

Damascus Residents Brace for Change

Although some favor it, Metro's growth boundary expansion proposal has many fearing urbanization.

**By Eric Mortenson
The Oregonian**

DAMASCUS – Contrasting ways of life face off along Oregon 212, where two dozen workers silently bend over rows of cucumbers in Jim Siri's field and two dozen passing cars a minute make conversation outdoors difficult.

A board fence separates a line of tightly squeezed houses from Siri's vegetable packing shed. Some of the residents in the 3-year-old subdivision that was once a dairy complain about smoke from the farmer's burn pile and noise from the refrigerators that keep is produce cool.

All of which makes Siri laugh when people who are opposed to expanding the urban growth boundary say they want to preserve the rural nature of Damascus.

"They don't want farming," he says. "They don't want to smell it. They don't want the noise. They don't want the (immigrant) workers. They just want to look at it."

Recommendation no surprise

Something's going to give. Well over half of the urban growth boundary expansion recommended today by Metro Executive Mike Burton would take place in Damascus – 10,187 of the 17,341 acres.

The recommendation is not a surprise. Damascus has long been targeted as the next big chunk of land to be brought within the growth boundary.

Damascus already has a Safeway store and a Bi-Mart on opposing sides of Oregon 212, plus a jumbled strip of fast-food restaurants and smaller stores. Traffic on the highway is horrendous, with 21,200 vehicles a day counted in the commercial district, according to the state Department of Transportation.

But the prospect of additional urban-style development in an area that features graceful fields of row crops and place names such as Old Barn Lane still causes a collective community grimace.

Siri estimates 90 percent of the several hundred people who attend a recent community meeting were flatly opposed to the expansion. Siri favors it and says he would gladly sell the 20 acres he owns. He leases 100 acres more from retired farmers, and they are anxious to sell as well, he says.

Siri says he would move to an area where the soil is better, water more plentiful, and he isn't dodging traffic and bumping up against subdivisions.

"I will still farm," he says. "If I had the money, I'd move now!"

Growth called inevitable

Some in Damascus are trying to make the best of what they see as a bad situation. Dee Westcott, a well-known auto body shop owner whose great-grandfather homesteaded in the area, heads a group hoping to incorporate Damascus as a city. That way, area residents could control its eventual development, he says.

"At this point we don't have any power at all, none," Westcott says. "We're just a big, flappy mouth."

Westcott and others say local land-use decisions make growth inevitable.

"It put us right on the tracks with the train coming and our feet tied down to the rails," Westcott says. "Did we see it coming? Yeah."

"It's an unpalatable pill to swallow, but maybe we can make it a little easier."

He favors a planning process such as is happening now in neighboring Pleasant Valley, which was brought within the urban growth boundary in 1998. A citizen committee and representatives from cities, counties and Metro have been working on a plan that mixes neighborhoods with a town center, parks, new schools and employment centers – while setting aside 40 percent of the valley for wildlife habitat and stream protection.

Still, as Westcott points out, not a spade of dirt has been turned in Pleasant Valley, and it may be years before Damascus sees any meaningful change because of serious infrastructure problems.

The area lacks a sewer system; even the big stores are on septic systems. Oregon 212 is crowded, and the local road system is inadequate to support the 20,700 new residents projected in Burton's recommendation.

However, the prospect of a Damascus boom is on people's minds. The land-use watchdog group 1000 Friends of Oregon has offered a plan for Damascus, while residents say representatives from large housing development companies have been knocking on doors, asking if people want to sell.

A real estate "hot potato"

Real estate agents Wendy Burns and Chris Olson, who've worked in the Damascus area for 10 years, built a two-story office on Oregon 212 this spring. They were required to install a 3,000-gallon sewage holding tank and have it pumped regularly.

Their electronic sign out front carries a variety of messages, including, "Thinking of selling?"

Burns and Olson have had to tread carefully as the community debates its future.

"There are people who moved out here because they like it just the way it is," Olson says. "Another group here is the second or third generation, and they're ready to move on. It really is a hot potato as far as the real estate office goes."

Property values in the area are high, with \$200,000 a "bare bones" price for a medium-size house and half an acre, Burns and Olson say.

Listings are hard to come by, Olson says.

"I don't know if that's because sellers are holding out to see what happens," she says.

You can reach Eric Mortenson at 503-294-5972 or at ericmortenson@news.oregonian.com