

Note: This transcript was substantially edited for accuracy, clarity, and legibility by Lee Miller and Kevin Pozzi in September of 2015.

Lee Miller Interview
Wednesday, 8/12/15

INTERVIEWER: Today is August 12, 2015, and it is my pleasure to be speaking this afternoon with Lee Miller. Lee has held numerous roles throughout his career in connection to land use including as Director of Lane County Planning Department and as the Chair of the Oregon Planning Director's Association. My name is Kevin Pozzi, and I am the Program Manager for the Oregon Planning Forum, which is housed within the College of Urban and Public Affairs here at Portland State University. Lee, we're honored to have you here and willing to sit down with us today. We're hoping to gather as much information as we can from the people who are influential in forming and shaping Oregon's land use system over these past, oh, now, 42 years, I believe. We're aiming to document the stories, anecdotes and experiences of the people who were involved back then, as well as to get your thoughts on how the system has evolved and where you think it might be headed in the years to come. We encourage you to share anything you feel is relevant to this effort. Let's begin. I was hoping that you might be able to start by just giving a little bit of a background, personal or professional, with Oregon's land use system.

LEE MILLER: Okay. I came to Lane County in 1969 and worked five years in California in county planning and became the planning director in 1969, just -- that was the year, I believe, that Senate Bill 10 had been passed with a requirement for cities and counties to have plans.

INTERVIEWER: Um hmm.

LEE MILLER: And I was fortunate to come into a situation where voluntarily in the met -- in the metropolitan area of Eugene/Springfield, the three jurisdictions there, had already embarked upon a joint effort metropolitan plan that became known as the 1990 Plan. And that just as I came to Oregon in 1969 in Lane County, that was about the time the citizen group put out its proposal, and it took two to three years for that to go through the machinery of changes and revisions and acceptance on all sides to finally have a plan. And that happened some time before, I believe, Senate Bill 100 was passed, real close proximity.

INTERVIEWER: Um hmm.

LEE MILLER: And I had my land use education was at the University of Washington, and I had Sociology degree and then one in Urban and Regional Planning. I went on to California, to San Joaquin County, and then came to Lane County.

INTERVIEWER: And I know had been a member of some professional organizations, if you wanted to talk about that involvement.

LEE MILLER: At the time it was the American Institute of Planners. There was a Northwest chapter, Oregon/Washington, and then at some point in time in the '70s it split into respective Oregon and Washington chapters, and I was a member and I was active but I didn't have any office in that organization.

INTERVIEWER: Um hmm.

LEE MILLER: The Planning Director's Association was more or less a self put together, self-help group of trying to just check with each other on how to get the job done and there were times when we also had the opportunity to reflect back to the LCDC -- or the DLCD staff on proposals that they were coming forth with.

INTERVIEWER: And so what period, in years, was your involvement in land use or in whatever Lane County...

LEE MILLER: 1969 to 1982.

INTERVIEWER: Hmm. Well, obviously, that encompasses Senate Bill 100. I was wondering if you believe LCDC, that was created from this legislation, acted correctly in carrying out the objectives that SB 100 had laid out?

LEE MILLER: I think it was a tough go for them with all the powers that be and skepticism. So, they've done a good job, and as I mentioned to you earlier, I haven't really been keeping that a close tab since '82. I was in another field of work and when I get out of the newspaper was pretty much what I've been able to follow on planning since. But I think in given the obstacles and the forces against it and withstanding the votes several times to either cripple or dismantle it, I think they've done a good job. There were times when as we argued a lot with them on approaches but not on their main mission.

INTERVIEWER: Um hmm. Do you have any experience or anything you wanted to touch on, anecdotes or whatnot, from the time when the passage of the bill was going through?

LEE MILLER: I remember one time when as a result of the new laws we had to get into a update, that is "we" being Lane County, Springfield and Eugene jurisdictions, of the metropolitan plan. And there was a time where we had, and I can't remember the issue, but various staff people were up at Salem working with the staff up there and told we absolutely had to do something. There was no way around it. It wasn't very acceptable to the local jurisdictions, certainly not Lane County. That was, of course, my boss and we said, no, when we went back and reported, we have to do this particular -- take this particular action and the county board got real upset and had Wes Kvarsten come down to a very public meeting and he sat there and said, oh no,

we'd never make you do anything like that. And I can remember the trust factor dropping real quick and both -- well, our staff and our elected officials and our relationship with the LCDC staff.

INTERVIEWER: You know, Lane County, at least geographically, is one of the more diverse counties in the state. I mean, all the way from the Cascades to the coast, which I think is pretty unique in the county.

LEE MILLER: We were the only jurisdiction that had to adhere to all 19 goals with the Greenway thrown in and the coastal. No other county has that situation.

INTERVIEWER: Do you believe in the 19 goals that any of them have been more important to the program or maybe not quite as important?

LEE MILLER: Well, I think the urbanization goal and the agricultural goal, and to a lesser extent probably the forestry goal, those went hand-in-glove to be able to withstand the pressures on development in the rest of the county. And it was mostly county's job, under the goals, to more or less hold the line until city development could be, over time, marched out to the growth boundaries as they became revised and extended. The boundaries don't seem to have needed to have been changed in our neck of the woods, in Eugene/Springfield there. They're still holding pretty much to the original boundaries. There's been some expansion, I believe, for industrial purposes. Not a lot for residential. They're just considering a concept that we had 40 years ago of reserve, still sometime but not yet.

INTERVIEWER: Hmm. Was there any particular goals that you had to focus on in particular during your time period there?

LEE MILLER: Well, we spent a lot of time on the Greenway Goal.

INTERVIEWER: It's not a goal that you hear much about.

LEE MILLER: And there's been just a couple of issues that have come up lately in the Eugene-Springfield area, one having to do with the development of the property that the Eugene Water & Electric Board is turning back to the city in some fashion or other for development, and it appears maybe the city will take over. And the development that the university had along the river close to the campus, the main campus, that drew a lot of criticism for the way the development was proposed. Neither of those moved forward. Well, they're still working on the Eugene Water & Electric Board property. That will happen in some fashion but it's got a lot of constraints besides the Greenway concerns.

INTERVIEWER: Are any of the goals you felt like maybe haven't lived up to their stature or weren't as focused on maybe as originally intended?

LEE MILLER: I don't have a good feel for that, again, because I haven't been directly involved. I think sort of the -- well, I think you're going to get to a question of what's missing.

INTERVIEWER: Um hmm.

LEE MILLER: And I don't know if anything is missing, but an emphasis maybe that wasn't really understood and that had to do, of course, with at least reacting to climate change. If -- and certainly there is a lot of effort to try to influence various factors that do affect climate movement, at least will be in a better position to react, in addition to the -- where we have in the coastal goals with the tsunami and that there was an initial interest and concern about dealing with potential tsunamis. Indirectly, I think the tools are there to deal with but perhaps there might be a focus of an additional goal that could pull it all together. I mean, again, not being that involved with it anymore I just raise that question as a matter of curiosity.

INTERVIEWER: Um hmm. What's been your career after land use?

LEE MILLER: I went to work for the State Department of Justice.

INTERVIEWER: Oh.

LEE MILLER: And for the most part I was the Personnel Manager.

INTERVIEWER: Um hmm.

LEE MILLER: I had a opportunity to go work for Dave Frohnmayer and my job had been cut at Lane County and there was -- there was a big budget crunch and mid-management positions were cut, and I had one of those, and so had an opportunity to work for Dave Frohnmayer, and from that I evolved into being the personnel manager in the department.

INTERVIEWER: Hmm. So, we've touched on this just a little bit but, you know, what goals or topics might be missing? I mean, I know at the time -- obviously climate change wasn't quite on people's radars but when, you know, administering the system in your role, were there any issues that came up that you didn't feel like the goals helped to address? Or topics that would have been beneficial at the time?

LEE MILLER: No, I think the bigger issues were -- not that there weren't tools to use, but difference of opinion on how to go about doing it. Most of our issues were having to do with the mechanics and certain rules, policies that were proposed and how they might be accomplished. And then, again, I'm really short on details and I apologize for that, but those are my overall recollections and we had lots of discussions, "we" being either from the local staff dealing with the staff up there, or through the American Planning Directors Association. I also was on a committee that Wes Kvartsen had and he put together from time to time and changed. I was one of the initial people on a local staff advisory committee. And pretty soon, I think they got tired of hearing from us and didn't put our -- our efforts into much -- in terms of -- it more or less had

became a show to just have us come up there once a month and sit down and tell us what was going on but hopefully go home soon.

INTERVIEWER: (Chuckling).

LEE MILLER: They had to deal with a lot of things and to be harped on a lot could get old, I'm sure.

INTERVIEWER: In 1974, as you're more than familiar, LCDC and DLCD undertook an unprecedented public outreach and involvement effort in adopting the first 14 of the goals. Do you think this was worth doing? Do you think that it affected at all the thinking and views that you had at the time?

LEE MILLER: Well, I'm certain it was worth doing.

INTERVIEWER: Um hmm.

LEE MILLER: Giving people an opportunity as well as some new people who hadn't been involved an opportunity to participate and for people who had a lot of concerns to see what was going on and to be able to see that there were people in support as well, that it wasn't just a whole lot of people in opposition, to go to meetings and find out there were people on both sides of the issues.

INTERVIEWER: Um hmm.

LEE MILLER: But also to point out the interest, in particularly farmland, saving farm land. That hadn't come out much in our county. And it gave some of the folks -- we did a lot of our own, when we had to put our plan together, a little bit later, working with granges, and at least having them host meetings, as we had to go about piece-by-piece in the county doing the planning for the various parts. The granges were helpful in pulling people together. And that sort of followed up the same way idea of the land use outreach that LCDC had.

INTERVIEWER: And, again, did what you learned from those outreach efforts did that change at all or bring up anything that you maybe hadn't previously thought about or a viewpoint that didn't...

LEE MILLER: I can't remember for sure. I think we had to react to some things as well, but not in a major way. It was just trying to go through and get the job done. We had, as I recall, something like 12 sub areas of the county to deal and the metropolitan area. And in Lane County we had an anomaly of a second planning commission, being the coastal commission, that the county had adhered to, some concerns that nobody was paying attention to the people on the coast. And so the county set up a second planning commission so -- I mean issues, plans, zoning, whatever, when we were dealing with it were county-wide, had to go through both commissions and bring things together and not always were they together. So, we were busy running back and forth between both sides of the coastal range and trying to pull that all together.

INTERVIEWER: (Chuckling) Goal one, Citizen Involvement, is considered by many as critical to the development and execution of the planning program here in Oregon. Do you feel like this goal is still relevant today and why might that be?

LEE MILLER: Again, I'm not in that much touch today. I remember back 30 years ago that my feeling about citizen involvement was the best way to become involved was to become involved with, or at least attach oneself, to an interest group of -- of your choice and let the interest group carry the mail. Because individuals, I don't think, were that effective. It was the various interest groups, whether it be the 1000 Friends or the homeowners, whatever. And particularly as it came to testifying on -- on actions that were being carried by the various local legislative bodies, and being attuned to -- to how to play the games, so to speak, what was relevant, how to write up proposed findings and conclusions and -- and so on. It became a fairly highly skilled operation

and, again, I think it was most effective to find the interest group that met your particular point-of-view and support it with money and work with it and hope that it was carrying the ball for you.

INTERVIEWER: I think many might argue that interest groups today are part of the polarization that we see, you know, both in the land use system but in just the political process in general. So, the main avenue though to make change sounds like it might be through an interest group.

LEE MILLER: I will say about the interest groups, early on, it's my remembrance that the work that came out of MacPherson's committee had to undergo significant changes to be acceptable by the legislature and the folks that pulled that off were the main interest groups getting together, somewhat behind locked doors, and making the compromises necessary to get the legislators to pass the bill. And I don't think that the original -- the folks that were on the original committee were, you know, we got something out there for them to dig into, but it was the interest groups that worked together and got it done.

INTERVIEWER: I mean obviously the ways that we connect with people and execute citizen involvement might look different today than it would have 30 or 40 years ago. Were there certain ways in Lane County for instance, when you guys did citizen involvement, that you found particularly effective or in what you were trying to carry out?

LEE MILLER: We did. Most of the citizen involvement came through by the initiative of really the local jurisdiction, the staff. We did have the county put together a program where there were local citizen involvement committees, but not just for planning. But at the time they were concentrating mostly in planning and most of them probably got started because of an interest in planning. They went on useful various other aspects of county government and then when money became less and less available, I think that effort to support those groups fell back.

But at the time, when we were having to adhere initially to the goals, that effort was very useful. The county had a coordinator of those groups and so in able to get that coordinator to help us and give us some insight also was useful.

INTERVIEWER: And today, I'm not sure if you participated at all in any citizen involvement activities, but I imagine, again, that they look quite different than they might have in the past and if you think that those current efforts are effective, I mean, whether it's through social media or are we entering a different age of citizen involvement, different ways to do outreach?

LEE MILLER: I don't really know. I did follow the local effort in the last two or three years that the city of Eugene went through, but not personally. I basically followed it in the newspaper. And the city manager, that was unusual, the city manager was the primary organizer and coordinator for that whole effort and that previously that would have come out of planning commissions and planning staff working with the city council. Managers usually were watching what was going on and making sure that they were comfortable in staff efforts, at least, in those activities. I don't know how reflective that is around the state, but the city manager put together the vision, the process, and then the vision that came from that process. So, I think he was the prime leader of that.

INTERVIEWER: Just as Lane County encompasses everything from the coast to the coast range, the valley and the Cascades, obviously Oregon encompasses an even larger geography and population base, and was just wondering if you thought if the statewide planning goals struck the right balance between state and local control that LCD had originally intended in 1974?

LEE MILLER: There was a realization on the differences over time. And initially there was a one-size-fits-all approach to doing a lot of things. And if not recognizing, at least compromising, with the political realities that there had to be some different approaches. In Lane

County, because we had a heavy end of urbanization, we didn't have to deal with that so much. Our work department, I could see that that was happening and particularly in Central and Eastern Oregon.

INTERVIEWER: Any examples, in particular, that you might remember throughout your time, of issues or concerns?

LEE MILLER: I think dealing with forestlands for one, and recognizing as well that in agricultural lands everything outside the growth boundary that on a map that wasn't necessarily good agriculture land. And that part did hit home in Lane County. We had to deal with the agricultural land problem. We had a pretty extensive effort of, even hired a soil scientist to map the whole county. But there were limitations on strictly going with certain number of just soil classifications, and saying that's good agriculture land or it isn't, strictly on the nature of the soil.

INTERVIEWER: And get other factors, right.

LEE MILLER: Plus a lot of other factors whether or not it was.

INTERVIEWER: And that mapping has been successful, I mean, in terms of the area that has been preserved?

LEE MILLER: Well, the county actually went through the acknowledgment process, even after I left. I left in 1982, and it might have been 1983 or 1984 when it was finally acknowledged. So, Lane County was involved with a major effort that I think failed in terms of getting some recognition of a lesser treatment of some agricultural lands. What they were able to accomplish was a lot less than what they were going for. And I remember a person that I had worked with on it, who was head of another division, led that particular effort for the county. In fact, they assigned him full-time to try to get that through and I think it was not successful.

INTERVIEWER: Hmm. So, in what ways have prominent state and local officials or ballot measures or other actions by the Oregon legislature undercut or maybe even advanced the original purposes of SB 100, political fights, whatnot?

LEE MILLER: The fire seems to have diminished a lot from what I see. Again, I'm sitting in left field on this one, but you don't see the statewide efforts anymore in terms of curtailing or cutting it back. You see the various fights and -- but growth boundaries, particularly in the Portland metropolitan area, I read about. But I think it's been accepted as part of Oregon now. And a lot of people who are gone now, of course, felt that that wasn't a proper way to have their land treated.

INTERVIEWER: You feel like, after Measures 37 and 49, those might have calmed down despite--

LEE MILLER: Well, they seem to be. They don't come forward in any major way and I don't see the interest groups, like the Homebuilders. They're working on individual efforts to be sure that there's enough buildable land for residential purposes and/or industrial purposes but they're working within the system rather than trying to change the system it appears.

INTERVIEWER: Hmm. So, on a related topic, you've spent now a few decades outside of land use as a career or directly working in the Oregon land use system, and of course a few decades before that directly working within it. Has your view of the system changed either with time or just being outside of the system? Do you feel like you were inside of it, and it really was something that you could work with, and once you left, you looked at it from more the eyes of a citizen?

LEE MILLER: Well, that's a good way to put it. And I think that over time the questions and issues I had, which were, again, were 'how' rather than major principles. Then I also

look back and had probably a lot of time spent that could have been better spent doing it differently, than I always seeming to be fighting little battles.

INTERVIEWER: Any in particular?

LEE MILLER: No. I just -- I remember a lot had to do with various proposed rules, particular in the Greenway.

INTERVIEWER: Um hmm.

LEE MILLER: And without being able to remember particular, I think, we were able to get some concession on a number of things and it just didn't seem practical. It didn't. I'm sort of giving generalities, but it's been over 30 years since I've been involved, and I haven't been following it even as a citizen as much as I thought I might.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that Oregon's land use program today in 2015, compares with what was envisioned four decades ago whether as a citizen or as someone who was working in the field, do you feel like it really has met what it originally envisioned?

LEE MILLER: I think so, yes.

INTERVIEWER: Um hmm. Anything in particular or any reasons why that?

LEE MILLER: Just the lack of apparent major controversy.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

LEE MILLER: I don't see any major changes being proposed by those who are strong proponents of planning, nor any efforts to try and to weaken it.

INTERVIEWER: Any reasons, in particular, you think this system may not have been exported to other states? I mean, we're rather unique in having this system.

LEE MILLER: No, I don't. I did have a lot of discussions with a friend who worked for me and went to work in Washington. And he left Lane County planning staff, started his own

private consulting firm, and then went to work for a forest industry lobby group in Washington, and I remember him telling me it was a whole different approach, in what he felt from his new vantage point, it was a better system than Oregon's. I can't remember the details on that and how it principally differed from the Oregon system. And you're right, it appears that not many other states have appeared to want to -- not that I know that California, where I had worked for five years, had a whole system of planning requirements and so on. But the enforcement of it was not there. And I think the enforcement at the state level was, as much as it chaffs a lot of people, that's what's made it have the long run in the State. And I'm sure that it changed over time in reacting. I was friends with, and went to work for Stan Long before he became the chairman, and I believe he was much different in operating the commission than say L.B. Day was.

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel like your education and planning, back in the 1960's, I believe, prepared you for the field?

LEE MILLER: With limitations, because I went into graduate school with no practical experience. And I can see that my classmates, who had gone on to work and came back, who were working while they were going to school, had a much better appreciation of what they were learning about than I did. And I had to make a response on a survey to the planning school once, not -- within five years after I graduated, and I had to make that major confession then that I'm not sure I got as much out of it -- I'm sure that I didn't get as much out of it. The education was there, but if I would have been able to put it together with more practical experience, I would have gotten a lot more out of it.

INTERVIEWER: Hmm. So, we talked about climate change a little bit. Are there other changes or additions to the planning laws that you feel like would enable our system to, you know, face the challenges of the future?

LEE MILLER: I don't have any suggestions along those lines. I would guess that there certainly are and I'd be interested in hearing other people who are in the field talk about those. And I don't have a firsthand feeling for that.

INTERVIEWER: Was there a particular topic or interest that drew you into planning?

LEE MILLER: Well, I was sailing along in Sociology, what am I going to do with a sociology degree, and along the tail end of my junior year I took an introductory course in planning from the head of the planning school, very dynamic, and at the same time I took an introductory course with the head of the school's social work, both of them having graduate programs, who was real competent, but not dynamic, and so that took me to planning from there. And that excited me at the time, and it was an exciting field at a time when it was a young person's field. I'm not sure now what it's like, but a lot of people stayed in it for a while, and then they'd go off and do other things, as eventually I did.

INTERVIEWER: In the Department of Justice?

LEE MILLER: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Um hmm. So, are there other topics that we may have missed or questions, any anecdotes or stories, you'd like to share?

LEE MILLER: No. And I did try to do some preparation for this. Went back and I looked at the timelines, and read the other two interview transcripts that you sent to me, and that jogged some things. That was helpful.

INTERVIEWER: Um hmm.

LEE MILLER: You asked just a couple of minutes ago, my interest and one of the things that drew me to planning, once I found out what it was about, it was coincidental at the time, the reason I took the planning course was, again, was wondering what am I going to do with myself

after I graduate college and I had two friends who were a couple of years ahead of me who were architects. And the planning school and the school of architecture were in the same school. Planning was a small part of the College of Architecture, and they said why don't you look at planning and I did and it took me. One of the things that I felt was important, in terms of the effort of planning, particularly in urbanization, is the efficiency of infrastructures. Basically the cost of public facilities and services, compact growth certainly had a lot to do with maximizing that effort, and it appears that while it might have been. It didn't have a major emphasis, the fact of the urbanization goal coming along, and then the recent stress on public finances, there's been a major benefit that's been realized just from the effort of planning in other areas towards the minimization of spending too much money that wasn't going to be there anymore to take care of the people who wanted to put suburban subdivisions way out and extend water and services, water and sewer facilities and transportation and so on. That's all been realized maybe indirectly.

INTERVIEWER: Was Lane County facing a lot of growth when you were there in the 1970's?

LEE MILLER: In the peripheries of the metropolitan area. And there was a lot of development outside of the two major cities in unincorporated area. And that pretty well came to a halt with, you know, and much of it has been annexed, particularly in the River Road/Santa Clara area, where the city's sewer extension and the halt of being able to develop a lot of the remaining land that was available for housing until there were sewers. So that was helpful.

INTERVIEWER: Any thoughts on how we might be able to finance infrastructure going forward? I mean it doesn't have to be technical analysis. I'm just curious if, with your experience, we are facing an infrastructure finance challenge and...

LEE MILLER: Well, they seem to be putting a lot of emphasis on the developer of a major, major development, close to Valley River in Eugene that is multi-housing of different types. They were required to widen the primary overpass serving that area. That's something that wouldn't have happened a long time ago, certainly. Major stream ribbons leading into the -- and widening the arterial close by and so on and that was -- that was more extensive than they would realize and I think that's probably something that's going to have to be done more.

INTERVIEWER: Is that fair?

LEE MILLER: It's more fair than having the people experience the problem or pay for it out of nonexistent road fund monies.

INTERVIEWER: Well, again, is there anything else you'd like to touch on before we close the interview?

LEE MILLER: I'm sure I'll think of things later.

INTERVIEWER: (Chuckling)

LEE MILLER: Wished I would have said this or wished I would have said that.

INTERVIEWER: Well, thank you, again for coming by.

LEE MILLER: Sure. Thanks for the opportunity. I enjoyed the opportunity just to think back.

INTERVIEWER: Great. Well, it's been a pleasure. Thank you, Lee.

LEE MILLER: Okay. Thanks, Kevin.

(Concluded)