

Metro says Portland area has room to grow inside current urban boundary

The Oregonian, September 15, 2009

Eric Mortenson



Torsten Kjellstrand/The Oregonian

In Forest Grove, a line of houses abuts the urban growth boundary. Metro, the regional government, concludes that much growth can be contained within the boundary, preventing development from spilling over into farmland.

Metro's vision of how the Portland area will accommodate a million more people during the next 20 years emerged Tuesday: Pack them in.

How? Through redevelopment of old buildings and once-polluted industrial sites. By infill and increased density within existing city centers. By building up, not out. With a tight hold on the urban growth boundary and less reliance on cars. With smarter spending on the pipes, streets, wires and other public facilities that make life go.

Michael Jordan, Metro's chief operating officer, said Tuesday at the Metro Council meeting that the region can buffer prime farmland and preserve key natural areas while providing land for the projected newcomers and for the additional jobs they will need.

Critics were quick to disagree. Development groups in particular believe Metro's proposed solutions are unrealistic.

Jordan laid out his recommendations backed by a 3-inch stack of studies, charts and maps compiled by planners during the past two years.

Among the findings: There are 15,000 acres of vacant, buildable land within the current urban growth boundary, or UGB, for Multnomah, Washington and Clackamas counties. That's about 35 times the size of downtown Portland, according to Metro.



Of that space, 10,000 acres are vacant "employment" land, suitable for industrial or commercial development. And thousands more acres of "dilapidated, contaminated and underutilized employment sites" lie within the current boundary, Jordan said.

Making a case that a tight growth boundary will work, Jordan said the area has added 20,000 acres to the UGB in recent years with little development to show for it, primarily because providing sewer, water and other infrastructure is too expensive. During the past 10 years, nearly 95 percent of housing has been built inside the original growth boundary established in 1979, he said.

The tri-county region needs to protect the public infrastructure investments it has made and focus on providing jobs, Jordan said. Global warming, energy costs, population growth and other factors require collaborative use of the limited public and private development money, he said.

If the region makes wise land-use, infrastructure and transportation choices, the current UGB holds enough land to handle nearly all of the population and job growth projected by 2030, according to Metro's projections, he concluded.

But as Jordan wryly noted, "We're the West Coast distributor of Great Planning," and now it's time for action. If the region doesn't use land within the boundary efficiently, development could spill to Vancouver, Sandy, Canby, Newberg, Scappoose and other communities outside Metro's jurisdiction, he said.

"You can't just hold the boundary and hope everything works," Jordan said.

Metro's recommendations were no surprise to development groups, which argue that it could constrict economic growth.

A commercial real estate development association, NAIOP, said Metro's recommendations don't provide an adequate supply of industrial land 50 to 100 acres or larger.

"Quality of life is not good if you don't have a job," said Mike Wells, Oregon NAIOP chapter spokesman.

And while the association supports infill and redevelopment, some employers need to spread out to have room for shipping, storage and material handling. For them, multistory, urban-style development doesn't work.

The group also questions whether it's cheaper to use existing infrastructure in an urban redevelopment site rather than extend utilities to a new development area. Existing infrastructure might require upgrading to handle an industrial plant or denser development, Wells said.

"We respectfully disagree with some of the underlying assumptions" of the Metro report, Wells said. "We embrace the goal of compact development and making wise use of infrastructure, but we challenge some of the assumptions as just not realistic."

Meanwhile, Multnomah, Clackamas and Washington counties -- Metro's planning partners in designating "urban reserves," or land that will be developed during the next 40 to 50 years -- have asked for twice as much acreage than Jordan recommends. Washington County wants to designate 34,000 acres as urban reserve, while Jordan's report recommends a range of 15,700 to 29,100 acres for the entire region.

Jordan's report kicks off a 30-day public comment period that will feature open houses and public hearings. The report also attempts to weave together three major planning decisions that will play out through 2010.

Metro is scheduled to adopt a regional transportation plan in December and will adopt an urban growth report by the end of the year as well. The latter formalizes population and job projections for the next 20 years.

Urban reserves and rural reserves -- areas set aside for farming, forestry and natural areas -- will be designated in the summer of 2010.