

Metro Dealing With The Ins And Outs Of Urban Growth Boundary

URBAN GROWTH BOUNDARY GOVERNMENT

By Rob Manning

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Population forecasts say the greater Portland-Vancouver area will double in the next 50 years. That means not one but two million people will need a place to live.

In Oregon, it's all about the urban growth boundary. Whenever it needs to be expanded because of new people moving in, you can always count on controversy over what's in and what's out.

As Rob Manning reports, Portland's regional government Metro is hoping to disrupt that pattern with a new process to separate the in and the out crowd.

Think of the inside of the urban growth boundary as an exclusive club.

At the door of Club UGB is a bouncer. In the past, that's always been the Metro Council. Club UGB is still going to be managed by the Metro Council, but getting inside is going to go a little differently.

David Bragdon: "You know, we're standing here at the velvet rope at the door of the club. First, I should say, this shouldn't be a popularity contest, it shouldn't be just a matter of who's clamoring the most to come in."

That's Metro bouncer, I mean, Metro President, David Bragdon. He says past decisions have not been based on popularity, or politics. Instead, state law has always required Metro to look very closely at the land in question.

Using the club analogy, Bragdon says it used to be all about that one item printed on your ticket.

David Bragdon: "In the old system, you had to show your ticket, and the only thing on the ticket, was an analysis of the soil type of your property. Well now, you'd be showing a ticket, but it has other things on there. Like, what would it cost the taxpayer to extend water, and sewer, and roads to this area? What are the forms of governance, or transportation that are in that area, in addition to a ticket that says 'I have the right soil type'."

It was a change in state law that allowed Metro's bouncers to look at other factors. And it also created a whole new step in the process. Just because you have a ticket with lots of factors to recommend you – like a good transportation infrastructure, or supportive local governments – that doesn't necessarily mean you're in.

David Bragdon: “Actually, you know, none of you can come into the club yet, but some of you can come into the foyer. Maybe a lot of you can come into the foyer, but only a few of you may eventually get into the club.”

To be more explicit – Metro is not actually expanding the urban growth boundary. Instead it's creating reserves. Properties that have the right kind of ticket, as Bragdon puts it, would be put in a foyer, or an urban reserve. Those would be the first in line to get inside the boundary, or the club, the next time it opens, in 2010.

You know, the club's not right for everyone. Being inside the urban growth boundary means becoming an urban area eventually, and sometimes that doesn't fit.

Welcome to a fruit stand in an area called French Prairie. It's just west of I-5, south of Wilsonville – and south of the Willamette River.

The location near I-5 and the Aurora airport make it ideal for development, over the next few decades. But Ben Williams with Friends of French Prairie says it's even better as farmland.

Ben Williams: “When the settlers arrived, this place was called the Eden at the end of the Oregon Trail for a reason. The reason being the climate, and the soil, that could grow almost anything, easily.”

Williams wants the nurseries and other farms in this part of Clackamas County to be protected. He says allowing Portland's urban area to cross the Willamette river to the south would open the door to sprawl.

Ben Williams: “This kind of row of dominoes – once one of them starts, it's very hard to stop subsequent ones, because you've got a case to refer to, right? And you can always make the argument based on projected growth there is, and how much need there is for this or that or the other thing.”

The amount of urban reserves will be based on population forecasts, and a few other factors. Rural reserves will be based only on what's on the ticket, like soil, economic viability, and the need for protection. Williams is worried that not having a minimum number of acres set aside for rural reserves will mean farmland will get short-changed.

Club UGB may get a little tense in the months to come. The debate will steer land use decisions 50 years into the future. The selection criteria are now more subjective. And, Metro will have to consult with Multnomah, Clackamas, and Washington counties to create the reserves.

Jeff Cogen is the lead commissioner from Multnomah County.

Jeff Cogen: “No one thinks this is going to be easy. It has to be unanimous, about where we’re going to grow in the next 50 years, and what areas we’re going to protect for the next 50 years. We all know there’s a lot of conflicting opinion about that. But it’s really important that we get it right.”

But for all the hoopla over creating the reserves, the boundary may not move much. Metro president David Bragdon says officials have learned a valuable lesson: it costs a lot to build out onto new land, and it’s cheaper to redevelop. That means the managers of Club UGB will probably focus more on what’s already inside, rather than worrying so much about who’s waiting, outside.