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Why Cities Need Strategic Plans by Former Portland, Oregon Mayor Sam Adams

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**Reimagining Local Government Conference
Chapman University**

**Why Cities Need Strategic Plans
By Former Portland, Oregon Mayor Sam Adams**

Will a given public project help a city? Hurt it? Make no difference? What appears to be good for a city might actually be bad. A project that helps out some residents may gentrify out many others. It is often hard to tweeze out the costs, benefits and unintended consequences of the projects and policies that cities take on. Although we will never have a perfect algorithm that weighs the costs and benefits of a given project or policy, we can improve upon relying too much on good intentions and political expedience.

Local policymakers can make better decisions and boost local democracy if they had a holistic, fact-based strategic plan guiding their decision making.

Creating such a plan takes partnering with all other governments working in a given city; doing the needed homework on trends and conditions; letting residents, workers and businesses owners help wrestle with the facts; and setting goals and a plan to achieve them. But once such a plan exists, city leaders would have a better yardstick to measure the value of each public project they consider and, ultimately, make better decisions about which projects to invest in.

First, some background. I am from Portland, Oregon, a city that has been called a, “paragon of healthy urban development.” Portland ranks among the most livable and sustainable large U.S. cities. When it is at its best, Portland builds and rebuilds itself prioritizing the long term common good of all its people. As Phillip Langdon wrote in *The Atlantic*, “The Portland attitude of ‘we’re all in this together’ implies a right — and even a responsibility — to intervene when individuals threaten to tear at the carefully woven fabric of public life.”

Portland was not always like this, or on a trajectory to improve. After World War II, the city suffered from polluted air and rivers, an emptying downtown, and decline in too many neighborhoods. It wasn’t until 1973 that the downward trend really began to change.

What happened that year was that Portlanders, along with foresters and farmers, went to the state legislature and created a regional Urban Growth Boundary and a smart-growth land use planning law to support the region’s core and protect woodland and farms. A regional government formed, managed by an elected President and Council who exercised regulatory powers to limit development outside this boundary.

Armed with these new tools, Portland and the new regional government pushed back against automobile-fueled sprawl. The city traded away freeways and ring roads for more streetcar, light

rail, bike paths and sidewalks. In terms of urban design, Portland gained a healthy obsession with creating great public spaces. The city dug up prime retail parking lots and a freeway and replaced them with parks and plazas. Portland's small city blocks became the focus of big ideas about streetscapes and transit oriented development.

By the mid1990s, Portland had brought itself back to the level of population it had in the 1950s. And as great as its rebirth as a city was — and it was an amazing trailblazing comeback — not every neighborhood improved. Gentrification displaced too many poorer residents. Portlanders of color, east Portlanders and many others did not have an equal opportunity to enjoy Portland's improving quality of life.

In 2008, I ran for mayor of Portland, using a quote from, Alasdair Gray, a Scottish writer almost no one had ever heard of: “Work as if you were living in the early days of a better nation,” the young, idealistic days. Watch video: <https://vimeo.com/2682152>

I campaigned to address fact that the economic and academic disparities between white and non-white Portlanders, between certain neighborhoods, had widened: in 2008, only 54 percent of our eighth grade high school students graduated on time. The most common reaction to these facts was surprise. I talked about the need for plans based less on politics and more on the facts; the need to plan with integrated strategies and a short list of specific measures to provide public accountability for real results; the need to more squarely aim our planning efforts toward people-oriented goals like prosperity, health, education and equity. The campaign was so wonky my campaign staff made placards that read, “honk for the wonk.”

Portlanders engaged, asking good questions. “Can local government strategic planning really make a difference?” “Absolutely,” was my answer. Often, it is only when we plan well that we make real progress on some of society's toughest problems. As an example, I cited how the Urban Growth Boundary and land-use planning initiatives from the 1970s did limit sprawl, achieve important urban renewal outcomes, built light rail (instead of highways) and helped to inspire new business sectors, including clean-tech. But I warned that we could not just rehash the last city plan. We needed a very different approach to charting our future as a city, an approach that placed more focus on making life better for all Portlanders.

I won my race for Mayor in May 2008. But in September, before I took office, the world's economy imploded. I took office as the nation careened downward in the worst economic plunge since the World War II, taking Portland down with it.

Even with the economy in turmoil, I did not want to give up on my promises to set Portland on planning approach to help better insure its public improvements really improved things. So in July 2009 we began a three-year process of creating a new kind of strategic plan that adds a

critical element: a new focus on the success of our people. In 2012, we completed what we call "The Portland Plan," <http://www.pdxplan.com>, the result of nearly three years of research, more than 300 public events and 20,000 comments from residents, academics, youth, workers, businesses and nonprofits.

It's not just a plan from city government. It is a plan for Portland city government and the more than 26 co-sponsoring public agencies that spend an estimated \$8 billion annually inside the 146 square mile boundary of Portland shaped the plan's direction and its actions. The City Council adopted the plan: <https://vimeo.com/40973549>.

Our new plan integrates actions around four goals to make Portland prosperous, educated, healthy and equitable. It includes 12 measurements <http://www.portlandonline.com/portlandplan/index.cfm?c=58269&a=390196> and nine action areas <http://www.portlandonline.com/portlandplan/index.cfm?c=58269&a=390194> with short- and long term actions.

We well exceeded our initial job creation goals with Portland's first economic development strategy in 16 years. We launched Greater Portland, Inc., <http://www.greaterportlandinc.com/>, based on the first Metro Export Initiative in the country with the Brookings Institution, and we now have a coordinated, regional strategy that calls on us to grow our exports. And Portland has lowered total carbon emissions 14 percent while the local while growing jobs and GDP 400%.

For the first time in decades, Portland Public Schools increased high school graduation rates. We created new a partnership called All Hands Raised, <http://allhandsraised.org/>, which has mobilized the community into a regional support network for education. We invested in innovative programs like Ninth Grade Counts, which served as an 8th grade summer school. Another program, SummerYouth Connect, reached the kids who are most at-risk of dropping out of high school. The local Future Connect Scholarships helped students earn a community college degree.

Since all the areas in the Portland Plan are interconnected, success in one area is designed to improve them all. For example, increasing graduation rates also benefits the economy -- which stabilizes our community and helps to level the playing field. Similarly, building sidewalks and bike lanes in underserved neighborhoods helps promote physical activity and provides better access to schools and local businesses. It was on the foundation of the Portland Plan that the City now is completing a retooling of its land use plans.

Implementing this plan may sound expensive, but it's not: it is first and foremost about doing more and better with the dollars we already have and taking single actions that have multiple

benefits. By working across agencies, instead of in silos, we can better leverage limited resources.

A plan such as this certainly helps the health of democracy in its own community, but it can also boost in its states and the nation as a whole. If more locales had integrated strategic plans, they would use resources more efficiently; in turn, that might inspire state and federal governments that are more grounded, realistic and effective. Prosperous, educated, healthy, equitable.