

# Advanced Urban Geography: Urban Sustainability A Case Study: Portland, Oregon Urban Growth Boundaries (Transportation, Political, and Economic Impacts)

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## Abstract

This research topic will provide an investigation in some areas on how urban growth boundaries have affected the city of Portland, Oregon, and its contributions to infill development in the region. The focus will be informative by defining what an urban growth boundary is, its purpose, what the implications are, and what some of the economic impacts are. Urban growth boundaries (UGBs) are organized through public policy in order to combat the issue of urban sprawl in suburban areas around densely populated cities. The idea is to allow protection of the environment surrounding a regional boundary, and help with infill development within central business districts and other locations. Infill development is the redevelopment of brownfield sites in an urban setting that allows the distribution of economic resources and population to cycle through time. Some analysis will explain the effects on property values by land use zoning caused by the urban growth boundary.

Urban sustainability has been a growing issue since the latter part of the 1900s from the 50s to the present. This research project can provide one of the many alternatives in accomplishing sustainability in an urban area. It provides an analysis of the behavioral, economic, and political impact of the UGBs on the region. This is a prime example of efforts being made, while providing results to support decisions, and the theory. Since the implications are not directly related to just one entity, they can provide insight in other areas on how the UGB has reduced automobile usage, catered to the pedestrian, and enhanced the quality of life for citizens in an urban environment.

Sources that may be referred to will be academic journals and articles, of which are solely based on the concept of smart growth planning, urban growth boundaries and development behavior and commuting, and land use policy. All sources will be provided by EBSCO Host, the Sustainable Urban Development Reader, and Science Direct. These will be referenced to help provide a better understanding on why UGBs are beneficial to a possible sustainable future, while explaining the positive and negative implications.

**Keywords:** Urban sustainability; Urban geography; Sustainable development

## Introduction

This research topic will provide an investigative analysis based on how urban growth boundaries have affected the city of Portland, Oregon, and its contributions to infill development in the region. The focus will be informative by defining what an urban growth boundary is, a brief history (and policy), its purpose, what the implications are, and what some of the economic impacts are, and to include some transportation efforts. Urban growth boundaries (UGBs) are organized through public policy in order to combat the issue of urban sprawl in suburban areas around densely populated cities. The idea is to allow protection of the environment surrounding a regional boundary, and help encourage infill development within central business districts and other locations. Infill development is the redevelopment of brownfield sites in an urban setting that allows the distribution of economic resources and population adaptation. Some analysis will explain the effects on property values by land use zoning caused by the urban growth boundary.

Urban sustainability has been a growing issue from the 1950s to the present. This research project can provide insight into one of the many alternatives in accomplishing sustainability in an urban area. It provides a detailed but brief analysis of the behavioral, economic, and political impact of the UGBs on the region. This study reveals some of the efforts being made decrease the impact of urban sprawl, while providing results to support decisions, and the purpose/implications of UGBs. Since the implications are not directly related to just one entity,

they can provide insight in other areas on how the UGB has reduced automobile usage, catered to the pedestrian, and enhanced the quality of life for citizens in an urban environment.

Sources that will be referred to include academic journals and articles, most of which are solely based on the concept of smart growth planning, urban growth boundaries and development behavior and commuting, and land use policy. All sources will be provided by EBSCO Host, the Sustainable Urban Development Reader, Science Direct, and some supportive online websites. These will be referenced to help provide a better understanding on why UGBs are beneficial to a possible sustainable future, while explaining the positive and negative implications.

## History

Since the end of World War II and the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, this provided financial assistance to veterans returning

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home from war to purchase a house with little to no money down. The results of this policy lead to high demands for housing outside of the central business district. As for the last quarter century, there has been a period of large-scale urbanization coupled with an extraordinary increase in personal affluence and mobility or “suburbanization” throughout the United States. After decades of continuous growth and economic prosperity, it became clear that this growth has become unsustainable. This kind of persistent growth develops with the mindset of what short term benefits a community can achieve, while providing tax incentives to businesses in order to bring revenue into the community [1]. Although in the end, this whole concept is not cost efficient and the city is left with the implications of maintenance cost of deteriorating infrastructure [2]. In many communities those implications are unused and growth continues in the form of urban sprawl, which would eventually lead to methods of growth management in places like Portland, Oregon.

### Political Background

In 1973, under Oregon state law with assistance and Gov. Tom McCall, legislation approved of a land use planning commission called the Land Conservation and Development Commission (LCDC) as the state’s central planning authority. In Portland, current land usage is regulated by what many cities call traditional land use regulations, but future development is regulated by an urban growth boundary. An urban growth boundary supports the development of infrastructure on land inside the boundary. It consists of urban services such as roads, water and sewer systems, public safety services, schools, and parks and recreation [3]. As well as preventing urban development on farm and forest land. The purpose of the UGB in Portland is to prevent urban sprawl while encouraging and inducing infill and redevelopment inside the urban core in order to maintain a strong central business district, as well as development elsewhere. To assure municipalities and businesses of future development, Metro (a regional planning authority) reviews

the need for change to project adjustments for potential growth in order to provide efficient transit services and development [3].

Metro manages the urban growth boundary of Portland, but municipal governments make the final decisions that relate to their communities. The region covers portions of 3 counties (Clackamas, Washington, and Multnomah), 24 cities, and over 256,000 acres of land [3]. After being designated in 1979, Portland and the state of Oregon was under criticism by other cities around the U.S., because of how an urban growth boundary could have negative implications on the local economy. By the requirement of state law, Metro has to provide twenty year estimates for future projections in population and economic growth, with a review every five years for adjustments in allocating more land or “urban reserves” [3]. Many small and large adjustments have been made in the past. As you will see in Figure 1, which shows adjustments to the UGB by 2060, urban reserves are projected to more than double in size compared to the other 2 counties, but still within the three county designated area.

### Economics of Urban Growth Boundaries

In recent studies it has been shown that the UGB does in fact affect property values inside and outside of the boundary. Property values follow trends like most markets do. As land prices rise, higher density development trends begin to emerge. This encourages higher density growth management and builders use smaller parcels of land keep their housing cost down [4]. Increased demand inside the UGB follows the typical supply and demand curve, so when demand is high and supply is low, costs typically increase resulting in profits for realtors. Although by assumption the opposite trend can be found outside of the boundary line. Since the land outside of the UGB has become “common” in a way that there is plenty of it available, the onset of supply and demand relates to this issue by decreasing the value of land because of the availability.

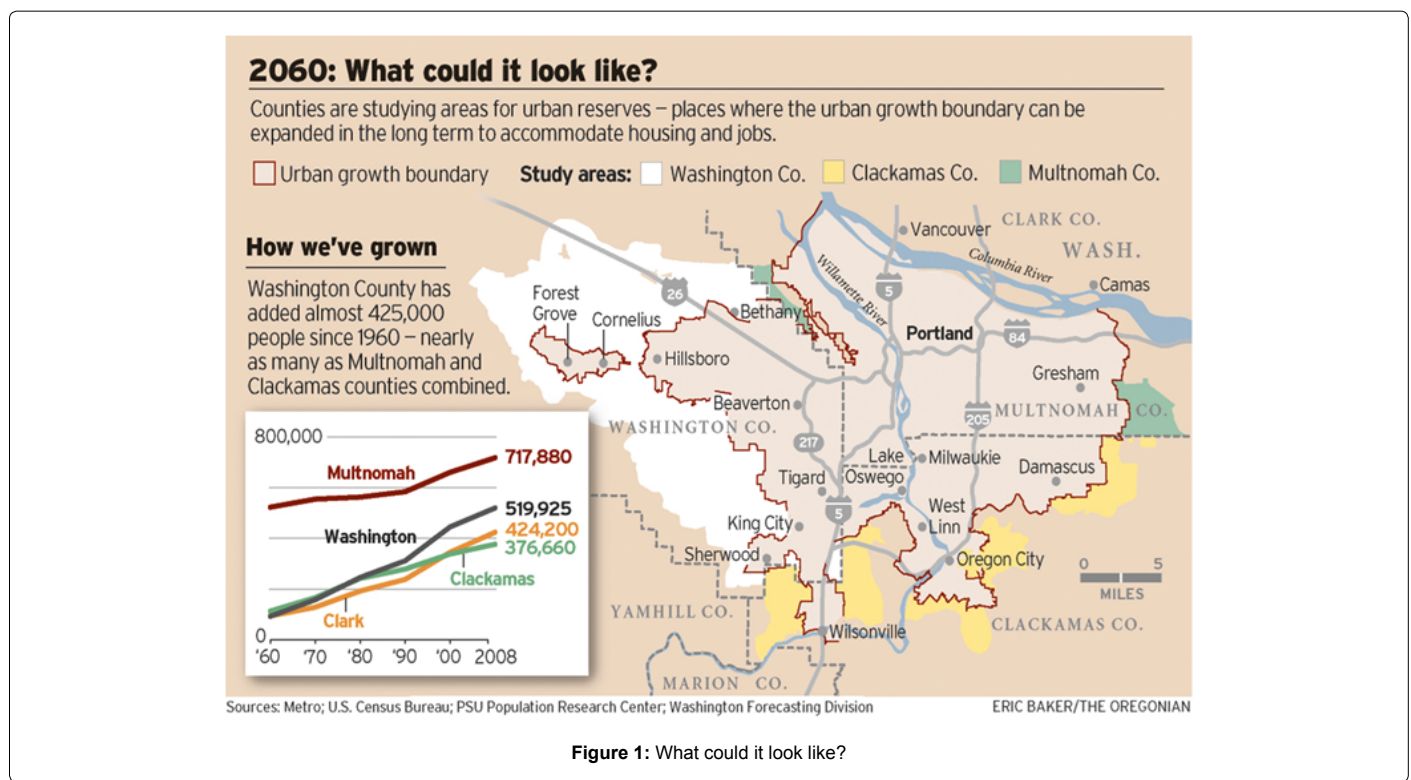


Figure 1: What could it look like?

From 1991 to 1995, the average lot size in both Clackamas and Multnomah counties have fallen by 13.5% and 20%. This supports the average cost per acre at \$18,000 outside the boundary, and \$150,000 per acre near the center of the UGB [4]. As for remote land within 1-5 miles outside the boundary (also prohibiting development), land value averaged nearly \$8,500 per acre, which is just about 21 times cheaper than land inside the UGB [5]. While in the past housing prices increased by 69% from 1991 to 1996 [4].

“Consumers are generally willing to pay less for housing as density increases due to the fact that higher densities usually mean smaller yards, fewer open spaces, and less privacy” [4].

In the end, the true principle of a UGB is to utilize space, but for realtors it is to maximize profits.

Cost differences like those listed above result in socioeconomic differences for the poor, and it then becomes harder for lower income families to survive within the UGB. This tends to decentralize people of low income status, and over time relocation is deemed inevitable. Advantages with UGBs may vary from each community, but the encouragement of inducing infill development and redevelopment requires developers and builders to include inclusionary zoning. This means that they are required to provide a percentage of housing units in high density developments to be affordable for low income families. Although developers may be required to provide cost efficient units to low income families, they still price other units at market value as expected. This is all feasible through tax breaks, and cost cutting incentives with infill development. Costs are substantially higher to redevelop a site that was formerly developed due to demolition, as compared to Greenfield development. Infill development in Portland, along with redevelopment and new housing located inside the UGB, has risen substantially in relation to the 1980s [4]. An increase of 29% in residential development came from infill and commercial redevelopment, and 37% for recent business employment development [4]. According to Metro, new housing growth in the boundary is at 65%, with a decrease in leapfrog residential development. Additionally, in relation to the 37% growth by infill development for employment development, over the last 20 years (1980-2000) employment in Portland's CBD had grown by 70.8%, and has ranked 6<sup>th</sup> in the country [6].

## Sustainable Transportation Efforts

Portland has been known for making its central business district as inconvenient as possible for automobiles. Through the urban growth boundary, they seek to provide a more efficient experience and a healthy atmosphere for the community. By reducing the reliance on automobiles and restricting urban sprawl, many transit oriented communities have developed outside of the CBD with commuter rail and light rail systems. A reduction in greenhouse gas emissions results from utilizing public transit systems, which in turn improves air quality and community health for a better quality of life. There is a reduction in noise pollution from automobile traffic as well. The reason for this is because they want to encourage a more pedestrian friendly atmosphere in the downtown setting. How they do this is by making it more accessible through public transit by bus, street car, and light rail.

They have actually redeveloped a section of the downtown area to replace automobile congestion with recreational space and make it readily accessible for pedestrians on foot or bike. In East Portland, the city expects to build nearly six miles of sidewalks from 2012 to 2013 [7]. Portland's regional transit system is called TriMet, consisting of buses, MAX light rail, WES commuter rail, and Portland Street Car [7]. For

those people who prefer biking as their main source of transportation, public transit has many reasonable methods that accommodate them as well. TriMet offers a variety of routes for cyclists to take their bike with them (depending on the time of day like rush hour) or areas to park their bikes. There are many secure and enclosed parking areas that have keycard access, enclosed eLockers with keycard access, reserved bike lockers for rent, and traditional bike racks all on a first-come, first-served basis [7].

TriMet highlights 3 goals that they firmly believe in for continuing success which are 1) continue focusing on rider needs, 2) enhance financial stability, and 3) build partnerships for growth. They operate according to a Transit Investment Priorities (TIP) program from input by jurisdictional and community partners, riders, and the general public to direct their investments appropriately every five years [7]. Like most transit systems, TriMet caters to local communities and efficiency. By creating alternate connections within local communities they are able to reduce congestion and lag time for passengers on a fifteen minute cycle. A mobile ticketing system is planned, which will reduce congestion by allowing passengers to purchase tickets on their smart phones and scanning a bar code as they board the transit system [7]. This transit oriented development impacts multiple sectors inside a community by becoming pedestrian friendly, locating transit stops within walking distance between residential and retail districts, and becoming more family oriented by catering to family needs. Funding from the Oregon Department of Transportation provides improved and direct access for pedestrians and cyclists through lane reconfigurations at bus stops (similar to a form of traffic calming).

Public transit systems cannot function without a struggle. TriMet like many other public services around the country encounters financial struggles from time to time. Due to budget cuts they have had to cut some programs out totally in the downtown portion of Portland, but only for light rail [7].

## UGB Contributions to Sustainable Communities

To be sustainable as a community we cannot act alone, but if we act as a group and practice a collaborative lifestyle (sharing time, space, and materials) with collaborative consumption (sharing what you own to reduce the consumption of material goods) it may be feasible. Although this statement is within reason, it is only an ideology. We all share the environment that we live in, and we live in a world where we consume more than we need, but if we work together as a community we can become more sustainable. Sustainability can be thought of as pyramid with tiers or levels. We can all do our part in order to reduce consumption, greenhouse gases, circular metabolism, and waste management, but we can never be 100% sustainable [8]. An urban growth boundary isn't an entity in itself, although it is a community effort, and it can be used efficiently if the right policies are in place. Although politics is what has led us in the direction we are in, an urban growth boundary does encourage transit oriented development, a pedestrian friendly CBD, and mixed use residential areas. A balanced transportation system that accommodates a variety of transportation options such as driving, public transit, bicycling, and walking, which improves community health through exercise by alternative routes connecting to bike trails. Likewise, in Portland, parks, recreation, and other rural activities (agriculture) are within a twenty minute drive from most communities inside the UGB.

## Conclusion

To conclude, urban growth boundaries do provide alternatives to

many problems, especially by restricting urban sprawl. Despite all of the contributions a UGB may have in a community, they do not come without shortcomings. We have to give consideration to the people who live outside the boundary line and find solutions to counter the effect it has on land market values in remote rural areas. We must also think of this as a long term plan providing that people do not have to live within the UGB, but if they choose to live outside of it that those restrictions are there and only allow rural development. After all I do not believe it is possible for everyone to benefit from a service that affects the public as a whole. Someone will always suffer from a solutions shortfall, no matter how large or small it may be. Take for instance the market values of land within the UGB, it is pretty obvious that realtors have most likely taken advantage of people based on self-interest. We can compare this to our current use of natural resources, if we continue to exploit our resources it is unsustainable and infringes on the needs of future generations. In essence, unsustainable growth is irresponsible and we need to take responsibility for our own actions.

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