

Comments on the

Proposed St. Johns/ Lombard Plan

August 2003 version

and

The Nasset Lombard Survey

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The Nasset Lombard Survey

The Proposed St. Johns/Lombard Plan was released in early August 2003 by the Portland Planning Bureau . The Plan proposes adding bike lanes to parts of Lombard, extending many curbs out to the edge of the traffic lane and restricting sections of the left turn lane by the addition of center islands. An earlier version eliminated the left turn lane entirely for sections of the study area.

Numerous informal contacts indicated widespread dislike of the some of the Plan’s elements. Local resident, Sharon Nasset decided to create an independent survey.

Ms. Nasset’s survey was formulated to include important elements of the proposed plan, including some that might be considered for addition in the future as well as other items of general interest to the region.

The questionnaires were widely distributed to residents without selection by age, ethnicity, social strata or willingness to come to city sponsored meetings. Questionnaires were passed out at a variety of locations including local businesses, working class resrtruants, bars and taverns and even from a vacant lot on Lombard street.

Survey Results

This survey will report on only the first four survey questions. The exact questions are reproduced below in bold, followed by the summary information on the same line. Each question had four choices, which are tabulated under the question. Approximately 240 individuals responded and most included their name and address.

	Yes	No	Ratio
Do you want bike lanes on Lombard? Absolutely Yes: 12 Yes: 16 No: 44 Absolutely No:155	28	199	7:1
Do you want extended (“bumpout”) curbs on Lombard? Absolutely Yes: 9 Yes: 7 No:52 Absolutely No:161	16	213	13:1
Do you think the center lane on Lombard should be removed? Absolutely Yes: 3 Yes: 4 No: 58 Absolutely No: 157	7	215	30:1
Do you think residents, not the city, should set zoning? Absolutely Yes: 74 Yes: 79 No: 20 Absolutely No: 16	153	36	4:1

Differences between the Nasset Survey and the City's planning process

One cannot help but notice the wide divergence between the proposed plan, created as the result of the public's participation and actual public opinions expressed in the Nasset survey.

Possible explanations include:

- Both groups of participants were self selected, but had different make-ups.
- City employees and employees of companies with an interest in city planning such as consulting and construction companies were present, in significant numbers, at the city run meetings.
- Certain subsets of the population, who have unusually large amounts of spare time, may have been over-represented in the city process which stretched over several meetings and neighborhood walks.
- Unlike the city's method, the results of the Nasset survey were not filtered through a multi-step process.
- Unlike the city's method, the Nasset survey results are based only on actual votes.
- Unlike the city's method, Nasset asked questions based on proposed construction features, not a desired or imagined goal. For example, in the city process, planners might ask questions such as "Would you like Lombard to be easier for pedestrians to cross." A yes answer would then be interpreted as the desire for extended curbs or center islands. The participants were given no opportunity to weigh the tradeoffs inherent in such interpretations.

Narrowness of the city's outreach The Plan area consists of St. Johns town center plus land towards the river, perhaps $\frac{1}{2}$ square mile and a narrow strip along Lombard St (approx 1.7 mile long and a few hundred feet wide, perhaps one-tenth square mile) . It was stated, at the planning commission hearing, that all residents and businesses in the plan area were notified, but this included only about $\frac{1}{2} + 0.1 = 0.6$ sq mile area. Since the total area of the Peninsula is in the neighborhood of 4 square miles, the stated notification area was only about 15% of the area of the Peninsula. However, much of this area is business not residential: perhaps only 5% of the population was notified. Considering Lombard's function as a main transportation link, the city's outreach probably reached less than 2-3% of those who would be affected by the plan. Even some people who were within the notification area testified at the Planning Commission that they were not aware of the Plan as recently as three weeks before the Commission hearing.

Commentary

I attended an early meeting at the North Portland Business Association (NPBA), an introductory public meeting one "visioning session" and two presentations on the proposed Plan.

The NPBA meeting was particularly instructive for several reasons: first, the president of the Association read a list of desires compiled from the Association's members. These included improving the free flow of traffic on streets and freeways and the reduction of regulatory interference in people's lives. After the meeting the Association president handed his prepared text to a planning department staffer, who literally threw it into the trunk of her car, saying something on the order of not wanting to argue. To this observer it appeared as if the planning department did not want to hear about real needs of residents.

Additionally a number of people, unfamiliar to one long time NPBA member, appeared at this meeting to make suggestions that generally fit the city's agenda while opposing those compiled from the Association members. It struck me that someone had packed the meeting with people sympathetic to the city.

One planning department staffer asked if local businesses would like more customers. The obvious answer, of course, was yes. This seemed to be a subterfuge to persuade people of the benefits of increasing population density. However staff did not mention that many of the new buildings would be zoned mixed use which would bring competitors to existing businesses. She also neglected to mention the possibility that increased population might attract big box retail which would ultimately devastate existing businesses.

The Planning Bureau's visioning session was also instructive. We were split up into little groups with a minder to lead each group. At the end of the meeting, each group reported its opinion on several items to the whole group and the overall leader.

On at least one occasion, the city facilitator was observed suggesting things which the group did not come up with on its own.

In my small group, I asked who wanted this process in the first place and never did get a straight answer. (Last week, the claim was made that the plan grew out of neighborhood requests.)

When I mentioned practical considerations, such as reducing congestion, increasing *family wage* jobs and the like I was mostly ignored. The process appeared to be geared towards producing a nice looking neighborhood, with no consideration as to whether one could actually live and work there.

On one occasion I mentioned a down side to a proposal and was told, by the facilitator, that it was not in the plan yet. Now that the plan is formed, there is not enough time given to comment on it.

I also noted:

- Many attendees were city employees or employees of city contractors.

- Votes were not used in a formal manner. Just one still mentioning something is enough for it to end up in the plan.
- When there was something that a facilitator needed in the plan, and no one mentioned it, he brought it up.

NPBA meeting On several occasions, I asked the planning department's presenter about the placement of bus stops on the extended curbs and their effect on congestion. The planner said:

- "Bus stops on curb extensions don't affect traffic congestion." (Did he really expect us to believe that a bus blocking traffic for up to one minute at every second block doesn't create congestion. I saw one bus block traffic for several minutes on Woodstock Blvd.)
- "Lombard will remain at an acceptable level of service" (he left out the fact that acceptable level of service in Portland has been redefined. Acceptable now includes stop and go traffic on major roads for several hours per day.)
- "You haven't heard the Plan talk of putting bus stops on extended curbs" (True, I didn't hear it, but I *did* read it on page 57 of the plan)

Suggestions to Make the Process More Representative

Outreach should include all affected people, not just those in the plan area. This would include all residents of the peninsula and all users of Lombard, even if they don't live or work in the plan area. Ideally it would include all users of neighboring streets such as Willamette Blvd and Columbia Blvd since changes on Lombard may change usage of these alternative routes. Note that many users of the streets come from other areas of town.

The lack of outreach in the Lombard plan process was vividly illustrated by the fact that the owners of two long time businesses testified that had only recently heard of the plan and of the possibility that it might drive them out of the area.

City employees and employees of companies that do business with the city should be ineligible to participate in the process just as employees of companies are typically ineligible to win prizes in contests sponsored by the company.

Get a representative sample of the population to participate in the meetings. Although this may require more effort, it is essential if the process is to be credible.

A well designed survey would give feedback on the process. A scientifically valid survey should be used to be sure that the final plan actually represented the wishes of the affected people.

Give adequate time to comment at all phases. The current Lombard Plan was an 18 month process. Now that it is in a form the City Planning Bureau likes, they've given the

public less than 3 weeks to look it over & comment on it. Earlier, we had been told, when we pointed out flaws, that the plan was not final yet and it was too early to comment. Now that it is almost final, there is inadequate time to comment. There have been no large area-wide meetings with a few hundred attendees, just a few poorly attended neighborhood meetings.

Facilitators should never become minders. They must never suggest problems to be solved - if no one, from the public, mentions a problem it should be assumed that such a problem does not exist.

City employees must remember that they work for the people and as such, they must present the downside of any proposal as well as the benefits. The lack of such balance can only be considered tricking the people into accepting that which is against their best interest. While we have no easy recourse against politicians who behave thus, it should be city policy to immediately terminate employees that present deceptive information to the public.

Outreach materials need to include possible downsides as well as benefits of any proposal. In this case the mailers should have included, in a prominent place and size of type something like this:

**The proposal may increase traffic congestion,
loose businesses and loose jobs in some parts of the study area.
It may cause property values, property taxes and rents to increase.**

Recommendation

From land use goal one, part one: “The citizen involvement program shall involve a cross-section of affected citizens in all phases of the planning process.”

I urge you to demand that the planners get extensive input from “a cross-section of affected citizens” at this final “phase” of the plan. Input at earlier phases were only on what *might* be in the plan.

At earlier stages, when citizens pointed out problems with proposals, the city planners sometimes brushed citizens off by saying that criticisms were inappropriate at that early stage. Now that there is something concrete, the city planners only want to give us a few weeks. Is this to limit input? Is it to avoid having to face angry citizens? Especially when people realize that this plan may further damage the plan region’s livability, instead of improving it?

Let the Plan get the light of day with ALL affected citizens, not just a few insiders in the planning process.

A special note to the planning commission

Planning commission members need to be aware that when the city planners tell you that the community wants something, it may really be the planner's own want, passed through a deceived public in the planner's carefully controlled outreach meetings.

Miscellany

Are the residents of the Plan area aware that the plan will likely increase congestion and increase pollution?

When the City revamped the Hollywood district's traffic patterns, they literally killed many of the businesses. YAW's closed and Fred Meyer's closed. I brought this up to a planner at a recent North Portland business association presentation and he said the changes were made to improve traffic flow. He didn't seem to care that the city had killed the business district. I have been told that the planners similarly killed downtown St. John's a few years ago.

Why is this important? Because this proposal may well do the same thing to St. John's/Lombard. Or are we to believe City Planner's have suddenly gotten competent, or if competent, suddenly stated caring about the survival of businesses and the jobs that they bring?

Additional information can be found at www.savelombard.com It is hoped that this web site will contain updates and additional information about Portland's planning process.