

## PAG Members' Supplemental Comments

The 2010 Portland International Airport (PDX) Master Plan, the City of Portland Land Use Plan, and the PAG Final Report, endorsing both, represent substantial steps forward for the region, and have been unanimously endorsed by the PAG. These supplemental comments by two PAG members simply provide perspective to guide future oversight of PDX and offer a recommendation on a potential political solution to ongoing oversight and future growth issues.

Problems, and their solutions, are of two types: technical and political. The technical elements of the PDX Master Plan and City Land Use Plan are far superior to any of the past. A major political problem has been solved by moving PDX land use planning from a "Conditional Use Permit" judicial (technical) process to a "Plan District" legislative process where the Portland City Council has greater say in PDX development. This is appropriate, since PDX impacts land use far beyond its immediate facility boundary, and should be decided by city-wide processes.

**The Remaining Political Problem.** The Port of Portland has long had a reputation of not being responsive to community concerns. We have seen substantial change of this attitude within this process, and commend the Port on its efforts to pay more attention to its constituents, to listen to public comment. Nonetheless, the following principles remain true:

- Organizations behave according to their structures,
- Organizational structures are defined by their information flows,
- Stable organizations defend their structures, and
- The Port's structure has not changed.

The Port's political structure is a volunteer commission of community leaders appointed by the Governor and confirmed by the Senate. Once appointed, Port commissioners cannot be removed except for malfeasance, resignation, or appointment to other boards. They hire the Executive Director, who works for them. However, being volunteers, their ability to understand the complex regulations defining operations is limited by learning time, which forces them to depend on the Executive Director and his staff for guidance. The Port's operations are complex, including three airports, marine terminals, and substantial real estate operations. Being a government, it must operate by governmental rules. Therefore, a great deal of what the Port does depends on the personality of Executive Director. The current Executive Director has been exemplary in addressing public concerns, but future Directors may not share his view.

In addition, the Port sees itself as a "quasi-governmental business" that operates more according to business practice than government practice. This impacts how the Port deals with public input. In government, public input is a quality control measure to ensure all voices are heard and mistakes are minimized. Good public input is time-consuming and often delays decisions, but the decisions are usually better. (The undersigned members started this process about a dozen years ago, with a ten-year horizon to make substantial changes. It has taken about ten years.) Citizens aren't very tolerant of government mistakes. Business, on the other hand, must move more quickly, and its mistakes are quickly forgotten. Serious mistakes may force a business into bankruptcy and closure. Since governments serve the public, this rarely occurs. Business deals are usually concluded in private, out of the public eye, and partly to maintain an edge over competitors. "The Port has long had a policy of not giving advance

notice of its business decisions, and that is not likely to change.”<sup>1</sup> Long experience shows that public input at Port Commission meetings regarding approvals never results in changes and there is rarely any opportunity to review business proposals in advance of Commission review and action. Fundamentally, therefore, the insensitivity to public input and its potential for quality improvement has not changed.

To address this, Airport Futures defined a PDX Citizen Advisory Committee (PDX CAC), which has the potential to hear proposals early and offer quality-improving comments. We hope this group is effective, but it cannot be effective if the Port does not change the policy noted by Mike Cheston a decade ago.

A second way to address this problem is to change the structure of the Port Commission, in a way that automatically changes the information flow. We recommend that the Governor appoint a Portland City Commissioner, ex officio, to the Port Commission. The Governor could do this administratively, or it could be embedded in the ORS section that defines Port Commission appointments. Because elected officials are sensitive to public input at every turn, their membership on the Port Commission would introduce a more governmental way of seeing things, reducing some of the Port’s bias to operate as a business. We believe this relatively small change would have substantial impact. The elected official should be from a general purpose government involved in planning, sustainability, and transportation.

**Seeing the Future.** Airport Futures is all about seeing the future, and substantial progress has been made to address our likely future, with a new emphasis on sustainability. But we see a more severe future than any political body, including the Port and the City, is willing to admit. We believe recovery from the current recession will be slow and shallow. We believe the projections of growth are still too optimistic. (“Optimism bias” is typical of airport master plans. For example, the 2000 Master Plan projections included an assumption that petroleum would remain at \$10 per barrel (1996\$) through the year 2020.) Flying is by nature energy intensive and polluting. Returning to past glory days is virtually impossible. All growth projections assume a growing population. While local growth should continue for the foreseeable future, world population will likely cap by 2050, with consequences here. We believe world population, resources, and pollution will converge in a “canyon” about 2050, and surviving it will take extraordinary measures to achieve no-physical-growth sustainability.<sup>2</sup> (Quality growth will still be possible if we can avoid the canyon.) Such warnings have been present for nearly 40 years<sup>3</sup>, and we are still taking only tiny steps to avoid this future. Growth has a “momentum” that grows as it gains mass. Slowing growth earlier by government policy means there will be less momentum at some future time, when it is clear to all that physical growth must stop. (Quality growth seems to have no bounds.)

The future presents the same problem as governing the Port. Understanding the future is a technical process, and science points to very serious problems. Doing something to anticipate it is a political process, and the population still clings to past paradigms of growth. One disappointment is that the Port, being somewhat isolated from political issues, could have been

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<sup>1</sup> Comment by Mike Cheston, Aviation Operations Manager, in 2000, when questioned at a CNAC meeting why there was no advance notice that the Commission was about to approve a contract for the Trammel-Crow Air Cargo Terminal.

<sup>2</sup> See *The Meaning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (2007) by James Martin.

<sup>3</sup> See *The Limits to Growth* (1972) by Meadows et al, and its 1992 and 2004 sequels, also by Meadows et al.

more aggressive in addressing the technical issues of managing and reducing growth. Instead, it continues to embrace growth, just adding focus to grow a little greener.

**Summary.** The Airport Futures package is an outstanding effort, more than we hoped for when we started. We endorse its findings completely. Our only regret is that the Port did not take this rare opportunity to go even farther.

Respectfully submitted by:

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