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### Regional Snapshot: Community change

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## Dispatches: Seeing change in 4 Oregon communities



By Craig Beebe and Justin Sherrill

Jul 19, 2016 09:00am

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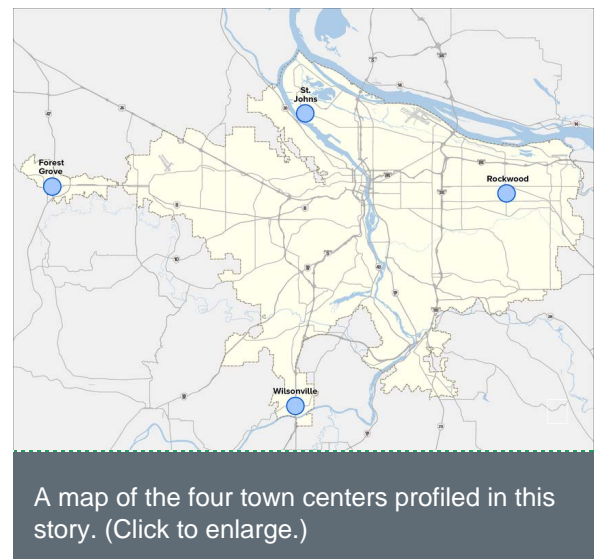
## A changing Portland region plays out differently in different places.

The idea of downtown holds a strong place in American communities. Simply saying the words "Main Street" evokes a timeless image of window-shopping, hardworking small-business people, community gatherings and more.

But in reality, downtowns can be as varied as the people who live, work and shop in them. Some are historic. Others are relatively new creations. Some are busy with activity. Others have struggled for years. Some have many residents, while others are mainly commercial.

And asking people in many communities where and what their downtown is – let alone what it should become – reveals interesting differences.

More than 20 years ago, Metro and the Portland region's 24 cities and three counties agreed on a simple concept: Town centers



should remain the heart of their communities, and the focus of the region's growth.

Every few years, Metro checks in on how those town centers are changing. To coincide with the release of the latest instance of this effort, called the State of the Centers, we spent a few days exploring four town centers in greater Portland, talking with leaders and people on the street about what's changing and what they hope changes next. Here's some of what we heard.



## Forest Grove: Balancing growth with deep history, diversity

On the edge of the Portland region – indeed, the farthest town center from downtown Portland inside the region's urban growth boundary – Forest Grove defies easy categorization. It's a college town with Oregon's second-oldest university. It's a farming community with a rapidly-growing Latino population. It's a bedroom community for people commuting into high-tech Washington County and even 30 miles to

Portland. And it's a place with a deep architectural heritage that, in the words of local historian Mary Jo Morelli, serves as a record of Oregon's history, with three historic districts and a stately downtown at the corner of Pacific and Main Street.



"We need to brag more about what we've got," said Mayor Pete Truax, a near-lifelong resident of the city. He and other city leaders cite a relaxed atmosphere, proximity to recreation and wineries, cultural opportunities at [Pacific University](#) and thriving agricultural enterprises.

But these leaders also acknowledge that Forest Grove is still reawaking from a long slumber, a period in which its downtown and the main approaches in and out of town have been marred by vacant

## VOICES ON THE STREET

We spoke to attendees at a Forest Grove Farmers Market

storefronts and half-used lots.

"There was a lot of stuff here, then there was nothing, and now there's a lot of stuff coming back," Truax said.

Why? Talk to almost anyone and it won't be long before they mention [the Wednesday night farmers market](#), which shuts down Main Street and in the summer can attract thousands of people, particularly on the first Wednesday of the month when it combines with an art fair. People cite the market as a key draw downtown, bringing residents and visitors alike and helping them discover other local restaurants and shops that might be worth visiting again.

The farmers market is run by [Adelante Mujeres](#), a local advocacy organization that works to empower and serve Latino residents of western Washington County. Forest Grove has one of the region's most significant Latino populations, and they've grown quickly to almost a quarter of the city's population in recent

one June evening. Here's some of what we heard.



**Tabitha Turin and Davinder Singh, new residents**

*What brought you here?*

We've lived here two weeks. I wanted to live here because the whole small town feel, but Portland's close, and I work in Hillsboro. It's like living in the country but you're not too far from the city. It's a lovely little town.

*What do you hope to see change?*

Well I love everything here already, so... I guess I'd love to see more breakfast places, some Mom and Pop businesses, more places to hang out. More local businesses that are open longer hours so when I get off work I can come and enjoy.



**Marcus Hazelett, 15-year resident**

years – more than twice their share of the Portland region's overall population.

Most people say they welcome the added diversity, but it hasn't been without tension. A high-profile incident at Forest Grove High School – in which [a student posted a "Build a Wall" banner](#), an apparent reference to Donald Trump's pledge to build a wall to halt illegal immigration from Mexico – recently sparked student protests in the city, catching widespread media attention.

But others note that racial tensions in the city are both quieter and more chronic than that incident suggests. Latino families generally live in worse housing and face greater poverty. Reducing these barriers and integrating the Latino and white populations in the years ahead remains a great challenge for local leaders.

Another challenge: Inviting new growth into downtown while preserving both affordability and a historic identity. Besides the farmers market, the other hot

*What have you seen change?*

The population. The town is getting bigger, traffic is getting worse.

*What do you hope to see change?*

I hope that we don't grow too fast without first improving the local infrastructure.



**Lindsey Chen, 4-year resident**

*What have you seen change?*

I think people are more aware of Forest Grove, that's for sure. Because it's the perfect balance between far enough from the city, and also still close enough to get somewhere in less than an hour.

*What do you hope to see change?*

I'm from Gresham, and Gresham used to be a small town when I was really little. And I feel like Forest Grove is like what Gresham used to be. I'd hate to see it get overrun with people trying to develop it too much.

topic in Forest Grove these days is [a proposed 4-story mixed-use, 78-unit apartment building](#) on the site of an abandoned printing plant. The proposed development is repeatedly called a catalyst by supporters, the first step in a vision to increase business activity and housing opportunities in Forest Grove Town Center.

City planners recently revised the city's zoning code to allow greater density in the core, and [the creation of an urban renewal agency](#) two years ago opened more tools for public assistance to jumpstart development. The agency bought the printing plant site and has identified [Tokola Properties](#) as its preferred developer.

Tokola president Dwight Unti says Forest Grove, with its easy access to transit and high-paying jobs in Hillsboro and Beaverton, is ripe for this urban-style development. But he cautioned that lenders and builders haven't quite awoken to that fact, meaning the project still needs assistance like state housing tax credits and a grant from Metro's [Transit-Oriented Development Program](#). But city leaders and Unti maintain that the success of the Times-Litho development will inspire more private development in the future.

There's a cautious sense of optimism in Forest Grove that more people living downtown can mean more businesses thriving there, and that more housing can keep prices relatively affordable compared to the rest of the Portland region. But as change comes, locals hope the city can build off its unique history and the presence of Pacific University, without overwhelming the small-town heritage that many say is what they most value about the community.



Rock the Block, an annual celebration in Gresham's Rockwood community

## Rockwood: Seeking a catalyst

Gliding into Gresham's Rockwood neighborhood on the Blue Line MAX, several things are immediately clear to a visitor. First, there's the symphony of languages and the palette of diverse faces – clues that you're entering Oregon's most diverse ZIP code, with 88 languages spoken and residents from around the world, many of them refugees or recent immigrants. Then there are the children and families – evidence that although Rockwood's history goes back to the early 20th century, its current population is among the youngest of the region's town centers.

1950's





Finally, there's a vast open space right at the heart of the community, where a bright-spiked sculpture blasts toward the sky beside the main Rockwood MAX station.

That lot could be the key to Rockwood's future, as city and neighborhood leaders try to dismantle a crime- and poverty-ridden reputation by creating new pathways to entrepreneurship, education and prosperity through a single catalytic development.

The 5.5-acre site once hosted a Fred Meyer, but that store closed a decade ago, along with five others in recent years. (The neighborhood has just one grocery store left.)

## VOICES FROM THE STREET

We spoke with people at the annual Rock the Block

Now the site has been rechristened the Catalyst Site as part of [Rockwood Rising](#), a development vision from the Gresham Redevelopment Commission. The proposal includes an array of uses intended not only to fill gaps in the kinds of businesses available to the community – particularly access to affordable healthy food – but to provide new opportunities for entrepreneurship and education. Among the core tenants are MetroEast Community Media, a small business development center from Mt. Hood Community College, a community maker space, flex office space and a food marketplace with dozens of stalls for small producers – including the region's first income-restricted commercial spaces.

The focus is local: the plan calls for no chain restaurants or stores.

Leaders are also taking a close look at whether housing should be part of the plan, and if so, what kind. Housing is a hot topic in Rockwood, in part because the community is already one of the

celebration about change in Rockwood. Here's some of what we heard.



**Aisha, resident for four years**

*How have you seen the neighborhood change?*

It's like a mass movement of families but no real community. I don't really see connectedness out here. People moving in. Most of our everything is still on the other side of town. We still don't feel connected.

*What would you hope to see change?*

There's no hub, no community center, no grocery store where everybody goes. I would hope to see that change. I like the idea of the Rockwood Rising. It's interesting to see what they're trying. I hope it works out the way they're hoping.



**Centae (right), a teacher new**

densest town centers in the Portland region. But more than half of its apartments were built in the 1970s or earlier, even before the MAX arrived, and many are now considerably dilapidated, according to neighborhood and city leaders.

Yet those apartments have become critical for thousands of people who need housing affordability, whether refugees from around the world or from rapidly rising rents elsewhere. Building community among all those new arrivals – and between them and long-time residents – is a big challenge. But many think a central gathering place is the way to do it.

The community has seen redevelopment plans come and go before, says Gresham urban renewal director Josh Fuhrer, who grew up in the neighborhood and previously served on the Gresham City Council. Indeed, the idea of a mixed-use town center on or around the Fred Meyer site has been on the books for almost a quarter-century, even before the Fred Meyer closed more than a decade ago.

## to the community

*What would you like to see change?*

I would like it a little more things like this that bring the community together. I don't know how many of these things we have but I'd like to see more.



## **Maria, resident for more than 10 years**

*What have you seen change?*

It's been improving a lot. We have more of a Spanish community, it's growing. And they've been improving services a lot for the community.

*What would you like to see change?*

I'd like to see more events like this fair more often, where we provide more information about the services for low-income families, for people with disabilities, trying to make more engagement with more services and have better communication with the government and agencies.

Why is this time different? The market is different, the developer is different and there are more public tools at play, but ultimately it comes down to an engaged community, Fuhrer says. Their needs and the gaps they see in the community drove the development of the project from its beginnings, he says.

Rockwood has become a crucible of diversity. And that diversity will be critical to the neighborhood's renaissance.

"Growing up, Rockwood felt like a very isolated place, where you're not Portland or Gresham but you're both depending on who asks," said Yesenia Delgado with the [Rockwood Initiative](#), a nonprofit that opened a futsal center last year in Rockwood.

"All these messages I got as a little girl were like, 'Your community is important but it doesn't matter to the outside world.'"

That's changing, Delgado said. An array of nonprofit organizations serve the community, providing health care, day care and education services, building housing and generally creating community. And outsiders are taking note too. Recent Portland State University projects led by art professor Lis Charman invested in [documenting the stories of Rockwood youth](#) and [connecting them with PSU students for so-called "friendtorship"](#).

Meanwhile local governments have recently invested in new facilities like [a county courthouse](#) in 2012 and a [police station](#) in 2013, as well as events like an annual celebration called [Rock the Block](#), which marked its fourth year in June with a big crowd despite record heat.

Rockwood Rising is the first private development of its scale in

the neighborhood in a long time. If successful, it could mark a turning point in the community's future, one that leaders and many residents hope will embrace and preserve diversity even while it grows its prosperity.



## St. Johns: Big change in North Portland

Originally a separate town like several other Portland neighborhoods, St. Johns was absorbed by Portland in 1915 and has since become one of the city's largest neighborhoods by size and population. Yet, ask nearly any resident of St. Johns about their neighborhood and they're likely to talk about how St. Johns still feels like a small town contained within a big city.

1950's





There's an element of truth to that feeling – contained within St. Johns' borders is an extensive array of industrial businesses and freight infrastructure, one of the region's largest natural areas, one of Portland's most iconic bridges, a small but thriving commercial district along Lombard Street and the homes of around 15,000 residents.

Many of those residents speak proudly of a prickly and self-reliant character that has long been identified with St. Johns, formed during its years as a major source of labor for the Portland region's various industries in the mid 20th century.

"We're out on a peninsula, flanked

VOICES ON THE  
STREET

by water and an industrial area," said Lindsay Jensen, executive director of [St. Johns Main Street](#), a community economic development organization dedicated to supporting local businesses, workforce development and affordable housing. Spending just a few minutes with Jensen is enough to feel her deep-rooted enthusiasm she has for her neighborhood and the exciting future she sees for it.

"I think because of that geographic location, and because of our history – we were our own town – we do feel like a small town where people know each other, they know their neighbors. It just feels very different," Jensen said.

But, as with the rest of the region, recent growth has altered that traditional arrangement.

"A lot has really happened in St. Johns over the last few years, and frankly a lot of it is development –



**Jasmine Deatherage, resident for three years**

*What changes have you noticed since you moved here?*

Well I'm sad that Sabi & Friends closed. There's a bunch of new cafes but no family-friendly restaurants. But I really like that there are no more big trucks driving down Fessenden.

*What would you like to see change?*

I want better public schools for all of Portland, including St. Johns.



**Narayan, resident of nearby Portsmouth for four years**

*What have you seen change?*

Definitely there's more of a neighborhood feel now, it was more of an industrial, warehouse feel before. A lot more people on the streets.

*What would you like to see*

development is the big change that we're seeing in this neighborhood," Jensen said.

Shamus Lynsky, a 12-year resident of the neighborhood, current vice chair of its neighborhood association and a coordinator of the iconic St. Johns Bizarre for the last nine of its 10 years, thinks the change started about three years ago.

"It seemed like you don't really see empty storefronts on Lombard anymore," Lynsky said. "Whereas for the first nine years we lived here, any new business that came here everyone went, 'Oh my god, we've got to go spend money at this place or it'll fail!'"

St. Johns is younger than the rest of the region, and it's getting younger as new families flocked to the neighborhood over the last several years, thanks in part to relatively affordable property values compared to the rest of the city of Portland.

But as the neighborhood's desirability increased, so has that once-inexpensive cost of living. As

*change?*

It would be nice to see this place grow like North Williams, or Mississippi. You know, more of a place where I can raise a family. I hope they don't commercialize this place too much, though. I think that would be great.



**Beatrice Walker, lifelong St. Johns resident**

*How have you seen St. Johns change?*

From, "Oh, we don't want to live in St. Johns!" to "Where have all these condos come from?" Everybody's coming into St. Johns. The house behind mine was bought by someone who lives in Beaverton. Before that, it had been owned by the same family for years and years.

*What would you like to see change?*

I hope they stop all the condos! They're taking all the big homes. In our neighborhood, we don't have many little homes with large lots. Most of the small homes are on the side of Lombard now.



of last year, per-foot property values in St. Johns' center are nearly double those of the regional town center average. Meanwhile, the median income in 2012 was around \$37,000, \$16,000 less than the Portland average, though incomes in St. Johns are expected to rise as the Portland region's economy grows.

In terms of diversity, St. Johns stands apart from the rest of the region, with a fifth of residents identifying as Hispanic, compared to a regional average of around 11 percent. However, some residents and local boosters worry that as the area continues to become more desirable and attract higher-end developments, rents and other costs of living in St. Johns will rise, pushing out those Hispanic and other historically underserved populations whose incomes are no longer high enough to stay.

That's a major concern for Maribel Prado, who's owned a dress shop on Lombard Street for 16 years. Even though Prado sees more residents as good for local businesses, she worries about what it means for her shop, which primarily serves Hispanics.

"It's going to be good for businesses to add newer people," Prado said. "It's not going to be good for me though because, for all the Hispanic market, all the Hispanic population, their rents went up so everybody's moving out."

But Prado feels change is more or less inevitable – as are mixed feelings about it.

"There has to be change, there has to be. Why not? And new dreams for people. It's a way of moving – moving the economy, moving jobs," she said. "You're never going to make people one-hundred percent happy, because everybody thinks

differently. But change is good."

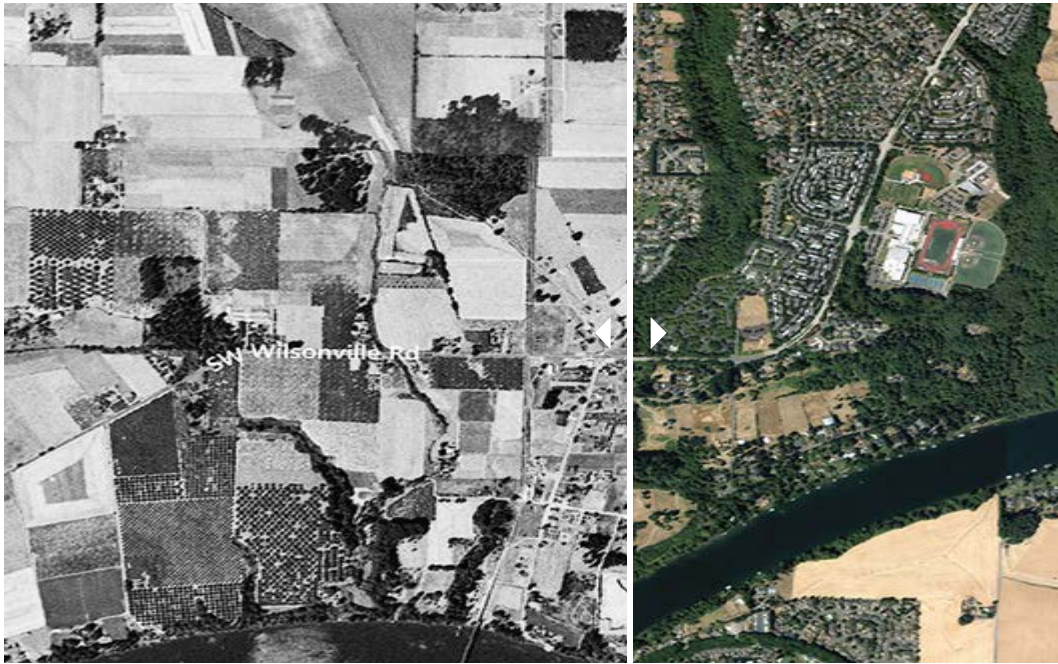
Beyond conjecture, one thing seems certain: Over the next several years, St. Johns residents will have to navigate big changes to their neighborhood.



## Wilsonville: An intentional place reexamines intentions

In contrast to St. Johns' and Forest Grove's historic cores and Rockwood's incremental infill, Wilsonville's Town Center is a deliberate creation of the late 20th century, a time capsule of an entirely different era.

1950's



Just east of Interstate 5 on Wilsonville Road, the town center is actually Wilsonville's third, notes Councilor Charlotte Lehan, a former mayor and lifelong resident. The city's first core formed around the landing for Boone's Ferry, a crucial connection between the Portland region and the fertile Willamette Valley that operated for more than a century until the Boone Bridge opened in 1954. Interstate 5 was routed across the bridge two years later, linking Wilsonville with downtown Portland and the Willamette Valley.

## VOICES ON THE STREET

**Emily Bryan, new resident**



*What made you choose Wilsonville?*

We were told by people who lived here in Oregon to come here to Wilsonville. We were told it was a really good community,

Later, the town center moved north to the intersection of Wilsonville Road and Boones Ferry roads, but with this area squeezed between a freeway and a railroad, city leaders decided in the 1970s to move the town center to flat farmland east of the freeway. They hired consultants to develop a somewhat utopian vision of tree-lined streets, large shopping centers, civic buildings and apartments, all orbiting a central park.

Decades later, that vision has largely run its course, says Mayor Tim Knapp. The central park is a popular destination for residents and visitors, particularly on sunny days when its large water feature is a welcome attraction and during events like the [Wilsonville Arts Festival](#). Wilsonville City Hall and several other key civic facilities are in the center, too. And nearly 2,000 people work in the town center.

But nearby, a large lot still sits vacant. Although some businesses in the area have thrived, others are struggling. Some of the planned

a nice commute and really beautiful. We looked at Woodburn and some other places further south, and we thought they were right. The school districts look better [here] as well.

**What do you hope to see change?**

Well I was told by someone that they're going to have a rec center here someday, so that would be something I was interested in. But, other than that, I would like to see the housing market go down so I can buy a house!



**Nguye Walter Kaladokubo, resident for 2 years**

*What made you choose Wilsonville?*

It's organized. When you look at it, it looks like a really white-populated place. Being a minority, I actually like it here. I lived in Tualatin, and came down here to hang out. Now that we moved down here, people are very, very friendly, and it feels like a little neighborhood community.

**What do you hope to see change?**

For the city, what matters is that

housing and other amenities have never arrived.

The center has around 1,400 residents within its official boundaries, but that's about one-third less than the average among other Portland-area town centers. And the town center's population is considerably less diverse than the rest of the Portland region, with around 90 percent of residents who live there identifying as white according to the latest Census estimates. (Overall, Wilsonville's population is about 85 percent white, about 10 percentage points higher than the rest of the Portland region.)

Most significantly, the center lacks a sense that it is, in fact, the heart of its city. Large parking lots surround stores, all but requiring driving from place to place. During non-business hours the area can be distinctly dead except for traffic on Wilsonville Road. Meanwhile, other commercial and residential developments at the town's other freeway exit and on the other side of the freeway have drained a lot of potential energy from the officially-designated town

it's well-connected and a melting pot, that everyone is working together.



**Yesenia Maldonado,  
Wilsonville resident for one  
year**

*What drew you to Wilsonville originally?*

I wanted to live in a suburb, and I was looking at the school district, which is what really appealed to me. And also having parks and the library so close.

*What do you hope to see change?*

Coming from California, I'd like more diversity, but I've seen it more and more as I've been here for a year. Besides that, I would like to see an aquatic center where the kids can have swimming lessons – right now I have to go to Canby to do that. It's a very nice city, I feel safe, my kids can come to the park and I feel like they'll be safe – I really like it.

center.

Now Wilsonville is about to begin re-envisioning the Town Center's future. Supported in part by a Metro grant, [the city will undertake a town center redevelopment plan](#) process this fall, appointing a task force to explore a wide range of possibilities for the future, everything from new housing, hotels or office space, to connecting new streets to make a more walkable, lively business district with a cohesive feel.

In recent years, hundreds of apartments and single-family homes have been built within walking distance of the town center's shops and parks. Knapp says businesses in the town center have noticed an uptick in business from people walking. But whether more housing is in the future of the town center is still an open question, he says.

Wilsonville is the Portland region's fastest-growing city, but Interstate 5 neatly divides it in half, creating both a barrier and a potential opportunity. Business leaders like NW Rugs' Mark Moran and local insurance agent Kyle French credit the freeway with high visibility and easy access for customers. And leaders like Mayor Knapp cite the highway as a key lifeline for employees coming into the city and residents going to work elsewhere in the region, as well as beyond to the Willamette Valley.

But only three roads link the growing west and east sides of Wilsonville across the freeway. And though the city and state invested millions to make the main crossing at Wilsonville Road more comfortable and even attractive for pedestrians, it remains a barrier to making the so-called Wilsonville Town Center feel like the true heart of the community, particularly since thousands of Wilsonville residents live across the

freeway in neighborhoods like the fast-growing Villebois.

How to relate to Interstate 5 will be one of the big questions for the community's future. As has been true for more than a century and a half, transportation and its impacts continue to define the direction of Portland region's southernmost city.



PREVIOUS: PART 2

### The Rundown: Many faces of equity

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