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Citizen Participation as the Driving Force Behind the Portland Plan

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Portland is a city often viewed as the leader in all things sustainable in America. This is because of its long history of environmentally focused decisions. Portland has had a head start on the rest of the country, because in the late 1970s city planners in Portland began making environmentally conscious decisions. Portland is a city with a huge amount of green spaces. Among its offerings is the largest urban forest park in the country, with a size over 5000 acres. In addition, Portland's waste and recycling programs often are leading the national trends. Portland has also developed a transportation system, the Trimet, which features a green fleet whose routes service nearly the entire city. Furthermore, Portland emphasizes land-use and the prevention of urban sprawl, which has resulted in the city being widely referred to as a "planners' paradise."

In the late 1970s, the citizens of Portland passed a bill, which set aside annually one percent of highway funds for the development of alternative modes of transportation. Additionally, in the late seventies Portland instituted an urban growth boundary, which limited urban sprawl and increased population density. This was responsible for Portland's becoming the beacon of light in the urban design world as it is seen today.

Because of these two actions, by the twenty-first century when sustainability plans began to hatch, Portland, Oregon would already be ahead of the curve.

The city today has a vast number of programs in place to help to maintain and develop sustainability practices in Portland. In fact, in SustainLane's 2008 (most recent) city rankings, the city was rated the number one most sustainable city in America, beating San Francisco and Seattle, and topping the charts in categories such as city innovation, energy and climate change, knowledge and communications, green economy, and green buildings. It was also ranked first in SustainLane's previous rankings and in a ranking of America's 50 Greenest cities by *Popular Science* magazine (Elizabeth Svoboda, 2008). The city government also has a department dedicated to planning and sustainability issues: the Portland Bureau of Planning and Sustainability. As the name suggests, the bureau is divided into two divisions: the planning division and the sustainability division.

One major endeavor that is being undertaken by the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability is the Portland Plan. This plan, which is a 25-year plan, attempts to direct the city in such a way that the Portland of 2035 will be a safe, environmentally friendly, and economically prosperous city. The plan is, and will continue to be, the central driving force behind Portland's continuing success. This is because it works toward the development of long-term sustainable lifestyles, as opposed to the immediate cessation of pollution, which although effective is often in conflict with business interests, therefore impeding the implementation of the program as a whole.

Due to this central goal of the development of sustainable lifestyles, we see that the people are thoroughly integrated into the city's planning process; the government is not simply making a legal change to how things work, but rather working with the

citizens to bring about meaningful change. Couple this with the fact that the Portland Plan in itself was conceived only after intensive citizen participation, and we begin to see a theme of citizen participation that is present in nearly everything the city does.

Although Portland is internationally recognized for its leading initiatives in urban design and land-use, what really sets this leading green city apart is the Portland Plan and its exemplary practices involving citizen-government interaction.

This paper will review the Portland Plan and discuss its strengths and weaknesses. Then it will take an in-depth look at Portland's best practice, and it will provide a brief summary concluding by analyzing the reproducibility of these programs in other cities and by offering suggestions as to its potential improvement.

Portland Plan – Citizen Participation

The Portland Plan is a proactive and practical solution to the very real issue that is facing the urban world today: how to go about urban city growth in a sustainable manner. The Portland Plan is a 25-year plan that has been created by Portland's branch of government solely devoted to sustainability in regard to the city: the Bureau of Sustainability and Planning. As the name suggests, the bureau is divided into two separate yet cohesive divisions, the planning and the sustainability divisions. Putting both planning and sustainability together, Portland ensures that future growth is done in an environmentally responsible and sustainable fashion. Without the Bureau, this plan would not be possible, which is why few other cities have anything near as comprehensive as the Portland Plan; few other cities have separate branches within their government addressing the dichotomy that is often perceived between sustainability and

growth. The fact that all major cities have not created these is alarming, and the fact that so few have is indicative of the priority our country places on such issues. What really sets the Portland Plan apart, however, from other such plans is how deeply integrated into the city and its denizens the plan is. Every aspect of the plan was tailored not only by government officials, but also by the citizens of Portland themselves. This was done through various hearings, fairs, and other public events hosted for the simple purpose of gathering citizen input on the various aspects of the plan, and the plan has been modified to reflect those influences. The result of this is that the Portland Plan reflects the views of its people, and so the plan is viewed as having been formed by the people and for the people. The resulting plan thus serves as a positive reinforcement, a goal for people to strive for, as opposed to a set of rules being forced upon the people by the government hierarchy. This results in the formation of a positive feedback cycle: people's non-condescending view of the sustainability initiatives creates a much higher involvement in them, which in turn means a higher rate of support and success for those sustainability initiatives. In turn, the high support results in creation of/more support for newer future sustainability initiatives, as successes reflect positively on the city as a whole, politicians and citizens alike.

The Portland Plan is divided into five distinct phases of involvement. These phases of involvement are ways by which people may participate in the creation of, and later shape and mold the integration and implementation of the Portland Plan into something that represents them individually. The five stages cover basically everything from the formation to the implementation of the plan. Phase one of the Portland Plan began with the initial gathering of data. The phase asks the community the question,

“Where are we now?” (Public Participation, 2) As the facts were gathered, policy makers and citizens alike were able to develop an accurate and overarching picture of the current state of Portland, Oregon. This first phase focused on doing thorough research to refine the facts, and utilized extensive public engagement to review this research.

Upon determining where they were as a city at that point in time, the city was really able to begin to see trends in the data, and was able to start to contemplate the question: “Where do we want to go from here?” (Public Participation, 2) This was the question asked in phase two of the Portland Plan’s comprehensive materialization process. It was here that the various members of the city who were compiling the Portland Plan began to set their priorities, and it was determined what core values would shape and mold the Portland of 2035. It was within this second phase that community involvement was the largest, as priorities were expressed to the committee in charge of drafting the Portland Plan through community conversations in which thousands of people were participants. Opinions were collected through an online forum on the Portland government’s online site, in which thousands of comments were left. The result of feedback was that citizens were able to highlight a few key draft goals that citizens wanted the plan to stress. These goals included value statements emphasizing the economy, education, streams and watersheds, sustainability working together with prosperity, safe/accessible/walkable neighborhoods, and maintenance of existing infrastructure (About the Portland Plan, 1). With all things taken into account, the value that was clearly the most vital to the people of Portland seemed to be that of equity.

In response to the importance that the people placed on the value of equity, the government drafted an equity initiative, with particular emphasis on the idea of equal

opportunity for all. Three primary goals were highlighted: education, economic prosperity, and affordability (About the Portland Plan, 1). These stages of involvement make the Portland Plan into much more than words on paper; the Portland Plan is not so much a plan as it is a living, breathing document that grows and adapts to reflect the City of Portland, Oregon, and the aspirations, goals, and needs of the people in it.

In the third phase, emphasis was placed on strategy building. The looming question was, “How do we get there?” (Public Participation, 2). Again, the question involved an open committee of Portland residents, including everyone from the unemployed, to teachers, to the very students they teach. To get the city of Portland from point A to point B, it was decided that the city needed a plan that would set clear investment priorities and would have quantifiable measures of success. This would ensure that the city could track their progress and make any necessary adjustments moving forward. At the onset of Phase four, a realistic Portland Plan, through a joint effort by the people of the city and the respective parties in the government, had been composed. This phase simply asked the denizens of Portland to look at this plan. The city has at this point moved from gathering and confirming fact to determining directions, objectives and integrated strategies, to creating the final 25-year plan for the city and its residents. In essence it is asking them, “What do you think of it [the plan]?” (About the Portland Plan, 2). In looking at this final plan, Portlanders were to decide whether or not the plan was representative of the people’s needs and aspirations, and whether the Portland of 2035 as molded by this plan was one they would want their children to be living in. This phase was to turn the final draft into a final plan, and is the phase the plan is at currently. The last phase, Phase 5, is the both least and most important of the

phases. It is the follow through; it consists simply of the implementation of the goals laid out in the finalized Portland Plan by the respective Portland Plan Partners. (About the Portland Plan, 2) What is most important about this, however, is the nine action areas that were conceived as a response to this realization of the need for a successful plan to have quantifiable measures of success.

These nine action areas are: prosperity and business success, education and skill development, sustainability and the natural environment, human health/food and public safety, transportation/technology and access, equity/civic engagement and quality of life, design planning and public spaces, neighborhoods and housing, and arts/culture and innovation. (About the Portland Plan, 2) These are the directions Portland will be focused on moving toward over the next 25 years. All nine of the goals either explicitly or implicitly contain a focus on green/sustainable initiatives.

The nine action plan goals each contribute to the Portland of 2035 making it an integrated sustainable city with a unique sense of community and charm unlike any other planned city of the future. In regard to the goal of prosperity and business success, sustainability is ever present in the form of creation of jobs associated with renewable energy resources as well as the potential for various forms of urban innovation. The transformation of neighborhoods and integrating storefronts and homes will create numerous construction jobs as the plan progresses. Within the stated goal of education and skill development, there is much room to raise the bar for quality education and to teach more citizens (children, adolescents and adults alike) about the environment and easy, cost-effective tips that can help save them time and money, while helping to save the environment. Raising the bar on teaching knowledge and adding teachers will also

further support the first stated goal: prosperity and business success. The goal, sustainability and the natural environment, readily aligns with human health, food, and public safety agendas in that less carbon emission heavy activities (i.e., automotive transportation) mean more alternative methods of transportation such as biking, which in turn benefit the overall health of citizens, while also reducing serious health hazards such as pollution-induced asthma. The Portland Plan's goals in regard to transportation, technology, and access are focused within the realm of sustainability in that they all focus on a shift toward readily available, comprehensive and efficient (environmentally and economically) public transportation for all, as well as a shift away from roads and more towards bike lanes and sidewalks. As before, the execution of this goal will contribute to furthering the first goal of prosperity and business success through the creation of further jobs. The goal to increase equity, quality of life, and civic engagement is achieved by the move to combine homes and storefronts into one walkable neighborhood business district, which then reduces the need for frequent commutes, effectively greening the community as a whole. The creation of this walkable neighborhood would also reduce incentives to drive, and expedite the transition toward active, healthier forms of transportation such as biking. The design and planning of public spaces can also integrate the idea of walkable storefront communities, while simultaneously serving to create a public spaces that would be effective in the reduction of the overall congestion of the city, while also serving to foster eco-districts and community gardens. Goals relating to neighborhoods and housing are relatively easy to address, as simply greening houses with solar panels, wind turbines, and family gardens, etc. serves to not only dramatically reduce a household's footprint but also to reduce the effect on a homeowner's checkbook.

The final listed action area goal of the Portland Plan--art, culture and innovation--is key because it creates and sustains Portland's distinctiveness, part of which is its huge focus on all things eco friendly. (This is not by any means intended to be an exhaustive list of ways the nine action areas relate to sustainability, but rather examples of how they can be applied to Portland and its development within the context of sustainability.)

Thus, the Portland of 2035 as will be created via the implementation of the Portland Plan is going to be a city with a strong core focus on, and a deep rooted historical focus in, the value of sustainability.

Along with a thorough discussion of anything comes the inevitable unearthing of its strengths and weaknesses. The Portland Plan has a number of strengths: it is comprehensive, inclusive, and should ultimately lead to a well-planned and sustainable city. The depth of the Portland Plan is a testament to its capacity to face any challenges to lead the Portland of today into becoming the Portland of tomorrow, because any potential question that may arise is likely addressed within the text of the plan. The mercurial nature of the plan is to its advantage, because anything not addressed within the text of the plan does not render the plan obsolete, but rather may be simply found by seeking the popular opinion of the citizens of Portland. Furthermore, this plan will have succeeded where others have failed in that measures of success within the Portland Plan are on the whole quantifiable, and so citizens and civil servants alike may actively track the city's progress in accordance with the plan. Finally, the biggest strength within this plan lies within its most unique aspect: its underlying theme of citizen participation. It is therein that the effectiveness lies, as it becomes a plan not simply forcing the people to be sustainable, as so many have attempted to do in the past, but rather a plan which gives the

people of Portland a support structure by which to educate the people of Portland on these issues, and inasmuch provides them an outlet encouraging the development of long term sustainable behaviors and lifestyles. These strengths will allow the Portland, Oregon of 2035 to be full of closer knit, more self-sufficient, environmentally conscious communities.

Though this plan is aggressive and innovative in nature, it is not totally without risk. As sustainable technologies and even planning methodologies improve, a plan as cohesive as the current Portland Plan may leave little breathing room to accommodate the integration of future improvements without large investments and comprehensive re-planning. In addition, plans as comprehensive as this one tend to leave less room for creative expression, which adds diversity and charm to the cities neighborhoods. In terms of raw efficiency, the choice to make this plan a joint effort between the city government and the citizens themselves, though a noble cause, can cause each step to take much longer, and even result in the delay of the project in its entirety due to the volatility of entire populations. One final risk of the plan is the risk associated with time. As any program needs money to continue on, people must continue to vote for the Portland Plan's various programs over the years in order for them to maintain funding so that they may continue bringing about the sustainable Portland as exists within the plan. The plan is to take place over 25-years, over the course of which any number of variables may change. Over the course of 25-years, the voting demographic will change, as 15-year olds who are too young to vote upon the plan's implementation will be 40 upon its completion, and so a huge challenge faced by the Portland Plan is its need to continue to attract support throughout the entirety of its 25-year implementation. The Portland Plan

is a plan, which, if successful, will help solve the very real challenge that is sustainable urban development.

Best Practice

Portland, Oregon's best sustainability initiatives are the land-use and urban design practices. No discussion of Portland's land-use policies could start without mentioning that Portland was one of the first cities to make the decision to instate an urban growth boundary. This boundary, which set an outer limit on the expansion of the city dramatically limited urban sprawl and increased urban population density. This increase in population density catalyzed Portland to focus on the planning and development of land-use and urban design. Having only limited amounts of land to work with, Portland had to switch its focus to quality rather than quantity of development, and it was this focus on quality, which led to Portland becoming known as the 'planners' paradise' it is today.

The increase of population density directly served two purposes: the decrease of individual transportation (which had a corresponding increase in demand for mass transit) and the increased potential for green spaces. Transportation is an element of Portland's land-use and urban development that has been very successful. The development of the rural-urban boundary encouraged dense growth in the city, and it was this population density that allowed carbon-free transit and mass public transit to really become efficient and effective. Portland's I-205 Multi-Use Path runs 16.5 miles and parallels I-205, transporting thousands of Oregonians each day by rail, car, bike, and foot. (I-205 Multi Use Path, 2) Portland also devoted itself early on to bicycle-conscious city planning,

passing a bill in the seventies setting aside one percent of state highway funds for bike lanes and paths. The result of this is that the city today boasts over 270 miles of bikeways, dramatically reducing the carbon emissions of Portland due to the increased use of active transportation methods such as biking and walking in lieu of driving. (Urban Cycling, 1) In fact, the city planners introduced in 2008 the nation's first-ever highly visible bike boxes. These bright green boxes are painted on the asphalt at intersections giving cyclists space to wait at the intersection with cars waiting behind them, thus giving bikes the right of way at intersections. This was determined to make the city as a whole safer, keeping cyclists in driver's sightlines and out of danger (Bike Boxes, 1). The city supports electric vehicles by streamlining the process to get a permit and by offering free plug-in parking spots for electric vehicles. The policies reduce not only the traffic congestion in the city but also the air pollution.

Portland is home to Forest Park, an urban forest reserve spanning over 5,000 acres and containing hundreds of bird and mammal species. (The Forest Park Conservancy, 1) Around this, Portland's Trimet transit authority utilizes a bus system, streetcars, a light rail, and an aerial tram. These four methods of transit are able to cover nearly the entire Portland area, due to the prevention of urban sprawl, to provide the people of Portland maximum convenience in the use of transit systems. This convenience provides an incentive for people to use the Trimet transit systems, which then further reduces pollution and increases air quality.

Portland's land-use policies as related to food are particularly unique. Portland has a Food Policy Council, which has an open application process anyone can join. This citizen interaction in the realm of food policy is what I believe allows the city to be so

responsive to the needs of the people. There are various learning gardens dispersed throughout the city, where they educate youth and adults alike on the topics of nutrition and gardening, allowing people to take their health and their food security into their own hands. Additionally, food banks are spread throughout the city to help distribute the healthiest food to the most people. The city has a website dedicated to community gardens, which creates a streamlined process by which one can register their community garden plots. This increased ease of use amplifies incentives to create and participate in farmers' markets, because there is no corresponding legal hassle to deter potential interested parties as there is in other cities. A similar non-government affiliated site exists for farmers' markets, which has an interface that allows for an easy way for buyers and sellers of locally grown produce to connect. Community gardens and farmers' markets are outlets by which citizens can buy locally grown organic foods that are simultaneously good for the environment and good for themselves.

Conclusion

The Portland Plan has clear investment priorities and quantifiable measures of success that guide the city toward a vision of a more sustainable city. In doing so, the city will have created a model by which other cities may refer to, because the Portland Plan attempts not to force people to adopt sustainability practices but rather to give the people a support structure that encourages the development of long term sustainable behaviors and lifestyles. Inasmuch, Portland, Oregon is the forerunner, while other cities play it safe, follow in its footsteps and observe every action and corresponding reaction. Considering how much is actually at stake (our entire planet), it is a sad truth that so few

are willing to put anything on the line for the sake of supporting sustainability measures, even for the very city in which they live.

Portland has been a leader in sustainable decisions since before sustainability largely became seen as something to strive for in societies. The diversion of state highway funds toward development of alternative modes of transportation and the urban growth boundary, both having been formed in the 1970s, were key components responsible for Portland becoming the beacon of light in the urban design world as it is seen today. Because of these two actions, by the twenty-first century when sustainability plans began to hatch, Portland, Oregon would already be far ahead of the curve. With respect to portability, the Portland Plan could be implemented in other cities; however, citizen participation may be unique to Portland's civic culture. There is no way to know what number of people in any given city will be receptive to and supportive of such a strongly environmentally driven city plan. Portland may, in fact, have such a large amount of citizens supportive of environmental programs simply because of their early gravitation toward becoming an environmentally conscious city in the late seventies and early eighties, which may have in turn altered the city's chemistry, because the sustainable practices of the city may have attracted more environmentally conscious people throughout the years.

Although it is hard to offer my own advice about a task as daunting as this, there are a few suggestions for improvement. The plan is very thorough and comprehensive, but its strength could also be a weakness. It is often so specific that its flexibility and resilience become an issue. In the event of change, be it in the form of new ideas toward

implementation or new technology, if the plan is too specific, it may backfire, preventing the expedited implementation of the very change its original goal was to bring about.

The integration of sustainability and government that is taking place in Portland, particularly as underscored by the Portland Plan and underlying theme of citizen involvement, is an unprecedented experiment in urban development. The city is undergoing a transition to twenty-first century cohabitation, the results of which have the potential to permanently affect not only the role of sustainability practices throughout our nation as a whole, but also the way by which we go about urban development; Portland is effectively leading by example.

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