

Oregon's environmental policies should be more than paper deep

Oregon has a proud history of protecting its wildlife and natural resources. We also have significant environmental problems.

The latter is particularly frustrating when the best intentions are left to languish under the weight of an underfunded bureaucracy. We all think we're doing the

right thing, that we've done our part, but the problem festers.

Our story in this edition on Oregon's

Department of Environmental Quality is a clear illustration of these placebo politics. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, Oregon has the highest percentage of expired state-issued, wastewater permits in the nation. This, despite having the some of the toughest water pollution regulations in the United States. In 2012, Oregon's waterways were ranked the 33rd most polluted in the nation, according to the Environmental Protection Agency's Toxics Release Inventory.

DEQ says it doesn't have the resources to do the job. The department was already navigating a major backlog when the recession hit, prompting nearly 20 percent cuts in staff and resources. The consequence? Regulations on emissions into our waterways that came into effect after a state-issued permit was written aren't being enforced. In some cases, this backlog stretches back to the 1980s. What we've learned about the ecological impact of chemicals, accepted discharge levels and water and fish consumption have changed significantly in recent

decades, as did our environmental standards. Yet the status quo on permits is extended time and time again. It's a kind of "pay it forward," only this is more like "pay for it forward."

In addition to the larger environmental impact, the water quality of Oregon's rivers, lakes and streams is linked directly to the health of our fish and wildlife, including the resources many families rely on. This isn't just between business and government. This is an issue of a community's health. A polluter's liability extends no further than the compliance of their current permit, even if it only reflects the environmental standards of the first Reagan administration.

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It's the kind of penny-wise and pound-foolish policy that gets played out on many fronts. Maybe it's human nature: the political tendency to be seen tackling a problem after the fact — after the damage is done — rather than investing in the less sensational approach: prevention. It is as true of our environmental protections as it is our education system, housing equity and policies around homelessness and poverty.

If we as Oregonians believe in the protection of one of our most vital natural resources, then we have to support what it takes to ensure its safety. Our DEQ needs the infusion of support, through fees and government funding, to update permits and assist companies and wastewater treatment plants in complying with the new standards that apply. The values and policies of Oregonians shouldn't be mere paper tigers — toothless and underfunded. They need bite.

EDITORIAL

Smart, calculated decisions will solve housing crisis

The landscape of Portland is changing before our eyes. New housing and business developments, apartment buildings and condos are popping up across neighborhoods. It's a brand new era. There's money to be made, and lots of it.

Saying all of that, we're proud in Portland for what we have been able to accomplish. Take the urban growth boundary, for example. It's something to be proud of, right? The idea that we would create an urban area with restrictions on growth to preserve the natural beauty of our state is something that is now looked upon as

revolutionary.

What's unfortunate is that we've developed one of the globes most prized urban growth strategies without any sort of equity and poverty lens.

There's no question that one of the gravest mistakes elected officials and urban planners made is not creating a regulatory standard for building and maintaining affordable housing within that urban growth boundary, especially as it relates to our transportation and new development in the private market.

Sadly, not much seems to have changed. None of the growth strategies that I've seen to date seriously attempts to answer the questions of affordable housing. Never mind that we're already an estimated 40,000 units short regionally and our population could increase by 1 million people by 2030, and up to 2 million people by 2060.

We haven't even talked about the effects of climate

change and how it will affect the region's growth as it relates to poverty and affordable housing. We should. It will. It is.

It makes me cringe when we as a community put our own needs ahead of what's best for the region at large. You don't want density in your neighborhood? Tough. What's more important — having a particular neighborhood free of affordable, skinny or tiny homes and a variety of housing options, or helping solve a housing crisis?

Some believe there is a way to build more cost effective affordable housing, as highlighted in the mayor's state of the city address. There's always room for debate, but that debate shouldn't come at the cost of people suffering. When it comes to trying to find a solution to the problem of affordable housing, everything should be on the table. We should be supporting all of our options.

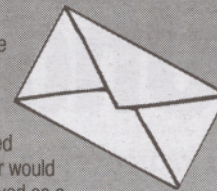
What we need to solve the issue is not more process and bureaucracy. What we need are visionary leaders willing to take smart and calculated risks.

Airbnb is one small example. Instead of redirecting money made from Airbnb for real regulations and money toward affordable housing, where there is a clear nexus, we simply said that it can't be done. That's not the way the system works. Unfortunately, right now, the system for building the necessary affordable units needed for people experiencing poverty doesn't work, either. Something has to give.

There is a wealth of opportunity when it comes to creating more equitable housing in our community. We have to find a way to get it done.

Write in

If you would like to have something that you've written published in our pages, or would like to get involved as a member of our reporting staff, contact Managing Editor Joanne Zuhl at 503-228-5657, joanne@streetroots.org. We ask that all submissions include the author's name and contact information, if available.



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