Cooper Mountain Nature Park | Beaverton, OR
Photo Credit: Mennen Middlebrooks

Governing a Regional Biophilia

By Mennen Middlebrooks

Landing Amongst the Firs

Arriving to Portland via the Pacific Northwest summer sky is a marvel to behold. From a westward-bound airliner, one passes over the expanse of Oregon's High Desert, with a distinct change of landscape just west of the Dalles and Bend. The vastness of the lush green landscape becomes more distinguishable as you near landing. Forests of Douglas fir surround a never-ending stretch of the Colombia River to the North, with the Willamette and its Valley vertically bisecting the City of Roses. A visual greeting of this scale assured me that a summer filled with natural wonder lay ahead.

I spent the months of June to August 2018 serving as an Oregon Summer Fellow, awarded by Portland State University's Hatfield School of Government. Oregon Metro's Special Projects team in the Parks and Nature Department sponsored my tenure as an Oregon Fellow, where I was quickly brought up to speed on the latest regional endeavors of equity and inclusion. My first summer in Portland with Metro proved to be one of the most immersive internships I have ever experienced, with a level of public engagement surpassing any expectation I may have had of a government agency.

While an exhaustive list of individual directors, managers and Metro staff would be fitting to include in a note of thanks, suffice it to say that these individuals truly made the difference in my summer experience. They guided me throughout my work with a true passion for innovation that was palpable. Understanding Metro's breadth of public influence and impact will help explain the foundation of their drive to serve the greater public welfare.

A Regional Biophilic Lens

Unique to Metro's regional form of government is its ability not only to preserve land for urban expansion, but also for the designation and use of land as conservation areas, wildlife corridors and nature-rich recreational parks for the greater public benefit. The nexus of both the urban and wild realms falls under the purview of Metro's Parks and Nature Department.

For the majority of the Portland region's 1.5 million residents, the decision to foster a regionally elected government entity was one that has evolved from a series of resolutions in land use planning made by previous generations of regional Portlanders. Since Oregon Metro Regional Government's (Metro's) core formation in 1993, the vision for regional cohesion in matters ranging from urban planning and land conservation to recycling and transportation has since been overwhelmingly supported by popular vote and taxpayer finances.

Any successes and support of this regional agency have been shaped by policy and molded by the electorate through decades of ballot measures, levy & bond funding approval, and various forms of public engagement and insight. Metro's Council President and six district commissioners are held accountable to their districts spanning three counties, and comprised of a total twenty-four individual cities; each with their own unique demographic population, land and environmental assets, and vision for their city's future.

Key legislation has been implemented through various planning tools; utilized to sustain environmental resources and ensure curtailment of urban sprawl, leading to the Portland region we see today. The Urban Growth Boundary (UGB) is one such tool that has allowed the Portland region to expand its bounds in a controlled manner while protecting the region's natural assets since May of 1972.

Metro is also tasked with maintaining a twenty-year supply of land for the future growth of the city, effectively adjusting the UGB in a controlled manner, with approval by the electorate every five years. Since 2007, Metro has coordinated with the three counties that it represents to designate "Urban Reserves" outside of the current UGB as a means of planning for slow growth over the next half century. While land use and transportation planning comprise the foundation of Metro's regional mission, resource and wildlife conservation provide the civic opportunities and nature-oriented inspiration that keep voters and elected officials directly engaged with one another and with the land that all Portlanders call home.

Applying this level of regional governance elsewhere in the U.S. has remained a challenge in modern times. Given the unique nature of Metro's scope of land use planning and citizen-elected decision makers, there are many conservation measures that may provide inspiration to other metropolitan areas throughout the nation and abroad.

Parks & Nature Department Field Visit
Photo Credit: Mennen Middlebrooks

Smith & Bybee Wetlands Natural Area
Photo Credit: Mennen Middlebrooks

Approaching Equitable Nature Provision

The Pacific Northwest plays host to some of North America's most unique climates from the rainforests of Olympic National Park in Northwest Washington to Oregon's high desert and Pacific coastline. The Cascade Range stretches from British Columbia to California, providing many nearby cities with breathtaking views of snowy mountain peaks, vast and biodiverse riparian corridors and fertile agricultural soils. Around the time of Metro's predecessor's formation in 1979, residents of the Northern Willamette Valley ranged from newly settled urban technology experts to historically prolific timber harvesters. Though relatively demographically homogeneous in the early 1980's (the Portland metro region's racial makeup fluctuates around 75% Caucasian today), commonalities in public opinion about the region's future are shared by an informed electorate from a wide range of occupations and ethnic backgrounds. One such shared opinion is for certain: urban sprawl into natural and agricultural areas should be curtailed.

My time with the Parks and Nature Department was spent working on strategic plans for racial equity, improving A.D.A. and accessibility amenities on public park and trail sites, and a detailed review of independent thesis research on public engagement of Metro's regional land holdings. Public accountability remained crucial throughout my involvement with these projects, and I enjoyed engaging with a diverse range of communities; from the native leadership of the Grand Ronde Tribe and various interest groups representing larger communities of color to schoolchildren and adults with mobile, cognitive and visual limitations.

Personal visits and volunteer opportunities in a portion of the 17,000 acres of Metro regional parks and trail systems provided a profound and positive experience; one that I believe was shared on the faces and in the interactions with like-minded visitors. I came away knowing that this regional government was comprised of people who cared deeply about the equity and quality of life of the citizens which Metro serves. Sustaining this level of personal engagement and public trust, I feel, is simply another factor that has spelled success in this form of regional governance, and will remain the critical human element necessary for fostering regional cohesion elsewhere.

Since the summertime, I have come back to Virginia with a notion of how an engaged regional government can help sustain for the citizens it serves. Diverse Oregonians conserving that which they love - the unique landscape that surrounds them - will help to ensure the conservation and stewardship necessary for future generations to enjoy these same nature-rich experiences.

Cooper Mountain Nature Park | Beaverton, OR

Blue Lake Regional Park | Fairview, OR

Haystack Rock | Cannon Beach, OR

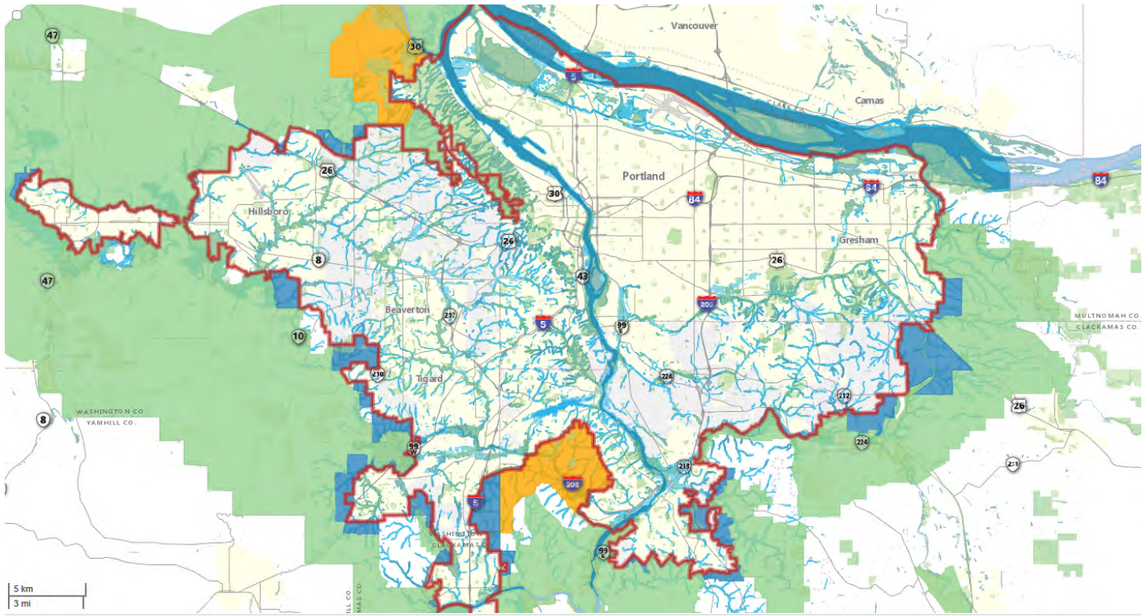
Measuring Municipal Progress

Although its impetus and continued support have been promoted through unique and often culturally oriented moments in its history, Metro Regional Government serves as a sound case study to glean from as we prepare for an uncertain global future. The 2040 Growth Concept, originally adopted in 1995, spells out the details behind the goals of Metro's vision of Portland's regional future.

The Urban Growth Management Functional Plan, last updated in April 2018, provides both binding requirements of the twenty-four cities and three counties as well as recommendations for performance standards and methods that municipalities may choose to utilize in pursuit of well-defined goals utilized in the regional promotion of:

- Safe and stable neighborhoods for families
- Compact development that uses land and money efficiently
- A healthy economy that generates jobs & business opportunities
- Protection of farms, forests, rivers, streams and natural areas
- Publicly oriented regional park & trail planning and operation
- Allocation of funding to support individual city grant applications
- A balanced transportation system to move people & goods

It can be argued that Metro's breadth of influence serves to provide the Portland region with a form of "governmental insurance" against the destruction of its natural resources which comprise its the urban fabric of its twenty-four cities. This need not be uniquely 'Portland' or regionally specific to the Pacific Northwest. Suburbanization and deforestation are the more visible signs of natural capital destruction; factors of growth that can be combated through more compact development and habitat-oriented environmental planning. While Metro aims to protect the Portland region from losses of habitat for salmon populations and native wildlife, other municipalities may wish to pool regional resources to combat ill-effects of sea level rise and protect their unique regional resources.



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Urban Growth Boundary (UGB)
Rural Reserve
Urban Reserve
Unresolved areas remanded to LCDC
Parks and/or natural areas
Riparian Class I
Riparian Class II
Riparian Class III

Land Classifications of Portland Metro Region

Generated Via: Metro Map

Portland'5 Centers for the Arts
Photo Credit: Mennen Middlebrooks

Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial, OR Convention Center

Applying Regional Change

The regional influence of both quality of life and economic vitality are values worth protecting for current population needs and safeguarding for future generations. The depletion of a state or region's natural capital has a systemic and external effect on stakeholders near and far; directly impacting the lives of citizens, visitors and consumers of the region's resources and products. While no single organization, private, public or non-profit, could ensure the complete prevention of this type of human-oriented natural market failure from occurring, a certain degree of balance could be attained through the collective cause of regional conservation policy.

While the core mission of the Parks and Nature Department is noted as "protecting clean water and restoring fish and wildlife habitat for current and future needs", perhaps alternative priorities exist when we consider the needs of an urban municipality outside of Chicago or a series of oyster-harvesting towns near Virginia's Eastern Shore. The natural resource assets and needs of both neighboring urban and rural areas will vary greatly depending on the region we aim to review, but the needs of all regions remain largely synergistic. In the case of the local corn and soybean farmer in Nebraska who wishes to sell her produce to large-scale bulk processors and to local consumers at the ever-popular farmer's market, her wish to have an adequate supply of water for irrigation is directly tied to the environmental conditions of the Ogallala Aquifer beneath her, and the rest of the region's collective feet. Intrastate cooperation of this scale will only be fostered if equitable biophilic ideals are prioritized by the regions within a given territory.

As for the local context of this regional influence, a series of revealing questions must be posed and data-driven answers conveyed before we can successfully adapt portions of Metro's or another regional agency's practices to a city like Charlottesville or a region such as Hampton Roads... What factors are unique to the Portland region that do not exist in other states with urban growth regulations such as Boulder, Lexington, Honolulu and Seattle? Are these regional goals and visions applicable at the smaller scale of a college town like Charlottesville, where pooled finances are more scarce and public opinion on the means of promoting conservation efforts more divided? Is the direct implementation of planning tools such as an urban growth boundary and its subsequent limitations to lot subdivision or available affordable housing the most fitting way to promote a sustainable city and limit urban sprawl?

The answer to these posed questions can and will be determined by current generations both in the U.S. and abroad. The heightened scale of collective regional and state actions will be critical in promoting the on-ground implementation of meaningful climate policy and environmental regulations that affect the lives of both the urban and rural citizen.

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