

## PORTLAND: GROUND ZERO IN THE LIVABLE COMMUNITIES DEBATE

U.S. Congressman Earl Blumenauer

*Presented at CNU 2000: The Politics of Place*

Congress  
for the  
New  
Urbanism

**Bio:** Congressman Earl Blumenauer was born, raised, and educated in Portland, Oregon and has been an Oregon elected official for his entire career.

At the age of 23, he served in the Oregon State Legislature, playing a key role in enacting Oregon's landmark land use and transportation planning legislation. He also was elected to the Multnomah County Board of Commissioners and in 1986 was elected Portland's Commissioner of Public Works. As a member of the City Council and County Commission for almost 20 years, he championed programs and policies that led to Portland's acclaim as one of the nation's most livable cities.

Congressman Blumenauer went to Washington in 1996. From his seat on the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, he has focused on making communities and families safer, healthier, and more economically secure. He is a member of the Bike Caucus, which he founded, the Task Force on Livable Communities, which he co-chairs, and the House Sustainable Development Caucus.

**JUNE 16, 2000, 8:30 AM**

Welcome to ground zero in the debate-over the politics of place that ensues around building a livable community. Is this an urban nirvana? Is this instead, as George Will and the Libertarians suggest, a place of bloated bureaucracy and over-regulation, where we are forcing people out of their cars and into expensive crowded housing which they don't like?

The intense politics of place make it hard to tell what the real Portland story is. From the vantage point of an admitted partisan, and a participant in the developments of the last 30 years, I want to offer some perspective.

Portland the Perfect. You're tired of hearing about it, and it's not true. The critics are partially right when they say that congestion is growing, and that we have more regulations than many places.

Some of our suburbs could in fact be Anywhere, USA. We have our share of strip malls and auto-dependent designs, and despite all our efforts to promote alternatives, only 2 percent of our commuters ride bikes and only 6 percent take transit.

Housing costs in Oregon are going up faster than the national average. According to the National Home Builders, we've flirted with having the most unaffordable housing in the country because of our urban growth boundary. Some citizens have finally reached the point where they're turning their back on our vaunted plans.

We also are told that nationally, urbanization is not a problem because we have developed only 6 percent of the United States land area. In fact, we have both surplus farm production and we've actually added agricultural land. Ultimately, our free market friends suggest that economics and preference will simply take care of our problems.

I value the critics of Portland and of the livable communities movement. They force us to defend our programs and our practices, and to look hard at performance indicators. This is an area of tremendous opportunity for people to come together to measure what we're doing.

Most of America is involved with a test of the status quo which isn't free market by any stretch of the imagination. Policies that favor suburbanization, construction of tract houses, the consumption of land, the paving of roads, and the automobile.

People can look to Houston to see how no land zoning impacts livability. Or North Carolina that allowed hog farms to locate without regard to sound land use planning and environmental protection. There are parts of America where we've built right up to the shoreline, and are spending

billions of dollars to replenish beaches, to recontour the coastline, or to fortify the coastline against the onslaught of the powerful ocean tides.

There's prima facie evidence that these other approaches are not adding to the quality of life. Our critics have a double standard. They don't apply the same measures, tests and criticism to auto-dominated communities, when looking at their subsidies, and the problems that those families face.

Our critics have no answers, no path that they suggest where we can continue paving urbanized area at a rate faster than the growth of population. This is not sustainable.

The people who contend that the free market is the solution have no comprehensive approach to develop a vision that's working anywhere in the country.

So, let's put our performance in perspective. Yes, our critics are right, only 2 percent of commuters use bikes, but that's five times the national average, despite having a terrible biking climate.

Despite an increase in Portland's housing cost, when you look at what the average family can purchase, they still are about in the same position they were in 10 years ago. Yet they have more choices and studies show that Portland homeowners are more satisfied with their housing than in other cities, such as Atlanta.

Despite the industry's grossly misleading housing assertion, Portland is not less affordable than Santa Cruz, no matter how you torture the statistics, with \$165,000 average home value versus \$300,000 or more. Portland is actually downgraded by the Homebuilders because we've improved our neighborhoods and no longer have slums and abandoned neighborhoods. It is not as cheap as it used to be, but it is still less expensive to live in Portland than in Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and quite comparable to otherwise desirable communities without urban growth boundaries. It's demand driven, stupid!

The intense politics of place encourage exaggeration. Some of our claims and accomplishments are overblown and we have fallen short of the mark in some areas. The mythic UGB is a prime example. It is not as powerful as it could have been. We placed too much emphasis on simply protecting farm and forest land, rather than creating livable communities.

We drew many of our UGBs too large. As a result of the combination of the oversized boundary and the economic depression shortly thereafter, Portland didn't really have the system tested. It was only in the last 10 years that it really functioned as a boundary.

We didn't capitalize on the initial alignment of our light rail system, MAX. We missed some key redevelopment opportunities such as the Gateway District — a major shopping center surrounded by a sea of parking, making a barrier between light rail and the development. The Gresham community refused to let Max go into their downtown.

In discussions with Portlanders over the past six months, many of the key actors agree about these shortcomings, and in fact are eager to point them out.

Despite all this, I am proud when I look at the evidence of the last 10 years that our system has been in place; the results are stunning. We can show that how the pieces are put together in Portland makes the difference.

Yes, congestion is increasing in Portland, like everywhere else, but it is increasing at a rate that is slower than most places. In fact, according to the Texas Transportation Institute, our relative congestion ranking has dropped from 7th to 12th. We're making dramatic progress in Portland relative to how the rest of America is coping.

Yet, lack of congestion is not necessarily a sign of vitality. The extreme politics of place demands a more nuanced view of congestion. Congestion along roads that people are simply travelling

through, where there's no appeal to stop, is much different than congestion that is a result of people seeking to go to a particular destination, not go through it, as is the case in some of our most exciting neighborhoods.

In the course of the last 10 years our economy has grown even stronger. We've added 225,000 jobs, and within the UGB our population has grown 42 percent. Our air quality has improved dramatically.

Home values have not just increased, but doubled in some inner city core neighborhoods. This is a sign of vitality and renovation. For many low-income Portlanders, the doubling of the home value has increased their wealth dramatically. They may not feel richer, after all they're living in their same home, and paying an extra thousand dollars a year in taxes. But it represents a huge increase in net worth and gives them more choices. As a Portland local official in the 1980s, I remember the trauma in these neighborhoods where people could not sell their homes for even the mortgage balance.

The bottom line is that Portland alone has turned the corner towards sustainability.

Only in the Portland metropolitan area are we urbanizing, paving, at a rate slower than the rate of population increase. And the future appears even more astounding. We have planned for to accommodate a 39 percent increase in population over the next 40 years using one-tenth the amount of land being projected by every other major region of the country. To put in context, places like Kansas City and Minneapolis project similar population increases but will need approximately 100,000 more acres.

Transit usage has increased 143 percent faster than the growth in population, and most critical, it has increased 31 percent faster than the growth in vehicle miles traveled since 1990. For seven consecutive years, every month has shown an increase in transit ridership over the previous year. No other region can make that claim.

The third point is that we've been saving agricultural land next to the metropolitan region. This is critical because the majority of the nation's farmland is immediately adjacent to the urban centers.

Yes, America has added some farm land acreage in recent years, by filling wetlands and irrigating the desert. The evidence suggests, both in terms of water supply and environmental regulation, as well as common sense, that this is not sustainable. We are not going to be irrigating more deserts. We are not going to continue to fill in wetlands.

Our agricultural resources are fragile. Fifty years ago, Los Angeles was the number one agricultural county in the United States, only to have its industry decimated through suburban sprawl. If the current trend continues, over the next 40 years the Central Valley in California, which includes Fresno County whose agricultural production is greater than 24 states combined, has the potential of losing 1 million acres and \$49 billion worth of product.

In Oregon, we have turned that corner. From the top of a tall building in downtown Portland, you can see Sauvie's Island, prime farmland, a 10-minute drive to downtown Portland, flat and buildable. There is virtually the same amount of land in agriculture production now as 25 years ago, which but for our land use planning laws, would have all been lost.

Hood River County, parts of which are less than an hour's commute to Portland along some of the most spectacular scenery in the country, has seen a 10 percent increase in orchard acreage in less than 20 years. But for the land use planning system, it would be subdivided and a gorgeous bedroom country for Portland.

Yamhill County in the southwest quadrant of the region, prior to the land use planning system, had zoned its hill sides for residential development. These same hillsides now support a growing, thriving vineyard and wine industry, to say nothing of the tourist-related activity.

Finally, in Washington County next to Portland, despite the addition of 40,000 people between 1982 and 1992, annual farm income increased 57 percent. At the same time, neighboring Clark County in Washington state, lost 6,000 acres and farm incomes rose only 2 percent per year. Metropolitan Portland is the largest agricultural producing metropolitan area in Oregon.

Each of the elements is unique. Nowhere in the United States can any community claim even close to these three achievements in the last 25 years:

- A) increasing transit ridership faster than vehicle miles traveled;
- B) reducing the land consumption rate below the rate of increase in population; and,
- C) preserving and enhancing agricultural production.

Why have we been successful? First and foremost, we've established a context of comprehensive statewide planning which has enabled everyone throughout the state to play by the same rules, rather than being at a competitive disadvantage to neighboring jurisdictions.

Lacking natural boundaries like San Francisco, Seattle, Vancouver, B.C., Boston and Manhattan, we have provided definition through a political and legal framework. It has focused development and helped promote the 24-hour community.

We have been successful by engaging our citizens and building a citizen infrastructure. Strong public support withstood three efforts by special interests to repeal our statewide land use planning process.

- A) Over 20,000 citizens participated in the latest 2040 planning effort.
- B) There are currently over 500 very active and engaged citizens in the region. Huge energy has been invested in taking the tens of thousands of aware and nominally involved citizens and raising their level of sophistication, their expertise, and their engagement.
- C) A critical component of sustaining the citizen infrastructure is the involvement of over a hundred key elected and appointed governmental leaders. Even those who are not necessarily supportive would be in the top 10 percent of elected officials nationally, based on my informal poll of the over 50 communities I've visited.
- D) We have had an understanding and sympathetic media - reporters who take the time to develop a story and understand the context.
- E) A cadre of sophisticated business leaders who "get it." This is not just a strong presence downtown. In outlying districts from Gresham to Hillsboro, there is growing awareness on the part of the business community, that their success is tied to the livability of a community.

The combination of business, press, elected leaders, citizen activists, and a very large number of citizen observers and participants, has made a huge difference. It also helps equip critics, including some who think we aren't going far enough, fast enough, or that we are in fact promoting growth.

Perhaps most importantly, we've learned from the mistakes acknowledged earlier, They have permitted us to actually make progress.

- A) The urban growth boundary was too big and we did not focus on the development of livable communities. Yet this situation allowed us to grow into the boundary while we developed the citizen base, the tools and the momentum.
- B) We see the same thing in terms of the evolution of light rail. We had some suboptimal development with our first rail project, but the 14 years of history has caught up with us and we've seen more development along the alignment. Gresham, which wouldn't let Max come to its downtown, has redefined its downtown towards Max with a 3-story city hall and an adjacent district that is becoming a more livable community. The west side Max is even better. There are already 7,000 housing units along the alignment and the number is growing. The West Side Project led to a complete redefinition of downtown Hillsboro.
- C) In the Gateway District, where we've been timid in the past, there is an emerging public/

private partnership that has huge potential. Located between two Max stations, with close connection to the airport, two interstate freeways, and nine bus lanes, it's captured the imagination of local citizens, and a plan is coming together. The Lloyd District has embraced new design guidelines, more housing, a transportation management district, paid parking, soon to be an extension of Fareless Square that is allowing this to blossom. We've learned how to capture the value generated by public investments. We have two rail projects currently under construction that will open next year. Both are funded in part by the increase in values these project themselves generate. Light rail to the airport is being built in partnership with Bechtel, and will have a huge impact on developable land in the vicinity of the airport, as well as on airport access.

The Central City Streetcar Project, connecting the booming northwest section of town to the campus of Portland State University through west downtown, is already having a dramatic revitalizing impact.

Lessons Learned What are the lessons for others? I would suggest 5 elements for any community that is interested in enhancing its livability.

- 1 Establish a framework. We chose a legal and political one, lacking a good geographic boundary. The process of creating this framework built the political coalition that made our growth and development possible.
- 2 In part, our success was the creation of a common vision and the work to nurture it. We celebrate our successes (perhaps too much for some people's taste) and learn from the defeats — not letting the critics provide the definition for either success or failure, but use our own words.

Do not fear small steps and simple programs. Livability makes the most sense to people when they can see how it affects their daily lives, when they can see progress and help participate in it.

- 3 Harness the collective acts of private individuals and business by making it easy to do “the right thing”. By setting standards then providing incentives and assistance for meeting them, we can create a framework where local jurisdictions, businesses and citizens win by making more sustainable investments.
- 4 Encourage and nurture the citizen infrastructure. Participation of people in your community is not an item on a list merely to be checked. It can and often does make a difference between success and failure. An informed and engaged citizenry is critical to success, not just smoothing potential political or public relations problems, which often springs to mind, there is a real benefit to this approach. Enlightened citizen participation in the process will test the assumptions and the solutions. Citizens add value, as well as legitimacy. It is important to have a comprehensive strategy of how to empower them.
- 5 Finally, government should lead by example. State and local governments, and I would add especially the federal government, should be willing to follow the same standards and programs they expect of the rest of America. The government, at the state and local level, can help set the tone and pressure the federal government, and inspire the private sector, by holding itself to the same high standards of process, protection and participation, of quality design and environmental leadership.

## **CONCLUSION**

Not perfect, it certainly is threatened. We may be the only metropolitan area that is on the path to sustainability. Our progress, while befuddling our critics and inspiring inaccurate and negative responses, is nonetheless documented and clear.

When you do this livability work, places become political, especially if you are able to show progress. To understand the politics of place requires a nuanced analysis. There is a danger of making distinctions and judgements that are too sharp and too political. Americans tend to have unrealistic, and often conflicting views and goals, particularly as it relates to our expectations of

timing to achieve results.

The problems of failure like those we faced 30 years ago as Portland began to build its framework for livability are easier to understand and simpler to attack. Progress can be both understood and seen.

The problems of success are more difficult on every count: to understand, to fashion solutions, to measure the progress. For example, the Texas Transportation Institute tells us that we moved from the 7th to 12th most congested area - which is a very real accomplishment - yet, difficult to explain to anyone outside of a CNU or transportation conference. Or consider the revitalization of neighborhoods. Getting rid of slums and upgrading homes quickly morphs into gentrification.

This is our challenge — how to deal with the implications of the politics of livable communities. In so doing, it is important to remember that creating a livable community is a journey, not a destination. Ending congestion or stopping pollution is not an end to itself. Portland is not “there” yet, but is as well positioned as any city in the country to take the ride.