

At a recent Portland conference -- sponsored by the Central Arizona Home Builders, the Home Builders of Northern Kentucky and various libertarian groups -- almost 100 people from around the country gathered to "preserve the American Dream" and belittle our efforts to plan for growth ("Visitors boo Portland planning," The Oregonian, April 18).

In the minds of the conference sponsors and participants, "the American Dream" we must preserve is the America of the Ozzie and Harriet suburb from 50 years ago -- a suburb supposedly created by "the free market."

There were many good things about this old version of the American Dream -- the promise of decent housing, safe neighborhoods, good schools and greenspaces, things most of us still want. But no one can claim that the 1950s middle-class suburb was simply the result of people making choices in the free market.

The 1950s suburb was founded on local government zoning regulations that prohibited apartments, duplexes, small houses, small lots as well as stores and offices, over thousands of square miles in America's cities. This pattern forced everyone to drive to the store and limited the choices of families of modest means, obliging them to live in the remaining land where housing they could afford was allowed by local zoning.

The 50-year-old version of the American Dream depended on hundreds of billions of dollars of federal funding for highways and sewers and water treatment plants and the relative starvation of funding for mass transit and intercity rail. It required hundreds of billions in tax breaks to promote home ownership (the deductibility of local property taxes and the interest on mortgages from federal income taxes).

The conference sponsors rely on statistics and analyses that are flawed or erroneous to attack efforts by Portland and other cities to update and expand the American Dream. For example, these critics claim that because of the urban growth boundary, Portland's housing prices are unusually high.

According to the National Association of Realtors Web site, the median sales price of homes in the Portland region at the end of 2003 was \$196,200 compared with \$191,000 in Las Vegas; \$233,000 in Denver; \$262,000 in Sacramento, Calif.; \$276,000 in Seattle; \$382,000 in Los Angeles; and \$457,000 in sprawling San Diego. If unlimited land supplies ensured affordable housing, why does a home in the Los Angeles area cost twice as much as in the Portland region? Sprawl has never made housing affordable and never will.

Contrary to what was said at the conference, investments to increase choices in how to travel have been cost-effective and are working. The \$12 million per track mile for the new Portland Streetcar (including the vehicles) is less than the cost of widening the Sunset Highway at Sylvan (\$20 million per mile). People in the region are choosing to use transit -- between 1996 and 2001 the use of the mass transit system grew five times faster than the region's population and almost three times faster than the amount of driving.

What kinds of solutions were discussed at the conference? According to conference organizer Randal O'Toole, "sole authority" over land development decisions should be delegated to property owners in neighborhood associations of a few acres to a few tens of acres in size. Under this scheme, we would have 6,000 new land-use regulatory authorities in the Portland region -- but would exclude the 40 percent of the households who are renters from participating. This is neither fair nor practical.

The real American Dream is about increasing the choices and opportunities available to all of us to realize our varied dreams. The Portland region has been a leader in increasing choices and the public has embraced them in the marketplace (evidenced by premium prices paid for higher-density housing in the Pearl), in how we travel and at the polls (soundly defeating pro-sprawl ballot measures and candidates).

Across the nation and across the partisan divide, other communities and other officials are embracing this vision of many American Dreams for all of our families. Portlanders should join them in wishing success in their own communities to transform and expand our many American Dreams.

Rep. Earl Blumenauer, D-Ore., represents Oregon's 3rd Congressional District, which includes east Portland.