

Opinion: Bay Area's experience doesn't have to be Portland's future

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What does the Bay Area have to teach Portland about affordable housing, equity, and homelessness? A lot, it turns out.

Last spring, a diverse group of nearly 100 Portlanders visited the Bay Area to learn from leaders in business, technology, health care, government, nonprofits, real estate, the arts, transportation, and civic advocacy. Representing a similar mix of sectors, the Portland delegation sought to learn from a region that has experienced immense growth and prosperity and returned to Portland with a deeper understanding of the challenges we face and a renewed sense of urgency.

Across all sectors, the message was unmistakable: Poorly-shared prosperity has devastating results.

Clearly, the Bay Area is incredibly prosperous, [with more billionaires per square foot than any other region in the country](#). Just as clear? Unaffordable housing has led to staggering rates of homelessness and a steady middle-class exodus. While businesses, city governments and nonprofits are working hard to address these issues, the common refrain we heard from local leaders was: We wish we had begun addressing these problems sooner. The experience felt eerily like a postcard from the future.

The Portland metro region's own [steady economic growth](#) has outpaced the [national GDP](#) since 2014, with our burgeoning tech, health care and creative industries attracting new hires in droves. [Nationally](#) recognized as one of the most desirable cities to move to, Portland's growing wealth is no secret.

Neither is our homeless crisis.

With the nation's [second highest](#) rate of homeless people living unsheltered—in streets, doorways, and under bridges—Oregon's own soaring housing costs have left [one out of three families](#) struggling to afford housing, according to the Oregon Center for Public Policy -- just one crisis away from homelessness.

This is both a human tragedy and an increasingly costly challenge. Research confirms that the effects of homelessness on people's mental, emotional and physical health makes success in [school](#) or a [job](#) difficult, if not impossible.

What makes the situation all the more complex is that economic success has attracted new residents faster than housing has been built for them.

The Bay Area has created many jobs and attracted many new households, but has built too few houses in response: In California as a whole, for every 100 households formed over the 2010-2016 time period, only 74 household units were built, according to an analysis published by the [Up for Growth Coalition](#). Among the nine Bay Area counties, Napa produced 110 housing units for every 100 households formed, but in the eight other Bay Area counties, the number of housing units produced per 100 new households ranged from not-quite enough (93 in San Mateo County) to less than half of the need (49 in Alameda County).

The Portland tri-county region -- including Multnomah, Washington and Clackamas counties -- is similarly underbuilt, adding just 67 new housing units for every 100 households formed from 2010 to 2016, according to a report published by the Oregon Community Foundation. When neighborhood opposition, drawn-out permitting processes, and other obstacles inhibit housing production, homeowners profit from higher home values while renters face impossible choices between paying the rent and buying food.

If the situation in the Bay Area tells us anything, it's that we cannot stand back and watch. To preserve the quality of life we hold so dear, we must grow with compassion, grace, and foresight.

Thanks to recent bonds passed by Portland and Metro area voters, the region has begun to invest nearly \$1 billion to build and preserve affordable housing. This level of investment is unprecedented in Portland's history. And since housing markets do not stop at city limits, the presence of our regional government, Metro, fosters collaboration that Bay Area leaders can only dream about.

We can't stop there.

We must pair investments in affordable housing with on-going public funding for wrap-around support services -- such as addiction treatment, care for mental health conditions, job training and more -- that our most vulnerable neighbors need. Investing in preventative services to reach people before they lose housing will save money.

At the same time, we need to take a hard look at our housing policies and make room for more housing of all types. If we don't, continued growth will overwhelm what we can do with shelters and rent vouchers.

This is no easy task. It will take all hands on deck to ensure that Portland achieves shared prosperity and remains a city that everyone can afford to call home. We've caught a glimpse of what the alternative looks like. Now is the time to work together to create our future together.

This piece was written on behalf of a coalition of more than 20 business and community leaders. Co-signers include Marcelino J. Alvarez, Hank Ashforth, S.L. Bachman, Caitlin Baggott Davis of North Star Civic Foundation, Joyce Barnard of the Beaverton mayor's office, Johnell Bell of the Portland Diamond Project, Stan Curtis of Open Commons, George Devendorf of Transition Projects, Ashley Henry of Business for a Better Portland, Becky Hewitt, Alana Kambury of Salmonberry Trail Foundation, Erik Lawrence, Nolan Lienhart, Eric Mandel of Killian Pacific, Andrew McGough of Worksystems, Kate Merrill of Central Eastside Industrial Council, Haley Morrison, Carl Moyer, Jonathan Singer, Nancy Stueber, Kina Voelz
