

Former Portland Mayor: Find regional solutions to growth issues

By: Charlie Hales May 20, 2019 0



Boise is a beautiful city, a great place to relax and enjoy a wonderful combination of God's handwork and our own.

It's understandable that people, even leaders, might be inclined to relax, enjoy the blessings of this good place and not worry too much about the future. But it's critical to act now for better transit and housing, to allow smart young people to stay here and build a life.

You've received some anecdotal warnings and a some formal ones, such as COMPASS's recent predictions that a million people will live in the Treasure Valley by 2040. And I will tell you that I don't believe your current governance system will allow you to effectively manage that growth. But if you look to the examples of your neighbors, and forge an effective coalition among you, I think you can create a power structure that will enable you to succeed.

At one time or another, every metro in the Northwest thought of itself as a big small town, a place where big city problems would not intrude. They all had to face challenges of robust growth that was not well coordinated. Let me tell you about a number of cities navigating toward the future, not as a template or a formula about how YOU might lead, but as a touchstone and proof that you can.

My city, Portland, was one of the first. Our story was entirely typical. When the automobile arrived as a big technological change decades ago, we accommodated it. Boy did we accommodate it, and we suffered the consequences of that unthinking accommodation. When I moved to Portland in 1979, we exceeded the federal air quality standards for 115 days that year.

But we found a way to think and act regionally, first with a mandate from our State Legislature, and then under our own power.

In the Seattle metro area, as COMPASS is doing here, the MPO had done the forecasts and issued the warnings. Soon enough, the limitations of the old approaches were becoming clear for all to see. Then they started a long and difficult path to building light rail. They failed in 1968. They failed again in 1970,

so badly that the federal government took money that they had allocated to Seattle and sent it to Atlanta.

In 1996, some success, followed by controversy and difficulty in 1999 and 2000, but finally in 2008-2009, they opened the first line and passed the ST2 ballot measure. Today, they are on their way to constructing a \$70 billion light rail system.

Something we have to understand about transit is that it will not cure congestion. The only cure for congestion is economic decline. Transit will give people another choice; that's as good as it gets. I think that is still important.

The Puget Sound Regional Commission has flexed and grown too. They now have a broader mission and more inclusive structure, including the Growth Management Policy Board and Central Puget Sound Economic Development District Board with a mixture of both public and private leaders working together. I know the Boise Metro Chamber has had many conversations with Envision Utah, and it should. The Salt Lake Valley and the Treasure Valley share many traits, problems and blessings. The Envision Utah model is very interesting. It is one of consistent, long-term leadership via a nonprofit organization, with broad business, philanthropic and religious support. The governmental sector in the Salt Lake Valley is also trying to work collaboratively. The Central Wasatch Commission was created by Interlocal Agreement, a contract among governments, a few years ago to manage mountain lands. It has three goals: transportation solutions focused on transit, walking, biking; visitor amenities, like trails; and watershed protection.

They have created a power structure to deal with something that is bigger than any one of them. Denver's Mobility Choice Blueprint, a project finished earlier this year, was created by the Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce, Denver Regional Council of Governments, Colorado Department of Transportation and the Regional Transportation District. They took on the whole question of transportation technology and asked how they should manage that as a region. They looked at pilot projects and targeted investments – not all big things, and not all in the central city, but all over the metropolitan area. They did a masterful job of bringing a coalition together to craft this plan. We found it was unique among similar efforts across the nation, although the issues, problems and opportunities were in no way unique to Denver.

In Calgary, a rarity: a legislative mandate from the Province's Legislative Assembly to move from the non-binding MPO model to a regional planning board with real authority.

Via some combination of public agencies, business leaders and nonprofits, each of these metropolitan regions has found a way to move forward to their goal, that goal being to manage growth and change THEMSELVES. They have found a way to create the team and advance toward their shared goal. I think it's important to do this not just for the traditional reasons I have talked about which motivate urban planning like population growth, the need for transportation choices and quality of life and environment, but also because some new change agents are upon us.

Remember how I described Portland in terms of accommodating a new technology? Well, some new technologies certainly ARE upon us. We are in a storm of new technologies like drones and driverless vehicles. And new technologies aren't just impacting transportation. The most obvious impact: traditional retail is suffering creative destruction via Amazon and other e-commerce.

Maybe the fans and vendors of this technology are correct – maybe all we have to do is just like before, relax, lay back, let innovation roll on, and accommodate it. Maybe we'll get to nap through that 55-minute commute from Caldwell to Boise.

Or maybe the promoters of this new technology haven't worked it out completely.

I think we have to go back to some bedrock planning principles:

- No large city has managed to maintain its livability in the face of urbanization without adding high-capacity transit.
- There is not enough space in the right of way of lively cities for a wide variety of vehicles, regardless of what kind of vehicles they are.

As someone who thinks about cities, I believe the only viable long-term approaches to growth in dense urban areas are:

- Design buildings and public spaces for the pedestrian.
- Give people transportation choices other than cars.

We had better act now to organize our scarce public spaces for the environment we want, and to manage a new variety and density of public and private conveyances. We need to shape the future of our cities not just around those traditional challenges of growth, sprawl, traffic and air quality, but also around the challenge of these new rapidly-developing techs.

Here's the question: Who will lead in facing these challenges?

Not the federal government – and I don't mean just this administration. The federal government stopped leading in the shaping of cities a long time ago. The creation of HUD in 1965 was the last time they really acted catalytically on the future of cities.

In general, state governments are also not the locus of leadership in managing growth. That locus of leadership has moved to metropolitan regions. Who will be on the regional growth management team here in the Treasure Valley to create a structure for regional action that is bigger than local turf and act in the shared interest in a prosperous and livable future? I don't think you'll do it just the same way as Portland or Seattle or Salt Lake or Calgary or Denver. And I don't think your elected leaders will do it without committed and active partnership. You won't necessarily create an effective growth management partnership through your existing organizations, as good as they are.

You don't have to adopt one of those other region's formulas, but I think you should hold fast to some basic principles:

- Be collaborative partners.
- Be regional.
- Be focused on your desired future.
- And the hardest word on this list: the "a" word – AUTHORITY.

That word bears the hard truth. You won't forge effective growth management from collaboration and partnerships. They are they starting place. You will ultimately have to USE collaboration and partnerships to give someone, some entity, real authority — the power to make some things happen, and others not happen.

There is the risk of failure by factional squabbling captured so well by Ben Franklin who in his wry way reminded his fellow leaders: "We must all hang together, or assuredly we will all hang separately." So, you need to stick together and rise above turf.

I believe it is your time to do this, to join together in collaborative leadership, to create the authority and provide the resources for the future you want. If you do, you will have the deep satisfaction of keeping what you love, building what you'll be happy to inhabit, and giving a great gift to those who follow.