

Straight Talk About Growth

by Mike Swaim

Salem is in a fiscal and physical state of stress. Many other communities throughout Oregon find themselves in similar circumstances. It is time for some straight talk on the issue of growth: are we growing better, or just getting bigger?

In a recent speech to the Salem City Club, Governor Kitzhaber observed that Oregonians really dislike two things: sprawl and density. I agree, but I am not sure that this message has been understood by many of us elected officials. If Oregonians dislike sprawl, which is the historic consequence of the growth is inevitable and there is nothing we can do about it point of view, and also dislike density, which is the urban planners response to sprawling growth in the absence of good planning, what do they want instead? Our constituents pretty much like what they have and want us to preserve as much of it as possible.

People are worried about losing their present quality of life whether through sprawl or density. Many Oregonians recently have expressed their concern about growth by voting for a string of more than a dozen local ballot initiatives (some passing with more than 70 percent approval) which mandate voter consideration of all proposed annexations of land, thus giving citizens the power to decide whether or not to expand the size of their cities.

On the other hand, the Department of Land Conservation and Development, 1000 Friends of Oregon and other plan-

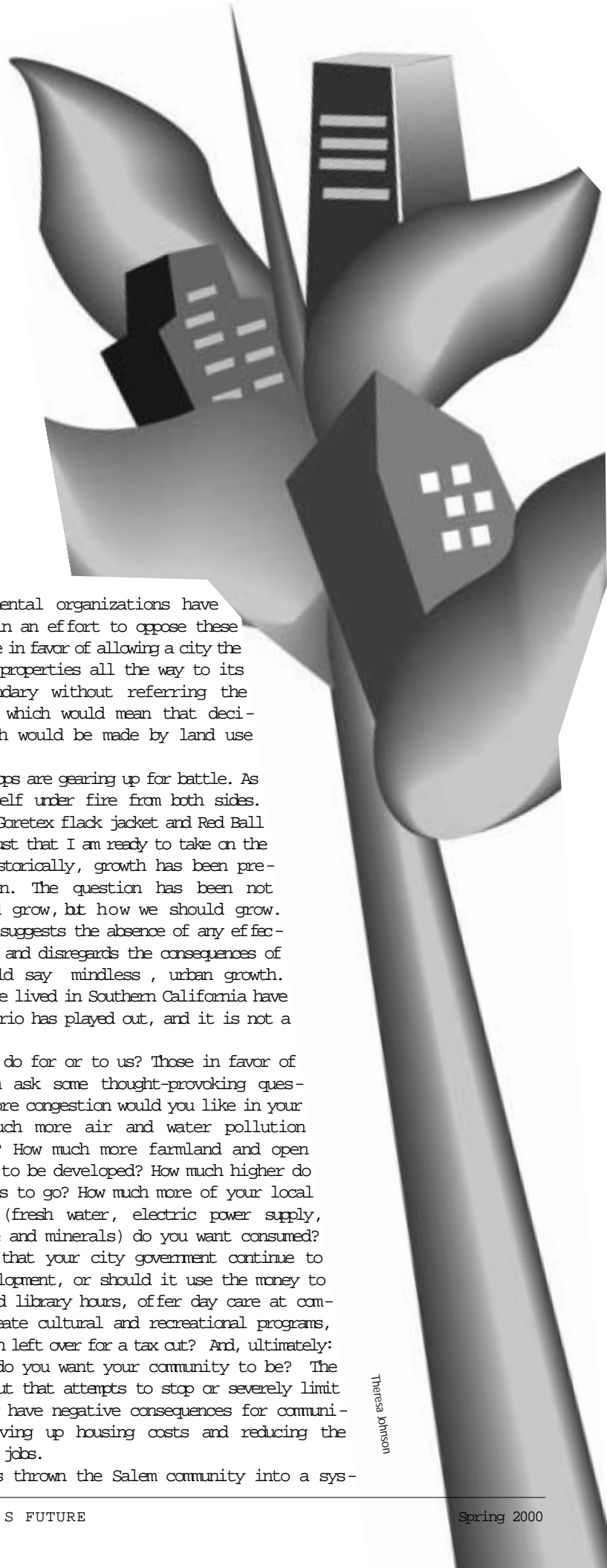
ning and environmental organizations have joined developers in an effort to oppose these initiatives. They are in favor of allowing a city the option of annexing properties all the way to its Urban Growth Boundary without referring the matter to voters, which would mean that decisions about growth would be made by land use planners.

In Salem, the troops are gearing up for battle. As mayor, I find myself under fire from both sides. However, with my Goretex flack jacket and Red Ball hip waders on, I trust that I am ready to take on the issue of growth. Historically, growth has been presented as a given. The question has been not whether we should grow, but how we should grow. This point of view suggests the absence of any effective political will and disregards the consequences of endless, some would say mindless, urban growth. Those of us who have lived in Southern California have seen how that scenario has played out, and it is not a pretty picture.

What does growth do for or to us? Those in favor of controlling growth ask some thought-provoking questions: How much more congestion would you like in your community? How much more air and water pollution would you prefer? How much more farmland and open space do you want to be developed? How much higher do you want your taxes to go? How much more of your local natural resources (fresh water, electric power supply, forests, aggregate and minerals) do you want consumed? Would you prefer that your city government continue to subsidize new development, or should it use the money to fund schools, extend library hours, offer day care at community centers, create cultural and recreational programs, and still have enough left over for a tax cut? And, ultimately:

How much bigger do you want your community to be? The other side points out that attempts to stop or severely limit growth will likely have negative consequences for communities, such as driving up housing costs and reducing the number of potential jobs.

Rapid growth has thrown the Salem community into a sys-



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temic crisis. We have significant infrastructure deficits—such as school overcrowding, congested roads, overflowing sewage plants, a need for expansion of our primary water mains, large numbers of pot holes everywhere, etc.; facility maintenance deficits—our city-owned historic properties are falling apart, chunks of concrete are falling off of city hall and our parking structures, etc.; a reduction in public services—fewer police officers per capita, reduction in library hours along with other reductions in social and recreational programs; increased public bonded debt to do major infrastructure construction for new roads, schools, waste water treatment plant expansion, etc.; increased taxes and a need to look for alternate sources of funding—e.g., new fees. Our city's present level of revenue is insufficient to meet the real and legitimate capital and operational needs of our community.

This kind of empirical evidence suggests that growth brings less, rather than more, prosperity. The bigger the tax base, the bigger the demand for all of the municipal services that have to be met. While growth creates a larger tax base, it clearly costs more than it generates—resulting in a net fiscal drain on the local community.

Opponents of growth tell us that underfunded local governments that fail to identify the real costs of growth risk further incurring the anger of voters

who wonder why they are getting so little for their tax dollars. We may have experienced some of that anger here in Salem recently, with the defeat of two serial levies that would have assured more library hours, improved streets, and addressed major fire station deficits. There is nearly unanimous agreement in the community that these are serious needs, yet voters were unwilling to dig deeper into their pockets to give local government the funds to meet these needs.

Is it possible to meet the expectations of our citizens through the usual growth management techniques? Probably not, at least not in the long run.

The best-looking and the best-planned growth still has an impact on the community and its ecology. Farm and forestlands may disappear more slowly and in a more methodical fashion, but they disappear nonetheless. Professor Albert Bartlett, of the University of Colorado at Boulder, says that smart growth ultimately gets you to exactly the same place as dumb growth—you just get there first class. Planning can solve many problems of urban growth, at least in the short term, and having first class growth makes the burden of growth less onerous. However, simply regulating growth through planning does not address the long-range problems brought about by continual growth.

If we take a more cautious approach to growth, we must stop investing millions of dollars in subsidies and tax waivers, and building significant excess capacities, which serve to stimulate both present and future development. Instead, we should be asking: How much does growth cost us? Who pays for it? Who benefits from it? We owe that kind of inquiry to our taxpayers. It is becoming too clear for debate that the larger the city, the higher the per capita taxes. New development tends to increase property taxes. The reason: growth creates a need for costly new infrastructure to serve the new development, and new residents are seldom, if ever, required to cover even half of the costs generated by the growth. The existing taxpayers in the

community are forced to pick up the tab for the rest.

If public funds are requested, then we owe it to our taxpayers to require a cost-benefit analysis, which should also look at other priorities, such as schools, libraries, and police officers. Additionally, we should do a community benefit analysis, to take stock of all of the potential impacts that a major development is apt to bring to the community. It makes a lot of sense to consider the likely impact of major development proposals before we permit and have to pay for them, rather than trying to mitigate their impacts after the fact. To the extent that there are more people being brought into the community—increasing the demand for, and the price of, housing—we should implement strategies specifically designed to create low cost housing. One such strategy is inclusionary zoning, which requires a mix of low and moderate housing in every subdivision over a certain size.

If elected officials are to respond to the wishes of the majority of their constituents on the growth issue, their approach must be to do whatever is necessary to slow down, if not stop, growth in those communities that feel they have had enough. We can, and should, set limits to our rate of growth, and even consider capping the ultimate size of our communities at whatever size we collectively feel is in our best interest. There are also communities in Oregon which do not want to slow down growth, but to speed it up, if possible, as they have not reached what they feel is an optimum size. As is often the case, one size does not fit all, and there must be an equally energetic effort to meet the needs of those communities that truly want and need additional growth.

In order to anticipate the consequences of growth, we need to consider the long-term effects of change—for a time span of at least 50 years. We should do what we can to ensure that growth will not diminish the quality of life our cities have attained. On the other hand, we should not rule out new development that helps us to achieve our civic goals. Unless we move quickly to address growth and related issues in the realm of public policy and law, we will be left, literally, in the sawdust.

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Author's note: I am heavily indebted to Eben Fodor for much of the creative content in this article. I strongly recommend his new book, *Better, Not Bigger* (New Society Publishers, 1999) to the thoughtful advocate on either side of the growth debate.