

May 4, 2021

To: PSC and BPS  
From: Mike Houck  
Re: PSC Reflections

When I started working on policies 40 years ago to better integrate nature into the urban environment I was told by many local and regional planners, including within the city, that there was “no place for nature in the city.” The statewide land use program did not contemplate natural resource protection inside the Urban Growth Boundary. Nature is “out there”, beyond the UGB they said. They were wrong, technically and philosophically. Fortunately, those views are no longer held by most planners, civic leaders, and elected officials.

When I founded the Urban Greenspaces Institute twenty-two years ago I adopted an organizational motto: “In Livable Cities if Preservation of the Wild.” It is intended as a corollary to Henry David Thoreau’s aphorism, *In Wildness is the Preservation of the World*. Creating compact, land-conserving cities is essential to protecting the rural hinterlands from urban sprawl. But, simply creating higher density, well- designed, energy-efficient urban form is not sufficient to creating a livable city. To be livable, lovable, and sustainable, a vibrant urban Green Infrastructure, one with healthy watersheds, streams and wetlands, and natural areas is essential. To be just, there must be an equitable distribution of resources, including affordable housing, parks, access to nature, and living wage jobs.

After serving a couple years on the Sustainable Development Commission Mayor Sam Adams combined the SDC with the Planning Commission. Susan Anderson, who then directed the city’s Bureau of Sustainability, asked who was interested in serving on the new joint, PSC. I raised my hand because until that point no one with a natural resource background had served on the Planning Commission. Turns out I was the only Sustainability Commissioner to come onto the PSC. I hoped to bring that perspective into both the land use and sustainability spheres.

Over the past eleven years I like to think we have done so. The best example of that outcome was our recommendations on West Hayden Island. I think the PSC members and public provided substantive land use, economic, and ecosystem analyses that resulted in recommendations that integrated land use regulations and sustainability. Had we only considered land use regulations and accepted Metro’s exempting balance cut and fill in the Columbia River floodplain our recommendations might have been technically and legally correct within a narrow land use lens. It would have also been wrong. Instead, taking a broader view, based on principles of sustainability and ecosystem health the PSC, with input from conservationists, other city bureaus--- principally the Bureau of Environmental Services---and tribal representatives, the PSC insisted the Port be held accountable for mitigating the loss of natural resources and 300 acres of floodplain and their attendant ecological functions.

Recent decisions regarding Port operations have validated our recommendations. I am hopeful that in the near future West Hayden Island may become “Forest Park on the Columbia”, a publicly-owned, ecologically and culturally significant element of the region’s system of parks, trails and natural areas.

As important as the environment is to our economy, clean air and water, and human health—physical and mental—I feel strongly that we have a moral and legal obligation to protect nature and the environment for its inherent, intrinsic values. We have stated so explicitly in the *Portland Plan* and *Comprehensive Plan*. That is so, in part, because indigenous cultural values were included on the advisory committees I served on. I'm hopeful that the bureau and PSC will take that as a serious criterion in policy making into the future.

However, as proud of our work as I am, I do have concerns about to what extent or whether that will be the case. Having served for a combined 13 years on both commissions my hope is that natural resources, biodiversity, Green Infrastructure, and environmental restoration and management will be central to all PSC deliberations and policies. I'm pleased the PSC is pushing the envelope on bringing issues of sustainability, beyond the legal land use sphere, into more serious, robust consideration in its recommendations.

At the most recent PSC meeting we were asked to share our thoughts regarding potential sustainability topics that may not be on the BPS agenda for future PSC work. My nominations are:

1. Beyond energy, human health, and design, what policies related to climate change will ensure resilience of our natural capital/green infrastructure? What does the city need to do to maintain biodiversity locally and regionally? Upcoming floodplain work will be one of the keys to that effort.
2. Policies advancing and accelerating the city's commitment to combining Grey and Green Infrastructure. I've seen, and many others have also observed, significant slippage and backsliding on that front. Portland was seen as a national leader in GI but other cities have taken that role. Portland needs to renew its commitment to integrating Green Infrastructure---both natural and built---into the urban fabric.
3. Equity and Environment: There has been a disturbing trend to view equity and the environmental goals in zero sum terms. Both are essential to creating a sustainable and equitable city. Both should be at the forefront of any PSC policy deliberations.

I have the highest regard for integrity, dedication, and hard work of every PSC member I've served with. The same is true for city staff in all the city's bureaus. I look forward to my occasional two minute opportunities to interact with you and BPS staff in the coming years.

Houck