

# The Public Purpose

## COMMENTARY

Number 64 • June 2003

### TURNING POINT IN PORTLAND?

## Metro Adopts Growth Boundary Expansion

When my family moved to the then Portland exurb of Hillsboro in 1957, barely 80,000 people lived in Washington County. The Sunset Highway was four lanes to Cedar Hills and was soon to be extended to Barnes Road. After winning the state high school mile and cross country championships at Hillsboro High School, I moved far away --- to Los Angeles and eventually. St. Louis.. Portland moved even further away.

Nearly 50 years and more than 350,000 people later, the Sunset Highway (US-26) is often in gridlock. The problem is not just the usual towards-downtown congestion --- it can be as difficult to navigate toward the suburbs in the morning, reflecting the dispersion of jobs that has occurred in Portland and virtually every other major US urban area. There is finally some relief. The Sunset Highway is being expanded, but not enough.. Highway expansions have been blocked by Oregon's tough anti-sprawl law and Metro's maladministration of the urban growth boundary (UGB), including a doctrinal opposition to highways. This is not to endorse sprawl, which is the natural consequence of growth and rising incomes. But there is a dilemma. Sprawl is unpopular at the polls, but intensively popular where people live, the larger houses on larger lots. But NIMBYism, that plague of the modern American urban area, seeks to deny to others the same benefits. This plays into the hands of the anti-opportunity planners.

The state "growth management" law required a 20 year supply of developable land within the UGB. But Metro decided that the UGB would be expanded *up*, not out. Metro intended to increase neighborhood densities by more than 50%. Indeed, Metro's *up not out* principle, taken to the extreme, would justify Mumbai (Bombay) densities, the highest in the world. At that rate the UGB could easily accommodate 30 million people (nearly the population of California) instead of the less than 1.5 million that live there now. But densification is already causing problems.

Higher densities are associated with *greater* traffic congestion. Predictably, Portland's traffic congestion has grown inordinately, and is now the worst of any similar sized metropolitan area. This comes as no surprise to drivers on the Sunset Highway.

Metro doctrine holds that light rail will accommodate increased highway demand. But most people are not traveling to downtown, as the two-way congestion on the Sunset Highway demonstrates. Yet downtown and dense urban cores are the only places transit provides auto-competitive service --- whether Portland, Phoenix, Perth or Paris.

Economics teaches that rationing increases prices. Metro's policies ration land and thereby competition in the development business. It is not surprising, therefore, that National Association of Homebuilders data reveals the greatest housing affordability drop over the last decade of any major urban area to be in Portland. To dispute this reality, Metro relies on a consulting community always prepared to describe, for a sufficient fee, the conditions under which the sun rises in the west (as in the Enron case, the Arthur Andersen types in the consulting business know exactly what Metro wants to hear). Higher prices mean less home-ownership, particularly for lower income households, who are disproportionately Hispanic or Black. This will not make Portland a fairer place.

Neighborhood densification is unpopular and there is rising discontent. This led to the May 21, 2002 voter initiative to strip Metro of densification powers.. Metro, which misses no opportunity to claim the popularity of its policies, was so concerned that it sponsored a competing, watered-down densification limit.

Metro should not take comfort that its measure passed and the initiative failed. In reality the Metro measure, which forbids future densification ordinances for a time, does virtually nothing, since the densification regulations are *already* in place. So, for concerned neighborhoods, Metro's unstated but unmistakable message is "we have not yet begun to densify."

But there are early indications that the message is getting through to Metro. Late last year Metro adopted an expansion of the UGB that takes it to a larger area than had been previously planned for 2040. Metro gave residents of Portland a stingy Christmas present last year.

But Metro's UGB expansion is too-little too-late. Like tax limitation (Measure 5), which took multiple efforts to enact, anti-densification initiatives can be expected to return --- unless Metro mends its ways.. Metro can heed the message of May 21 and meaningfully alter its densification policies, or it can wait for the people to do it for them. The question is not be whether Metro's radical policies will be reversed, it is rather when.

Demographia: <http://www.demographia.com>  
The Public Purpose: <http://www.publicpurpose.com>

---

*Wendell Cox is principal of Wendell Cox Consultancy, an international demographics and transport firm located in the St. Louis area. He is a visiting professor at the Conservatoire National des Arts et Metiers in Paris (a national university granting degrees through the doctoral level). Mayor Tom Bradley appointed him to three terms on the Los Angeles County Transportation Commission (1977-1985). Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich appointed him to fill the unexpired term of New Jersey Governor Christine Todd Whitman on the Amtrak Reform Council (1999-2002).*