



From the desk of
Representative Brian Clem

The Legislature should help the metro region in land-use planning: Editorial

The Oregonian Editorial Board By The Oregonian Editorial Board

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The bill moving through the Legislature is a model of Oregon-style, get-it-done collaboration. It should be approved.

It's difficult to underestimate the amount of time spent and ire suffered in the last several years on the subject of land use in Washington, Clackamas and Multnomah counties. The forces of growth and development that attend population and business expansion collided with deeply held community-by-community values about the protection of farmland and residences.



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Where residential housing meets farmland ... finding the right balance is the challenge of land use planners. This scene, from a 2009 file photo, is from a rapidly growing North Plains, in Washington County. Fredrick D. Joe/The Oregonian.

The battle has been hottest of all in Washington County. In an area known as Helvetia, north of Highway 26 about 15 miles west of Portland, protectionists fought hard to challenge the designation by county leaders of farmlands as acreage ripe for business and residential development. Similar pressures linked to urban growth boundary designations were felt across the county, notably in Hillsboro, Cornelius and Forest Grove.

Accusations occasionally flew about county commissioners making backroom deals and Metro, the regional planning agency, espousing onerous housing density goals and development imperatives. The result has been to trap thousands of acres of land in limbo, stymieing development and investment, whether for farm, commercial or residential purpose. And the result was exactly what nobody wanted: Everybody loses.

It took the **Oregon Court of Appeals** to say the land-use planning process – decreed by the Legislature but carried out by local governments – was broken. Last week the court threw out a 50-year growth plan hatched in 2010 by the counties and asserted, among other things, that Washington County had used faulty metrics in gauging the value of farmland it would convert to commercial use, notably the acreage in Helvetia. It's rare that a court uses loaded language, but it said Washington County had applied "pseudo factors" that misrepresented long-known soil and drainage characteristics of the Helvetia farmland.

This week the Legislature responds to this regional dilemma by considering bill amendments that act to free up 2,000 acres of land for potential development; protect the Helvetia acreage as farmland while diminishing urban reserves near Hillsboro, Forest Grove and Cornelius, and leave Multnomah and Clackamas counties alone to sort out their own land-use challenges. House Bill 4078, as amended following arduous weekend meetings led in part by **Rep. Brian Clem, D-Salem**, thus sets into statute Washington County's urban and rural reserve map. It should be embraced by lawmakers as fair to most landowners while giving to developers and farmers alike the certainty they'll need to plan, invest and upgrade over the next several decades.

At least one phantom project of purportedly large scale and economic consequence, too, could be unlocked: Project Azalea, reportedly a multibillion-dollar electronics factory that could employ an estimated 1,000, would be situated on land just north of Hillsboro but, owing to the proposed land designations, find itself situated within Hillsboro proper. It's unclear whether Project Azalea was declared to be on hold, as **reported by The Oregonian's Mike Rogoway**, because of economic conditions or because of land complications in Washington County or both. But removing one key local complication is the most Oregon officials can do to provide a green light for Azalea – or any another suitor.

Significantly, the bill as amended is a model of Oregon-style, get-it-done collaboration. A Sunday meeting to hammer out the amendments comprised several mayors, county commissioners, developers and conservationists– among them those that had sued to protect the Helvetia land – and ended with everyone signing a consensus agreement.

Before the court made its decision last Thursday, legislative intervention in the region's land-use process was feared widely as potentially meddlesome and damaging to complex and nuanced work already completed by local elected officials with extensive local input. But the court's decision is that uncommon wrecking ball: a stunning blow that shows the price of continuing a faulty process could impede Washington County's development for years.

A yes vote would change that.

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