

Opinion: Rural governace for Oak Lodge leads to inertia

Tom Civiletti

April 27 2021

Tom Civiletti: We can see clear progress in a neighboring incorporated area, while our urban area faces opposition from other parts of county

I grew up surrounded by apple orchard that was surrounded by woodland of various age. The new stands at field edges and where orchard had been abandoned were dominated by pioneer species like grey birch and quaking aspen. Older woods had sugar maple, white oak, shagbark hickory, black cherry, eastern hemlock and white pine crisscrossed by stone walls, remnants of farms abandoned when mechanized farming made rocky Pennsylvania hills unprofitable land for row crops. With thousands of trunks between me and the nearest kid my age, I spent a lot of time among the trees, getting to know them and growing comfortable with them around me. When I came west four decades ago, western Oregon is where I decided to put down roots. There were lots of trees, unlike the dry southwest I first explored. It felt like home and still does.

When we had the savings to buy more than a fix-up starter home, Oak Lodge was the area most appealing to us. We found a house with a Douglas fir grove in the front yard just down the street from some of the little remaining urban native white oak habitat in the area. There were big trees all over, some native species, some introduced from California, Asia or the eastern hardwood forests. What a place for trees! In the 33 years we've lived in Oak Lodge, some of the finest of those trees have been lost. Majestic redwoods are missing from the skyline. A grove of Douglas firs that was home to a blue heron rookery was cleared. A white oak that stood before John McLoughlin showed up was reduced to an impressive stump until even that was erased. Another grove of Doug firs large enough to become a needed community park was mowed down to make construction easier. I, and many others, mourned them as lost friends.



Tom Civiletti

Not only the biggest and oldest trees are important, though. The green canopy provided by neighborhood trees has health and other benefits. A survey of studies for the international Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health found many benefits of intact tree canopy, including less lung cancer, asthma, heat-related illness, psychological stress and crime. Significant tree cover is associated with stronger immune systems, increased physical activity, healthier Body Mass Index, better cardiovascular health, and positive impacts on the social well-being of individuals and communities. Tree cover saves energy. It increases home

values. And it provides habitat for wildlife. Our yard has been visited by bald eagles, ospreys, pileated woodpeckers, crows, raccoons, possums, skunks, coyotes and blacktail deer. Western screech owls and native squirrels live right here.

But when Oak Lodge residents asked Clackamas County to protect our trees, the proposed ordinance was weakened to the point of ineffectiveness, mostly because of opposition from some who lived in other parts of the county, areas that would not have been affected by the tree protection. What to Oak Lodge was a matter of livability and sense of place became a matter of ideology at the county level. In contrast, Milwaukie, the city to our north, has been named Tree City of the Year for 2021, because of efforts to protect and grow its tree canopy. The people of Milwaukie were able to make policy to enhance their livability. The people of Oak Lodge were not.

Because the Board of County Commissioners is Oak Lodge's local government, we are subject to the disruptive shift in political ideology that occurs every few election cycles. I am all for democratic elections, but also am quite sure that the yo-yoing of county politics is more extreme than change in the political opinions of Oak Lodge voters. Although it may not reflect our opinions, the ideology that guides the board of commissioners certainly affects us. When the Park Place Orange Line Station was being planned, Clackamas County wanted little to do with it, because those in power were antagonistic toward light rail transit. There still is no appropriate zoning in place to guide development in the area around the Park Place station, which may be why there has been so little appropriate development in the area. Contrast that with what Milwaukie has accomplished around its light rail station. Again, we can see clear progress in a neighboring incorporated area, but insurmountable inertia in our unincorporated area. Even older is the insurmountable inertia around the rest of the McLoughlin Area Plan, which began in 2010 and still has not seen substantial implementation despite thousands of hours of work by dedicated volunteers hoping to improve their community.

So, should we now create a new city in the Oak Lodge area? Should we instead annex to Milwaukie or Gladstone? I do not know. I lack sufficient information to make such a decision, which is why I worked with other Oak Lodge residents to secure a grant for study of the economic realities of and governance options for our area. The Oak Lodge Governance Project

study will be completed this fall. Then we can have informed discussion on the future of our neighborhoods.

Email us at oaklodgegovernance@gmail.com. Connect on Facebook: Oak Lodge Governance Project, Twitter: @Oaklodgegp, and Instagram: @Oaklodgeproject. Our website will be operational soon.

Tom Civiletti is a member of the OLGP steering committee. He has served on the Oak Lodge Sanitary District Surface Water advisory committee, Clackamas County Transportation Service Plan advisory committee, Oak Grove-Lake Oswego Ped/Bike Feasibility Study community advisory committee, and as a volunteer with North Clackamas School District, Urban Green, and the long-running Oak Grove Commons Open Mic series.