

The Precautionary Principle

A long-term perspective for Lane County



By a 5-0 vote, Lane County's commissioners recently made an astounding commitment to the county. On Nov. 10, the commissioners adopted "The Precautionary Principle as a Guide for County Policy Development."

After having studied what the precautionary principle could do for Lane County during two invited presentations (one by a San Francisco city/county employee who effectively implemented that county's 2003 precautionary principle ordinance) and two work sessions, the question the commissioners debated on Nov. 10 was whether to "endorse" the principle or "adopt" it. Lane County Performance Auditor Stewart Bollinger suggested endorsing the principle now and revisiting it later for potential adoption, but Commissioner Rob Handy warned that an "endorsed" policy would gather dust on the shelf, while "adoption" would put it to work now. Handy's perspective was supported by Commissioners Sorenson and Fleenor, and ultimately by all five commissioners.

So... what is the precautionary principle? As spelled out by our commissioners (and the principle has been spelled out differently in local ordinances to international treaties), five tenets are to be considered when bringing agenda items for commissioner decision-making. The five tenets might at first look like apple pie, but in fact they constitute a long-term perspective on human and environmental health too often lacking in our nation, and procedures designed to evoke good ideas and information from Lane County's citizens.

The six tenets (abbreviated slightly here) of the Lane County Precautionary Principle policy are:

- 1. Anticipatory Action.** County departments will consider how to prevent harm in the future as an integral part of their duties.
- 2. Right to Know.** County departments will communicate complete and accurate information on potential human health and environmental impacts associated with their selection of products, services, operations or plans.
- 3. Alternatives Assessment.** County departments will examine a full range of alternatives and select alternatives offering significant improvements to human health and the environment.
- 4. Full Cost Accounting.** County departments evaluating potential alternatives have a duty to consider all significant short and long-term costs.
- 5. Participatory Decision Process.** County departments' decisions applying the precautionary principle must be transparent, participatory and informed by the best available information. Citizens and resource users may have correct information not available internally; hence, their participation and information count as elements of "best available information."
- 6. The County Administrative Procedures Manual** will be amended to require the incorporation of tenets 1-5 into agenda cover memos.

Thus, when departments bring a proposal to the commissioners for action, the commissioners will want to see that the departments have sought public input, considered all reasonable alternatives, considered long-term as well as short-term costs and are recommending an alternative that offers significant improvements to health and the environment. This is a wise, look-at-options-before-leaping policy, and its door is wide open to public contributions.

Significantly, the county commissioners acknowledge that citizens and resource users 1) have a right to know all potential costs, benefits and impacts of a proposal; and 2) may have information and ideas not arising internally in the department. As tenet #5 notes, citizen information and ideas may in fact be the "best available information."

The largest opportunity for citizens and civic groups will lie in offering alternatives to those being proposed by county departments whenever the departments are missing options that should be considered. Offering alternatives is also the most *demanding* task for citizens: to delve deeply enough into an issue to suggest a reasonable, environmentally sound and practical alternative. It's infinitely easier to criticize a policy, project or purchase than to propose a better one, but the latter course leverages the most change.

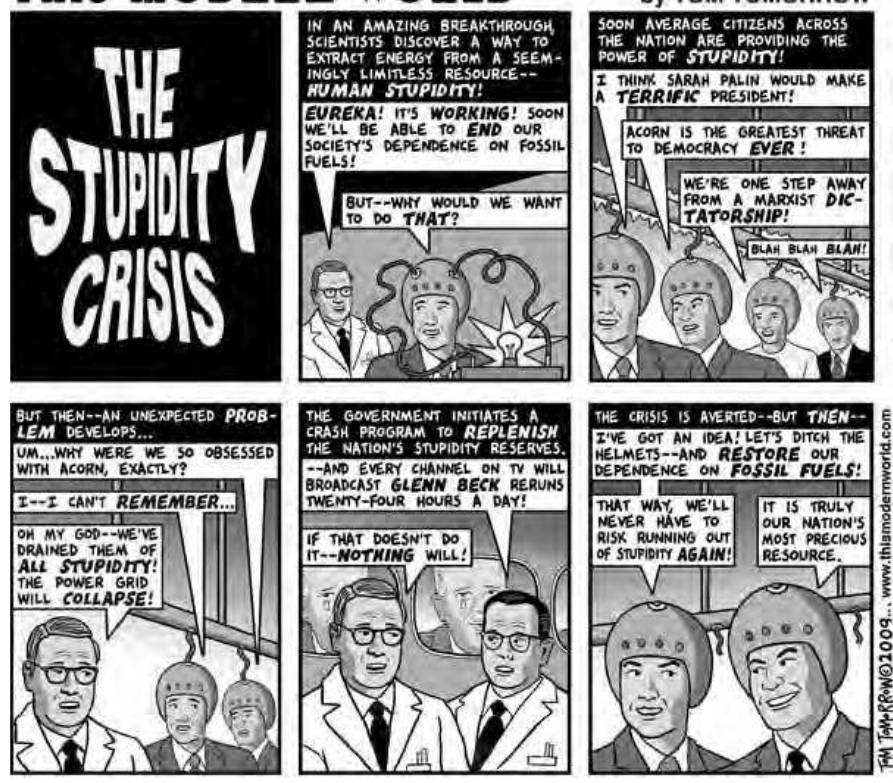
Whether adopting the precautionary principle leads to better decisions in Lane County will depend on three sectors: commission attention to whether proposals by county departments embody the first five tenets; county department implementation of the spirit of the six tenets; and citizens' and civic organizations' timely submission to county departments of good information and sound alternatives for full consideration.

It's great policy. Innovative contributions to it by active commissioners, county departments and citizens will turn the policy into great decisions.

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THIS MODERN WORLD

by TOM TOMORROW



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

QUANDARY OF THE HOMELESS

Where do we find homeless people in Lane County?

Katy Bloch of Lane County government is trying to locate homeless people for a required census. Those bureaucrats who require that a census be taken should use the government's own statistics, gathered by the Food Stamp program that verifies participant's incomes.

The number of households in Lane County who get Food Stamps and had no income in October was 11,338. The total of individuals with no income was 14,593.

With no income, there is no cash to pay mortgages, rent, \$2 a night at the mission or \$50-\$150 a month for the cheapest rehabilitation programs.

It is against the law for homeless people to camp without paying, or to park a vehicle without paying. Those who "camp" or park illegally in public or private places must hide or be arrested. Without an illegal "camp" there is no place to store or cook food. Oregon no longer supports out of work and disabled persons. Food Stamps don't keep them warm and dry.

There are many more of these officially criminalized homeless people hiding than the best census takers can find.

The federal government should provide "stimulus funds" to provide housing assistance for those people who are known to have no money.

This could reduce the thousands of persons abandoned into "homelessness" and restore General Assistance welfare that was cut from disabled and out of work Oregonians by the state.

Jerry Smith, MSW, retired Eugene

EPD OUT OF CONTROL

Two police smashing a young man's head into the pavement and Taser-ing him twice while face down on the pavement in handcuffs, saying they felt threatened. Get a grip. An Asian exchange student getting Tasered and the officer saying it might have been because one of them swept his

feet from under him, so he Tasered him. Welcome to America!

An officer sicing his dog (exploitation of animals) on the homeowner instead of the suspect, saying when he saw the man was white, the suspect black, he called the dog off. Should he not have thought he had the wrong person when the other man jumped out the window and ran away? Duh.

And then the SWAT team blowing out my windows, knocking down my door and terrorizing everyone in the house and neighborhood. They were driving their little tank up Seneca, cops hanging off the side, guns drawn. Is this Iraq? A key point of the cops being able to get the warrant to destroy the safety of my home was based on a lie to the judge. They implied to the judge that my son had shot someone when they knew this was untrue. The rest of the lies and distortions will come out during the lawsuit. I do not know if I will waste my time with the pro-police Civilian Review Board.

Until the City Council and citizens of Eugene get a handle on the police, we will not be safe from the police or criminals.

Joann Ernst Eugene

MAKE RUBBLE PUBS

I like the idea (cover story, 11/5) of creating guerrilla gardens in the downtown pits and other neglected places. I also love that this concept, which I "invented" to label some of my actions years ago, is now an agreed-upon notion.

When I was in Budapest this summer, I ran across a couple of what they call ruin pubs, created in little godforsaken spots in the rubble, and turned into little artistic oases to sit in and have a beer. (Google "Budapest ruin pubs" for more on this.) It made me think that this is something that could happen here with Whiteaker-Last-Friday consciousness.

Go for it!

Karen Stingle Eugene