

Chapter 10

Case Study: Portland Urban Growth Management

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Over time, American cities have been plagued by urban sprawl and the problems arising therefrom. After World War II, the automobile industry began to flourish, giving rise to a suburban culture characterized by detached houses, cul-de-sacs, scattered land use and car dependence. This has also caused environmental problems such as traffic congestion, hollowing out urban areas, reduced green land, rainwater runoff and air pollution. Although the local governments have tried to cope with the problems brought about by urban sprawl, only a few succeeded due to the tradition of American free markets and the plight of collective actions by the urban and suburban areas.

Growth management is not equivalent to “growth restriction”. On the contrary, it integrates economic, social and ecological goals. At the economic level, it means to build a bustling metropolitan area with a vibrant downtown. At the social level, it means to provide affordable housing and accessible public infrastructure with less social class isolation. At the ecological level, it means natural resource protection, little environmental impact and low carbon emission. Compared with the vicious cycle of urban expansion,

growth management is committed to achieving a multi-dimensional virtuous cycle of sustainable development.

The Portland Metropolitan Region (PMR) in Oregon is one of the few metropolitan areas where urban sprawl is managed. As a medium-sized region, the PMR has made solid achievements in managing urban sprawl and making public transit systems accessible, housing affordable and downtown areas vibrant. What makes the PMR different from other metropolitan regions of Los Angeles, Detroit and other cities in the US? To answer the question, this chapter deals with the development of Portland's urban growth management system from the perspectives of politics, legislations, institutions, as well as the policies and programs developed by such institutions. To figure out how policies have been developed and implemented, we shall gain an insight into the legislatures and enforcement institutions, which are exactly part of what make Portland different from many other cities.

I. Introduction

Portland is a typical American city in many ways. Like most cities on the west coast of the US, Portland thrived in the mid-19th century thanks to trade. Adjoining the Pacific Ocean on its right and along the Willamette Valley on its left surrounded by mountains, Portland had a population of 583,776 (2010). Once an all-white city without racial segregation, Portland has become more accepting of ethnic diversity since the 1980s.

In the early days, Portland's economy relied heavily on agricultural and forestry products. During World War II, as the shipbuilding industry started to boom, people from the east flocked to Portland. The population of Portland increased from 17,000 in 1880 to 373,628 in 1950. After the war, just like most other American cities, Portland was also engulfed in the wave of urban sprawl. In the 1960s, downtown Portland was confronted with the challenges in parking space, public transit systems and retail business.

By the 1960s, the history of Portland had been similar to that of most other American cities. Today, however, this city is different

from other cities both economically and politically. First, Portland is the only city in the US that has retained the city commission government. Constituted of five to seven officials, the city commission is endowed with legislative and executive power. At the beginning of the 20th century, such a form of government was very popular among American cities. While it has been replaced by the mayor-council government in other cities, it was voted through in Portland by a small margin at the beginning and has been retained to this day. Second, Portland was established relatively late. Thus, its industry heritage was weak, but it had more than agriculture and forestry. These differences, driven by the intentions of the city leadership and the opportunities at the time, set the stage for Portland's urban growth management policies.

As urban and environmental crises shot up amid surging political changes in the 1960s, the baby boom generation (the generation after World War II) began to challenge the conservative politicians of the older generation. A few politicians who supported environmentalism began to take power in Oregon, including Portland. In order to revitalize downtown Portland, three "green" political leaders — Neil Goldschmidt, the Mayor of Portland, Tom McCall, the Governor of Oregon and Glen Jackson, the Chair of the Oregon Transportation Commission — proposed the Downtown Plan in 1972 and used the Highway Trust Fund to build light rail. In 1973, Oregon passed the landmark legislation — "Oregon Land Conservation and Development Act". Based on this Act, Oregon's Land Conservation and Development Commission (LCDC) was established to manage the land use of the entire state in accordance with 19 planning objectives. According to the Act, an urban growth boundary (UGB) was set in an attempt to control urban sprawl. Established in 1978 as the result of the expansion of the Metropolitan Service District built in 1970, Metro is the first regional government for the Oregon portion of the Portland metropolitan area. LCDC, UGB and Metro are the three keywords defining the differences of urban growth management between the PMR and other metropolitan regions. Political and policy changes are illustrated in Figure 10.1.

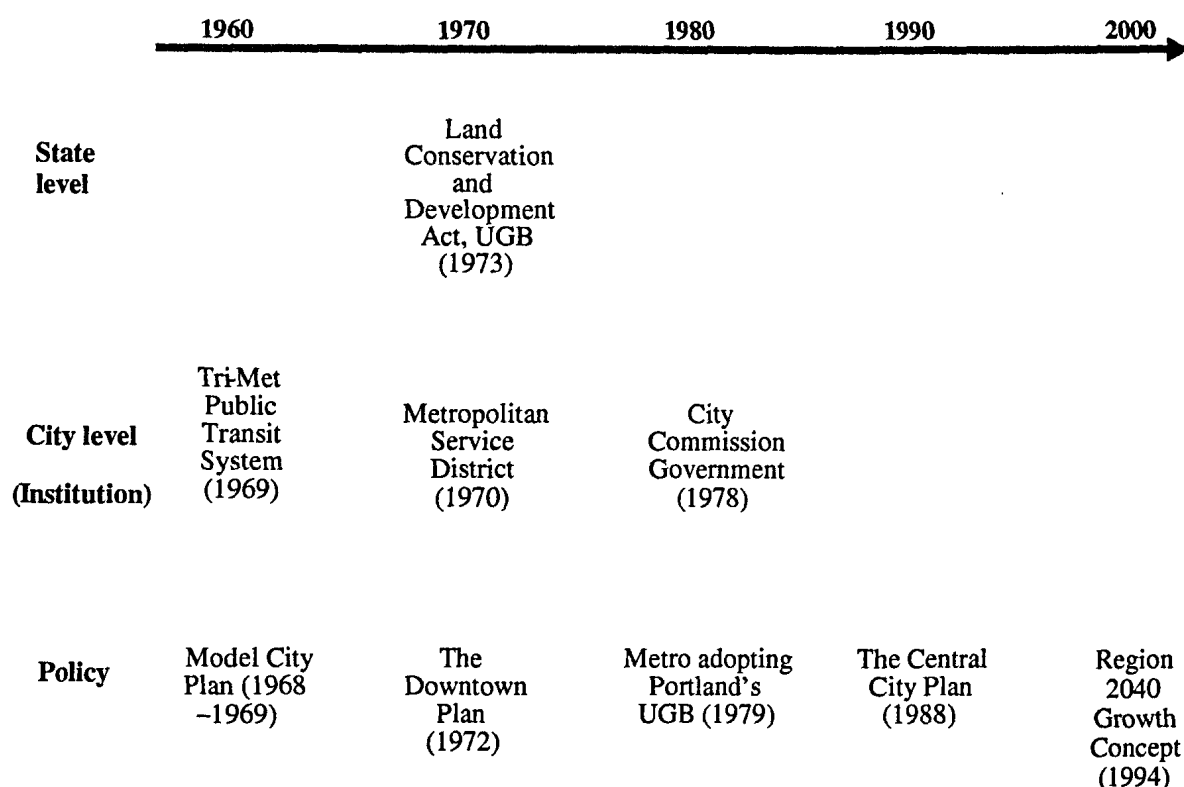


Figure 10.1. Portland's Politics and Policy Changes.

Portland's urban growth management policies were enacted based on the interests of social groups. These interest groups strove for political changes and pushed ahead with new legislation to create new institutions and procedures. To carry out the assigned tasks, these institutions have developed clear policies and projects to define land use in the metropolitan region. Therefore, to answer what makes PMR's urban growth management the way it is today, we need to understand how the management system has been established and the way it functions.

II. Politics, Institutions and Policies

(I) Political process

Covering several cities and autonomous areas, PMR's land policy involves participation at the local, regional and state levels. The land-use plan was first proposed by the state legislature. The interest groups and the political alliances organized by them promoted the state and regional legislation for PMR political management

policies. The alliance between local economic growth promoters and environmentalists is a key feature of the politics of Oregon and PMR. In short, the two main sectors (agriculture and forestry) of the local economy — the urban residents who are concerned about the hollowing out of the city and the business community of the top three largest cities of PMR, along with environmentalists — jointly supported the enactment of the “Land Conservation and Development Act” so as to integrate their interests into the objectives of the whole state.

The smaller towns in the vicinity of PMR’s top three largest cities, suburban developers, advocates for detached house and its ownership, and those who cannot bear the housing price increase within the UGB formed an opposing alliance but much weaker in power. Limited by the UGB, small towns were deprived of the opportunities for large-scale development. Some other organizations may benefit from suburban development, but they were limited in power. Moreover, the alliances supporting the urban growth management tried to reach a consensus with them.

Political alliances are found not only in state legislations but also in institutional policy development. The latter will be discussed in the following.

(II) Institutions

Two institutions play the most important role in the management of PMR’s urban growth. At the state level, the main institution is Oregon’s LCDC. Like the United States Environmental Protection Agency, LCDC was established through legislation. “Oregon’s Land Conservation and Development Act” passed in 1973 gave birth to LCDC and defined its administrative duties. The Act sets out Oregon’s land conservation and development goals and authorizes LCDC to manage land development and to achieve the goals. The 19 goals involve the conservation of forests, farmland and natural resources; sustainable use of land and mobilization of public participation. All counties and cities shall develop land-use plans on the basis of LCDC’s standards. Therefore, LCDC plays an important

interactional role in planning the use of land in the PMR and other places.

At the metropolitan region level, the main institution is Metro — the local government of PMR's part within Oregon. Managed by LCDC, Metro covers Oregon's three core counties in the PMR and is responsible for providing services and plans with regard to land use in the region in accordance with LCDC's standards. With the establishment of LCDC in 1973, Metro was established in a statewide vote in 1978. Metro is responsible for defining the UGB for PMR and implementing land management and planning. Land management involves waste disposal and a number of regional services related to public infrastructure. Metro performs its responsibilities in cooperation with Tri-Met and other public service agencies.

Metro has worked closely with LCDC on land-use planning and policy development. Their collaboration led to the enactment of urban growth management policies that brought drastic changes to PMR's urban development.

(III) Policies

The policies and projects related to the management of PMR's urban growth focus on transportation, central city planning and long-term planning tools.

1. Transportation

The drastic change in transportation policies in 1969 marked the beginning of Portland's urban growth management. Since then, urban growth management has become a major concern. In short, in accordance with PMR's transportation policies, the resources to be used to build highways would be reallocated to build public transit systems, such as light rail and bus transit. Figure 10.2 shows the timetable of PMR's transportation policies. It reveals how changes in politics and institutions have caused changes in transportation policies.

Tri-Met was established in 1969. Funded by the local government, it is the primary provider of public transit services in PMR. Having

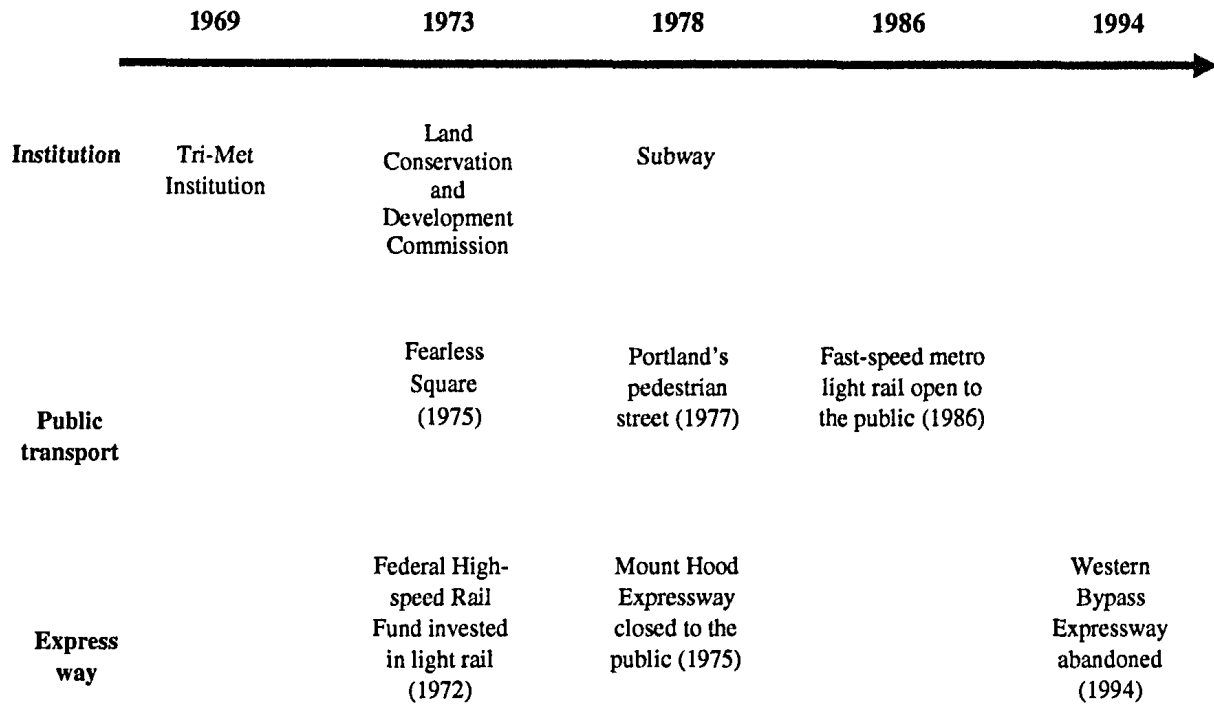


Figure 10.2. PMR's Transport Policy Changes.

taken over a private public transit company in bankruptcy, Tri-Met has renovated the public transit system for better accessibility and has built light rails. It aims to make the public transit system easily accessible in PMR's downtown by increasing parking lots and improving public transit services. As shown in Figure 10.2, Tri-Met has made it more convenient to use public transportation in PMR's downtown by building the "Fearless Square". Bus and light rail within the Fearless Square are provided for free. In addition, built in downtown Portland, the rapid transit system has the capacity to accommodate all buses traveling from the downtown to the main stations in PMR. In 1986, the first MAX light rail was put into use and new lines have been built thereafter.

PMR's transportation policies also deal with road construction. PMR believes that road construction is closely related to the urban sprawl. Therefore, it decided to limit new road projects that might disrupt local communities, natural resources or farmland. Most disputes over road construction occurred at state or interstate level, so PMR's government could not exercise full jurisdiction over such road construction projects. Therefore, it is required that institutional and political measures to be combined. In 1972, three political

leaders who are environmentalist — Neil Goldschmidt, the Mayor of Portland, Tom McCall, the Governor of Oregon and Glen Jackson, the Chair of the Oregon Transportation Commission — made a joint decision to remove multi-lane expressways from Toronto's lake region so as to make space for parks to be built in the area. In addition, in the 1970s, PMR's government suspended the ongoing Mount Hood Expressway project, as it would disrupt many middle- and lower-class residential areas and had triggered fierce opposition among the local residents. In 1994, Oregon's Department of Transportation canceled the Western Bypass highway project. In PMR, resources were channeled from road construction to public transit infrastructure, making public transit system easily accessible in the downtown in a cost-effective manner and with low impact.

2. Downtown planning

The second focus closely related to PMR's urban growth management is the revitalization of PMR's downtown. If the downtown is neither useful nor beautiful in the eyes of the general public, it will not flourish even if the public transit system in the area is well established. Historically, an ideal city must have the infrastructure allowing different groups of people to communicate and exchange goods, services and ideas. A compact, multifunctional city is defined by Jane Jacobs as a vibrant one. Her definition is widely accepted around the world. Portland has embraced the idea that a city shall have multiple functions, a compact downtown and an accessible transport system. The idea has been implemented through strict downtown planning.

The downtown planning of Portland was first proposed by Neil Goldschmidt in the Downtown Plan in 1972 and adjusted in 1988 in accordance with the Central City Plan. The Downtown Plan constituted three parts, i.e. downtown planning, reconstruction of old residential areas and public transport. With regard to downtown planning, the stakeholders involved in the reconstruction of old residential areas are more diverse than those involved in public transport. This has also led to institutional innovation in urban planning, i.e. public participation on mutual voluntary basis and political alliance building.

Public participation and consensus building are nothing new. Few cities, however, were able to engage people in urban planning at that time. If urban planning failed to reach a consensus, numerous negotiations would be required. Public participation in the urban planning of PMR indicated that government influence could be effectively used to build political alliance or reach consensus.

First proposed by Neil Goldschmidt in 1972, the Downtown Plan aimed to maintain the appeal of the central metropolitan region despite the surging up of shopping malls in the suburbs and the impact of surrounding small cities. In addition to attracting people to the metropolitan region, it also satisfied the demands of different communities interested in the region.

The Downtown Plan covered downtown planning, reconstruction of old residential areas and public transport. The public participation mechanism plays a part in each of the three aspects. To increase the appeal of the downtown area, the new design included a waterfront park (rather than a highway project) and a corridor where retailers and office buildings are densely located. With regard to institutions, the Downtown Plan involves a review process for the downtown design in order to ensure public participation.

In accordance with the Downtown Plan, the old residential areas built between the 1880s and 1930s have been reconstructed. The public funds and private capital obtained through favorable policies allowed some old residential areas to be renovated. Reconstruction triggered opposition from local residents because it would cause their living costs to rise. By letting the elected residential committees participate in the negotiation, the government has managed to resolve its disagreement with the residents. Including the “well-behaved” lobbies into the decision-making group is a crucial step towards consensus based on shared interests in tough situations.

3. Long-term urban growth management tools

In addition to transportation reform and central city planning, long-term tools for urban growth management have also been used in PMR, including the UGBs and the Region 2040 Growth Concept which were proposed after the transportation and central city

policies. Both were based on previous policy implementation and have been officialized in the land-use standards.

Three states in the US have UGBs, and Oregon is the first. As a policy tool, UGB aims to control unplanned land use and urban sprawl. Oregon's UGB was first introduced in 1973 in accordance with "Oregon's Land Conservation and Development Act" (LCDC was established based on this Act). To comply with the Act, the Columbia Region Association of Governments, known today as Metro, proposed the concept of the UGB for Portland in 1977. In 1978, Metro adopted the concept of UGB. In 1980, LCDC passed the UGB proposal. Since then, UGB has been expanded by 29,704 acres for additional housing and employment.

In accordance with Oregon's UGB standards, land is divided into four levels based on priority. Only after the land at a higher priority level is fully used can the land at a lower level be included into the UGBs. The four levels are reserved land, non-resource land, marginal land and farmland/woodland. Within the UGB, the burden of proof has been put on the opponents of land development. Outside the UGB, the burden of proof has been put on land developers. These developers are required to explain how to easily provide necessary services for their land and why their land has not been reserved as vacant lot or farmland. The UGB prepared for PMR serves as a land development principle for achieving the 19 urban growth management goals. In other words, UGB itself is not a planning process but an urban growth management tool for PMR development planning. Accordingly, UGB may be expanded in order to achieve new development goals.

To implement the PMR development plan, Metro began to design the "Region 2040" in an attempt to outline a framework for PMR development in the next 50 years. The PMR development framework was drafted in 1992. Not long before that, Metro had just expanded its power. The governments of the three counties and 24 cities/towns within the PMR were obliged to comply with the regulations on the division of regions based on Metro's overall planning. The draft provided four options for the development of PMR, i.e. baseline plan (not subject to LCDC's management or any planning), concept A

(subject to LCDC's management but not to any planning), concept B (strong urbanization) and concept C (urbanization and satellite cities). In 1995, Metro adopted a compromised proposal between concepts B and C. This proposal involves using urban vacant lots to build multi-user dwellings, attached areas and downtown corridors, as well as to expand UGB. According to Region 2040, nearly half of the newcomers can settle in the downtown, corridor areas or on the main streets.

Whether Region 2040 can ensure PMR's sustained growth remains disputable. There are studies supporting both the positive and negative answers to the question. In any case, the consistence between the state goals, the regional development plan and the UGB prepared for specific land use is worthy of attention.

III. Conclusion

Portland is a typical American city that attempts to manage its urban growth. Like other American cities, Portland also faces urban sprawl and the problems arising therefrom, such as traffic congestion, pollution, the shrinking of green space and the hollowing out of the city. PMR attempted to control urban sprawl through a framework interconnecting the decision making at local, metropolitan region and state levels. The successful establishment of such a framework is attributed to legislation, institutional building and the establishment of efficient alliances suitable for the policy instruments. PMR's growth management system is comprehensive and consistent and the product of the system is worth analyzing.

The PMR government has made a choice between the two urban growth patterns. Following the pattern the government has chosen, the city would be developed into a compact, multifunctional one with easily accessible public transit system and multi-user dwellings. However, according to some studies, there is a price to pay for "artificial" compact cities. The rising land price within the UGB makes housing unaffordable to low-income families, thus forcing them to relocate from the downtown. Furthermore, the improvement of public transport has only contributed to a small reduction of the use

of private cars, partly because the public transit system has not been so accessible to the degree that local people opt for it over private cars. In addition, growth management does not necessarily bring growth. Whether growth management will be successful depends on the integration of urban planning and real economy. It is now unclear whether PMR's growth management maintains its current goals and for how long, as the two growth patterns both have successful and unsuccessful cases.

The challenges faced by major cities in the developing world are quite different from those faced by Portland and other American cities. Cities in the developing world have higher density of population, so there is no need to attract people to the downtown areas. Besides, public transport systems are easily accessible. However, they also face increasing challenges in urban planning. For instance, urban planning and the renovation of old residential areas have gradually become normal in major cities of developing countries. The current decision-making process involves the unresolved conflicts of interests among various stakeholders. PMR's public participation mechanism provides valuable insight for making fair decisions with sufficient information. However, there is a lack of consistency between political process, institution building and policy outcomes in many cities of the developing world. Moreover, due to the lack of institutional and political support for urban planning in many cities, the effects of urban planning have fallen short of expectations.

Published by

World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd.

5 Toh Tuck Link, Singapore 596224

USA office: 27 Warren Street, Suite 401-402, Hackensack, NJ 07601

UK office: 57 Shelton Street, Covent Garden, London WC2H 9HE

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Zhao, Zheng, 1979– editor.

Title: Green development of Asia-Pacific cities : building better cities towards 2030 /

edited by: Zheng Zhao (Development Research Center of the State Council, PRC).

Description: New Jersey : World Scientific, 2018. | Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018006458 | ISBN 9789813236813 (hc : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Sustainable urban development--Pacific Area--Case studies. |

Sustainable urban development--Asia--Case studies. | City planning--

Pacific Area--Case studies. | City planning--Asia--Case studies.

Classification: LCC HT243.A78 G74 2018 | DDC 307.1/416095--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018006458>

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

亚太城市绿色发展报告

Originally published in Chinese by China Social Sciences Press.

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<https://www.worldscientific.com/worldscibooks/10.1142/10897#t=suppl>

Desk Editors: Dr. Sree Meenakshi Sajani/Sylvia Koh

Typeset by Stallion Press

Email: enquiries@stallionpress.com