

## **EDITORIAL**

### *A Suburban Fatwa*

What would happen if all of Portland's liberal antipathy for corporations, capitalism and cars finally convinced suburbanites to stay in their own neighborhoods for shopping, dining and even office space?

Apparently, we are about to find out.

A recent *Willamette Week* cover feature detailed the decline in Portland's much vaunted restaurant scene. Oddly, the reporter and the chefs and restaurateurs who were interviewed seemed surprised and somewhat baffled by the decline in business.

It's easily explained, and it was bound to happen. Suburbia has finally issued a *fatwa* against the City of Roses, or rather the city has brought it upon itself. Portland's own *fatwa* on the automobile has resulted in miles of ripped up streets, entire roadways dedicated to mass transit only, green bike boxes that confound drivers, and restricted parking spaces. These roadblocks to would-be city users are not accidental. They are the result of "planning" aimed at reducing the number of cars in downtown Portland.

Decades of far left-leaning programs and projects have created a city where it is nearly impossible to find parking, and when you do, prepare to pay dearly. Billions of dollars spent on light rail have left roads congested and in poor repair. Crumbling bridges would turn even normal drivers into frightened phobics.

Entire Portland neighborhoods have risen up against Wal-Mart and McDonald's entering into their areas. "Big box" stores find safe haven only in the suburbs (where shoppers flock to them); they get no welcome in Stumptown.

Furriers Schumacher and Nicholas Unger can tell hair-raising tales of angry protests and concerted efforts to drive their legitimate businesses out of town.

An aggressive business income tax probably tops the list of ways that Portland's elite leaders have driven capital out of the city. It's simple economics for most of the businesses that have found more welcoming quarters in the countless new office complexes and modern shopping malls springing up in the 'burbs.

Anti-auto activists such as Metro Councilor Rex Burkholder have gotten their wish. Bicycle fanatics such as Earl Blumenauer are seeing their dream come true. "Smart growth" advocates such as Sam Adams can now reap the consequences of their goals.

"Mission accomplished," as someone once said. Cars, corporations and capitalism have been diminished in downtown Portland. Suburbanites have listened and heard; they are staying home.

Amidst all their plans to create their smart city — designed for pedestrians and bikes with quaint shops and sustainable restaurants — these planners forgot one fundamental lesson of economics: capital is mobile.

And unfortunately, their plans all hinged on holding captive in their city the same dollars that have been there in the past, to be spent at the quaint shops and sustainable restaurants.

But those dollars have escaped. They are gone, baby, gone.

Now, with the economy shallow and perhaps sinking further, the outlook for some of Portland's more fragile service businesses could be serious.

*Willamette Week's* cover story notes the high cost of many downtown meals, higher wholesale wine prices, "biofuels sucking up the grain supply in the Midwest" (another poorly concocted liberal fad), and Oregon's fourth highest minimum wage in the country (thanks to Portland voters) as major causes for concern in the downtown restaurant scene.

"Egalitarianism can be a bitch," according to reporter Byron Beck.

And declaring war on cars, corporations and capitalism can really put a dent in your profits. It can result in suburbanites changing their minds and changing their habits, permanently.

Some of those decisions are soft — based on anecdotal experiences and satisfaction levels.

Example: On a recent visit to a downtown restaurant, one suburban couple drove separately to meet for dinner. Both paid a parking fee of \$8 for a total of \$16 on top of their meal. That's the price of an entrée out in suburbia, or at least an elegant appetizer.

Portland's environmental protectors would accuse this couple of contributing to global warming by having the audacity to drive two cars into the downtown core for dinner. Activists' war on the automobile disdains the use of one car; two is unthinkable. But it all works out, because next time that couple will know better; they'll stay in their own neighborhood for dinner.

Other decisions are hardened choices — the result of a constant refrain of moral condescension from elitist activists conveying to suburban working class families that they, their cars and their values are unwelcome in the downtown core.

For a variety of reasons, it is not unusual to hear people say they have chosen to no longer spend their time or their money in downtown Portland. Even business appointments and events are being scheduled more often outside the war zone of downtown construction. The line between downtown Portland and its suburbs grows increasingly distinct. And the lines forming outside the restaurants at Bridgeport Village and other trendy new suburban developments exemplify this shift. Both Bridgeport Village and The Streets of Tanasbourne offer *dozens* of restaurant choices, conveniently located next to shopping, theaters, and yes, freeways and free parking.

This is an unhappy situation for Portland and for the region. The city's young, so-called creative class will suffer most as their already meager service-level jobs disappear. They might find new, more lucrative jobs in the suburbs, but it's one heck of a long bike ride.

"The short-term solution lies with us," writes *Willamette Week's* Beck. "If we want to keep up our town's foodie rep, we have to step up to the plate, literally, and eat out."

Maybe. But who's we? An "us and them" mentality has been created that turns off and turns away more than half the population. The demographic tide has turned, and in a soft economy it's unlikely that a rousing pep talk will solve the problem. It may take more than roads, bridges or even tax reform to overcome the *fatwa* on downtown Portland.

Maybe it's time for Portland to grow up.

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