

Shaping the new Damascus

The group 1000 Friends of Oregon is betting that Damascus can be a model of a compact, livable city while absorbing over 10, 000 new citizens

By John Ferguson
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1000 Friends of Oregon came to Damascus recently and unveiled their plan for what the new city of Damascus should look like. Actually, only about ten of the Friends showed up, about the same number as local citizens invited to attend the Damascus Area Community Design Workshop. The other twenty to thirty participants included urban design experts, developers, and officials from Clackamas County, Gresham and Happy Valley. This plan is in response to a widespread assumption that the urban growth boundary (UGB) will be expanded to include Damascus and that most of the new growth of Portland over the next twenty or so years will be directed to take place right here in our own back yard.

Some local residents, as well as newspaper journalists, have voiced concern that any planning for what Damascus might become should be left to the citizens who live here and not to “outsiders” like 1000 Friends of Oregon. Actually, 1000 Friends are no more outsiders than Clackamas County or Gresham officials. And frankly, Damascus doesn’t have the money to hire planners and landscape architects and other design professionals to do their own planning, and probably, doesn’t have the expertise necessary to develop the conceptual and master plans for a new city. So the \$160,000 study that 1000 Friends is spearheading is being done for Damascus free of charge. The question is will the local residents like the results.

As one of ten local citizens invited to participate in this workshop, I hope to represent the people in this area – at least the ones who plan on living here for the long term, who value forested buttes and free flowing streams, who thrill at the sound of coyotes and owls calling at night. If you are like me, you don’t want a city here in the first place; if you did you would have moved to Beaverton or Portland and not to the Damascus area. I do not represent you if you plan on selling your land to the highest bidder and moving out. But rest assured, there are other interests that do. I still don’t accept the idea that growth is inevitable or that progress is measured by the number of housing units and fast food joints that spring up. But I do recognize that should the growth come, we better have a plan, a plan that will put quality of life at the forefront.

We should also be clear about another things – 1000 Friends of Oregon has an agenda. Their mission statement declares their objectives are to conserve farmland, forests and range land, to protect natural resources, and to promote compact, “livable” cities. I don’t think their involvement will make everyone with a financial

interest in Damascus happy. I doubt the Home Builders Association invites them to many social gatherings. At the same time, I don't know that 1000 Friends has a genuine concern about the people of the Damascus area, any more than they would for people in Sherwood or Troutdale or Scappoose. But what they do genuinely care about is the opportunity that Damascus presents. 1000 Friends has a \$160,000 bet that Damascus can be a model of compact, livable city, one that will serve as a blueprint for future urban expansions onto semi-rural areas. If it works, if Damascus can absorb 10,000 or 100,000 people while preserving natural areas and creating a desirable place to live, then 1000 Friends would be true to its mission statement. And if Damascus can be transformed into a town-city that is an aspiration to other places targeted for growth, then 1000 Friends might even have accomplished a paradigm shift in the "clear-cut, bulldoze, full speed ahead" way that growth usually occurs, not only in Oregon but across the country.

So what has resulted so far? Well, the two half-day workshops comprising phase one of the process mostly were an opportunity for 1000 Friends and their landscape architect consultant, Patrick Condon from the University of British Columbia, to present and explain a set of design principles which would guide how development should occur and to show examples of what a city might look like that actually incorporated these ideas. Personally, I had envisioned sitting down in small groups, and from a blank piece of paper, coming up with ideas and guiding principles and a plan for what we believed the new Damascus should look like. Instead, the paper had pretty much been filled in for us and we made editorial comments in the margins. Even though the design principles didn't originate with the workshop participants, most everyone seemed to support the overall objectives. We were given the opportunity to comment on the ideas and toss them out if we didn't like them, and a fair amount of time was spent quibbling over details. Some people thought the principles were not strongly worded enough on issues such as preservation for green spaces and wildlife habitat. Others wanted to make sure Highway 212 didn't become a major commerce route for the entire region and particularly, a route for transporting hazardous waste. Still others were more concerned with making sure there would be plenty of affordable housing for all income levels and that there be a mix of housing types so that low income areas would not be segregated. In the end, the guiding principles that were adopted, the one we made corrections in the margins of, was agreed by the majority to be pretty good.

In a nutshell here is my translation of the guiding principles of the design of the Damascus city/community that were adopted:

1. Protect natural areas and protect and restore wildlife habitat including streams, slopes and ridgelines.
2. From a system of parks, greenways, streets, housing and businesses that are all interconnected and within a short walking, biking or driving distance of each other.

- 3. Build a healthy economy that provides jobs in the community, where locally owned and branch businesses can thrive.**
- 4. Preserve existing homes and provide for a mix of new housing for a variety of income levels.**
- 5. Establish “green” infrastructure that keeps a rural style atmosphere, that uses land efficiently, and that protects streams and habitat. An example of this would be narrower, tree lined streets in residential areas with less pavement, safe for walking and biking.**

These principles were more detailed than this, and I hope I have done an adequate job in translating them succinctly. The next phase of the workshop will take place May 29 – June 3. Design teams will then develop concept plans and models for a new community that will include aerial views, ground level views, neighborhood plans, and district-wide transportation, land use, and natural resource protection concept plans. There will also be opportunities for broad public involvement during the workshop. Residents who are interested in being notified about these opportunities can contact Karen Fox at 1000 Friends of Oregon at 497-1000, Karen@friends.org.

In the end, whether or not the plan for a new Damascus becomes a reality will rest in large part on the citizens of this area. If they agree with the plan, it will be up to local citizens to tell Clackamas County and Metro that this is how they want Damascus developed. Otherwise, Clackamas County can toss this study into the trash can and proceed however they see fit.