

August 3, 2016

To: The Planning Commission, Bureau of Planning and Sustainability, Portland, Oregon
Re: Building Heights and View Corridor Protection/Preservation of Views.
Submitted by: Richard A. Potestio

Dear Planning Commission Members,

I am writing to submit testimony pertaining to the proposed height allowances for buildings in our central city and inner east side with regard to the preservation of important views that are currently protected by view corridors.

I wish to emphatically state that the Planning Commission should not approve proposals to raise Building Height Limits, by right or through bonuses, such that new buildings would block views currently protected by view corridors.

Views of Mt. Hood, from significant vantage points such as the Salmon Street Springs, the Vista Bridge, and the Rose Garden and Japanese Garden in Washington Park would be negatively impacted if Height Limits were raised allowing taller buildings on certain blocks in the inner East Side, and the Central City.

Specific views of the Vista Viaduct would be negatively impacted if Height Limits allowing taller buildings were raised on certain blocks in Goose Hollow and along SW Jefferson.

By Mt. Hood, I mean the both the Snow Capped portion above the timberline AND that forested portion of the mountain visible above the foreground ridgeline created by Mt. Tabor, Mt. Scott and the other Buttes visible in the image below:



By the Vista Viaduct, I mean the entire structure, inclusive of the arch (which is the essential architectural and structural component of the bridge) as represented in the image below:



I wish to further stress that a view corridor is a wide zone defined by a pedestrian's vantage point, in a pedestrian realm, such as a sidewalk, park, bench or viewpoint. Further, the view corridor should protect views for all citizens, in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

A view or view corridor is not a narrow sightline predicated on the center of a ROW, or from an unachievable or singular vantage point.

Further, I urge that you not propose to raise heights such that lower, architecturally significant buildings are made economically obsolete by the relative inflation of land values due to the potential to replace it with a higher building. In the absence of real protections from demolition for significant historic buildings, the raising of height limits imperils many great works of architecture in our city.

Nor should you propose heights in a manner or area such that development would be allowed to occur disproportionately tall on a few blocks rather than appropriately tall on many. Portland thousands of underutilized blocks, therefore concentrating development on a few is counterproductive to creating a vibrant urban fabric.

I'd like to offer a personal perspective on the topic. I grew up in Portland. I have seen Portland's views change radically in the past 36 years. In 1980, when I watched Mt. St. Helens blow its top from Council Crest, the view from that promontory was virtually unobstructed for 270 degrees. On a clear day, one could see all the major Cascade Mountains, including Mt. Jefferson. The view to the east side of the city was one of rooftops--not the green canopy we have since nurtured. Looking west, the view of the Tualatin Valley was of thousands of acres of farmland, not suburban sprawl. When I moved into my condo on the fifth floor of a small building on King's Hill, my view of downtown was panoramic and crowned by Mt. Hood. Big Pink was prominent. Today a magnificent cedar tree hides Big Pink and the new Park West Tower has completely block my view of Mt. Hood.

Therefore in advocating for appropriate building heights that do not obstruct views from public spaces and places, I am not acting in my personal interest, or on the basis of ignorance with regard to the temporal and changing nature of our natural and built environment. Rather I am writing in the interest of the public to advocate for the preservation of those intangible aspects of our environment— in this case views— that are the basis of an urban society's meaning, memory, identity, uniqueness, and endearment. I am advocating protecting views that are a fundamental component of our city's design.

Portland's views are unique. From Portland, five the major mountains are visible: Mt. Rainer, Mt. Adams, Mt. St. Helens, Mt. Hood, and Mt. Jefferson. But Portland's views are not just a factor of geography. They are a legacy of the enlightened planning and urban design that is the foundation of our city's plan. Our earliest settlers and citizens realized that our city occupied a special position in a remarkable landscape and endeavored to protect and promote this. Thus they hired the Olmsted Brothers Landscape firm to set forth plans for a region-wide park system. Part of that plan, only a portion of which was realized, included today's Washington Park, Vista Avenue, and Terwilliger Parkway. These were designed to connect the city to the immediate and larger landscape, and included viewpoints from promontories and architecturally compatible structures such as the Vista Viaduct.

When Big Pink, The Wells Fargo and Koin towers were built, they obstructed views from homes across the west hills. But the Koin blocked a very significant view of Mt. Hood from the Vista Tunnel on Hwy 26. The negative response, this time came not just from hillside residents...but from a cross section of all Portlanders who actually valued that view... visible from their cars, for a few fleeting moments.

Citizen activists and planners of the day wisely realized that views of our natural environment were significant shared experiences central to our values and our collective identity. Thus they set forth to identify "view corridors" to protect views to and of such monuments as Mt. Hood, and the Vista Viaduct.

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Indeed iconic views are economically important drivers for tourism and for business in general. Imagine a tourist advertisement, brochure or business campaign for Rome without a view of the St. Peter's Dome; for Paris without a view of the Eiffel Tower; for New York City without a view of the Statue of Liberty; for San Francisco without a view of the Golden Gate; or for God's sake, Seattle without a view of the Space Needle.

Portlanders often wish for an icon on par with these...yet none of these can compare with Mt. Hood. And I contend that the Vista Viaduct, a legacy of the Olmsted's plan for our city, is as elegant a structure as any of those I just listed.

Today greed, ego, ignorance and a lack of shared values, in part the byproduct of a city growing faster than its new developer class and residents can establish a routine walk to the park, mean that these view corridors are threatened by interests that serve persons and businesses, rather than people and the economy of the city.

Portland's economy is booming. But compared to the rest of the West Coast's major cities, it is still small and slow to grow. That is a good thing, for we need to take time to appreciate what we have and to allow long-term values to balance short-term profits.

I'm not advocating for a low rise city— in fact, I believe that some proposed building height limits are being set too low, in particular along major “corridors”, around parks, open space, and within neighborhoods. But we should not follow the lead of San Francisco, which has lost its sense of scale as its lofty new skyline has dwarfed its fabled hills.

In conclusion, I ask that you think about the broad range of issues involved in planning our city. But I also ask that realize that a great city is not just the byproduct of planning considerations, but also the result of design values based in an artistic and humanistic sensibilities.

Therefore, on behalf of future generations and with respect for the wisdom of past generations, I ask that you preserve our city's intangible aspects, its views, as you set parameters for its physical form.

Yours,

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