

Legalizing Ecovillages

Restoring Oregon's leadership in progressive land use laws

Here in Oregon, we see much support for the concept of finding ways to live on this planet that are more environmentally sustainable. Many groups in the Eugene area promote clean energy, alternative transportation, wholistic gardening and green building design. A logical next step is the creation of entire communities (often called "ecovillages") that are consciously based on these values. Unfortunately, there are unnecessary road-blocks in the land use laws governing rural areas of this state which are seriously inhibiting such a natural progression.



Oregon has been perceived as a national leader in establishing responsible land use guidelines, and much has been written about the efforts of "property rights" advocates to weaken these laws. Those rules that legitimately protect the public interest of all Oregonians and their future generations ought not be removed. However, many laws enacted in the 1980s to protect the rural environment have now become barriers to those who seek the highest form of such protection.

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This blockage does not appear intentional but occurs because of the inflexible application of density rules. For any rural area, there is now a "single family dwelling" rule that prohibits the sharing of a parcel of land with others except for roommates in one house, or farm workers. The original purpose was to prevent standard high density development and overpopulation of the countryside. This same rule, however, also prevents a small group from joining together to form an environmentally friendly ecovillage.

The answer is to create flexibility in a system that is currently over-rigid. Small groups of some of our most ecologically responsible citizens (say up to 15 people) should be allowed to formulate explicit, legally binding land use plans based on the ethic of sustainability. In exchange, they could be granted what might be called an "ecovillage exemption." These exemptions could be structured to require annual renewal, thus providing for revocation by the county if the plan is not followed. Through such an option, the public interest of the state and the well-being of the planet as a whole would both be served.

Another great benefit of such flexibility is that land in Oregon might once again become accessible to those of our citizens who are not independently wealthy. Anybody paying attention in the last 20 years has seen the price of land west of the Cascades skyrocket. This problem has been exacerbated further in many counties by the non-allowance of any land partition smaller than 40 acres. With the exemption described, many conscientious people who currently have no such option would be enabled to pool their financial resources and become part of a planned and approved ecovillage.

Largely in response to Measure 37, Gov. Kulongoski has called for a series of public hearings to take a fresh look at the state's land use laws. The first was held March 3. While the focus will be on the implications of the ballot measure, they will also provide a chance to examine whether some existing rules may be counter-productive to the achievement of original goals. If enough citizens contact lawmakers about Oregon supporting sustainable development in the form of ecovillages, this issue may finally receive the attention it deserves.

Awareness about the need for a sustainable future is growing every day in Oregon. We can restore a planning system based on a larger vision which encourages noble aspirations rather than be siphoned away in an inflexible process. There is a need for public interest groups like 1000 Friends of Oregon and LandWatch Lane County to help show the way. I cordially invite them to respond by submitting a reply to the *Weekly*.

Gary "Spruce" Houser is a long time Eugene-area environmental activist researching this land use issue and the potential for win/win solutions.

How to Be Happy

by Shannon Wheeler



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

NEGATIVE FORCE

Developers have pulled out of their giant Yuppie Destruction Project for downtown Eugene. I call it good news. Some greedy developers call it bad news. If you want the center of Eugene to look like a yuppie conformist version of a downtown shopping mall, then maybe you call it bad news.

The developers, who have let several buildings they own sit empty for many years, have been the biggest negative force downtown. Maybe they let the buildings sit idle to lower the value of other buildings they wanted to buy. Even if they didn't do that on purpose, the result has been to create a haven for heroin shooting galleries and homeless kids.

If there is anything worse than a bunch of smack freaks, it's legions of self-satisfied yuppies feeding their faces and shoveling cubic yards of mass-market crap into their SUVs. So celebrate, Eugene! Now, we can determine the fate of our own city ourselves. Unless they come back and this was just a ruse to get tax dollars.

Ralph Wombat
Eugene

A DAMN LIE

There are lies and damn lies. Your reporting ("Magaña Ruling," 4/13) that I, a Eugene police sergeant, received a report that Officer Magaña had forced a woman into having oral sex was a damn lie. I would have considered it the crowning achievement of my career to derail Magaña and have him arrested. I am certainly not alone in wishing his cancer had not invaded our department.

Accountability is a responsibility for us as it is for the media. I can only ask that you use a finer brush, Mr. Pittman, and paint a more accurate portrait rather than besmirch someone.

David Poppe
Eugene

EDITOR'S NOTE: The allegation regarding "Officer Poppy" is directly quoted from Judge Thomas Coffin's list of reported incidents.

NEW COMMISSIONERS

Myself, I'm a one-issue voter, and that issue is herbicides. Today (4/25) I attended the county commissioners meeting where they voted 3-2 to approve the whole list of five poisons to be used on our roadsides, though none of these were approved by the Health Advisory Committee.

I think we could use some new county commissioners. I urge votes for Ron Davis and Bill Fleenor.

Lynn Bowers
Rural Eugene

HOSPITAL OUT OF LINE

I attended the Cal Young Neighborhood meeting last week, and I left the meeting knowing more about the McKenzie-Willamette Hospital building at the North Delta proposed site:

- \$5 million dollars for road improvements (offered by McKenzie-Willamette) for an area that requires \$100 million or more is a drop in the bucket and will require property taxpayers in all of Lane County, and even the state, to pitch in the rest.

- If your loved one is in the ambulance and is in need of emergency attention, the only route available to said ambulance (to M-W) is down a congested highway system or through two school zones.

- Eugene growth is west and south — why are 75 percent of the medical facilities available to only 10 percent of the city, by placing two major hospitals within four miles of each other, leaving a lot of Eugene without service?

- The only people who seem to be in support of the hospital are the people who are financially involved with the project and due to make a profit.

- McKenzie-Willamette/Triad is a for-profit corporation. Do these profits stay to help Eugene's growth or do they go home to Texas?

- McKenzie-Willamette's Traffic Impact