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Citizen Participation: Is It The Issue?

by Ethan Seltzer

Oregon's land use planning program is founded on the belief that Oregonians share a sense of place and common purpose. Our state's approach to comprehensive planning assumes that there is a public interest, that it is discoverable, and that we can and should act on it. Moreover, our public interest is deeply rooted in our admiration for the landscape of Oregon and its natural resources. In essence, it is an assertion of values commonly held, and an expectation for stewardship and collective action.

In this context, citizen participation is part of the process for stewarding our values. The roles for leaders are clear. The necessity for action is plainly apparent and the responsibilities of public and private interests are understood. When Tom McCall spoke about the need for statewide land use planning, he did not plead for our allegiance to the idea of planning goals, or to citizen participation, or to institutions. Instead, he

asked Oregonians to salute the beauty of this state and to take extraordinary care with this irreplaceable resource called Oregon.

Today, our vision of common purpose has dimmed. We are growing an economy, particularly in the metropolitan area, that is not linked directly to the productive capacity of a working landscape. The knowledge economy has made its own geography, and it is different from the geography of wheat, lumber, and fish. Urban and rural Oregon find themselves increasingly at odds. Opinion polls tell us that citizens do not lack trust only in government, but also in virtually every other societal institution, secular and religious, public, nonprofit, and private.

For the first time in a while, the whole notion that Oregonians harbor collective interests other than unrestricted individual liberty is being challenged. Particularly with respect to land use planning, we are seeing a disturbing coalition at the polls, linking citizens overwhelmed by growth with property rights and free market activists. For years, Oregon has made a name for itself by doing things differently than other places, and being proud of the results.

The bottle bill, the beach bill, and even Senate Bill 100, the landmark 1973 land use planning law, stood as testament to the fact that Oregonians were willing to do what was right even if they did it differently elsewhere. These newly emboldened contrarians have publicly, and somewhat successfully, begun to ask why Oregon is not toeing the line when it comes to planning and (lack of) growth management like the rest of the country.

Consequently, that driving force behind the Oregon program that we are all in it together and share something of incomparable value and quality is becoming harder to sustain institutionally despite the fact that the love of this land is still a dramatic force in our lives. How else to explain the over 50,000 volunteers that work every year with SOLV (Stop Oregon Litter and Vandalism), or the growing list of friends of groups, or the strong commitment to the restoration of native salmonid populations reported in polls and the press? The fact is that the landscape still has power despite the fact that the institutions in our society, including those charged with stewarding the landscape, seem to be losing ground.

In short, civic responsibility, if you want to call it that, is alive and well, but it is

taking different forms and drawing people into relationships different from those that formerly guided our communities and state. Consider the fact that we have witnessed almost the complete departure of locally-owned banks, utilities, and large corporations that previously played key leadership roles in politics, community celebrations, and civic initiatives. Does this mean that we will no longer have politics or civic initiatives? Hardly, but it does mean that we, both locally and statewide, need to learn new ways of doing things if they are still important to us.

Now, take a look at Oregon Statewide Planning Goal 1: Citizen Participation. The goal calls for a program of citizen involvement in planning and implementation that "...insures the opportunity for citizens to be involved in all phases of the planning process. It requires that governing bodies develop a specific program for citizen involvement that is appropriate to the scale of the effort, has clear points of contact, and assures effective two-way communication with citizens and that citizens will receive a response from policy-makers. Citizen involvement programs must receive adequate funding and must provide information in terms useful to and understandable by community members.

However, it is safe to say that we depend today on almost all of the techniques and strategies for engaging citizens in planning that we have for the past 25 years. Newsletters, advisory committees, hearings, and planning commissions have not changed much despite the fact that our communities are quite different culturally and economically. In a state that has long depended on immigration for the lion's share of its growth, our approach to keeping people engaged, much less letting them know what is going on, has simply not kept pace. Oregon has been described as an intentional place, but intention can only be sustained when residents, new and old alike, know what it is.

Quite simply, it is plain amazing that we have gotten this far depending on the strategies for involvement that we have used. It is a tremendous achievement to have simply been able to keep the planning discussion together, and a testament to the power that landscape plays in uniting us here. However, instead of lamenting the loss of a common bond, or seeking a quick fix for a leaking rule or broken goal, it is time to rebuild our collective sense of purpose around two critical tasks.

First, we need to spend time asking a very different kind of question. For the

past few years, we have been asking growth management questions. Growth management is the effort to manage the rate, location, or timing of growth. It is a game run by economists. It relies on population forecasts and lengthy and technical arguments about how hypothetical future residents will hypothetically behave. The promise has been that if we do it right, we will keep the soul of the place intact. It is important to ask and answer questions about how big the pipes should be, how many lanes the roads need, and how many acres should be inside the urban growth boundary.

However, the current reaction to growth, including talk of moratoria and numerous initiatives to require voting on annexations, are a reaction to the fact that folks do not like the change they are seeing. In point of fact, we have oversold growth management and its ability to make the effects of new growth virtually disappear. More people mean a different experience, on the road, at the store, at the fishing hole.

Furthermore, we know that sprawl is not free, not by a longshot, and the alternatives to sprawl are not free either. Compared to most other places in North America, we are doing a good job, but planning cannot deliver on keeping things the same. Change is inevitable, whether the economy is booming or not, and those changes play out over decades.

There is a question that remains before us as a fundamental challenge. Simply put, no matter how many people come and no matter when they get there, what should still be true about this place? This is a question about basic values, about what we want to be known for:

Do we still want to be able to take a daytrip to the wilderness?

Are we committed to preserving the grain of Portland neighborhoods, where high and low incomes live in close proximity?

Will salmon and steelhead, eagles and great blue herons still be residents of the city?

The fact is that we cannot know much about the future, but we can know what we want out of it. Enlisting Oregonians in a wide ranging and lasting discussion of what ought to be key qualities of their state, and planning to preserve those qualities, ought to be clear and passionate purposes for the land use planning program.

Second, we need to recognize that the future of our society needs as much or more attention than the future of our land-

scape. Though beyond the scope of the land use planning program, our desire for collective achievement on behalf of the landscape will be frustrated unless and until we begin to reach agreement on the kind of society in which we want to live. We all say education is important, but we fund prisons better than schools, and courts better than daycare. We lament low voter turnout but do little to honor the citizenship of kids.

Articulating the social contract that binds Oregonians must be a high priority for leadership, just as saving the salmon and stewarding our natural resources has been and continues to be. What are we going to do to keep the light shining on both saving the salmon and keeping kids out of poverty? One without the other will be a hollow victory and both are crucial.

This is not an easy task. It is, however, necessary for helping communities figure out what the civics of the next century will look like. The best of what citizen participation has to offer is not just enabling individuals to enter individual interests into the process, but for individuals to engage each other and collectively shape the agenda and the outcome.

Breathing new life into Goal 1 is not a technical or institutional problem. It is a question of values and of core expectations for what it means to be both an Oregonian and a member of the Oregon community. It is time to revisit our techniques, especially in this age where citizens using the Internet can get more information and faster than decision-makers and planners. Where we go with citizen participation is not fundamentally a challenge of process. Recognizing that people are figuring out new ways of living in community and coping with changes in traditional institutions is a place to start. Recommitting to stewarding the Oregon landscape, and committing to building not just a place worth visiting but a society worth emulating will be the keys to our success.

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