

Portland, Oregon

A robust civic culture positioned the city well to develop a formal neighborhood system in the 1970s, along with broader state growth management, metropolitan planning, and energy planning. In addition, strong bicycle and watershed movements emerged in the 1990s. Its participatory culture helped shape one of the most robust systems of community-based learning in higher education at Portland State University. Portland was among the first US cities to develop a sustainability plan, and the first to develop a climate action plan.

Background

- *form of government:* city commission: mayor plus four commissioners and an auditor constitute the city council, with legislative powers, who also share executive authority over various bureaus (environment, planning, transportation, and the like); planning authority shared with elected Metro planning organization
- *population:* approximately 655,000 in 2019, more than 70 percent non-Hispanic white, 6 percent African American, 9 percent Hispanic or Latino, and 7 percent Asian
- *geography and land area:* approximately 145 square miles, port city on the Willamette and Columbia rivers, inland from the Pacific coast

Postwar urban struggles

A robust civic culture and early successes in neighborhood empowerment and regional planning prepared the way for Portland's trajectory towards a sustainable city.

- *civic culture:* the city has a long history of populist participation and middle-class radicalism going back to the Progressive Era, and the state was a pioneer in its direct democracy reforms. Women were especially active through women's clubs and League of Women Voters chapters through the postwar decades.

Nonetheless, it was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s that civic activists and other reformers began to shift the political culture away from uninspired downtown business and professional leadership and towards citizen-driven sustainability, albeit with some cooperation of business and the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA).

The city and metro area have experienced major shifts away from steel manufacturing, ship building, and forest products, among several other industries, and towards high technology, but also with corporate headquarters of various major sportswear and other firms.

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- *neighborhood movement*: built partly upon the foundations of federal Community Action and Model Cities programs in late 1960s and early 1970s.

A citywide system was institutionalized through the Office of Neighborhood Associations (ONA) in 1974. ONA provided contractual funding through officially recognized District Coalitions (DCs), which served as an umbrella and representative of the dozen or so neighborhood associations that might fall within a given district. Neighborhood autonomy within a design for accountability, oversight, and training, which sometimes resulted in organizational tensions and institutional change.

Many other types of urban environmental groups – dozens of “friends” of specific streams, wetlands, and parks – formed either from neighborhood associations or in relationship with them. Local chapters of multi-tiered environmental associations – such as the Audubon Society and the Sierra Club, with local and state chapters and a national office – were among the densest in the nation in membership and also had many ties to these various local groups.

The policy design of citywide neighborhood associations promoted strong democracy and a rich ecology of civic organizing, according to the comparative study of neighborhood associations by Berry, Portney, and Thomson, *The Rebirth of Urban Democracy* (1993).

DC staff have received training designed to broker relationships across various community groups, neighborhood business associations, and public agencies, as in many of the best models nationwide.

ONA was transformed in 1997 into ONI – the Office of Neighborhood Involvement – to become more inclusive of ethnic and immigrant associations, multicultural organizations, youth groups, neighborhood business associations, and other groups that worked across neighborhood boundaries. In 2018, it was further redesigned as the Office of Community & Civic Life. While the city portrays this as an enrichment of its mission, some neighborhood activists and planning and architecture professionals see it as a marginalization of neighborhood involvement.

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- *State Growth Management Act*: Oregon passed the first state Growth Management Act (GMA) in 1973 with support from urban as well as rural interests and bipartisan support in the legislature. This act required cities to establish urban growth boundaries through the preferred tool of comprehensive planning and placed emphasis on citizen involvement.

The new law established a Land Conservation and Development Commission, with a “citizen involvement advisory committee” deeply influenced by neighborhood association practices in Portland and several other cities. It proceeded to send out 100,000 invitations for citizens to participate in land-use planning workshops in 35 locations, with some 10,000 who eventually participated over several phases.

[1000 Friends of Oregon](#) was founded in 1974 by environmentalists under the leadership of Henry Richmond, with the support of governor Tom McCall (1967-1974), to act as an independent watchdog of the implementation of GMA. It also became an important educator and technical assistance provider, as well as advocate, across the state on land-use issues. For an overview of its integrative perspectives, see its 2017 issue of [Landmark](#).

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- *Mayor Neil Goldschmidt* (1973-1979), who had created the Office of Neighborhood Associations in response to grassroots organizing, reconfigured the metropolitan bus system around a downtown transit mall and provided the early impetus that resulted in the city’s famous light rail system in the mid-1980s.

In response to the national oil crises of 1973 and 1979, he made energy conservation part of land-use planning, established an energy office and a citizen energy commission, and introduced the first municipal energy policy in the nation, before leaving to become President Carter’s transportation secretary.

- *Metro*: citizens in the Portland region voted in 1978 to create Metro, the only elected regional government in the country, to coordinate land-use planning and urban growth

boundaries across 24 cities and parts of three counties. While not especially vigorous during the deep and prolonged state recession of the 1980s tied largely to the wood products industry, in the following decade Metro began to engage citizens, environmental and civic groups, business interests, and local jurisdictions in developing alternative growth scenarios projected for the next 50 years.

These included a system of greenspaces approved in a major levy and supported by vigorous organizing among the one hundred groups affiliated with Friends and Advocates of Urban Natural Areas (FAUNA), as well as multimodal transportation options supported by Portland's bicycle coalition and funded by the federal Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA, 1991) in its initial round of grants.

The early round of public involvement in strengthening Metro capacities and authority in the 1990s relied upon sending 500,000 copies of a tabloid – one for every household – outlining four alternative growth scenarios and tradeoffs, and coupled these with extensive public hearings and workshops, presentations to local civic and environmental organizations, and cable TV and local news media coverage.

Metro planning director John Fregonese, known widely as “Frego,” was deeply committed to community involvement, and had a video produced of the preferred alternative and vision that had emerged through public deliberation; it was widely advertised and distributed free of charge through local Blockbuster and other video rental stores, resulting in an estimated 50,000 viewings.

Metro has since co-produced GIS tools for citizen and professional collaboration in visualizing and evaluating the impacts of land-use options across a complete base map of land parcels, now available with extensive layers of community data on the Regional Land Information System website ([RLIS Discovery](#)). These tools have been utilized effectively in planning workshops, larger public meetings, civic association offices, and now on activists' laptops, tablets, and smart phones.

Much of the land-use planning within Portland and Metro incorporates new urbanist design principles and green building practices, and has been enabled by a decades-long process of nurturing what Ethan Seltzer has called a “culture of inhabitation.

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Bicycle planning and advocacy

Critical Mass in the early 1990s, which develops into more collaborative approaches with city agencies.

- [The Street Trust](#): the Bicycle Transportation Alliance (BTA), founded in 1990 initially as the Portland Area Bicycle Coalition, has been the central actor in building the local field. Over time, it developed a broader frame to include healthy communities, walking and transit advocacy, neighborhood greenways, and gender equity through Women Bike. It then changed its name to The Street Trust to reflect this more inclusive frame.

The Street Trust’s strategy has also come to include more vigorous efforts at bicycle equity, especially in East Portland, where the critique of the movement as predominantly white and gentrifying, as well as erasing black culture distinct to the area, most strongly emerged. The Street Trust has also focused on bringing the Safe Routes to School curriculum to all twenty-two low-income Title 1 schools.

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Watershed planning and restoration

Watershed associations have been quite active in Portland for several decades and have enhanced civic participation in planning and restoration. Five regional watersheds are part of the Portland area.

Watershed planning, and the protection and restoration of riparian buffers in urban streams, proceeds from the complex command-and-control regulatory framework of the Clean Water Act (CWA) of 1972, its 1987 revisions with greater attention to nonpoint sources of pollution, and other federal laws, as well as state roles within this framework, the state Growth Management Act, and Metro planning. Metro relies heavily upon advisory committees that include the Audubon Society of Portland, 1000 Friends of Oregon, public agencies, local businesses; its engages many other civic and “friends” groups, as well as property rights groups.

The [Community Watershed Stewardship Program](#) has been a partnership between the City of Portland’s Bureau of Environmental Services, Portland State University (below), and local civic groups and institutions. Working in collaboration with professionals (ecologists, hydrologists, botanists, civil engineers), several tens of thousands of community volunteers and students have added trees and plants to neighborhoods, schools, churches, Indigenous communities, and among the homeless, and have restored parks, playgrounds, and streams banks. They have removed invasive species, and have installed green roofs to reduce stormwater runoff. Stewardship grants help fund citizen groups, who have been involved in front-end planning as well as coproduction. Citizen-driven projects complement large-scale infrastructure projects.

Watershed and neighborhood groups have had an especially important role in planning to revitalize the Willamette River as a working harbor that is healthy, green, embedded in neighborhoods, and a source of civic partnership and education.

“The Oregon Plan for Salmon and Watersheds” in the late 1990s made watershed councils the official watershed management unit statewide.

The [Johnson Creek Watershed Council](#) provides a case of several decades of successful work.

[Network of Oregon Watershed Councils](#) (NOWC): serves some 90 councils across the state; [Strategic Plan 2018-2021](#). Fifty-nine watershed councils receive capacity funding support through the state Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB).

The [Oregon Conservation Partnership](#) includes NOWC, the Oregon Association of Conservation Districts, the Coalition of Oregon Land Trusts, and the Oregon Conservation Education and Assistance Network.

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Portland State University (PSU)

Community-based learning has been distinctively robust since the early 1990s across virtually all disciplines, with undergraduate and graduate students, as well as a large cross-section of departments engaged in many civic and sustainability projects. Its College of Education now also has a program in [Leadership for Sustainability Education](#). “Let Knowledge Serve the City” is the university’s formal mission, emblazoned on the main pedestrian Skyway bridge across Broadway.

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Climate action and sustainability planning

Portland was among the first US cities to develop a sustainability plan, and the first to develop a climate action plan.

With broad support from civic and environmental associations, such as 1000 Friends of Oregon and the Bicycle Transportation Alliance (now the Street Trust), the city began to develop the first climate action plan in the nation. City councilor Mike Lindberg, Goldschmidt’s former planning director in charge of implementing the city’s energy policy (and a former neighborhood activist), leveraged several other networks to move the city and the broader movement forward.

One was in his role as chair of the National League of Cities’ energy and environment committee, which became responsive to the Brundtland Commission’s 1987 report on sustainable development, as well as to the U.N.’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

The second was his leadership in getting Portland to join with thirteen other American, Canadian, and European cities in ICLEI’s Urban CO2 Reduction Initiative, which began to learn from each other in a network design and to further diffuse innovations nationally and internationally. The climate action plan of 1993 was coordinated by Susan Anderson, who eventually went on to head the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability until 2018, providing important leadership continuity.

The city adopted a set of Sustainable City Principles in 1994 under three-term mayor Vera Katz (1993-2005), followed by climate plan updates in 2001, 2009, and 2015, each of which has further enriched and integrated the framing, including restored watersheds, urban forests, sustainable businesses, food systems, and green building.

The city has built strategic partnerships among professionals, civic groups, and trade associations. Ongoing institutional innovation included the creation in 2000 of the Office of Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Commission of Portland and Multnomah County. These systemic efforts enabled the city in its institutionalization of sustainability across city bureaus.

Some sixty environmental, housing, church and, social justice groups formed the Coalition for a Livable Future, which over its twenty-year history (1994-2015) placed emphasis on urban sustainability projects.

Many other civic groups generate and diffuse green practices and participate in third-party certification processes. Citizen engagement has remained important to these and many other initiatives, as well as to open planning workshops as the climate plans were being developed. An Equity Work Group engaged environmental justice leaders and communities of color in the 2015 climate plan.

Equity was also highlighted as the foremost concern in the Portland Plan, with “partnerships” across civic, nonprofit, market, and public agencies as the main driver of change, and a specific “diversity and civic leadership” program built around five community-based organizations: Center for Intercultural Organizing, NAYA Youth and Elders Council, Latino Network, Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization, and Urban League of Portland.

Portland State University developed an explicit civic mission in the early 1990s to “Let Knowledge Serve the City,” and an ambitious array of community-based learning initiatives that engage undergraduate, as well as graduate and professional school students and faculty, in sustainability projects of various sorts, including with neighborhood associations and nonprofits, local businesses, and major institutions such as PDX international airport

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