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Brian Elliott

Portland State University, elliott3@pdx.edu

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Zoning out: Urban agriculture, sustainability, and development in Portland, Oregon

Problem Statement

The Portland metropolitan area urban growth boundary (UGB) was established between 1977 and 1980 as a key tool to manage urbanization. The ostensive purpose of the Portland UGB is to limit urban sprawl and thereby protect valuable farmland and natural areas from unnecessary urbanization. The most recent review from 2009 led to the addition of around 2,000 acres of land for residential and industrial development on the southwestern edge of the UGB. While the amount of land earmarked for development after a periodic review varies significantly, the overall trend has been one of expansion into undeveloped areas. This has involved the incorporation of farmland and gradually pushed agricultural production further from Portland central city and inner neighborhoods. Such a process is in tension with efforts by the City of Portland and Multnomah County to integrate food production more effectively into urban life. Proposed solutions focus on reforming land-use zoning policy:

Solution 1) There is currently a system of designating land adjacent to the UGB as either an urban or a rural reserve. Presently these designations operate only beyond the UGB. Integrating something like an agricultural reserve *within* expansion areas of the UGB would serve to protect farmland on the edge from future non-agricultural development.

Solution 2) The first solution serves the needs of peri-urban agriculture. An additional proposed change would involve introducing a new category of land-use that specifically

targets *urban* agriculture. In the context of the *Diggable City* project from 2005, Portland compiled an extensive inventory of public lands suited to such use.

Solution 3) A third, related solution would entail introducing legislation to have developers dedicate a given percentage of development costs to establish amenities such as community gardening plots. There are precedents for such initiatives, for example, having developers incorporate funding for art projects into development budgets.

Abstract

The establishment of a governing body and an urban growth boundary for the Portland metropolitan region is credited with significantly reducing the potential for urban sprawl in the area (Mendes et al, 438). In particular, adoption of the Transit Oriented Development (TOD) model in the 1990s and according efforts to enhance the metropolitan public transit system have led to Portland being acknowledged as a national and international model of “smart growth” (Calthorpe, 123-25). Given growth since the 1990s and a projected population for the Portland-Beaverton-Vancouver (WA) region of around three million by 2030 (2009-2030 Urban Growth Report, 4), it is unreasonable to assume that the UGB will not be subject to continuous expansion in the decades to come. If the food system of the area is to enhance its resilience there must be changes to land-use zoning policy to allow for extensive food production *within*, and not just beyond, the UGB. In and around Portland there are already widespread grassroots efforts to expand community gardens and small-scale urban agriculture. In 2004 the City of Portland, under the leadership of Commissioner Dan Saltzman, charged a group of PSU graduate researchers with the task of compiling an inventory of publicly owned land suited for conversion to food production. The findings, titled “The Diggable City,” were released in 2005 (Mendes et al., 11-12). This paper argues that land-use zoning reform within the Portland Metropolitan UGB must be made an urgent

priority if the popular grassroots desire for widespread urban and peri-urban agriculture is to become a reality over the next decade.

Growing with the Boundary

The very concept of an urban growth boundary implies that a clear divide between the urban and rural can be made. In fact, making this divide a stark reality is a recent phenomenon (Mougeot, 1994; cited in Mendes et al., 4). Until the advent of industrial scale agribusiness urban areas were much more porous with respect to surrounding countryside and its food production. Any urban growth boundary is ostensibly a policy mechanism for limiting sprawl and hence checking unnecessary development of rural lands for domestic housing and industrial uses. Currently, the Portland Metro UGB does not allow for the incorporation and protection of agricultural lands within its border. As the 2009-2030 Urban Growth Report (UGB Ordinance No 11-1264B) findings indicate, Oregon Statewide Planning Goals are interpreted in such a way that the desires and concerns of developers hold sway over other considerations, such as extant agricultural production or environmental health factors. The working assumption seems to be that urban development on the fringes of the UGB is inevitable and the role of decision-makers is to determine strategies of damage limitation. Given this assumption, it is reasonable to expect that significant areas of local food production will be pushed progressively further away from major metropolitan population centers. This process has a number of negative economical, ecological, and social effects; effects that could be mitigated through land-use policy reform.

One of the biggest challenges the UGB concept must face relates to its underlying assumption that urban and rural lands are mutually exclusive (cf. Mendes et al., 4). This assumption is only valid on the further presumption that rural land is used for industrial-scale commodity agriculture. Alternative, smaller-scale (up to fifty acres) agriculture

operating on organic or permaculture principles does not necessitate a hard separation from residential urban development. In fact, as both the *Diggable City* and *VisionPDX* reports demonstrated, there is a widespread perception among Portland residents that small-scale food production represents a positive amenity that actually enhances the quality of urban life (Mendes et al., 17). Given that Goal 1 of Oregon's Statewide Planning Goals and Guidelines (OAR 660-015-0000(1)) commits State and City officials to involving residents in planning policy and decisions, the strong popular mandate for urban agriculture needs to be reflected in more credible and robust ways by Metro planning policy. As the most recent Urban Growth Report notes: "Planning for the future is not just an exercise in providing numbers and forecasts. Planning creates opportunities for people and communities to define and articulate their collective desires and aspirations for enhancing the quality of life in our region" (UGR 2009-2030, 2). In 2008 Metro Council adopted "six desired outcomes that provide guidance for growth management decisions" (2). Given economic conditions at the time, it is unsurprising that a concern "economic competitiveness and prosperity" precedes goals relating to ecological health and social equity.

One way to meet the challenge would be to legislate for the possible retention and protection of productive agriculture lands when additional areas are placed within the UGB. Currently, developers seek large tracts of land (hundreds of acres at a time) owned by relatively few parties, and expect local government to meet the costs of infrastructure development in whole or part through public funding. Given that land prices generally decrease in proportion to distance from central city neighborhoods, there is at present an obvious financial disincentive for developers to purchase urban "brownfields". The latest UGB Report cites a recent article as evidence of this reality:

... because infill and redevelopment projects are often concerned with providing amenities such as transit and pedestrian orientation, access to retail and employment opportunities and green space and residential dwelling units located above commercial development, the capital lending markets consider such projects as risky. (Infill Development, 8)

Arguing, as the 2009-2030 Metro Urban Growth Report does, that urban redevelopment is economically unattractive to developers, runs counter to one of the underlying reasons for establishing a UGB in the first place, namely to avoid sprawl by adding housing density within existing urban areas. The selected quotation of the study just cited betrays a systemic bias at work within Metro's decision-making that favors the commercial interests of developers to the relative disadvantage of community concerns.

Metro must ensure through its periodic reviews that the UGB contains 20 years of land for future development. A historical map of the growth of the UGB since 1980 shows that major extensions to the boundary have largely occurred on the eastern and western fringes, with an unusually large annexation of land around the Damascus area to the southeast of Portland in 2002. On the edges of the UGB we find another land designation that is of crucial importance for understanding expansion: urban and rural reserves. An urban reserve is, in effect, earmarked for future inclusion within the UGB, while a rural reserve is effectively protected from development (at least until 2060). The 2009-2030 Urban Growth Report on Metro's decision to add around 2000 acres of land to the UGB (Ordinance No. 11-1264B) is instructive. The preamble to the Report essentially concedes that there is neither public funding nor private investment interest to support Metro's preferred method of increasing urban capacity through enhanced density. Many impediments to density are

cited: impossibility of enhancing public funding through means of taxation; lack of desire by private developers to redevelop urban land parcels; relative higher costs for developing smaller, fragmented lots as opposed to larger, contiguous parcels; costs of supplying infrastructure up-front, instead of over stages of development (2009-2030 UGR, 3-8).

In the case of the largest area added to the UGB in the 2009 review – just over 1000 acres in South Hillsboro – the report recognized negative affects to agricultural lands: “Because most of the area is devoted to agriculture, there will be adverse economic and social consequences to farmers and to agriculture in the area due to loss of land base” (12). Beyond stating that these affects would be worse if other land were to be selected for urbanization, the only justification given for taking this area out of agricultural production is their characterization as “conflicted agricultural land,” meaning land that is not a premier value for large-scale commercial operations. Nevertheless, the report concedes that slating the South Hillsboro land “will present issues of compatibility with farm practices in the [nearby] rural reserves” (14).

In order to prevent the kind of trade-offs between economic viability and agricultural integrity illustrated in the recent UGB expansion, the designation of rural reserves needs to be possible *within* the boundary. Given expansion over the last thirty years and current projections of population growth with the Portland metropolitan area, the current mechanisms of the UGB can only mean continued erosion of food production around the city. The result is further distance and estrangement between urban populations and their local food producers. Allowing for such rural reserves – in conjunction perhaps with a land trust framework – would allow for the retention of agricultural land within the growing city. These rural reserves would no doubt require that different practices were adhered to, practices adapted to proximity to residential developments. They would best thrive as mixed-

use agricultural lands, divided into smaller parcels, and perhaps integrating areas for community gardens, wildlife protection, visitor or learning centers, etc. They could be managed to some extent as urban parks are today in Portland, while being operated as locally owned businesses. The establishment of these alternative agricultural reserves on the edges on the UGB could then gradually be incorporated into the urban fabric as the metropolitan area grows.

The Growing City

Allowing for agricultural reserves within areas added to the UGB needs to be complemented by more robust efforts by Metro and the City of Portland to generate credible funding streams to support small-scale food production in urban neighborhoods. Both the *Diggable City* and *visionPDX* reports from 2005 and 2007 respectively made clear that there is widespread grassroots support for local food production. According to a study comparing recent urban agriculture initiatives in Portland and Vancouver, BC: “many planners perceived the food system to be a rural rather than an urban issue, underscoring the false dichotomy between urban and rural food policy” (Mendes et al 437). This state of affairs, however, does not generally lead to a situation of benign neglect, as “modern land use practices effectively prohibit agricultural activities in urban centers” (Pothukuchi and Kaufman, 1999; 2000; referenced in Mendes et al, 436). The positive reasons for altering urban land-use policy to embrace urban agriculture (UA) are manifold: “UA has been shown to support a host of sustainability goals including environmental protection, public health and nutrition, poverty reduction, community capacity building, participatory decision making, social inclusion, and community economic development, among others” (Mendes et al, 437).

The basic question can thus be seen as one relating to optimal policy means to meet this demand. Admittedly, simply demonstrating support for enhancing UA capacity in no way means that there are no grassroots concerns that might run counter to this support. Any reform in the area of metropolitan land-use policy must be sensitive to potentially conflicting concerns voiced by other stakeholders, including neighborhood associations and local businesses. One group's flourishing permaculture garden may be another's eyesore or health and safety concern. Additionally, as with access to urban parks, municipal policy changes in this area must embrace principles of environmental justice to ensure that the distribution of social and ecological is equitable. In other words, any changes to urban land-use endorsed by the City must make strenuous efforts to avoid being perceived as furthering rather than combating existing inequalities.

The *Diggable City* project was initiated by City of Portland Commissioner Dan Salzman in November 2004. In the absence of significant City resources, a team of eight graduate researchers at Portland State University was charged with the task of compiling an inventory of publicly owned land most suited to food production. The report, published in 2005, identified a total of 430 properties and divided them according to categories of size, type, and usage: potential community garden spaces of at least 7,500 sq. ft.; small-scale growing operations of less than 10,890 sq. ft.; large-scale growing operations of more than 10,890 sq. ft.; and growing on impervious surfaces of at least 5,000 sq. ft. (Mendes et al., 440). While the land inventory was the immediate goal of the *Diggable City* project, it also put forward five basic recommendations for the City of Portland. Among these, the fifth – a comprehensive review of policy and zoning obstacles – is most immediately relevant to the position advanced in this paper.

As shown in the preceding section, currently the Portland Metro UGB framework has no policy provisions or tools for the retention or expansion of agricultural activities within urbanized and urbanizing areas. The *Diggable City* report strongly suggests that a different kind of zoning category needs to be created. There are precedents for this in other North American cities, such as Montréal where community gardens carry their own land-use designation (436). Such designations are necessary for two principal reasons: first, to ensure that UA is not effectively priced out by urban land speculation; a second reason, related to the first, is to allow for lower utility charges (in the first instance relating to irrigation charges) on UA lands. While a restricted economic analysis could argue that this would simply allow for urban land to be systematically undervalued, a triple bottom-line analysis could potentially make a solid argument for the net benefits of UA zoning.

UA zoning might not be appropriate in every US city, but earlier initiatives by the City of Portland strongly suggest that it could work there. The Portland Office of Sustainable Development (OSD) was created in 2000 and the Portland/Multnomah Food Council Council, overseen by the OSD, has been in existence since 2002. Together with mature nonprofit organizations based in Portland such as Ecotrust and Food Alliance, there appears to be ample capacity to ensure land-use policy changes would be meaningful, effective, and popular. The economic arguments against UA nevertheless represent formidable potential opposition. Even if ecological, social, and cultural dimensions of sustainability are factored in, City and business representatives may still argue that there will be insufficient financial means to ensure that land set aside for UA will be properly developed and utilized. This is a genuine problem. Small-scale urban agriculture requires initial investment for preparing sites and installing adequate infrastructure (around \$20,000 to \$30,000, according to Mendes et al, 441), even if the City is willing to sell publicly owned lands below market rates applicable to

redevelopment projects. For all their enthusiasm for community gardens, Portlanders would be unlikely to back proposals for generating further local taxation revenue to finance such initiatives.

In the case of smaller land parcels (5,000 to 10,000 sq. ft.), the best option might be to transfer ownership to non-profit organizations such as Oregon Sustainable Agriculture Land Trust (OSALT), which already owns the land of a number of community gardening and farming operations in the Portland metropolitan area. However, organizations such as OSALT still require other non-profit or neighborhood groups to take on the day-to-day management and funding of sites. Alternatively, where infill and redevelopment on larger parcels (over 10,000 sq. ft.) is proposed, the City could frame policy that requires developers to include in their budget the cost of establishing of UA facilities. High density housing in condos already charges residents for landscaping, so that ongoing maintenance of food-producing spaces could be built in. Co-housing developments in Portland and elsewhere often include communal gardening facilities. While access to offsite community gardening or allotment systems are of value to residents lacking yard space, their distance from a place of residence is an obvious disadvantage.

Requiring developers effectively to pay a small additional percentage cost to a city authority for establishing UA facilities bears comparison with some existing schemes relating to public art. For example, the City of Los Angeles levies a 1% Arts Development Fee on developers. The fee can either be paid directly to the City or indirectly, in which case developers undertake to fund a city-approved arts project (<http://www.culturela.org/publicart/privatepercent.html>). There would two obvious relative advantages for parallel schemes of UA funding: first, they tend to provoke less public controversy than public art commissions; and, secondly, developers are better placed to offer in-kind facilities (building,

landscaping, sourcing materials, etc.) to meet their obligations. Provided a serious case could not be made that including the additional fee to developers' budgets would make a development unfeasible, initiating something like a "one percent for food" policy holds much potential for meeting UA start-up costs.

Future Farm-Cities

A century ago around ten per cent of the global population lived in urban areas. It is estimated that by 2050 three-quarters of the world's population will reside in an urban environment (Scholar, 3). In a world that is already predominantly urban, food production can no longer be seen as an exclusively rural activity. As our cities continue to expand, they must learn how to grow. Numerous pressures on poorer countries in the global south mean that these countries are not as well placed as those in the global north to begin a genuine and deep-rooted transition to urban agriculture. What now takes place piecemeal and on a small-scale must become part of a more integrated and expansive economic and social change. Legislators and policy makers must do their part. In most cases they will not lead the way, but they can, at the very least, remove elements of land-use policy that currently stand in the way of UA.

For both government and civil society alike, a paradigm shift must come about that will dismantle the ingrained tendency to treat and think of the rural and the urban as two radically distinct and unmixable categories. The very sense of progress and civilization is integrally connected with a movement out of the countryside and into the city. The challenge of creating resilient food systems requires a different sense of progress, a sense where urban space is seen as potential food producing space. While the separation of city and country has been culturally encoded for millennia, the arrival of industrial-scale agribusiness in the

twentieth century sharpened this separation significantly. While the struggle over agricultural means and methods in rural areas (chiefly organic vs. fossil-fuel based production systems) shows no signs of ending soon, the promotion of UA can do much to reconnect urban dwellers with a real sense of where their food comes from. The policy reforms outlined in this paper build on currently successful means for promoting UA and appeal to ways in which more robust funding mechanisms might be constructed. Rather than proposing an unfeasible future utopia, such reforms represent a credible next stage of present developments.

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