

# Orange Line is coming, Park Avenue Station is Built --- Now What? A Case Study of Urban Green Activities

Japanese Local Government Mangers Training Program  
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## Abstract

This case study is the fourth installment of the description of the Urban Green, the community-based organization located in Clackamas County, Oregon. It highlights the events that took place since the fall of 2014, following the sequence of events described in the previous edition of the Urban Green case study *Power of Partnership-Collaboration between Clackamas County Urban Green and Nature in Neighborhoods*. As Urban Green shifts their effort following the opening of the Park Avenue Station of the newly constructed MAX light rail Orange line, they face challenges in negotiating with Clackamas County on the need to develop an appropriate zoning plan <sup>around</sup> the new station. It concludes by describing the ideas of Urban Green and the Oak Grove community for the next steps.

## 1. Introduction

This fourth edition of the Urban Green case study follows the story described in the previous edition, *Power of Partnership-Collaboration between Clackamas County Urban Green and Nature in Neighborhoods*. It provides the account of the activities and recent challenges that Urban Green has faced since fall of 2014.

Urban Green is a community activist organization based in Oak Grove, Oregon, an unincorporated area that borders the City of Milwaukie to the north. In July 2008, local jurisdictions and the public decided to develop a 7.3 mile MAX light rail route (Orange line) to be operated by TriMet, the regional transit service. The Orange line, which opened in September 2015, connects Portland State University in downtown Portland to the City of Milwaukie and Oak Grove. The Park Avenue Station, terminus of the Orange line, is located in Oak Grove. The local environmental activist group Urban Green leveraged the strengths of Oak Grove community and helped design and build the station and garage building to enhance the natural amenities and healthy ecosystems that characterize the community. (For more detailed description of Oak Grove and Urban Green, see *Power of Partnership-Collaboration between Clackamas County Urban Green and Nature in Neighborhoods*.)

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<sup>1</sup> This case study is written based on the interviews with Chips Janger, co-founder of Urban Green, and other members from the Oak Grove community.

Although it is not the focus of this case study, it should be noted that the construction of the Orange line that connects Clackamas County to downtown Portland, sparked intense political discussion among the County commissioners and the residents of the Clackamas County, dividing those who support the extension of the MAX line and those who do not. Some background information on the political debate surrounding the Orange line construction is included in Appendix A.

## **2. Efforts for zoning change around the Park Avenue Station**

In the fall of 2014 Urban Green and other community activists met with the head of the Clackamas County planning department to discuss zoning changes around the Park Avenue Station. When new stations are developed, it is customary for the local governing body to develop 'station area zoning plans' to take advantage of the economic benefits brought to an area with the introduction of the rail system. Since Oak Grove is an unincorporated area, in the case of the Park Avenue Station, the community expected Clackamas County to take the initiative in developing the new zoning plan. At this meeting with the planning department director, however, to the surprise of the community members, the director stated that no recommendation would be made to the county commissioners to introduce a station area zoning plan. The director explained that the planning department already had a full agenda for the coming year and was not able to add any additional items without removing existing agenda items because of limited staff capacity. He suggested that the community raise the idea to develop a station area zoning plan for Park Avenue Station with the Clackamas County Planning Commission that was scheduled to meet in December of 2014.

On December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2014, Urban Green and other community activists in Oak Grove testified before the Clackamas County Planning Commission about creating a station area zoning plan around the Park Avenue light rail station. They emphasized the importance of having a plan that aimed to optimize community economic benefit by promoting smaller, locally owned businesses and also at the same time preserve the best features of the natural environment around the new station. After hearing the testimony, the members of the Planning Commission agreed unanimously to recommend to the Board of County Commissioners of Clackamas County (BCC) that they add the zoning plan to the Planning Department's projects for 2015.

Despite the recommendation of the Planning Commission and the efforts of Urban Green and other community activists, including the McLaughlin Area Plan (MAP)<sup>2</sup> Committee, the Park Avenue Station zoning plan project was ultimately deferred indefinitely by the BCC, which has the final authority to decide what urban planning projects should be implemented for the County. The BCC's decision to reject the Park Avenue Station zoning plan project was largely due to the recommendation made by the Planning Department to the BCC. The Planning Department noted that they already had a list of prioritized projects for the coming year, and advised the BCC not to take on any "new and additional" projects. They recommended that the new zoning plan project

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<sup>2</sup> MAP is a community-led planning effort that examines the McLoughlin area for its economic revitalization and community enhancement. MAP was created and funded by Clackamas County.

around the new light rail station to be included as ‘continued study’ and to possibly be implemented in the following year, after 2016.

### **3. Clackamas County and the Board of Clackamas County Commissioners (BCC) : Its Values and Actions**

Most of Clackamas County consists of agricultural and forest lands. The County encompasses 1,879 square miles (4,866.6 square kilometers), and timbered geographical areas include the 11,235-foot high (3,424 meters) Mt. Hood, the Mt. Hood National Forest, the Bull Run Watershed, and numerous rivers. In addition, some of Oregon’s richest farmland is located around the cities within Clackamas County, such as Canby, Sandy, Boring, Wilsonville, and Molalla.

The five members of the Board of County Commissioners (BCC) hold legislative authority in land use decision-making, and are responsible for approving zoning plans within the County jurisdiction. The BCC must balance the interests of both rural and urban residents. Oak Grove is the third largest urban area within Clackamas County, and seen by BCC as an urban community within the County that has more progressive urban planning project demands.

In spite of the success of the Park Avenue Station process by Urban Green and the Oak Grove community, and growing support by the larger community, there has been a relatively small but vocal contingent of Clackamas County residents who have consistently and vocally opposed the expansion of Portland’s light rail system, especially the MAX Orange Line project. Those who opposed the Orange Line project testified at a number of BCC meetings and crafted a ballot measure requiring the County to allow residents to vote on any transit-related funding decisions. The way the original ballot measure was written seemed to imply that passing the measure could stop construction of the Orange Line, which was the ultimate goal of the ballot measure sponsors. Given the existing multi-agency contract signed by Clackamas County, Metro, and Trimet, stopping the construction of the Orange Line based on the ballot measure was not legally possible. An Oak Grove activist and member of Urban Green sued the County and won, succeeding in changing the wording of the ballot measure to reduce some confusion.

In spite of the efforts by the supporters of the Orange line, the measure passed .at the September 2012 election. Due to the effort to clarify the language in the ballot measure, and the legal obligation that binds Clackamas County’s portion of the financial responsibility for the project, the construction of the Orange line and the Park Avenue Station was not affected by the ballot measure. The controversy around the construction of the Orange Line, however, was broadly covered by the media. Especially during election time, the Orange Line opposition received extensive coverage in local media,<sup>3</sup> which diverted people’s attention from considering important issues such as how development would change the community in the area around the station. It also took the community’s attention away from the important work to define the fundamental nature of Park Avenue Station as a station *in a forest*, rather than a train station with some trees around it.

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<sup>3</sup> For a compilation of this media coverage, see Appendix A.

The story of the Park Avenue Station and the significant transformations being developed from the Nature in Neighborhoods grant-funded project is described in the previous case study *Power of Partnership-Collaboration between Clackamas County Urban Green and Nature in Neighborhoods*. While the story highlights the important contribution of a grassroots process that has provided numerous measurable benefits to the local community while partnering closely with public agencies to improve the proposed public transit project, it received virtually no media coverage, unfortunately.

Although the State of Oregon requires public entities to conduct outreach to the public and integrate citizens' opinions in public policy decisions, Clackamas County's current public process appears to be minimizing the impact of citizen goals and objectives on County policy. From the community organization perspective, such as Urban Green's, the County appears to conduct public meetings because they are required, and not because they want to seriously consider public input in the County's policy making process.

Simple zoning regulation changes can preserve community assets and catalyze the kind of economic development that helps a community to thrive. It's not clear to the Oak Grove community, that the BCC has the capacity or inclination to make the necessary changes to the status quo in the urban part of the County.

#### **4. Urban Green: Its Values and Actions**

The Max Orange line and the Park Avenue Station began operation on September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Urban Green has taken the initiative to pursue zoning changes designed to achieve the community's vision developed over the last several years. The new station is located on McLoughlin Boulevard (State Highway 99E), a major arterial roadway that carries a substantial fraction of the County's daily north-south commuting traffic. It has a long history of being home to many new and used car dealers, fast food franchises, and big-box retail chains. Very little of this economic activity fully serves the community, in major part because many of the businesses are not locally owned and have a very small economic multiplier. Franchised businesses and big-box retail stores tend to extract wealth from a community, while paying lower wages and benefits to the employees in comparison to the smaller, locally owned businesses.

A true economic revitalization of the McLoughlin Boulevard corridor will require a combination of preserving and enhancing the community's current assets – its forests and ecosystems, affordable housing, and excellent connections to the rest of the metro area – and a policy focus on promoting the success of smaller, locally owned businesses. Without an appropriate new zoning plan in place, development will occur in accordance with the current zoning, which provides little or no guidance for the kind of development that would achieve the community's goals. Functional and aesthetic integration of new development with existing neighborhoods is not required in the existing zoning rules. As a consequence, the ecosystem function currently exists would likely be lost. Urban Green is especially concerned about the likely loss of the large, mature trees that are the anchors for functional ecosystems.

These losses, which are already ongoing throughout the community because of the largely ineffective tree preservation ordinance enacted by the County, would also cause a significant loss of the community's current oak forest character. It was these impending losses to traditional development that drove Urban Green to go before the Clackamas County Planning Commissioners in December 2014 to request that the zoning plan project be considered as soon as possible.

Over the last several years, the community has found significant common ground in conversations about what is needed for the community to thrive. These conversations have harmonized the community's voices about what they imagine for the redevelopment of the McLoughlin Boulevard area. These community visions and values underlie the proposal to develop a zoning plan for the Park Avenue Station. These visions and values are also driving the community's Mclaughlin Area Plan (MAP) process that has produced a plan that should be acknowledged by the Planning Department and the Board of County Commissioners (BCC) and implemented. The same visions and values are at the core of the Nature in Neighborhoods projects, described in the previous case study *Power of Partnership-Collaboration between Clackamas County Urban Green and Nature in Neighborhoods*.

While there are many potential benefits that would derive from the BCC's approval and implementation of the Park Avenue Station zoning project, quickly, as noted earlier, the BCC did not show any interest in taking immediate action. The BCC has a reputation of producing recommendations that do not seem to produce results on the ground. Urban Green, therefore, decided to dedicate its activity to recognize and implement community goals and values.

## **5. Moving Forward: Considering Pathways to Become a City**

Urban Green and other activists are now considering whether the best way forward may be to incorporate Oak Grove and become an independent city. By becoming a city it will have its own authority to implement 21<sup>st</sup> century planning regulations, provide incentives for effective development, and protect the community value. Concurrent with the effort to work with the County and create changes, Urban Green has begun due diligence on the idea of incorporating Oak Grove. Those who support the idea of incorporating Oak Grove share an understanding that by becoming a city, Oak Grove will be able to implement necessary changes in a faster and more effective manner. They are convinced that it will be better than any processes that involve action by the Board of County Commissioners (BCC).

Many people in Oak Grove believe that this is a historic moment of change for the community. Urban Green is committed to assisting this process to create a model city that is efficient, effective and where people are excited to be engaged in its planning and decision-making processes. Because it requires more than 50 percent of the residents' vote supporting the creation of a city, Urban Green plans to reach out to community members and make sure this initiative receives support from as many people as possible.

In assisting and supporting this community-lead incorporation initiative, Urban Green will continue to utilize several strategies that have proven successful in their previous community engagement efforts. It will develop and expand on its existing partnerships with organizations and groups such

as Metro, TriMet, Portland State University's (PSU) researchers and students, Mclaughlin Area Plan (MAP) committee members, local Community Planning Organizations (CPOs), landscape architects, and local and national consultants and planners who have experience in the establishment of new cities. They will seek support and recommendations for strategies as they move forward with the incorporation process.

Urban Green and the community are also looking for a consultant who has a successful track record in establishing a new city in the United States. Concurrently, they are partnering with local activists and drafting a zoning code for Oak Grove. Once the draft zoning code is completed it will be distributed to those partners and other experts for peer review.

Urban Green believes that having a clear vision is one of the most important strategies in organizing the community. In order to garner support for the incorporation idea, the most important thing is to develop a clear vision of the reasons why Oak Grove should become a city. They then have to present the vision to the residents in the way that people understand and get excited about.

Although Urban Green is not advocating or encouraging population growth as part of their future vision of Oak Grove, they are aware that growth is coming in the near future, and that it is important to plan for it. They are working with architects and designers to create a visual presentation describing why incorporating into a city would be advantageous to the residents of the Oak Grove community.

On September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015, the Max light rail Orange Line opened and the entire TriMet transportation system (i.e. trains, buses, streetcars) was free for the day to celebrate the opening. Thousands of people visited the Park Avenue Station, the terminus station located at the *end* of the Orange Line. Urban Green and the community staged a festival at the Station, showcasing a lively atmosphere with music, food and beer, a wine garden, strolling entertainers, and circus acts in the station plaza. Hopefully, this event gave Oak Grove residents the opportunity to develop even stronger sense of a community that is cohesive enough to support an independent city. It may also become an opportunity to gain support from visitors from Portland and elsewhere to recognize Oak Grove as an independent community that has strong engaged residents who contributed in developing the Park Avenue Station, supporting the new development while preserving community ecosystems and the feel of the forest.

## References

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