge and the ability to come up with new ideas, access to the regional economy requires education and training like never before. Has the bond between place and economy been replaced by the link between education and economy?

A closer look reveals that the characteristics of this place still offer a strong foundation for the region's economy. The bioregion is still a fundamental reason

for being here. The notion of our region as not just an economic unit, but as a cultural region, continues to draw people from around the world—people with creativity and innovation that have become a critical resource for the future in all sectors (services, agriculture, high tech, etc.).

For years this region has depended on living off of the educational investments made by other places. In the future, this will be harder to do as we compete with other places for the best talent. Further, for residents who lack education and skills, economic prospects will become increasingly dim. Consequently, we need to begin to put education and the economy together in a new equation based on human capital and community quality of life. How will we do it? What does a 21st century connection between education, the economy, and this place look like? Can we strategically engage these issues in ways that we haven't in the past?

2. How will we accommodate the next million?

Our region is growing. Not, perhaps, as quickly as other places, but growing, nonetheless. In the next 30 years, our metropolitan area of about 2.1 million is expected to exceed 3 million residents. No matter how soon they arrive, what should still be true about living in this region when our population jumps beyond what we can currently imagine? Will the addition of 1 million people happen via the addition of the equivalent of two "Cities of Portland," or will we come up with a different equation?

This is no academic question. Certainly the path of least resistance is to simply wait and see what happens. However, deliberate thought and many deliberate actions created today's metroscape. Do we want to trust our luck and default to passive observation as our future unfolds? If we actually have some preferences about how it all turns out, now is the time to say something.

3. How can we make the most of the realignment of our “city-suburbs” thinking about this region?

It used to be that our conception of a metropolitan area was based on a central city surrounded by suburbs. For most of the last 50 years, the notion was that if the city was doing well, it was at the expense of the suburbs, or that if the suburbs flourished, it was only at the expense of the city. However, people no longer live “jurisdictional” lives. We all live, work, shop, recreate, and socialize in regions of our own devising—regions that differ from those of our neighbors. In this region, we have planned for growth in both Portland and surrounding communities, and we’ve seen it happen. Fundamentally, we’ve moved beyond the typical, oppositional city/suburb model used to describe most US metropolitan areas to one characterized more accurately as “polycentric.”

This polycentric lifestyle has a number of advantages. Since 1996, vehicle miles traveled per capita have generally been declining, indicating that a broader range of functions and activities are being found closer to everyone’s home. We’re more likely to interpret the relationships between our communities as collaborative than competitive. How can we leverage this new sense of function and interrelationship into a competitive advantage for this metropolitan area? We already have some of the shortest commutes in the nation among metropolitan areas our size. And the differences between city and suburban incomes are smaller than those found in many other metropolitan areas. Rather than viewing these as emblematic of trends playing out elsewhere, how can we utilize these new dynamics, arrived at largely by design, to make us more effective functionally and competitively in the future?

4. How will we articulate, nurture, and leverage the ties between the metropolitan region and the states?

Institutionally, politically, historically, and culturally, we are part of the states of Oregon and Washington. What does that mean in today’s world?

We continuously hear and observe that metropolitan regions are the relevant units of global competition. Although we often tell the story of our metropolitan region as if it were an independent unit, the unreality of that story is made readily apparent every time we hold an election or a meeting of the state legislature. Our challenge

as a region is to figure out the story of the states, and the contribution that we make to that larger context. Further, we need to understand both what we’re a part of and what we’d like to be a part of—we won’t be allowed to go it alone. The current environment of confusion, tension, and outright hostility associated with the so-called “urban/rural divide” has become an unacceptable distraction, particularly as we attempt to address the other questions on this list. Strategically, we are part of two states and the bi-national Cascadian bioregion. For too long we’ve either ignored or simply tolerated these affiliations. It’s high time we put them to work and use them to shape our preferred future.

5. Can we transcend the last several decades of declining trust in “the public” and government in particular?

Community quality of life is a collective achievement. In a similar sense, economic competitiveness emerges from what we do here together. Our metropolitan region faces huge challenges, some of which are outlined above. Citizens are increasingly concerned about health care and education, and by most accounts they expect public entities to act to secure greater predictability for households and communities. We haven’t lost our belief that government has an important role to play, but we seem unsure of what our public institutions can and should achieve.

Perhaps the most crucial challenge for elected officials and all units of government is to understand the trust placed in them, and to live up to it. Recent election results reveal a real reservoir of hope and optimism in our collective inhabitation of this place. Glimmers of a stronger public sense of purpose remain. Can our institutions deliver? Are we as citizens, inhabitants, leaders and followers able to make more of the whole than we have in the recent past?

As has been said, “there are a million stories in this city, and this is just one of them.” Getting the story right isn’t nearly as important as making the attempt to have one in the first place. We offer these issues as a summary of the story we find in the 2007 issue of the Metropolitan Briefing Book. We look forward to making more of the sum of the parts here in the future, not just with this publication but with this vital place we’ve chosen to call home.

IMS MISSION STATEMENT

The Institute of Portland Metropolitan Studies is a service and research center located in the College of Urban and Public Affairs at Portland State University. The mission of the Institute is to serve the communities of the Portland-Vancouver metropolitan area and to further the urban mission of Portland State University by:

Identifying the most pressing issues facing this metropolitan area and its communities, and developing the data and other information needed to fully communicate their scope and significance;

Building capacity in the region to address critical metropolitan issues by:

- *brokering partnerships among faculty, students, and area communities to foster new understanding of and/or new strategies for addressing those issues; and*
- *acting as a catalyst to bring elected officials, civic and business leaders together in a neutral and independent forum to discuss critical metropolitan issues and options for addressing them; and*

Developing new resources to support research and service activities needed to meet those objectives.

By acting effectively on this mission statement, the Institute will enable the:

University to help advance the economic, environmental, and social goals held by the communities of the region; and

Communities of this region to act collectively to seek and secure a sustainable future for this metropolitan area.

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