

Editorial: The moody creatures of Oregon's "Sim City"

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What's the average life of a political movement? Roughly a generation, 25 years, maybe 30.

The French called the post-war years between 1946-73 their golden years. The Reagan Revolution began in 1964 with Goldwater's nomination and ended in 1989 when Reagan left office.

And in Portland...a generation of progressive, planning politics in Oregon has ended. Not everybody knows that this generation's politics is over, but it is. Over. All that remains is the burial.

But the danger, the real danger, comes when a society denies changing times. In that regard, the dancing and the celebration on election night over the passage of the first county income tax west of the Mississippi seems especially anecdotal. Particularly when Portland Mayor Vera Katz and Multnomah County Chairwoman Diane Linn celebrated that "victory" in the metropolitan area with the worst economy in the nation.

Add to that the unnecessarily offensive label of "Loser" tagged onto Phil Knight by the Portland Tribune because he was apparently foolish enough to back three unsuccessful, anti-tax school board candidates. His and their crime—suggesting a change in the economic status quo. (Progressive reform? How dare they.)

We know, we know. The celebrators were saving the unions...we mean schools.

Oregon's generation of progressive politics began in 1973 when then-Gov. Tom McCall and the Oregon legislature passed Senate Bill 100, Oregon's radical venture into land use planning. A session before, Oregon and McCall had tiptoed into this generation with the passage of the Bottle Bill.

In '73, according to McCall biographer Brent Walth in "Fire at Eden's Gate," McCall gave the speech that would send his land use law to the legislature and set a movement in motion. Said McCall:

"There is a shameless threat to our environment and to the whole quality of life—unfettered despoiling of the land, Sagebrush divisions, coastal condominiums and the ravenous rampage of suburbia in the Willamette Valley all threaten to mock Oregon's status as the environmental model for the nation.

"We are dismayed that we have not stopped misuse of the land, our most valuable finite resource....The interests of Oregon for today and in the future must be protected from the grasping wastrels of the land."

That was the rhetoric and the logic that formed the beginning of Oregon's progressive generation. Along the way came Bill Walton, the Grateful Dead, marijuana, an NBA Championship, Neil Goldschmidt's mayoralship, Neal Goldschmidt's governorship, LCDC, Brooklynite Mayor Vera Katz, bicycles, an Oregon Health Plan, an assisted suicide or two. Thus rose the pillars of this generation of leftist, progressive politics. And for a while—never mind the hiccup of the deep recession of '82, and Vic Atiyeh's small business style governorship to fix it—progressive Oregon seemed to work. The state earned quite a reputation.

But stay around long enough and you'll eventually go stale. Not know when to leave and you'll eventually bastardize the movement. Lord Acton's 19th century political adage that "power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely," describes how a generation of Oregon's liberal tradition could fail.

Progressive Oregon grew far too PC to suit many of its residents, but thanks to high-tech money in the 1990s, it was still working. In '03, with the worst unemployment in the nation, roads in disrepair, and economic opportunity a thing of the past, progressive Oregon looks very, very dowdy. The leaders who have presided over Oregon's failure ended up doing what occurs when any political movement runs past due. They bastardized it.

Think John Kitzhaber in his faded blue jeans leaving office as arguably one of the worst governors in Oregon history, unwilling to talk to the press or even Democrat leaders, and arguing for the repeal of his own once revolutionary health plan, saying that health care reform can really only come from the federal level.

Think how Mayor Vera Katz took Neil Goldschmidt's planning legacy and twisted it into something so wickedly horrible, draconian, and mangled that a company as deeply civic-minded as Columbia Sportswear would be forced to flee. They and others.

Neil Goldschmidt is no Vera Katz, but he and his planning movement did give birth to her anti-business, personal, confrontive politics. Think how Mayor Katz managed to bastardize the city's image nationally with her "in your face" lack of cooperation with Attorney General John Ascroft on America's war on terrorism. Think of Mayor Katz sending a bill of \$100,000 to the White House for security costs during a presidential visit, and then think of the Mayor complaining when the federal government wouldn't give Portland any federal homeland security dollars. Think of the Speaker of the House Denny Hastert or the President of the United States, George Bush, in private meetings making caustic comments about Portland's national reputation. That's how political movements get bastardized, when they don't know where the exit door is, when 90s leaders try to solve '03 problems.

Look again now at election night May 20, to McMenamin's Kennedy School and watch Vera Katz and Diane Linn about as deep in denial as two mental patients doing the same thing over and over, expecting different results. Watch them dance in celebration as taxes

are raised in Multnomah County, watch them dance as taxes rise, jobs flee, opportunity disappears and Portland diminishes. Watch them dance as the city shrinks, major downtown hotels near bankruptcy, brokerage firms are cut in half. Thousands of people in Portland feel real economic pain, pain brought about not in small part by the arrogance and bastardization of a political movement run its course. It's a natural evolution.

What's next?

Amity Shlaes writes in London's Financial Times about the fictitious place called "Sim City" in the computer game of the same name. Shlaes offers up the supply-side creed as she rebuts tax-raising mayor Michael Bloomberg's current policies for New York City.

"To be a good guardian to your Sim City, you have to manage a subtle thing. You have to make it want to grow. This involved thousands of continuous real-time fiscal and regulatory decisions taken by you, the mayor. The key to success is making such calls not from the point of view of City Hall but from the vantage point of your charges. For, as the SimCity 4 handbook notes, "Sims come first;" and Sims are moody creatures. Incentives inspire them to invest. Disincentives make them sad. Small alterations in the tax law yield big changes in their behavior. Even the most apparently inconsequential steps may send your city into irreversible decline.

"Of course, such a tragedy is not instantly visible. All may look fine when you walk away from your chair. But while you are off telephoning or dabbing goat's cheese on your cracker, your city is beginning, quietly, to die."