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Clackamas County still searching for its soul

By *Nick Christensen*

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As Metro staff has pitched its proposed [Community Investment Strategy](#), and elected officials get set to debate whether to adopt its recommendations, one part of the region is seemingly seeing more questions than solutions stem from the report.

Clackamas County is still searching for its soul, and how its complex collection of communities can work together to flourish, to take center stage.

When you read the Community Investment Strategy, parts of the region immediately come to mind as you flip the pages. The urban growth boundary brings images of Washington County, burgeoning and looking for more land to build homes and factories. The community redevelopment aspect conjures Multnomah County, its industrial sites along the river and transitioning neighborhoods like Gateway and Rockwood needing attention and investment to improve.

What does Clackamas County want?

That's a tough question to answer in what's easily the most diverse of the three counties in Metro. It stretches from [gleaming](#) historic subdivisions in Milwaukie to ski lifts on Mount Hood, from rodeo grounds in Molalla to gated estates in Lake Oswego.

On the northern edge of the county is the home of Acting Metro Council President Carlotta Collette, whose district represents northwest Clackamas County. The Clackamas-Multnomah county line runs through her backyard.

"You sort of think about Washington County as the future. You sort of think about Portland and Multnomah County as the present, the trendy. And Clackamas County is our history and our heritage," Collette said. "We want to protect our heritage, protect our traditions. But we also want to make sure as the region grows, we're not left behind."

So how do you get a county focused on its past to think about its future? Competition may drive just that.

"An anecdote I've heard out here for almost 20 years has been that Metro has said your turn will be next year," said Burton Weast, director of the [Clackamas County Business Alliance](#). "After years of that, you get tired of waiting for next year."

Clackamas County is reliant on timber, farming, fishing, factories, shipping and, to a

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large extent, jobs in other parts of the region.

"There's no future in that history," Weast said, referring to Collette's observation. "We're not going to continue to export residents elsewhere to work in the future. That's not a sustainable model. We're going to have to change that."

Rolling hills vs. smooth sailing

In a sense, the terrain of Clackamas and Washington counties is a metaphor for the history of development in those places. Washington County's flat, fertile Tualatin Plains sustained its farming industry, then provided easily-developable turf for the tech industry that drives much of the region's economy. Cities in the area have been aggressive about attracting new development, from Hillsboro's lot aggregation at Ronler Acres in the 1980s to [Tigard's new downtown plan](#) that focuses on bringing in denser development to compliment a planned mass transit line.

Development in Clackamas County has been more rocky. The likeliest target for greenfield development is the Stafford Basin. But the region cherishes Stafford's rural character, and neighboring cities want nothing to do with handling the urbanization and planning that will someday result in a new community. Ten miles east, in Damascus, a planning process is nearly a decade old and has only recently resulted in [some development concepts](#).

Downtown development efforts in Oregon City and Lake Oswego are still nascent. The only part of the county that has light rail, the Clackamas Town Center, is anchored by a shopping mall – nobody's ideal of compact urban form. Downtown Milwaukie, [just a few years from having light rail](#), was downgraded from a regional to town center in the 1990s.

"The success we've had is locational," Weast said, meaning that the positive development efforts in the county have spurred more from geography than anything.

Concerns about equity

Some Clackamas County representatives have cast a wary eye to the northwest. A proposal to designate the AmberGlen area in east Hillsboro as a regional center has raised questions from Clackamas County about what constitutes a regional center, and whether designating AmberGlen as such could draw more resources to the Tualatin Valley.

[› Click here to read more about AmberGlen](#)

Regional centers are focus points for transit, redevelopment and concentrated future growth. They are ranked higher when it comes to scoring for money for infrastructure projects. Six of the seven regional centers are connected by rail transit.

Clackamas County Commissioner Charlotte Lehan said she doesn't know whether AmberGlen should qualify as a regional center. But the proposal to add a fourth such center on the westside – there are four regional centers east of the Willamette, two in Multnomah and two in Clackamas county – raises a litany of questions.

"What's the criteria to be a regional center? What's the expectation for what happens once you are a regional center? How many regional centers should we have in the whole region? Should they be distributed around the region? Should

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there be a ratio between town centers and regional centers? Why would you want to be a town center if you could be a regional center?" Lehan asks.

"I don't really know what the impact is. But I don't think we've had that discussion," she said.

Collette, who was not on the council when regional centers were designated, acknowledges that the centers haven't had the same kind of growth that was envisioned for them. She blames part of that on the massive urban growth boundary expansion of 2002, which opened thousands of acres for development in Damascus and North Bethany, straining planning and investment resources.

"We have managed to get light rail to most of them, which helps because investment tends to follow the train," Collette said. "But we haven't gotten, consistently, the kind of urban development we had hoped for."

Lehan also questions some of the existing regional centers. Three of the seven are centered around shopping malls.

"How do we make a large shopping mall into a real urban center?" she said. "Most of them (the regional centers), I don't think anyone would say qualify. Most of them have no housing."

Metro Councilor Robert Liberty, who represents southeast Portland, said only one area fits his mental image of what a center should be.

"If you walk around Hollywood, Hollywood is getting close to feeling like a town center," he said. "It's a little dispersed. But I was just through there the other day, and I thought 'This will be the first one that's not really downtown that looks like a center.' It's got a library, and shops, and not just boutique things but a place where you can buy hardware, and 4-5 story buildings are being built. You go, 'Oh, this feels different.'"

Troubles in trying

That failure to launch is not for lack of effort. Oregon City has nearly all the tools to become a vibrant regional center – an Interstate highway, a recreational riverfront, a large commercial district, traffic problems that are slowly being addressed. It's got a few bus lines, and ambitious commuters could even use Amtrak's Cascades train as a makeshift commuter rail line - \$4 each way.

[›Click here to read about Oregon City's downtown plan](#)

Missing has been that spark, which Mayor Alice Norris attributes, in part, to urban growth boundary expansion.

"Because Hillsboro and Washington County are growing so fast and their needs are so obvious, does that become a giant sucking sound that pulls resources from our side that is growing more slowly due to lack of resources?" she said. "Although we're making progress, a lot of our population has to commute to the jobs-rich areas."

Collette said it's a challenge that takes time and energy to address, as cities and counties are just now discovering.

"I think people are recognizing the commitment it takes to get to a place where Hillsboro is at," she said. "The whole process has really forced us to say 'Wow, it takes a lot of work. It takes a lot of government commitment.'"

Weast said the county needs to focus on its blend of brownfield and greenfield development sites, including the McLoughlin corridor near Milwaukie, the Highway 212 corridor south of Happy Valley and long-term strategies for the Stafford and Borland areas between Wilsonville and West Linn.

"Washington County has attracted the kind of development – employment development – because they've had large lot land available, willing governments and good planning," Weast said. "That's what we want in Clackamas County. We need all three."

› [Read more about the Community Investment Strategy](#)

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CLARIFICATION: An earlier version of this story used a different adjective to describe Milwaukie. That has been changed. Additionally, the quote "We want to protect our heritage, protect our traditions. But we also want to make sure as the region grows, we're not left behind" was added to the story. No other changes were made to the story after its initial publication.

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