

Summer 2018

The Landscape: Happy Valley

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Recommended Citation

Moore, Eavan, "The Landscape: Happy Valley" (2018). *Metroscope*. 134.
<https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/metroscope/134>

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Happy Valley

by Eavan Moore

When the city of Happy Valley first incorporated in 1965, it was to fend off the threat of annexation by Portland and any resulting urbanization. Since 1999, however, growth management has been a theme in Oregon's fastest-growing city, which increased its population by almost seven percent between 2016 and 2017.

The new center of Happy Valley is based on Metro's "town center" concept, a vision of mixed uses and multimodal transportation serving tens of thousands of people within a three-mile radius. City hall, which was built with LEED certification in 2008, sits directly northeast of the Happy Valley Town Center, a commercial development on SE Sunnyside Road anchored by New Seasons and served by TriMet bus 155. Townhouses and single-family homes surround both this commercial complex and a second one recently completed to its east. Zoning in the town center discourages drive-throughs and encourages construction in the "Happy Valley Style," which emphasizes pedestrian-friendly elements and draws on Craftsman, Oregon rustic, and prairie architectural styles for aesthetic inspiration.

Happy Valley's Transportation Systems Plan envisions a network of neighborhoods linked by walkable, bikable roads. As subdivisions go in, the developers build out these roads—and there are many subdivisions going in. Rock Creek Meadows added ninety-six lots north of Fred Meyer in 2014. Grand View Meadows, Pine View Meadows, and Scouter's Meadow are all under construction at the north end of the city. Another housing development next to Scouter's Mountain Nature Park will result in a total of 600 single-family homes on 223 acres over the next decade. Still another development will add about 1,200 multifamily and single-family units on the former Pleasant Valley golf course.

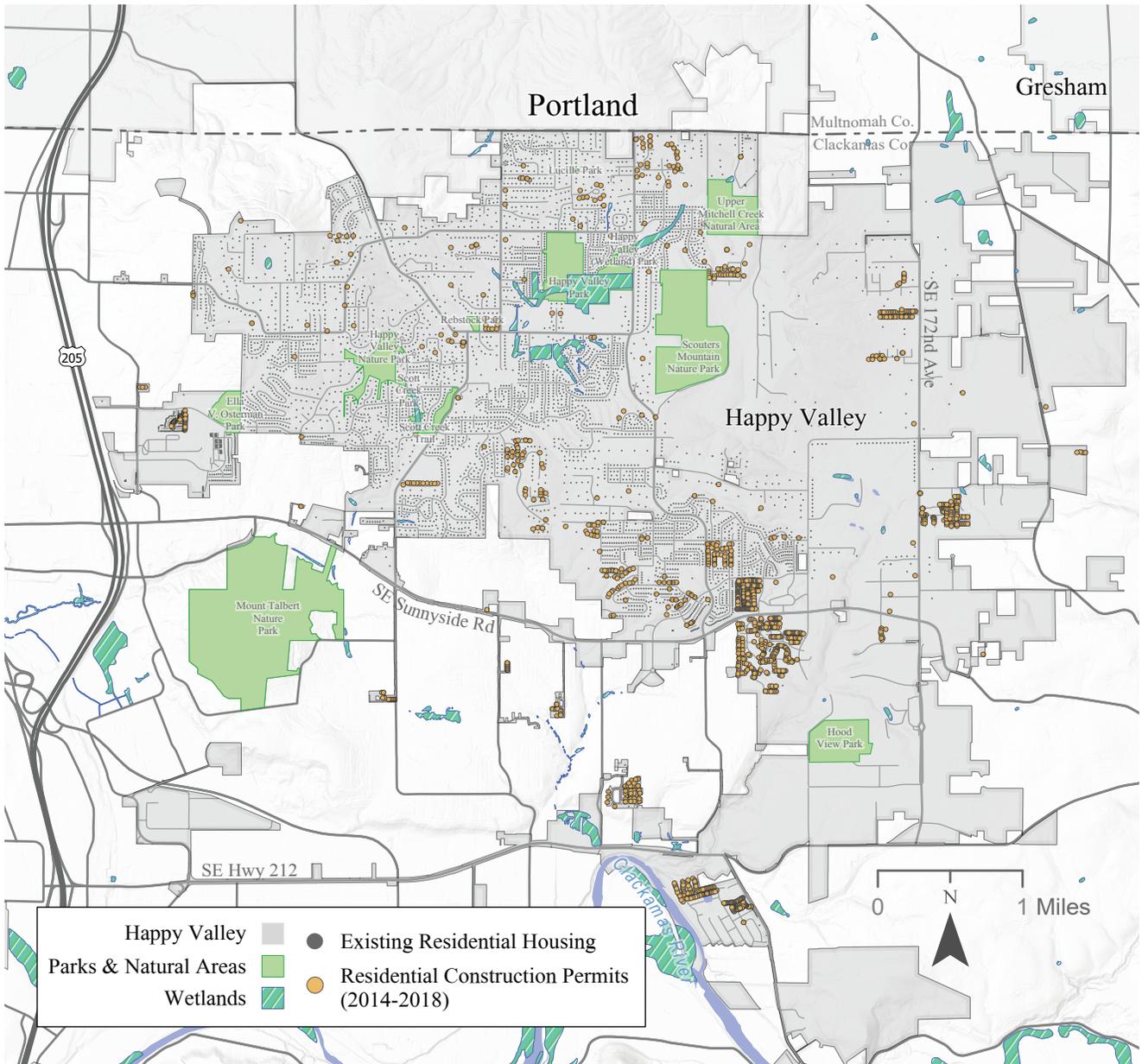
Happy Valley has grown in acreage as well as population. After Damascus ended its seven-year experiment with incorporation in 2011, the owners of more than 1,000 acres opted for annexation by Happy Valley, which as a result is now working on the Pleasant Valley/North Carver Integrated Land Use and Transportation Plan.

Density requires roads, and that poses challenges. Elected officials are interested in making major improvements to 172nd Avenue that would allow people to walk from homes to shops. The question is: Where will the money come from? Happy Valley has a relatively low property tax rate and typically relies on developers for capital improvements.

Then, too, the hilly topology is challenging for road-building. Roads and hills are a couple of the reasons Happy Valley has seen little industrial land use, though Metro's Urban Growth Management Functional Plan requires some industrial zoning. The land currently zoned for this purpose has seen no new development beyond its existing agricultural uses. Industrial zoning may complicate planning for the North Carver area, because it is far from any highway.

Very steep slopes are protected, as are wetlands; this is another facet of the city's managed growth approach. At the Rock Creek Meadows development, a large wetland has been set aside and the houses will be built on smaller lots to compensate. Slope protection means that it will be possible to enjoy some natural areas without seeing signs of the rapid development taking place all around.

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and staving off cuts to music, visual arts, theater, and sports.

One of the biggest impacts of losing SRS—on tourists and locals alike—landed in the county sheriff’s department. “In the last five years, we’ve seen a 33 percent reduction in our patrol staff,” said Sheriff Dave Brown. “Because our staffing levels are what they are, we typically only have two patrol deputies working the county at any given time. For two hours every day, no one is on duty.”

On the ground, that means uniformed deputies are fitting in cases that would normally be investigated in plain clothes. It can be more difficult to interview a child sex abuse victim while in uniform, and it is impossible to do a controlled drug buy.

This situation also hampers the county’s ability to meet demand for emergency services. When an emergency call comes in, a deputy trained to manage search and rescue missions either leaves patrol duties or comes in to work overtime. Six of the seven staff who left in the last five years were search and rescue coordinators. Until now, the department has used an SRS fund to cover search and rescue on national forest lands. But that money will run out by the end of June, and the annual expense budget will cover the cost. “If things go the way I think they will, the bulk of responses and the financial impact is going to be put back on our local taxpayer,” said Brown.

That does not necessarily seem fair, given that it is generally not the local taxpayers needing to be rescued. “Because of the vast recreational opportunities in the county, we see upwards of one-and-one-half to two million visitors a year coming through the county,” said Brown. “Those visitors generate more than ninety percent of our recreational accidents and search and rescue calls.” In the first six months of 2017, Brown’s emergency services department responded to thirty requests for help: eighteen “overdue person” calls, eight searches, and four accidents. Some of these calls are competing with local emergencies. Brown is reluctant to charge for rescue service, but he is not alone in thinking that visitors should be better prepared.

The Eagle Creek fire has piqued new interest in Skamania among hikers looking for alter-

native trails on the other side of the river. This annoys some locals, whose favorite secluded spots are more popular now, and has mixed potential for the local economy. On the one hand, it could mean more revenue for recreation-related businesses. On the other hand, it could put more pressure on emergency services.

Tracy Calizon, the Forest Service’s community engagement staff officer for the Gifford Pinchot Forest, said that Forest Service employees had noticed an uptick in use in September 2017. Longer-term, she said, it’s hard to tell what the impacts of the fire will be.

“We’re anticipating that more people will know about the Gifford Pinchot National Forest as they think about other places to go,” she said. Those used to the relative creature comforts of the Gorge need to be aware that Gifford Pinchot has rougher roads and fewer amenities. “I think a lot of search and rescue... comes from people getting lost or not being able to rely on their cell phone for directions or not having enough food. Eagle Creek fire or not, I would like to encourage people to always be prepared when they come to the national forest.”

Timber

Brown, Lannen, and Albaugh all agree on one point: The county can and should be receiving more natural resource revenue. Under the Northwest Forest Plan, allowable timber sales by the US Forest Service are more than fifty-two million board feet a year. Over the last twenty years, the actual harvest has averaged half that—for a variety of reasons, but above all because of litigation. Between 1999 and 2002, there were almost no sales at all. The formation of forest collaboratives—multi-stakeholder working groups that meet to discuss and negotiate forest management practices—ended the period of intense litigation, but the process of working in a collaborative and putting trees up for sale is still slower than some would like.

Forest collaborative participants generally agree on the value of thinning existing plantations. More controversial is a practice commonly called a “regeneration harvest.” Northwest Forest Plan co-authors Jerry

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Franklin (University of Washington) and Norm Johnson (Oregon State University) suggest that deliberate tree-felling can create space for species that are part of a healthy forest ecosystem. In its most widely proposed form, regeneration work clears a large area to mimic the effects of wildfires, landslides, and other natural events. This creates early seral habitat that supports deer, elk, and birds that prefer open spaces.

The enthusiasm for regeneration harvesting concerns conservation groups. “What it looks like on the ground is a clear cut, to us,” said Matt Little, executive director of the Cascade Forest Conservancy (known from 1985 to 2016 as the Gifford Pinchot Task Force). He sees a difference between a moderate approach as recommended by Franklin and Johnson (two-thirds clearance of a unit, with some trees left in the cleared area) and current proposals to reduce hundred-acre areas of timber by 85 percent.

Lannen supports multiple approaches to increase timber yield, including thinning and regeneration harvesting. The Forest Service has published research on the rate of new growth in the forests, called the annual increment. In the Cascades, the annual increment is around 500 million board feet a year. Lannen believes that volume makes a case for a much bigger harvest. “One of the groups that we worked with said you ought to be able to take a hundred million board feet off the forest every year to support local economies, improve multiple species' habitat, and not do anything severe as far as the covered lands for the spotted owl are concerned,” he said. “We call it the hundred million plan.”

Concerns over logging methods notwithstanding, Little agrees it is naive to think that recreation can replace timber as a sustaining economic force. “There has to be a multi-tier solution,” he said. “It has to be a combination of more thinning projects in the forest, supporting the Forest Service in their funding and projects, working with the counties to support continued [federal] funding, and trying to figure out new revenue sources.”

Fagerness said the local workforce development council was looking to address the employability of county residents, many of whom are just out of high school and unused to the working world. “We’re working with WorkSource, and People for People, which place workers,” she said. “A lot of what we’re seeing is the need for training on soft skills—how to make eye contact, and shake hands firmly, and show up on time.”

Investing for the Future

While SRS compensates counties for ongoing restrictions on federal land use, many think of it as a bridge for counties on their way to becoming self-sustaining. As the years went by and these counties continued to depend on federal payments, support for the program waned in Congress.

The disappearance of SRS has reportedly caused some new consternation in DC. Losing that funding automatically increased payments under another program called Payment-in-Lieu-of-Taxes, or PILT, which compensates counties for the untaxed federal land within their borders. About 62 percent of US counties receive PILT funds—and because the pool is a more or less fixed amount, some areas previously unaffected by the SRS issue are seeing their payments reduced.

In the face of SRS’s continued unpopularity, however, the Montana-based nonpartisan research center Headwaters Economics has proposed an alternative bridge in the form of a federal natural resource trust. There are different ways to implement it, but the general idea is that either resource revenue or federal appropriations would seed an endowment that would generate annual interest income for the counties.

“It’s not a new idea,” said Mark Haggerty, staff researcher at Headwaters. “Trusts are used by every state in the West for state lands. Any royalties and fees that states receive from timber or grazing or oil or gas, they put into a permanent fund.... We’re borrowing an idea from the states to do the same thing with federal land revenue.”

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If the fund followed the model most states use, it would distribute a fixed percentage of the ending fund balance every year, with the amount matched to the fund's growth rate. In one year, \$1 million invested in a trust could generate \$40,000.

If this is such a great idea, why hasn't it yet been implemented? One reason is that the White House Office of Management and Budget opposes any plan that would send investment income anywhere other than the federal treasury. Another reason is that permanent, consistent payments would weaken the hand of those who advocate for changes to forest management. To some, persistent county budget holes are a compelling argument for increasing the timber harvest.

In response to that argument, Haggerty asks: "What was the purpose of the payments in the first place? Was it to compensate counties for nontaxable federal land? Or was it really this promise that the Forest Service would cut down trees?"

Future Growth

As distant as Skamania County may currently feel in a cultural sense, its proximity to urban centers means that urban growth is starting to ripple out in its direction. Melissa Still remarked that her hometown of Fall City, in unincorporated King County, Washington, had rebounded from similar timber-related problems largely because of settlement by Microsoft employees and others in the tech industry.

Lannen thinks the county should be preparing for new residents. He foresees potential spillover into Stevenson-Carson from Portland, Vancouver, Hood River, and White Salmon. "Ridgefield is the fastest-growing community in the state of Washington right now," he said. "News to me, but, you know, those things happen. People are going to come this way, so I think we need to be actively thinking about it."

The idea of merging with Clark County for the sake of administrative efficiency has been raised but immediately panned. The sense in Skamania is that it would be neglected by a government based in Vancouver.

However, there may be a case for looking across other borders for solutions. "For us, the Gorge is

its own region," said Albaugh. "We more identify with the Gorge, but half the Gorge is Oregon. When we had that weather event, it would have been declared a disaster if we'd been able to combine our losses and damage with the losses across the river, but that isn't how it works."

He thinks that better transportation connections might also help Skamania County. There are two bus services in Skamania County and Hood River County, for example, but they don't connect. The Bridge of the Gods at Cascade Locks is the county's only road connection to Oregon. "If we're talking pie-in-the-sky things, I'd like to see more bridges across the Columbia River," said Albaugh.

Fundamentally, said Haggerty, the opportunities that Skamania County has to grow its economy have changed in the last couple of decades. Timber jobs will never provide the same levels of employment; automation has sharply reduced the number of people needed, even though it brought up the skill level and associated wages. "But the county's public land and the kinds of services the county provides contribute to a quality of life," he said, "that really can help it attract more businesses and more people, because of its proximity to the Portland Metro area. The local government being adequately funded is absolutely essential to their economic development opportunities."

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