

Learning the lessons from Portland

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=862#more-862>

Portland, Oregon has long been held up as a classic example of New Urbanism, but according to a study done by the Heritage Foundation, it is not all that it seems.

The Heritage Foundation published a book with a series of studies regarding New Urbanism entitled *A Guide to Smart Growth – Shattering Myths, Providing Solutions* in 2000.

This book was sent to me by former Congressman Earnest Istook, who recommended it as a valid source even though it is eight years old. As I read the chapter on Portland, written by John A. Charles, it contained much of the same information as one done by the CATO Institute more recently.

The chapter begins, “For more than decades, officials in Portland, Oregon, have been implementing a growth management agenda that is specifically designed to shape patterns of land use. Although the “urban growth boundary” (UGB) around the metropolitan area is the best-known feature of Portland’s approach, its agenda also includes creating strong regional government, emphasizing government-built light rail rather than highways, and funding programs that contain urbanization by increasing population density in the metropolitan area.”

“Smart Growth advocates frequently cite Portland as a model of what all communities should be doing to control sprawl. They claim its style of growth management offers many potential benefits: It will protect rural farm and forest land from development, reduce the costs of development by encouraging more efficient use of urban infrastructure, and reduce traffic congestion through mass transit serving higher population densities. Moreover, this approach will provide affordable housing while preserving open space and scenic vistas.”

“Notwithstanding their praise, Portland’s 20-year commitment to smart growth has failed to achieve most of the predictions. Its approach has been ineffective in limiting suburban development, and it actually has intensified several of the city’s most troubling problems, such as traffic congestion and a lack of affordable housing.”

The rest of Charles’ chapter, “Lessons from the Portland Experience,” contains statistics and anecdotal evidence backing up his conclusion that Portland’s smart growth policies have not lived up to its promises.

Charles asserts that Portland’s smart growth policies turned it into a “political battleground that pits one community against another, (and) empowers well-heeled developers and affluent homeowners.”

He cites a study done by outside consultants to determine if the urban growth boundary concept had allowed Portland and several other Oregon cities to achieve their density goals. The study concluded that, “land inside the boundaries had been developed at densities below zoning

specifications, while land outside the boundaries had been developed at densities higher than the zoning specified.”

In other words, the outcome was the opposite of what they were trying to achieve. This conclusion makes sense because higher land costs will cause development to move where there is less regulation.

Regarding farmland protection, Charles’ study found that prime farmland was developed, but less productive farmland was not. He said, “farmland protection, per se, is not really the goal; the real agenda is simply “urban containment,” and calling it farmland protection just happens to be a politically useful strategy.”

Reduction of infrastructure costs had also not been accomplished. This is because higher density construction is inherently more expensive to build. High-density construction had been encouraged in, for example, the Pearl District, which is heavily subsidized by taxpayers due to the development of the light rail system that serves that area.

Charles asserts that because Portland’s planners don’t really know where to establish the UGB because of lack of information, UGB’s typically became political boundaries that, once established, were fiercely defended by homeowners to prevent the movement of the UGB’s. That is because of the impact that the establishment of urban growth boundaries have on property values (read my article from last week).

Charles’ study also confirms what I wrote last week, that is that urban growth boundaries increase property values to the point that housing becomes unaffordable, just the opposite of the smart growth goal of creating affordable housing.

Nor was Portland’s traffic congestion problem solved by its smart-growth policies of mass transit and highway planning. More on that next week.

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Randy W. Bright, AIA, NCARB, is an architect who specializes in church and church-related projects. You may contact him at 918-664-7957, rwbrightchurcharch@sbcglobal.net or www.churcharchitect.net.

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