Why I'm Moving from Portland back to California

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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"Governors Resolve to Build Bridge" - Portland Tribune, April 28, 2011.

It would be hard to live anywhere in the United Paved Precincts of America (a.k.a. the USA) if responsible leadership and environmental protection were top considerations, because one would be thoroughly disappointed. So I will not overemphasize my disappointment over the new Interstate 5 freeway bridge over the Columbia River. It is planned for profitable and grandiose dreams rather than efficiency, safety, environmental considerations, and community health. Nothing new with that!

"Sometimes, somebody just has to make a decision." Any fascist dictator could have said such a thing. Governor Gregoire of Washington State said it in connection with the bridge. Any supporter of the corporate state loves such an approach: stop the environmentalists' obstructionist concerns and anyone's suggestions for a low-cost alternative to boondoggles.

To replace the already huge I-5 bridge, when state budgets are being cut for essential human services, fits with defying peak oil and climate disaster. Mainly, $3.6 billion is too tempting a price tag to not spread around so much moolah to contractors and bureaucratic empires -- especially when the bridge can net $1.3 billion in "free" federal funds. Besides, "green" features for the bridge can allow the fuzzy-minded to ignore the traffic-generation and car-dependence that a bigger bridge generates.

Of course, the Portland Tribune editorialized to laud the "leadership" of the governors. When protesters do not march on corporate media outlets to take them over*, this may guarantee the willful destruction of the biosphere and waste of money and other resources. This state of affairs could serve as a reason for me to give up on this region as an enlightened home, but the soon-to-be-obsolete "bridge to collapse" is part of a national syndrome: denial of realities for the sake of growth.

Some know all too well that the Democratic governors of Washington and Oregon have twisted priorities when budget cuts for good programs ravage real people and the ecosystem. But very few people see that a big preference over the Republicans is misplaced. The public is bamboozled to cling to incremental change -- through the lesser of two evils -- that in sum does no good when the world is spinning into unprecedented chaos. Let's look at really progressive policy for a moment:

The Urban Growth Boundary law for Oregon, enacted in 1973, stops the bulldozers and pavers from perverting all manner of farmland and wildlife habitat for real estate speculation. Only two other states have such a law. In Oregon the "Metro" authorities update the boundary every five years "to assure there is always a 20-year supply of buildable land in the region." So a current fight dubbed "Jobs or Farms? Plans Spur Land Fight" [Portland Tribune, April 28, 2011] is about a business group's opposing the 1000 Friends of Oregon over changing the boundary. The protection offered by the boundary eventually may be as illusory as the "roadless" designation for wilderness and forests all over the U.S. and world -- until, however, the oil for bulldozers and pavers dries up.

After 2 1/2 years as a Portland resident I have come to accept and act upon the inevitable realization that Portland is part of the dominant culture. This is despite Portland's well deserved reputation as a cutting-edge, friendly town. The limitations of a better-than-average place, that's not Ecotopia, can feel acceptable for making a life, provided there's a sense of hope that one's life-purpose and sense of community are on the upswing. But without strong connections such as family, it's hard to believe in any town. When it came down to it, in Portland I had to be satisfied with slowly making new friends and waiting for richer connections, a cool music scene I could plug into, or attracting close companionship

perhaps from afar -- these challenges and having to wear long underwear and layers of wool to survive much of the cold, dark, wet year. It's an open secret that Pacific Northwesterners diss their own weather to discourage migration that results in Californication. So maybe I'm being loyal by complaining about harsh weather!

I was just on the road for almost four months this year, inadvertently escaping the Portland winter. Now, despite the lovely spring flowers and other amenities of Portland, my California experience took hold by telling me that Portland is not my home. In California I enjoyed family and friends, and even felt at home in my old stomping ground near the UC Berkeley campus -- "Berserkly." My promotion of my book Songs of Petroleum seems more promising in the media centers of California compared to the Pacific Northwest. So when I returned to Portland in late April it was to sell my little sloop that has been my floating home and send off my modest possessions to California. Some final social get-togethers in Portland were so satisfying that I wondered if I was making the right decision. But I knew that my overall loneliness when far from California would not soon abate, and that Sail Transport Network faced a more uphill battle in Portland than a good ways further south. However, I know that Portland will continue to see innovative, Earth friendly projects to build community; pay attention!

On May 11th I took a flight -- reluctantly, after hearing that there could be train delays for the West Coast. The Coast Starlight train is frequently late by hours, but maybe a terror-alert delay would now be of a new order when Osama bin Laden is invoked. A terror-alert could be real, but it would be a shame if the relative freedom of catching a train is ended in the U.S. and starts to resemble the much despised airport security hazards.

The government wants us to be afraid, but of what? Actual terror that people have knowledge of, such as wrapping an automobile around a highway sign, is downplayed. Instead, the terror of foreigners striking at Amtrak is suddenly a big news story. Rep. Charles Schumer, Democrat of NY, wants to create a no-ride list for Amtrak -- a considerably more costly approach than dissuading people from getting into deadly cars. Is the idea to save lives, or control our movements ever more tightly?

The "freedom" of driving a car is questionable when a law enforcement officer can pull you over for no reason, or, a bit more alarming, you can have a fatal wreck. The U.S. Dept. of Transportation changed its "accidents" designation to "crashes" over a decade ago. So the fact of carnage on the roads, at the rate of one 9-11 death-toll equivalent happening every month in the U.S., is somehow okay and is de facto policy. Everyone in the transportation sector knows that Amtrak fatalities in the organization's four decades thus far have totaled only a bit over 100 people -- almost half of whom died in a single crash in Alabama in 1993. But more cars are unquestioned, and Obama typifies this when he takes credit for saving General Motors.

Of course, California is just like Oregon in terms of oppression by cars and overpavement. But my rural island home near Portland was less bike friendly than my options in California, and the opportunities for getting another sailboat in California are many.

The culture of Portland is considered ultra hip compared to other U.S. cities, as evidenced by a noticeably larger per capita population of bicyclists with tattoos and ear-piercings. There's more world-awareness and friendliness among Portlanders than most other U.S. urban areas. This is quite pleasant to experience. A guy can strike up a conversation with a stranger, even a beautiful woman, on a Portland city bus or light rail car -- just try this in most big cities, and be prepared to be ignored as a you probably ought to be.

Despite their preferences for local food and more conviviality than suburbanites anywhere else, Portlanders are caught in the same dominant American culture of private property, capitalist employment, car & pavement domination, and central authority resting in a police force on up to state and federal forces. Unemployment is relatively high in Portland, partly by choice when some citizens try to live outside the system. But it's a struggle, especially since the financial meltdown of 2008.

When I lived in Portland and promoted Sail Transport Network and Pedal Power Produce, it seemed that a dozen people at most were truly interested in bringing it off. This may be three times as many people as absolutely necessary, but when people are hostage to jobs -- assuming they would be active if they only could be -- activism is possible only with funding for staff. Volunteer activism indeed occurs in Portland, such as for the annual Village Building Convergence, but that is by now a tradition with momentum and established relationships.

While we activists everywhere wait for palpable community fervor for reorganizing society, what's stopping us now from getting together and changing the world? People need income, including the hip and revolutionary. So activism suffers for lack of volunteers, and the "movement" that ought to be gaining momentum is disjointed. I chimed in on the bridge boondoggle in the daily Oregonian; I attended a rally against it; studied the issue; networked online; offered my services as a roadfighter, but I could not really plug in or contribute much. I would have had to drop everything else to be of significant service in order to be called upon to help fight the bridge.

But fight it for what? To defeat the bridge is important, but lately I have a question: Do such efforts make sense when public sentiment, as typified by so-called leaders' desire for boondoggles, persists? As collapse of the oil infrastructure nears, saving ourselves from the same old folly of never-ending expansion may mean stepping back and re-evaluating what is most effective. For me, getting closer to family and my many activist friends in California is paramount. I may see my brother's and my Wrongful Death lawsuit regarding our mother shut down in Santa Barbara, for lack of an affordable attorney, but I'm prepared to write it off and say "we tried." For one may have a greater purpose: with everyone I can network with in my global community, I will continue to search for ways of helping both the planet and whatever home-community I end up in.

* Upon reflection of the past 24 hours, I would differ with myself: rather than see take-overs from the street (i.e., a nonviolent revolution), what will occur first most likely is all of society being hit by manifestations of collapse. People will be simply trying to survive, while more easily ignoring centralized power that begins to ebb with collapse.

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Bridge to Interstate Collapse via 12 Lanes by Jan Lundberg

Governors resolve to build bridge
Kitzhaber, Gregoire say debate is over, now is time to act, by Jim Redden, Portland Tribune, April 28, 2011

Urban growth boundary, Wikipedia

Lundberg v. Lundberg, Santa Barbara: The Wrongful Death of an Oil Guru's Widow, by Jan Lundberg

New AlterNet article What's So Great About Portland? by Jay Walljasper, comment by Jan Lundberg