Summer 2006

The Landscape: Damascus

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In the mid-1850s, not far from the terminus of the Oregon Trail, Edward Pedigo brought his cross-country journey to an end in an area marked by steep slopes and wooded buttes. A decade later, when the loose-knit group of pioneers decided the locale needed a name, he chose “Damascus.”

To Pedigo, this land, like the Biblical city of Damascus, seemed to be a “place of new beginning.” Outside the walls of ancient Damascus, St. Paul had experienced revelation and conversion. Here, he—the clean, green, wide-open Oregon Country—new generations of pioneers could find rebirth and renewal.

For more than a century, the town of Damascus, Oregon, continued to serve in its own modest way as a place of new beginnings for pioneers and farming families. For the most part, it was not unlike other small farming towns of the Willamette Valley. In 1867, a post office opened near what is now State Highway 212. The rolling collection of extinct lava domes, from Hogan Butte to Tower Mountain, continued to shelter farms and houses in the valleys between. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, local farmers relied on crops of flax, hops, grass seed, and vegetables. Recently, nurseries—growing lilies, tulips, and Douglas fir—have become quite profitable and overtaken the traditional crops. Damascus persevered as a small rural community into the 1990s, even as many of its full-time farms were bought and used by newcomers who commuted to jobs in Portland and elsewhere.

But in 2002, Damascus underwent an identity change. In that year, the Metro Council decided to expand the urban growth boundary by the largest amount ever, with the biggest expansion taking place in the Damascus area, where 12,200 of the region’s total 18,000 acres would be added. Recent projections indicate that Damascus’ current population of 9,000 may reach 60,000 or more in 20 to 30 years. Urban growth, it suddenly became clear, was coming to Damascus.

In the following years, Damascus deliberated its future. In 2004 and 2005, a group of residents and representatives of outside agencies and groups assembled a “Concept Plan”—a legally required document that will guide the city’s future growth with a set of broad core values and general land development principles.

In September 2005, as the Concept Plan process came to a close, 88 percent of Damascus’ registered voters voted to approve the city’s incorporation through a local ballot measure, making Damascus Oregon’s first new city since the creation of Keizer in the early 1980s. But the vote was anything but an indiscriminate embrace of urbanization. Most residents made clear that their support for incorporation stemmed from a desire to retain as much local control over growth as possible.

While the city’s sudden acceleration from rural town to future city may in some respects seem startling and unique, the process unfolding in Damascus also bears striking similarities to the growth of numerous other Oregon towns. Population growth, expansion, and the urbanization of formerly rural satellite towns, is, of course, a recurring theme in the modern American west. In 1960, agriculture-rich Beaverton had two thirds the population of today’s Damascus. By 2000, the town had grown by 1,182 percent to a city of more than 76,000.

For better or worse, the leaders of new Damascus have no illusions that they can prevent growth from coming their way. They do, however, hope to shape it. “If growth were to progress like it has in the past, we could have houses until Bend,” says Damascus Mayor Dee Wescott. He hopes to guide new urbanization through the shared principles developed in the Concept Plan. Goal A includes creating a “well-designed community with core mixed-use areas [and] livable neighborhoods,” while Goal B directs the city to “provide for a diverse range and adequate amount of employment opportunities.”

Not all new residents waited for a UGB expansion, incorporation, or the proper urban infrastructure before making the decision to move to Damascus. Ine and Dick Bockee moved from Holland several years ago to run a 6-acre nursery not far from the area designated to become the future city center. Ine has mixed feelings about the urbanization of the small town. She loves the area’s open space but participated in recent planning efforts to shape new urban growth. In time, the couple will be joined by many others, a new generation of residents arriving to Damascus for their own new beginnings.
Above, a typical Damascus farmhouse typical stands beside several acres of Christmas trees, one of the area’s important crops. At left, looking west from eastern Clackamas County, a new subdivision marks a clear boundary between urbanized and rural land.