

Land: Key ingredient for Clark County growth



Farming land for sale in Woodland at the height of the real estate bubble in Clark County. Growth in Clark County was heading north from Ridgefield.

By [Aaron Corvin](#)

As of Saturday, May 21, 2011

The 1990s heralded a full-speed ahead period for Clark County's economy.

Interactive story

To see the full multimedia package for this story, including videos, a photo gallery and an interactive graphic, visit www.columbian.com/growth.

A suburban part of the Portland metro area, the county acted as a relief valve for families seeking affordable housing. It also scored significant employment victories, roping in high-tech employers and a variety of manufacturers, and sprouting scores of retail, construction and other businesses.

Clark County claimed a title in the '90s: fastest-growing in Washington state. But that title masked a growing problem. By taking on too many houses and too few jobs, the county was building a wobbly economic portfolio. It also was neglecting a key piece of economic development: industrial land.

In 1994, Brian Wolfe, who was at the time preparing to retire as chairman of the Columbia River Economic Development Council, warned against a lack of planning for industrial land, which he said was key to creating family-wage jobs and to building a diverse tax base to pay for public services.

“Realtors especially must realize you can’t sell bedrooms without also planning for boardrooms,” he told 400 people who had gathered for a Realtors-sponsored business event. “They aren’t just selling houses in Clark County, they’re selling quality of life in terms of good schools, good jobs and a clean environment.”

As data show, the message never sank in. In 1990, Clark County had 84 jobs per 100 households — not enough jobs within county limits to support the population, forcing many local workers to commute to Oregon. That state’s Clackamas County was in a similar situation, with 85 jobs per 100 households. Over the next two decades, however, Oregon land-use policies that require communities to set aside land for commercial and industrial use helped transform Clackamas from a commuter county to one with enough jobs to support its population. By 2009, Clackamas County had 98 jobs per 100 households — and in February, its unemployment rate was down to 9.5 percent, better than two thirds of Oregon counties.

Over the same period, home construction outpaced job creation in Clark County, which, by 2009, had 82 jobs for every 100 households. Clark County’s 12.9 percent February jobless rate was worse than two thirds of Washington counties.

Wolfe, now a Port of Vancouver commissioner, said there had been too much pressure to cash in on breaking ground for houses and too little patience to set aside land for industry and jobs.

“It’s very rare that you have a property owner that has the financial capacity to wait it out,” Wolfe said. “In our community, we had this gold rush for housing.”

Maintaining its industrial spot

Clark County’s hunger for housing has had real consequences for industrial employers.

Bob Lewis, the president of Vancouver-based [Columbia Vista Corp.](#), said the encroachment of homes along roads near his sawmill has raised concerns for him about the long-term viability of his operation.

And the company has had to fight to protect the “heavy industry” designation that it needs to keep operating.

About seven years ago, Columbia Vista was temporarily bumped out of compliance with zoning rules when the county overlaid the company’s property with a “business park” designation. The company fought the move during county planning commission meetings.

Ultimately, the company was annexed into the city of Vancouver and secured an agreement through the city council to keep its property zoned for heavy industry.

If the “business park” zoning designation had stuck, Lewis said, Columbia Vista wouldn’t have been able to operate.

Lewis said the county has a severe shortage of industrial property, and the city's agreement with his company recognized this. While a business park "might create more jobs per square foot," he said, "we create more higher-wage jobs per square foot than a business park."

Lands to jobs?

Recognizing an imbalance in how land is used is one thing. Getting more land ready to meet the needs of business is much more complicated.

How to create jobs by tapping the county's land base is once again on the minds of the region's leaders as they scramble to spur job growth in the face of unrelenting unemployment.

A task force set up by Clark County commissioners is investigating how other counties have used their land-use codes to help retain and expand businesses. According to the task force's work program, it will "concentrate on providing opportunities for manufacturing and industrial facilities that create sustainable, high-paying jobs."

The task force expects to develop recommendations by December.

Meanwhile, members of the nonprofit Columbia River Economic Development Council — the county's chief economic development agency — are assessing the county's supply of land to figure out how quickly more parcels can be put on the market for industrial or office development. That analysis, expected to finish this month, will eventually lead to policy recommendations for county, city and port leaders.

One of the leaders of the CREDC's effort, Brent Grening, executive director of the Port of Ridgefield, said the goal is to prepare land for companies that do business regionally or globally, and therefore import wealth.

"We've got a lot of housing," Grening said. "We need some jobs to come in now."

 us on Facebook for the latest news and information from Clark County

[Close for now](#) | [Close for good](#)

[Follow @thecolumbian](#) on Twitter for the latest news and information from Clark County

[Close for now](#) | [Close for good](#)