

Few places to build jobs

Clark County has willing workers but a dearth of shovel-ready land for employers, and that could imperil the area's economic recovery if local governments don't take action, experts say



Photo by [Troy Wayrynen](#)

The 32-acre former Boise Cascade waterfront area is seen from the air in 2011.

By [Aaron Corvin](#), [Stephanie Rice](#)

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Lisa Nisenfeld, Head of CREDC in Vancouver



Brent Grening, Executive director, Port of Ridgefield



Helen Devery, Chairwoman of Lands for Jobs Committee

The Columbia River Economic Development Council's

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Sierk Braam (Norris, Beggs & Simpson)

Carol Curtis (Clark Public Utilities commissioner)

Bob Durgan (Andersen Construction)

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If a big employer came to Clark County looking to put down roots, it would find plenty of willing workers, including more than 18,700 unemployed residents, and one big roadblock: finding a place to build.

The county has too little employment land, and it takes too long to prepare it for development, according to a new analysis by the Columbia River Economic Development Council, the nonprofit jobs promoter and business recruiter. In the metro area, businesses can choose from 56 vacant large-lot industrial sites in Oregon, and can expect to start building on nine of those locations in as little as six months, according to a similar study from that state. In Clark County, by contrast, a mere 13 sites are available for any employer — from software developers to heavy manufacturers — and it would take up to a year and a half to get permits in place for construction.

That shortage of readily available land has already led some businesses to look elsewhere to grow, and could imperil the community's economic recovery, according to local leaders. Without action, "we are going to be dead in the water in a fairly short amount of time," said Lisa Nisenfeld, CEO of the Columbia River Economic Development Council.

But it's not too late for local governments to act.

From buying property that might otherwise turn into subdivisions to streamlining building permits, experts have identified a battery of policy measures

Clark County could take to build up its inventory of employment land. The question is whether leaders and advocates can come together to make it happen, or whether financial, political and technical challenges will lead them to again fall back into the pattern of inaction and legal skirmishes that got us here in the first place: with three residents for every job, higher than state and national 2-to-1 averages.

Plan of action

To fail to act is to court fewer employers and, as a result, miss out on bringing jobs to a county that badly needs them.

"We've got to be pushing ourselves to be ready, or we won't be when the client comes," said Brent Grening, executive director of the Port of Ridgefield, who helped conduct the CREDC's new "land for jobs" study.

Among the policy measures that could be part of the solution, according to CREDC's analysis:

- Making the permitting process speedier and more predictable.
- Adopting flexible land-use codes (the three elected Clark County commissioners — Tom Mielke, Marc Boldt and Steve Stuart — are expected to review new employment zones that would blend office, business park and light-industrial zones to give businesses more flexibility).
- “Banking,” or setting aside, lands for industrial purposes to prevent them from becoming new subdivisions.
- Pushing to expand sewer capacity in Ridgefield to accommodate new development.
- Ensuring that land in the Discovery Corridor (a planning area stretching from Salmon Creek to La Center) is available for new offices and business parks.
- Working with the region’s educational institutions, including Washington State University Vancouver, to “find land for business parks, readily accessible to WSU Vancouver to leverage research and development opportunities.”

Some of these proposals are already well understood in Clark County and across the state — especially the stark difference between how Oregon and Washington handle permits.

In Portland, economic boosters define their top shovel-ready sites as those that can be prepared for development within six months — about one-third the time it takes in Clark County.

“Washington state is a ground-up system,” Nisenfeld said. That contrasts with Oregon’s top-down land-use model. In Washington, “you start out at the bottom with localities, and anywhere along the line you can get kicked out of that process by an individual,” she said.

Not only is Oregon’s permitting track quicker and more predictable, but the state also has won a reputation as a protector of the environment. That shows that moving dirt more quickly and more predictably doesn’t necessarily equal sacrificing environmental goals, she said.

Nisenfeld makes these assessments having spent time in the public and private sectors. Her experience includes economic and workforce development, running her own consulting firm and a stint as director of workforce and target industries at the Portland Development Commission.

Already, Clark County has made an effort to speed up local permitting.

Eric Golemo, a civil engineer who has spent six years on a county development advisory board, said county government, for example, has been working on streamlining permitting services and offering incentives in order to attract good-paying jobs.

Requirements, including those for road and parking standards and low-impact development, can create a challenging puzzle.

“A lot of times, it’s just not as simple as you thought it was,” Golemo said. “I think they are doing what they reasonably can. If there was an easy fix, it’s been done.”

Too late?

John Karpinski, an environmental attorney and veteran of the county's urban growth boundary wars, doubts that Clark County's latest wave of land-use angst will translate into concrete action.

The county's business and political leaders — those who hold influence over local zoning decisions — have had ample opportunity to set aside employment lands, Karpinski said, and instead they've largely caved to residential real-estate interests.

The thoughtful land-planning that regional leaders now seek “should have been done 20 years ago,” he said. “If it had been done 20 years ago, we would have jobs.”

Nisenfeld understands the county's troubled history with land use. “But we have different actors,” she said. “We have a different county commission. We have a new analysis of what's available and what needs to be done to transform that into jobs. We have a recession. I think we're in a different time. And we will take a run at it. I guess people can roll their eyes. People will remain skeptical until they see what we're going to do. We are promising to do our best, but we're not far enough along yet to know what that's going to look like.”

Some proposed fixes to the land-for-jobs imbalance have rarely — if ever — been tried.

Take, for instance, the CREDC's focus on “banking,” or setting land aside for employers.

Under the state's landmark 1990 Growth Management Act, the county is authorized to reach outside the urban growth boundary to acquire two large rural parcels if it can prove that comparable land doesn't exist within the urban growth boundary. There are stringent requirements, including planning for infrastructure, addressing environmental concerns and setting sufficient buffers between the industrial development and neighboring rural parcels.

But buying land to protect it for job creation remains a possibility.

“We're not talking about eminent domain,” Nisenfeld said. “We're just talking about when the opportunity arises, if there were a large parcel that could be optioned or purchased.”

Boldt, the Clark County commissioner, said it would make sense to buy parcels along the county's 33-mile Chelatchie Prairie Railroad. Then perhaps the county government could enter into an agreement with a port district to oversee economic development of the parcels, Boldt said.

Ports in Vancouver, Ridgefield and Camas-Washougal, which already hold and groom industrial land and harbor clusters of employers, are likely to play important roles in any local land banking.

State law allows ports to team up to acquire land beyond their boundaries for employment purposes. Port of Vancouver Commissioner Brian Wolfe, a former chairman of the CREDC's board, said the county's three ports have, during periodic all-port meetings, discussed the possibility of putting together such a deal. “We haven't come to any conclusion,” he said.

Wolfe said the Vancouver port commission has, in the past, discussed acquiring land along the Chelatchie Prairie Railroad.

But until mid-2013, when the big steps on the port's \$150 million rail expansion are complete, port leaders are unlikely to seriously consider land banking, he said.

Grening, the Port of Ridgefield executive director, said the idea might be worth pursuing — but ports would have to sell the idea to taxpayers in their districts.

Infrastructure lacking

Knowing where Clark County stands with employment lands — and what the solutions could look like — aren't enough. It's also necessary to understand what could get in the way of progress.

For land to be ready for development, it needs to be connected to roads, water and other infrastructure. Funding for future transportation projects is starting to dry up, and sewer systems are not equipped to handle large businesses in much of the county, posing major sticking points for local leaders.

They know that a lack of infrastructure doesn't attract businesses that can afford to be choosy.

The status of a significant road project in Salmon Creek is instructive.

The \$133 million Salmon Creek Interchange Project, a joint venture with the Washington State Department of Transportation, will, among other things, extend Northeast 139th Street east over Interstates 5 and 205. The total project will unclog an area that has been under multiple growth moratoria.

But federal, state and local transportation funds “are not keeping pace with transportation needs, especially as stringent environmental regulations make projects more expensive,” Pete Capell, director of Clark County's public works department, wrote in a report to county commissioners. “In the future, most county projects will be smaller, both in scope and cost.”

Rather than building new roads to improve access to businesses, limited money will send the county into preservation mode — focusing on maintenance, not new construction.

The county's ongoing sewer struggles also pose hurdles to siting employers and pumping up jobs, and illustrate one of the deepest hurdles to preparing land for jobs: a history of political distrust.

For years, the cities of Ridgefield and Battle Ground, the county's public works department and the Clark Regional Wastewater District struggled to come up with a plan to install sewers in north Clark County. The county didn't want to pay for infrastructure — such as sewers, water lines and roads — only to have city governments annex the souped-up acreage and then reap all of the sales tax revenue as the land gets plowed into retail outlets, said Boldt.

After years of negotiation, however, the county and the cities of Ridgefield and Battle Ground are expected to sign a final agreement on a regional sewer plan.

Land litigation

Legal flaps over the county's land-use policies have further snarled efforts to establish employment lands. Environmentalists argue that so much land has already gone to homebuilders that what remains for job creation is vulnerable to legal challenges.

Five years ago, commissioners — who at the time were Stuart, Boldt and Betty Sue Morris — approved a massive expansion of urban growth boundaries, opening up 19 square miles of rural Clark

County for development. The 12,000-acre expansion was meant to plan for growth over the next 20 years, and it was among the biggest statewide since the inception of the state's 22-year-old anti-sprawl Growth Management Act.

Critics pounced.

Environmental lawyer Karpinski blasted the county commissioners' 2007 decision: "It was a houses-first, jobs-second proposal, and the jobs were really an afterthought to making the housing market continue to flow," he said in a 2009 interview. "We bet the farm — literally, in this case — on housing development, while industrial development lagged behind. This is why we have some of the highest unemployment around, because when the housing market bubble burst, it took Clark County's economy with it."

"We opened up more land for jobs than ever before," county Commissioner Steve Stuart said in a recent interview, defending the 2007 decision. "If all the land that was brought in was used for jobs, we'd no longer be out of balance. We'd have two people for every job, the state and national average. That's the goal."

By "out of balance," Stuart was referring to data that underscore Clark County's history of absorbing more houses than jobs: There are three people for every job here — higher than the state and national average of 2 to 1.

Yet after a legal challenge by Karpinski and a Seattle environmental group to the county's 2007 plan, the Western Washington Growth Management Hearings Board ruled that the county failed to protect farmland and prevent urban sprawl, restoring 1,620 acres to farmland.

When the county fought back, a Clark County Superior Court judge allowed some building but blocked plans for an industrial park south of Brush Prairie. The fate of about 1,000 acres of contested land will be decided by the state Supreme Court.

Progress possible

There is hope that more land will become available for office development, manufacturing and other business uses, however.

For example, leaders hope the \$40 million regional sewer agreement expected to be signed this year will help make the dream of drawing business growth to the Discovery Corridor a reality.

Construction on the Ridgefield portion of the project could begin in 2013, Capell said.

Recent history also shows that existing buildings present opportunities for prospective employers.

PeaceHealth, drawn in part by good schools and a strong base of potential employees, opted to move its headquarters to the site that once housed Nautilus headquarters, and is bringing hundreds of jobs here — a potential spark for further investment in the local health care industry.

Although it has no Intel-sized company to anchor it, the county remains home to several major high-tech private employers who hold their growth plans close to their vests.

And as the county's K-12 education system continues to draw families to town, it's also an eye-catcher for employers.

'Urgent we start now'

Yet the Columbia River Economic Development Council's policy push comes with urgency born of missed opportunities.

"Out of the 19 times the CREDC has been contacted in the past five years by a business looking to locate on parcels that were more than 20 acres in size, only a few were able to find a site that met their needs," according to Helen Devery, a vice president of BergerABAM who led the "lands for jobs" analysis.

"We need employers that will build something," said Steve Oliva, a Vancouver businessman who has a stake in two of the 13 parcels the CREDC identified as available for development. "We've been living on housing and retail for too long."

Grening, the Port of Ridgefield executive director, said the point of the "lands for jobs" analysis is to get ready for when the economy begins to accelerate — and employers return to the hunt for sites.

"We have a need to increase shovel-ready land," he said. "We need to be able to show people some options."

To that end, Nisenfeld, who officially took the reins at the CREDC in October, said she sees the agency advocating solutions and building partnerships.

"It's urgent we start now," she said. "We expect results longer-term."

Businesses need places to locate for the local economy to grow, said Scott Bailey, regional labor economist for the state Employment Security Department. "Having enough land that's zoned and serviced and shovel-ready is really important in a competitive market, and it's one of the things we have control over locally."

Staff writer Cami Joner contributed to this story.

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