

The Anatomy of a Developing New City:
Finding a Home for the New American Dream in Damascus, Oregon

By: Keith Daily

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Professor: Jean von Bargaen

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Finding a Home for the New American Dream in Damascus, Oregon

Portland, Oregon is one of the first cities in the country to have established an Urban Growth Boundary that defines its city limits. Delineating where development can and cannot occur, the purpose of the UGB is to promote density within existing urban areas, while preserving the land outside the boundary and reducing sprawl. Portland has been experiencing a significant increase in population over recent years, enveloping what was left within the Boundary. The bubble finally burst in 2002, when the Urban Growth Boundary was expanded to accommodate the next 20 years of Portland's growth. The area of expansion includes a considerable amount of Oregon's treasured rural areas, and will have a cataclysmic impact on the nature of this landscape. Traditionally seen as a leader in sustainable city development, Portland once again finds itself in the spotlight; in the eyes of many, how Portland deals with this major urban shift, could ultimately determine the success or failure of the entire Urban Growth Boundary system.

Prior to 2004, the Damascus Community was an unincorporated rural area of about 12,000 acres, including a population of approximately 12,000 residents living in 4,000 dwelling units (DamascusYes). Sudden change was brought to this distinctly pastoral community in 2002, when the Metro Council voted to expand Portland's Urban Growth Boundary to include 12,200 acres within the Damascus and Boring region of Oregon. The coinciding urban growth that follows this decision is expected to yield a five-fold increase in the area's population over the next 20 years. It is anticipated that the resulting 60,000 inhabitants will be housed in roughly 25,000 dwelling units; increasing the area's density over that time from 43,560 square feet per person, to 8,712 square feet per person (DamascusYes). In addition, it is predicted that the growth will bring in 50,000 more jobs, spread across 1,650 acres of employment land, including a new and vibrant town center. With hopes of maintaining a fiscally responsible, yet balanced, well-planned, and well-executed plan, citizens of the Damascus community voted overwhelmingly to incorporate on November 4, 2004. Establishing a set of core values and a vision through community involvement, the new city embarks on a path that they hope will preserve the

spirit of Damascus for future generations, while embracing the urban development that is necessary for greater Portland today.

Falling under the governing umbrella of Clackamas County, leading members sought to create a Concept Plan for the acreage included in the 2002 Urban Growth Boundary expansion. In conjunction with Metro, Oregon Department of Transportation, local government and citizen groups, the County established a pattern of future urban development for a landscape of wooded lava domes, rustic valleys and prominent streams. The resulting Damascus/Boring Concept Plan provides guidance for the transition of this area from rural habitat to urban environment; meeting federal, state and regional requirements, as well as community aspirations along the way. Formulated over a two-year period from September 2003 to December 2005, and consisting of three key elements: the Concept Plan Map which serves as the overall urban growth diagram, the Concept Plan Report that includes the project's background, goals, analysis and recommended plan, and the Implementation Strategies and Action Measures which provides suggestions for future regulations and program execution; the Damascus/Boring Concept Plan is the initial step in planning the urban development for the new city of Damascus.

The Damascus/Boring Concept Plan defines three basic types of areas; urban, transition and conservation. The urban areas will be defined by inter-connected, mixed-use centers, residential neighborhoods, employment opportunities, transportation hubs and public amenities that enhance community. Meanwhile, the transition and conservation areas will help maintain clean air and water, providing a "green system" that keeps residents in contact with the environment and protects wildlife habitats and natural features.

In formulating a plan for the rapidly developing region, the project team identified the core values of the Community through an extensive process of public involvement. Ultimately, a Steering Committee of 45 citizens compiled the input received into the following set of value statements:

1. *Well-Designed Communities and Core Areas*

- Develop mixed-use core areas that combine medium to high density residential units with compatible commercial and retail components in a sustainable and environmentally responsible manner.

2. *Effective Transportation Systems*

- Ensure an efficient, attractive, financially feasible and technically appropriate hierarchy of motorized and non-motorized transportation solutions.

3. *Employment and Economy*

- Create a diverse range of employment opportunities that builds on existing employment in the area.

4. *Governance*

- Establish effective, responsible and distinct local governing bodies with a sense of integrity, ownership and accountability to provide appropriate infrastructure.

5. *Rural Character*

- Retain a substantial degree of rural character, even while accommodating a fair share of residential and employment growth; integrating a more visually dominant open landscape with new urban development.

6. *Sense of Community*

- Develop communities that accommodate opportunities for neighbors to gather and participate in caring for the community, with a diverse set of activities and interaction amongst citizens of all ages.

7. *Environmental Responsibility and Protected Special Places*

- The Damascus and Boring communities shall distinguish themselves nationally by their concern for natural areas; maintaining opportunities for farming, local markets, and pastoral views with trails linking green spaces, historical sites and natural landscape.

(Damascus/Boring Concept Plan)

Using these core value statements as a foundation, the Damascus/Boring Concept Plan represents the essence of the community's ideals for development. The process of transforming the Concept Plan from idea to reality resulted in the embodiment of these idealized statements in an established set of goals forming the backbone of the Plan:

GOAL A: COMMUNITY

Create a well-designed community with core mixed-use areas, livable neighborhoods and a range of job opportunities all integrated with the transportation system, natural environment, open space network and public facilities.

GOAL B: EMPLOYMENT

Provide for a diverse range and adequate amount of employment opportunities.

GOAL C: HOUSING

Provide housing choices for people of all income levels and life stages.

GOAL D: TRANSPORTATION

Provide an effective transportation system that provides a range of travel options.

GOAL E: NATURAL RESOURCES

Preserve, restore and/or enhance unique areas, natural features, fish and wildlife habitats and special places.

GOAL F: PUBLIC FACILITIES

Plan for adequate and coordinated public facilities and services, including sewer, water, storm drainage, police, fire, parks and schools.

GOAL G: RURAL CHARACTER

Retain rural character while accommodating a fair share of urban development.

GOAL H: FUTURE GROWTH

Recommend long-range boundaries for future expansion of the UGB or designate urban reserves in the Secondary Study Area.

GOAL I: FEASIBILITY

Ensure that the concept plan can be implemented.

GOAL J: URBAN DESIGN

Ensure the Concept Plan reflects the state of the art of urban design principles and practice, built from centuries of experience, and applied to a new 21st century community.

(Damascus/Boring Concept Plan)

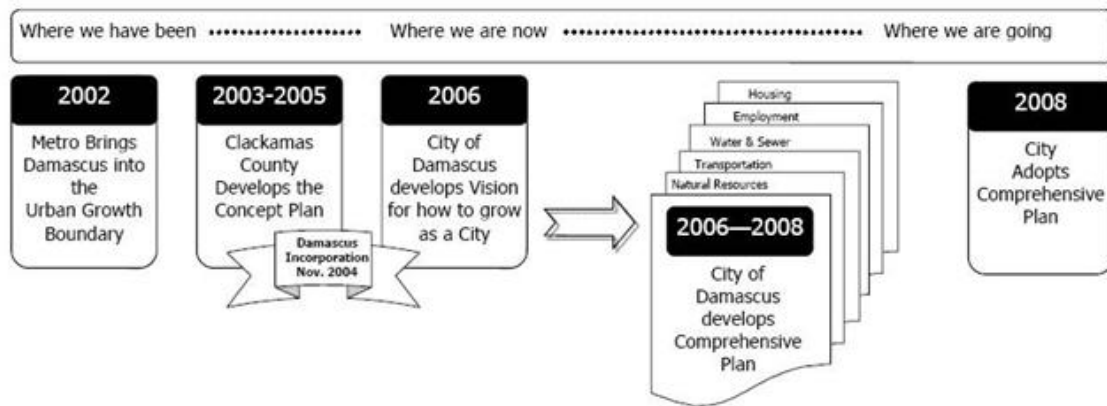
With the Damascus/Boring Concept Plan in hand, the City of Damascus now undertakes the task of formulating a comprehensive plan and zoning development ordinances; guiding how the city will develop over the next 20 years. The State of Oregon requires that a new city develop a comprehensive plan within four years of incorporating, which means the end of 2008 for Damascus. Being the first new Oregon city in more than 20 years (City of Damascus), there is still a lot of planning left to be done if Damascus is to grow in a manner that reflects the desires of its citizens, while still meeting all the state and regional requirements of a new urban development. Using the County's Concept Plan as a starting point, the mandated Comprehensive Plan will create a blueprint for city development that describes:

- the city's methods for decision-making and community involvement
 - general locations of housing and jobs
 - future planning for schools, roads, and parks
 - policies for urbanization, utilities and economic growth
 - zoning and land use
 - environmental protection areas for streams and creeks
 - new streets, parks and open spaces
 - sewer, water and storm drainage systems
 - preservation of the rural character of the community
 - land set aside for jobs and industry
- (City of Damascus)

When completed, the Comprehensive Plan will provide the city of Damascus a detailed look into the future; establishing the needs and desires that will shape the community's growth and preserving the elements that should remain unchanged.

The first step taken in the development of the Comprehensive Plan for Damascus was to craft a community-wide vision for how to grow (City of Damascus). Expressing the ideas and values residents have for the future of Damascus, this vision provides the basis of the Comprehensive Plan. Detailed in the document, "Guidance for a New City," the Damascus Vision consists of three components; Residential Priorities, Core Values and Building Blocks. The Residential Priorities include protecting and preserving existing neighborhoods, connecting communities with streams, buttes and nature, respecting private property rights, embracing all types of land use at appropriate scales, and developing at a pace that fits within Damascus' capabilities. Meanwhile, the Core Values

reiterate the seven core statements established in the Damascus/Boring Concept Plan, with some minor enhancements that highlight city specifics. Finally, the Building Blocks lay the groundwork for Damascus' future developments, and can be broken down into two categories; Walkable, Mixed-Use Building Blocks that include city centers, shopping and service areas, and city neighborhoods, and more Conventional, Separate-Use Building Blocks that include residential neighborhoods, job lands, and natural areas.



(City of Damascus)

With a vision now in hand, the City of Damascus has established the guiding principles to direct the development of the Comprehensive Plan. Unfortunately for local residents, the hardest work still lies ahead – converting a vision into a reality. Since the completion of the Concept Plan, very little has changed. Tied up in City Council politics, the Concept Plan has never been officially approved by the City, and therefore, no real answers have been provided for what comes next. With a dominant population over the age of forty (many of which are seniors), a number of Damascus residents are still having trouble envisioning their rural landscape being transformed into an urban center. Despite all of the hard work that has already occurred, the inactivity of the council is a direct reflection of this local discomfort.

With the dawn of 2007 right around the corner, it is imperative that the City begin to move forward. The offices of the City of Damascus currently reside in a strip mall; where is City Hall going to go? A Safeway and Bi-Mart are anchored on the main strip of

Highway 212; what is going to be built up around them to create a viable new town center? Residents still have to travel to Boring to get to a post office; where is the new 97089 branch going to be placed? The Carver area, Damascus' access to the Clackamas River, has been cited as an important region for development; what is going to happen there, commercial buildings, single-family, or affordable housing? The buttes and river basin are treasured natural features; what will be done to enrich and preserve their integrity as development occurs? These, along with many others, are the tough questions that Interim Community Development Director Mary Weber is currently placing before the members of City Council. With the difficult issues out on the table, she hopes that the Council will finally break loose from their stalemate and set a definitive course for the future growth of Damascus.

While the debate continues over what the City truly wants; Ms. Weber and the other members of the planning department are busy researching the timing and impact of all this anticipated development. First and foremost is the backbone of any city, the water system. With the entirety of Damascus still on septic, creating the infrastructure for a new sewer system is going to be a monumental task. The basic ideas for providing water throughout the city are in place; but the estimated build-out for the first phase of work is five years, which encompasses less than half of the total area that falls within the Damascus borders. After the infrastructure is finally in place, then you can start thinking about jobs. It is important for the planning board to understand what types of jobs will be appropriate for this area, and when they should be brought in. While it is desirable to provide a market that draws in new people to promote density growth, it is also imperative that there be jobs available for the current residents who have spent their lives as part of a rural community.

The expansion of Portland's Urban Growth Boundary in 2002 forever changed the geography of the Damascus region. Two years later, Damascus officially became a new city in the state of Oregon, and residents were on their way to creating a plan for the anticipated population growth. Under the guidance of Clackamas County they developed a Concept Plan, highlighting mixed-use cores that foster a strong sense of community,

efficient transportation systems to effectively move people around, a diverse mix of jobs and housing that cater to all income levels, and an environmental responsibility to protect the rural character and beauty of the natural landscape. The City of Damascus is now faced with the task of formulating a Comprehensive Plan for that future growth. The hard work on the Concept Plan has led to a guiding vision for the Comprehensive Plan, but the marathon has just begun. Four years have passed since the UGB was expanded, it will be at least five more before the basic infrastructure is in place, and the City is still without a defined course of action. The regional growth delineated in the Concept Plan was for a twenty year period, and that time is quickly eroding. While City Council struggles to put forth the Comprehensive Plan, the detrimental side of that inactivity can already be seen across Damascus. Multiple suburban housing divisions, those that residents staunchly oppose, are already being constructed on multiple sites; including a distinctly unaffordable single-family neighborhood that occupies a beautiful site just off the Clackamas River. A profound vision for smart growth has been laid out; the residents of Damascus now need to put it into action before it gets too late.

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