

In Our View: Land for Jobs

Clark County's economic development is stifled because businesses can't find places to build

As of Monday, January 9, 2012

When a county places excessive and irrational hope in building houses instead of businesses, a couple of bad things can happen. First, the residents-to-jobs ratio becomes imbalanced. That ratio is about 2-to-1 at the state and national levels, but in Clark County, it's 3-to-1, reflected partly in the estimated 55,000 local commuters to jobs in Oregon. Second, the local economy becomes dangerously dependent on the housing market. When that market deflates (sound familiar?), the community's pain during a recession is more piercing than what the state and nation feel.

It's time for local leaders — political and business — to look beyond their provincial interests and collaborate to stimulate the local economic recovery. They can do that by emphasizing jobs over houses in land-development policies. The need is urgent, as described by Scott Bailey, regional labor economist for the state: "Having enough land that's zoned and serviced and shovel-ready is really important in a competitive market, and it's one of the things we have control over locally." Indeed, but you'd never know that by observing the political and economic development wrestling matches of recent years.

Bailey's comment appeared in a [Sunday Columbian story](#) by Aaron Corvin and Stephanie Rice. The article focused on a recent study by the Columbia River Economic Development Council that identified two daunting roadblocks in developing land for employment:

The shortage of available land in our county constricts job creation. The metro area in Portland has 56 large industrial sites ready for job-creating businesses. Clark County has only 13.

The bureaucratic maze in Washington state is serpentine and suffocating. In and around Portland, developers can start building on nine of those 53 sites in as few as six months. Here, it could take up to a year and a half to get permits for construction.

That is no recipe for recovery. It's a formula for failure.

It's not as if local leaders aren't trying. County commissioners have tried to streamline permitting, although the effects of that effort have yet to take full force. And, as Corvin and Rice reported, the epic political battles over sewer systems development could be nearing a truce if not peace and progress. The county and the cities of Ridgefield and Battle Ground are expected to sign a final agreement on a regional sewer plan. We recommend haste, for to hurry would accelerate job creation in north Clark County, particularly along the Discovery Corridor on Interstate 5.

Environmentalists and developers are quick to blame each other for the agonizing and stifling status quo, but the truth is, there are several outside-the-box solutions to this problem. One is the "banking" of land for employers rather than for buyers of new homes. Another is engaging the county's three ports more fully in identifying and designating land for jobs. For example, why not create a zone along the county's 33-mile Chelatchie Prairie Railroad for industrial or commercial development of business parks or manufacturing? What about designating land near Washington State University for

light industrial, so that businesses would have better access to the university's research and development endeavors?

We commend the CREDC for its analysis and recommendations. We also urge county and city elected officials to more vigorously engage businesses, environmentalists, ports and land experts. Together, they must not only arrest, but reverse Clark County's ongoing inertia in developing land for jobs. Otherwise, as CREDC leader Lisa Nisenfeld said, "we are going to be dead in the water in a fairly short amount of time." And at the worst possible time, coinciding with the economic recovery enjoyed elsewhere.

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