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## Memo to Ernis and Carly Houk from Ernie Bonner

Ernest Bonner

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12/12/93

To: Ernie and Carly Houk  
From: Ernie Bonner  
Subject: Ernie Bonner's Planning Journal (1960-1993)

I am writing this for two reasons.

First, both my Grandfather on my Mother's side (Alex Rea) and my Grandfather on my Father's side (Ernest E. Bonner) led what I suspect were very interesting lives. I didn't get to know them very well, and they left little that would let me in on what they were doing and what they thought. If you ever get interested in what my life was like, this will help you understand.

Second, I just finished a few parts of an interesting book about Portland by Carl Abbott, a professor at Portland State University. He demonstrated considerable insight about issues and events with which he had no personal knowledge, but I was struck by the difference between his perspective on some of the important issues of the 70's and 80's around here, and mine. If nothing else, this can serve as another individual's interpretation of the things that were happening in my small corner of the world as I pursued my planning career.

### **The discovery of urban planning: Univ. of Colorado, Final Term, 1960**

I spent a lot of time getting to college. I graduated from high school in 1950 from Morrill High School in a little town called Morrill, Nebraska. There were 15 of us in that graduation class. The Summer following graduation we moved to Scottsbluff--about 15 miles away. That Fall I enrolled in Scottsbluff Junior College, where I learned to drink beer (God, how I hated the taste of beer--but that was what all of the guys were doing, so heck . . .). I worked a full shift at night at the Scottsbluff paper and went to class at the Junior College during the day. I don't recall studying, nor do I recall any class or any instructor. Mostly I recall chasing girls, trying to get beer down and hanging out with some new friends in Scottsbluff. That first semester was a classic case of wasting time, big time.

I lasted only one semester there, and then decided to go (in the Fall of 1951) to Chadron State Teachers College in Chadron, Nebraska, about 100 miles north of Scottsbluff. I took my first foreign language class (Spanish) there (the teacher said I was expert at pronouncing the words). Again, I remember little about classes or teachers. A male friend and I tried out for cheerleader, and won. The only problem was, then we had to be cheerleaders. All the guys thought it was great to have guy cheerleaders; some of the girls hated the idea. I worked part-time at the local newspaper and went to school full-time. In addition, I worked in the student union--where I existed for one whole week on snickers bars and cokes (I was dead broke). I lasted two years there, finally leaving in August of 1953 to go to the Army. I was in the Army from August 1953 to June 1955. I was Outstanding Trainee in our basic training company. I spent my 21st birthday on the recoilless rifle range in 10 degree weather. I was in Fort Riley, Kansas and Fort (then Camp) Carson, Colorado. I was a company clerk, I was a drill instructor, I was a radioman, I was mostly glad to get out of there early (by 2 months).

All of the foregoing is only to show that I was untainted by any interest in education prior to my enrollment in the University of Colorado where my formal colleg education began. I enrolled at Colorado because by the time I left the Army, Mom and Dad had moved to Sterling, Colorado to run the newspaper there. I left the Army and established residence in Sterling so that I could go to Colorado as a resident of Colorado. I still remember the day I

put everything I owned in the back of my 1946 Chevrolet and headed for Boulder to start college. What a wonderful feeling of excitement!

My first thought was to become an architect. By my second year, it was clear to me that my drawing skills would not be good enough to get me through as an architect. Instead I chose architectural engineering, where I had shown that I could do the quantitative and technical things needed in the Engineering School, and where everybody said you could get good jobs when you graduated. Along about my second year, I also started taking business classes, with an idea of getting both an engineering and a business degree in 5 years--a special offering at Colorado. Again, everybody said I could really make a lot of money with both an engineering and business degree.

A lot of things happened to me at Colorado. I must have started paying attention, because I remember some of the classes, even some of the instructors. I got reasonable grades, just short of a B average if I remember correctly, and close to an A average in the last several years. I had my first experience with theater, and loved it. I was in a production of Guys and Dolls, another production of My Fair Lady and a student-written production the name of which I don't recall. I remember seriously considering quitting school and heading for New York to pursue some fantasy notion of a stage career. In fact, I wasn't that good on stage, but it sure was exciting. I went 'steady' with a woman for the first time in my life--a woman who lived at the boarding house where I ate meals. Her name was Rene Gass, a Jewish woman from Denver. Her parents were not happy about me, and I'm sure they were elated when we broke up and Rene married a Jewish lawyer who worked in downtown Denver. I spent a lot of time drinking beer at Tulagi's. Again, I went to school full time and worked part time--at the local newspaper (The Boulder Camera). I had the GI Bill, of course, which paid my tuition (about \$100/semester) and also gave me about \$150/month for living expenses. I lived in rooming houses mostly, moving to a basement apartment with another guy in my senior year. In school, I was plugging along with my engineering and business degrees, when I got this opportunity to take a city planning class the first semester of my last year. This class was a real general look at city form and function, with a class model of a city as the final project. That really fascinated me, that there was such a thing as city planning. I had been studying building engineering and planning, and didn't know there could be something so grand as city engineering and planning. So I got excited. This is what I wanted to do: design cities. What could be more exciting. I finished that first course and began to make plans to attend graduate school in city planning.

Along about this time I met Glenda Prosser, I think I met Glenda right after the first of the year in 1960. She started working at the Boulder Camera, in the front office, when I was working in the back shop.

### **Heading for the Univ. of Washington planning school, and ending up at Cornell.**

One of the first things we did was to apply for different graduate planning schools. I applied as I recall to three planning schools, Cornell, MIT and the University of Washington. Glenda and I were married in April of that year. The University of Washington accepted me for enrollment in the Fall. No word from the other schools, so we were planning to go to Seattle in August. In June we headed for McCall, Idaho where I had a job designing pre-fab mountain cabins for a lumber mill owned by Frank Brown--the father of a classmate of mine at Colorado by the name of Frank Brown II. While we there, I received notice that I had been accepted by Cornell, with a full tuition scholarship plus a part-time job with a research project there. So we changed our mind, and headed back to Colorado to get ready to go back east to Cornell.

**Practice in Ithaca and Theory at Cornell.**

**Pursuing the black box of economics (people have choices, you know) at Univ. of Colorado and at University of Pittsburgh.**

**Thinking I know enough about it to teach at the Univ. of Wisconsin Dept. of Urban and Regional Planning.**

**Leaving academe for the mean streets of Cleveland.**

**Trying to save the world from a cubicle in the attic of Cleveland City Hall.**

Sometime close after the first of 1973, a friend of mine who taught at Cleveland State University (Cleveland) mentioned to me that his aunt in Milwaukie, Oregon had told him that there was a new Mayor in Portland, Oregon who was looking for a planning director. I was interested. I wrote to the Mayor, told him I was interested, and promptly forgot about it. Several weeks later, I get a letter from the Mayor's office, asking if it would be possible for Bill Scott to meet with me at the Planners' conference in Los Angeles. As it turned out, I was going, and I agreed to meet him. In fact, both Doug Wright and myself were there, along with Norm Krumholz. Doug and I met with Bill Scott in the bar of the hotel. He talked about the job. It was obvious that they were looking across the country for someone to help them get Portland moving in a different direction. Bill encouraged me to apply. I did. But not before Doug and I made a fabulous trip to Mexico. (But those stories can wait for another time).

I did apply for the Portland job. It must have been in mid-Summer of 73. It turned out that I was one of 5 individuals selected for a civil service interview in Portland. So I headed for Portland.

This was the first time I had ever been in Portland. On the plane trip in, I struck up a conversation with a soldier home on leave about what Portland was like. I asked him lots of questions about the geography of the town, including where the poor lived. He told me in the Northeast section of town. When I got to Portland, I rented a car and struck out to explore Portland. When I got into the Northeast I looked around, and was surprised (being familiar with Cleveland) to see virtually nothing of the deterioration and dilapidation that the poorer sections of Cleveland exhibited. *Furthermore, everywhere I looked, everything seemed so clean and new, and the people (even bus drivers) were polite. This was obviously some kind of foreign land!*

At the civil service interview, there were 6 or 7 people asking questions. I remember Marjorie Gustafson (then on the Planning Commission), Ogden Beeman (soon to be on the Planning Commission), and Howard McKee (SOM). Gary Stout (the person who would be my boss, may have been there as well.) I guess I made quite a favorable impression among many with my blunt statement that building freeways will not reduce congestion (*I didn't know that they were then fighting an interstate freeway expansion*). *Now that I look back on pictures of myself (with real long hair and a beard) taken during that time, I am absolutely amazed that I lasted more than half an hour at the interview.*

As I recall, that interview was the only thing on the agenda for my first day. And I think we found out who were the top three at the end of the day: myself, Sheldon Lynn (the Assistant Director in Baltimore) and a guy from Houston (I just can't remember his name). The following day the three of us who had made it through the first day of interviews were scheduled to interview Neil. As it turned out, I was the last one scheduled, at 11:00 am. Well, the Mayor got so far behind in his schedule that morning that he finally came out and said, Look, I've got to pick up my wife and family and go to a picnic (you're invited), why

don't we just drive out together and we can talk along the way. I don't remember a lot about that conversation. He wasn't that interested in a comprehensive plan. I think he had a lot of projects he was interested in. I told him I would give him a letter of resignation before I took the job if that would make him less nervous about me. I also have the impression that he wasn't altogether that interested in talking. (But that would be so much unlike Neil) When we got to his house (on Alameda), his wife was obviously angry. It seems they were about an hour late to the picnic. Well, we all jumped into the car--Neil and Margie in the front, and Rebecca and Joshua and I in the back. We hadn't gone more than about 2 blocks when Neil turned to Margie and said, You don't mind if Ernie and I continue our conversation, do you? And Margie, visibly upset, said No, of course not, why should she mind? Please continue your conversation with Ernie. Forget I'm even here! *Well, you can imagine. Here I am trying to get a job, and I get stuck in the middle of a family squabble. Not good positioning, at all.*

At the picnic, I continued my winning ways by hitting Charlotte Beeman (who was pitching) right in the stomach with a line drive. *I wonder if she has ever forgiven me? In other ways, the picnic was probably a success. I pulled in a long drive to right field, and I got several good hits. All in all, it was a decent day on the diamond for me--which also, I think, ingratiated me with the young, athletic Mayor's staff.* I left Portland not knowing which of the three finalists had been selected.

After my return to Cleveland, I was informed that the three of us would be considered further. Part of this closer review included a visit to Cleveland by Gary Stout to check on me, a visit to Houston, TX by Bill Scott to check on my leading competition. *It's my impression that Stout didn't want me, and Scott didn't want the Houston man. I guess they were sent either to confirm their fears or to get their concerns met. Both must have come back even more convinced, for Stout continued to champion the Houston guy and Scott continued to champion me. I'm not sure that anyone made a trip to Baltimore, MD to check on Sheldon Lynn, the third candidate.* I don't remember seeing Stout in Cleveland.

It was clear that there was disagreement in the Mayor's Office about who should get the nod. I guess they must have decided that the choice was too close, and that another interview was needed. So Lynn and I flew into Portland again, probably in late August or early September. Close upon our arrival in Portland, I got a note that another of the contestants for the position, Sheldon Lynn, the Ass't Director of Planning in Baltimore, wanted to see me. He talked to Lynn and I at the Red Lion (where we stayed), and we went to dinner at Bennyhana's. He had concluded that the choice was between myself and the competitor from Houston, and that he, Sheldon, didn't really have a chance. But Sheldon definitely thought I would be a much better director than the other person (can't remember his name). Further, he reasoned that the real problem the Mayor and others were having with me is that they distrusted my ability to manage the department. They thought I had good planning credentials and great vision, but the other guy had great management ability. *(I was glad I had the reputation I had, and not the one he had!)* So Sheldon proposed that I go into a meeting set up for the next day with the Mayor's staff and propose a complete reorganization of the planning staff, to prove that I knew what I was doing as far as management and administration was concerned. And then he proceeded to sketch out some options for that reorganization with me on a napkin in the bar at Bennyhana's. Well, we spent the rest of the night working out the main points of the presentation. *Sheldon was one of those rare individuals who was smart and competent and real nice as well.*

The next day I made the presentation to the Mayor's staff. *I never heard any feedback from that meeting, but I think that made a difference to the Mayor's staff.*

That same day I got a call to be at the Red Lion (Lloyd Center) bar at 5:30 to meet with Neil. When I got there, Neil had brought along Gary Stout, and a list of requirements.

1. I had to sign the letter of resignation. I did.

2. I had to hire David Kish, one of Neil's hot shot young soldiers then on the Model Cities staff. I agreed, and have been a fast friend of Dave's ever since. *He is at once a damn good administrator, a creative salesman, and an honest and decent man.*

3. I had to hire Sheldon Lynn as my Deputy Director. *This did not seem a requirement to me. I was delighted that Sheldon would agree to such a position, and obviously happy to have such a competent guy on the team.*

4. Fourth, I had to serve and obey (I don't remember the exact words, but they meant that he was the boss!) Gary Stout. Those who know Gary would probably agree with my hunch that these words were his, not Neil's. *I agreed to do that, but (eventually) only did part of it.*

Then Lynn and I returned to Cleveland to get ready for the pilgrimage west. This was a very exciting time in my life. I was off to a new playing field. For the first time in my life, I was going to be the boss. (Or so I thought).

At first, being the Director only meant being the guy who led the spear carriers behind Neil's charge. I remember three immediate fire drills in Portland: developing a park plan for what was then the city dump; resolving a land use planning dispute occasioned by requests to expand industrial land in an area of North Portland between the Portland Slough and the Columbia River; and trying to push through City Council a plan by some of the Mayor's backers (Harold Pollin and Hal Saltzman) for City assistance in their development of a large parcel of land on the Willamette River (where the Alexis Hotel now stands). The Mayor really pushed for this project, but didn't have the horses against the opposition of Frank Ivancie, Mildred Schwab and Connie McCready (not to mention John Platt, then of the Northwest Environmental Defense Center). The plan for the 'greening' of the old City Dump was a success: it didn't get accepted right away, but the landfill area today looks a lot like the plan drawn up in late 1973. The Gertz-Schmeer plan was a very carefully crafted compromise between industrial, single-family residential and agricultural interests. It wasn't pretty, but it has met the test of time pretty well. The Mayor's plan for the downtown waterfront got nowhere—in the way he proposed it on behalf of the Davidson Co. (And in the years ahead before anything got going on the waterfront Neil used to wish out loud that he could 'just tear down that old pier,' or 'remodel that old brewery' on the site.' The City should have taken Neil and the Davidson Co. up on their offer. Today the area looks a lot like what they were proposing—after millions of dollars of public tax increment money and two decades of effort.

And, of course, there was the downtown plan. The Citizens had spoken, downtown goals had been forged out of a citizens' committee, and adopted by the Planning Commission and City Council.

You can imagine my shock, just arriving from Cleveland where zone changes were sold for \$2,500 a pop, and where it was hard to get two citizens interested in the downtown. And we spent all of our time on federal policy, regional housing policy and basic municipal services. Now here I was standing up there in front of people talking about park design, zoning policy and theory, and citizen involvement (all physical planning kinds of efforts). I felt like a fish out of water much of the time. I had to count on those around me and that was a hard thing for me to do. In fact, I'm still not much good at that, even today.

My main challenge immediately was staff. There were some good people at the Bureau when I got there, but Neil's agenda required more and different people. David Kish, who Neil required I hire, came on immediately as did Sheldon Lynn, the Assistant Director. Both

of those guys were great. They were smart, they knew how to get things organized. They knew about the cost and management controls you needed to run such a place. In addition, Sheldon was an experienced city planner. I leaned on both of those early appointments a lot. The next priority was to hire the 4 or 5 Section Chiefs in the Organization. The first was Doug Wright, who I had persuaded to come to Cleveland with me from Iowa, where he studied under Dave Ranney--an old friend from Univ. of Wisconsin in Madison. Doug was one of the two staff at Cleveland that I trusted to be able to do anything. I asked him to come out to Portland. He agreed immediately. We initially had a Comprehensive Planning Section. I made him the Chief of that group. But, of course, his talents were turned almost immediately to transportation, where he built the foundation upon which Portland sprang to world class city status. His right hand man was Ernie Munch, who had come from the architectural firm of Skidmore Owings and Merrill, where he worked for Howard McKee on the Environmental Impact Statement for the Mount Hood Freeway. Soon after I got to Portland, Alan Webber of the Mayor's Office asked me to take a look at Ernie, with a view to hiring him. I did. Ernie is/was impressive. I hired him right away; it was one of the best hires I ever made. Ernie is one of those few individuals that I can safely say made a big difference in Portland. Dennis Wilde of the Model Cities staff was recommended to me. He had an architectural background and a lot of recent experience working in Portland's neighborhoods. Finally, I asked Don Mazziotti, then an instructor at the University of Iowa Planning School to join us. He did. His legal background was used to get him hired, but his main interest at the Bureau was policy.

Of course, much of my problem was with some of those who were still there from the old Planning Bureau. Chief among those was Lloyd Keefe, the Planning Director who was there before me. Lloyd's tenure at the Planning Bureau was long and tortured. He had worked diligently under Commissioner William Bowes; he came to Portland in the middle fifties, I think, and spent about a decade developing a new zoning code for Portland, adopted in 1959. Lloyd was angry and obstinate and opinionated; which wouldn't have been that bad except that his opinions were definitely not those of the Mayor or Lloyd Anderson (at that time, a Commissioner with a lot of say in planning matters). In fact, it was my impression that Neil, Lloyd Anderson and Frank Ivancie all thought Lloyd Keefe should be fired. (In fact, Lloyd Anderson once told me that he had gotten Ivancie to agree to fire Keefe, but Frank chickened out). No one had the guts to fire him. So when I came around, guess who was sitting right down the hall? I give Lloyd one thing: he didn't pull punches. He didn't like the way we were doing things. He told us so. I eventually had to fire him--and I had to explain to Frank Ivancie why!

In addition to Lloyd Keefe, another long time Bureau employee was there--Dale Cannady. Dale was not the problem that Keefe was. He worked hard, he didn't quarrel with the party line out of City Hall, he helped out a lot with the administration of the Bureau. And, in fact, he served the City with honor in that way until his retirement sometime later. I think of Dale once in a while--now that I am in a similar position at BPA. I have had a lot of experience. I bring some skills and a bit of wisdom born of hard experience to the enterprise. But I am not one of the hot shots at BPA anymore (if I ever was.) The younger people are in there spinning their wheels and huffing and puffing at the importance of it all, and I am viewed as kind of an eccentric, I guess. I guess it's what you call being put out to pasture. Dale must have had a few chuckles at us during that time, just like I do now. Frank Frost was head of the Land Use Controls Section. Here is another man who made a difference in Portland. His calm, informed judgements at the counter and among the management at the Bureau were a major factor in whatever success we had in those days. Another jewel on the staff was Bev Nelson, my secretary. I have still to find her match.

**From rabble-rouser to Director: City Council Politics, Urban Design and Meeting the Folks**