

Envisioning Eugene: Any Questions?

Eugene, Oregon is a bountiful and a beautiful place, and the official projection that 34,000 people will be added to our current population of around 179,000 over the next twenty years seems like a reasonable premise for the Envision Eugene process of updating our Comprehensive Plan.

Of those 34,000, some 20% are expected to be over the age of 65. Over 22% will continue to be of college age because of the U. of O. Our minority population, especially Hispanics will continue to increase and household sizes will decrease, according to the city's Envision Eugene: Fact Sheet #3.

These demographics are important. If the projections are accurate, almost half of the population increase will consist of retirees and students, neither of which is typically looking for a starter house on the city's fringe. Where then might we consider putting this new cocktail of Eugeneans? I know that knowing the "who" will have everything to do with the possibilities of the "where" and ultimately the "how" of urban form.

The recently completed Eugene Comprehensive Lands Assessment (ECLA), which is a projection of past trends, estimates that Eugene will need an additional 950 acres of land for housing (640 acres is a square mile); 400 acres for employment needs; and 450 acres of public land. This would require, approximately, a 5% expansion of our present urban growth boundary (UGB). ECLA, of course, begs the question of whether these current trends will or should continue?

I suspect not.

And the reason is because I think we are once again on the cusp of considerable change in the evolution of the Western American city. I predict that the neighborly "encouragement" we have been given to update our UGB and Comprehensive Plan will prove to have been both beneficial and timely.

The question is, will we be smart enough to ask the right questions and make the right assumptions? Here are a few for starters.

- What key formative trends will impact our city over the next 5, 10, and 20 years? It's time to do some powerful assuming.
- We know, for example, that Shelley Poticha has been hired by the Obama administration to head up an HUD office promoting walk-able and transit-oriented cities. Eugene and LCOG already have an investment in studying the potential for pursuing these goals through nodal developments and mixed-use centers. What role might such strategies play in our new plan?

- Will the banks get with the program? I'll assume that they will, given some additional backing from federal programs such as the ones Shelley is developing as we speak.
- Eugene has spent several years studying the problems and potentials of neighborhood infill. Have we built a useful guide to densifying our neighborhoods without destroying their desirable qualities and character?
- What will our plan offer as "starter homes" in this new era?
- As everyone knows, the suburban city is a product of cheap energy. Will our new plan assume that energy costs will rise substantially over the next 20-year period and connect the dots between energy costs and the form of our city? This would suggest contraction and greater efficiency rather than expansion.
- Will anyone really come here if we continue to disinvest in our schools? We need to modify Measure 5 or find a new and stable funding source. Oregon hates the idea of having a sales tax, but I'd be willing to consider one if it was dedicated entirely to K-12-Community College.
- How might we pay for the urban services (roads, schools, sewer, water, power, police, fire...) of an expanded UGB when it is increasingly difficult keeping up with the costs of the present one?
- Will we be able to build our local economy and employment base out of the competitive advantage we enjoy of cheap water and electricity without giving away the store and a healthy environment?
- How will the triple bottom line show up in and affect the plan?
- Might we build an armature of agriculture and a matrix of parks, urban farms and urban forest, open space, wetlands and other natural areas to cradle our city? Will we be smart enough to add the amenities that make greater density palatable? (Think of a New York apartment looking out on Central Park or a flat in Portland's Pearl)
- What criteria will DLCD and 1000 Friends of Oregon use to grade our plan?
- Cities, like Eugene, have typically been decaying from the inside out. Can we finally conceive of, agree about, and act upon a fresh downtown strategy that is not a mall?
- Will our motto of being "A Great City for the Arts and Outdoors" have any real influence on our Comprehensive Plan or is that just marketing?