

## Here's Big Looking at You Kid

**T**his Big Look review of land use planning in Oregon could turn into one of those horror movies where you think something was successfully buried but you look up and here it comes again.

You wonder: will that scary band of hairy old shibboleths that we thought we'd buried in the early 70s ever be made to rest?



“Ye shall know them by the mottos from their mouths,” as someone has surely said. For example, “The state has no business telling me what to do with my property,” or “Land use decisions belong at the local level because people there have to live with the consequences of their actions.” “Urban growth boundaries unnaturally restrict the supply of land needed for housing and drive up prices.”

“We should deregulate the land use process in Oregon. “Let’s just protect the really productive land and give the counties more say on rural land development.” We need more incentives and should rely more on the market. Too many sticks and not enough carrots.”

“Government isn’t the solution, government is the problem.”



### **Read my lips...**

How our land use planning process has survived these past years of political know-next-to nothingness, religious belief in the ultimate wisdom and sanctity of the market and other dumbed-down dimness, is just remarkable.

**M**aybe Oregon was trying to do something right and people knew it. Maybe people here wanted land to be something more than a wealth-builder for the happy few. Maybe the marrow in their bones lay empathetically next to Aldo Leopold's who said, "First you must love, honor and respect the land," the Aldo who reminded us that we ought to think of ourselves as mere citizens of the land, not its conquerors or venal users.

Did we somehow intuit that a love of land necessarily precedes a law of land, and therein comes the will and the patience to work it out?

Looking back: I vividly remember the mayor of Florence saying that the state wasn't going to tell his city what to do, that it had to meet certain state-wide goals and have a comprehensive plan. People I meet occasionally still argue passionately that it's nobody's business if they want to raise pigs in their back yard in the city. I'm just glad that I don't have to live next to such a disconnected and piggish philosophy.

Recently, after several very dry years, the underground water movement on my property shifted and dumped a substantial lake on my neighbor's yard. I suppose I could have coyly observed, "Nice water you've got collected there, neighbor. What are you going to do about it?" It wasn't necessary to take me to court to remind me that this "spillover" condition that came from me was my responsibility to fix.

Tell that to the field burners of the Willamette Valley. Same problem, bigger scale, but where there is a lot of money involved, where it is much cheaper to dump your pollutants in the public commons, the spillover principle get politically muddled for economically selfish reasons and needs more regulation. I forget, wasn't it in *Duck*

*Soup* that Groucho said, “These are my principles. If you don’t like those, I’ve got some others?”

**R**emember when Urban Growth Boundaries, UGBs, were thought of and called USBs, Urban Service Boundaries, the limits beyond which urban service would not be provided? This naming framed a belt tightening strategy around an expansive suburban appetite for converting cheaper land at the city’s fringe. The USB point was that communities had limits about how much service they could afford to provide, and that the city’s ability to afford basic services – fire, police, sewer, water, schools, parks, roads, mental health - needed to be a primary player in any calculus of expansion.

Fast-forward to today where the emphasis has been shifted to predictions of population growth and the land supply supposedly needed to meet that growth. Add in the anti-government, anti-tax movement’s hugely negative impacts on the city’s ability to provide services of any kind. Is it any surprise then that we ask: can we afford to build more roads when we are having trouble caring for the ones we already have? Should we be laying out new property when we can’t afford enough police protection for the property that we have?

Call me Jeremiah, but I foresee an era coming to an end that no one is going to miss. In my vision, deregulation has lost face along with everybody’s shirt. Property rights are finally forced to come face to face with a denser-living urban-ecological reality. There is a widening of what we believe to be basic human services and a renewed willingness to pay for them. UGB-USB considerations of supply, equity and affordability receive the careful consideration they deserve. The old and worn-out hairy, anti-planning notions that somehow crept out are returned to the underside of their rocks and buried a little deeper this time.

**A**nd we are able to remark that Oregon, like a barnacle on a rock, has managed to hold fast to its land use planning program long enough to be able to enjoy the fresh flush of a brand new tide.