

Looking Large at Oregon's Future

– Bob Stacey, Executive Director

The three-year assessment of Oregon's land use planning system established by Senate Bill 82 is known informally as the "Big Look." The legislation establishes a 10-member Task Force on Oregon Land Use Planning, which is required to make an interim report to the 2007 legislature with legislative "recommendations on (a) The effectiveness of Oregon's land use planning program in meeting current and future needs of Oregonians in all parts of the state; (b) The respective roles and responsibilities of state and local governments in land use planning; and (c) Land use issues specific to areas inside and outside urban growth boundaries and the interface between areas inside and outside urban growth boundaries." A final report is due on February 1, 2009.

Will this review be good for Oregon and Oregonians, or only for special interests?

That depends on the answers to four questions:

1. Where should the Big Look be looking?
2. Who should do the looking?
3. How should the looking be done?
4. What should be looked at?

First question: Where should the Big Look look?

The Big Look should focus on the changes that are coming Oregon's way in the next several decades. One is continued strong

population growth: by 2040, Oregon will likely add nearly two million more people, for a total population of 5.4 million (compared to 3.6 million today). If trends continue, Oregonians will also be much more ethnically diverse. The

typical new Oregonian not only will not recognize the name "Tom McCall;" she may not even have grown up speaking the same language.

If this effort is successful, it will be because the Task Force serves as a conduit through which the people of Oregon do the looking.



The Big Look should help us enhance our competitiveness in a future with over 8 billion people worldwide, very expensive petroleum, and a changing world farming economy.

Our most pressing need is to prepare for this future in which we and our children will live. So that's where the Big Look should focus its gaze: on envisioning our future.

Second question: Who should do the looking?

The general agreement has been that the Task Force members need to be broad-gauge thinkers, respected in their communities or statewide, and not beholden to any of the interest groups that have battled over land use policy in the legislature or at the ballot box.

But the Task Force should only be managing the Big Look, not doing the looking. If this effort is successful, it will be because the Task Force serves as a conduit through which the people of Oregon do the looking. As many Oregonians as possible must be directly engaged in figuring out where Oregon should be heading, how best to get there, and what tools we need to plan that journey.

We are long overdue for a statewide conversation about planning Oregon's future. This is our opportunity to engage, inform and motivate a new generation of Oregonians to take charge of their future rather than simply letting it happen to them.

The last time we did this, the results were remarkable. In 1974, in an Oregon of barely two million people, 10,000 people attended workshops and hearings and one hundred thousand Oregonians were on LCDC's mailing list. In today's Oregon, with nearly twice as many people, and with vastly more sophisticated communication methods, shouldn't the Task Force hear at least 50,000 voices over the next three years? Shouldn't we expect a process that engages at least half a million Oregonians to protect their community's future?

The third question: How should we look?

To ensure that 500,000 Oregonians know about the Big Look enough to inform themselves and potentially participate, the Task Force must design a two-way communications strategy in which Oregonians have a chance to propose ideas, as well as respond to proposals. It must be more than "open mike" public hearings, where special interests will pack the hearing room and crowd out the new voices that need to be heard.

To attract attention, the Task Force will need to generate accurate information and competent estimates about current

conditions and future trends. Given the endless distractions of modern media, the Task Force will need to campaign for the public’s attention, engage that attention with accessible and compelling information, and then reward that attention by incorporating the public’s ideas into its work.

Finally, question four: What should the Big Look look at?

For some, like the Home Builders, Realtors, and some county governments, the Big Look is all about “fixing” land use regulations—and these folks use “fix” in the veterinary sense.

The Big Look should focus on all the effective tools we’ll need to achieve our new vision. We need to expand our focus to include the three “i”s:

n Incentives: in addition to our land use laws, let’s look at incentives like cash for conservation easements or development bonuses and regulatory streamlining for the kind of development we want.

n Infrastructure: We should identify what Oregon needs to do to serve the areas where we want growth and development, and that we provide transportation and other services that can be sustained as energy and environmental stresses increase. This means reaching broad consensus among Oregonians that a better future is worth the investment necessary to bring it about.

n Investment: As competition quickens in the global economy, we will need a strategy to make the most of our strengths and invest in them to ensure success. We’re not a rich or powerful state. So we need to focus on our key strengths, such as:

1. A strategic location on the Pacific Rim. The United States will be tipping more sharply westward to the Pacific in the years ahead.



2. Productive soils on which Oregon farms and forests can provide even more jobs than they do today, and supply markets that make farmers and foresters more economically secure.

3. Fabulous landscapes draw visitors and locals to all parts of our wonderful state, and our land use laws have had the effect of protecting more of our



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vistas and special places than less fortunate states over the past thirty years. Investing in development that respects and protects the natural character of beautiful Oregon places could become a critical strategy for attracting high-end tourism and high returns on that investment.

4. Oregon’s people. The ones who are already here are great. The ones who are coming are really smart—they’re choosing one of the best places in the world to live and work. To keep it that way, to return our people’s optimism about the future, to make Oregon’s future better, we must invest in our people. If we are to realize a better future for Oregon, we can’t be satisfied with an Appalachian education system in the years ahead. If the Big Look also helps Oregonians focus on this crisis, that alone will make the entire effort worthwhile.

All this is one direction the Big Look can take. If it does, we can be assured that Oregonians will conclude that the tools we have today—urban growth boundaries, zoning to encourage affordable housing, farm and forest land protection, integration of transportation and land use planning—are needed even more in the future if we are to prosper in a world with a swelling population and limited resources.

But we must remember that there is another Big Look: the witch-hunt, led by those whose goal is to gut land use planning. These are the people who say that Measure 37 was a referendum on our land use planning laws, and that the people of Oregon have repudiated those laws and the vision on which they are based.

That is a lie. And as we prepare to engage in a positive process to strengthen our communities and our state, we must also be prepared to throw that lie back in the faces of those who are still pursuing the modern equivalent of slash-and-burn development. Oregonians aren’t planning on moving somewhere else after we destroy this place; Oregonians aren’t planning to allow this place to be destroyed. Our Oregon will be around for a lot longer than thirty years, if we’re wise enough for it.

