

A CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Are we getting the results we expected?

by Nohad Toulan

Oregon's experience with statewide land use planning and growth management started with Senate Bill 10 in 1969, which required all

cities and counties to adopt comprehensive planning and zoning ordinances. Yet the planning process did not really begin to gain momentum or get the attention of many Oregonians until 1973, when the bolder and more controversial SB 100 established the Land Conservation and Development Commission (LCDC) and led to the development of an ambitious set of statewide land use planning goals. For people living in the Portland metropolitan area, the creation of Metro in 1978 and the introduction of the Urban Growth Boundary (UGB) were the more obvious early milestones.

The real impact of our thirty years of involvement in statewide land use planning is tough to judge. Since Oregon's planning system is unique in the nation, we have very little against which to measure the relative strength or weakness of our planning tools and processes. Even if we ignore the relative merits of our system and focus instead on the question of its success in achieving its own goals, the job

is still quite a challenge. For one thing, planning does not function in a vacuum. During the last two decades, the state has gone through major economic changes including a shift of jobs away from natural resource industries to high technology and services. Our tax system and the way we fund government services and infrastructure also was changed drastically by the 1990 passage of Ballot Measure 5. Because there are so many factors that influence the way we grow and develop, there is no easy way to assess the effectiveness of land use planning that satisfies both proponents and opponents of our system.

Land Use and the Urban Scene

It does not take much effort to recognize the rising skepticism that surrounds the UGB and other urban planning efforts. Interestingly enough, such skepticism is rarely shared by anyone outside of Oregon. Among professional planners and observers of the urban scene, we remain a state to be envied for its dedication to orderly and efficient urban development and rational growth management. Our clearly defined goals and planning regulations are often cited among the livability factors that attract investors to Oregon's cities. Nevertheless, there are several questions that need to be addressed, and not all the answers are likely to favor the current process.

First among these is the question of

housing. The impact of growth boundaries on the housing market seems to be the rallying cause for those in favor of the elimination or drastic modification of our current planning regulations. These concerns are focused on the Portland metropolitan area, which has been classified as one of the least affordable housing markets in the nation. It should be noted, however, that it is not one of the most expensive markets. Affordability is the function of two variables: prices and incomes. Incomes in Oregon have not increased as quickly during the last ten years as those in neighboring states, while the increase in urban housing prices during the same time frame has been similar to increases observed in the other western states. Although the price of housing in Portland is affected by land use regulations, additional factors have contributed to the recent upswing: an era of vigorous economic growth which followed the long recession of the 1980's rapid population growth and cuts in property taxes.

Another housing issue is the availability of choices. On this account, our record in the Portland area has been relatively good. Reducing the ability of developers to leapfrog and build on cheaper land has encouraged higher densities and produced a significant shift in the direction of town houses and condominiums not only in Portland, but in suburban communities as well. Although this is not entirely due to the UGB, especially in central city areas like the Pearl District, in the



absence of the boundary there would be much less incentive to experiment with alternative housing forms.

What About The Impact Of Land Use Planning On Transportation?

Proper planning and growth management was supposed to provide Oregonians, particularly those in the Portland area, with more transportation options. While a compact urban pattern is a prerequisite for a successful public transit system that reduces reliance on the automobile, density alone does not produce viable alternatives. In other words, land use regulations that are not supported by a commitment to invest in transportation simply do not do the job. The recent failure of North-South Light Rail in Portland provides some useful lessons. While the exact reasons for the failure remain the subject of debate, there is no doubt that we failed to project a vision for what could become a complete network that supports a well-defined urban form, characterized by corridors of high and moderate density development. There are the beginnings of an urban pattern that would support more transportation choices. However, until we present a compelling picture of what we have in mind and are able to persuade the public to support long-term investment in new transportation systems, those choices will continue to elude us.

One area in which land use planning has produced clear and positive results is neighborhood organization and involvement. Whether prompted by interest in the regional planning process or by anger against infill and higher densities, neighborhoods are more active and informed about the issues and challenges facing them. Other cities experimented with neighborhood associations before we established ours in the early seventies, but very few of them have the level of activism that we have.

Wide Open Spaces? The Challenge Of Rural Land Use Planning

Both Senate bills 10 and 100 were crafted by coalitions that included farmers and farm interest groups. The expectation was that state-wide land use planning would protect farmland from over-zealous developers. What has happened outside Portland's UGB (as well as its recent expansion) raises serious questions about the ability of current regulations to protect prime agricultural land. The fact that undesirable development has occurred outside



Ian Crawford

Spaces that were once open, such as this neighborhood southwest of Portland, are now teeming with houses as the growth boundary bursts at its seams.

UGBs is due, in part, to our lack of experience and understanding of the dynamics of UGBs in the early years. Very early in the process we made the wrong assumption about where the impacts of a UGB were likely to be observed. We focused on changes on the inside and paid very little attention to what was happening on the outside. Clackamas and Deschutes counties are good illustrations of this.

Small communities in rural areas are another case where the process did not always help. Here, however, the problem is not unrealistic expectations. Rather, our original diagnosis of the problems in these areas was wrong. By applying many of the rules uniformly across the state, we actually froze existing settlement patterns in place. No allowance was made for differential rates of growth to allow for the healthy growth of small towns and the creation of regional employment centers which help diversify rural economies. In many of those areas the problem was not urban sprawl but the lack of comprehensive regional planning to balance land use regulations, environmental concerns, and economic development scenarios. In retrospect, it would have been helpful if our goals remained uniform but our regulations recognized differences in regional conditions and realities.

Urban Formlessness: The Need For New Patterns Of Growth

None of the issues discussed so far suggests a basic failure in what we have attempted to do. On the contrary, many of us who participated in this process from the beginning are amazed at how much we have accomplished. On one front, however, we did not fare as well. The mistake we made with regard to growth patterns and the urban form was to put rules and regulations in place before we could develop a vision for the future. The result has been to maintain the status quo. Because we failed to identify alternative regions for new growth and development,

we have been unable to alter a settlement pattern that has been stable for more than ninety years. But the high rate of urban population growth during the last decade has brought about changes that we can ignore only at our peril. Since 1990, the Portland metropolitan area has increased its share of the state's population from 44.9 to 46.8 percent, and the Census Bureau has created a new Consolidated Area combining Portland and Salem that contains 57 percent of all Oregonians. As a result, if we do not alter our current approach, the 21st century will witness the urbanization of the entire I-5 corridor between the two cities, and no UGB will be able to prevent such an outcome. We already have the means to regulate growth but still lack the vision and programs that can effectively divert growth into new areas, properly selected to maintain livability, environmental quality, and urban efficiency.

Where do we go from here? On the whole, the land use system we have is already working well, but it should be viewed as the first phase of a two-phase process. Metro's 2040 Plan is a great accomplishment, but it needs to be followed by a statewide regional planning effort. Our success will be complete only when the whole state is covered by similar plans, based on a comprehensive vision. To begin with, Metro's area, or at least its planning jurisdiction, needs to be expanded to cover all six metropolitan counties on the Oregon side, and a way must be found to bring Washington's Clark County into the process through a bi-state compact. If we move in this direction, planning regulations will have a more coherent vision behind them, and UGBs will gain added strength and purpose. Playing an active role in orchestrating growth, instead of simply regulating or containing it, becomes the target. If this looks challenging, think of the challenge we faced when we first ventured into uncharted territory back in 1969.

Nohad Toulan is a professor of Urban