

PORTLAND  
IMPROVEMENT



# Portland Improvement

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# Director's Report

November 10, 1943

City of Portland  
County of Multnomah  
School District No. 1 of Multnomah County  
Port of Portland  
Commission of Public Docks

Dear Sirs:

You asked me to supervise the activities of engineers and attorneys in the preparation of a general report and recommendations for a postwar program. This program was to apply generally to construction work by the public bodies you represent and to include recommendations concerning arterial and other traffic ways, approaches and feeders, port, airport, rail and bus facilities, approaches thereto and coordination thereof, bridges and bridge approaches, school buildings and other school facilities, methods of financing self-liquidating crossing projects where practical, and any other matters which might in my judgment achieve these objectives.

It will be seen that the scope of the report was limited to certain very definite recommendations, all looking toward the expediting of needed and desirable public works to afford employment, stimulate business and help bridge the gap between the end of the war and the full resumption of private business. Arterial improvements were to head the list, but other objectives were also mentioned. It was not, as some seem to have thought, a responsibility of this group to suggest means of reviving business, new fields of private enterprise, or the expansion of old ones.

It is our understanding that we were asked to come to Portland because of experience in rather large-scale public works, because some of us were identified with recent studies of congested war production areas for the Army and Navy, and others with postwar planning and employment, particularly from the point of

view of public improvements, because practically all of us had been connected in one way or another with the supervision of work relief projects during the depression and had presumably learned some lessons from it, and, finally, because whatever wisdom we may have gained from such a background would not be warped by any local interest.

A quick diagnosis of this kind has, however, its decided limitations. It is as good as the diagnostician and no better. Any metaphor can be worked to death, but it is well always to keep in mind that the diagnostician is not the local family doctor or surgeon, and that he will not be around during the period of convalescence. Probably no operation will be needed. The native strength, resilience, and frame of mind of the patient will no doubt see him through. Public works are good medicine, but no panacea. The diagnostician gives his opinion and goes on his way. If he is a responsible person he is scrupulously careful about the opinion and tests it against all that he has done before, because he wants to leave something behind which will be really useful and will serve as a reliable guide to those who are responsible for determining and carrying out the program.

Portland is not the only community in the United States which will have a postwar employment problem growing out of a large increase in population due to rapidly expanded war industries. There are other cities in which the adjustments will be more complicated and some where they will be easier. Whatever the problem in this instance may prove to be, every citizen of Portland has a right to be proud of the fact that this community is prepared, while there is still time, to face the future with unclouded vision and with a determination to meet the challenge, whatever it may prove to be. The community which meets the problem early, squarely, and with no ducking, dodging and buck-passing and, on the other hand, with

none of the false pride which scorns state and federal aid, will somehow find the answer. Unfortunately very few states or cities have as yet been willing to do this, and the role of the federal government is only now beginning to reach the stage of conclusive debate.

It is a curious fact which impresses itself strongly on those of us who have looked into conditions in other congested war production areas, that the Portland district has stood the strain on its existing facilities very well. Streets, transportation, shops and other services are much less overloaded than in areas like Hampton Roads, Virginia, or San Diego, California. This is due partly to the adequacy of existing facilities and the common-sense handling of the situation. Measured by this extraordinary test the Portland district has shown a flexibility and a capacity to expand which prove that the physical improvements needed for future postwar growth are by no means as comprehensive and numerous as might be supposed.

Portland has always been a conservative town. Founded in 1845, the third generation of descendants of the original settlers are prominent in its affairs today. Sandy Boulevard is the Oregon Trail of less than one hundred years ago. Many of the older residents can remember clearly when the city had only 40,000 inhabitants. Some of them liked it better that way, and there are still honest, conservative and by no means reactionary leaders in the community who are not anxious that it shall grow rapidly or become a great metropolis, who accepted war expansion as a patriotic sacrifice, but believe that it is neither possible nor desirable to keep all of the war workers attracted from other parts of the country in and around Portland when the war is over and the vast construction projects, notably in shipbuilding, have been curtailed or shut down. It is impossible not to sympathize with those who wish that Portland shall keep as long as possible the flavor of a transplanted New England.

There are others in Portland who believe that the future of the entire region is so promising that not only all war workers but many more outsiders can and should be invited into the community to make and share the prosperity which is already on the horizon. It is pointed out by representatives of this group that plastics and plywood are natural products of the forest and that they can best be manufactured near the source, especially if power, transportation, climate and other factors are favorable. There are those who believe that the further rapid development of electric

energy from falling water along the Columbia River will attract industry, which in turn will require great numbers of new people. They concede that there will be a loss of customers right after peace is declared, if war orders are cancelled and new ones from other sources here and abroad are not obtained quickly, but they think that a great North Pacific Empire, with water power as its controlling force, is about to come into being.

These federal power enthusiasts are not without great political and social as well as economic objectives in which private enterprise is to play a comparatively subordinate role. These objectives begin to emerge when we consider, for instance, the publications of the defunct National Resources Planning Board. It is claimed by advocates of the power theory that a vast expansion of the aluminum industry logically belongs in the Oregon, Washington and Idaho area served by Columbia River power. The clay from which alumina can be extracted undoubtedly exists here. Power, rail and other facilities are present also. It seems probable that a pilot or experimental plant will be started immediately. To date, however, the evidence is that we have enough aluminum in hand and sight for war purposes, that no reliable conclusions can as yet be drawn as to the economic practicality of extracting alumina from clay as distinguished from mining bauxite where it is found in large quantities, and that the peacetime use of aluminum is as yet a matter of speculation. Certainly it would be unwise to count on the immediate postwar expansion of power plants or to expect large additional employment on the assumption that aluminum manufacture from the ground up will be the great new enterprise of Oregon or the North Pacific area generally.

There is still another group in the Portland area which believes that since the Kaiser associates have revived shipbuilding in this area at the instance of the federal government, and since they have brought great numbers of people into the area and have settled them there, they must by the same token be held responsible for keeping this population at some kind of work, whether it be shipbuilding or something else. Some think that this is a moral responsibility shared by the Kaiser group, the Maritime Commission and the federal government generally. Others insist, or perhaps merely hope, that the same initiative, inventive genius, and enthusiasm which have

characterized the Kaiser war enterprises will find new outlets on the postwar Pacific Coast as yet uncharted but as sure as salvation.

There is still another variety of public opinion which reasons in this way. The European war is bound to end first. The Japanese war will then be the main thing. The Atlantic ports and industries will be less busy. The six big Pacific ports will become the gateways through which vast quantities of material will be shipped to the Far East. Even if Pacific shipbuilding is cut down, the plants such as those in the Portland area will be used for tremendous stevedoring and embarkation activities and for repair of Navy vessels which will employ many of the workmen now engaged in shipbuilding and related work. By the time this phase is over and the war is finally won there will be orders for new ships from United States, Dutch, Scandinavian, Chinese and other sources, the more inevitable because the flat tops and Liberty ships have no rosier commercial future than the wooden ships after the First World War. There is, however, a serious flaw in this argument. The splendid war record of the Kaiser plants should not blind us to the fact that these yards, no matter what their present output may be, are overloaded and overmanned, and that those which survive will have to be ruthlessly overhauled and cut down if we expect to compete with other nations which have a much lower wage and living standard.

These speculations, prophecies and hopes are interesting and significant. If, however, we were to pursue them very far we would never reach the very limited conclusions as to which our opinion was asked. Nor is very much gained by the familiar device of inventing pretentious equations and formulas so dear to those who hate to exercise judgment. We have no right to assume that there will be full employment in and around Portland immediately after the war, that is employment at high wages sufficient to take care of all the present 137,000 war workers, as well as those discharged from the armed forces. We must assume that there will be a slump, and that at least a large percentage of war workers must retire voluntarily or be laid off.

Retirement of most of the women workers will help. It is much more difficult to figure out how many of the newcomers not previously resident in the community will wish to or ought to go home. Contrary to the general impression, a very large proportion of

all shipyard workers in the Portland area came from west of the Rockies and not from the four corners of the country. Figures on these and other matters are included in the consultants' report which follows. Questionnaires on a subject of this kind are obviously very undependable as sources of accurate information. Casual inquiries at the right times and places and directed to people who are talking frankly and off the record, are much more revealing, but also inconclusive.

In a community with such a conservative background there are bound to be two widely divergent points of view as to the disposition of war workers after the war, and as usual there is a middle ground between two extremes on which the average common-sense citizen can stand and ultimately find himself in a majority. The more conservative and less recent settlers will contend that a community gaited to slow and steady growth should not be swamped with transients whose contribution is doubtful because many will stay through inertia and the hope of an easy life in a pleasant climate amid beautiful surroundings rather than because of any genuine continuing interest. On the other hand, more radical thinkers with a national outlook and less respect for state and municipal traditions and lines will contend that mobility of population is the first principle of democracy. They will urge that a territory which in the early days actually campaigned for settlers and asked only that a man bring a willingness to work, should not now dismiss war workers who were recruited for the emergency, who did their part and who in the end are likely to be just as good settlers as the original ones. They can make a pretty good argument that it is a bit rough to order those who have spent a large part of their war earnings in the Portland area to make tracks as soon as their pockets are empty.

In between these contending philosophies is the attitude of the less articulate run-of-the-mill fellow who sees no reason why the community should not grow, has, on the other hand, no enthusiasm for a succession of booms and depressions, and knows that all of the transients can't stay. He believes that somehow the situation will adjust itself through force of circumstances so that those who really belong elsewhere and have their roots down in other soil will go home, and so that the more adventurous and those better adapted to the Northwest, will stay on. These middle-roaders realize that you can neither push peo-

