

Opinion: Oak Grove community with heart imagines way forward

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Nate Ember: Laws, policies are ours to shape and change for our collective benefit

I came to Portland from Boise, Idaho, immediately after graduating college to pursue a career in architecture.

After living with family and in cheap apartments in outer Northeast Portland for the first few years, I finally landed a job in my field and we started saving to buy a home. Affordability was key, as well as car-free transit access to downtown (No. 33 bus) to keep our expenses manageable.

We weren't even thinking about Milwaukie/Oak Grove until a Realtor showed us a tiny home that was just good enough to live in with two tiny kiddos while we worked to add on and eventually replace the whole thing almost exclusively through our own direct labor. We built feverishly for the next five years, paying no attention to anything beyond our lot and direct neighbors.



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Just as we finished rebuilding our house, we learned that TriMet would begin constructing the Orange Line just below our new home. Immediately, our concern for our own investment along with my compelling interest in such a project as a trained architect and planner sucked me into the broader world of local politics like a truckload of Dyson vacuums. This project would prove to be both devastating and incredible in many ways as it meant many of my immediate neighbors' homes were bought out and torn down, as was the wall of mature trees and vegetation that protected us from the intense drone that is McLoughlin Boulevard.

It also meant fantastic transit access, the Trolley Trail connection to Milwaukie, great landscaping, and through much advocacy, a concrete sound wall to make up for what homes and trees used to do. This arc of experiences was simultaneously colliding with other critical shifts in my personal life and career. After taking in a couple who were houseless through an incredibly harsh winter, we became glaringly aware of the inequity inherent in our social and governmental structures that stratifies who benefits and who gets left behind.

Since then, I put both my personal and professional time in places where I can work with neighbors and friends who share an understanding and commitment to work for the good of all, not just themselves.

What I've found in the unincorporated neighborhoods of Oak Grove and Jennings Lodge are people who want a voice for themselves and their community as a way to take on collective projects that are difficult to accomplish, for many of the reasons others in Oak Lodge Governance Project have explained.

In this work, I've had the great honor of friendship with many incredible community advocates, including two amazing individuals we lost a few years ago; sincere gratitude and peace to you, Fred Nelligan and William Wild, whose legacy lives on in our continued quest for better.

This community has heart, and it recognizes that what is precious is not only our physical assets, but our natural and social assets as well. Through this lens of deep care, I advocate for a renewed look at local governance and what it could actually mean for this community we share.

What I sense is that folks have gotten used to the status quo and so don't feel that change is possible. My job is to imagine what's possible beyond current constraints and realities, and to include others in visioning work to discover the path to make change possible.

By applying a mindset of abundance, we can create a future where there is always plenty to go around instead of arguing over what little is left. Local laws and policies are ours to shape and change for our collective benefit; and while there are certain limits we can't control, many are simply perceived and hard to reimagine. This is a counterpoint to the status quo, focusing on yes to better things so long as the benefits we seek can truly be experienced by each and every one of us.

Right now, we have the opportunity to awaken ourselves to what it means to dwell here, in this place that was so carefully stewarded by the Indigenous communities who remain its rightful owners. We get to think about what it truly means to be neighbors to one another.

Together, we can find a path forward that empowers everyone, especially those most forgotten. We can choose to live and trade in human potential

and experiences instead of wealth and power. We can rebuild connection with one another and the breath of this place, seeking both our own benefit and that of everyone and everything around us.

It can be a tough choice because new paths are scary and they take constant effort, but I believe it's worth it because living well is worth it, and leaving well is worth it too.

Nate Ember is a member of the Oak Lodge Governance Project Steering Committee.

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