

# Understanding Plannerspeak

*In planners' jargon, black is white and white is black.*

Ortem Fact Sheet #6

*"Ortem is turning Metro around."*

Planners have developed their own jargon that is sometimes confusing to the public. As a service to Portland-area residents, ORTEM has prepared this dictionary of commonly used planning terms. Each of the definitions is documented based on statements by Metro or other planning agencies and advocates.

**affordable housing**—housing subsidized with your gasoline, property, income, and other taxes.

*Explanation*—Portland's urban-growth boundary is causing housing prices to shoot up, turning Portland from one of the most affordable cities in the country to one of the least affordable. In response, Metro wants developers to build homes on high-density developments: apartments, row houses, or homes on very small lots.

But people don't want to live in such homes, so developers will build them only if they are subsidized. Portland and other local cities are therefore waiving development fees, giving ten years of property tax breaks, and even giving developers outright grants if they will build higher density housing.

**automobiles**—devices of the devil that people shouldn't be allowed to use.

*Explanation*—New Urbanist James Kunstler refers to the auto-centered world as "the evil empire." Metro advocates such as Portland City Commissioner Charles Hales often talk of people having a "love affair with" or being "addicted to" their cars, as if use of the auto was somehow irrational. Planners just cannot believe that people use cars because for many purposes they are more efficient and more convenient than any other form of transportation.

**balanced transportation system**—spending more than half of a city's transportation dollars on a transportation system that serves less than 2 percent of its people.

*Explanation*—When cities spent most of their transportation money on roads and streets, planners said that this was "unbalanced." Now the Portland area is spending well over half of all its transportation funds on light rail, even though planners say light

rail will carry less than 2 percent of the trips Portlanders take. But this still isn't "balanced" enough, and Portland wants to spend even more money on downtown streetcars.

**congestion**—a positive urban development.

*Explanation*—Transportation planners once tried to reduce congestion by improving roads. Metro has no such plans. Instead, it says that "the 2040 Growth Concept represents a departure from past transportation planning practice. Concentrating development in high-density activity centers will . . . produce levels of congestion that signal positive urban development." (*Regional Transportation Plan Update*, March, 1996, p. 1-20.)

**Congestion Mitigation/Air Quality Fund**—a federal fund used to increase congestion and reduce air quality.

*Explanation*—Congress created the "CMAQ" fund out of your gas taxes in 1991 to help cities reduce congestion and pollution, but it restricts them from spending the money on roads and other things that would actually reduce congestion. Instead, Gresham and other Portland-area cities have used the funds to subsidize high-density developments that will increase congestion.

**downtown**—the congested part of the city that Metro thinks everyone should visit as often as possible.

*Explanation*—Since downtown is the densest and most congested part of the city, many people avoid it. But Metro's goal is to insure that downtown grows as fast as the entire metro area. This will make downtown more congested than ever. To meet this goal, Metro will continue to route nearly all bus and light rail lines through downtown even though most travellers don't want to go there.

**efficient transportation**—spending hundreds of tax dollars per rider on light rail when the same rider could be carried by bus for just a dollar or two.

*Explanation*—In the 1970s, Tri-Met attracted people out of their cars at a cost to taxpayers of a dollar a rider by concentrating on improving bus service. But after Tri-Met started building light rail, it neglected buses

and ridership fell. Today, bus ridership is increasing, but not as fast as the overall population. Light rail costs taxpayers \$10 or more per rider, and some parts of the westside and south-north lines will cost over \$100 per rider.

**high-capacity transit**—transit that has a lot of empty seats.

*Explanation*—Light rail vehicles can carry three times as many people as a bus, but they often run nearly empty and even during rush hour are rarely filled to capacity.

**keeping Portland from becoming Los Angeles**—using Los Angeles as a model for Portland's future.

*Explanation*—Los Angeles has the highest density and the fewest miles of freeway per capita of any metropolitan area in the nation. Metro wants to increase Portland's population density without building many new roads, which will make Portland more like Los Angeles than any other U.S. city. "In public discussions we gather the general impression that Los Angeles represents a future to be avoided," says Metro. But "with respect to density and road per capita mileage it displays an investment pattern we desire to replicate." (*Metro Measured*, May, 1994, p. 7.)

**light rail**—1) an excuse for forcing neighborhoods to accept higher density housing. 2) a way for cities to get more federal pork.

*Explanation*—Light rail "is not worth the cost if you're just looking at transit" says top Metro growth planner John Fregonese. "It's a way to develop your community to higher densities." After building light rail through neighborhoods that don't really want it, Metro tells them that they have to accept higher density developments to generate ridership. (Fregonese quoted in *Wisconsin State Journal*, 23 July 1995.)

But the big push for light rail comes from engineering companies, banks, and other firms that expect to make huge profits from construction. Even Metro admits that better bus service could carry nearly as many people as light rail but at a much lower cost (which means it could be done on far more than three or four routes). But buses don't create any

local construction profits. If Portland doesn't build the south-north light rail, says Metro executive Mike Burton, it will lose its "fair share of federal transportation dollars . . . to other regions of the country." In this case, "fair share" means "all we can get." (Burton memo to JPACT, 11 December 1996.)

**livability**—making Portland more livable for the 10 percent of people willing to live without cars and a living hell for the 90 percent of people who need to drive.

*Explanation*—Metro's 2040 plan projects a 75 percent increase in population by the year 2040, but Metro plans to build fewer than 15 percent more roads. As a result, Metro planners predict that congestion will increase by nearly 300 percent over current levels. But Metro admits that 90 percent of all travel in the region will still be by automobile.

**mass transit**—transportation that doesn't go when or where you need it, is useless for shopping, often requires standing in the rain, and is much slower than driving yourself.

**mobility**—immobility.

*Explanation*—Planners regard the mobility provided by the automobile as the major problem with our cities, since such mobility created suburbs, shopping centers, edge cities, and other things planners don't like. So planners hope to immobilize the auto with congestion and limited parking.

One planner told *Washington Post* writer Joel Garreau that he would "fix" the suburbs by increasing "dramatically the real residential population. . . . I'd raise the gasoline tax by 300 percent. . . . I'd limit movement completely. . . . And then I would put enormous costs on parking." In short, comments Garreau, this planner would "force Americans to live in a world that few now seem to value." But it sounds very similar to what Metro wants to do to Portland. (Quotes from Joel Garreau's book, *Edge City*.)

**New Urbanism**—a planning philosophy that aims to make cities more livable by increasing congestion, reducing living space, and preventing people from working and shopping where they like. Metro solidly supports New Urbanism.

**pedestrian-friendly design**—automobile-hostile design.

*Explanation*—To planners, the large parking lots in front of many stores are "pedestrian unfriendly." So planners want to forbid such lots and require stores to build right to the street fronts. Parking, if any, will be behind the stores. That will be more inconvenient for auto users, and could be dangerous at night. The fact that Metro projects that 90 percent of people will still drive even after Portland has been made more pedestrian-friendly is irrelevant to planners.

**planning for the future**—locking cities into the past.

*Explanation*—Metro is writing a plan for Portland in the year 2040. But who in, say, 1950 knew that jet airliners would carry most intercity travellers, that freeways would carry most commuters, and that personal computers and the internet would allow many people to work at home in 1997? They couldn't know that, so a plan they would write for 1997 would be entirely wrong.

Since Metro doesn't know what Portlanders will need in 2040, it simply plans Portland to look like planners' ideal of a city, namely Portland in 1890: A city with light rail (they called them trollies then), high-density developments (they called them tenements), and mixed uses (they called them nuisances).

**public involvement**—making sure everyone who agrees with planners gets involved.

*Explanation*—Metro's "community outreach" plan for its light-rail planning specifies that it will "identify citizens, business and community leaders willing to speak and make presentations." Metro has indeed identified and arranges speaking engagements for more than 50 citizens who favor light rail, but none that oppose it.

**rapid transit**—20 miles per hour.

*Explanation*—France has a train that goes 180 miles per hour, and Amtrak runs trains at 110 miles per hour. So people think that all trains are fast. But the MAX light rail averages less than 20 miles per hour, and the westside and south/north light rails will be about the same.

**sprawl**—the way you want to live but planners don't think you should.

*Explanation*—"Sprawl is the enemy" thundered an *Oregonian* editorial. But is it? Despite rapid population growth and ever-larger average home lot sizes, the urbanized area in and around Portland occupies only a quarter of a percent of the state of Oregon. Low-density developments allow people to avoid congestion, enjoy the open spaces in their back yards, and choose their own lifestyles. But they don't threaten open space or farm lands, since more than 98 percent of Oregon is open space and more than 60 percent of it is public land, meaning it will remain open space forever.

**suburb**—next to the automobile, the greatest evil ever imposed on cities.

*Explanation*—Portland City Commissioner Charles Hales refers to the suburbs as "trash. . . godawful subdivisions." Hales' complaint is that many of Portland's suburbs are low density which, in his opinion, wastes land. So Metro wants to zone the suburbs out of existence by forcing them to accept higher densities. "Suburbs are passé," says Michael

Burton, Metro's director. (Hales quoted in *Governing* magazine, May, 1997; Burton in *Sunset* magazine, November, 1996.)

**traffic calming**—putting obstacles in roads to make driving as frustrating as possible.

*Explanation*—Traffic calming includes a variety of techniques such as making lanes and streets narrower, installing "bumpouts" and other obstructions, all aimed at making people drive slower. Such techniques make sense on neighborhood streets where speed limits are low. But planners want to apply them to major commercial streets as well.

Planners see the fact that traffic calming will increase congestion as a plus, not a minus. "Anywhere that doesn't have congestion, you probably wouldn't want to be there," says one planner. "A lot of people are furious about tampering with their ability to drive fast," says another. "But they aren't politically organized."

Planners' real goal is to make suburban streets just as congested as downtown. Then people won't want to be in the suburbs, planners think, and they will go downtown. More likely, they will simply move to some other city. (All quotes from the *Wall Street Journal*, 7 August 1996.)

**twenty-first century**—nineteenth century.

*Explanation*—Light rail is supposedly "transportation for the twenty-first century." In fact, it was developed in the 1880s and has not significantly advanced since 1900. Metro's housing plans for Portland after the year 2000 are also based on nineteenth-century housing, including lots of apartments and mixed uses, and housing intermingled with commercial developments.

**urban villages**—slums or future slums.

*Explanation*—In planners' "vision" of the future, everybody lives in "villages" or high-density neighborhoods in which commercial and residential uses are mixed. People can therefore walk to work or shopping and won't need cars. Northwest 23rd in Portland is often cited as a good example; others are Manhattan and Brooklyn.

**zoning**—1) a way for planning agencies to force neighborhoods to accept unwanted developments such as row houses, apartments, and commercial uses. 2) (archaic) a way for planning agencies to help neighborhoods prevent unwanted developments such as row houses, apartments, and commercial uses.

*Explanation*—When zoning was first developed in the 1920s, the Supreme Court said that it was a legitimate tool that neighborhoods can use to keep "nuisances" such as apartments and commercial uses out. Now zoning is used by Metro to force neighborhoods to accept such nuisances, which Metro sees as positive developments.