



Urban Rural Connection Project
Oregon Land Use: Decisions Made Without All Voices
Draft Summary

American Leadership Forum of Oregon’s Urban Rural Connection Project

The American Leadership Forum of Oregon (ALF Oregon) is a non-profit, non-partisan organization that brings a diverse range of corporate, public, and non-profit leaders together to build effective networks of collaboration and service throughout Oregon. Its purpose is to join and strengthen leaders in order to better serve the public good and to enhance leadership by building on the strengths of diversity and by promoting collaborative problem solving within and among communities.

Since 1985, ALF Oregon has led cohorts of proven, experienced leaders through year-long programming designed to advance this mission. Upon completing their first year, the graduates, called Senior Fellows, have the option to complete a project together that builds on what they learned and puts them in service to themselves, to their classmates, and to Oregon.

The Urban Rural Connection Project (the “Project”) is a revisit of engaging Senior Fellows and other experienced leaders in multi-month projects to work in service to Oregon. For more information about the Urban Rural Connection Project, please [CLICK HERE](#), for a link about the Project on our website.

The Project’s first phase involved hosting Regional Dialogues that took place in six cities around Oregon. From these Dialogues, the Urban Rural Connection Project Cohort (13 Senior Fellows that planned and facilitated all of the Dialogues, “Cohort”) selected three issues for three committees of Senior Fellows and other seasoned leaders to devote their time, leadership, and energy towards exploring and advancing solutions from May - December 2019. The three issues are: Diversity, Equity and Inclusion ([click here for that draft summary](#)); Broadband Connection: Access to High-Speed, Reliable Internet ([click here for that draft summary](#)); and Oregon Land Use Planning: Decisions Made Without All Voices. Its draft summary is below.

This summary involves the Regional Dialogue conversations surrounding land use regulations in Oregon, the varying viewpoints, and the ways in which rural communities in particular feel hamstrung with the state laws. The full report, due this summer, will provide summaries of each of the six Regional Dialogues and each of the Priority Issues.

Please note: Below, individuals are described frequently according to the Regional Dialogue that they attended. This is not necessarily where they live, nor does it indicate if they identify as urban, suburban, or rural. All Regional Dialogues included Participants from each of these settings.

Land Use Planning: Decisions Made Without All Voices

In each Regional Dialogue, Participants discussed Oregon’s land use policies, but the topic came up much more in the five Dialogues outside of Portland. As a state reliant on and known for its natural resource abundance, communities are affected by management decisions regulating real estate development and natural resource extraction, as well as the high number of acres publicly protected for conservation and recreation (and thus off the books for most economic development and tax revenue). Many stand by Oregon’s land use laws for their focus on promoting development in town and city centers preserving undeveloped land for agriculture, conservation, and recreation. Others identify these same laws as constraints on the creation of housing for middle-income households and economic development. Whether people appreciate these policies or feel completely hamstrung by them, Participants iterated that these policy decisions are predominantly created in state and federal institutions based in urban centers. A core tension across Oregon is that rural communities are not at the decision-making tables, thus creating a reality where individuals feel unheard, ignored, or both.

As part of the conversation around land use policies, a few Participants in different Dialogues specified SB 100, the state land use policy that came into law as the Oregon Land Conservation and Development Act of 1973. They provided background to the law for other Participants in their small group discussion. In short, it was designed to protect farm, forest and agriculture as well as focus development within towns or urban centers, requiring all cities and counties to prepare comprehensive plans that also met state goals laid out in the law.

As part of the law, communities identify where development should be focused; this area is bound by an “urban growth boundary,” commonly know as a “UGB.” One theme was how time-consuming and expensive adjusting the UGB can be to allow for a community to develop. On one hand, time and expense might be expected if the change involves developing lands rich in natural resources. But Participants frustrations surrounded UGB changes to lands that seemingly did not consist of good farm soils, forest, or other natural resources.

For example, Participants from different Regional Dialogues unequivocally recognized the Willamette Valley as having the best, most productive farm soil in the state. Such areas with good agricultural soils are named “Exclusive Use Areas,” or EFUs. The state land use laws intend to protect this resource. However, a number of Participants mentioned that their communities also have these EFUs, but these designated areas actually do not have these same productive agricultural soils. A Warm Springs Participant described how the exclusive farm use area outside of Madras grows rocks and sage brush, but very little else. Another Warm Springs Participant expressed frustration that some changes don’t involve any controversy; a change may yield minimal environmental impacts and positive community or economic results. Whether the change is controversial or not, communities put in a lot of work and expense. Changes should not be that hard, the Warm Springs Participant lamented, “Especially when the change doesn't affect any farm land, you know, farm or forest land – when there are no negatives.”



The Participant further explained that the comprehensive plans lay out growth within the UGB but specifically don't plan for development outside of the UGB. Without a plan for development beyond the UGB – and recognizing the time and expense going into a change, communities cannot respond nimbly to interests in development or new business. “I think sometimes we need to be able to plan beyond the urban growth boundary,” the Participant concluded.

In Baker City, a Participant said regarding planning policies, “One of the divides is the attitude that one size fits all for this great big state.” The topography, the economy, existing infrastructure, and the natural resources of rural areas perhaps present factors and criteria different from urbanized areas; what works in Portland and Salem does not always work for rural communities.

A Medford Participant who was part of the conception process of SB100 discussed how the early understanding of the law was that it would be decentralized and would work from the grassroots up. He added that he sees more decision-making happening through a central warehouse than he thought was intended. He feels like communities would be better off without decisions needing to go through Salem, providing more ownership of their plans and decisions; “I just think that more of that will create more creativity,” he said.

Some Participants brought up that their rural communities actually don't want to grow. A Medford Participant recognized that people there hang on to a “stay small” approach, but that leads to no housing or new jobs. Participants in Baker City joked how the city has had the same population for decades, “It's like ten people move and then we let another ten move in.” In fact, since 1940 through current census estimates, the population has hovered around 9,500, increasing or decreasing by only a few hundred.

The Dialogues also expressed support for these land use laws that confound so many. The spirit of the UGBs in concentrating residential, business, retail and public services together within a UGB is to create positive ripple effects of protecting undeveloped lands, yielding more transportation options, generating less pollution (both air and storm water), and increased social exchanges. Participants defended this intent. In Warm Springs, a Participant said, “The bottom line is that we have to stop polluting and we have to stop developing things that are polluting... I want less carbon emissions. I want to protect the land and I want to look at other economic benefits. But the bottom line seems to be what the manufacturers want. So we need to be more transparent about those things and talk about those things because I'm not NOT about economic development.”

Other Participants, some working in planning field in the city or county level, expressed support for the land use laws. In Lincoln City, a Participant felt like the area would have been destroyed decades ago without such intentional planning. He recognized that the policies have flaws, “I just can't imagine what this place would look like without the regulations. And one of our great assets is that people want to be here. This more urbanized kind of economy is taking root here because all these accomplished people are moving here and making it a more interesting, compelling place. I love the old coast, but I love the new coast. In Yachats they've got disposable income. We need to get them plugged into the schools and the community colleges.



We've just begun to take advantage of this gradual transformation of Rural Oregon that's happening all by itself.”

A Salem Participant felt like land use works better in Oregon than in many other states; protection works. More than a few times, Participants mentioned other cities that they don't want to become. In Medford a Participant referencing Tucson and Phoenix said, “I don't think anybody wants such sprawl.” A Warm Springs resident said that she moved to Oregon because the planning policies at the state level are really progressive compared to the rest of the nation. “I would like to see us maintain that status here in central Oregon especially as it continues to grow and especially at this exponential rate. We're seeing lots of people come in... There's continued pressure for urban growth boundaries to expand and to be able to maintain that balance between what land is protected and what land we're going to develop... It seems like public lands and rural areas are just as important to people here, just as building affordable housing places. Maintaining that balance will be key... and not ending up looking like the cities that are really sprawled like Jacksonville.”

A Baker City Participant also supported the land use policies, “I think there's a lot of perception that land use in Oregon is stunting economic growth, especially if you look at recent years in eastern Oregon and in the Boise area. Boise has had a population and development explosion. But they're also aggressively eating up all their farmlands in ways that we would find disgusting in Oregon... as far as economic development, in fact if used right, it can be used to appropriately locate industry.” A Medford planner iterated that the planning rules are needed, that he does not want to see the urban sprawl of other areas, but also added “I think they [Oregon land use laws] are too restricted right now and there's no wiggle room.”

Participants seemed to feel that more dialogue between rural voices and policy makers might be the answer. However, this leads to another theme around land use laws throughout the Dialogues. Per a Warm Springs Participant, “Rural I think often feels left out of the conversation.”

In one conversation, an official said that he traveled 200+ miles one way to go to 19 meetings in Salem and Portland to serve on a task force. The travel involved at least one night stay in a hotel room, paid out of his own pocket. No one else drove like that. Participants also added that, when a meeting takes place where some are in the room and others are on a conference line, a disparity exists. The person on the conference line can't hear everyone; the line itself may have static. The chatter before and after the official meeting can also direct decisions.

A Medford Participant swore by the importance of the physical attendance of not just going to meetings, but also seeking invitations. “I consider myself part of a rural community in this part of the state of Oregon. I made a habit over the last five years of inviting myself to tables that I would not have otherwise been invited to... meetings that usually involve mainly folks from the Portland Metro region.” The Participant added, “I can't expect to advocate for rural needs if I'm not willing to be at the table. And do you have to physically go? Oh yes. And what I'm finding is that our voices are welcome. Yes, we do have to invite ourselves to begin with. But now I'm invited to all of the related discussions. I'm invited to sit now on rule making committees and to



be the rural voice. That's fine. I would like to lose that label eventually. But what would you want it to be replaced with?" Another Participant described how their community invites state agency representatives to witness and understand their local issues. "You need better communication and understanding with state agency contacts, invite them to come meet with you, and see the problems themselves."

The Salem Regional Dialogue had rich discussions about community involvement. One said, "We don't invest enough in leadership; we work with a model where all decisions are made at the top. We need to use another model to make decisions, not to arrange the process without accountability or enough resources to build the system to accomplish the stated task." Another Salem Participant added, "We need to listen to find adaptable solutions and address systemic issues. People are responding to different things. This prevents people from coming together. It can generate a sense of distrust about the other side and not understanding their needs, not acting for the benefit of Oregon." Another Salem Participant felt like understanding geographic equity piece is very important. She sensed people in charge do not include rural communities in their decisions.

Some conversations involved more procedural ideas, such as changing the capitol to Bend or Redmond, communities more central to Oregon communities. A Participant in Medford suggested that the state senate be changed so that senators represent counties to ensure that all counties had at least one dedicated representative. A Warm Springs Participant suggested that meetings are consistently scheduled over video conference three-quarters of the time so that all attendees have equal access to each other. This would create more of a balance of discussion, everyone seeing the body language and the chatter before and after the meeting. This Participant added, "I think you would increase then the number of people from rural communities who would be willing to participate on boards and commissions if they could drive less."

The concern of rural voices does not exist solely around land use, but other issues as well. Participants gave examples of not being able to hire professionals as teachers because the professional did not have teaching certification. Statewide mission-driven organizations don't ask for rural input and then helicopter in providing trainings that rural communities don't request. Others talked about natural resource management decisions made without input of fisherman, loggers, ranchers, and farmers. Every Regional Dialogue discussed this challenge of not having rural voices. A sympathetic Salem Participant said, "The assumption is that there is some intentionality behind the inequity behind [decision-making]. There is not intentionality behind it. I'm not sure that I do understand rural. I have a low understanding of land use... If we did understand maybe we would make different decisions."

The challenges around land use and rural voices not getting heard were strong themes throughout the Dialogues. The Cohort recognized the magnitude of these issue and attempted to reflect on many of its complexities but did not want the scope of the problems to prevent ALF Oregon's engagement on the issue. The Cohort recognized the divisiveness of this issue and how central it is to the divide between urban and rural communities. The Cohort saw this as an issue to wade into further, seek more explanations, and perhaps find examples of how urban policymakers and



rural communities have productively connected or identify pathways to get rural voices better heard and involved with future decision-making.

With Appreciation

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