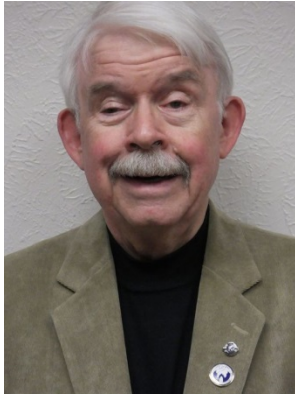


Woodburn councilor: Oregon land-use system needs overhaul

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Peter McCallum is the Woodburn City Council president. (Photo: Special to the Statesman Journal)

Being a 13-year member of Woodburn's City Council, I understand the sense of helplessness that accompanies economic downturns driven by national and global markets. I do not feel the same sense of economic helplessness, but frustration with Oregon's self-imposed and antiquated land-use system.

What does it say about our system that it literally takes years to resolve the most fundamental planning functions and ultimately requires special legislative intervention to garner sensible economic investments? It says that Oregon is really closed for business.

This past year, in light of a negative Court of Appeals ruling, the Oregon Legislature issued Metro's tri-county region a "grand bargain," allowing Washington County to move forward with the addition of employment land. A primary factor for Washington County's economic success has been the availability of developable land. By no means is land the only reason for its success, but without it, Washington County's growth would be stalled.

When Oregon's system failed to produce a favorable decision for Metro, legislators simply did a special end-run.

Now Oregonians need to ask our state leaders: "What about McMinnville, Bend, Newberg and Woodburn? Can Oregon's other cities create jobs for our residents like Washington County?"

Right now, the answer is no. There has been no “grand bargain” for these communities and their efforts to grow.

Woodburn, a community where the average income falls well below the state average, is a case in point. Our expansion was approved – at all levels of local, county and state government – to add about 1,000 acres of developable industrial and residential lands.

The proposed industrial property was located along Interstate 5 and connected to a regional transportation hub. It is adjacent to existing industrial and commercial zones and fully served by utilities. All property owners are willing developers and our effort has broad community support. The city has been attempting to bring this property into our city limits since 1994.

Is there anywhere else in America this development would be in question or delayed so extensively?

Twice the Court of Appeals has halted Woodburn’s effort to add this industrial land to our Urban Growth Boundary with no real decision. The reason is that the law and planning processes are ambiguous. The result is that no new industrial land has been allowed in Woodburn for more than a decade.

Woodburn’s City Council believed a Supreme Court review was necessary because the lower courts have not provided clear direction, leaving too many communities in limbo. Unfortunately, the Oregon Supreme Court declined our case. This system remains broken.

I’m not suggesting that expanding municipal boundaries should be easy. Only that it should be possible without special legislative action or decades running in circles.

This issue is not about the uncontrolled loss of farm land, as some would have you believe. This is about an outdated system that no longer provides balance and deprives our residents from better incomes, stable government services and improved quality of life.

I’m calling on legislators to immediately undertake a comprehensive modernization of our land-use system. Our system was innovative before and it can be innovative again.

Let’s work to create a system that is a true balance between conservation and development. Let’s make a balance that works for our residents.

Peter McCallum has served 13 years on the Woodburn City Council and is the current council president.