A Brief History of Our Future: A Historian Imagines Our City in 2033

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For most of the last century, visitors have been struck by Portland's self-satisfaction, settled feel, and status quo mind set.

As early as 1905, one journalist noted the contrast with its brasher neighbors: "You will hear Portland spoken of in some communities on the coast, as if it were as old as Rome [with] the ease of a matured civilization." Another in 1931 commented that "to know what Portland would do under the stress of any given circumstance, it is only necessary to imagine how Calvin Coolidge would act."

Despite the shipbuilding boom of World War II, Portland settled back after 1945 into what journalist and later U.S. Senator Richard Neuberger called "placidity and gentle living." Its economy stagnated between 1945 and 1965 as it rejected the sorts of initiatives that were changing Seattle from a provincial center into a major national city. As late as 1970, journalist Neal Pierce wrote that "if any west coast town could be said to have a monopoly on propriety and an anxiousness to keep things as they are, it is Portland, a town of quiet wealth, discrete culture, and cautious politics."

Even after 30 thirty years of very successful civic activism and planning at the end of the century, the city still feels snug, bright, tidy, "Scandinavian," to journalist Robert Kaplan: "With its neat trolley lines, geometric parks, rustic flower pots beside polymer-and-glass buildings, crowded sidewalk benches ... Portland exudes a stagy perfection."

So Portland is a comfortable and conservative city. That's not Jesse Helms-style conservatism. It's conservative in the literal sense of wanting to hold on to a good thing. Portlanders like what we have in our communities and in the surrounding environment, and we want to preserve it. We're cautious about promises, careful about panaceas. To borrow a phrase from Missouri, we're the "show-me city." Do planners argue that infill townhouses will improve the neighborhood? Well, show me. Do civic leaders claim that we need major league baseball to put us in the metropolitan big leagues? Well, prove it.

In most forecasting, the mostly likely future is an extension of the present, for social and economic patterns have great inertia. The conservative character of Portland, of course, exaggerates this power of the past.

Nevertheless, Portland is substantially different now than in the early 1970s – more diverse, more cosmopolitan, better connected to national and international flows of ideas. Part of the credit goes to worldwide trends in technology, immigration, and communication. Part also goes to leaders who have seen these trends as opportunities to revitalize downtown, to link city and suburbs, and to build an information-era economy.

In speculating about scenarios for the next three decades, we might think in terms of traditions, trends, transformations, and thunderbolts.

Traditions are the foundations of the regional culture. Portlanders are going to continue to grow roses, to take fish out of the rivers, to walk on the beach, and to go to neighborhood meetings.

Trends are changes that are easy to predict from current information. An example in recent years has been the high demand for Pearl District housing, dri-
ven by the inevitable aging of baby boom households and householders. Look for a surge in assisted-living communities in 10 or 15 fifteen years as the we boomers continue to age.

Transformations are also rooted in the same trends, but they involve real innovation. They require conscious decisions, individual leadership, and/or the coalescing of shared goals among a new generation.

Thunderbolts are the unpredictable events that upset any forecast, from earthquakes to investment or disinvestment decisions by outside corporations. The Mount St. Helens eruption and the arrival and rapid expansion of Intel are two different kinds of thunderbolts.

In the following paragraphs, let's speculate about trends and transformations, since thunderbolts are by definition unexpected.

PEOPLE (AND POLITICS)

One of the most obvious trends will be the continued diversification of the Portland area population. There is far more ethnic and racial diversity in Portland now than in the 1980s, with newcomers from eastern Europe, Latin America, Asia, and, of course, California. The metro area that used to be 90% white is now 80% white, and it is likely that the change will continue. Because we're still on the trailing edge of this particular curve, there is still a window of opportunity to anticipate the next wave. On all three coasts, it is possible get a glimpse of the future by looking at places like San Diego or Houston.

One of the most striking changes may be in the composition of the school-aged population. Migrating long distances, especially across national and cultural boundaries, is hard work. Immigrants tend to be younger people in their child-bearing years, and immigrant couples tend to have large families. Schools in both city and suburbs will therefore reflect the new demographics population mix faster than most other aspects of Portland life, they will continue to show the change as the children of 1990s immigrants themselves begin to create families.

It will be interesting to see how these same immigrants and their children will enter into the political mix. Will Latinos, Koreans Americans, Russian Americans, and others join the traditional liberal coalition with its emphasis on social services, or will they find greater appeal in the entrepreneurial values of the neoconservatives? The answer will depend as much on trends in national politics as on local leadership, but it will have profound effects on the direction of local government by the 2020s and 2030s.

There is a similar question about younger Portlanders. For the last decade, Portland has been a cool place for people in their twenties and early thirties. It has attracted a disproportionate number of well-educated young people who are looking for careers in the arts, information industries, and public service. The city benefitted greatly in the 1970s from an earlier wave of young, energetic newcomers who are now in senior positions and leadership. We can hope that the current generation will similarly provide new ideas and energy to keep Portland's civic revolution simmering.

PLACES

It is safe to predict that downtown Portland will continue to be a strong center thirty years from now, and that the middle class will still be willing to ride the bus. These are traditions built into the fabric and culture of the city.

These same traditions will help the continuation of some important trends. The downtown will continue to expand into the south waterfront. Light rail will make it to Clackamas and Clark counties.

The most striking transformation will be downtown Vancouver. There will be more office space and business activity in Washington County, but it will continue to be spread among half a dozen clusters and campuses. Vancouver, in contrast, will capitalize on its accessibility (light rail will come), its strong amenities of location, and its commitment to good urban design. Vancouver will be Portland's equivalent of Bellevue, Washington.

Another change may be the St. Johns Renaissance. There's no certainty in predicting taste, but a turn to
industrial chic is a real possibility. Portland will be glad that it preserved the industrial sanctuaries of the Central East Side and the Northwest Industrial District. And North Portland will boom as people want to be close to the industrial action. Land prices will soar in Linnton, and St. Johns will become a trendy address. Luxury high-rise towers on North Lombard Street will give their lucky tenants views of both Rivergate to the north and Terminal 4 to the south. Any house with a view of Swan Island and Mocks Bottom will command a premium.

PROSPERITY

Portland in the twentieth century was the tortoise to Seattle's hare. Seattle's economic chart looks like a roller coaster – Way up! Way down! Up again! Down! Portland's chart looks like a stairway. It steps up during fast growth decades like the 1940s, 1970s, and 1990s, then levels off to assimilate the gains. With this pattern in mind, we can expect the first decade of the present century to be another period when we consolidate the gains and changes of the recent past, with the possibility of a new surge of further into the century.

The regional orientation will remain the flywheel that keeps the metropolitan economy relatively steady. People from Pendleton and Port Orford, Pasco (WA) and Payette (ID) will continue to look to Portland for professional expertise, business services, wholesale distributors, and banks. The old Imperial Hotel, where eastern Oregon ranchers used to stay when they were in town, has transformed into the extra-chic Lucia Hotel, but the business connections remain in place.

A key challenge for further economic growth is to revive the Pacific orientation that seemed so promising until the East Asian economy went into a tailspin? Portland's airport enjoys more clear flying days than Seattle and it has room to expand onto those neighboring golf courses. I can envision a greatly expanded airport that supplants Seattle as an air hub between the East Asia and the Atlantic economy.

In the same light, Portland might postpone its entry into major league baseball until it can join in creating the Pacific Rim League. The state economic development department might want to buy up a couple surplus Concorde team planes for the Portland Pioneers. They'll get the Pioneers quickly to games with the Tijuana Brass, Mexico City Monarchs, Tokyo Tycoons, Seoul Train, the Taipei Tigers, the Singapore Slingers, the Beijing Bombers, the Shanghai Dragons, and the Manila Monsoons (nicknamed the Manila Folders for their unfortunate tendency to lose leads down the stretch).

The other economic challenge is to become an exporter of intellectual content – not just silicon wafers but the ideas that move across them. Portland has a good foundation with grassroots artists, a multimedia industry, OH&SU, and PSU. The next economic boost is far more likely to come from something unexpected – an new application, a new industry – than from refinements in mature industries. The Silicon Forest needs educational support, but the growth industries of the next generation need a flexible educational base that supports interesting ideas across the board.

BIG GESTURES OR INCREMENTAL CHANGE

Neither social forecasters nor dial-up psychics can confidently predict thunderbolts. Any scenario that looks 30 thirty years into the future will be overtaken by events. Nevertheless, I've tried to suggest a few areas where we might consider where present traditions and trends might carry us.

It's not likely that Portlanders will suddenly adopt a taste for big gestures. We're too careful, too tight with a buck. Big, risky ventures aren't in Portland's style.

We can be confident, however, that Portlanders have learned how to do a lot of little things (and middle-sized things) right. We know how to support older neighborhoods, how to protect key natural areas, how to make design choices that fit with each other. That's a capacity that will help Portlanders conserve much of what they like about their communities, and not a bad vision for the coming decades.

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