

## *Portland's pivot from today to tomorrow*

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Many of us share unease about certain local trends. For example:

- \* what is remembered as free-flowing traffic has (d)evolved into congestion heading toward gridlock
- \* there is a sense that general well-being is plummeting. Fewer families appear to be thriving; more are struggling; many undeniably are suffering
- \* what is remembered, or imagined, as tolerably sufficient housing for all income groups has degraded into a shelter crisis even for many two-earner families
- \* satisfaction with the condition of our civic furniture has eroded into concern that streets, public buildings, schools and various civic services – public education not the least among them -- are decaying
- \* belief that portland's governance is accessible, responsive and capable has degenerated into suspicion that the city's strong-mayor form of government with citywide-elected commissioners who run bureaus is not up to its administrative tasks and is mostly immune to accountability
- \* skeptics argue that single jurisdictions (cities, counties, special districts) can't resolve complex problems by themselves. Yet these units of government usually lack the vision, willingness or skill to attack the problems as pragmatic teammates.

Within our book group and elsewhere, we also hear people passionately expressing differing feelings about zoning, building sustainability, disaster preparedness, parking, historic structures, data and technology applications, public education, urban tree coverage, parks, air quality, climate action, energy use, density/infill, view corridors, bridges and more ... so, how does Portland move successfully from where we are to where we want to be? How do we generate discourse and dialogue that redefine the public good to usher in, locally, a vibrant 21st-century social compact?

My ramblings concentrate on tactics, not strategic goals. My reasons are:

1. Arguably, much of Portland's "special place" dna is composed not only of planning's goals and their physical outcomes, but also of ingredients the city used to engage its residents in shaping – and "owning" – the targets and the results. How you map your route usually determines whether you reach your objectives.

2. I was a close witness, in various roles at the Oregonian, to the state's and city's late-20th-century planning ventures – statewide land-use planning, Portland's downtown and citywide plans, private urban transit's pivot to publicly owned and operated tri-met, the battles over whether to build the mount hood freeway or light rail, the creation of metro from the Columbia Region Association of Governments, the efforts to create the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area and to save 13 miles of the lower Deschutes River for public use as opposed to private development of McMansions.

I want to mark some techniques as guides going forward to help avoid procedural dead-ends and corrosive hostility, to minimize waste of time, money and effort and to build public trust and buy-in on proposals. Laser-focused the core messages are easily stated:

- \* little worthwhile happens without exceptional leadership.

- \* major, lasting change requires a concise overarching narrative about an exciting future to be grasped and an accompanying narrative about a diminishing future if action is not taken. In short, big shifts require a captivating agenda plus a credible warning that not to decide is to decide -- in favor of irrelevance or downward drift.

- \* the exercise must be seen genuinely as a community effort, not a top-down imposition of anyone's pinched self-interests. Residents, businesses, commuting workers and civic institutions must truly be engaged to address the core questions: what do Portlanders want to preserve? Change? Create? And how can we best pivot without stumbling?

Successfully executing the core messages is hard to achieve: inspirational leadership (think Tom McCall, Neil Goldschmidt, Vera Katz) is a huge plus. With or without charisma, though, effective leadership (think Vic Atiyeh) is indispensable. Effective leaders of major advances in Oregon's recent past have distilled grievances into (a) a concise, positive vision/narrative ("clean up the Willamette River"); (b) selected superior staff to organize a professionally led but grass-roots engaging decision process; (c) personally worked hands-on and intensively in a nonpartisan spirit with opinion leaders from business, labor, media, clergy, other political jurisdictions and minority groups to educate them, identify special concerns, collect ideas, correct misinformation, relieve anxieties about motives and gain validation of the goals and process via buy-in or at least the temporary suspension of disbelief; and (d) generously spread credit far and wide to those who helped achieve traction -- downplaying "i" and emphasizing "we," as in "community means something we do together."

Projects that have yielded major, lasting, worthy change here have been time- and labor-intensive. They have invested heavily -- relentlessly sometimes -- in tutorials to raise civic literacy about how complex details of plans support shared overall goals; that is, people need to understand, at least roughly, how it all fits together. (anecdote: in the late 1990s the director of UMTA, the U.S. Urban Mass Transit Authority, walked into my office. He had been riding Portland-area buses and light rail for two days, talking to passengers. He said he believed the average rider in portland knew more about the interplay of mass transit, highway congestion, city planning and quality-of- life considerations "than your average ph.d back east." he wanted to know how that happened. I told him that he was seeing dividends of 15 years of civic investment by lots of people -- politicians, articulate staff from many agencies, civic groups like 1000 Friends of Oregon, the City Club and teachers.

For the newspaper's part, I had assigned reporters to suburban planning news and analysis full time for the first time back in 1979. Two editorial

writers had been focusing on planning issues since 1981 and that just in the prior year 52 editorials or columns -- one per week -- appeared on the page -- most of them quite short, building on issue after issue, consolidating, repeating, being responsive to readers' queries and critiques.

Little by little, planning became part of the local mind-set and vocabulary.) the process must be front-end-loaded with abundant chances (at convenient times) to see proposals and have them explained, to critique assumptions and suggest ideas. People learn at different rates, so repetition is invaluable, not wasteful. A successful process must consciously work to build trust. That requires slavish attention to providing feedback. Two of the lessons drummed in to residents are that no one can get everything they desire, but also that no one is ignored. This minimizes the alienation, powerlessness and hostility that breed naysayers who, in coalitions, often stymie progress.

Experience testifies that most citizens will accept results of a process that considers their concerns even if their views don't prevail. But any sense of being ignored -- "they didn't even listen to me" -- invites rigid opposition in place of reasoned give-and-take. So, from the beginning, messaging systems must include feedback loops to acknowledge receipt -- preferably within 24-48 hours -- of citizen comment or testimony. Whenever the contribution is more nuanced than tabulation of support or opposition -- especially when there are nuanced objections or suggestions--the acknowledgement should indicate to whom a human being has referred it for consideration. Because news sources from which people "mine" useful, reliable information are thinning and fragmenting, for our next complex, controversial civic projects, we will have to invent accessible, free, authoritative, independent vehicles to convey facts, distill arguments, and fact-check to debunk myths and alarmist propaganda. Also, this gold-standard platform is likely to become the prime source for showing whether all local jurisdictions -- city, county, Metro, TriMet, school districts -- are

integrating their efforts; that is, pulling in the same direction at the appropriate time.