

our last landscape

Measure 26-80 and Beyond

By Mike Houck

Here in the Portland-Vancouver region we still have the opportunity to preserve and restore an ecologically and visually rich landscape, one that integrates great urban communities with a productive and ecologically sustainable working landscape—arranging for what the *Garden Cities movement's* Ebenezer Howard envisioned as a “stable marriage between city and country, not a weekend liaison.”¹

Myriad animals, rare and common, still share the urban landscape with us. Relatively intact stream corridors still bring ribbons of green into most of our neighborhoods. Diverse plant communities, distributed across the urban and rural landscape provide regionally important wildlife corridors and ecological anchors. Hundreds of bird species nest, migrate through, or live here year-around. But our concern for landscape ecology goes beyond maintenance of biological diversity. Equally important is ensuring access to nature, within what Robert Michael Pyle² describes as our “immediate radius of reach,” which for the very old and the very young is a short walk or bicycle ride from home.

In his “The Extinction of Experience” Pyle’s poignant, and provocative, question, “*What is the extinction of the Condor to a child who has never known a wren?*”³ articulates the tenet that to appreciate the exotic and to develop true environmental awareness children need access to common backyard nature—what British author Richard Maybey calls the “unofficial countryside.”⁴ To ensure there is nature nearby, from the neighborhood to the regional scale, an interconnected network of streams, parks, greenspaces, trails, and an ecologically functional green infrastructure⁵, must permeate our cities and extend into the rural landscape.



Children’s Nature Class • Photo by Mike Houck

Measure 26-80, Natural Areas, Parks and Streams

“*Our options are expiring. The land that is still to be saved will have to be saved in the next few years. We have no luxury of choice. We must make our commitments now and look to this landscape as the last one.*” William H. Whyte⁶

On November 7, 2006 passage of *Measure 26-80* (www.savenaturalareas.org), will guarantee the next generation of parks, trails, and natural areas to meet our growing population’s needs. *Measure 26-80* will add to the legacy begun with the 1995 bond measure⁷, which generated \$135.6 million for acquisition of over 8,140 acres of natural areas and construction of miles of recreational trails. *Measure 26-80*, which would raise \$227.4 million dollars, will be a comparative bargain to the many other money measures, at a mere 19 cents per \$1,000 of property value or less than \$3 per month. *Measure 26-80* will also help integrate the built and natural environments and contribute to the region’s economic vitality, ecological health, civic vitality, and quality of life. It will protect ecologically significant habitats in both the urban and rural landscapes.

William H. Whyte’s *The Last Landscape* reminds us there is nothing new under the sun. His admonition to build higher density cities while preserving floodplains, ridge tops, and nature for children has never been more relevant. Whyte’s sense of urgency is apropos to our effort to accommodate more than a million new residents, while maintaining the region’s quality of life and ecological integrity. We have the opportunity, through two initiatives—Metro’s *New Look* and the Regional Parks, Trails and Natural Areas Plan—to bring landscape ecology and design to bear at every scale—regional, local, and neighborhood.



Rock Creek Greenway • Photo by Mike Houck

Regional Scale

“Where the water flows, the positive benefits of open space are the clearest. If we follow this track in our open-space planning, we are at once securing the prime lands and the lands which give linkage and continuity—in a word, regional design.” William H. Whyte⁸

Measure 26-80, *Natural Areas, Parks and Streams*, will provide \$168.4 million for acquisition of roughly another 5,000 acres⁹ of regionally significant landscapes including areas like the east county volcanic lava domes and Washington County’s Cooper Mountain, Wapato Lake wetlands and Tonquin Geologic area. In Clackamas County, the Clackamas River bluffs near the new city of Damascus, the Willamette Narrows, and Canemah Bluffs in Oregon City are at the top of the acquisition list.

But it’s not solely natural areas the bond measure will acquire. A regional interconnected system of bikeways and walking paths is also central to the measure. Just as Olmsted’s 1903 park master plan¹⁰ envisioned connecting the city’s parks with boulevards and parkways, a regional trail plan¹¹ will create a bi-state multipurpose trail network that will provide for an alternative transportation system and a short walk, jog or bicycle ride to a park or natural area. One of the most popular examples from the 1995 bond measure is the Springwater Corridor along the Willamette River that stretches over three miles from the Vera Katz Eastbank Esplanade, past 160-acre Oaks Bottom Wildlife Refuge to Sellwood Riverfront Park in Portland.

Local Scale

“For years open-space acquisition has been planned with an eye mainly on costs, and this has unduly emphasized low price rural land. If benefits are given equal weight, the equations become more favorable for high cost land where people are.” William H. Whyte¹²

The bond will also make available \$44 million to local park providers like the City of Portland which will purchase land in park deficient neighborhoods in Northeast Portland and natural areas in the Westside Wildlife Corridor. Trail projects include Forest Park, Stephens Creek Natural Area and Powell Butte Nature Park. Ecosystem restoration will be undertaken at Oaks Bottom Wildlife Refuge and newly acquired Big Four Corners Natural Area on the Columbia Slough.

In Washington County, the Beaverton Creek trail, restoration on Sexton Mountain, Orchard Park in Cornelius, restoration and trails in Heron Grove Park in Durham, and numerous projects along Bronson Creek in Hillsboro are priorities. Clackamas County will expand Barton Park on the Clackamas River, purchase land on Scouter Mountain and the Willamette Greenway in Milwaukie and restore habitat on Iron Mountain in Lake Oswego.

Neighborhood Scale, Integrating the Natural and the Built Environments

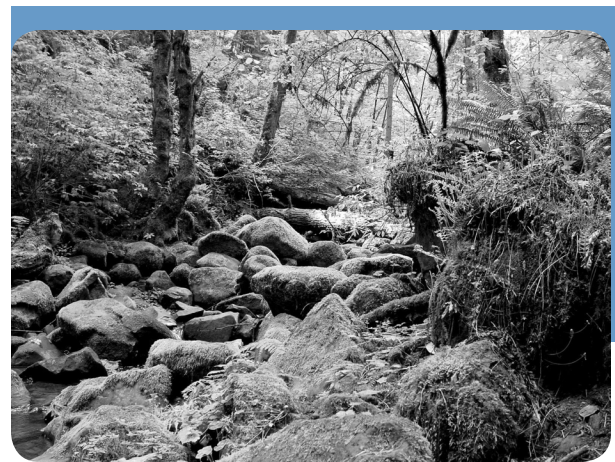
“I have found that people who feel very strongly about their own landscape are more often than not the same people who are pushing for better comprehensive planning. There is a moral in the fact that threats to local landscapes arouse more passion than positive planning proposals. Planning that becomes too abstract or scornful of this aspect will miss a vital motivating factor. People are stirred by what they can see.” William H. Whyte¹³

The *Natural Areas, Parks and Streams* bond will include \$15 million for a competitive grant program to fund innovative “re-greening” projects; integrate natural and built environments within neighborhoods; and to provide opportunities for the community to actively protect fish and wildlife habitat and water quality near where people live and work. Projects eligible for funding include the acquisition of neighborhood natural areas, development of community gardens, habitat restoration efforts, interpretive displays and development of trails.

The Regional Context

“In the United States it has been our policy to try to separate the city from the country. In contrast, the impulse behind the greenway networks is to integrate land uses rather than separate them—to join the urban and the rural into a kind of normative American countryside. The name of the enterprise we undertake to accomplish all these worthy goals is regional planning.” Charles Little¹⁴

From a landscape perspective, as important as it is, Measure 26-80 is but one piece of two much larger regional landscape visions—the *New Look*¹⁵ and the recently adopted vision for a comprehensive, interconnected system of parks, trails, and natural areas for the Portland-Vancouver metropolitan region.



Balch Creek, Forest Park • Photo by Mike Houck

The New Look

In 1995 Metro adopted the Region 2040 Growth Concept¹⁶ that was predicated on the region's "growing up, not out." It was designed to accommodate new growth in mixed-use regional and town centers inside the Urban Growth Boundary (UGB) and to use public transit to form compact areas of retail, cultural and recreational activities in a pedestrian-friendly environment. Region 2040 was also designed to ensure the protection of parks and greenspaces, both inside and outside the Urban Growth Boundary, recognizing that parks, trails, and natural areas are essential to the region's residents accepting higher density development.

The *New Look* is an effort to update Region 2040, not by revisiting the core philosophy that the region should accommodate population increases not by sprawling outward across farm, forest and natural resource lands, but by "growing up, not out." Central to the strategy of maintaining a compact region—a growth management stance that sets the Portland metropolitan region apart from other regions in the United States—is to efficiently utilize buildable lands inside the UGB before considering any expansion of the Urban Growth Boundary. The quid pro quo to that strategy, however, is maintaining "ribbons of green," parks, and open spaces inside the boundary as well. Achieving these goals simultaneously is a perfect venue for creative landscape professionals to influence design solutions, with regard to where and how UGB expansions should, or should not, occur and how to better integrate the built and natural environments inside the existing UGB and new expansion areas.

Comprehensive, Bi-State Park and Natural Area System

Relevant to better integrating the built and natural environments, a vision complementary to the *New Look*—a bi-state, interconnected regional parks, trails, and greenspace system—was unanimously adopted by the Metro Council in March 2005, an action that brings us full circle, back to the philosophy so eloquently enunciated in John Charles Olmsted's 1903 Portland park master plan, but applied at a regional scale.

Our modern day park, trail, and greenspace vision¹⁷ calls for "an exceptional, multi-jurisdictional, interconnected system of neighborhood, community, and regional parks, natural areas, trails, open spaces, and recreation opportunities distributed equitably throughout the region. This region-wide system is acknowledged and valued here and around the world as an essential element of the greater Portland-Vancouver metropolitan area's economic success, ecological health, civic vitality, and overall quality of life."

Metro's Greenspaces Policy Advisory Committee (GPAC) advises the full Metro Council on issues related to parks and greenspace. This committee is working to define in pictures, maps, and words what the "system will look like in fifty to one-hundred years, to identify new revenue sources, and to describe what institutional arrangements will best serve to own and manage the system.

A Challenge to the Landscape Profession

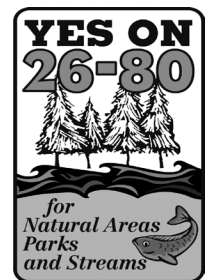
"Commissions have been staffed primarily by people concerned with physical design and development. The people who think mostly about nature, such as ecologists and biologists, have been operating on the fringes of regional planning, literally as well as figuratively. So have the landscape architects." William H Whyte¹⁸

This is perhaps our last opportunity to preserve and restore the best of our Last Landscape, both inside and outside the region's Urban Growth Boundary. There is no single group to better realize Ebenezer Howard's vision for a marriage between city and country than the landscape architect and design community. There are opportunities for landscape professionals to become engaged at every scale, from designing our regional ecological landscape to the local streetscape.

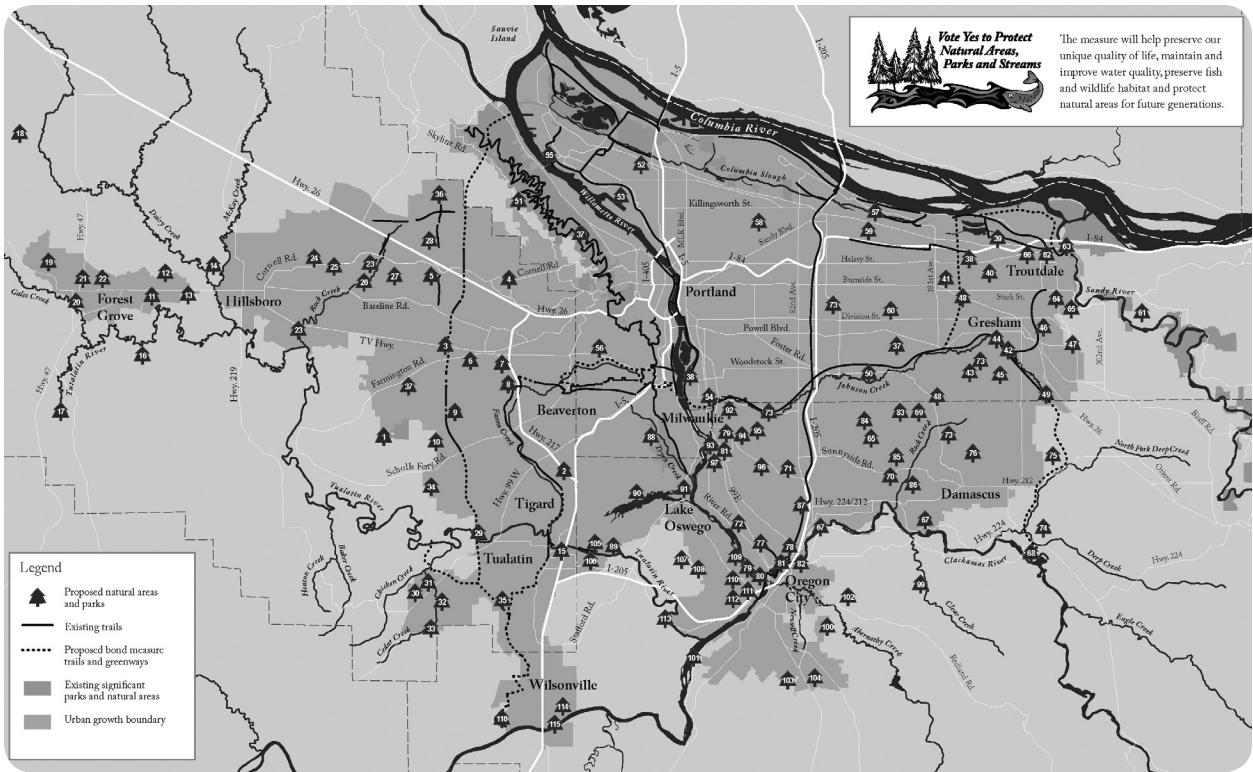
Landscape architects have, for the most part, been absent from this discourse. They have, at best, been working at the periphery of regional and local land use debate. Historically, we have benefited from the wisdom and vision of John Charles Olmsted and Lewis Mumford¹⁹, one a landscape architect and the other a regionalist, both of whom goaded and guided us to the last generation's contributions to our sense of place and regional planning initiatives. Who will inspire this century's vision? Will the landscape architecture community be there when it counts?

To become involved in the Vote Yes on *Measure 26-80* go to www.savenaturalareas.org and give the campaign your endorsement; send a web-based message to your friends and colleagues on the "Get Involved, Tell Your Friends" portion of the website. Donate.

To become involved in the broader regional issues go to grassroots-based www.urbanfauna.org. For more information on Metro's regional *New Look* and park initiatives go to www.metro-region.org.



Mike Houck, Executive Director of the Urban Greenspaces Institute (www.urbangreenspaces.org), has worked on urban park and greenspace issues since 1980 when he founded the Audubon Society of Portland's Urban Naturalist Program. He served on Metro's Blue Ribbon Committee which advised the Metro Council on Measure 26-80, and serves on Metro's Greenspaces Policy Advisory Committee and the City of Portland's Park Board. He can be reached at mikehouck@urbangreenspaces.org or (503) 319-7155.



Endnotes

- 1 Charles Little, *Greenways For America*, (Johns Hopkins, 1990), pp 15-17.
- 2 Robert Michael Pyle, *The Thunder Tree*, (Houghton Mifflin, 1993).
- 3 Pyle, pp 140-152.
- 4 Richard Maybey, *The Unofficial Countryside* (Collins, 1973). William H. Whyte, *The Last Landscape* (Penn, 2002).
- 5 "an interconnected network of protected land and water that supports native species, maintains natural ecological processes, sustains air and water resources and contributes to the health and quality of life for America's communities and people.", from www.greeninfrastructure.net.
- 6 William H. Whyte, *The Last Landscape* (Penn, 2002).
- 7 The 1995 regional bond measure, which raised \$138.6 million and was approved by over 60% of the region's voters, resulted in the acquisition of over 8,140 acres of regionally significant fish and wildlife habitat and more than 74 miles of stream and riverside riparian lands. It also provided \$34 million to local park providers that purchased additional acres of locally significant lands.
- 8 Whyte, p.
- 9 Another reason for urgency is \$168.4 million is projected to buy between 4,000 and 5,000 acres, while \$138.6 from the 1995 bond measure allowed for the purchase of more than 8,000 acres. As John Charles Olmsted, William H. Whyte and others have long argued, it's better to buy land while it's "cheap", land bank it and worry about development and management later.
- 10 OLMSTED BROS., Landscape Architects, *Outlining a System of Parkways, Boulevards and Parks*, for the City of Portland (Report of the Park Board, Portland, Oregon, 1903).
- 11 Metro Regional Parks and Greenspaces, working with citizen trail advocates and local park providers, has adopted a formal regional trail plan that guides the prioritization of bicycle and pedestrian trail projects. For more information go to <http://www.metro-region.org/article.cfm?ArticleID=3418>.
- 12 Whyte, p.
- 13 Whyte, p.
- 14 Little, p.
- 15 Metro's *New Look at Regional Choices* is described by Metro Council as "a collaborative effort to find new, creative ways to absorb the arrival of a million new residents in this region in the next 25 years." The primary focus of the *New Look* is to identify new growth management tools, recommend changes to state law and local policies, and pursue investment strategies. See www.metro-region.org/article.cfm?articleid=16386.
- 16 Metro, *The Metro 2040 Growth Concept* defines regional growth and development in the Portland metropolitan region. The growth concept was adopted in the Region 2040 planning and public involvement process in December 1995 (www.metro-region.org).
- 17 Metro, *Greenspaces Policy Advisory Committee, Vision, outcomes, objectives and means*, March, 2005
- 18 Whyte, p.
- 19 In his 1938 address to the City Club of Portland Lewis Mumford, in addition to calling for a bi-state Columbia Gorge Commission, also urged the creation of a bi-state Portland-Vancouver park and natural areas planning process. He also famously asked said, "I have seen a lot of great scenery in my life, but I have seen nothing so tempting as a home for man as this Oregon country. The view I got in the Columbia Gorge knocked me flat. It is one of the greatest in the world. You have here a basis for civilization on its finest scale, and I am going to ask you a question which you may not like. Are you good enough to have this country in your possession? Have you got enough intelligence, imagination, and cooperation among you to make the best use of these opportunities? Oregon is one of the last places in this country where natural resources are still relatively intact. Are you intelligent enough to use them wisely?"