

**REPORT ON
DISCUSSION DRAFT,
CITY OF PORTLAND COMPREHENSIVE PLAN**

To the Board of Governors,
City Club of Portland:

A. Background of Study

I. INTRODUCTION

In 1976, the City of Portland began work on a comprehensive land use plan to satisfy requirements of the state Land Conservation and Development Commission (LCDC). The first draft (Discussion Draft) of the Comprehensive Plan for the City of Portland (Plan) was published in January, 1979, concluding just over two years of work by the City Bureau of Planning in conjunction with citizens and citizen groups. Following the current review period, a second draft of the Plan will be developed by the Bureau of Planning and presented for public review beginning in September, 1979.

B. Study Charge

Your Committee was given a charge in December, 1978, to review the first draft of the Plan and inquire into these specific areas:

1. Is there a clear "direction" or "vision" for the City indicated in the first draft? If so, what is it? If not, why not and who should establish it?
2. Are there currently relevant goals or values as set forth in informal or adopted City of Portland policies, or prior City Club reports which have been ignored or in conflict with provisions of the first draft?
3. Does the first draft adequately provide for effective implementation and for later amendment?

The charge included the request that: "The Committee should be prepared to accept a further charge related to subsequent drafts and further development of the Plan."

C. General Statement

In the charge by the City Club Standing Committee on Land Use and Planning, your Committee was advised that it was "not expected to be experts . . . but informed reporters and commentators." Since the first draft of the Plan is now undergoing citizen review, this position has seemed to your Committee an appropriate one from which to evaluate the Plan. Throughout its meetings, interviews, discussions, and review of the Plan draft and technical documents, your Committee has acted in that capacity. A list of persons interviewed is included in Appendix A and a selected bibliography is included in Appendix B. With a study grant funded by the Portland City Club Foundation, your Committee obtained the very able assistance of a research intern, Ms. Cindy Greene, a student majoring in political science at Lewis & Clark College.

The task has been challenging, and your Committee's most significant finding has been that it has had considerable difficulty discovering a well-formed concept within the Plan from which to analyze it and its implications for the City looking to the year 2000.

Your Committee strongly supports the effort to develop a comprehensive plan for the City of Portland. The City Club has encouraged comprehensive planning for the City for many years, and the LCDC mandate handed down in 1973 has provided an appropriate legal stimulus to the City to formally engage in such a planning effort.

The first draft resulting from this effort, however, is disappointing. It fails to provide citizens with a framework which would facilitate understanding of the planners' goals and allow for meaningful citizen comment. It also fails to provide citizens with a clearly-stated vision for the City's development over the next 20 years.

II. BACKGROUND

A. Definition of Comprehensive Planning

Various definitions of the term "comprehensive planning" exist, but most authorities on the subject suggest that a comprehensive plan be general and long-range, a policy guide facilitating coordination of regional development.

Opinions differ among experts as to how specific and detailed an urban comprehensive plan should be, whether or not specific zoning regulations should be part of the plan, and to what extent a truly "futuristic" approach should prevail.

In its introduction to the Goals and Guidelines for comprehensive land use planning, the LCDC, under whose mandate the Plan has been developed, provides a definition as follows:

"A comprehensive plan is a set of public decisions dealing with how the land, air and water resources of an area are to be used or not used. These decisions are reached after considering the present and future of an area. Being comprehensive in scope, the plan provides for all the resources, uses, public facilities and services in an area. It also incorporates the plans and programs of the various governmental units into a single management tool for the planning area."¹

The Plan itself states, that "a comprehensive plan establishes goals and policies to guide future public and private development decisions."²

B. History of Planning in Portland

This Plan is not the first planning effort for the City, but it is the most extensive and specific, and the first mandated by state law. Examples of more limited planning efforts in Portland would include both the Portland Park Plan and the Moses Plan—each having left a distinctive mark upon the City. By contrast, comprehensive planning is more inclusive—broadening itself to include social, economic, administrative, and fiscal matters. The Bureau of Planning's "Portland Planning Firsts" is included in Appendix C.

C. City Club's Historical Position on Comprehensive Planning

Over the years, the City Club, through its research reports, has encouraged the development of an orderly plan, comprehensive in nature, to guide the development of the City and the region.

In reports on urban renewal, mass transit, building heights, the Moses plan, and community goals, for example, a common thread has been the encouragement of long-range planning to coordinate services and growth within the region, to retain the best qualities of the region and to improve those assets which were less than satisfactory. This regional emphasis for such planning has been intended not only to determine Portland's place within the region, but also to establish a cohesive and coordinated plan. Such a Plan would not only provide a broad range of amenities for the region as well as the City, but would also create an opportunity for government agencies to work together to make the best economic and environmental decisions in determining when, where, and how annexation and cooperation might occur.

In the Report on the Moses Plan (1944), City Club members were told:

"The Portland area, the committee firmly believes, stands at the threshold of a new era. There are great opportunities and responsibilities before it. It can, in the period immediately ahead, move firmly in the direction of

¹Oregon Land Conservation and Development Commission, *Statewide Planning Goals and Guidelines*, Salem, Oregon. April, 1977. p. 1.

²Bureau of Planning, City of Portland, Oregon. *Discussion Draft, Comprehensive Plan*. January, 1979. p. 4.

building up a metropolitan area of much greater efficiency, beauty, and distinction as a service center for local, regional, and national industry and commerce as a community in which to live, as a place to visit, and as a vital center of culture and recreation.”³

The City Club has also consistently identified the need for citizen involvement in this planning process. In the Report on Urban Renewal in Portland (1971), for example, recommendation number two reads:

“Urban renewal should be undertaken only as part of a determined comprehensive planning effort that includes goals for all types of physical development, intended to meet social and economic needs, with particular emphasis on housing for low and middle income residents. Such a program must be an on-going effort that sets priorities in time and money and provide the means for its implementation, and must be developed with the full cooperation of citizens on the neighborhood level.”⁴

III. LCDC MANDATE AND GOALS

Senate Bill 100, enacted by the legislature in 1973, established the LCDC and directed it to adopt statewide planning goals and guidelines to be used by cities and counties in preparing comprehensive land use plans. In December, 1974, the goals and guidelines were adopted, and comprehensive planning efforts were initiated in communities throughout Oregon as of January, 1975.

In November, 1976, the City of Portland began its work on the Plan. A process for developing Portland's Plan was adopted on May 4, 1977 by the City Council but was superseded by Resolution No. 32066 on March 22, 1978, outlining the City's procedure and schedule for compliance (see Appendix D).

The Discussion Draft currently under review was produced as scheduled in January, 1979, and the planning efforts as outlined in the Resolution are expected to follow the timetable. Your Committee was told that the process must proceed on schedule in order to comply with the LCDC mandate.

The sense of “predestination” which some citizens have expressed at the public review meetings may be based in reality. The rigid timetable could affect the ability of planners to make major revisions within the specified time-frame should such revisions be demanded by citizens during the hearings process.

Perhaps because of the urgency to comply with the LCDC mandate, the Plan appears to be, more than anything, a political document intended to satisfy a set of legal requirements.

Any comprehensive plan in Oregon is required by law to comply with the statewide planning goals established by LCDC. The first draft of Portland's Plan addresses all applicable goals, including: citizen involvement; land use planning; forest and agricultural lands; open spaces; scenic and historic areas; natural resources; areas subject to natural disasters and hazards; recreational areas; state economy; housing; public facilities and services; transportation; energy conservation; urbanization; the Willamette River Greenway; and air, water and land resources quality.

The final Plan must address all pertinent goals and also provide technical material in support of the goals to be judged complete. Ultimate compliance can only be determined when the final Plan and accompanying technical documents are presented to LCDC.

³City Club of Portland. “Portland Improvement: A report to the people on the Moses Plan.” January 24, 1944.

⁴City Club of Portland. “Report on Urban Renewal in Portland.” Vol. 52, No. 12. August 13, 1971.

IV. THE COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING PROCESS

Comprehensive planning, like all planning, is a dynamic process in which abstract and perhaps idealistic goals are translated into concrete and achievable objectives which have measurable results and price tags. This dual aspect of comprehensive planning is critical to an analyst of the Portland Discussion Draft, especially with regard to questions of vision and implementation.

Comprehensive planning is also a process in which ideas are constantly being evaluated, with adjustments made for unpredictable human behavior which defies statistical models and technical analysis. The comprehensive planning process is inherently complex. Policies satisfactory to one group of citizens may offend or irritate another group. Questions of housing density, population, annexation, economics, and public services, among others, generate factions and provoke an essentially adversary situation.

Abstract goals with which all citizens might easily agree, e.g. "Promote a healthy urban economy . . ." can become points of contention when translated into zoning regulations affecting individuals and neighborhoods in ways perceived by them as adverse.

Writers on the subject suggest that it is necessary for planners to remove these points of contention wherever possible, or at least to provide citizens with other ways of evaluating a comprehensive plan proposal. The present Plan offers abstract goals and very specific, detailed technical information in two separate documents. There is not, however, a synthesis of the material or a guide included with which Portland residents could easily determine the benefits or penalties for acceptance or rejection of the Plan or its particular elements.

V. DISCUSSION

A. Major Issues

Your Committee recognizes that the issues set out in this section are interrelated and should not be considered separately in an overall evaluation of the Plan. We have separated them here only to more clearly identify our findings and make particular points about each issue.

1. Density

One of the stated goals of the Plan is to increase population within the City. This goal is tied to the desire to increase employment opportunities through further industrial and commercial development within the City.

Opinions vary widely on how much population and housing density the City can or should sustain. On one side of the issue are those who would prefer that Portland continue to concentrate on its traditional pattern of single family housing with a population level which can comfortably fit into that pattern. Those who support this view are most interested in preserving the quiet, residential nature of much of the City. Preservation of this atmosphere is perceived as the means by which the City can compete with the spaciousness of the suburbs. This spaciousness is seen as one of the prime reasons city dwellers have moved from the City to the suburbs.

The Plan itself, despite stated goals to "encourage population growth . . ." and "promote a range of living environments . . ." appears to support the view of limited density when it states elsewhere that "neighborhood quality in Portland means houses with yards, quiet streets in good condition, shade trees . . ."⁵

Those on the other side, however, propose even higher density than the Plan offers to house a greatly-increased population. Livability, it has been pointed out, means different things to different people. It is possible that even higher density and more people will bring to Portland excitement, stimulation, change, and amenities which only a large and economically sound city can support: cultural activities; education; employment;

⁵Bureau of Planning, City of Portland. *Discussion Draft, Comprehensive Plan*. January, 1979. p. 6.

⁶Ibid. p. 4.

parks and recreational facilities; and major public services to satisfy the diversity of interests implicit in a large and viable population.

It is also possible that greater population and higher density will become a matter of survival for the City in the coming years, as more and more evidence comes in to support the conclusion of some planners that medium-sized cities like Portland will not survive the economic pressures of the future without major growth to form a more substantial tax base.

Those who support greatly-increased density point out that technological advances in construction and design have made higher-density housing attractive and appealing to substantial numbers of responsible and permanent residents throughout the country. The current high interest in quality condominiums and townhouses supports this view. Owners of these units often choose this lifestyle specifically because of the ease of maintenance, energy-efficiency, and amenities available in high-density developments: swimming pools; specialty shops; restaurants; security and small parks. In the central city, there is the added incentive of close proximity to the services of the downtown core and cultural and recreational facilities.

Higher density housing also will increasingly be the only economically feasible way to provide suitable and comfortable shelter for the growing segment of the population who can no longer afford the investment in or upkeep of single-family housing.

It is difficult to please many groups with one document. Your Committee believes that single-family, residential housing can co-exist with higher-density housing, but the Plan should clearly point out the values and benefits of both to the public.

2. *Annexation*

Annexation has been addressed only superficially in the Plan and, in fact, has generally been set aside for future consideration. In the Technical Report, planners state that, "the City would support a change in state law which would allow a more planned approach to annexation . . .," and "annexation to Portland will be accomplished in phases to allow for smooth transition in service provision, more logical city boundaries and coordinated capital improvements programming. The City is in the process of establishing an urban services boundary . . . once this boundary has been identified, annexation of land will take place only within it . . ."⁷

Reviewers of the draft, however, are left to speculate on which particular parcels of land will be considered for annexation.

Annexation is a highly-charged and controversial issue. But it is difficult to evaluate a Plan for the next 20 years without some insight into potential annexation and its effect on the City—economically, structurally, environmentally, and culturally.

There are some areas so intrinsic to the workings of the City that the Plan suffers from the lack of their inclusion. Areas such as the unincorporated property between the City and I-205 and parts of the Capitol Highway Water District are physical as well as political realities. Your Committee believes that the Plan, in its vision, should speak to the realities of the future regarding annexation and incorporation of these fringe areas, rather than shy away from the political natural of this issue and color things only as they currently are.

3. *Economics*

The economics of the Plan have not been clearly set out in the first draft. The data necessary to a full understanding of the Plan's costs, benefits, and penalties is difficult to gather and even more difficult to assimilate. The Plan addresses the urban economy in terms of jobs, population and "trade and service vitality," but it does not provide information clearly outlining the economic impact of new zoning. Nor does it address the need for an increased tax-base to support facilities and services, the possibility of a non-

⁷Discussion Draft, *Comprehensive Plan. Technical Report*. January, 1979. p. 78.

resident user-tax to aid in support of those facilities and services, the continued dependence of Tri-Met upon tax revenues, or the feasibility of developing major new industry on a limited amount of available land.

The proposed economic development policy for the City of Portland, for example, which is reflected in the Plan, envisions an expanding commercial and industrial environment. The City, however, has only a five-year supply of vacant developable land currently available.⁸ The proposals have been approved by the Metropolitan Boundary Commission for the annexation of the Rivergate and East Columbia areas, providing an additional 2,300 acres of developable land to the City.⁹ The possible development of these areas is not mentioned in the Plan, nor is the question of the costs of the development of these areas addressed.

Your Committee believes that answers to the following questions would aid citizens in evaluating the economics of a comprehensive plan:

1. Why does the community exist?
2. What are the principal causes of change in the economy?
3. What are the most important forms of imbalance in the community economy?
4. How can the imbalances of the economy be remedied?
5. How can economic problem remedies be expressed as community development targets?
6. How do the facts of community economic structure, problems, problem remedies, and targets relate to other community problems and targets in which the planner is involved?¹⁰

All of these questions may have been asked by planners when drafting this Plan, but the answers have not been clearly set out for citizen review.

4. *Mass Transit*

The Plan is generally acknowledged to be interdependent with Tri-Met and a proposed light-rail transit system. The principal areas of increased density proposed by the Plan would be developed along the Gresham/Portland City Center light-rail corridor and along the City's present major transit corridors. The purpose of this zoning is to increase Tri-Met ridership.

No apparent consideration has been given in the Plan to any major changes in the presently-used radial transportation system. The Plan anticipates that public transportation ridership will continue to be limited to trips to and from the central core City or may increase in shorter trips along the already-existing corridors.

Historically, the metropolitan region has been able to develop a sizable suburban population because of the availability of adequate highways and arterial streets. The construction of a light-rail line between the City center and outlying suburban centers such as Gresham or Hillsboro will enable the continued growth of suburban centers.

Your Committee raises the following questions:

1. Will people continue to be willing to spend considerable portions of their waking hours in transit between home and work?
2. Will the continuation of major transportation investments, such as light-rail systems, not only place significant economic pressures upon the taxpaying public, but also tend to detract from the Plan's goal of increasing the density within the limits of the City's boundaries?

⁸Office of Planning and Development, City of Portland, Oregon. *Proposed Economic Development Policy for the City of Portland*. January, 1979.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Goodman, William and Freund, Eric, *Principles and Practice of Urban Planning*. International City Managers' Association. Washington, D.C. 1968. p. 77-78.

3. How will a continued radial transportation system affect the proper development of desired neighborhoods and residential/employment/geographical relationships?

B. Planners' Responsibilities

1. *Planners' Responsibility to Communicate*

The 18-page basic document, *Discussion Draft, Comprehensive Plan*, has proven to be paradoxically easy to read, but difficult to understand. The 356-page *Technical Report* accompanying the Discussion Draft carries important details referred to in the draft, but it is difficult to integrate the material in the two documents in a meaningful way. Taken together, they comprise an amorphous body of information not easily interpreted by an average reader.

Your Committee believes that the City's planners are responsible for providing a technically-competent Plan *and for communicating the implications of the Plan clearly to the community*. We believe that the authors of the first draft have failed in their efforts to communicate.

2. *Planners' Responsibility to State Their Vision*

Your Committee found in its review of the Plan no clearly-stated vision for the City, but it did develop a general impression of what the planners might have had in mind. The use of such terms as "preserve," "maintain," and "retain" throughout the Plan, taken together with the use of the term "rowhouses" (which carries a somewhat romantic and historical connotation) rather than the more modern "townhouses," and frequent references to Portland's single-family neighborhoods, has led your Committee to conclude that the planners are primarily interested in a vision with a strongly historical bent. There is a sense that status quo, or even something pre-dating status quo, is to be desired.

Your Committee finds a conflict between this philosophy of preservation of the status quo and stated goals in the Plan for increased population and more jobs. The planners' commitment to the growth and development of the City is unclear to your Committee. Your Committee strongly supports growth and development for the City, including increased population and higher density. We believe that a proper concept for that growth and development is necessary.

C. Design of the City

While our city, any city, seems perhaps too large and unwieldy to be "designed," it is only through some kind of conscious design effort that cities of distinction develop.

One urban expert points out that, "in fact, we *do* design our cities, however imperfectly . . . The city is a great (if disordered and uncomfortable) sensuous spectacle, and could be manipulated for the joy of its inhabitants."¹¹

Portland's design has been "manipulated for the joy of its inhabitants" in the past. Its citizens today delight in the vision of their predecessors who wisely laid out the downtown Park Blocks, for instance, and set aside Washington Park for residents of the future. Citizens today should not be less farsighted in planning a joyous habitat for their own heirs. Historical preservation is important, but is only one side of a coin. Your Committee believes that in the rush to preserve the best of our City's past, we should not deny our future.

Portland residents and City officials have been justifiably proud of the City's recent claim to the title "most livable city," but we should not forget that Portland has had other "titles" from time to time. It has been called a mediocre city, a "flat" city of too much equilibrium leading to stagnation, and a big city with a small-town complex.

Plato said that the beginning is the most important part of any work, and a more

¹¹Ibid. p. 249

