

# Milwaukie planning commissioner: Oak Lodge deserves better

Joseph Edge

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## **Joseph Edge: Clackamas County government not equipped to provide the level of service required by residents of our urban area**

I clearly remember, when I was 8 years old, asking my dad for whom he voted in Milwaukie's mayoral election. "We don't live in Milwaukie," he said. But our mailing address, post office and library were in Milwaukie. "So what city do we live in?" I asked. "Clackamas County," he said. Knowing that counties are not cities, I pressed: "I know we live in Clackamas County, but what city do we live in?" His reply: "there isn't a city." After a moment of pondering this revelation came the inevitable: "Why not?"

Growing up in Oak Grove, I was struck by the lack of shared identity. I attended Oak Grove Elementary, which enjoyed a strong identity among students, their families and faculty, but I eventually learned that identity did not extend to the larger geographic community. There were no community events. Our parks were overgrown fields. Then, after entering the workforce, I learned few outside of Oak Grove knew where it was or, in many cases, had even heard of it.

I joined the North Clackamas Watersheds Council Board in 2015, serving as its chair since 2017. NCWC partners with cities and special districts to deliver environmental restoration projects and community-education programs. Milwaukie is an enthusiastic partner whose broad local land-use authorities position it to comprehensively support the mission of the NCWC, such as implementing a tree code to protect mature tree canopy. The special districts are also wonderful partners, and their employees are dedicated to the communities they serve, but they are constrained to their narrow charges, while Clackamas County retains land-use authority in unincorporated areas like Oak Lodge.

In 2015 I began volunteering for the Oak Grove Community Council reviewing land-use applications, was elected to their board in 2017 and have been serving as chair since 2019. Very quickly I learned that members are passionate about the community and share values such as preserving trees and habitat, engaging with our local history, and inviting community-supportive businesses into the area. Time after time, it was clear the county's Zoning and Development Ordinance was not serving the vision or values of the community.

The OGCC appointed me to the McLoughlin Area Plan Implementation Team in 2015, where I've served as vice-chair since 2017. I believed an advisory committee created by the Board of County Commissioners charged with implementing a plan for Oak Lodge could achieve needed change in the area. Of the over 50 projects and programs identified by the community-led McLoughlin Area Plan — accepted by the Board of County Commissioners in 2012 — only four were substantially completed.



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In 2018, I applied to serve on Milwaukie's Planning Commission, where I presently serve as vice-chair. After years of advocating for land-use and transportation policy changes at the county, the contrast has been eye-opening. At the county, many complex land-use decisions are delegated to a hearings officer to make a final determination. In Milwaukie, these decisions are made by a group of volunteers — the Planning Commission — who are residents or have business interests within the city. In both cases, public hearings are held, but there is a stark contrast between testifying to members of your community versus testifying to one person who may not even live in the same county.

My years of engaging with Clackamas County staff, advisory boards and commissions, and elected leaders has made it clear that a rural county government is just not equipped — financially or politically — to provide the level of service required by residents of our urban area. And my volunteer experience confirms that we do have a shared identity, but it isn't adequately represented by a county government serving over 400,000 residents. Looking north to Milwaukie I see the type of government Oak Lodge deserves: elected leaders and a Planning Commission from the community, and land-use policies that respect our unique place in the county. For some neighborhoods, that may mean annexing into Milwaukie or Gladstone, for others it might mean incorporating a new city. And as we learn more about the options for our future, I often think back to that dialog with my father and still ask: "why not?"

The OLGP is committed to delivering factual data to the community that will help determine whether annexation or incorporation is economically feasible. While OLGP is not dedicated to any specific governance outcome, we are all dedicated to our community. Regardless of our area's future, we believe in building a stronger collective identity around the place we live so that we can grow as a community.

To learn more about Oak Lodge Governance Project, please connect with us at [oaklodgegovernance@gmail.com](mailto:oaklodgegovernance@gmail.com), Facebook: Oak Lodge Governance Project, Twitter: @Oaklodgegp and Instagram: @Oaklodgeproject. Our website is forthcoming.

Joseph Edge is a member of the OLGP Steering Committee.