

Opinion: Growth requires Oak Lodge to consider governance options

Nathan Breitenfeldt

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Nathan Breitenfeldt: Change is coming to Oak Grove/Jennings Lodge, and that's not up for debate.

As a steering committee member of the Oak Lodge Governance Project, I would like to share my personal motivation for participating in the project. When my partner and I moved to Oak Grove in the summer of 2016, at first we didn't know where we were. And we aren't unique; newcomers to northern Oak Grove often think they live in Milwaukie. But once we realized that we were moving to unincorporated land, well, that explained a lot about our neighborhood. Not everything is bad in my opinion: I think the baffling mix of styles and sizes and setbacks of housing lends a quirky charm to my neighborhood. But roads are insufficient and dangerous. Residential sidewalks are rare and scattered, hilariously insufficient gestures of public safety.

Many of my fellow members of Oak Lodge Governance Project have been civically engaged in the Oak Lodge area for years, and hearing about their past experiences and frustrations has been illuminating (Check out Mitra's article <https://bit.ly/3wDjoqY> and Valerie's article <https://bit.ly/2R6pSOS>, and watch for more in coming weeks). They've made



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Herculean efforts just to make small changes in our community, because we don't have a government that can adequately respond to our community's needs. But I'd like to instead talk a bit about our future. Because change is coming to Oak Grove and Jennings Lodge — that's not up for debate. The real issue is whether it's time for us to take a more active role in shaping our future.

Let's take HB 2001, for example. This state law will reduce restrictions on middle housing like duplexes and triplexes in low-density residential zones in Oak Lodge. No matter what you think of it, it's the law now, and it applies to the Oak Lodge area regardless of our incorporation status. We should expect denser housing and more neighbors in coming years. But there is a major distinction that residents should keep in mind: because there is no city here, complying with HB 2001 in the Oak Lodge area will fall upon Clackamas County rather than a city government. I have little doubt that the county will rezone the area in overly broad strokes that will upset all sides along the way. Other cities are integrating HB 2001 in

comprehensive, nuanced plans that balance allowing for more housing types with other priorities, such as maintaining the tree canopy and natural areas. To be clear, this is not an indictment of Clackamas County administration or leadership: the county is huge and has hundreds of thousands of residents. They don't have the institutional capacity to really focus on just one little corner of the county. Nor should they! The county can't be expected to provide a municipal level of governance.

However, the Oak Lodge area is already densely populated like a city, and we already have all of the resulting issues around land use as a city. And the county's current zoning for our community already leads to increased density, even before adopting provisions to comply with HB 2001.

Community leaders in Oak Grove and Jennings Lodge will likely try to influence the zoning changes coming as a result of HB 2001 implementation, but ultimately we just have to hope the county won't mess it up too badly. And if you'd like to see the county's track record with land use in our area, I'd invite you to take a walk down McLoughlin and survey our commercial zoning. Try to count the car lots without getting hit by traffic!

And as our community continues to grow, especially with HB 2001, our underdeveloped streets are likely to become more dangerous. I fear that our current governance structure will be inadequate in addressing this problem and others. I fear that future civic engagement will be too much like past and present civic engagement in the area: endless effort to address even basic problems in our community and limited tangible results.

It may not be time yet for any of the Oak Lodge area to incorporate or annex. Cities require resources and political will. But at the very least, it's time for us to start seriously discussing it. That's why I'm excited to be part of OLGP. We are going to provide actual data to the community that will help determine whether incorporation is financially feasible. While OLGP is not dedicated to any particular governance outcome, we are all dedicated to the long-term project of building community in our area. 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, Facebook: Oak LodgeGovernance Project, Twitter: @Oaklodgegp and Instagram:@Oaklodgeproject. Our website is forthcoming.

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