

**Case Description: Power of Partnership-Collaboration between
Clackamas County Urban Green and Nature in Neighborhoods
(First edition April 2012, Second edition June 2013, Third edition July 2014)**

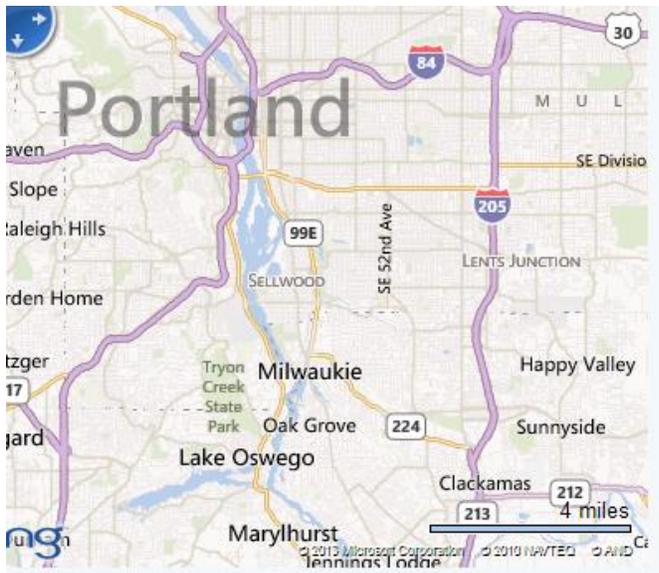
by

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Executive Summary

The Portland metropolitan region has enjoyed an international reputation for its robust economy, vibrant communities, and beautiful natural amenities. The region has attracted diverse industries, particularly in such sectors as transportation and high technology. Economic progress has been shaped by creative tensions between advocates for economic growth and development and advocates for environmental conservation and sustainability. While some development programs try to balance environmental, social and economic outcomes, other local and regional players have often focused on short-term financial gains at the expense of long-term environmental, social, and economic performance.

Realizing that the abundant natural assets in the region are precious capital assets for a better future, local residents bear a reasonable expectation that new growth will conform to a balanced model of sustainable development that pursues not only economic benefits, but also more livable communities and healthy ecosystems. Portland's regional government Metro and local communities share an understanding that partnerships and collaboration are essential to achieve long-term sustainability and prosperity. The experience of one community, Oak Grove, illustrates how trusting partnerships can empower citizens and governments to successfully pursue sustainable development.



Challenges in Oak Grove

Oak Grove is an unincorporated community in Clackamas County in the Portland metropolitan area of Oregon. As its name suggests, the local area consists of residential neighborhoods nestled in groves of beautiful oak trees, and surrounded by scenic views of clear streams and lush hills.

Oak Grove borders the incorporated city of Milwaukie to the north. Milwaukie is the southerly terminus of a transportation corridor that links suburban neighborhoods

in the southeast sector of the metropolitan region to the urban center in Portland. This south

corridor has experienced rapid growth during the past 20 years, and is expected to add more than 300,000 new residents and over 50,000 new jobs by 2030. Urban development has put pressure on public services in this area of the metropolitan region, particularly the local transportation infrastructure and transit systems.

Regional efforts to plan for and manage growth in this area of the region began in 1999 with a study to find out the transportation needs and preferred transportation options of communities along the Portland-Milwaukie corridor. Local neighborhoods identified and recommended the adoption of light rail transit services as the preferred option to deal with increasing urban development. In July 2008, after years of research, local jurisdictions and the public finally selected the alignment for the long-discussed Portland-Milwaukie light rail system. Once completed, the proposed 7.3-mile route (Orange Line) will be operated by TriMet, the regional transit service (a special-purpose regional government organization) that runs mass transit in the Portland metropolitan area.

The chosen plan links Portland State University in downtown Portland to the City of Milwaukie and the unincorporated community of Oak Grove. The Oak Grove station is the terminus of the Orange Line, and will include a new light rail transit station and 355-car Park and Ride garage located at SE Park Avenue and SE McLoughlin Boulevard. Although the new transit center will provide significant economic benefits and better transit services for the residents in the Oak Grove area, the new project raised serious concerns from the local community, including the possible environmental impact of the construction. The station/garage complex will be located on an ecologically degraded tract of land (a former forest) that has become mostly impervious surface, used auto lots, and a sprawl of unplanned buildings and parking lots. Residents were worried that the concrete station building and large parking lot would continue to degrade the area, and they wanted to use this opportunity to enhance the natural amenities and healthy ecosystems that characterize their community. A local environmental activist group, Clackamas County Urban Green, decided to leverage the inherent strengths of the Oak Grove community to shape the light rail project into a more sustainable and environmentally-friendly development.

Urban Green

Clackamas County Urban Green is a community activist organization based in Oak Grove. Its mission is to “protect and restore urban ecosystems, create a vibrant and healthy community, and improve the lives of Oak Grove citizens” (Urban Green & TriMet, n.d.). Urban Green emphasizes local power as the major driving force for greener development. This motto came from the interesting and instructive story of the group’s formation.

Living in a forested, unincorporated area in Clackamas County, the neighbors in Oak Grove had not built any social bonds with each other until 2006, when one resident initiated a discussion course with a few others in their neighborhood. This study session ignited a long-lost sense of belonging and spawned various community events. The original study group gradually evolved

into a Good Neighbors Association featuring regular social activities such as block parties, researching sustainable living strategies, community gardening, local live music and pot-luck meal gatherings. Through the intentional use of community interaction and involvement, these residents realized that building intimate relationships with each other and the physical place where they live could greatly enrich their lives and the quality of life in Oak Grove.

A small group from the Good Neighbors Association fostered the creation of Urban Green when residents responded to shortsighted and ill-conceived development projects that threatened the removal of longstanding oak trees and the degradation of local ecosystems. Urban Green's response to this was the decision to write and introduce a Tree Protection Ordinance that would cease (or at least slow) the removal of mature oak trees from their beloved forest. Urban Green was the lead partner in a coalition of Community Planning Organizations (CPO's), environmental groups, and neighborhood associations in writing and establishing a tree protection ordinance for Clackamas County, Oregon. The ordinance aimed to halt the practice of real estate developers coming into the county, buying a piece of land, cutting down all the trees and clearing all native habitat in order to maximize the number of houses that could be built. This effort became a several-year project involving speaking to local groups throughout the county to establish a 'groundswell' of support to protect the county's trees and habitat. It also involved gathering numerous letters from neighborhood, community and environmental groups, as well as testifying at the county governmental hearings. Urban Green also conducted a considerable amount of research on the benefits of trees to a community, which involved identifying and reviewing the most effective existing tree protection ordinances in the United States. This was Urban Green's first project.

While the final product, the Tree Ordinance, was not effective as originally conceived, it was only a first iteration for Urban Green. This experience gave the group "a renewed sense of purpose [...] working for a cause they consider crucial to [the community's] survival and prosperity, environmentally responsible development" (Wood, 2008). The organizers learned that to be effective, they needed to be action-oriented, to focus on practical goals for their community, and to take action in partnership with their neighbors, other stakeholders, government agencies, and community organizations. Urban Green is determined to continue improving the ordinance as opportunities arise. They reaffirmed their intention to take action in the future whenever necessary to stop and transform irresponsible and unintelligent developments into developments that were sustainable and compatible with the character of their community.

When TriMet decided to extend the light rail to Oak Grove with a new station and a parking structure, local residents were concerned whether the project would be environmentally friendly and would be an asset to their community. Urban Green knew it needed to take the initiative to ensure the project would be designed and built in line with the community's expectations – as such, an Urban Green member began a conversation with Councilor Carlotta Collette as well as Metro President David Bragdon at Metro, the regional authority in charge of the development.

Metro and Nature in Neighborhoods

Metro is an elected regional government of the Portland metropolitan area in Oregon. As the only directly elected metropolitan planning organization in the United States, Metro serves more than 1.5 million residents in Clackamas, Multnomah and Washington counties and the 25 cities in the Portland region (Metro, 2012a). This distinctive regional government seeks innovative ways to realize its mission to “make the region an extraordinary place to live, work and play” (Metro, 2012a). One of Metro’s most important responsibilities is to oversee and update the Portland metro area’s Urban Growth Boundary (UGB). This unique development policy, mandated by the State of Oregon, requires cities to limit their urban development to a defined area that is reviewed and updated every five years. By administering the UGB, Metro not only preserves agricultural and natural areas outside the city, but also plans for the resulting higher density in urban centers.

Thanks to this and other policies, the Portland metropolitan region has managed to preserve and protect an exceptional natural environment that features beautiful hills and mountains, clear rivers and streams, abundant green open spaces, and clean air. People believe that “this tremendous natural inheritance sustains residents’ health, fosters the region’s economy, provides healthy activities for all and is central to the region’s identity” (Metro, 2012b). Committed to protecting the region’s natural assets, Metro launched the Nature in Neighborhoods program in 2005.

Recognizing that nature protection and restoration transcends organizational and jurisdictional borders, Nature in Neighborhoods seeks strategic collaboration between various partners to help communities in the Portland metropolitan area make nature thrive. The program advocates local community designed projects, and partnerships that connect multi-disciplinary strengths, foster innovative and entrepreneurial spirit, and leverage public resources to meet shared interests. Different types of programs were adopted and Nature in Neighborhoods provides support for such collaboration. Among them, the Capital Grants program, funded by a 2006 regional bond measure, supports projects which “re-green” and “re-nature” neighborhoods.

Partnership Through Nature in Neighborhoods Capital Grant

As a result of the meeting with the Metro Council Chair, David Bragdon, Urban Green was asked to help Metro to introduce Integrating Habitats program to various audiences in Clackamas County---Community Planning Organizations, neighborhood groups, county officials, community activists, etc. Urban Green agreed to help Metro and this became the first collaboration between Urban Green and Metro. Metro assigned staff to help Urban Green's effort.

Some of the staff were also working on another Metro's program Nature in Neighborhood. Through the staff Urban Green and Nature in Neighborhood learned about each other. When the leaders of Urban Green and Metro's Nature in Neighborhoods were introduced to each other, both sides became aware that they shared a common mission to protect and restore nature. Both organizations also acutely sensed that by combining their resources - money, expertise support and advice from Nature in Neighborhoods, and rich local knowledge as well as local aspiration from Urban Green - they could create a project to make the Oak Grove light rail station and parking structure project an exciting showcase for sustainable, green development.

A capital grant from Nature in Neighborhoods became the starting point for their partnership. Unlike the traditional methods usually employed by similar government programs, Nature in Neighborhoods uses non-regulatory methods to encourage participation and partnership building. Its capital grants encourage diverse partnership from every level of society and seek innovative ways to realize naturally friendly development. Several key features of the program are:

- ✧ Projects must either purchase land or make improvements to public property that result in a capital asset with a life of at least 20 years and a total value of at least \$50,000.
- ✧ Neighborhoods and community groups, nonprofit organizations, schools, cities, counties and public park providers are invited to apply.
- ✧ The applicant must match grant funds with outside funding or in-kind services equivalent to twice the grant request.
- ✧ Metro staff is available to help shape a project, connect the applicant to resources and offer technical support. (Metro, 2011)

To meet the application criteria, Urban Green created a partnership with TriMet as joint applicants for a grant of \$350,000 for re-greening the Park Avenue light rail station and Park and Ride. To make it an even more participatory project, these two major partners also convened a broader partnership with local environmental groups, government agencies, and neighborhood organizations. Urban Green's partnerships included Clackamas County Parks and Recreation, Oak Lodge Sanitary District, Oak Grove Community Council, and Oregon Department of Transportation, to name just a few. Nature in Neighborhoods established close relationship with Urban Green and its partners to provide advice and support throughout the project.

During a long, thoughtful, and engaged planning and design process lasting almost four years, the partners were able to increase the project's scope significantly. At first, it seemed difficult to push the scope beyond the criteria of the grant – but soon, each stakeholder began to see that the station was a model project for sustainable, collaborative, and community-based development. The result was a design that went above and beyond the original expectations, created a network of effective partnerships, and fostered increased cooperation between partners. Urban Green members consistently attended every meeting to make sure the community's interests were represented. Their strong relationships with local Community Planning Organizations (CPOs)

and environmental organizations allowed Urban Green to speak for a greater community than just themselves.

The broad partnerships established by Urban Green helped facilitate the design and construction of the transit project. Each partner in the relationship contributed in its own way. For example, TriMet offered over \$500,000 as the major portion of the required matching fund while others have provided all types of in-kind service ranging from designing and volunteering to contract procurement and sub-project management. In addition, project partners, including designers and landscape architects, became genuinely excited, as it gave them opportunities to expand the scope of sustainability in ways seldom seen in this type of project.

Most importantly, throughout the project, Urban Green drew power and guidance from its primary resource pool: the Oak Grove community. Oak Grove residents have provided important input to the transit project: their advice and recommendations about the way the project should look and how it would connect with the values and character of their community. These shared ideas have helped build a holistic picture for the project which not only focused on the light rail station itself, but also involved many other aspects such as redevelopment of the area, improving natural habitats for wildlife, and meeting community needs, including recreational facilities, local business development, and a safe environment for all. Of equal note, Urban Green identified a local talent pool of residents who have diverse expertise – such as grant-writing and architectural design - to help support and expand the project. This “professional” team, together with Urban Green, works as the hub that takes in every partner’s feedback and links them together by integrating their input into a concrete work plan. Such active engagement from all has led to a co-production process that has generated amazing results.

Current Situation of Max Station Project

The “Re-greening Park Avenue Light Rail Station and Park-and-Ride” project by Urban Green and TriMet is currently under construction and is scheduled to be completed in September 2015.

In 2012, in order to capture the best local talent and expertise, Trimet, Urban Green and their partners held a design competition for the eco-design of the re-natured parking garage. The final scheme has three major components. First, the transit center parking structure will minimize its ecological impacts by substantially increasing the amount of planting on site (consultants were able to expand this planting area significantly after the parking requirement was dropped from 1000 to 355 spaces partway through the design process). Second, the transit-related developments are designed to enhance the riparian forest at and around the light rail station site. Finally, the partners propose to expand riparian forest along Courtney Springs Creek near the station by adding new trees and restoring the existing forest. The plan also includes ecosystem-based storm water treatment and surface water management to address possible issues caused by the McLoughlin Boulevard development and nearby private properties. In fact, the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT), recognizing a shared interest, offered the

partners an additional grant to extend their stormwater treatment improvements to a greater area along McLoughlin Boulevard. The ecological improvements will also connect the transit developments to a new local trail system – the Trolley Trail – to provide safe pedestrian facilities and connect residents to nature.

The underlying concept of all the efforts is *integrating habitats*. This concept emerges as a method to address tension between conservation and development. Integrating habitats aim to blend, balance, and integrate the needs of people with those of the natural environment (Kriszenski, 2007). Guided by this concept, the Urban Green and TriMet project strives to embrace a more substantial design for the Oak Grove area. The final stage design of the project envisions a livable community for all: the light rail station and the parking structure are covered with native shrubs and trees that provide habitat for wildlife and bring people into harmonious contact with nature.

Through their continued involvement, Urban Green continues to help modify and improve the design to incorporate long-term considerations – for example, the eventual effects of climate change on the vegetation structure. The project partners are striving to create something that will be as impactful on opening day as it will be 50 years in the future when the oak forest has matured. The project when the light rail construction from Portland will reach its southern terminus at Oak Grove. The completed project will showcase “development that balances design excellence, ecological stewardship, and economic enterprise” (Metro, 2011, p. 3).

The success of the partnership to design a sustainable light rail station has increased the trust and enthusiasm of local residents in Oak Grove. Local residents believe the construction of the station and the parking lot will generate economic benefits with opportunities to renovate the surrounding area along SE McLoughlin Boulevard, rejuvenate local businesses, and connect Oak Grove with the rest of the region. Encouraged by their success, they are determined to expand partnerships to restore ecosystems in their neighborhood while guiding the character of economic and community developments around the light rail station and SE McLoughlin Boulevard.

Urban Green - Other Activities (Janger, C. 2014, personal communication)

Urban Green has also been involved in other environmental protection, community development, and sustainability related projects. Some of the projects are listed and explained below.

Local Stream Restoration. Urban Green is also a partner with Oak Lodge Sanitary District in another Nature In The Neighborhoods Grant. The purpose of the grant is to replace an old bridge and culvert and carry out stream restoration. The project is currently underway, and will bring back salmon and other fish to a degraded creek for several miles in the middle of an active

neighborhood of houses for the first time in over 100 years. It will also begin the restoration of a wetland area several miles upstream from the culvert.

Oak Grove Neighborhood Center Plan. In 2010, a group of graduate students from Portland State University's Master of Urban and Regional Planning (MURP) program worked with Urban Green to create the Oak Grove Neighborhood Center Plan. The purpose of the plan was to create a vision for the future of Oak Grove by utilizing prior plans, exploring future investment possibilities and opportunities, and investigating ways to improve livability. The graduate student group approached their objective through the lens of ecological, economic and social sustainability. Utilizing public outreach through community meetings, on-site research, stakeholder interviews, business surveys, and community open houses and presentations, the group designed and described a vision that will help manifest the future economic and social potential of the Oak Grove community. This project established a relationship between Urban Green and Portland State University that will continue to provide mutual benefits in the future.

Vision for McLoughlin Boulevard. Urban Green is working with a group of young architects and community activists to design a new vision for McLoughlin Boulevard---a severely degraded, badly designed, ineffective economic thoroughfare that runs through the middle of Oak Grove. This Boulevard also divides the community into two pieces. The purpose of the McLoughlin Boulevard project is to create a community of thriving neighborhoods, shops, restaurants and services that is green and sustainable, healthy and safe; woven together by walkable, tree-lined streets, trails, natural areas, and open spaces; and strengthened by a diversified local economy, great educational opportunities, and engaged citizens.

Bike-Ped Bridge. One of Urban Green's current projects is the development of a concrete plan for a bicycle and pedestrian bridge over the Willamette River that would connect the existing regional Trolley Trail in Oak Grove to the City of Lake Oswego on the western riverbank. This project is highly feasible, and has been included in Clackamas County's long term Transportation System Plan (Urban Green activist members participated in the Citizen's Advisory Group that reviewed and selected projects for the plan). There may also be federal funding available for this type of active transportation improvement project. Urban Green sees a great opportunity to develop substantial community support for this project, and is currently working with other community activists, environmentalists, and Community Planning Organizations, while also working with architects to develop a conceptual design for the bridge.

Last-mile transportation. Urban Green is exploring the potential for a community based, co-op taxi system that could use community members' cars to bridge the "last mile" between the light rail station and riders' final destinations. Smartphone apps already exist for similar programs in a for-profit context – but Urban Green is exploring the use of this model to create a not-for-profit co-op. This would allow community members to use their own personal automobiles as taxis, allow them to earn income, and not require the need to purchase additional vehicles, keeping

costs and rates low. This kind of community “start up” could be a model to help solve other last-mile transportation problems in other metropolitan areas.

All of Urban Green’s projects are anchored by an understanding that meaningful changes at the community level can be more feasible and impactful than changes at the national scale. In light of an increasingly uncertain environmental and economic future, Urban Green believes that local partnerships and sustainability efforts will help to create stronger and more resilient communities in the long term.

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