



"Downtown Revitalization Rules"

Posted by [Prof. Goose](#) on October 8, 2006 - 12:37pm

Topic: [Environment/Sustainability](#)

Tags: [hans noeldner](#), [oregon](#), [wisconsin](#) [[list all tags](#)]

This is a guest post from Hans Noeldner.

I am a trustee in the village of [Oregon, Wisconsin](#), a rapidly growing bedroom community of about 8,300 near Madison, Wisconsin. I ran for public office because I believed that 90% of the work to create a sustainable society must be done at the community level. Having served for nearly two years, I am even more convinced this is true. Our consumption of resources and production of wastes is more powerfully shaped by our land use decisions than any other factor I can think of. And land use decisions are intensely local.

More of Hans' interesting (and it being Sunday, it has an NPR-Michael-Feldman-esque feel about it...) observations on the rules of downtown revitalization under the fold.

Oregon began over 160 years ago as a stop on the Oregon Trail, and it soon evolved into a relatively self-contained rail center in a dairy farming community. For nearly a century the village had a "full-service" downtown where residents and farmers could do virtually all of their "trading" within two or three blocks. But like small downtowns everywhere in the United States, ours nearly collapsed during recent decades. Fortunately our downtown has begun to recover in the past ten years, but the going is tough. There have been repeated plans to kick-start redevelopment and improve aesthetics, and a number of downtown property owners have nicely restored individual structures. Thus far, however, there have not been any major redevelopment projects or overhauls of civic or municipal infrastructure in the area. But streets and sewers are crumbling, and we need to replace and rebuild them soon. Downtown Oregon is on the front burner again.

Over the past several months another village trustee and I, along with help from some dedicated citizens, have been working on a new plan to revitalize our downtown and establish a "square" or "plaza" - i.e. a large contiguous pedestrian area for public gatherings and events. In August and September of this year we held four listening sessions and a public forum. During the process I became increasingly frustrated that participants at these events were willing and eager to discuss some things - parking in particular - but were unwilling to discuss the things that matter most to me - connections between our lifestyles, our community, and the possibility of a sustainable world. Following the public forum I compiled the explicit and implicit "rules" that currently govern our civic discourse.

And once I saw them in black and white, it became utterly clear to me that my real challenge is to enroll my community in another game - one of connections, responsibilities, and transformation from within, one in which our personal actions matter.

But for now here are the rules for the game we have been playing - "Let's Revitalize Downtown

Oregon!" Some of the rules consist of objections that have been raised against wasting valuable downtown parking space on a pedestrian area. Many pertain to smooth flow of motor vehicle traffic. Other rules comprise underlying assumptions that everyone knows but no one speaks aloud. The axiomatic rules are at the end of the list.

"Any loss of parking would be painful, because people just don't want to walk anymore." - Oregon business owner.

The desire to avoid walking is especially keen in places like downtown Oregon; people will drive to malls and walk several hundred yards from the parking lot to the entrance, but downtown Oregon is entirely different. A customer who can't park right next to the entrance is a lost customer.

"...no matter how people feel, people are not going to give up their automobiles." - country estate resident from township adjacent to Oregon which claims it has the most progressive land-use policies in Wisconsin.

Forget giving up automobiles, Oregon-area residents are not going to cut back on their driving at all. "Absolute reliance on the automobile" is at about 98% right now, and it's not going down. We have to accept reality.

The fact that some people truly need to drive and park downtown - elderly and disabled folk, farmers, and businesses people who are moving materials and equipment - means that everyone else is going to drive and park too.

Township residents have no choice but to drive downtown. A few Village residents may walk or bicycle most of the time, and some residents may walk or bicycle occasionally, but it will never be enough to make any noticeable difference in downtown traffic levels, parking demand, or non-motorist business activity.

Downtown "ambiance" - a sense of place - is irrelevant. All that matters is parking.

Downtown business owners have a right to Village-owned parking stalls near their front door and on their side of the street - then their customers won't have walk across streets.

Downtown business owners and their employees have a right to park in a free municipal lot close to their businesses and then complain about not enough parking downtown.

Village employees have a right to free all-day parking close to Village Hall, in the municipal lot that is closest to downtown businesses.

The Village cannot afford to enforce parking time limits downtown - not two-hour limits, not two-day, not two-week. The cheaper alternative is stay the course - i.e. give little pink warning slips to downtown business owners so they can warn offenders, and then build and maintain more and more free surface parking.

Downtown business owners have a right to maintain and increase traffic levels on Main Street - more motor vehicle traffic is the only way to attract and retain customers.

Residents from Oregon suburbs and the surrounding countryside have a right to drive through downtown Oregon as much as they want without being impeded by narrow streets, lower speed limits, parked cars backing out into traffic, stoplights, too many turns, or stalled traffic.

Residents on major and minor "collector" streets in the Village have a right to keep as much traffic as possible on Main Street rather than allowing some of it to be diverted to "their" streets.

Residents along Main Street do not have a right to less traffic. If they wanted low traffic levels nearby, they should have purchased a house on a cul-de-sac or a 35-acre country estate in a township.

The need for pedestrian safety downtown is almost entirely defined by motorists walking from and to their vehicles. People in Oregon don't walk further than this unless they are exercising their dog or jogging.

Oregon motorists have a right to street widths and parking arrangements which ensure that the rear end of a parked nineteen-foot-long full-sized crew-cab pickup truck (our favorite single-occupancy commuter vehicle) will not be clipped by traffic.

Downtown Oregon is a poor venue for events and activities like the Farmer's Market, festivals, performances, civic gatherings, and so forth. There isn't enough parking, and the Village already has expansive parks near Village limits for stuff like this.

Downtown events and activities do not appreciably increase income for downtown business owners.

Existing downtown businesses have the right to prevent additional businesses and residents from coming to the downtown area because the newcomers would appropriate "their" parking stalls. Downtown Oregon is already parked to capacity, and every 2000 square feet of public plaza or new first-floor building space would steal about six (6) free Village-maintained, no-time-limit surface parking stalls from the businesses.

Oregon-area residents have a right to drive as much as they want and then park without feeling accountable for the fact that downtown Oregon nearly collapsed due to "not enough parking".

Oregon-area residents have a right to drive as much as they want and then park without acknowledging any connection between their driving and their sense that our Village has lost a "sense of place".

Oregon-area residents have a right to drive as much as they want and then park without feeling any guilt or responsibility that our automobile-dependent way of life is linked to regional and global phenomena like wars for oil, petroleum financed terrorism, sprawl, global warming, congestion on the Beltline, the national debt, obesity, isolation, road rage, etc.

Our lifestyles are personal, private matters. We have the right to consume as many resources and occupy as much land as we can legally afford. Beyond this, it is totally unrealistic to plan a community with the expectation that residents will freely exercise self-restraint and stewardship of the Earth's ecosystems on behalf of current and future inhabitants.

Freedom of movement - i.e. driving a motor vehicle whenever, wherever, and as much as we want - is one of our most precious and fundamental rights.

[editor's note, by Prof. Goose] And these, my friends, are just a few of the reasons this is a tough row to hoe.

(Also, if this topic interests you, you should check out [peakguy's \(really good and related to this topic\) piece on NYC here](#)).

DISCLAIMER: The views herein do not necessarily represent those of the Board of Trustees in the Village of Oregon, Wisconsin.



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