

IN THE WORKS

Oregon's Future has myriad ideas to explore and outstanding editors, advisors, and authors prepared to share their expertise. What we require is funding to take on these complex issues—YOU can help. The following abstracts discuss the importance of several fascinating topics and why they matter to Oregon, the Northwest, and the country.

Contact *Oregon's Future* to participate in or sponsor these topics, or propose another subject you care about.

WITHOUT YOU THERE IS NO OREGON'S FUTURE.

Equity

Jill Fuglister and Jo Ann Bowman,
Coalition for a Livable Future

A Partnership with Future Generations

Social equity is a contentious and vital issue for both Oregonians and our society as a whole. What is it? Why is it important? How does it affect us? Why should we care? As the first in a regular series on equity, we will explore these questions and begin to suggest answers.

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the term *equity* means "justice according to natural law or right; specifically: freedom from bias or favoritism or inequity." In other words, equity is about fair and equal access to basic necessities and to opportunities for advancing oneself and one's family. Like notions of freedom and democracy, fairness is a core American value.

Yet we are ambivalent when determining standards of fairness and applying them in our communities. Public debates about standards are usually contentious, as balancing the scales requires the examination and modification of practices that support the privilege and power of certain influential groups. This balancing act happens within every issue, whether it is housing, education, employment, immigration, or sustainability.

Why Does Equity Matter?

It is not commonly understood that leaving some groups behind reduces the region's overall economic prosperity and deprives future generations of the standard of living that so many of us now enjoy.

In any city in the Portland metro area, one can see the sharp discrepancies between the haves and the have-nots. Each week more and more high-end housing is built in communities where most of the workers cannot afford to live. So, depending upon economic status, one has access to the best or the worst that the region has to offer.

For people of color in the Portland area, the notion of equity has deep roots. NE Portland developed as Portland's most racially and ethnically diverse district in part because of overtly discriminatory practices like *redlining*, the historic practice of financial institutions drawing a "red line" around certain areas deemed inappropriate for bank loans or other financial assistance. While redlining no longer occurs, its legacy still determines how equitably resources are distributed, and new concerns have emerged with respect to the redevelopment strategies being employed in NE Portland.

In the early 1990s Portland's housing market began to heat up, and NE Portland neighborhoods that had thousands of vacant properties suddenly began to attract new interest due to their downtown access, low housing prices, and quality housing stock. At the same time, the city enacted various economic development policies to help encourage sustainable redevelopment of these neighborhoods. As this dynamic took hold, skyrocketing housing prices began to force out many long-time residents who could not afford to stay and benefit from the revitalization. This push-out of people of color and economically vulnerable residents to the suburban areas has impeded their access to employment opportunities, public transportation, cultural services, and a sense of community. How do we create fair access to important assets and resources for all members of a community? This is the fundamental question that we must address if we are to reach a more equitable future.

Moving Toward Equity

While there is much more to do to achieve current and future equity in our communities, Oregonians have applied their innovative thinking to take some good first steps. One example is our state's Metropolitan Housing Rule, which works toward making access to housing more equitable in communities across the Portland region.

The rule requires that at least 50 percent of new residential units be attached-single-family or attached-multi-family units. While the rule does not guarantee affordability, (the next critical step that we need to take) it does provide a basis for limiting exclusionary zoning tactics used by many

cities to keep low-income people out of their communities, such as mandating only large-lot, single-family homes.

Another example of equity planning is the thoughtful approach that residents of the Portland region have taken with respect to providing long-term protection of our streams and natural areas. In 1995, voters passed a regional greenspaces bond measure to acquire and permanently protect natural areas for ecological purposes. This year, voters will decide whether or not to support a new bond to buy and protect more of our valuable natural resources. These measures help ensure the long-term health of our streams, rivers and natural areas so that future generations can experience nature close to home.

Equity Requires Participation

A final and critical element of equity is participation. Without the meaningful participation of all groups as full and equal partners, we cannot create equitable communities. It is imperative that public policy reflect the rich diversity of voices that will need to share the limited natural, cultural, and community resources of our state. A regular column on equity will bring to you the voices of those around the state working on equity issues or struggling with injustice. ▲

Civic Engagement in Oregon

Wendy Radmacher-Willis,
Executive Director City Club of Portland

Civic engagement is defined as people's activities in the public, governmental, or civic sphere. Social capital refers to the connections between individuals and the reciprocal relationships that arise from those connections.

Over the past few years, government agencies, non-profits, and public officials have emphasized the importance of civic engagement, yet we have not had a rigorous conversation about what civic engagement means for us nor have we carefully examined the underpinnings of social capital and where we might need work to improve basic social interconnections between Oregonians. *Oregon's Future* is a perfect place to start that conversation.

In 2000, Harvard Professor and Political Scientist Robert Putnam burst into popular consciousness with his best-selling book, *Bowling Alone*, which argued—exhaustively and convincingly—that civic engagement and social capital in the United States were on a precipitous decline by almost every conceivable measure. He argued that Americans were retreating into the private sphere and that everything from letters to the editor to membership in civic associations to picnics and dinner parties were on the decline.

Despite the alarming national trends, however, Putnam concluded in a follow-up study that Portland, Oregon is the great exception to the decline of civic engagement. In February 2004, Putnam proclaimed to a packed house at City Club of Portland: "It's terrific to be here in Portland. For anybody who studies civic engagement, coming to Portland is like coming to Jerusalem." In his 2003 book, *Better Together*, Putnam argued that Portland was the only major American city to buck the trend of declining civic engagement. Although he did not undertake a major analysis of social capital in Oregon, Putnam found that "Portlanders of all walks of life were three or four times more likely to be involved in civic life as their counterparts elsewhere in America." Putnam further concluded:

In Portland, as in many other places across America, baby boomers in the late 1960s and early 1970s had gone into the streets over issues of war and peace, racism, social justice, and women's rights. Talk of 'participatory democracy' was all the rage. But in the ensuing decades elsewhere in America the aging boomers left the streets, discarded their placards, gave up on politics, and slumped onto the couch to watch television. In Portland, by contrast, the ranks of civic activists steadily expanded as Portlanders experienced a resurgence of exuberant participation in local affairs. Only in Portland, these data show, did participatory democracy become more than a faded and then forgotten slogan.

Portland's—and Oregon's—history is replete with examples of the citizenry directly participating in issues of critical public importance. For example, in the early 1970s, 100,000 Oregonians attended workshops and public events convened to design Oregon's land use system that ultimate-