

The Oregonian

## Hey, Portland: Try to fit twice the people here

**Metro-area agencies will plan for a long-term growth puzzle**

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If you're worried about our collective carbon footprint, wait for this shoe to drop: By 2060, the seven-county Portland metro area could have 3.85 million people.

That's about the current size of Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas, and double the region's population now.

The population forecast sent a shudder through nearly 200 planners, economists, administrators and elected officials gathered to hear it at a Metro forum May 30. The consensus: Oy.

"What went through my mind is that there are a lot of people coming here," Multnomah County Commissioner Jeff Cogen said, "and I'm frankly really glad that we're trying to plan for it."

The region's response might start with the designation of urban and rural reserves. Metro, in partnership with Multnomah, Clackamas and Washington counties, will decide which areas sprout houses, stores and factories, and which will grow crops for the next 40 to 50 years.

Planners, builders and farmers say those designations could provide long-term stability and remove some of the contentiousness from land-use decisions -- especially expansion of the urban growth boundary and preservation of farmland.

By design, the 2060 population forecast sets the starting point for discussion, because all those people will need homes, food, water, ways to get around and jobs. Not to mention schools, parks and stores.

Something might have to give to accommodate that growth. Farm groups in particular hope it isn't agricultural land.

Despite being the most densely developed area of the state, the three urban counties accounted for 17 percent of Oregon's farm production in 2005. Clackamas County ranks second and Washington County third in farm production, and Multnomah County is 14th among the state's 36 counties.

The Portland area's growth conundrum is serious enough that the 2007 Legislature authorized establishing urban and rural reserves as a way to provide flexibility and stability. But the designations won't come without angst.

Metro, the regional government, will set the urban reserves, which are the areas where the urban growth boundary will be expanded. The counties will establish the rural reserves. The decisions have to be simultaneous and unanimous -- and a host of interest groups will be leaning on county commissioners and Metro councilors.

The first step -- begun by drawing a five-mile radius from the current urban growth boundary -- will be to decide which areas should be studied for reserves. A series of open houses will begin this month to let the public review a draft study area map. The first meeting will be 5 to 8 p.m. June 16 at the Beaverton Resource Center, 12500 S.W. Allen Blvd.

The 2060 projection, which included population and employment forecasts, was based on various potential growth rates for what's called the Portland-Beaverton-Vancouver Primary Metropolitan Statistical Area. It includes Multnomah, Clackamas, Washington, Columbia and Yamhill counties in Oregon, and Clark and Skamania counties in Washington.

Based on birth and death rates, migration trends and past growth, the area could have a 2060 population of 3.2 million to 6.2 million, according to the Metro study. The most likely outcome is 3.85 million, plus or minus 300,000, Metro statistician Dennis Yee said.

For perspective, a population of 3.85 million 50 years from now wouldn't crack today's top five cities in India or the top 10 in China. It's less than New York City's population in 1900.

Still, it's a bunch of people to be accounted for as urban and rural reserves are designated.

"You don't have to be a student of political science to know there's an awful lot of different perspectives coming to the table," said Cogen, the Multnomah County commissioner.

Rob Dixon, an assistant city manager in Hillsboro, said the region should focus on creating communities that are environmentally and economically sustainable rather than worry about preparing for a specific population figure. "The overwhelming driving factor is employment. If the jobs don't come, not too many will show up."

Joe Cortright, a Portland economist, said the projection is just a point on a line, reached by plugging in presumed growth rates across time. Focusing solely on the number, he said, "creates the illusion that there's only one possible future out there."

If the same sort of 50-year regional forecast had been done in 1958, when wood products were king in Oregon and the state's population was about 1.7 million, "what would the discussion have been about, and how accurate would it have been?" Cortright asked.

"If someone had said then that Oregon's only Fortune 500 company would be a shoe company (Nike), they would have sent them to Dammasch (State Hospital), right? We underestimate the possibility of change."

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