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Jeremy R. Young

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Stafford Triangle

by Jeremy Young

This year, the Portland metro area recognizes the 40th anniversary of Senate Bill 100's signing into law by the late Governor Tom McCall. This landmark legislation paved the way for Oregon's renowned land use planning system and pioneering urban growth boundaries. Since the implementation of the state's first urban growth boundary (UGB) in the 1970s, the UGB has become a model for anti-urban sprawl efforts nationwide and has helped to preserve vast areas of agricultural and forest lands statewide. Since its inception, however, the UGB has excited controversy, especially in the state's most populous area: Portland metro. This year, as many celebrate the birth of the UGB and its many successes, a largely rural community south of Portland and its surrounding municipalities continue to be embroiled in a decades-long conflict over the potential expansion of the boundary and the prospect of urbanization.

The community of Stafford is comprised of ten neighborhoods located within what is known as the Stafford Basin, or "Stafford Triangle," in unincorporated Clackamas County. The roughly 3,900-acre area is bound by Tualatin to the west, Lake Oswego to the north, West Linn to the east, and Interstate 205 to the south, and is mostly agricultural today. Much of the land is zoned "exclusive farm use." The area's rolling hills, steep topography, and numerous riparian areas including the scenic Tualatin River and its tributaries, have hindered urbanization since Anglo-

American settlers first arrived in the 19th century. Nevertheless, the Stafford Triangle is home to nearly 2,200 residents today.

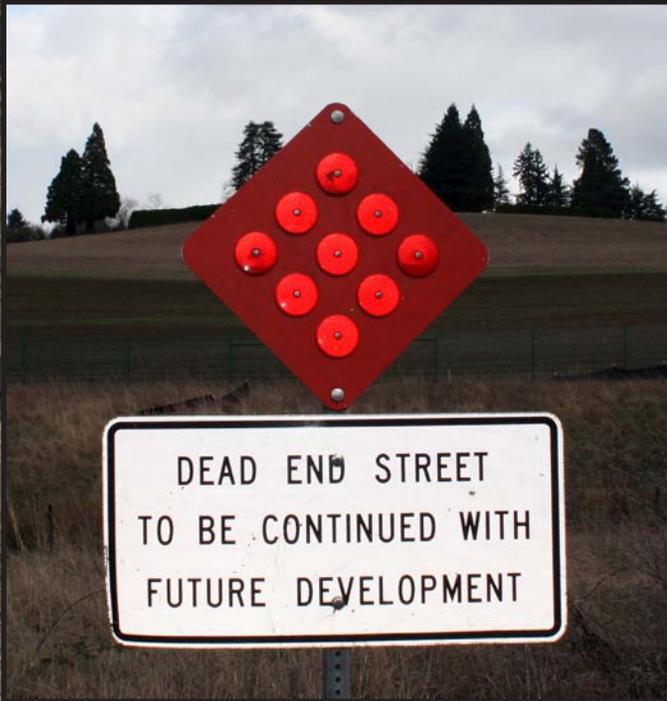
Stafford's challenging topography hasn't kept it off of Metro's or Clackamas County's radar as a potential site for future population and employment growth, however. The area was first targeted as a UGB expansion area in the early-to-mid 1990s, but the idea was quickly shot down as the cities of Tualatin, Lake Oswego, and West Linn expressed concerns over the high costs of providing infrastructure and services there.

Stafford's earliest consideration for inclusion within the UGB came at a time when Metro and regional municipalities were required by state law to reassess its 20-year supply of developable land every five years to determine whether or not it could adequately support new growth. The frequency of this process and specifically the question of which areas would be selected next led to many property owners on the urban fringe, especially farmers, having uncertainty about what the future held for their land. This, as a result, caused many headaches for the region's planners and elected officials.

According to Carlotta Collette, Metro Councilor for District 2, which includes the Stafford Basin, the consideration of Stafford as a UGB expansion area in the 1990s also occurred at a time when Metro was required by state law to consider the quality of agricultural soils over anything else when identifying areas suitable for

Lake Oswego

West Linn



The 2010 urban reserve designation immediately rekindled the tensions of the 1990s in Stafford, pitting neighbor against neighbor and developers against open space preservationists.

urbanization. In other words, the lesser the quality of the soil in a given area, the more suitable it was for urbanization. To a large degree, topography was not a primary consideration during that time.

New land use legislation signed into law in 2007, Senate Bill 1101, has since provided Metro and the three counties with a more efficient way to identify areas for future urban growth. No longer selecting new areas based primarily on soil quality and deciding simply where not to develop, Metro and the counties must now identify and designate “first priority” developable lands, or urban reserves. These are locations outside the UGB that may facilitate the most efficient and cost-effective development of new urban areas and “livable communities.” While Metro is still required to reassess its need to expand the UGB and evaluate the adequacy of its 20-year land supply every five years, property owners on the fringe now have more certainty about the future: urban reserves are designated as such for 50 years. Every five years when considering if and where to expand the UGB, Metro is required to draw first from areas that are designated first priority urban reserves. An urban reserve designation does not guarantee that an area will be urbanized, however.

In compliance with the new legislation, Metro and the three counties, Multnomah, Washington, and Clackamas, formally designated areas outside of the UGB as urban reserves in 2010. Once again, Metro and Clackamas County saw Stafford’s potential for urbanization and took the appropriate steps to seal its fate, designating it as an urban reserve until at least 2060. In light of Stafford’s history

of resistance to urbanization and noting some of the challenges associated with urbanizing, Metro designated the greater portion of the basin as “urban reserve with options/conflicted agricultural land.” The remaining portions of the basin (south of the Tualatin River and north of Pete’s Mountain) in the area of Borland Road and the I-205 interchange and a smaller area containing Rosemont Road (abutting the City of West Linn) pose the least challenges and would likely have little effect on commercial agriculture, according to Metro.

The 2010 urban reserve designation immediately rekindled the tensions of the 1990s in Stafford, pitting neighbor against neighbor and developers against open space preservationists. The City of Tualatin and the City of West Linn, once again objecting to Stafford’s development, also filed an appeal with the Land Use Board of Appeals, just three weeks following the official designation. The appeal remains in litigation and a decision is expected “soon,” according to Jeffrey Condit of Miller Nash, the land use attorney representing the two cities.

Gearing up for the rumored urban reserve designation in the years immediately preceding Metro’s 2010 decision and anticipating the potentially bitter conflict ahead, Stafford property owners came together in 2007 in an attempt to have their voices heard on the issue and to begin work on a shared vision for the area.

What began as a grassroots effort quickly evolved into a quasi-governmental entity, one of three “Hamlets” now recognized by Clackamas County. The Stafford Hamlet is represented by a board of directors, comprised of com-



munity leaders, who essentially serve as advisers to the Clackamas County Commission. “The Hamlet system is an expression of Clackamas County’s desire to invite more citizen participation in governing decisions,” says Molly Ellis, one of the Hamlet’s original board members and a resident of the Basin for forty-plus years. “Although we have no legal power as a Hamlet, both [the County and Metro] have invited us to the table and respectfully listened and responded to our requests.”

The Stafford Hamlet ratified an official Vision and Values statement in 2008, which serves as the “standard for all future decisions” and helps the community to speak in unison, according to Ellis. The Hamlet’s vision, according to the document, addresses the following concerns: upgrading infrastructure should new development occur; clustering development to preserve open space in the Basin; concentrating higher-density residential development and new employment centers in the vicinity of Borland Road and I-205, south of the Tualatin River; mitigating impacts to the river; protecting the Basin’s

most sensitive natural areas and wildlife habitats, especially along riparian corridors; and allowing existing lower-density residential neighborhoods to maintain their current densities.

The Hamlet remains committed to a set of core values, which prioritizes striking a “balance between competing interests” and “preserving the “Stafford Character.” The latter represents a desire by many for the area to maintain an overwhelmingly rural feel despite the potential urbanization of portions of the Basin.

Whether or not the Stafford Basin is urbanized in the next fifty years remains to be realized, but the recent designation of the area as an urban reserve has proved, if anything, to be a successful community-building exercise. An issue that initially polarized the residents of Stafford has brought them together. **M**

Jeremy Young is a student in the Master's of Urban and Regional Planning program at Portland State University. He is originally from Lancaster, Pennsylvania.