



Paper: Oregonian, The (Portland, OR)

Title: SOUTHEAST PORTLAND HIS VISION STRETCHES INTO THE FUTURE AND THE PAST

Date: January 18, 2002

Summary: Ernie **Bonner**, a city planning director in the '70s, has eastside dreams and a Web site with history. Once Ernie **Bonner** decided Portland would be his permanent home, he didn't leave anything to chance.

The itinerant former Portland city planning director, who had lived in 11 states at one time or another, bought a plot in Lone Fir Cemetery.

"I'm going to be here forever," he says.

At 69, retired and healthy, **Bonner** should have lots of time left. He's using it to pursue some far-reaching projects: encouraging Portlanders to examine revitalization prospects in inner Southeast Portland and documenting the creative planning legacy of the wild decade of the 1970s.

"My major message is to young people," **Bonner** said. "What's here today was started 30 years ago. So what's here in 30 years starts now. Where are the armies for the next 30 years?"

Bonner's analysis suggests that five main decisions in the 1970s set the tone for the city Portland has become. Although many people attribute those decisions to former Mayor Neil Goldschmidt, **Bonner** -- a Goldschmidt hire in 1973 -- says hundreds if not thousands of Portlanders worked on those projects.

Bonner's history project, located on the Internet at www.pdxplan.org, is aimed at "giving voice to the thousands of people who contributed so much" during the 1970s. His Web site includes transcriptions of interviews with political activists, planning commission members and bureaucrats of high and low levels. "Most people don't know who they are," **Bonner** said.

Eyes on new riverfront

At the same time, **Bonner** still wears his planning hat. With an informal group of activists called Riverfront for People, he'd like to see land occupied by Interstate 5 between the Marquam Bridge and Burnside opened for new development.

The City Council in 1993 rejected an Interstate relocation plan. But the council passed a River Renaissance plan last year that shows conceptual drawings of an inner Southeast Portland without the freeway.

Tunneling a burrow for the freeway at its current site or widening Interstate 405 to take over as the main north-south freeway would free 43 acres on the central eastside, including 18 acres for private development. Some estimates suggest that total assessed value could climb from \$350 million now to \$1.35 billion.

"This isn't a new vision," **Bonner** said. "The task is to figure out how we can get there.

"I'm sure I'll be dead before anything substantial happens. But I refuse to quit trying to get this on the agenda. You have to start now if you want to get it done in 40 to 50 years."

Bonner's vision for inner Southeast Portland isn't unanimously shared in the planning community. Carl Abbott, an urban planning professor at Portland State University, sees the North Macadam urban renewal area and the River District as available commercial areas with fewer limits on development.

"We're not desperate for that land yet," he said of inner Southeast. "But who knows about 50 years? The world changes."

An alternate view

In the meantime, Abbott sees benefits in leaving the Central Eastside Industrial District as it is -- with its mix of older office and industrial buildings that offer comparatively lower rents. "Cities need places like the Central Eastside," he said. "They play a real role in the urban economy."

Peter Finley Fry, a private planning consultant who has worked extensively in the eastside industrial area, agrees. "It would be devastating to move the freeway for maybe the next 70 years," he said. "You'd absolutely wipe out hundreds of family-owned businesses."

Although Abbott and Fry disagree with **Bonner** about the freeway, they respect **Bonner** and his background. "Ernie has done a lot of good work," Fry said, "and he has a really big heart."

As planning director from 1973 to 1978, **Bonner** "saw the big picture of where planning fits in, as well as the small details," Abbott said. "He was a real positive influence."

Bonner said Portland in the 1970s was blessed with visionary leadership -- and lots of money to carry out ideas. He predicts that urban planners even a century later will look back and wonder how it happened.

That's where www.pdxplan.org comes in. "I don't have time or money to do a book," **Bonner** said. "I put the information out there, and people can use it as they will."

So far, **Bonner** has conducted 55 interviews with figures from the 1970s and has scores more in mind. He places the interviews on the Web after they are transcribed.

Looking back, **Bonner** sees five key decisions from the 1970s that changed the future of Portland. They are the Downtown Plan, building MAX instead of the Mount Hood Freeway, neighborhood planning, the urban growth boundary and creation of Waterfront Park.

"Lots of things we brought to fruition have become the foundation of the city of Portland," he said. "That's a crucial period in city history."

Although vision and money provided much of the impetus, **Bonner** attributes some of Portland's success to "dumb luck." How much? "I don't know. I'm working on a project that will try to assess that."

City works its magic

A small-town Iowa native, **Bonner** led a roving life as a child and a professional. Before coming to Portland from Cleveland, "I'd never worked in one place longer than three years," he said. He assumed Portland would be no different.

But the city worked its quiet magic on **Bonner** and his wife, Lynne. They lived in the Buckman neighborhood for 20 years before moving to Irvington, about the same time **Bonner** retired from the Bonneville Power Administration in 1995 as energy conservation manager.

With a nudge, **Bonner** lists several reasons why he decided to stay in Portland.

"People here listen to me," is one. But they all come down to a final explanation: "Portland is such a comfortable place."

You can reach Fred Leeson at 503-294-5946 or at fredleeson@news.oregonian.com.

Photo by STEVE NEHL - of The Oregonian staff

Sidebar text -- **BONNER** FILE

Copyright (c) 2002 Oregonian Publishing Co.

Author: FRED LEESON - The Oregonian
Section: PORTLAND ZONER WEST ZONER
Page: D03
Copyright (c) 2002 Oregonian Publishing Co.