



The League of Women Voters of Portland

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**To: Don Hanson, Portland Planning Commission chair
Portland Planning Commission members**

**From: League of Women Voters of Portland
Elizabeth Pratt, president
Debbie Aiona, action chair
Ann Mulroney, board member**

Re: Portland Plan Background Reports

Thank you for this opportunity offer comments on the The Portland Plan. League members attended most of the neighborhood meetings about the Plan, read most of the background reports, and have met to review comments appropriate for us at this stage of The Portland Plan development. Our framework for review was League positions on planning, redevelopment, schools and economic development developed since the early eighties.

We were overwhelmed by this comprehensive view of the planning process. It is the first time so much interrelated but distinct content has been so well described and related to each other. These documents are a call to broaden our thinking when establishing a rational framework for our planning and regulatory systems for land use and urban design. Thank you from all of us for this incredible work.

As we read the documents they sorted into three foundation themes central to Portland's future. These themes also reflect the issues that are most important to the League. As the Plan evolves and implementation is discussed we will return to these themes to evaluate continuing work.

Healthy Natural Systems are our foundation. We think the Watershed Health Report best expresses the need for and the ways to sustain our natural environment.

Our Neighborhood-Based Built Environment is central to Portland's character. The Urban Form report, the School report, and the Economic Development report (the portions on neighborhood commercial areas) best characterize our views on Portland's built environment.

The Central City and the traded sector specializations that sustain it, our traditional trade and distribution sectors, and the growing strength of our

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institutional and education sectors can continue to provide a firm foundation for our economy as it diversifies and expands.

We'd like to share a few comments on these themes and conclude with a few features of the Comprehensive Planning process that we would like to recommend.

Natural Systems/Watershed Health

In our discussions about the natural environment we felt that thinking about our natural systems in the context of watersheds would result in planning policies and regulations that best connect all aspects of the natural environment.

Starting with watershed health led us to a better understanding of the impact development has on the health of all our natural systems, and how public policies and actions can affect that health.

Neighborhood-Based Built Environment

Schools continue to be the heart of Portland's neighborhoods. The Public Schools Report includes valuable ideas for enhancing the connections between the school and community and we urge that these connections continue to be a focus of the Portland Plan.

Recognizing the critical role schools play in Portland's success, a school focus can provide direction for linking housing policy, transportation improvements and land use regulations. We recognize too that a diverse housing stock keeps neighborhoods alive and we support all planning efforts to expand our stock of new and revitalized housing for all income groups.

Strong schools bring people to a community, contribute to community connectedness and bring the stability that attracts commercial uses to neighborhoods. We hope all public agencies recognize their central role in our future.

We appreciated especially the five distinct neighborhood patterns described in the Urban Form Report and believe they are an important framework for intentional development guidance in Portland.

Economic Development

We recognize and support the intent in the Economic Development Background report to strike a balance between the needs of Portland's international trade and distribution sector, the needs of the traded sector specialization that sustain our Central City, our target industry sectors and the growing needs of the institutional and education sectors.

We note that the six largest traded sector specializations of the City's economy are professional services, wholesale trade, corporate management, insurance, transportation and energy utilities. The target industries should be nurtured of course, but we note the "bird in the hand" theory and urge support of the industries that have made us prosperous and continue to show strength.

The primary link in the Report is between job forecasts and land needs. We believe that the critical link here is between education and job creation and would like to see this linkage

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strengthened in all land use planning and regulatory efforts. All of our target industries and “economic specializations” depend on a highly educated workforce. Carole Smith, Superintendent of Portland Public Schools, reported in a recent City Club interview that 63 percent of children who enter high school in the district graduate. Thirty-five percent of African American children are on track to do so. We recognize that the interface between the Comprehensive Plan and the Public Schools is limited, but also believe that providing space, infrastructure and whatever else is necessary to support all of our educational institutions is critical for our future.

The League like all of us is concerned about the consequences of this severe recession. Colliers International, an international commercial/industrial real estate sales and reporting firm, anticipates a long, slow recovery in Portland. Nationwide restructuring of our economy is underway. In this light we urge frequent monitoring of the industrial/commercial land absorption rate in Portland and the economic trends and forecasts on which it is based.

We believe the linkages between the continuing vitality of the Central City and the strength of the City’s economic base specializations are very important. A speaker at a previous meeting on the Portland Plan expressed concern that housing may absorb too much of the commercial space in the Central City. We urge frequent monitoring of the land use mix in this heart of Portland.

During the League’s review, members frequently noted the scope of the job that has been completed and the job ahead. Several process and management thoughts were expressed repeatedly and we’d like to share them.

Clarity. Keep working to make sure that the documents are understandable. Make sure the public understands the principal implementing programs.

Consistent Data. Projections included in the background reports were not always consistent with other city reports. Specifically, we are concerned about how the household projection numbers were determined. Recent reports (Comprehensive Plan Evaluation - Housing Technical Working Group, Comprehensive Plan Evaluation – Infrastructure Technical Working Group, and the Central Portland Retail Research and Analysis) include projections ranging from 90,000 – 160,000 new *residents*. The Housing Background Report Overview, however, projects 105,000 – 136,000 new *households*. The difference is significant and will have an impact on how we plan for the future. Please make sure that information used in similar ways is consistent across sources or provide reasons why they are not.

Terminology. Please provide definitions for the terminology used to describe future reports. We understand that words such as strategies, goals, objectives, etc. can have overlapping meanings but would like to know the definitions the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability is using. Understanding intent and context can help us understand future documents. For instance, our study group considers a strategic plan as a guiding, short-term document providing direction for action during the tenure of the current city leadership. On the other hand, the state mandated Comprehensive Plan governs the city’s development over decades.

Governance. An overwhelming number of agencies, governmental units, and boards and commissions will play a role in implementing the Comprehensive Plan. We think it would be helpful if the intergovernmental structures and informal arrangements necessary to implement

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the Plan somehow could be illustrated or described for the public and included in the final document.

Collaboration. Portland has an extensive community of non-profit organizations that will play key roles in implementing aspects of the Plan, especially housing. If there is some way to describe or illustrate these partnerships, we also think that would be helpful.

Implementation/Priorities/Financing. There was in our group considerable discussion about the unintended consequences of regulation. We recommend that regulations be carefully designed to reduce unintended consequences as we work to improve the intentional consequences of our land use and urban design regulatory systems.

Budget and management challenges will be formidable going forward. We urge that implementation priorities with time horizons and projected costs be considered from the outset. We expect that financing maintenance and new infrastructure will be very difficult, but extremely important. One member of our group talked about “Forward to Basics” as a theme for the future. Please incorporate or continue an “innovations in public financing” program as part of the Plan implementation process.

Finally, throughout the Economic Development Background Report there was acknowledgement that Portland companies, to remain globally competitive, must always look ahead, be innovative, flexible and adaptable. We urge our planning and regulatory infrastructure to be so as well. These reports are evidence of the Planning Bureau’s great capacity. Thank you.