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Greater Portland: Experiments with Professional Planning, 1905-1925

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Greater Portland

Experiments with Professional Planning, 1905-1925

Carl Abbott

Before the great extravaganza of the Lewis and Clark Exposition in 1905, Portlanders felt daring when they predicted a metropolitan population of 200,000. In the decade that followed the exposition, they became accustomed to targets that have yet to be reached—1.5 million, 2 million, 4 million. The “Greater Portland Plan” of 1911 envisioned a Paris of the Pacific, with the Willamette River standing in for the Seine. In a utopian pastiche that a businessman published in 1913, the city of 1999 stretched 40 miles from Hillsboro to Mount Hood, with 50-story department stores and office towers served by flying vehicles.¹

Even though it failed to match the grandest expectations, Portland did experience extraordinary change in the 20 years after its world’s fair. The city’s population nearly tripled in two waves of growth that lasted from 1905 to 1912 and from 1917 into the mid-1920s. The balance of population shifted from the west side of the Willamette to the east side. Private investors reconstructed the downtown business center. Local government provided sewers, parks, streets, bridges, and docks at a cost that could scarcely have been imagined in the 19th century.²

Dreams of magnificence were only one response to this unprecedented growth. A more practical reaction was the self-conscious effort to use comprehensive planning to guide the expansion of the new east side and the rebuilding of the old west side. Calling first on Edward H. Bennett and then on Charles H. Cheney, two of the nation’s most highly regarded planning specialists, Portland tested the current approaches to the control of urban development and land use. From 1906 to 1917, the city experimented with planning as the predetermination of public spending and public works programs; between 1918 and 1925, it concentrated on channeling private decisions through housing and zoning codes. Together, these Portland efforts in the first quarter of the century provide a case study of the emergence of modern planning practice in the United States.

The most striking characteristic of the Portland experience is continuity in the

politics of planning. Older accounts of the growth of the city planning profession often describe a sharp change starting around 1910, a shift in emphasis from urban design and architecture to a systematic application of social science and engineering principles to urban development. The key events have usually been listed as the first National Conference on City Planning and the Problems of Congestion (1909), with participants as diverse as Jane Addams, the philanthropist Robert De Forest, and the financier Henry Morgenthau; the organization of the National Conference on City Planning (NCCP) as a permanent association (1910); the adoption of general land use zoning in New York City (1916); and the establishment of the American City Planning Institute (1917). The new orthodoxy was codified in the inaugural issue of the *City Plan* in 1915, in which the lead editorial by the NCCP’s secretary, Flavel Shurtleff, announced a change of interest from the City Beautiful to the City Scientific.

As with any broad periodization, the distinction between planning as urban design and planning aimed solely at efficiency tends to disappear on detailed examination. Daniel Burnham’s *Plan of Chicago* (1909)—the climax of City Beautiful planning—had concerns beyond aesthetics and was more comprehensive and modern than is sometimes thought. In contrast, the master plans that professional consultants mass-produced in the 1920s neglected housing, social welfare, and other matters germane to social science. Conversely, planning education for at least a generation after the presumed change continued to approach the subject as a design field rather than as a physical or social science.³

1. Jeff W. Hayes, *Portland, Oregon, A.D. 1999 and Other Sketches* (Portland, 1913), 1-40.

2. For population, see U.S. censuses for 1900, 1910, 1920, and 1930 (12th–15th) and estimates from the Portland school census as reported in Oregon Bureau of Municipal Research, *Basic Factors Relating to the Financial Problems of Portland* (Eugene, Ore., 1946), 5.

3. Studies that describe a major intellectual as well as organizational change include Robert A. Walker, *The Planning Function in*

A detailed study of Portland, Oregon, further blurs the distinction. It is useful to approach the history of Portland city planning in terms of a policy analysis model that examines the ways in which the basic needs of a political entity are filtered through a decision-making system, and the ways in which the resulting decisions modify the political and social environment. In the field of urban planning, the perception and the definition of problems that require public attention depend on at least three sets of factors—the natural and built environment of a metropolis, the economic and social goals of local citizens, and underlying political values in both metropolis and nation. The planners and planning organizations that act on these problems work within a context of larger political institutions and interest groups. Resulting policies express ideas about urban land use held by professional planners, politicians, and the interested public.

The following review of the work of Bennett and Cheney in Portland finds obvious differences in the type of report each man prepared and in his specific recommendations. It also finds that

these reports and policies represented two slightly different ways to achieve the same results, both efforts at comprehensive planning for Portland having been occasioned by concerns about the costs of growth. Similar interests within the city—individuals and groups who agreed on the function of planning—sought the expertise first of Bennett and then of Cheney. Similar changes in the economy punctured the planning balloon, twice eliminating the need for immediate action and undermining the impact of the planners' sound technical advice.

Times in Portland had never been so good as during the years after the Lewis and Clark Centennial Exposition of 1905. Every statistical indicator told the same story of sustained economic growth. During the first decade of the century, the expansion of employment outpaced that of population, which itself leaped by more than 18,000 annually between 1905 and 1910. An extraordinary building boom pushed the value of building permits up by 400 percent in each of those five years (see

table). The volume of banking transactions rose by 160 percent from 1905 to 1912. "Prosperity Everywhere Apparent," trumpeted a local journalist in 1910, "and No Cloud on Horizon."⁴

The boom drew on the advantages of location and transportation that had always worked in Portland's favor. Construction of James J. Hill's North Bank Railroad along the Columbia from Pasco to Portland began in 1906, and work on Swift and Company's huge packing plant in north Portland started in 1908. With the diversification of crops in western Oregon and the rapid development of agriculture in the Inland Empire of the upper Columbia basin during the first decade of the century, the value of farm property quadrupled, and the population grew by 500,000 in Portland's natural hinterland of Oregon, Idaho, and eastern Washington. Between 1899 and 1910, accelerated cutting in the coastal ranges and Cascades raised the timber production of the Pacific states from 8 to 19 percent of the national total.⁵

PORTLAND GROWTH INDICATORS
1905-1925

	Building Permits (\$1000s)	New Single-Family Houses	Multnomah Co. Motor Vehicle Registration
1905	4,183	na	na
1906	6,902	na	na
1907	9,447	na	na
1908	10,405	na	na
1909	13,481	na	na
1910	20,886	na	na
1911	19,152	na	na
1912	14,652	na	na
1913	12,316	1,817	5,500
1914	7,373	1,429	na
1915	6,210	906	na
1916	6,336	472	8,808
1917	3,804	226	20,008
1918	5,950	567	23,799
1919	9,463	1,062	29,167
1920	12,207	996	36,106
1921	17,004	2,890	41,742
1922	22,780	3,322	48,297
1923	24,603	3,070	58,965
1924	28,782	3,997	67,880
1925	38,565	3,668	76,100

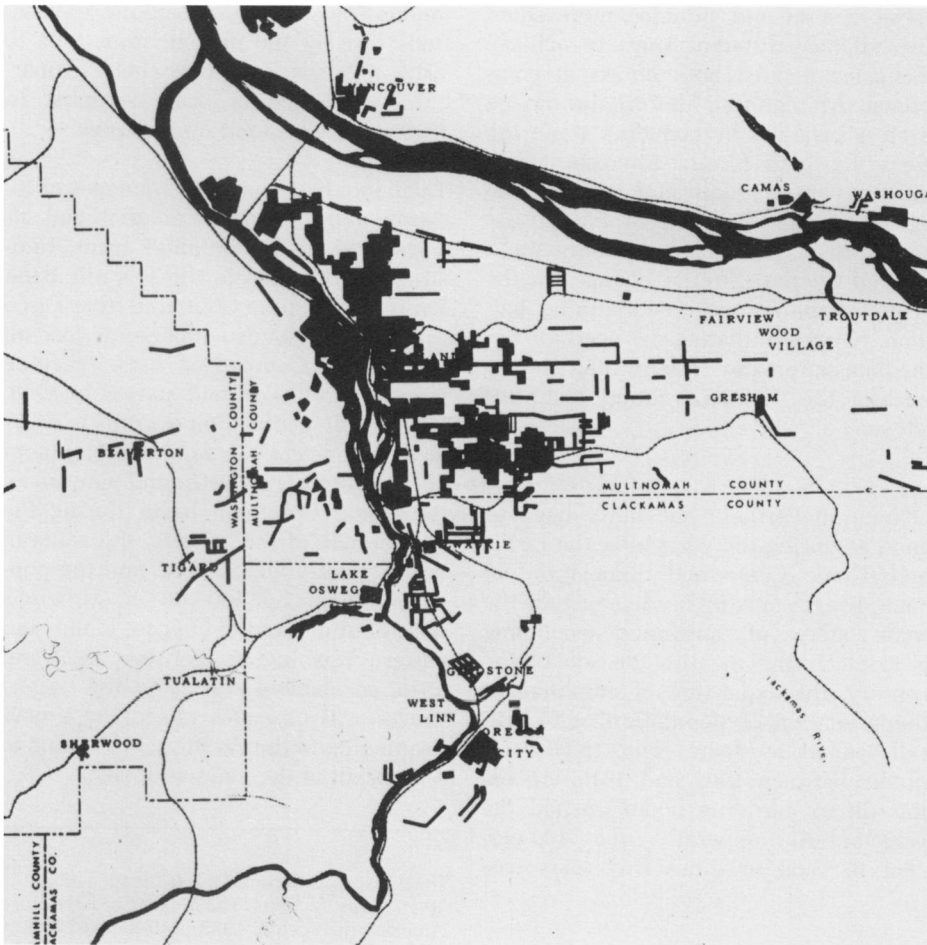
SOURCES: Building Permits: Oregon Bureau of Municipal Research, *Basic Factors*, 6. Single-Family Houses: Harland Bartholomew and Associates, *Report on Streets and Waterfront*, 96. Motor Vehicles: Bartholomew, 353-54, and Charles H. Cheney, *Major Traffic Street Plan, Boulevard and Park System for Portland, Oregon* (Portland, 1921).

na = not available

Urban Government, 2d ed. (Chicago, 1950), 10-16; John W. Reys, *The Making of Urban America* (Princeton, 1965), 519-25; and Mel Scott, *American City Planning since 1890* (Berkeley, 1969), 117-27. Continuity is an important theme in Thomas S. Hines, *Burnham of Chicago* (New York, 1974), and Norman J. Johnston, "Harland Bartholomew: Precedent for the Profession," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, Vol. 39 (March 1973), 115-24. Also see Carl Abbott, *Portland: Planning, Politics, and Growth in a Twentieth-Century City* (Lincoln, Neb., 1983), 6-10, 267-73.

4. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Twelfth Census of the United States, Taken in the Year 1900*, Vol. 2: *Population*, Pt. 2 (Washington, D.C., 1902), 583, and *Thirteenth Census of the United States, Taken in the Year 1910*, Vol. 4: *Population: Occupation Statistics* (Washington, D.C., 1914), 592-93; report on operations of Portland Clearing House (1915), in Henry Reed Papers, Oregon Historical Society (OHS), Portland; *Portland Oregonian*, Sept. 25, 1910.

5. Herbert D. Croly, "Portland, Oregon: The Transformation of the City from an Architectural and Social Viewpoint," *Architectural Record*, Vol. 31 (1912), 592; "The Future of the North Coast Cities," *World's Work*, Vol. 18 (1909), 11945-47; *Oregonian*, Jan. 1, 1910; Henry Reed, "The Phenomenal Growth of Portland and Its Causes" (typescript, 1912), Reed Papers. For hinterland—defined as Idaho, the 19 eastern counties of Washington, and Oregon outside the immediate vicinity of Multnomah and



This 1910 map shows the boom in Portland's east-side development—and the start of suburban sprawl in the southeast. (Author's collection)

Much of the building activity that helped fuel the Portland boom provided office space for the bankers, insurance agents, grain dealers, wholesalers, accountants, and attorneys who served the city's domestic and foreign trade. As total rentable downtown space grew from 900,000 square feet in 1900 to 2,000,000 in 1910 and 2,900,000 in 1920, every Portlander could see the expansion of the central business district. By the time the building boom crested, the city had 95 buildings of at least 6 stories and 16 that towered 10 or more. The new city was brighter as well as taller, built with light bricks and glazed terra cotta rather than the heavy stone and cast iron of the last century.⁶

The other obvious impact of the real estate boom was a remarkable shift of residential patterns. In 1900, nearly two-thirds of Portland's population lived on the narrow strip of terraces and ravines between the Willamette and the looming West Hills. During the next two decades,

however, Portland homes and homeowners followed streetcar lines across the city's five bridges to the east side of the Willamette. The old west-side neighborhoods began to lose population in the teens. The previously open lands of the east side, in contrast, housed approximately two-thirds of all Portlanders by World War I.⁷

The exigencies of growth turned the attention of Portland's business leadership to systematic planning. A second water pipeline from Mount Hood and a storage reservoir on Mount Tabor cost \$1,720,000. The bill for streets and sewers came to \$28 million from 1905 through 1914, compared to \$8 million for the entire period from 1865 through 1904. A related issue was the need to

maintain the structure of property values by preserving easy access between the growing downtown and the new neighborhoods. The replacement of three old bridges and the construction of one additional crossing between 1904 and 1913 took \$4 million.⁸

Portland's first serious experiment with comprehensive planning was therefore intended to assure maximum benefit from unprecedented public spending. Designation or actual construction of parks, streets, government offices, docks, and railroad terminals would set the geographic framework for private investment. Planning would place no constraints on development of private property, but a coherent city plan and the public investment that followed it would be persuasive guides for private developers.

In pursuing these goals, Portland's community leaders attempted to bring their city into step with new trends that were transforming much of urban America. The City Beautiful movement at the turn of the century was an effort to make American cities impressive, inspiring, and efficient. Its origins are often traced to the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, but the real inception

Clackamas counties—development data, see *Thirteenth Census*, Vol. 6: *Agriculture, 1909 and 1910*, 390-92 (Idaho), Vol. 7: *Agriculture, 1909 and 1910*, 410-13 (Oregon) and 840-43 (Washington). For timber production see U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1957* (Washington, D.C., 1960), 313.

6. Harland Bartholomew and Associates, *Report on Proposed System of Major Streets and Development of Waterfront* (Portland, 1932), 307-17; Henry Reed, "Heights of Existing Buildings in Portland" (typescript, 1919), Reed Papers; Croly, 599.

7. *Twelfth Census*, Vol. 1: *Population*, 637 (wards 1-7 west side, 8-11 east side), and *Thirteenth Census*, Vol. 3: *Population*, 523 (wards 1-6 west side, 7-10 east side); *Oregonian*, Dec. 18, 1905; Charles H. Cheney, "General Report on City Planning and Housing Survey of Portland, Oregon, for the City Planning Commission" (typescript, March 1919), 100, Bureau of Planning, City of Portland.

8. Portland City Club, "Graded Streets in Portland," *City Club Bulletin*, Vol. 1 (August 12, 1921), 4.

was the revitalization of Pierre L'Enfant's plan for Washington, D.C., in 1901-1902. At the request of a congressional committee, the architects Daniel Burnham and Charles McKim, the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., and the sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens toured the capitals of Europe before submitting plans for filling in the "magnificent distances" of Washington. In the same years, Charles M. Robinson advocated the coordination of street plans, civic centers, architecture, and landscaping in *The Improvement of Towns and Cities* (1901) and *Modern Civic Art* (1903). Over the next decade, consultants and converts redesigned scores of American cities, giving particular attention to metropolitan park systems, improved transportation, and

development of civic centers with public buildings grouped around a park or plaza and served by radiating boulevards. Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, St. Louis, Detroit, Omaha, Dallas, Denver, Minneapolis, Los Angeles, and Seattle all benefited from plans in the City Beautiful tradition. Daniel Burnham's plans for San Francisco in 1905 and Chicago in 1909 were the most complete of these expressions of the City Beautiful approach.

Following the Chicago and San Francisco pattern, a private association of business and professional men sponsored Portland's own City Beautiful plan. The first meeting of planning enthusiasts in the fall of 1909 appointed a committee of 100, which in turn recommended creation of a permanent body, the Civic Improvement League. The new league set about raising \$20,000 by private subscription to hire an expert to do a comprehensive plan for a civic center and for making Portland "an ideal city." Money came from the *Oregonian* and *Oregon Journal*, from major landowners, real estate investors, lumber and construction companies, architects, lawyers, manufacturers, and politicians. A number of contributors had their arms twisted by Senator Jonathan Bourne, who knew Burnham from his work in Washington, D.C. The executive committee was a commercial "who's who," with heavy representation from the land development and building sectors.⁹

When Burnham was unable to undertake the commission, the Civic Improvement League happily accepted his recommendation of Edward H. Bennett. A 35-year-old English architect and 1902 graduate of the *École des Beaux-Arts*, Bennett had directed the staffs of assistants and draftsmen as Burnham's chief lieutenant on the Chicago and San Francisco projects. He was noted for his interest in the basic transportation framework of a city as well as in its amenities. Bennett agreed to a contract in March 1910 at a fee of \$500 per month plus expenses. Local newspapers chronicled his public lectures, his meetings with league leaders, and his impressions after a return visit in June 1910 to observe congestion during the Rose Festival. He presented preliminary sketches to the Civic Improvement League in Feb-

ruary 1911 and provided final sketches by the end of the summer.¹⁰

Careful consultation assured that the Portland business community got what it wanted—"architectural engineering in its application to city building." Bennett gave special emphasis to street and rail traffic, the separation of economic functions for efficiency, and the enhancement of the city's natural beauty. In a city that already suffered from crowded streets, an outgrown harbor, and inadequate parks, Bennett argued, additional growth "would be a calamity were not preparation made for it." One of the principles underlying his proposals was the need to accommodate the natural segregation of activities that came with urban expansion. In the organic city, "parts and activities [would be] closely related and well defined, but not conflicting." A second principle was the need for a plan that would be implemented gradually over several decades: "the Plan indicates the equipment which the City must continuously acquire . . . to serve convenience, utility and beauty, in progressive stages."¹¹

Bennett's plan for Greater Portland worked outward from the center of the city. Anticipating a metropolitan population of 2 million, he called for three municipal centers as anchors for the business and office district—a set of

*Taller and brighter than before, post-1905
Portland was characterized by buildings made
of light bricks and glazed terra cotta. (Gifford
neg. 7786, Oregon Historical Society)*



9. *Oregon Journal* (Portland), Nov. 13, 1909; *Oregonian*, Nov. 13, 1909; "Subscription List to City Beautiful Fund" (typescript, 1909), Mayor's Office Files, Portland City Archives; Mansel G. Blackford, "The Lost Dream: Businessmen and City Planning in Portland, Oregon, 1903-1914," *Western Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 15 (1984), 47-49.

10. Hines, 180, 270; Daniel Burnham to C. B. Merrick, Dec. 18, 1909, in Daniel Burnham Papers, Chicago Art Institute; J. R. Wetherbee to Joseph Simon, Dec. 1, 1909, Feb. 28, March 23, April 20, June 10, and Sept. 20, 1910, Mayor's Office Files; *Oregonian*, Nov. 13, 1909, June 15, 1910, and Feb. 12, 1911.

11. Merrick to A. G. Rushlight, Sept. 1, 1911, and Wetherbee to Simon, June 30, 1910 (first quotation), Mayor's Office Files. The description of the plan in this and the following paragraph is drawn from an article by Bennett in the *Oregonian*, Feb. 4, 1911, and from Marshall N. Dana, ed., *The Greater Portland Plan of Edward H. Bennett* (Portland, 1912) (quotations, 5, 25).

government offices grouped for convenience and “nobility of appearance,” a cultural center with a civic auditorium and museum, and a transportation center to include the post office and a union terminal. His response to the surge of residential growth east of the Willamette was a radial highway system stretching 20 miles east and southeast. The plan provided neighborhood parks and parkways to serve the expected east-side population. Separation of activities was to be realized most clearly along the waterways. By encouraging the already apparent movement of shipping and manufacturing to downstream locations, the city could free the central waterfront for freight wagons and railroads serving downtown wholesalers. Upstream, Bennett called for a waterfront park, embankments, and landings for pleasure boats. Downstream to the north, he suggested filling wetlands for docks and marine terminals.

The local reaction was enthusiastic. Ion Lewis of the parks commission and J. R. Wetherbee of the Civic Improvement League proudly displayed Bennett’s plans at the third national planning convention in Philadelphia in 1911. The league re-formed, expanding its base to include representatives of general civic organizations and neighborhood associations and becoming the Greater Portland Plans Association (GPPA). Each civic group elected a member of the advisory committee. The executive committee balanced league activists with representatives of the major newspapers and with smaller businessmen who had not previously been involved with Bennett’s work.¹²

The GPPA had the single purpose of promoting adoption of Bennett’s plan. February 29, 1912, was Greater Portland Day by mayoral proclamation. Canvassers fanned out through the city at 10:30 a.m. when blasts from scores of factory whistles signaled the start of the association’s membership drive. Seven thousand Portlanders purchased GPPA buttons at one dollar each. A second drive that began in June raised the total over 4,000 as the GPPA began to take stands on specific park and street planning decisions. The final step was to secure formal recognition of the Bennett Plan by the voters, even though no bond

issue accompanied the measure. In October 1912, a committee headed by Marshall Dana, editor of the *Oregon Journal*, published a summary of Bennett’s ideas using city funds. After a parade of citizens, a marching band, and 100 automobiles moved through downtown Portland on the evening of October 30, an audience of thousands heard Dana, the orator Frank Branch Riley, and Rabbi Jonah Wise praise the plan as Portland’s pathway out of chaos. The tally on November 2 was 2 to 1 in favor of adopting Bennett’s scheme as the official plan of the city and requiring that the city council be guided by it as far as reasonable and practical.¹³

Unfortunately, Portland ratified the plan just as the great boom collapsed. The price of wheat slipped below 1912 levels for two years. The price and production of lumber dropped in 1914 and 1915 as a depression hit the entire Northwest. The virtual standstill in population growth in 1914 crippled local construction, with the annual value of building permits falling from \$20 million in 1910 to less than \$4 million in 1917 (see table). Portland had built 2,760 houses in 1912 at the peak of the boom. As vacancy rates climbed to 12 percent, the number of new houses dropped to 906 in 1915, 472 in 1916, and 226 in 1917.¹⁴

Hard times also halted the public improvements that stood at the heart of the Greater Portland plan. As total assessed valuation fell, voters became worried about the burden of past debts. In November 1912, Portlanders rejected a \$2 million bond issue for new parks even as they approved the Bennett Plan in the abstract. In June 1913, they again rejected the park bonds, this time by a wider margin. Six months later, they turned down overwhelmingly a stopgap levy of \$200,000 for improvements to existing parks. City spending on streets and sewers fell from \$7,500,000 in 1911 to an average of \$600,000 in 1915, 1916, and 1917. Oregonians also reacted to previous spending by limiting revenue increases from property taxes to 6 percent a year, save in jurisdictions where voters approved higher local rates.¹⁵

Economic recession quickly killed the interest of influential Portlanders in creating Greater Portland. The plan had

been purchased as a cure for the problems of growth; it seemed irrelevant when that growth slowed. In addition, the plan lacked a definite niche or sponsor within the municipal government. An outside consultant, Bennett had moved on to other projects. Powerful businessmen could force city council decisions on specific projects, but overall progress required clear direction within City Hall. Although Mayor Joseph Simon and the city councilman George Baker had participated in the organization of the Civic Improvement League, neither had been a strong advocate, and neither would guide the plan through the rough times. The city’s switch from mayor-council to commission government in 1913, following law enforcement and vice scandals, was also detrimental to Bennett’s plan. Until voters reaffirmed the commission charter in 1917, personal infighting and power plays distracted the politicians.¹⁶

Fifteen months later, Portland was ready to try again. When Charles Cheney arrived at the request of the city council in 1918, he wanted everyone to know

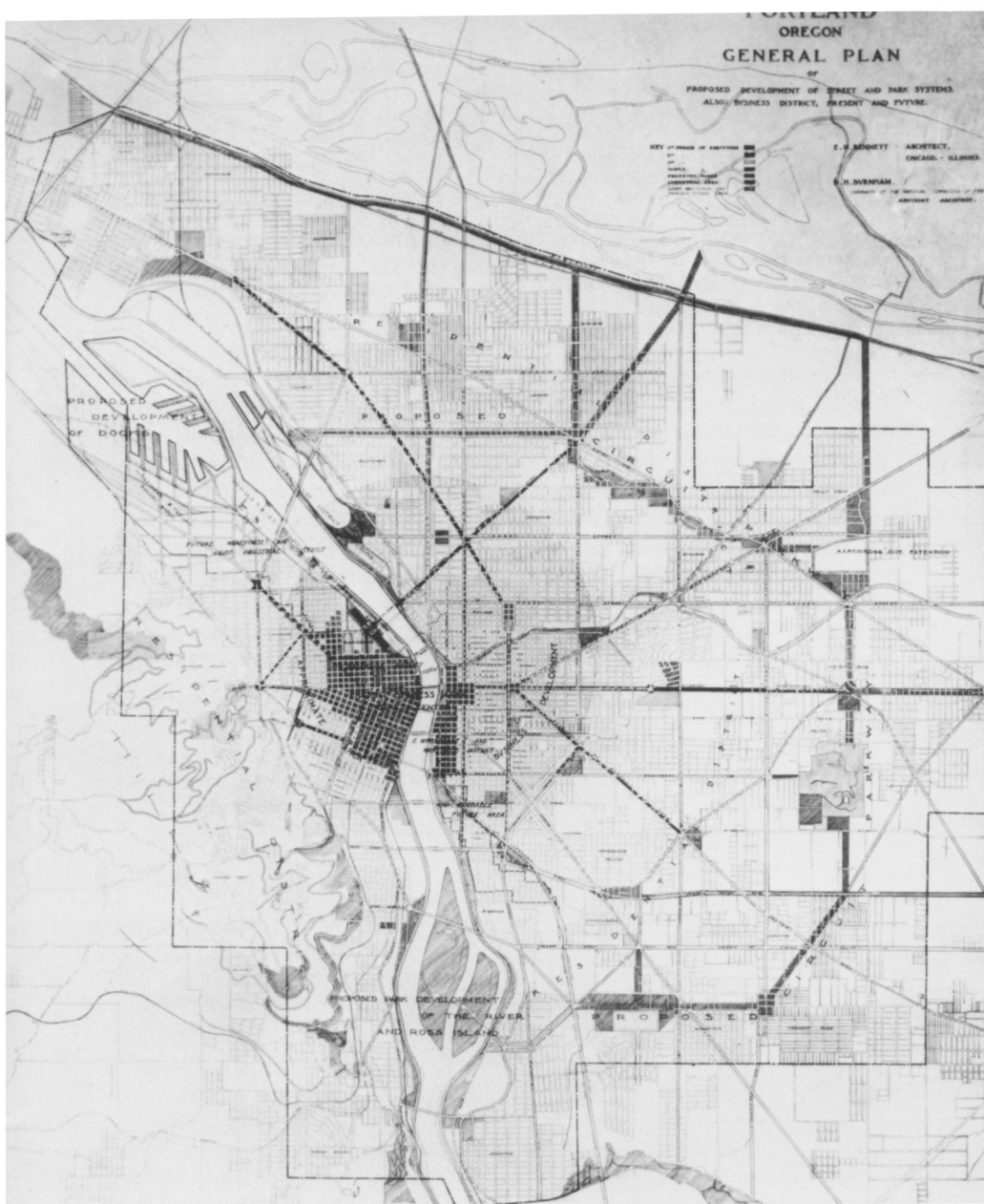
12. W. F. Woodward to Simon, April 25, 1911, and Merrick to Rushlight, Sept. 1, 1911, Mayor’s Offices Files; *Oregonian*, May 18, 1911; George Hinton, “Portland the Optimistic,” *Harper’s Weekly*, Vol. 57 (May 24, 1913), 11.

13. Howard Weed to Rushlight, July 1, 1912, Mayor’s Office Files; *Oregonian*, Feb. 29, March 1, April 28, June 6, Oct. 31, and Nov. 3, 1912. Also see *Greater Portland: Official Organ of Greater Portland Plans Association*, Vol. 1 (February-April 1912).

14. For commodity prices see *Historical Statistics*, 123, 313-14, 317; for vacancy rates see Portland Water Bureau service data, Reed Papers; population estimated from school census and water service data.

15. Henry Reed, “The County Budget and Annual Tax Levy” (MS, speech to Oregon Association of County Judges and County Commissioners, Dec. 8, 1915), Reed Papers; *Oregonian*, Nov. 4, 1912, June 4 and Dec. 10, 1913; “Graded Streets,” 4.

16. R. D. Leigh, “Commission Government Ratified in Portland, Oregon,” *National Municipal Review*, Vol. 7 (1918), 90-91; E. Kimbark MacColl, *The Shaping of a City: Business and Politics in Portland, Oregon, 1885-1915* (Portland, 1976), 442-45; H. R. Albee, “Portland: The Ideal City,” *Oregon Country*, Vol. 22 (February 1915), 61-67.



Edward Bennett proposed diagonal boulevards, east-side business development, and riverfront industrial areas to the north. (The Greater Portland Plan, 1912)

that he was a different sort of planning consultant—practical rather than visionary. His résumé looked remarkably like Bennett's, with an architecture degree from Berkeley in 1905, study at the École des Beaux-Arts, and travels in Europe. While Bennett had worked with the country's most prestigious planning firm and drafted big plans for big cities, however, Cheney had scrambled to make a reputation through free-lance consulting for smaller cities like Fresno, Palo Alto, and Berkeley. Bennett had come to Portland with elaborate drawings and interesting plans, said Cheney, but no one in the city had taken final responsibility for carrying them out.

While splendid studies of Portland and other cities were made, their effect was largely the same as shooting into the air, most of the recommendations being so far over the heads, or beyond the grasp of existing authority and legislation that these splendid early civic efforts went beside the mark and were largely wasted.¹⁷

Cheney's task in Portland was eminently practical. American entry into World War I brought an explosive shipbuilding boom to Portland, as the Emergency Fleet Corporation placed orders for scores of steel- and wood-hulled cargo vessels. At their peak just before the Armistice, Portland shipyards employed approximately 28,000 workers. Shipyard purchases supported roughly 5,000 more jobs in foundries, machine shops, lumber yards, and sawmills. The creation of more than 30,000 new industrial jobs put an obvious strain on housing and public services. The best indicator

of annual population increases is the city's school census, which counted fewer than 50,000 school-age children at the nadir of Portland's depression in 1915-16. The total jumped to 58,713 in 1918 and swelled to 60,000 in 1920. City officials estimated the city's population at 270,000 at the end of 1917, and estimates a year later ranged around the astonishing figure of 320,000. The unexpected shortage of housing made it difficult for shipyards to hold workers, disturbed federal officials who awarded contracts, and threatened both public health and neighborhood stability.¹⁸

The official response was to hire Cheney in September 1918 to find out how much, where, and what kind of housing was needed. When he took the job, he had just finished similar work in Los Angeles and Alameda. He promised his first results in two months rather than Bennett's two years. Previous plans for Portland, Cheney told an interviewer, had been "directed more to the embellishment of the city . . . than to the housing problem which will now be given primary attention and which after all is the more practical way for the city to approach planning for the future." A detailed study of housing demand and supply, he added, could generate comprehensive suggestions for public facilities, recreation, schools, and the regulation of land development, and it could pave the way for a needed and permanent city planning and housing commission.¹⁹

When the end of the war eased Portland's housing crisis two months after Cheney's arrival, he turned his full at-

17. Charles Cheney to George Baker, Aug. 27, 1918, Mayor's Office Files; Cheney, "General Report" (quotation); Scott, 161-64.

18. Charles Cheney, "First Preliminary Report to the Housing and City Planning Committee" (typescript, Oct. 29, 1918), Bureau of Planning, City of Portland, and "General Report," 21; Edgar Sensenisch, "Portland, Oregon," *Banker's Magazine*, Vol. 97 (1918), 654-55; *Oregonian*, Jan. 1 and Oct. 19, 1919. For population estimates see *Oregonian*, Jan. 1, 1919, and Cheney, "General Report," 10.

19. "Statement on Hiring of Charles Cheney," Sept. 25, 1918, Mayor's Office Files.

tention to the underlying goal of the city's business leadership. Both Cheney and the businessmen who had urged his employment understood that his larger mandate was to use the housing survey as the wedge for a renewed effort at comprehensive city planning that would help to channel the location of new construction during a period of fast growth. The key to such planning, they believed, was the exciting new tool of land use zoning. Adoption of a systematic zoning code in New York City triggered action for zoning in dozens of other cities from Baltimore and Philadelphia to Los Angeles and Sacramento. To support Cheney's work, the city's ad hoc housing committee in September 1918 asked for additional funds

for working out with each part of the city of Portland such districting and building regulations as are necessary there to stop the in-

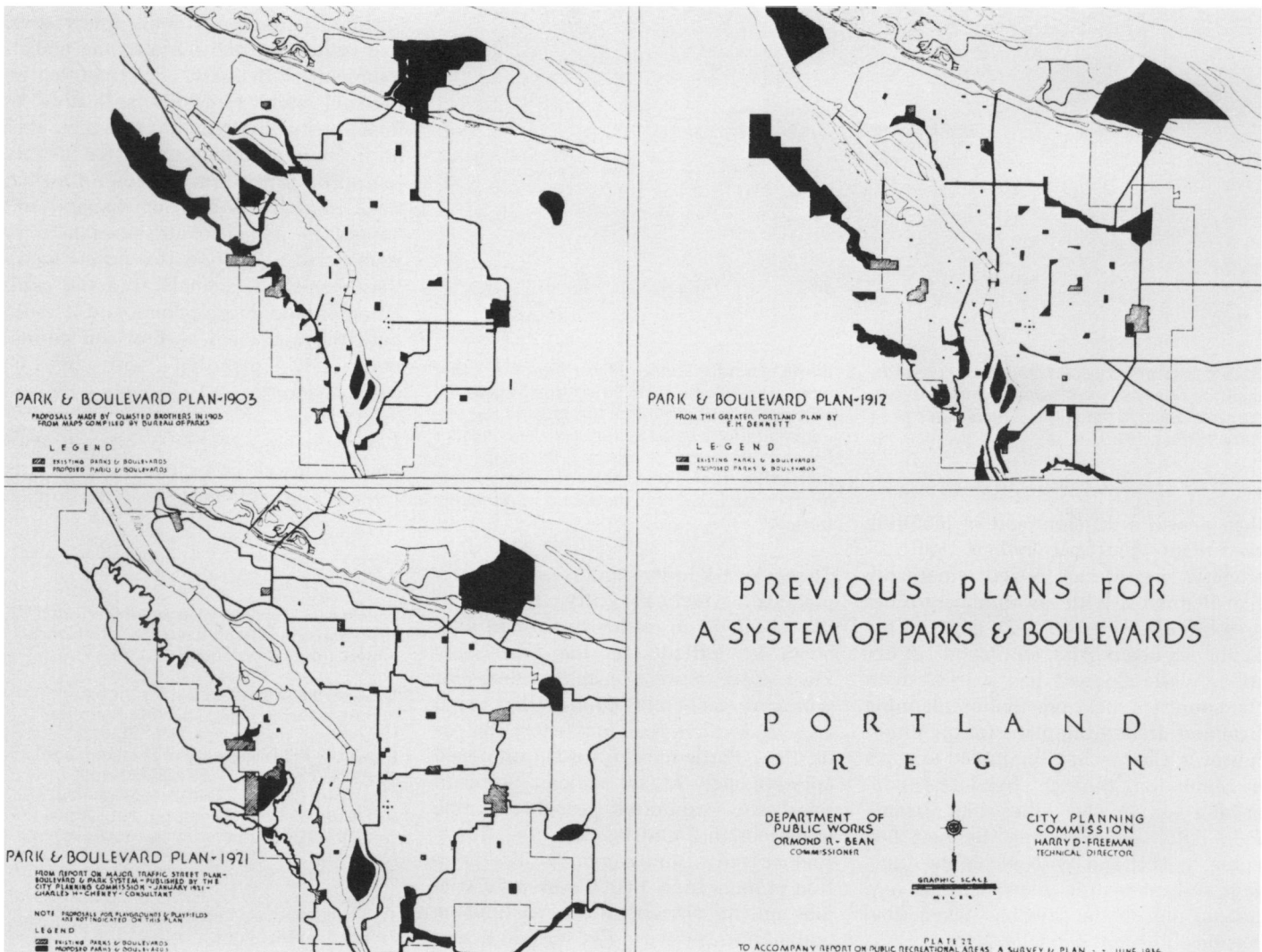
*vasion of home neighborhoods by types of buildings unsuited to them and the holdback of industrial districts for lack of protections and municipal improvements, all of which now cause demoralization and discontent of labor, deterioration of property values, and loss of rents and taxable return to the city.*²⁰

With Cheney drafting the text and Mayor George Baker supplying the political leadership in response to the concerns of his business community supporters, the city council created the City Planning Commission on December 27, 1918. According to the text of the ordinance, the commission was to offer advice and suggestions to the city and to other units of government on street extension and widening, the acceptance of plats and subdivisions, the location of public buildings, parking and traffic congestion, housing conditions, and

“the establishment of zones or districts limiting the use, height, area and bulk of buildings and structures.” It could recommend plans for beautifying the city, for improving sanitation and utilities, for expanding harbor and transportation facilities, and for generally regulating future growth. Its first members were picked to represent the chamber of commerce, banking, organized labor, realtors, architects, and civil engineers. Several had been active in the Civic Improvement League.

The new planning commission agreed on a crash program for zoning the city.

Bennett's plan for parks (upper right) made use of the crest of the West Hills, the river lowlands, and the ridge lines for boulevards and parkways. (Author's collection)



Although Cheney pointed to a broad range of benefits, the business leaders and large property owners who continued to furnish the major backing for Portland planning had little interest whether zoning could make life easier for city engineers or improve the conditions of the poor. Like the county assessor Henry Reed, they favored zoning because it "would tend to stabilize [land] values." On the central business blocks, height limitations could prevent new skyscrapers from cutting off light and air to older buildings and destroying their rental value. In outlying Portland, use zones could prevent the intrusion of businesses into residential areas and minimize the blighting effect of hospitals, which the recent construction of Good Samaritan in northwest Portland had demonstrated. A special worry was the rapid spread of gasoline service stations and garages within residential neighborhoods. A proposal to erect a large garage in the heart of the Irvington area in early 1919 helped to build interest in zoning. Paul Murphy, a land development executive responsible for the elegant Laurelhurst neighborhood, cited the planning work of J. C. Nichols in Kansas City and urged systematic planning to protect the future value of Portland real estate. The banker and utility investor J. C. Ainsworth summarized the establishment position for the *Oregon Journal*:

*\$300,000,000 has already been invested in Portland real estate. . . . The lending institutions in the city, in conjunction with the property owners, are therefore heartily in favor, I believe, of a plan . . . that will tend to conserve and protect values, because of the permanence and stability that can only be secured by a far-sighted zoning plan that will harmonize the property interest of owners and the health, safety, and convenience of the public.*²¹

Among zoning advocates were Mayor Baker, heavyweight members of the downtown business community, and homeowners in affluent neighborhoods. The counterattack against property regulation came from smaller property owners and real estate brokers. These opponents argued that zoning blocked the natural growth of the city, benefiting a few land barons and upper-crust neighborhoods at the expense of the broad middle class. Behind their protest was the fear that restricting areas to sin-



Charles Cheney used this picture to illustrate the need for land use zoning to protect residential neighborhoods. ("General Report on City Planning," 1919)

gle-family use would end the lucrative practice of building apartments or stores on residential properties. Thus, both real estate speculators and landowners whose only capital was one or two city lots joined in common cause against zoning.²²

The campaign against planning started with a direct attack on Cheney and an indirect attack on the planning commission. The *News* called Cheney "a dapper and dandified little gentleman with an uncanny mastery of the subtle art of gab." His retainer of \$500 per month as a half-time consultant, the paper continued, paid him for rounds of golf with Portland bigwigs and afternoon tea at the high-toned Arlington Club. With Cheney transformed into a partial liability, the council decided not to renew his contract for a second year or to fund other staff for the planning commission. The council reversed itself in December 1919 after strong protest and threats of resignation by planning commission members, but it still cut the commission's budget by half. Council hearings on the zoning ordinance in November and December also brought the opposition out in force. Scores of residents in lower income or half-developed east-side neighborhoods like Montavilla appealed the specific designations of their

properties. Other disgruntled voters complained that the commission had packed its citizens advisory committees and that the entire scheme was being railroaded before the public knew what was happening. In January, the Portland Realty Board took a formal stand against zoning, resolving that it was a ruthless interference with property that would raise rents by limiting apartment building. The Citizens Anti-Zoning League, as the historian Kimbark MacColl has noted, was little more than a front for realty interests.²³

Zoning advocates relied on the prestige of leading citizens, the endorsement of

20. Housing Committee to Baker, Sept. 23, 1918 (quotation), and "Statement on Hiring Cheney," Mayor's Office Files.

21. Cheney, "General Report," 104-106; Paul Murphy to Baker, Nov. 27, 1918, Mayor's Office Files; *Oregonian*, Oct. 26, Nov. 1 (quotation) and 30, 1919; *Portland Telegram*, April 25 and Dec. 8, 1919; *Sellwood Bee* (Portland), Sept. 5, 1919; *Oregon Journal*, Feb. 28, 1920; E. Kimbark MacColl, *The Growth of a City: Power and Politics in Portland, Oregon, 1915 to 1950* (Portland, 1979), 296.

22. *Telegram*, Aug. 1, 1919; *Oregonian*, July 1, 1919.

23. *Portland News*, July 29, 1919; *Oregonian*, Oct. 25, Dec. 5, 17, and 21, 1919, Jan. 10, 1920; *Telegram*, Dec. 19, 1919, Jan. 10 and 13, March 24, 1920; Portland Planning Commission, Minutes, Nov. 17, 1920, Bureau of Planning, City of Portland; MacColl, *Growth of a City*, 298.

the Central Labor and Building Trades councils, and the backing of progressive civic groups such as the Architectural Club, City Club, and Oregon Civic League. Editorials portrayed a simple contest between PROGRESS and REACTION. Zoning, said the *Oregonian*, was “an effort under the direction of public-spirited and far-visioned men, to make a more orderly and prosperous city.” The *Telegram* thought that “city planning is progress indubitably proven.” Opponents were “standstillers, reactionaries, and retrogressionists . . . the malcontents, the indifferent, the uninformed.”²⁴

Caught in the controversy, city council members began to cast around for a graceful way to desert a leaky ship. In its confusion, the council adopted the zoning ordinance on March 17, 1920, by a 3 to 2 vote but repealed it on March 31 pending the outcome of a November referendum. The repeal was to take effect on December 1 if the voters in fact agreed to live without zoning. After the extended debate in the winter of 1919-20, the fall campaign raised no new issues. “SAVE YOUR HOMES,” trumpeted the ads placed by zoning advocates, who claimed to represent “the 29 Neighborhoods of the City.” Prevent “vicious discrimination . . . against the small property and home owner,” countered the opponents. The result was a narrow defeat for zoning, 30,706 to 30,288, on a turnout of 40 percent of eligible voters.²⁵

The vote actually occurred in an economic environment of painful readjustment rather than of wartime prosperity. The staggering wartime inflation that nearly doubled consumer prices reached its peak in 1920. Shipyard workers and their ready cash scattered as the yards closed during 1919, and the federal census of 1920 reported disappointing totals—not 325,000 Portlanders, but only 258,000 (300,000 in the metropolitan district). With urban growth temporarily stalled, it had been hard to argue in 1920 that zoning was a vital emergency measure.

Zoning came back under consideration during more prosperous years later in the decade. The value of building permits reached \$17 million in 1921, for the highest total since the great boom of 1911, and climbed to a new high of \$38



In addition to protecting neighborhoods, zoning could prevent new construction from blocking the light and air of older buildings downtown. (Photography Collection, University of Washington Libraries)

million in 1925. Data on building permits and water connections show an annual average of 3,400 new houses from 1921 through 1925 (see table). The unprecedented availability of 70 percent, 80 percent, and even 90 percent mortgages spurred construction of 400 new apartment buildings; sited haphazardly throughout the city, they created worries about housing quality and the future of neighborhoods. The second and successful try to zone Portland occurred as zoning became an accepted part of American urban government. Under the leadership of Herbert Hoover, the U.S. Department of Commerce published a model for state zoning laws in February 1924. Hoover noted in his introduction that “the discovery that it is practical by city zoning to carry out reasonably neighborly agreements as to the use of land has made an almost instant appeal to the American people.” Portland’s archrival, Seattle, was among the 218 cities with zoning ordinances by the end of 1923. The total was more than 500 by 1927. On the national scene, zoning was both accepted and acceptable.²⁶

The second try in Portland was supported not only by the climate of opinion but also by new tactics that reversed

the procedures of 1919. The first effort had been directed by an outside consultant and left open to public input at every step. At the end of 1921, in contrast, the planning commission designated members to work with the Portland Realty Board on a small committee. The strongest support again came from middle- and upper-class neighborhoods like Irvington, Ladd’s Addition, Eastmoreland, and Portland Heights, where the greatest concern was residential amenities. Pressures for zoning mounted as deed restrictions expired in several neighborhoods and left middle-class housing unprotected. The committee spent 18 months in quiet meetings. Only after the sensitive issues had been negotiated to the satisfaction of real estate and building interests did the planning commission publish the suggested code and zoning map in August 1923. With the real estate industry now added to the list of zoning advocates, voters ap-

24. For quotations see *Oregonian*, Jan. 15, 1920, and *Telegram*, March 1, 1920. Also see *Telegram*, Jan. 14, Feb. 23, March 3, 1920, and *Portland Forum*, Dec. 12, 1919.

25. *Oregon Voter*, Vol. 23 (Oct. 30, 1920), 46 (first quotation); *Telegram*, March 24, 1920 (second quotation); MacColl, *Growth of a City*, 300; *Oregonian*, Nov. 6, 1920.

26. Portland Planning and Housing Association, *Bulletin*, December 1929 and February 1932, *Housing Authority Papers*, OHS; Scott, 194 (Hoover quotation), 249.

proved the revised code by 41,504 to 28,105 in November 1924.²⁷

The guiding principle of the ordinance was simplicity. Planning commission members thought that confusion about height and area districts and an excessively detailed zoning map had contributed to the defeat in 1920. Instead of the 64 height, area, and use districts possible under Cheney's proposal, the new scheme divided Portland into 4 use zones: single family, multifamily, commercial, and unrestricted. Deed restrictions took precedence when they were more stringent than zoning. The zoning map carved the city into large sectors with uniform zoning. All river frontage went into zones 3 and 4 for factories and warehouses. Most properties along trolley lines were placed in zone 3 to encourage commercial strip development. About two-thirds of residential land was zoned multifamily, to satisfy large apartment developers and to allow small owners to exploit their holdings with duplexes. With few exceptions, the planning commission waited for requests from affluent and well-organized neighborhoods before designating areas for single-family use. The result was that the upper third of Portland neighborhoods now received the protection they had sought since 1919.²⁸

The overall system of zoning both accommodated and sanctioned the existing division of land among economic functions and social classes. Second-class citizenship under the ordinance went to working-class neighborhoods such as Corbett, Sellwood, Sunnyside, Sabin, Woodlawn, Kenton, and St. Johns. The neighborhoods placed in zone 1—Mount Tabor, Laurelhurst, Ladd's Addition, Grant Park, Alameda, Irvington, Eastmoreland, University Park, Portland Heights, Council Crest—have held their higher status for more than 60 years. Although zoning opened the fullest opportunities for future growth that were consistent with the basic idea of land use regulation, it also proved less relevant than hoped. As every planning advocate admitted from the start, it allowed much more intense development than the city would likely ever achieve. It also went into effect as the building boom of the early 1920s began to dissolve into the Great Depres-

sion. From the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s, both planning and the planning commission suffered neglect comparable to that of the Bennett Plan. Portland was no closer to becoming Greater Portland in 1930 than it had been in 1905.²⁹

In historical perspective, Bennett's plan and Cheney's work for Portland show more similarities than differences. Despite the presumed changes in the planning profession during the second decade of the century, both consultants shared the basic interest in linking all aspects of physical development in a comprehensive city plan. The major difference in the content of the proposals was the order in which the author approached the various plan elements. Bennett started with access to the central business district as the single most important problem. His plan gave careful attention to details for downtown growth, arterial streets, and railroads. The location and allocation of industrial, residential, and park land were determined by the regional transportation framework. Cheney started with the maintenance of stable neighborhoods as the most general goal. As a consequence, he considered that the proper location of industrial areas should be determined by their relationship to residential areas as well as by their rail and river connections. Development of the grid of minor streets was as important as the development of radial highways. The central west side was treated not only as a commercial core, but also as an area of dense population with particular housing problems.

More important, the two men worked in similar circumstances. The established businessmen and landowners who were their effective employers (through the Civic Improvement League or the planning commission) wanted to buy plans rather than a process for planning. They shared the attitude that planners were urban physicians who could diagnose a city's complaints and prescribe a specific product or procedure. In Portland, the ailment was disorderly growth, first during the boom of 1905-12 and again during World War I. However, Bennett and Cheney delivered their remedies just as economic slumps eased the immediate symptoms, and the city's lead-

ership lost its sense of urgency about planning. The same series of events recurred in the 1920s. Portland adopted a weak zoning code in response to an active real estate market from 1921 to 1925, but interest in planning declined as soon as the market cooled.

The experience of Portland during the first quarter of the 20th century reaffirms that planning is a political activity. Both Edward Bennett and Charles Cheney drew their proposals in order to meet the problems troubling their employers rather than to point the way to an ideal city. They suggested specific protection for new streetcar suburbs from the sorts of change that had reduced the attractiveness of older residential areas, and they offered ways to stabilize the value of existing buildings. Their plans also rose and fell on the strength of public interest and support rather than on technical merit. As imported experts, they had no continuing role in Portland; they could do nothing to prevent the dwindling of initial enthusiasm or the failure to implement the proposals. Given its narrow conception of the function of city planning, Portland's civic leadership got what it wanted. □

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27. Portland Planning Commission, Minutes, Nov. 30, 1921, July 19 and Dec. 27, 1923, and "Report for 1924," Bureau of Planning, City of Portland; Strong and MacNaughton Company, newsletter, March 1923 and January 1924, OHS; *Oregonian*, Aug. 5, 1923, Nov. 7, 1924.

28. Portland Planning Commission, "Report for 1925," Bureau of Planning, City of Portland.

29. *Ibid.*; *idem*, "One Year of Zoning in Portland," Bureau of Planning, City of Portland; Lloyd Keefe, "History of Zoning in Portland" (typescript, 1975), 5-7, OHS; *Plan-It* (Portland Planning Commission newsletter), Vol. 8 (November 1934), Vol. 11 (January 1937).