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OPINION HOME

GUEST VIEWPOINT

River Road plan can lead to healthy, resilient neighborhood

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It's a rare opportunity when people can help create a civic plan with potential to benefit their homes, neighborhoods, businesses and quality of life for decades to come.

Residents of the River Road and Santa Clara areas have such an opportunity: a collaborative process with the city of Eugene that will craft a neighborhood plan to guide how River Road and Santa Clara evolve into the future.

Land use, transportation, open spaces, economic development, public participation and housing are all vital elements of this planning process. It might look a bit wonky, but the process is of historical importance.

For generations, our country's growth and development have been dominated by sprawling land use, oil and automobiles. Five of this country's 10 largest corporations produce oil or cars. With similar populations, the urban footprint of Atlanta, Ga., is 25 times that of Barcelona, Spain.

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We are learning that our resource-intensive and polluting way of life has serious consequences for the natural world, foreign policy and public health. To a growing number of people, sustainability and resilience should be the over-arching considerations for how to plan transportation, land use, economic development and just about every other aspect of human culture and the economy.

Many are surprised to find that state and city planning goals include a great deal of language regarding resilience and sustainability.

Envision Eugene, the city's vision for the next 20 years, calls for walkable neighborhoods that reduce the need for cars, address climate change, conserve natural resources, allow public participation in decision-making, encourage community building and much more.

A neighborhood plan in Eugene must be consistent with state and local planning documents that clearly identify sustainability and resilience as core values.

With strong public support, citizens of River Road and Santa Clara can transform Envision Eugene's thoughtful language into a pioneering neighborhood plan for taking on many of the greatest environmental, economic and social challenges of our time.

At home, the plan could encourage solar energy, tiny homes, front yard gardens, rainwater systems, de-paving and more.

The plan could encourage important city programs like Neighborhood Watch, matching grants, Community Emergency Response Team training and neighborhood mapping to consider incorporating green actions and strategies that could make these programs even more effective for creating homes and neighborhoods that are more prepared, cohesive and resilient.

The neighborhood plan could improve public health, keep more money local and decrease pressure to build more roads by encouraging mixed use re-development along the River Road corridor with shops providing products and services near to where people live so they can walk or bike instead of driving to take care of important needs.

Above the shops could be apartments designed for people who want to live without owning a car or want to work at home. The same apartments could facilitate social interaction, attracting baby boomers wanting to downsize but stay in the neighborhood with friends.

These resilience and sustainability improvements to the neighborhood, both home and commercial, can create many jobs in construction, design, caregiving, entrepreneurship and more.

Another important tool for the neighborhood is the economic development corporation, an organization, usually nonprofit, whose mission is to promote economic development within a specific geographical area.

A River Road-Santa Clara neighborhood plan could assist creating an EDC specific to these neighborhoods. Perhaps in partnership with a local credit union, the EDC could channel investments from neighborhood residents into high-value projects, public and private, that would benefit the neighborhood's civic culture, economy and resilience.

Imagine people in the neighborhood investing millions of their own dollars close to home in ways that boost resilience, cohesion and preparedness. Imagine a vigorous civic culture where seniors, students, faith communities and ad hoc groups volunteered eight or 10 hours a month to restore natural habitat, help neighbors or volunteer at a school.

A pioneering and ambitious neighborhood plan can create exciting new opportunities for a more resilient and sustainable neighborhood, but it can't make magic.

Ultimately, it's up to the residents of River Road and Santa Clara to value themselves, their families, their homes, their environment and their neighborhoods enough to learn about the issues and participate to make smart use of this unique planning opportunity.

State and city planning goals are an open invitation to take ambitious action at this critical point in history.

What could be better than working with our friends, neighbors and families to create a resilient, healthy and civic-minded place to live?

Jan Spencer is a member of the River Road Green Caucus. The River Road Propagation Fair and Neighborhood Learning Forum will occur from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday at the River Road Community Center, 1400 Lake Drive, or visit www.reculture.org to see the "Green Paper."

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