



Peer Reviewed

Title:

Now That We Have Their Attention [To Rally Discussion]

Journal Issue:

[Places, 13\(2\)](#)

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Publication Date:

2000

Publication Info:

Places

Permalink:

<http://escholarship.org/uc/item/3t43x1jc>

Acknowledgements:

This article was originally produced in Places Journal. To subscribe visit www.places-journal.org. For reprint information contact places@berkeley.edu.

Keywords:

urban, design, architecture, placemaking, history, native, america, new urbanism, congress, earl blumenauer

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HEY!

Now That We Have Their Attention

Earl Blumenauer Several years ago I was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. Because I won a special election and because I am a Democrat, I was last on the seniority list in the minority party in a Congress in which Democrats and Republicans were absolutely polarized and at each other's throats. So I left the city I love and I left what must be the best local job in America — city council member in Portland, Oregon — to go to a place where I was absolute political pond scum.

I went to Washington, D.C., because I am convinced that the federal government needs to be an aggressive, thoughtful, cooperative partner in making our communities more livable. My colleagues often say the issues communities are dealing with are local, that the federal government doesn't have any role in them. But that is absolute poppycock. The federal government has been involved with land use since we first started taking away land from Native Americans and giving it to European settlers so they could farm it. Consider the transcontinental railroad, what we've done with water projects, how we manage (or not) public lands, our urban renewal (or urban removal) program and the interstate freeway system — a great idea in concept but carried to grotesque extremes, particularly when applied to urban areas with no sense of the context, no citizen involvement and, in some cases, perfunctory local interaction.

The federal government has been a partner, for better or worse, in shaping the design of our communities. Now it's time for the federal government to catch up with what is happening in the rest of America, happening in large part through the help of people like you. Although there has been leadership at the national level, from people in the Clinton administration, including the president and vice president, local communities are really driving this change.

In 1998 there were 200 community livability ballot initiatives at the state and local levels; most of them were successful. This is happening not just in places like Portland. Places like Athens, GA., and Salt Lake City have come up with plans that look like what we have done in Portland for the last twenty-five years.

People who have their finger on the public pulse — for example recently elected governors Roy Barnes of Georgia or Jesse Ventura of Minnesota — have been successful, in large measure, because they reflect some of the concerns their constituents have about growth and development.

My career tracks these issues. I'm an unapologetic junkie. My first government appointment, while I was in college, was to the Livable Oregon Committee, by then-governor Tom McCall. When Oregon passed state land-use laws, I was a legislator in the county that was the first major jurisdiction to implement a comprehensive plan. I learned from sophisticated citizen volunteers and dedicated professional planners. Being on the Portland city council for ten years was a magnificent experience.

An Agenda for Congress

First let me tell you what I've done in Congress, because that helps set the context. In the course of one's first three years, when nobody's going to listen to you anyway, when you have no significant committee assignments, you might as well do what you want. (That is advice I would give to anybody in the political arena. It's better for your mental health and you might be surprised at what happens.)

I have set out — in my campaign, when I was inaugurated and ever since — be the spokesperson for livability in Congress. Every week I'm on the floor of the House, either speaking on an amendment with a special order or making one of those goofy one-minute

This article is adapted from comments made at the Seventh Congress for the New Urbanism, June 12, 1999, in Milwaukee.

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speeches that are just for the record, referencing an issue of the day and how it relates to livable communities.

My legislative program, whether it's taxation, transportation, water, federal building policy or bicycles, is an attempt to craft issues that will make a difference in terms of livability. I want to provide more tools for the federal government to be a good partner and for state and local governments to have the resources, the flexibility and the capacity to do the job.

I am working with the media, spending an increasing amount of time giving journalists information about issues, responding to terrible articles, trying to offer a sense of current events with a livability spin to it.

I am working with the Clinton administration, which is perhaps the most sensitive in the history of our country to the nature of the federal–community partnership. The president announced several initiatives in his State of the Union address. The vice-president has made a number of statements about these principles and continues to make livability an issue.

I am working with cabinet secretaries and other critical people in the agencies that are dealing with these policies. Congress can play a critical role in helping people, particularly at the second and third levels of the administrative structure, to take risks for livability.

I am attempting to work with people in local communities. I have been the Johnny Appleseed of livability, visiting more than forty communities, trying to work with other members of Congress, either bringing them to Portland, going to their communities, trying to get them to understand that picking their shade of green with livability is important to their constituents, and candidly, for their political career.

I am even organizing in Congress! In addition to the Bike-partisan Bicycle Caucus (a fun way to address some of these issues), we have a task force with more than fifty members from the Democratic Caucus, meeting every two weeks to deal with issues of livable communities. We have a bipartisan caucus for sustainable development, and there is a bipartisan smart

growth caucus in the U.S. Senate. These are platforms to get the word out, not only to members of Congress, but also — even more critically — to the twenty-something year olds that really run Capitol Hill, keeping them supplied with policy information and opportunities to interact.

I am working on policy development, experimenting at your expense. I am in your communities all the time, testing ideas, stealing shamelessly from you. I am trying to reciprocate by being an ally. Some of you have been pretty aggressive about using this service of my office, giving me articles that you think we should respond to, hooking us up with local talk shows, sometimes working with your local officials or business people. This is a two-way street.

I am trying to make this a political issue. I have organized a political action committee, the Committee for a Livable Future, which has made contributions to more than forty candidates for Congress who are not ethically challenged, who have a chance of winning and who understand this.

An Agenda for Designers

That's my agenda. But more important than that is your political agenda. What are professional designers doing to make this happen?

I have no patience for people who are exclusively involved in the ozone in a theoretical sense. Some of that is fine, because it helps provide intellectual movement and energy. But focusing solely on theory instead

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Government performance is the single most powerful tool at your disposal.

of hard political spade work, instead of building citizen infrastructure, instead of fighting these issues out on the ground, is a waste of time.

The first thing you must do is be aggressive about building a platform and a political coalition, both nationally and in your local community. The other side is doing it. I am contacted every day by people I

do not know, about issues I do not care about, taking up my time. They push; they organize; they make political contributions; they have lobbyists, platforms and conferences. In short, they make things happen because they are politically aggressive.

3 Get involved in the 2000 presidential campaign; make community livability an issue.

You must care politically as much as the wingnuts and the whole host of organized groups — you know who they are. I can't believe that you do not care as much about your livelihood or your community, about building livability, as some of these people who are using up oxygen in Washington, D.C., state capitols, county commissions and city halls.

Another point. Government performance is the single most powerful tool at your disposal. Make the government — state, federal and local — play by the rules to promote livability. Robert Peck, of the General Service Administration's Public Building Service is fighting an uphill battle because the federal government, despite the best intentions of this administration, does not have its collective act together in terms of promoting livability.

I have submitted a bill that would require the U.S. Postal Service to obey local land-use laws, zoning codes and environmental regulations. I was afraid for a moment that it would pass last session; I live in fear that President Clinton and Vice President Gore will simply order the Postal Service to do this. Bad post office decisions are one of best tools we have for organizing, for getting the point across: We wouldn't need new laws, taxes, regulations or rules if we could only get the federal government to do what it is telling local communities to do to protect the environment.

Seize this issue as a blunt instrument and beat up every federal, state and local official whenever there is even a hint of hypocrisy. You will have righteous indignation on your side, and it will help you build your coalition and generate momentum.

People who would rather gargle formaldehyde than utter the words "land-use planning" understand this. It will help Bob Peck if you raise your voice and demand that the federal government, which has portfolios of a million or more square feet in sixty metropolitan areas, be a full partner for livability. It will help him and it will help you.

Get involved in the 2000 presidential campaign. I commend the vice president for making livability an issue. He is doing his part. If Al Gore is your cup of tea, tell him so, get involved, help him refine the message. Push back the people that are trying to make this an issue by perverting what he is saying and trying to do.

For those of you of a different political flavor, make this an issue for your candidate. You will be doing him or her a favor. These people are going to be running around for the next year trying to find air time, trying to look intelligent. You can help them with one of the least toxic, most persuasive and important issues of our time.

For those of you who want to wait, organize local forums, particularly if you happen to be from New Hampshire, Iowa or California. Invite the presidential candidates or their surrogates. Have a livability forum.

Organize a strategy for enlisting college students. Colleges of environmental design, architecture, landscape

4 Reach out to organized labor, the environmental movements and students.

architecture and planning are a source of amazing vitality and energy. You should be there, pumping them up, engaging them — you can make livability an issue on campus just as anti-war, civil rights and environmentalism became issues. Young people understand the livability issue, they relate to it, they can be involved.

Reach out to organized labor. Seize the opportunity for a green — blue alliance. Livable communities have more union jobs, they are more pleasant and they are safer — not only for construction or transit workers,

5 Do not assume that the rest of America's political action committees, in their aggregate, are going to represent you and your interests.

but also for letter carriers, fire fighters and others who provide neighborhood services. Those of you in the development arena should think about the potential of tapping into tens of billions of dollars of union pension funds for livable community projects.

There should be a stronger relationship with the environmental movement. Design professionals have some terrific ideas for saving salmon, reducing emissions, conserving energy and protecting the water cycle — seek out and involve environmentalists. This relates to an issue that seems academic but should nevertheless be on your radar screen: developing a new round of environmental protections that are results oriented and performance driven, not regulatory and bureaucratic.

Come up with your own examples of my post office bill, of micro-policies that are so simple, direct and powerful that they will get the point across to the most hidebound opponent, the most obtuse person on the other side of this equation.

Here's another example: When I went to Congress, I was mortified to learn that I could give my employees free parking, either in Portland or Washington, yet I could not spend a penny of my million-dollar budget to subsidize employees who wanted transit passes. I was not allowed, even though the federal government had been telling the rest of America to do this for years, even though many federal agencies were doing it, even though Washington has terrible air pollution and congestion, even though both Portland and Washington have effective regional rail-bus systems. It took two years and discussions with more than three hundred of my colleagues before the Republican leadership gave up and changed the rules.

Lastly, get real about the politics. Do not assume that the rest of America's political action committees, in their aggregate, are going to represent you and your interests. Do not assume that the rest of America's political action committees, in their aggregate, are going to represent you and your interests. There are

conservatively
250,000 design professionals. If each of
you would con-

tribute \$10 a month, you could amass a political fund similar in size to that which Tom DeLay is raising from the business community for Republicans running for House in the next election. The fund would be larger than the National Rifle Association's, in league with what organized labor is spending. This would transform the arena in which you do business.

Hear what I said. You do business. Most of you make your living related to things that are at least tangentially involved with livable communities initiatives. You will make more money if we spend our infrastructure dollars wisely, if we make it easier to finance mixed-use development, if we stop doing stupid things with our transportation system. You will have more professional satisfaction and your communities will be better.

The American public does not agree with the NRA on provisions that deal with gun violence. The NRA's radical views are actually embraced by only about three or four percent of the population. Yet they have tied our Congress and state governments in knots because they are focused and they care.

Every week I get on a plane and go somewhere new to talk about this. I am convinced that this is the time to make a difference for livability. I am absolutely convinced that you in the design professions can make a difference in your community and nationally. And I appreciate what you are already doing.