

I thought I tackle this one from a Salem perspective, which is mostly where I spent the rollicking 70's and 80's and 90's. It's good to remember that Portland wasn't isolated from the rest of the state, although it often appeared that Portland would have preferred that.

There was equally dynamic state leadership from Tom McCall, Clay Myers, LB Day, Hallock, even Bob Straub, Dave Frohnmeyer, and more. The ground breaking work on environmental issues in Salem, and the willingness to propose a sales tax and more, made the Portland innovations feel natural. I felt I was in an echo chamber sometimes, except the Portlanders were smugger.

I think some of the innovative slow-down in Portland was generated by the statewide problems of the 80's recession. At that point, Governor Goldschmidt wouldn't risk funding economic development projects in Portland for fear of a backlash and because the rural areas were legitimately needier. Oregon saw the rapid decline of the timber industry, the loss of corporate headquarters (and consequently corporate leadership). State government was at war with itself over priorities and all things were no longer possible.

The recession and its ripples were barely in the rear view mirror before the state passed Measure 5 which placed a massive new burden on state revenues. Instead of funding 30% of school costs (which were mostly in the school bus support function), the state was now responsible for 70% of school costs everywhere and had to "equalize" the revenues around the state. You heard a loud sucking noise in Portland as revenues raised here went out to rural school districts. At the same time, decently funded Portland schools started scrambling for resources. I think the erosion of our education system began here, and it is too often ignored.

The consequence of inadequate school funding is in our face daily. The quality of Portland schools was one of the primary reasons our neighborhoods were so vibrant. Middle class people rehabbed old houses and sent their kids to great schools, and everyone could easily go to the city's cultural events without driving 15 miles. Now, new folks look at Lake Oswego and West Linn and Beaverton. We know what it costs to provide excellent education and we know what the programs look like. We just won't pay for it and get ourselves wrapped around issues like pensions instead of educational programming. (I could go on as a former school board member during this time in the state's most affluent district. We could barely hang on; the consequence was an erosion of trust between the government and citizens who were willing to pay but weren't allowed to. At the same time the early tea partiers kept insisting on something for nothing.)

The economic stresses I referenced created obvious needs that many of us have identified. Those obvious needs have sapped the energy, creativity from our local public discourse. How can you think great thoughts when people (including me) are FURIOUS about the homeless problem and the crazies on the street who need to be cleaned up and fed? Focus in the city is increasingly limited as the consequences of various economic stresses are catching up and citizens' lives are being affected on a daily basis – with impossible traffic, sidewalk camping, highway litter, potholes. By not meeting these basic needs, the City simply can't convince people they need a new light rail line.

Foibles of our leaders haven't helped here. The discussion about leadership has to confront the public falls of our friends. While these are individual tragedies, and we ache for these folks, they have significantly added to the alienation of the public from its government. Their fall from grace was far more than personal tragedies. They proved that people who governed aren't trustworthy or honorable. That is a collective tragedy.