

# Opinion: Oak Lodge deserves a more responsive government

Cole Merkel

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## **Cole Merkel: Governance Project provides an opportunity to talk about how that could look**

I joined the Oak Lodge Governance Project because I want to live in a community that has a more responsive government, a better sense of identity and greater opportunities to engage in conversations about our future.

When I first visited Oak Grove, my partner and I were looking at the house we would eventually buy and had no idea we were no longer in the city limits of Milwaukie. The street address was Milwaukie, but unlike the Milwaukie neighborhoods I'd visited, there weren't any sidewalks. Still, there was something charming about the area — somewhat shaggy but verdant lawns and gardens, easy access to the Willamette, and quick, bikeable paths to the Orange Line meant we could stay a single-car family while I commuted to downtown Portland.



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With no community manual to understand the government structure of this unincorporated urban area in Clackamas County, I slowly found out who operated what services by trying to get things fixed that weren't working. For example, every time I cross River Road and Courtney on my bike, I feel like I'm putting my life in jeopardy. Early on, I called the Clackamas County Transportation Office to inquire about a four-way stop at the intersection.

They told me they would "get a traffic engineer" out to assess the situation. Five years later, the intersection is still exceptionally dangerous and I have no idea if that engineer ever showed up. After that experience, instead of asking about getting better overhead lighting on the Trolley Trail between Courtney and Park avenues (which I biked in the pitch darkness twice a day), I just bought a really bright light from REI. I took matters into my own hands because I came to expect neither a response nor action. I attended a few meetings of the Oak Grove Community Council thinking it could address these issues, but soon stopped. It quickly became apparent that regardless of the committee's recommendations, the county has

ultimate veto power, which from the first meeting we attended, seemed frustrating and disempowering to many of the longtime members (see Eleanore Hunter's piece last week for more). This makes some sense: the Clackamas County Commission manages an area larger than Rhode Island, with much of the landmass located in rural areas outside Metro's urban-growth boundary. A board with that much responsibility doesn't necessarily have the capacity to understand the nuanced needs of a growing, urban community.

I will note one early request that was resolved quickly. When we moved in, our house had been vacant for a few months, had new plumbing and the water just didn't taste right. A call to Oak Lodge Water Services District quickly resulted in them flushing the main. This is the type of local, responsive government that I believe Oak Lodge deserves more of. I believe we need to be visionary and grounded in the realities that are coming to the region.

We must respond to our current needs and plan ahead for years to come. We need to build denser, more livable neighborhoods that welcome new neighbors and prevent displacement for those who have lived here for generations. We need to ensure that affordable housing is integrated in the apartments, duplexes and triplexes that are built next to existing homes. Meeting our current needs and planning for the future means building abundant and safe sidewalks so our kids, elders and everyone in between can walk together. It means welcoming creative solutions to homelessness and housing insecurity to our community so that the county can fully implement the regional Supportive Housing Services measure (which I helped develop and pass last year). It means creating a community that truly welcomes and embraces neighbors from all backgrounds, especially neighbors who belong to communities of color.

I'm most excited about what comes next from the OLGP study. It will create opportunities to talk about the community we want to build out of the one we currently have based in factual data. From it, we can work together to create a government that better responds to our needs. How we get better representation remains to be seen — whether through greater responsiveness from the county, annexation into a nearby city or incorporation into our own, new municipality — matters less to me than having the conversation itself.

So let's start talking about it!

Cole Merkel moved to Oak Grove in 2016 with his partner, Nathan. A longtime advocate for homeless services and affordable housing, he served on the Clackamas County Housing Affordability and Homelessness Task Force from 2018-19. Learn more by emailing [oaklodgegovernance@gmail.com](mailto:oaklodgegovernance@gmail.com), or visiting Facebook: Oak Lodge Governance Project, Twitter @Oaklodgegp and Instagram @Oaklodgeproject.

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