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Report on City of Portland Proposed Comprehensive Plan

City Club of Portland (Portland, Or.)

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REPORT ON

CITY OF PORTLAND PROPOSED COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

To the Board of Governors,
City Club of Portland:

I. INTRODUCTION

The City Club Committee to review the *Discussion Draft* of Portland's Comprehensive Land Use Plan was formed in December, 1978. After several months of study, the Committee presented its report to the membership with conclusions and recommendations on June 8, 1979. The report was adopted by the membership with the following recommendations to the City's planners:

"1. City planners should creatively approach the question of vision for the future of Portland, and this vision should take into account newly-developed technology as well as lifestyles (which are changing in many different directions), demographics, economics, energy considerations, and "livability" for a highly diverse population.

2. Technical data necessary to a full understanding of the Plan, and the specific mechanisms for implementation of the Plan, should be redrafted into one clear, concise document for general citizen review. This document should include a clear statement of the goals—the "vision"—against which the Plan itself can be measured.

3. The Plan should be explained publicly in terms of dollar investments, implications of zoning differences, employment possibilities, public services, and so on. A matrix should be developed for evaluating the Plan in terms of amenities to be gained and penalties to be incurred as a result of decisions to accept or reject particular elements of the Plan.

4. The second draft should insure coordination of the plans of the region.

5. The following issues should be more fully addressed in the second draft:

a. the possibilities for and implications of aggressive annexation by the City;

b. the development of mass-transit patterns not exclusively tied to the present radial system;

c. amenities which could accrue to the City with greatly increased population;

d. the economic implications of the Plan, for the private and public sectors, and the sources from which public funds will be drawn to finance the Plan, including the possibility of a user-tax to help recover costs of City facilities used by suburban residents."¹

In June, 1979, the Committee was asked to accept a further charge to review the revised *Proposed Comprehensive Plan* after its publication in September, 1979. The purpose of the additional review was to determine whether or not specific City Club recommendations had been acted upon and whether or not issues raised in the June 8 report had been addressed in the revision. The Committee accepted that charge and met several times again after September 1, 1979, to discuss the revised Plan.

On October 11, 1979, Committee Chairman Clifford Carlsen, Jr. testified at a public hearing before the Portland Planning Commission to discuss the Committee's review of the revised *Proposed Comprehensive Plan* prior to the Commission's approval of the Plan. This report is based on the Committee's initial review and City Club report on the *Discussion Draft*, review of the revised *Proposed Comprehensive Plan* and supporting documents, and the testimony presented by Carlsen to the Portland Planning Commission.

¹Report on *Discussion Draft, City of Portland Comprehensive Land Use Plan*. City Club of Portland. Vol. 60, No. 2. June 8, 1979. pp. 23-24.

II. DISCUSSION

A. General Statement

The *Proposed Comprehensive Plan* for the City of Portland was approved by the Portland Planning Commission on November 8, 1979, after the Commission reviewed the Plan and heard testimony at several public hearings. The Plan now goes to the City Council which is scheduled to conduct additional public hearings, amend the Plan as necessary and adopt it in June, 1980, in order to comply with the stated deadline of the Land Conservation and Development Commission (LCDC). Only if City Council adopts the Plan and LCDC approval is granted, will the Plan become an official planning document.

As stated in our earlier report, your Committee believes that the planners have satisfied the statutory obligations mandated by LCDC, but we continue to believe that the planners have missed an excellent opportunity to address fully two issues of great importance to the future of Portland:

- (a) the benefits of increased residential density, and
- (b) a vision for the City.

Your Committee is concerned that this Plan is presented as a comprehensive plan for Portland. As such, the Plan's very existence as the City's official planning document may hinder future, more truly comprehensive, planning efforts. Your Committee is concerned that residents and public officials will be unwilling to engage in another full-scale planning program for years to come. For this reason, we believe that more consideration should be given to these two major issues *before* the Plan is adopted by the City Council.

B. Major Issues

1. Density

In your Committee's report of June 8, 1979, we stated that: "It is possible that higher density and more people will bring to Portland excitement, stimulation, change, and amenities which only a large and economically sound city can support: cultural activities; education; employment; parks and recreational facilities; and major public services to satisfy the diversity of interests implicit in a large and viable population.

"It is also possible that greater population and higher density will become a matter of survival for the City in the coming years, as more and more evidence comes in to support the conclusion of some planners that medium-sized cities like Portland will not survive the economic pressures of the future without major growth to form a more substantial tax base..." (pp. 18-19).

Overall, the *Proposed Comprehensive Plan* recommends increased density for the City over the next 20 years, and your Committee concurs that such an increase will be of benefit to Portland in meeting both economic and housing needs.² Any city which hopes to be viable during the next decades must promote conservation of energy, maximum use of existing public facilities, development of available vacant land within its urban boundaries, and innovative means of economically and comfortably housing a growing and changing population.

The planners have failed again to communicate the need for and the benefits of higher residential density in a way which would stimulate enthusiastic public acceptance. Important information explaining the need for increased density is included in several of the planning support documents, especially *II Urban Development*, *IV Housing*, *VII Energy*, and *XI Public Facilities*, but this information is not brought together in an effective and easily understood format for public review. The public has again been left with the difficult task of sorting through complex technical data in order to understand the planners' expressed goals.

²Ibid. pp. 18-23.

Planners appear to have retreated from their earlier, more direct, position on increased residential density, possibly as a result of negative public response during hearings on the *Discussion Draft*.

Your Committee here reiterates its support of increased density for the City.³ As stated earlier, we believe that single-family residential housing can co-exist with high density housing, and we regret that planners have not chosen to make a stronger case for their own proposal.

For instance, planners might provide a "change map" for public review — a map which would show density changes as they could be expected to occur incrementally over the coming years. This kind of map might be more beneficial in promoting citizen understanding than the map accompanying the *Proposed Comprehensive Plan* which shows the changes as if already accomplished.

Planners have also failed to relate clearly increased density to projected population figures, resulting in confusion apparent at public hearings as to what higher residential density will mean in terms of actual numbers of people occupying numbers of units. The present trend toward single or two person households means that "increased density" may bring only one or two people per unit into an area, but the term "multi-family," used by the planners, is often equated by the public with as many as four, five or six people per unit. Those responsible for explaining the document and its implications to the public should be aware of the connotative meanings of such terms as "multi-family" which may trigger unnecessarily negative response from the public unless fully and carefully explained.

Misunderstanding of the density issue will continue to divert the public's attention from the larger and more significant problem of the lack of an overall vision for the City in the Plan. Since the Plan has now passed from the hands of the planners through the Planning Commission, your Committee feels it is incumbent upon the Portland City Council to recognize the importance of clarifying this issue during its public review period.

2. Vision

In our earlier report, your Committee called for "a clear, positive, perhaps futuristic, even idealistic statement of vision for the City — a vision on which the details of the Plan can hang and which will provide a context for discussion and debate among the City's residents over the coming weeks and months." (p. 22)

In the recommendations of our earlier report, we included this statement:

"1. City planners should creatively approach the question of vision for the future of Portland, and this vision should take into account newly-developed technology as well as lifestyles (which are changing in many different directions), demographics, economics, energy considerations, and 'livability' for a highly diverse population." (p. 23)

Planners have included in the revised *Proposed Comprehensive Plan* a section entitled, "A Vision of Portland's Future," but this section appears to be primarily a restatement of the "Looking Ahead" section of the earlier *Discussion Draft*.

Your Committee does not believe that this statement fits the description of the vision called for in our first report. Our position on the question of a lack of vision for the *Proposed Comprehensive Plan* has not changed from that taken in our first report. The planners have failed to provide the City with a vision, and your Committee believes that the lack of a vision which unifies and helps explain diverse aspects of the Plan to citizens is a serious flaw in the plan. We recommend that the planners' work be supplemented now by a city-appointed task force to develop a vision for the City to be incorporated into the Plan before its adoption by the City Council.

The City Club Board of Governors, recognizing the importance of the need for such a vision, authorized a study committee to prepare a City Club report on "A Vision for

³Ibid.

Portland." This study, expected in May, 1980, will put forth a vision for Portland's future to reflect not only the legal minimums of the LCDC goals, but also our aspirations as a community. The vision will have an emphasis on the entire City, against which the Plan itself can be measured.⁴ This Vision Study will be available for use by the City Council and any city-appointed task force.

In the August 27, 1979 issue of *Willamette Week*, Portland City Planner Tracy Watson was quoted as follows: "If people think this Plan is conservative, much of that is because it has to be, by necessity. The City is already 85% developed and you can't impose some visionary, avant-garde land use plan on an already developed City."⁵

While it is true that planning a vision for an already-existing city is not the same as planning a vision for an unbuilt city, a vision is still possible and necessary. Noted architect, planner, and professor Kevin Lynch addressed this possibility several years ago when he wrote:

"We are continuously engaged in the attempt to organize our surroundings, to structure and identify them. Various environments are more or less amenable to such treatment. When reshaping cities it should be possible to give them a form which facilitates these organizing efforts rather than frustrates them."⁶

Those charged with the responsibility for developing a vision should see that a visual inventory is conducted to identify the physical elements, problems and potentials of the various districts of the City. Basic work on such an inventory was completed by the Portland Chapter, American Institute of Architects, in 1971. Results of this study were published in their book, *Entering Portland*.

Your Committee believes that with a well-developed vision for the City based on a thorough review of the already-existing elements of Portland, City officials could make a written commitment to quality in redeveloping, reinforcing and preserving the physical elements of the City. The San Francisco plan, while not specifically suited to the unique countenance of Portland, is an example of such a commitment to urban design closely tied to a vision of that city. It is interesting to note that the San Francisco plan did, indeed, address the reshaping of and a vision for an already-built city.

With such a written commitment to vision and urban design in hand, we could measure against it our decisions regarding new development, preservation, growth and change in the City. Our ability as residents and citizens to see clearly what does or does not meet the requirements of this commitment would be greatly enhanced.

III. CONCLUSIONS

Your Committee believes that the *Proposed Comprehensive Plan* has addressed more fully than the *Discussion Draft* some issues of significance: annexation, mass transit, energy, and coordination of regional plans. But your Committee finds the issues of density and a vision for the City treated somewhat cavalierly in light of their importance to the City's development.

Density and a vision for the City are closely linked. Jobs, economic development, an adequate tax base, public improvements, cultural activities, schools, in short — all those things which keep the City livable — are interconnected with these two issues. Your Committee concludes that the inability or the unwillingness of the planners to present a strong and clear case for increased density as part of a larger vision for the City is a major shortcoming of the *Proposed Comprehensive Plan*.

⁴City Club of Portland, Authorization for Study, "A Vision for the Future of Portland," August 13, 1979.

⁵Peter Siström. "The New-look Comp Plan," *Willamette Week*. August 27, 1979.

⁶Kevin Lynch. *The Image of the City*. Harvard University Press, 1970. p. 90.

Your Committee is disappointed that these issues were also apparently disregarded by the Planning Commission when it approved the Comprehensive Plan. Your Committee looks now to the Portland City Council to examine more closely the questions of density and vision before the Plan receives final approval. We stress again that this Plan will become a powerful document upon its adoption and will have force for many years in the shaping of our City. Every effort should be made to prepare the best document possible rather than simply the most expeditious.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

Your Committee recommends the following:

1. A carefully and clearly prepared statement on the advantages of and alternatives to higher residential density should be presented by planners to the public during the City Council public hearings process.
2. A vision task force should be appointed by the City to develop a vision of breadth, imagination and quality for the City. The report of the City Club Vision Study Committee, which will list our aspirations as a community, will be provided to City Council.
3. A visual inventory should be started by the City to list the physical elements, problems and potentials of the various districts of the City. This inventory should be coordinated with similar, ongoing efforts conducted by such groups as the Historic Landmarks Commission, and city neighborhood associations.
4. The City should make a commitment in writing to quality in redeveloping, reinforcing and preserving the physical elements of the City.
5. A written commitment should be made by the City to an urban design process similar to that used in developing the San Francisco plan.
6. A "change map" should be prepared by the planners to reflect cumulative changes in the shape of the City based on proposed new zoning.
7. City Council should accept and approve only a truly Comprehensive Plan which will be of value to the City for the next 20 years, even if this requires an extension of the deadline from LCDC.

Respectfully submitted,
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Clifford N. Carlsen, Jr., *Chairman*

Approved by the Research Board on November 29, 1979 and submitted to the Board of Governors. Received by the Board of Governors on January 14, 1980 and ordered printed and submitted to the membership for discussion and action on January 25, 1980.*

*Myron Katz, who is a member of the Portland City Planning Commission, abstained from deliberating and voting on this report.

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