LandWatch

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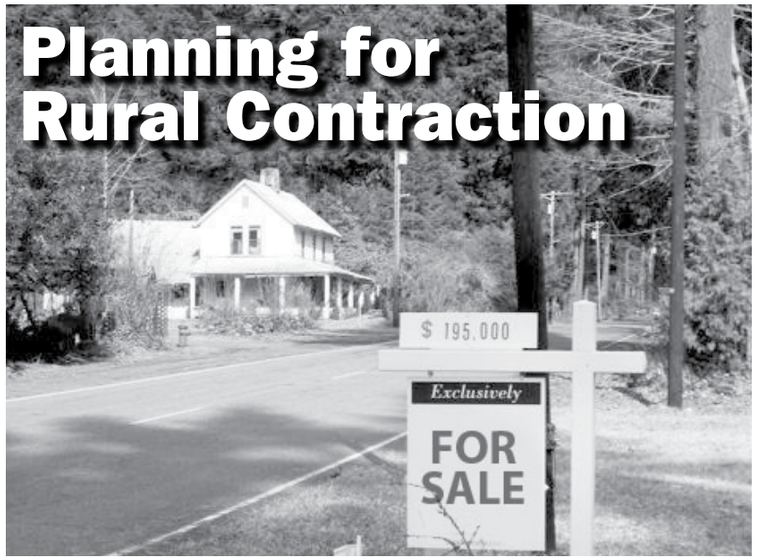

Planning for Rural Contraction

As we look to Oregon's and the nation's future, we see that sustainability, rather than growth, is not only desirable but also imperative.

Our current planning laws and programs, however, are premised on managing and sustaining growth. They presume growth will happen and seek to make it "orderly" and adequately supported with the necessary infrastructure. Moreover, growth is seen as economic development. Governments and legal structures actually encourage, attract, and require the accommodation of growth, believing that it is desirable and necessary for the success of a community.

The benefits and problems of urban growth are different than the issues that face rural areas, but our land use laws treat rural areas only as leftover "not urban" areas that are the places not yet developed. There is no requirement for rural areas to plan for their future as rural areas.

Rural communities have never experienced sustained or sustainable growth as rural communities. Whether based on local wildlife and seafood, timber, minerals, energy-generating deposits (i.e., natural gas and coal), or agricultural products, rural communities have long been tied to the boom-and-bust cycles inherent in a finite resource base and scarce natural amenities such as water and topsoil. As Michael De Alessi writes in a recent essay ("The Rural West: Jovial No More?" from *Visualizing the Rural West*), rural communities have long been declining, despite our best efforts.

President Teddy Roosevelt created the Country Life Commission in 1908, with the charge of eliminating barriers to a rural lifestyle. But rural populations have continued to decline as the marginal economic returns, combined with numerous other factors, cannot be overcome. Whereas in 1900 nearly 40 percent of the American workforce was in agricultural production, today that number is less than two percent.

In attempting to maintain their existence and viability, rural communities have pursued urban-type economic development or tried to somehow tie their communities to nearby urban enterprises (for example, as bedroom communities for commuters). But these strategies have failed and will

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At the beginning of January every year the Lane County Board of Commissioners delivers a public State of the County address, What this amounts to, by and large, is a plethora of platitudes about the county's economy—never enough—and its budget—increasingly less. Rarely is anything more than lip service paid to the state of the county's environment.

In this Just-spring issue, we've gathered some of Lane County's hard-working, uncompromising land use activists, and EWEB's drinking water specialist, to assess the state of the county's forest, watershed, transportation and local food systems for a more astute diagnosis of the health and safety of our county's environment and economy and its implications for the future.

Even in 1807 the poet Wordsworth worried that " the world is too much with us" and that " getting and spending we lay waste our powers; little we see in nature that is ours." What he meant is that by destroying our essential connection with nature we've lost touch with our own. In another sense, though, over 200 years later we can confidently say that little we see in nature isn't ours. Indeed, since those lines were written, the natural world that had so inspired the poet has been laid waste—in England, in America, in Lane County— in ways that he could scarcely imagine. Degradation of nature and moral corruption are co-dependents in a county, nation and world heading toward collapse.

Therefore, as Wendell Berry contends, each and every almost 7 billion of us has " an obligation to leave (the natural world) better than we found it, by undoing some of the effects of our meddling and restoring its old initiatives—by making our absence the model of our presence".

A serious business that. And so perhaps we'd do well to heed Edward Abbey's advice to get out and enjoy, up close and personally, the landscapes we're seeking to protect.

Robert Emmons, President
LandWatch Lane County

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continue to fail because they are based on the false belief that rural communities can "grow" out of immutable and inherent limitations.

In Lane County, for example, the town of Veneta, a rural bedroom community about 15 miles west of Eugene, has discovered that, in order to provide urban water service to new residential development deemed essential for the continued growth of Veneta, the systems development charges and water rate increases necessary to finance the new water supplies would so increase the cost of new development as to effectively curtail the new development that requires the water. This Catch-22 situation is inherent in the economic development plans of all Oregon's rural communities.

Politicians call for more of the same old business as usual that has never proved effective or sustainable. More of the same means that the populations of rural communities will stagnate or even further decline. Our planning program, which assumes continued expansion and cannot even imagine stagnation or contraction, will only ensure that the inevitable decline is more painful and chaotic than it needs to be.

Thus, the problem we face is how our state can address the real needs of rural communities and plan for an orderly contraction of the rural areas, while we are saddled with outdated and ineffective land use planning laws and programs based on the impossible premise of sustained growth.

Defining a vision is the first step in finding a solution. Essentially, a sustainable rural community is expected to provide two primary functions for society: (1) local food production and (2) open space and wildlife habitat. Let's look at the viability of each in turn.

Local food production: As transportation costs increase and consumer preferences force shifts to more local food economies, scattered rural food producers will become increasingly viable, especially if supported with strong rural infrastructure and if protected from competing short-term market forces (i.e., development pressure).

Open space and wildlife habitat: Global climate change is already causing changes in natural landscapes. For example, warmer, drier climatic conditions result in more insect infestations and other stresses on forests, increasing the impact of wildfires. Wildlife populations shift as their habitat changes. We will need to ramp up our capacity to preserve, and even restore, our natural areas. In addition, intact forest landscapes will ameliorate global warming effects by sequestering carbon out of the atmosphere. Further, undeveloped natural areas provide cleaner water and air, which directly benefits human health.

But how will we pay for this, given that decreasing populations in rural communities will not be able to finance these two functions with merely their own taxing abilities?

If rural communities of the future will be required to fulfill the role of providing food and ecosystems services, it must be acknowledged that the benefits accrue primarily to urban dwellers and urban industries. Therefore the costs of providing these essential services should not be borne wholly or even primarily by the rural communities.

Regional cost-sharing or tax-sharing schemes must be developed so that rural communities receive what amounts to conservation easement payments that incentivize leaving land unavailable for urban-type development. Something like a large "local food district" that overlays both the urban (consumer) areas and the nearby rural (producer) areas could be implemented. Market-based cost shifting, such as mitigation banks for wetlands preservation and restoration financed by payments from urban development, and systems development charges and utility surcharges (i.e., stormwater fees devoted to riparian preservation and enhancement zones, or water surcharges devoted to forest preservation and restoration activities in the watershed) might all prove to be part of the solution.

However, urban dwellers, who are used to getting the benefits of rural lands for free, will likely balk at having to pay for rural land to be left for food production and open space. This will also cause some political strife, as conservative rural legislators are put in the position of having to advocate for higher taxes, additional layers of regional government, and fairer distribution of tax revenues.

It won't be pretty. The case must be made, however, that there really are no other viable options. The status quo is not working, and more of the status quo will not make it work any better. The chaos of unplanned rural contraction will not be any less chaotic if we ignore its reality.

Jan Wilson, attorney
Western Environmental Law Center

Overcutting and Pollution of County Watersheds

Clearcutting and landslides lead to stream siltation and toxicity

Years of sampling by Eugene Water and Electric Board (EWEB) has revealed increasing levels of toxicity in the McKenzie River, Eugene's municipal water source. These include herbicides and pesticides, pharmaceuticals, heavy metals and dangerous bacteria that are entering the river from failed septic systems and from poor vegetation and pest management by local residents living in floodplains and riparian buffers. However, over 90% of the land in the McKenzie drainage is owned by logging companies or is public land administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and United States Forest Service (USFS).

Each year in the McKenzie watershed thousands of acres of industrial forestlands are clear-cut by private logging companies. When they're finished with the removal of their monoculture crops, the "waste" is burned and the units sprayed with herbicides to kill nutrient-competitive species. Then they are replanted with "genetically improved" seedlings to start the cycle all over again. Weyerhaeuser, and likely other companies as well, have been cloning trees for years. The soils on these lands are poisoned, landslide-prone and infertile due to the lack of organic matter from logging and the removal of biomass. Each year soils slide and the river runs brown with the silt, herbicides and rotting debris left over from the profit-driven devastation ordained by Oregon's Forest Practices Act.

Publicly owned assets also are being liquidated. The USFS promotes huge projects, cynically labeled "restoration" or "fuels reduction", that are not supported by sound, peer-reviewed science but are still heavily subsidized by the taxpayer. For example, the Horse Creek Project, now in preparation, encompasses over 50,000 acres in the project area and includes a lot of heavy commercial thinning by the creek and the boundary of the Three Sisters Wilderness Area.

While EWEB and the Lane County Board of Commissioners sought minimum drinking water protections for waterways impacted by small parcel owners, they ignored a logging industry that continues to scalp both the public forests and their vast private tracts and every year exports billions of board feet of trees as pellets, chips, pulp, cants, merches and raw logs overseas-- along with ever more local jobs. Money from these sales is often deposited offshore, avoiding the millions in taxes that would help support education and other facets of the county's economy and services. Industrial logging used to pay a 6.5% severance tax on the trees it cut, until former and current Governor Kitzhaber signed a law to eliminate it. Governor Kitzhaber is now one of the state's strongest supporters of increased logging for toxic biomass incinerators.

Notwithstanding self-evident environmental fallout, federal agencies still regard their chief mandate as "getting the cut out", their quotas based on "industry needs" rather than sound science. Over 95% of our native forests in this country and in this state have already been logged. The 5% that remains must be retained to help protect our water, soil and air and stabilize our climate.

Clearly, sharply curtailing industrial logging and the taxpayer-subsidized theft of our commonwealth would be the most effective way to curb the millions of tons of silt, and the vast use of herbicides degrading our watersheds. Milling all the logs from our forests locally would create and keep jobs at home rather than sending them overseas. Taxing industries that make billions from local lands would go a long way toward rescuing our failing school systems.

These commonsense solutions should begin with a makeover of the Forest Practices Act. But for that to occur requires a change in public perception and predilection sufficient to move the governor and legislature to break up the closed system perpetuated by a majority of industry-biased members of the State Forestry Board.

While an effort has been made to correct Lane County's longstanding policy and practice of permitting housing in floodplains and riparian areas, the most egregious invaders continue to pillage the county's watersheds with taxpayer-subsidized impunity.

Bill Barton and Tim Hermach
Native Forest Council

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Biomass plant such as the Seneca facility under construction in Northwest Eugene

Land Conservation and Biomass in Western Oregon Mutually Exclusive

Land conservation advocates and environmental protection proponents must work together proactively to solve current and future energy needs. Our chief concern must be how to conserve energy so that we don't need to generate as much of it. The next goal should be to champion non-extractive methods to meet our energy needs.

Forest biomass is the newly professed darling of renewable energy. Though heralded as a carbon-neutral and sustainable energy source, the practice of extracting trees and organic forest materials to burn in a boiler does nothing to address resource conservation or to end intensive resource extraction.

The history of fossil fuel extraction and combustion has left an unmanageable legacy of natural resource and wildlife destruction, acres of contaminated soils and beaches, polluted air, undrinkable water, and a global warming crisis. The extraction and combustion of our forests to "supply energy demands" is on the same trajectory.

Burning trees, or parts of trees, to generate energy has an immediate impact of increasing carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. The term "immediate" is critical, because when a tree is burned all carbon that was sequestered in that tree is instantly released. It will take perhaps 80 to 100 years to sequester that same amount of carbon when a new tree is planted and grows in place of the one that was burned up in a matter of minutes. A replanted forest cannot re-absorb the equivalent carbon that is released at the point of incineration. Furthermore, the equation will never be balanced under Oregon's Forest Practices Act, which incentivizes a succession of tree plantations harvested in short growth rotations.

In the short term, burning trees for fuel emits more carbon pollution than other extractive energy sources. All available data, from industry and science sources, shows biomass incineration emits more climate-busting carbon dioxide per unit of energy than coal, oil and natural gas.

And yet, despite the scientific findings, the EPA has been forced to back away from regulating carbon emissions from biomass smokestacks. Instead, bowing to intense political pressure from the timber industry, the EPA has awarded the industry a three-year exemption from the carbon regulation rules.

Ignoring the near- term consequences of increasing greenhouse gases from biomass burning may send us too far past the tipping point of climate

catastrophe. Yet Governor Kitzhaber has chosen to take advantage of the EPA concession to big timber by fully supporting biomass incineration.

Smokestack emissions from biomass plants not only add more carbon for every unit of energy they produce, they are also major sources of harmful air pollutants. Even with pollution controls such as scrubbers, ostensibly clean biomass incineration emits industrial scale levels of air toxics. These toxicants, from dioxin to particulate matter, are culprits in diseases such as asthma, heart disease and cancer. Medical research proves unequivocally that breathing chronic levels of these pollutants shortens lives.

Also touted as a renewable energy source, biomass just doesn't measure up. In a letter to President Obama and members of Congress, a consortium of environmental advocacy and science organizations presented evidence that burning wood for electricity is wasteful and inefficient. Biomass incinerators are about 25% efficient; i.e., for every 100 trees burned, only 25 are converted into energy. Lack of efficiency has profound impacts on land use: The timber industry refuses to guarantee that they will not log whole trees to meet the insatiable hunger of a biomass incinerator boiler. This is troublesome, particularly if they are required to meet energy supply contracts.

For example, a moderately scaled biomass facility, such as the Seneca biomass plant now under construction in Northwest Eugene, requires 180,000 tons of dry wood per year to produce 18 megawatts of energy. At that rate, Seneca will need to put more pressure on small, private forest landowners in Lane County to supply this tonnage, year after year.

The consequences to our local forests have already begun. We are witnessing intensified logging in the McKenzie and Siuslaw watersheds, to the detriment of water quality and wildlife protections. Logging on small parcels in the suburban interface zones also has the potential to transform resource land into rural residential land. For example, local timber companies in Lane County are buying up small F-1 and F-2 parcels, clear-cutting the timber, and then attempting to resell the land as potential home sites. Additionally, small, private land owners, who, after consenting to have their diverse forest ecosystems logged, are subsequently pressured to replant with a single species of fir tree and to use pesticides to rid the land of hardwoods.

Promoting such mono-culture management strategies may be accelerated to the point that natural habitat no longer exists. Equally worrisome, logging practices typical in West Lane County deplete soils of the decomposing organisms that create the nurturing and de-toxifying functions of healthy forest duff.

Today's rush to burn forest resources for energy follows the model of fossil fuel extraction and combustion, eclipsing precautionary approaches that address the real threat of climate change and rapacious land uses. Will we realize too late the need to reverse the impacts of extraction and conserve what is left of Oregon's forests?

Lisa Arkin, Executive Director
Oregon Toxics Alliance

Likely fuel grown for biomass burner

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Karl Morgenstern Interview

Karl is the drinking water source protection coordinator for the Eugene Water & Electric Board (EWEB). Prior to EWEB, Karl spent ten years at the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) and seven years as an environmental consultant managing high priority cleanups at abandoned hazardous waste sites and responding to hazardous material spills. He received a bachelor's degree in geography from the University of Kansas.

Karl is on the Board of Directors of the East Lane Forest Protection Association; serves as President on the Board of Directors for Cascade Pacific Resource Conservation & Development; is President of the Oregon Association of Resource Conservation & Development Councils; and, is a Director with the Upper Willamette Soil & Water Conservation District. He enjoys spending his free time with family and friends hiking, camping, sailing, skiing, traveling and gardening.

LW: *How long have you worked with EWEB, and what is the scope of your work?*

KM: Ten years. My job is to develop a program that protects the McKenzie River as EWEB's sole source of drinking water. This includes being able to measure the effects from human activities in the watershed, such as urban runoff, septic systems, agriculture, forestry, hazardous materials use/spills, roadside herbicide spray and commercial/industrial development, against watershed health over time and implement actions that maintain a healthy balance for providing exceptional water quality.

LW: *With a county-appointed task force, you were instrumental last year in proposing new floodplain and drinking water protection ordinances to protect Eugene's drinking water source, the McKenzie River, that would be applicable to other rivers and their watersheds as well. What conditions and studies led to those proposals?*

KM: The two main projects that informed this proposal were EWEB's Septic System Assistance Program, and the U of O study of development patterns and Lane County's land use code and how this code is implemented. The septics project focused on clusters of septics (higher density areas) in gravelly soils near the river, or about 800 systems in eight cluster areas along the river. In these areas we conducted water quality monitoring for bacteria, nutrients and metals in surface water and shallow groundwater up and downstream of the clusters. Results indicated a pattern of increasing levels of bacteria and nutrients downstream/downgradient of some clusters. In addition, we offered homeowners in these areas free septic inspections and pump-outs (if needed). We inspected about 430 systems and found 55 failing.

The U of O study analyzed county code to better understand how development occurs in the watershed, especially along riparian areas, in floodways and floodplains, and the siting of septic systems and storage and use of hazardous materials. Findings indicate development trends that are resulting in an increase in smaller lot sizes (37% are less than one acre), with homes permitted within 50 feet of the river and in floodways. It was apparent that

county regulations do not adequately prevent development in these sensitive and critical areas, which leads to use and storage of pesticides and hazardous chemicals in close proximity to the river and in places prone to flooding, as well as to a higher density of septic systems close to the river. This pattern was a concern over time for increased water quality impacts. We also relied on reports and studies from other areas in the Northwest and across the country to help us understand how these trends may lead to increases in water quality pollution that could impact Eugene's water supply over time.

LW: *Conceding to an unruly mob, the Lane County Board of Commissioners canceled a public hearing on the ordinances last fall and decided not to reschedule. This foreclosed the public's opportunity to learn the results of EWEB's testing, to clear up rife misinformation and disinformation about the ordinances, and to explain the rationale behind the proposals generated by the county's appointed task force. Given the anti-regulation, anti-government tenor of the opposition, do you think that public involvement beyond that represented by the watershed groups and the public hearing process would or could have resulted in any meaningful, effective regulatory protections for drinking water or wildlife?*

KM: Yes. I think if a conversation with affected public and stakeholders had happened it could have resulted in some meaningful regulations being drafted and voluntary actions implemented--with the understanding that if these voluntary efforts fail to protect water quality then future regulations would be pursued.

LW: *Scientific studies have shown that 200ft, or one tree length, is the minimum inviolable buffer necessary to protect riparian areas and the waters that run through them. However, depending on zoning, the present ordinance is 50 or 100ft along fish-bearing streams. Twenty-five percent of the vegetation within existing setbacks may be removed. And Lane County's Land Management Division routinely grants variances or exceptions for additions or entire structures within the setback. To protect dwellings sited too close to the river, revetments have been constructed, both legally and illegally, that alter river hydraulics and create erosion on properties downstream.*

Such practices have resulted in water runoff toxic to fish and to drinking water; in invasive, non-native vegetation; and in the removal of vegetation serving as filters and as thermostats to control water temperature critical to aquatic species.

Unfortunately, property owners, fomented by the anti-government private property rights organizations, Oregonians in Action and the Oregon chapter of Americans For Prosperity, founded on the east coast by an oil billionaire, have rigidly opposed any change in the existing regulations, positing their "stewardship" as an antidote instead.

EWEB has been meeting with representative property owners along the McKenzie in part, we presume, to determine how unregulated stewardship might be defined. Is the utility entering these negotiations with a minimum setback and conditions within it that it is willing to defend? Given EWEB's understanding of the needs of the river, not to speak of its customers downstream, what besides acceding to legislation by private property rights does EWEB expect from these meetings? In other words, will EWEB repair a few septics and walk away from the issue?

KM: My program strives to understand the various threats to water quality in the McKenzie, develop partnerships with all parties involved in an issue, collect data to establish baseline conditions and understand the magnitude of existing conditions, then craft a variety of actions to mitigate for threats over time. By pushing multiple actions we are open to pursuing opportunities when the time is right. The County ordinances were one path we were engaged in since 2007, which led to the County expressing a desire to move forward on these ordinances in 2010, an opportunity we pursued. Obviously, the process did not lend itself to success, but the learning from and increased awareness of this issue has allowed other efforts we have been pushing to now gain traction.

Conversations with upriver residents have begun, with more planned over the next few months. We are finding homeowners receptive to listening and asking good questions. They've committed to being vigilant in repairs or replacement of failing systems, and to pursuing a voluntary incentive program to protect and restore riparian forests. We have been working with OSU on the latter project to create a funding mechanism that makes annual payments to landowners that have healthy riparian areas in return for the landowner signing an agreement to maintain this riparian condition over a set number of years or as a conservation easement. The funding would come from a water rate increase, corporate sponsorship, mitigation fees and other potential sources.

We are also pursuing statewide legislation to put in place required septic inspections at time of sale. Other efforts are underway as well, focused on use/storage of hazardous materials in floodplains and riparian corridors. We are using this increased awareness as an opportunity to design and implement a number of programs with landowners that start to mitigate for development in these areas. We are also having conversations with residents and others about possibly putting in place large fees to mitigate for and discourage development that occurs in riparian buffers, floodways and floodplains.

LW: *Farm and forest practices are regulated by state law and state agencies and boards. How have these practices impacted the McKenzie and other watersheds in ways that concern EWEB? What can be done to change them and will EWEB be an advocate for improved farm and forest regulation?*

KM: We are working on a number of fronts to help keep farm and forest land from being developed while reducing chemical use and increasing buffers. Our studies in creek basins to date show less impact from forestry herbicides than we expected, well below what we are seeing from urban runoff and agriculture. EWEB has been working with the agriculture community for years to implement the Healthy Farms Clean Water Program that increases the economic viability of farms while reducing chemical use. The riparian marketplace would also reward good stewardship of riparian forests and may provide incentives for farm and forestland owners to leave larger buffers.

LW: *One of the criticisms of the county's existing riparian ordinance – and an argument against a new one – is that it is inadequately enforced or not enforced at all. Will EWEB be an outspoken proponent for county enforcement?*

KM: Yes. Part of the problem is that the existing riparian ordinance is really unenforceable. Another is that regulations impact all landowners, even though a large number are good stewards, and, as you point out, rely on a broken system with little or no enforcement. EWEB would like to pursue the voluntary and market-based approaches to build awareness and lock-in good riparian conditions in long-term agreements, while crafting strategic ordinances that address areas where enforcement can occur and landowners agree are necessary such as septic systems, hazmat storage and use, etc.

LW: *In your estimation, what are the greatest threats to the McKenzie and other waterways and watersheds?*

KM: Urban runoff; hazardous materials used and stored close to waterways in large quantities; the transport of large amounts of hazardous materials through watersheds and the threat of spills; and, not least, continued development along waterways.

LW: *Where county regulation has failed might federal law, such as the Clean Water Act and the Endangered Species Act, apply?*

KM: Maybe. We have not looked at this yet, because fairly detailed data are needed to make a case against specific activities that lead to impacts requiring regulation.

"McKenzie River Recipe:" 1. Strip bank and line with rip-rap. 2. Easily obtain variance to site in bald buffer. 3. Build eave to eave in river bend. 4. Add taxpayer and insurance bailout when houses wash away.

Transportation Planning: Full Speed Ahead

Lane County's transportation plans are similar to those nearly everywhere else in the US as we pass Peak Oil – full speed ahead on road expansions plus a side show of public transit upgrades.

In two decades of freeway fighting I have been unable to find a single community in our country that has canceled any highway expansion plan due to the end of cheap oil and the start of climate chaos.

Lane County's main transportation project underway is widening Interstate 5 via the new, wider Willamette River bridges. Widenings at the McKenzie River and the Route 58 interchange were recently completed. The next focus will be the 30th Street interchange near Lane Community College. Widening I-5 at 30th will require moving the frontage roads, which may displace businesses, including Sequential Biofuels.

ODOT is doing two major highway expansion studies in Lane County. The bigger effort would expand Beltline between River and Coburg Roads, another is to make Route 126 six lanes in Springfield.

Beltline is the County's busiest road, but mitigating safety concerns at the Delta interchange doesn't require expansion to 11 lanes (one of the options drawn up for the study). A simple, cheap "low build" ramp change at Beltline/Delta would solve the worst "weaving" problem, but politicians

Wider I-5 bridge under construction over the Willamette River between Eugene and Springfield

and bureaucrats are not promoting cost-effective solutions. The recently expanded Beltline / I-5 interchange is far larger than needed to mitigate safety problems. It was supersized to facilitate development, not solve traffic hazards.

Widening I-5, Beltline, 126 and similar projects are federal decisions made by the Federal Highway Administration. However, under Federal law, the local governments approve wish lists that the state and feds then work to approve and implement. All of the local governments in the Lane Council of Governments have endorsed these highway plans at the Metropolitan Policy Committee meetings – almost entirely without meaningful public awareness or scrutiny. For example, I was the only member of the public to speak at the recent LCOG MPC public hearing on updating the Regional Transportation Plan.

In November 2008, the Governor's Transportation Vision Committee report called for $18 billion in new and expanded ODOT highways, including $1 billion in projects for Eugene and Springfield. There were three environmental groups invited to participate in this committee, but that didn't stop the report from recommending lots of road widenings and new bypasses.

In December 2010, outgoing Governor Kulongoski's administration released the Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Sunrise Freeway, a billion dollar plus new interstate highway in Clackamas County. Sunrise Freeway would be the transportation artery for the new sprawlville of Damascus, Oregon's newest city. This approval also includes massive expansion of I-205 near the Sunrise terminus; I-205 would become Oregon's widest road if this is built. Rep. Earl Blumenauer, a Portland Democrat who champions bicycle lanes and "Smart Growth," supports building a "parkway" on the route, even though there is no environmental difference in the designs. I am unaware of any organized environmentalist or community opposition to this new freeway.

Plans are also accelerating for the Newberg-Dundee Bypass, which would pave over farmland.

The only local transport project that has any public attention is the West Eugene Bus Rapid Transit proposal. Both sides of this debate have valid points. We certainly need better public transit, but it's also true that this BRT line has severe design flaws and is overpriced.

State law requires transportation projects to be integrated with land use plans, but the West Eugene BRT did not include any efforts to stop approvals of big box stores and other car-centric designs. Worse, it is using the same flawed traffic models that claimed the West Eugene Porkway would be needed because traffic levels are going to continue to increase. But traffic levels have peaked and plateaued since gasoline prices rose. Although local governments know about these issues, they refuse to include them in their plans.

On the downslope of Peak Oil, transportation funding triage is critical, for it will be difficult just to maintain existing roads and bus transit service.

Mark Robinowitz

Mark Robinowitz is a "road scholar" who documented WEP's legal problems; details at ***www.sustaineugene.org****. Peak Oil and Peak Traffic could be used to block federal highway expansions; please see* ***www.road-scholar.org***

Lane County Agriculture in Transition

Transition is the key word for agriculture in Lane County and really the entire Willamette Valley as we move from 2010 to 2011. This is primarily a transition in what crops are being grown, but in a lesser way it is also a transition to creating a stronger local food system.

Grass seed production has been the anchor of Lane County agriculture since the 1980s, but the grass seed industry is now entering its third year of diminished demand and unsold inventories. This reversal is linked to the economic downturn in general and specifically to the radical decline in housing starts since the contraction of the housing bubble of 2008-9. While some varieties of forage and turf grasses remain viable, most do not, and Lane County farmers have been forced by hard times to seek alternatives.

The best fit and easiest alternative to grass seed production in the Willamette Valley is soft white winter wheat. Fortunately for local growers, wheat prices now hover in the eight to nine dollar a bushel range, more than twice what wheat was selling for as recently as five years ago. Where most of the common grass seed varieties are now selling at prices below production costs, wheat has become a narrowly profitable crop in the valley.

Grass seed production accounted for some 550,000 acres of the Willamette Valley's 900,000 acres of field crops in 2006. Wheat that year accounted for less than 30,000 acres. In 2010, grass seed production was down near the 400,000 acre level and wheat was pushing 200,000 acres. If wheat prices stay where they are today and the economy continues to lag, we should expect more of the same, with wheat conceivably becoming the leading crop by acreage in the Willamette Valley by 2012, something that hasn't happened since 1979.

While this is a huge tide change for agriculture in this region, to a lesser degree we are seeing a more modest transition in farming practices and an increased interest in local processing and storage. Due in large part to the efforts of the Southern Willamette Valley Bean and Grain Project, we are seeing some of this transitioned grass seed acreage move into the organic

production of hard red wheat and, in some cases, dry land beans. Both of these efforts are still very much in the experimental stages, particularly the beans, but are significant because of the move from conventional to more sustainable practices.

Though it is true that the market more than anything else has prompted the move away from grass seed and into wheat and other food crops, at the same time there has been a strong push among local food advocates for the rebuilding of local food system infrastructure as a response to concerns about long term food security. Worries about a changing climate, the rising price of petroleum, and the common sense value of producing food closer to home have attracted considerable public and consumer attention.

As a direct response to these concerns, the Eugene Sustainability Commission initiated a Food Security Scoping Project at the end of 2009. The City of Eugene, in conjunction with Lane County and the Eugene Water and Electric Board, released the results of this scoping project in the fall of 2010. A critical piece of the project was a Lane County Local Food Market Analysis written by the University of Oregon's Community Planning Workshop.

This analysis verified that there is a shortage of local food storage and processing in Lane County and that Lane County spends more than 95% of its food dollars (totaling $1.2 billion annually) on imported food products—suggesting there is a prime opportunity in a valley as fertile as ours for investing in the reinvigoration of our local food system. In response to this, Lane County gave three Video Lottery Fund grants in excess of $90,000 to food system development projects (Camas Country Mill, Hummingbird Wholesale, GloryBee Foods) and created a one-third time staff position for a local food coordinator.

Another central facet to reinvigorating the local food system is getting more locally grown food, especially fruits and vegetables, into Lane County school cafeterias. In 2009, the Oregon Solutions Lane County Food Distribution Project, prompted by EWEB and Karl Morgenstern, brought food growers, farm advocates, and school buyers together to address this issue. With support from Willamette Farm and Food Coalition and the work of Megan Kemple, there was a doubling of Lane County produce sold to Lane County schools in 2010, and the Eugene 4J District increased their local produce purchases almost ten-fold from 1,340 lbs in 2009 to 12,339 lbs in 2010.

In summary, along with the gradual transition of grass seed acreage to the cultivation of wheat, there has been a focused movement within the community to increase local food production and processing and to emphasize the long-term importance of our farmland. If we are looking for a way to stimulate the local economy, if we are looking for a degree of food sovereignty and security, our farmland is our future and needs to be preserved.

Dan Armstrong

Member of the Lane County Food Policy Council and the staff writer for the Southern Willamette Valley Bean and Grain Project. Access to Dan's agricultural writing is available at his website, ***Mud City Press (http://www.mudcitypress.com).***

Newsletter Credits:
Editors
Robert Emmons
Nena Lovinger

Layout & Design
Chris Berner

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Mail to:
LandWatch Lane County
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Phone: 541.741.3625
Email: hopsbran@aol.com

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